

**TUTORIAL**  
**3.1**

# Introducing Romans

Bible Teacher Scot Keen introduces the themes of the book of Romans and explores why Paul wrote it. Then he delves into the implications which Romans has for our lives as believers and for the Church as a whole.

## Introduction

We are calling this module *Living in God's Narrative* because we are dealing with the book of Romans and 1 and 2 Thessalonians which help us to live inside the story that God is writing in history.

The letters of Thessalonians are written by a church planter to a church plant, so they are relevant for someone who wants to spend their life involved in reaching the unreached with the Gospel and seeing churches established that honor the Lord. We believe that you are going to be built up in the faith and encouraged through these books.

## How Romans is significant

We will begin this module with the book of Romans. The major theme that Paul covers in Romans is the righteousness of God. The book of Romans is significant in terms of its content and also its potential life impact. The content of the book of Romans is unique in that Paul covers several heavy theological topics that are very relevant for the Christian life.

We will call this “potential life impact” because it is not a given that a believer is going to read the book of Romans and then automatically be impacted. It is a *potential* life impact, and it comes down to the question, “Are we going to choose to respond in faith and obedience to God's word?” If we do, then the potential life impact is almost immeasurable.

For example, if we come to grips with the message of Romans, then we are going to stop looking for righteousness in ourselves because we are going to realize there is none. We will stop trying to give God a reason to love us because we will realize that we never gave Him a reason to love us in the first place. We will stop worrying about whether or not we have done enough to be accepted by a holy God because we will be convinced that it is not about what

we have done; rather, we are saved because Christ satisfied God's wrath when He died on the cross.

We will not worry about security and whether or not we will make it into heaven when we die because we are going to find that, through Christ, we are secure and our salvation is a settled matter. We are going to find that we can walk in newness of life, empowered by the Spirit of God and liberated from indwelling sin, because of the fact that we died with Christ and that we rose again to walk in newness of life.

Furthermore, we are going to find that it is possible to live in fellowship with other believers who come from different theological backgrounds, although they have different convictions about issues of Christian liberty. All of that is addressed in the book of Romans, so it truly is life changing. We encourage you to be asking God to challenge you throughout this module. Ask God to help you respond in a way that is pleasing to Him so that his word can have maximum impact in your life.

Historically the significance of the book of Romans has been huge. For example, in the fourth century, it was the book of Romans that challenged Augustine. Then during the Reformation, it was the book of Romans that lit a fire under Martin Luther with the statement *the just shall live by faith*. It was also the book of Romans (through the influence of the Moravians) that challenged John Wesley and caused him to trust in Christ alone. Romans has had a profound impact throughout church history, and it is not because Romans is more inspired than other books, but rather because of the content that God has placed in this book.

We find that the book of Romans is unique for several reasons. First of all, it is the most theological of all of Paul's letters. It deals with theological topics like the lost-ness of humanity, justification by faith, redemption, propitiation (all terms that we will unfold later on in the module). It also deals with Christian life principles; being dead to sin and alive under God. It deals with Christian liberty and with God's plan and purpose for Israel as a nation, including Israel's future.

It is also the largest of Paul's letters. The book of Romans has more quotes from the Old Testament than any other letter that Paul writes. In fact, Paul alludes to the Old Testament more than fifty-seven times in the book of Romans.

And finally, it is the most formal of Paul's letters. It is written in a logical way and, in that sense, it is formal because Paul is not necessarily singling out problems until he gets towards the end of the book.

## Authorship and Audience

Paul is the author of the book of Romans and in chapter sixteen we find that Tertius is his scribe. We also find in chapter sixteen that Paul commends Phoebe to the church in Rome. Phoebe was a servant of the church in Cenchrea, which is about nine miles away from Corinth, which was where Paul was when he wrote this letter. Evidently after Paul wrote the letter, he placed it in the hands of Phoebe who carried it to the church in Rome.

That is some of the background on the authorship of Romans. As far as the audience goes, Romans 1:7 reveals that Paul is writing to the believers in Rome. Now it is possible- and in fact likely- that the church in Rome was made up of several house churches. In chapter sixteen Paul identifies unique groups of believers in Rome. These house churches would have collectively made up the church in Rome.

