

# Romans

Scott W. Hahn



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17 18 19 20 21 22 23      7 6 5 4 3 2 1



To Matthew Levering—friend,  
colleague, and model scholar

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## Editors' Preface

The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the body of the Lord. . . . All the preaching of the Church should be nourished and governed by Sacred Scripture. For in the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven meets His children with great love and speaks with them; and the power and goodness in the word of God is so great that it stands as the support and energy of the Church, the strength of faith for her sons and daughters, the food of the soul, a pure and perennial fountain of spiritual life.

Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum* 21

Were not our hearts burning [within us] while he spoke to us on the way and opened the scriptures to us?

Luke 24:32

The Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture aims to serve the ministry of the Word of God in the life and mission of the Church. Since Vatican Council II, there has been an increasing hunger among Catholics to study Scripture in depth and in a way that reveals its relationship to liturgy, evangelization, catechesis, theology, and personal and communal life. This series responds to that desire by providing accessible yet substantive commentary on each book of the New Testament, drawn from the best of contemporary biblical scholarship as well as the rich treasury of the Church's tradition. These volumes seek to offer scholarship illumined by faith, in the conviction that the ultimate aim of biblical interpretation is to discover what God has revealed and is still speaking through the sacred text. Central to our approach are the principles taught by Vatican II: first, the use of historical and literary methods to discern what the

biblical authors intended to express; second, prayerful theological reflection to understand the sacred text “in accord with the same Spirit by whom it was written”—that is, in light of the content and unity of the whole Scripture, the living tradition of the Church, and the analogy of faith (*Dei Verbum* 12).

The Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture is written for those engaged in or training for pastoral ministry and others interested in studying Scripture to understand their faith more deeply, to nourish their spiritual life, or to share the good news with others. With this in mind, the authors focus on the meaning of the text for faith and life rather than on the technical questions that occupy scholars, and they explain the Bible in ordinary language that does not require translation for preaching and catechesis. Although this series is written from the perspective of Catholic faith, its authors draw on the interpretation of Protestant and Orthodox scholars and hope these volumes will serve Christians of other traditions as well.

A variety of features are designed to make the commentary as useful as possible. Each volume includes the biblical text of the New American Bible, Revised Edition (NABRE), the translation approved for liturgical use in the United States. In order to serve readers who use other translations, the commentary notes and explains the most important differences between the NABRE and other widely used translations (RSV, NRSV, JB, NJB, and NIV). Each unit of the biblical text is followed by a list of references to relevant Scripture passages, Catechism sections, and uses in the Roman Lectionary. The exegesis that follows aims to explain in a clear and engaging way the meaning of the text in its original historical context as well as its perennial meaning for Christians. Reflection and Application sections help readers apply Scripture to Christian life today by responding to questions that the text raises, offering spiritual interpretations drawn from Christian tradition or providing suggestions for the use of the biblical text in catechesis, preaching, or other forms of pastoral ministry.

Interspersed throughout the commentary are Biblical Background sidebars that present historical, literary, or theological information, and Living Tradition sidebars that offer pertinent material from the postbiblical Christian tradition, including quotations from Church documents and from the writings of saints and Church Fathers. The Biblical Background sidebars are indicated by a photo of urns that were excavated in Jerusalem, signifying the importance of historical study in understanding the sacred text. The Living Tradition sidebars are indicated by an image of Eadwine, a twelfth-century monk and scribe, signifying the growth in the Church's understanding that comes by the grace of the

Holy Spirit as believers study and ponder the Word of God in their hearts (see *Dei Verbum* 8).

Maps and a glossary are included in each volume for easy reference. The glossary explains key terms from the biblical text as well as theological or exegetical terms, which are marked in the commentary with a cross (†). A list of suggested resources, an index of pastoral topics, and an index of sidebars are included to enhance the usefulness of these volumes. Further resources, including questions for reflection or discussion, can be found at the series website, [www.CatholicScriptureCommentary.com](http://www.CatholicScriptureCommentary.com).

It is our desire and prayer that these volumes be of service so that more and more “the word of the Lord may speed forward and be glorified” (2 Thess 3:1) in the Church and throughout the world.

Peter S. Williamson  
Mary Healy  
Kevin Perrotta

### Note to Readers

The New American Bible, Revised Edition differs slightly from most English translations in its verse numbering of Psalms and certain other parts of the Old Testament. For instance, Ps 51:4 in the NABRE is Ps 51:2 in other translations; Mal 3:19 in the NABRE is Mal 4:1 in other translations. Readers who use different translations are advised to keep this in mind when looking up Old Testament cross-references given in the commentary.

# Abbreviations

†	Indicates that a definition of the term appears in the glossary
AB	Anchor Bible
ACW	Ancient Christian Writers
AnBib	Analecta Biblica
AYBRL	Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
<i>Bib</i>	<i>Biblica</i>
Catechism	<i>Catechism of the Catholic Church</i> , 2nd ed. (New York: Doubleday, 2003)
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CCSS	Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture
ch(s).	chapter(s)
ESV	English Standard Version
FBBS	Facet Books, Biblical Series
FC	Fathers of the Church
HUCA	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
ICC	International Critical Commentary
JB	Jerusalem Bible
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JETS	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
JSNT	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
JSNTSup	Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series
JSPHL	<i>Journal for the Study of Paul and His Letters</i>
JTI	<i>Journal of Theological Interpretation</i>
KJV	King James Version
Lectionary	<i>The Lectionary for Mass</i> (1998/2002 USA edition)
LNTS	Library of New Testament Studies
LSJ	H. G. Liddell, R. Scott, and H. S. Jones, <i>A Greek-English Lexicon</i> , 9th ed. with revised supplement (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996)
LXX	Septuagint
NABRE	New American Bible (Revised Edition, 2011)
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NIV	New International Version

NJB	New Jerusalem Bible
<i>NovT</i>	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
NovTSup	Supplements to Novum Testamentum
<i>NPNF</i> <sup>1</sup>	<i>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series</i>
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
NSBT	New Studies in Biblical Theology
NT	New Testament
<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
OT	Old Testament
PCNT	Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament
RSV	Revised Standard Version
RSVCE	Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition
SNTSMS	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series
SP	Sacra Pagina
TTCS	Teach the Text Commentary Series
v(v).	verse(s)
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
<i>WTJ</i>	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament

### Books of the Old Testament

Gen	Genesis	Tob	Tobit	Ezek	Ezekiel
Exod	Exodus	Jdt	Judith	Dan	Daniel
Lev	Leviticus	Esther	Esther	Hosea	Hosea
Num	Numbers	1 Macc	1 Maccabees	Joel	Joel
Deut	Deuteronomy	2 Macc	2 Maccabees	Amos	Amos
Josh	Joshua	Job	Job	Obad	Obadiah
Judg	Judges	Ps(s)	Psalms(s)	Jon	Jonah
Ruth	Ruth	Prov	Proverbs	Mic	Micah
1 Sam	1 Samuel	Eccles	Ecclesiastes	Nah	Nahum
2 Sam	2 Samuel	Song	Song of Songs	Hab	Habakkuk
1 Kings	1 Kings	Wis	Wisdom	Zeph	Zephaniah
2 Kings	2 Kings	Sir	Sirach	Hag	Haggai
1 Chron	1 Chronicles	Isa	Isaiah	Zech	Zechariah
2 Chron	2 Chronicles	Jer	Jeremiah	Mal	Malachi
Ezra	Ezra	Lam	Lamentations		
Neh	Nehemiah	Bar	Baruch		

### Books of the New Testament

Matt	Matthew	Rom	Romans	Phil	Philippians
Mark	Mark	1 Cor	1 Corinthians	Col	Colossians
Luke	Luke	2 Cor	2 Corinthians	1 Thess	1 Thessalonians
John	John	Gal	Galatians	2 Thess	2 Thessalonians
Acts	Acts	Eph	Ephesians	1 Tim	1 Timothy

Abbreviations

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2 Tim 2 Timothy  
Titus Titus  
Philem Philemon  
Heb Hebrews

James James  
1 Pet 1 Peter  
2 Pet 2 Peter  
1 John 1 John

2 John 2 John  
3 John 3 John  
Jude Jude  
Rev Revelation

# Introduction to Romans

Few writings have influenced the history of Christian thought quite like Paul's Letter to the Romans. Though the letter is short as far as literary masterpieces go, the impact of Romans has been seismic. It is a work of special magnificence in which Paul's considerable skills as a pastor, evangelist, and theologian are given full display.