We don't know how the church in Rome began. We have no record of an apostle going there before the church existed. One possible and informed guess would be that Jews who were present at Pentecost from Rome heard the Gospel, as proclaimed by Peter, and took it with them on their return to Rome. You can read about the visitors present at Pentecost from Rome in Acts chapter two.

Now that is just a possibility so we cannot be confident about that. However, what we can be confident about is that the church in Rome was made up of believers from both Jewish and Gentile backgrounds. This is going to be very important, as it relates to the purpose of the book. There are several things accomplished by the writing of the book of Romans that are not necessarily the main purpose.

## Why Paul wrote the book of Romans

For example, Paul introduces himself to the church in Rome by way of explaining his theological positions to them. They had never met Paul personally, and yet in chapter fifteen, Paul says he wants to be aided by them in an outreach to Spain. He wants them to be a partnering church, so Paul introduces himself to them.

It is also a letter of edification. In Romans 15:14 Paul says that he is convinced that the church in Rome is full of goodness, full of knowledge and able to admonish one another. So they were a maturing church, but he says, "I have written very boldly to remind you, again, because of the grace that was given to me from God to be a minister of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles, ministering as a priest the gospel of God, so that my offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit."

What Paul is saying there is that he pictures his ministry in the terms of a priest, and he wants to see the church in Rome sanctified by the power of God's Spirit, a maturing church, so that when this church stands before Christ at His judgement seat, He will be pleased with them. In other words, Paul wants them to grow so that they are pleasing to God and he wants to see this ministry of building up the Church as ultimately an act of worship to God. He wants to edify them, or in other words, to build them up.

There is also an aspect of protection here. Romans 16:17 says, "Keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them." That would be Apostolic Doctrine. If anyone teaches contrary to Apostolic Doctrine, watch out for those people. Paul is trying to protect them. They were probably being targeted by legalistic Judaizers, and Paul is going to give them this letter of true doctrine to protect them from false doctrine.

## **The theme of unification**

We believe that is the major reason why Paul wrote the book of Romans was for unification. Let's go back to what we just saw a few minutes ago. The church was comprised of Jews and Gentiles. We have to think like a first century Jew or a first century Gentile to really appreciate this. These believers came from very different backgrounds, and with their different backgrounds came different convictions and different liberties that they would either enjoy or refrain from.

Here is a personal illustration. I grew up in the south-eastern United States, and it is not uncommon there for believers to chew tobacco and to smoke. In World War 2 people from the southern US moved to the northern US to find jobs in factories. As these southerners moved to the north, they were appalled that the believers there would sometimes have alcoholic beverages, and the believers in the north were appalled that the believers from the south would chew tobacco. These were just different convictions based on culture.

Now the Jews would abstain from meat and would recognize certain holy days, even though they were not under the law. The Gentiles had no regard for any of those things and yet they are going to be unified together as God's people. Paul writes the book of Romans to unify them so that they can function together in a way that honors Christ. Paul is going to specifically deal with these issues of Christian liberty in chapters fourteen and fifteen.

As you go through the book of Romans, you will notice the unification theme. In chapter one Paul says, "I am not ashamed of the gospel. It is the power of God for salvation for everyone who believes, to the Jew first, and also the Gentile." Right out of the gate Paul is showing that the Gospel is the answer for mankind's sin, whether Jew or Gentile.

He is going to show us in chapter 3:9 that they both need a savior. “What then? Are we better than they? Not at all; for we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin.” Both need a Savior. Both are justified by faith.

Paul is going to say that God justifies the Gentiles by faith and that He justifies the Jews by faith. Both are saved in the same way. In chapter ten Paul will say that God is rich in mercy towards both Jew and Gentile, and finally, in chapters fourteen and fifteen that they can live together in unity because of who they are in Christ.

## Implications of unification

Now this is an important to see that this is Paul’s purpose because it is going to impact the way we read the book. Consider how you are going to serve the Lord in your ministry. The chances are you are going to be serving with people from different backgrounds and you need to be convinced that God's word is able to unify believers, and that God is able to work in us so that we can function together as a healthy body and reach the world with the Gospel. Romans is going to get us there.

Before we move on, remember that Romans is the most theological of all of Paul’s letters. Sometimes people say, “Don't talk about doctrine, because doctrine divides,” but we want you to catch what Paul is saying. Paul is writing a doctrinal book, and he’s doing it *for* the purpose of unification.