The importance of Romans might be measured by the list of scholars and saints who have struggled to elucidate its message. Origen of Alexandria seems to have been the first to attempt a detailed exposition of the letter, and he was followed by St. John Chrysostom, St. Augustine of Hippo, St. Cyril of Alexandria, and St. Thomas Aquinas, to name a few. Likewise, the intellectual architects of Protestantism, Martin Luther and John Calvin, hammered out several of their leading ideas on the anvil of Romans. Today the stream of research and writing devoted to Romans continues unabated. Like the rest of Sacred Scripture, which has God for its transcendent author, Paul's Letter to the Romans has a spiritual and theological depth that is literally inexhaustible.

## Author and Date

No one seriously disputes that the apostle Paul authored Romans. From ancient to modern times, only a tiny handful of exegetes, most of them writing in the 1800s, have ever challenged the Pauline authorship of the letter, and none has succeeded in disturbing the settled position of New Testament scholarship on this point. Not only is the name "Paul" attached to its opening line (1:1), but also virtually all agree that the imprint of Paul's extraordinary mind and personality are evident throughout. The author describes himself as an "Israelite" from

“the tribe of Benjamin” (11:1), as “the apostle to the Gentiles” (11:13), and as one who spread the gospel “from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum” (15:19). Taken together, these details fit the biographical profile of Paul like no other figure known to us from earliest Christianity.

To say that Paul authored Romans is not to say that Paul penned the letter with his own hand. The reader may be surprised to hear at the end of the epistle, “I, Tertius, the writer of this letter, greet you in the Lord” (16:22). Tertius, who is otherwise unknown, served the Apostle as an amanuensis—a scribe who either drafted the letter under Paul’s direction or copied it out at Paul’s dictation. Either way, Romans is too carefully worded and its arguments too sophisticated to cause us to think that Paul had anything but a very direct involvement in shaping both the content and expression of the epistle.

Paul appears to have sent his Letter to the Romans from the city of Corinth in Greece. There are several indicators that support this. (1) Near the end of the letter Paul indicates that he is making ready to travel to Judea with a “contribution for the poor among the holy ones in Jerusalem” (15:26). This matches the final phase of the Apostle’s third missionary tour described in the book of Acts (Acts 18:23–21:16), where we learn that Paul made a three-month stop-over “in Greece” (Acts 20:2–3) just before setting out for the Jewish capital (Acts 21:15–16). (2) This correlation between Romans and Acts is reinforced by Paul’s comment that Timothy, along with a man named Sosipater, was with him as the letter was being penned (Rom 16:21). In all likelihood, these are the same individuals mentioned in Acts as “Sopater” (a shortened form of Sosipater) and “Timothy,” both of whom were with Paul in Greece shortly before the Apostle commenced his journey to Jerusalem (Acts 20:4). (3) Paul tells us that he wrote Romans while staying as a guest in the house of “Gaius” (Rom 16:23). Presumably this is the same Gaius whom Paul had baptized when he founded the church at Corinth only a few years earlier (1 Cor 1:14). (4) Paul sent his letter to Rome by the hand of Phoebe, a deaconess from “the church at Cenchreae” (Rom 16:1). Cenchreae was the Aegean seaport in southern Greece that served the city of Corinth.

Paul most likely wrote Romans in the late winter of AD 57, give or take a year. This is inferred, once again, from the overlap between Paul’s remarks in Romans and the testimony of the book of Acts. Again, as indicated by his intent to travel to Jerusalem with a relief offering for Judean Christians (Rom 15:25–26), Paul is at the tail end of his third missionary tour (Acts 18:23–21:16), which may be dated within a small margin of error to the years AD 52–57. And since Acts informs us that Paul left Greece not long before the springtime feast

of Unleavened Bread (see Acts 20:6), a date for Romans around March of AD 57 cannot be far off the mark.

## Christianity in the Capital

Rome was the largest and most illustrious city in the world known to Paul. As the capital of the vast Roman Empire, its political importance was unrivaled. As a bustling center of cultural and commercial activity, its power to attract intellectuals, merchants, and opportunists from across the Mediterranean world was legendary. It is hardly surprising, then, that a missionary such as Paul should perceive the strategic potential of Rome for the advance of the gospel. By winning and strengthening converts in Rome, he could use the city's considerable influence to reach an entire civilization with the Christian message.

Oddly enough, precious little is known about the beginnings of Christianity in Rome. Questions about when, where, and under what circumstances residents in the capital first made contact with the gospel remain unclear. Nevertheless, there is broad agreement among scholars that Christianity first took hold in the city's synagogue community.



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Figure 1. Main hall of the Roman-period synagogue next to the gymnasium-bathhouse complex at Sardis, third century AD.

Historical evidence indicates that Jewish migrants settled in Rome as early as the second century BC; by the middle of the first century AD there could have been as many as fifty thousand.<sup>1</sup> According to one ancient source, a sizable number of Jews living in first-century Rome were descendants of captives taken to Italy from Roman military campaigns in the East and subsequently freed by their masters.<sup>2</sup> These Jews, like those throughout the empire, were accorded special protections and exemptions that allowed them to observe their religious customs without compromise.<sup>3</sup> Their freedoms included the right to assemble for worship, the right to collect the annual sanctuary tax for the temple in Jerusalem, the right to abstain from court proceedings on the sabbath, and the right to decline otherwise compulsory military service. Archaeology has thus far produced the names of more than twelve synagogues established in ancient Rome,<sup>4</sup> along with catacombs, indicating that a Jewish community thrived on the west bank of the Tiber in the first century.

It is not difficult to imagine that faith in Jesus as the Messiah would first find a home in the Roman synagogues rather than among the pagan inhabitants of the city. Ancient testimony suggests that a continuous flow of traffic and communication passed between Rome and Israel in the first century,<sup>5</sup> not least because of the annual pilgrimage festivals, which brought Jewish families from across the Roman Empire to worship in Jerusalem every spring (Passover, Pentecost) and fall (Tabernacles). In fact, the book of Acts states that Roman Jews were in attendance at the feast of Pentecost in AD 30 when the Holy Spirit first drove the apostles into the streets of Jerusalem with the gospel (Acts 2:10). It is certainly possible that some of these Roman pilgrims not only witnessed the event but also returned to Italy as baptized members of the newborn Christian Church (Acts 2:41). Or perhaps Roman attendees at a subsequent feast were the first to carry home convictions about the messiahship of Jesus. Regardless, it would only be a matter of time before “the power of God” released through the gospel (Rom 1:16) would make itself felt in the Jewish quarter of the world’s most prestigious city.

1. Harry J. Leon, *The Jews of Ancient Rome*, updated ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 135–36.

2. Philo of Alexandria, *Embassy to Gaius* 23.155.

3. Policies favorable to the Jewish population of the empire were put in place by the Caesars Julius and Augustus. See E. Mary Smallwood, *The Jews under Roman Rule: From Pompey to Diocletian*, 2nd ed. (Leiden: Brill, 1981), 120–38.

4. The evidence, drawn from Jewish burial inscriptions, is briefly surveyed in Wolfgang Wiefel, “The Jewish Community in Ancient Rome and the Origins of Roman Christianity,” in *The Romans Debate*, ed. Karl P. Donfried, rev. and expanded ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 85–101.

5. For instance, Acts 28:21 implies that written communication between Roman and Judean Jews was not out of the ordinary. There are also stories of Palestinian rabbis making visits to Rome (‘Mishnah *Abodah Zerah* 4.7; *Erubin* 4.1).