Doctrine does not have to divide. In fact, doctrine can unite us around the person of Christ, and that is exactly what Paul does in this book. It also shows us that doctrine is very practical. Paul uses doctrine to unify believers, so it has a practical purpose there.

Finally as far as the theme of the book of Romans, Paul is going to show us that God’s righteousness is lacking in unsaved man. It is imputed to believing sinners. It is imparted as we walk by faith. It is vindicated, or shown to be true, through God's dealing with Israel. And finally, it is lived out in practical application. This is the skeleton of the book of Romans that we’ll be following throughout this module.

## Worldviews present in Rome

Paul is writing to the believers located in Rome, which was approximately thirteen miles in circumference. The people in Rome were divided as far as the socioeconomic classes. The rich lived in villas and the poor lived in apartments. As far as the socioeconomic conditions, approximately fifty percent of the population in the city of Rome were slaves. It was basically the top five percent who controlled everything in Rome, so there was a huge gap between the rich and the poor.

In Rome and in the Greco-Roman world everyone believed in many gods. They were polytheistic. Some of the religions were licensed by Rome and others were not, but nevertheless, there were many religions.

For example, there might be gods that would be seen as the gods of Asia. There were also hometown deities, or civic deities, and these were the deities that would be worshipped in specific locations. If you read the book of Acts, you're going to hear about Zeus and Hermes. Their territory is larger than some of the other gods.

Then you have Diana of the Ephesians. You also have people who worship gods in their own home. People had both civic deities (large geographical deities) and they also had deities in their home. As Acts chapter seventeen will show us, sometimes they would even have an altar to an unknown god just in case they missed someone.

So the Romans were very polytheistic. They believed in many gods. In fact it has been said about the Greco Roman world, they were comfortable with many gods, as long as no god claimed to have a corner on the market. In other words, they were comfortable with many gods as long as no one god claimed to be the exclusive god. That is going to be a problem, as you know, when we look at the New Testament.

## **Athenagoras of Athens**

There is a quote from Athenagoras, which is second century, but it shows the culture that was already there, present in the first century. I want you to catch this. It says that, "As regards, first of all, the allegation that we are atheists ... most of those who charge with atheism ... charge us with not acknowledging the same gods as the cities." What we are pointing out here is that in the Greco Roman world, if you only believed in one god, you were as good as an atheist to those around you.

Here is another quote from the same author, "As to the other complaint that we do not pray to and believe in the same gods as the cities, the very men who charge us with atheism for not admitting the same gods as they acknowledge are not agreed among themselves concerning the gods." You get this picture in the Greco Roman world that many gods are worshipped. If someone only believes in one god then they are seen as an atheist, and that is going to be a major issue, because Paul is going to say that Jesus Christ is Lord.

One inscription that was found on a coin of Caesar Nero in Corinth says, "Nero, Lord of the Entire World." This is a claim of being the absolute Lord, or the Supreme Lord. Nero was the Caesar when Paul wrote the book of Romans, and Caesar's presence was felt throughout the Roman Empire.

## Greco Romans Culture

It was common in Greco Roman culture for people to be called “lord”. So a wife could call her husband “lord,” or a servant would call his master “lord,” and someone in a chain of command would call their superior “lord”. There was no problem with that as long as someone did not claim to be *the* supreme lord. Only Caesar Nero could make that claim, and he in fact claimed to be lord of the entire world.

It was this world that the first century Christians went into, and they said that there is one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism. The reason we are bringing that out is because Paul states in Romans 1:16 that he is not ashamed of the Gospel. Paul is counter cultural in his claims. He is going against the flow by proclaiming that Christ alone is Lord, regardless of what Rome and Nero claimed.

Let’s be challenged by the same mindset: we are going into a world that can be hostile to our faith, and yet we are not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ.



### DISCUSSION POINTS

*Introducing Romans*

1. How do we know that the Church in Rome was comprised of believers from both Jewish and Gentile backgrounds?
2. What was the occasion for the book? i.e. Why did Paul want to write them?
3. What is the theme of the book?
4. Approximately how many Jews were living in Rome during the first century?
5. How does our culture compare with 1st century Rome?



### ACTIVITIES

*Introducing Romans*

1. In half a page describe the religion of the Roman Empire.