There is also a tradition that the apostle Peter came to Rome near the beginning of the reign of Caesar Claudius (AD 41–54).<sup>6</sup> Admittedly, some have questioned whether Peter ever traveled as far as the capital, especially at so early a date, but the relevant sources have not been sufficiently discredited to rule out the possibility that he had dealings with the Roman church at a point prior to the arrival of Paul’s letter. The tradition need not mean that Peter founded the Roman church in the sense of making the first converts in the capital.<sup>7</sup> It is just as possible that he helped to organize and encourage a small community of believers that was already in existence.<sup>8</sup>

In any case, Peter was almost certainly not in the capital when Paul wrote his Letter to the Romans. If Peter was, in fact, ministering in Rome in the mid-50s, Paul likely would have referred to him in the epistle, at the very least as someone to be singled out for greeting in the list of names in 16:3–16. Further, nothing Paul says in Romans convincingly undermines the tradition that Peter ministered in Rome in the 40s. Commentators sometimes read Paul’s remarks in 15:20—that his missionary policy was not to “build on another’s foundation”—to exclude the possibility that Peter or any other missionary could have played a significant role in establishing the Roman church. But if anything, this passage indicates that Paul, in sharing his gospel with believers in Rome, was making an *exception* to his usual practice. Normally the Apostle would steer away from places “where Christ has already been named,” but in this case he does just the opposite. Paul is eager both to write to the Roman Christians (1:15) and to visit them in person at his earliest opportunity (15:24, 32).

What is beyond dispute is that the Christian community in Rome was already well-established by the time Paul wrote his epistle. Not only does Paul claim that he has desired to visit the Roman Christians “for many years” (15:23), which presupposes that their church’s history stretches back for some time, but also he tells the congregation, “Your faith is heralded throughout the world” (1:8)

6. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.14. Jerome, *On Illustrious Men* 1.1, specifies that Peter arrived in Rome in the second year of Claudius.

7. On the one hand, a Christian writer from the fourth century claims that the Romans had not “received their faith in Christ from any of the apostles” (Ambrosiaster, *Commentary on Romans*, preface, in *Commentaries on Romans and 1–2 Corinthians*, trans. and ed. Gerald L. Bray, Ancient Christian Texts [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009], 1). On the other hand, the fifth-century historian Orosius attributes the beginning of the Roman church to the evangelization of Peter (*History against the Pagans* 7.6). Irenaeus, a bishop of the late second century, also states that the church in Rome was “founded and organized” by Peter and Paul (*Against Heresies* 3.3.2), although this is generally taken to refer to the apostles’ activities in the mid-60s, when both ministered and suffered martyrdom in Rome. The *Catalogus Liberianus* of AD 354 also names Peter as the founder of the church in Rome.

8. Even scholars who are unpersuaded that Peter was in Rome this early nevertheless find it probable that Christianity had come to the capital by the early 40s. See, e.g., Raymond E. Brown and John P. Meier, *Antioch and Rome: New Testament Cradles of Catholic Christianity* (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), 103.

and “Your obedience is known to all” (16:19). This is a church that has existed long enough to have stirred the admiration of Christians everywhere.

## The Christian Community in Rome

Little can be said with certainty about the social and economic situation of the believers addressed by Paul, except that they likely represented a cross section of Rome’s urban population. Based on the reception of Christianity in other major cities in the first century, one can probably envision a modest number of affluent and perhaps politically influential persons amid a congregation that consisted mainly of folks from the middle and lower classes, from artisans and merchants to manual laborers, slaves, and former slaves.

More significant for the interpretation of Romans is the question of the ethnic and religious background of Paul’s original audience. Views range from identifying the Roman Christians as predominantly Jewish, to predominantly Gentile, to some combination of the two. On this matter scholars rely on a degree of guesswork; but it seems likely that both Jews and non-Jews counted themselves members of the church in the imperial capital.

That some Jewish Christians formed part of Paul’s readership is clear from his list of personal contacts in Rome (16:3–16).<sup>9</sup> Three of the individuals he greets are identified as his “relatives” (16:7, 11), by which Paul means his Israelite kinsmen; two more, Prisca and Aquila (16:3), are generally considered a Jewish-Christian couple (Acts 18:2). Beyond this, Paul occasionally speaks in Romans as though Jewish ears were attending to his words. When the Apostle comments in 7:1, “I am speaking to people who know the law,” it is fairly certain that he has in mind readers steeped in the teachings of the Torah. Also, early in the letter Paul conducts a rhetorical dialogue in which he speaks to various issues and concerns peculiar to one who professes to be “a Jew” (2:17; 3:1). This is part of a pattern in Romans in which Paul defends himself and his teaching against Jewish objections, whether actual or potential (3:27–31; 9:1–3; 10:1–3). One does not get the impression from Romans that converts from Judaism formed a dominating presence in Rome’s Christian community, but they were certainly among the recipients of the letter.

More obvious is that Paul counted his Roman readers “among . . . the Gentiles” (1:13). This is apparent from passages such as 11:13, where Paul declares, “Now I am speaking to you Gentiles,” after which he cautions non-Jewish disciples

9. I hold that ch. 16 is an integral part of Paul’s original Letter to the Romans, even though a few modern scholars dispute this.

against a prideful disdain for unbelieving Israel. Likewise, if the list of Paul's acquaintances in 16:3–16 is any indication, Gentile Christians in Rome must have outnumbered Jewish Christians by a wide margin. Of the twenty-six persons who receive a greeting, a full twenty bear native Greek and Latin names. Still, nothing like an exact proportion of Jews to Gentiles can be determined. The majority of scholars are content to say that the Christians in Rome were mostly Gentiles, with an appreciable number of Jewish believers among their ranks.

Assuming this to be a reasonable judgment, we might then ask: How did the church in Rome come to have more Gentiles than Jews by the time Paul sent his letter? The problem is acute given the common belief that Roman Christianity initially took root in the synagogue community. At least two considerations can help answer this.

First, numerous Gentiles in the Roman world were attracted to Judaism and observed its religious customs in varying degrees. In other words, synagogue communities in the †Diaspora (i.e., in lands outside Israel) were already places where Jews and Gentiles came together for fellowship and worship on a regular basis. Some Gentiles chose to become Jewish converts or proselytes, which means they embraced the full yoke of the Torah, beginning with circumcision. However, a greater number of Gentiles attached themselves to the synagogue in more limited ways. They became what are often called “God-fearers”—persons who admired the moral ideals of Judaism and worshiped the God of Israel but stopped short of circumcision and complete conversion to the Jewish religion. Thus the Roman church, although it originated in the synagogues, probably did not start out as a purely Jewish community. The earliest group of disciples in Rome likely included Jews and Gentiles from the start, even if members of Jewish descent were at first more numerous.

Second, the shift from a Jewish to a Gentile majority in the Roman church by the mid-50s is best accounted for by the Edict of Claudius in AD 49. This imperial decree expelled the Jewish community from Rome because of disturbances in the local synagogues instigated by a certain Chrestus.<sup>10</sup> According to most scholars, “Chrestus” is not the name of a troublemaker in the community, but a variant spelling of the Latin name *Christus*, or “Christ.” In other words, it seems that the upheaval in Rome's synagogue community was caused by sharp disagreements between those who believed that Jesus was the Messiah

10. The edict is first mentioned by the Roman historian Suetonius (*Life of Claudius* 25.4). The date of the edict, however, is given by the fifth-century Christian historian Orosius (*History against the Pagans* 7.6.15). The latter's testimony agrees with Acts 18:2, which indicates that around AD 51 Paul crossed paths in Corinth with the Jewish-Christian couple Aquila and Priscilla, who had “recently” come from Italy on account of Claudius's eviction.

and those who did not. The book of Acts shows that tensions of this sort could be expressed not only in heated debate but also in persecution and violence.<sup>11</sup>

Whatever the precise nature of the unrest, Claudius found it a nuisance, and so he ousted the Jewish community from the capital. And since Christian Jews were indistinguishable from non-Christian Jews in the eyes of the authorities at this early date, the decree suddenly deprived the Roman church of its Jewish membership, leaving only God-fearing Gentiles behind to carry on without them. It was not until the death of Claudius in AD 54 that the decree effectively expired, allowing Jews to reestablish residency in the capital. For at least five years, then, the church in Rome was a purely Gentile community, and no doubt one that continued to expand and grow with new members. The return of Jewish-Christian exiles in the mid-50s would explain the presence of a Jewish minority in the Roman church as well as the friction between Gentiles and Jews reflected in the letter. Numerous scholars find this to be a plausible reconstruction of the historical situation addressed by Paul.

### Reasons for Writing the Letter

Paul had several reasons for writing Romans. Most of these are made explicit in the opening and closing parts of the letter, especially in 1:8–15 and 15:14–33, while others may be inferred from a reading of the letter as a whole. At least three primary aims can be identified.

1. Paul wrote to make *personal contact* with the Roman Christians in advance of an anticipated visit. With the exception of those named in 16:3–16, the Apostle was not directly acquainted with the believers in Rome. His missionary travels had not yet taken him as far west as Italy, and yet he desired to visit the Roman Christians in person and to strengthen them in their faith (1:11–13; 15:23). He felt himself obligated (1:14–15) as “the apostle to the Gentiles” (11:13) to preach the gospel in the epicenter of the Gentile world (15:15–16). In view of these facts, Romans may be considered Paul’s letter of self-recommendation, wherein he takes the opportunity to introduce himself and his teaching as a way of preparing for his arrival.

2. Paul wrote to establish a *partnership* with the Romans in bringing the gospel to Spain. Thanks to his tireless efforts in the 40s and early 50s, the foundations of the Church had been solidly laid in the eastern Mediterranean (15:19), and Paul felt it was now time to turn his attention to the West (15:23–24). He saw Rome as a potential base of operations for his projected mission to Spain, much as the

11. Acts 13:16–50; 14:1–7, 19; 17:1–9, 13; 18:5–6, 12–17; 19:23.

church in Syrian Antioch had sponsored his evangelization efforts in the East (Acts 13:1–3; 15:35–41; 18:22–23). In sending the letter, the Apostle hoped to gain the Romans’ support—spiritual, logistical, and financial—so that this next phase of missionary activity could be successfully launched (Rom 15:28–32).

3. Paul wrote to sort out a *pastoral problem* that had come to his attention. It is fairly certain that the church in Rome was experiencing internal tensions between Jewish and Gentile believers. Divergent perspectives on the plan of God, exacerbated by mutual struggles with ethnic and religious prejudice, appear to be the leading causes of the trouble. Judging from Paul’s comments, it seems that some Jews boasted of being the chosen people of God. They therefore put a high premium on the rituals of the law that served as badges of Israel’s <sup>†</sup>election, things such as circumcision, feast day observances, and dietary regulations (2:23–25; 4:1–11; 14:1–9). Some, in fact, may have considered themselves superior to uncircumcised Christians (2:17–23), perhaps as having a special claim on God, as though he was not equally the God of the Gentiles (3:27–31). A number of Gentile Christians, for their part, apparently came to think of themselves as a replacement for Israel, as though God had rejected his beloved people of old (11:1–24). Theirs was the boast of the latecomer who thinks that he supersedes and supplants the predecessor. The result was that certain Jewish and Gentile disciples were condescending and unwelcoming toward one another (15:7). The influx of returning Jewish Christians into a flourishing Gentile church in Rome likely occasioned or intensified these types of friction and disunity.

## Themes and Theology of the Letter

Most scholars agree that Romans is the crown jewel of the Pauline Epistles. It is one of the fullest and richest expositions of the Christian gospel ever captured in writing; some have gone so far as to call it a compendium of all Christian doctrine.<sup>12</sup> This latter assessment is certainly overstated, since too many essential topics are unmentioned in the letter to consider it a synopsis of Paul’s whole theology.<sup>13</sup> Still, along with the Letter to the Hebrews, Romans is the closest thing we have to a formal theological treatise in the New Testament.

Romans is all about the drama of sin and salvation. Paul’s thoughts range widely over a landscape of theological and pastoral matters, yet each can be

12. This was the view of Martin Luther’s protégé, Philip Melancthon.

13. For example, Romans has little or nothing to say about the Church and its various ministries, about the centrality of the Eucharist in Christian worship, about the return of Jesus in glory and the events of the end times, and so forth, even though these are vital subjects of discussion in some of Paul’s other letters.

traced back to this inner core of Pauline preaching. Underlying the doctrinal exposition of Romans is a story in which God and the human family are estranged and reconciled again, thanks to the saving righteousness of the Father, the death and resurrection of the Son, and the sanctifying action of the Spirit. Together the Persons of the triune God have done for the fallen race of Adam what it was helpless to do on its own—namely, to raise it from the bondage of sin and death to the grace of new life in the family of God. Paul's achievement in Romans is to showcase this truth as the distilled essence of Christianity. The gospel is nothing if not a message of unmerited grace, of God's love redeeming a world undeserving of such a blessing (5:8; 6:23; 8:15; 11:32).

The theology of Romans may be summarized under four headings: (1) God's righteousness as the basis of salvation, (2) the benefits of salvation for humanity, (3) the salvation of Israel in particular, and (4) the responsibilities that salvation places on the Christian community.

### 1. *The Righteousness of God*

Before all else, Paul contends that the gospel reveals the righteousness of God (1:17).<sup>14</sup> By this he means that God has shown himself faithful to his covenant commitments of old by accomplishing his greatest saving work in Jesus Christ (3:21–26). Paul elucidates this theme throughout Romans with an eye toward two developments in the early Church that demanded careful explanation: (a) Christianity's acceptance of Gentiles into the messianic community without requiring their submission to Jewish rites such as circumcision; and (b) widespread unbelief in the gospel among Jews, which could seem to call into question the veracity of the Church's proclamation. Because these missionary situations raised questions about God's plan for Israel and the world, Paul labors in Romans to vindicate the faithfulness of God by delineating the various ways the Lord is accomplishing salvation for all people. He is not content simply to assert God's "fidelity" (3:3), "love" (5:8), "kindness" (11:22), and "truthfulness" (15:8) without support; he shows how God's actions in Christ confirm the divine promises to the patriarchs (15:8), the testimony of the Mosaic law (3:31), and the expectations of the prophetic writings (16:26).

In particular, Paul expounds God's righteousness with reference to God's covenants with Abraham and David. He contends that the Abrahamic covenant,

14. Romans has even been called "a large-scale map" of the righteousness of God. See N. T. Wright, "Romans and the Theology of Paul," in *Pauline Theology, Volume III: Romans*, ed. David M. Hay and E. Elizabeth Johnson (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 30–67, quotation from p. 36.

which included promises of Abraham's universal fatherhood (Gen 17:4) and worldwide blessings through his <sup>†</sup>elect offspring (Gen 22:16–18), reaches fulfillment as Jews and Gentiles come to faith in Jesus Christ and receive his salvation on equal terms (Rom 1:16; 3:28–30). For believing Jews, the true significance of circumcision as a sign of the Abrahamic covenant (Gen 17:10–14) is fulfilled when they exercise the faith of Abraham (Rom 4:12) and observe the Torah from the heart (2:25–29). That only a <sup>†</sup>remnant of Israel has come to embrace the gospel (11:1–5) is no argument that the word of God has failed, since Scripture reveals that the Israel of faith has always been a chosen subset of Israel according to the flesh (9:6–8). Likewise, in reference to believing Gentiles, Paul insists that their faith is counted as “righteousness,” just as Abraham’s was before he was circumcised (4:3–5, referring to Gen 15:6), and that their imitation of Abraham’s trustful reliance on God makes them his spiritual children, fulfilling the divine pledge that Abraham would become “the father of many nations” (Rom 4:16–17, referring to Gen 17:4). All this was made possible, Paul says, because the Father did not spare his only Son but handed him over to death, just as father Abraham willingly surrendered his beloved Isaac, so that the blessings of the covenant could flow out to all nations (Rom 8:32, alluding to the episode in Gen 22:1–18).

Less appreciated but no less important is Paul’s announcement that God has also fulfilled his covenant of kingship with David. This was the Lord’s threefold pledge to enthrone David’s offspring forever, to make his heir a “son” by royal adoption, and to establish the heir’s rule over Israel and the Gentiles together (2 Sam 7:12–14; Pss 2:7–8; 89:3–5, 20–38). It was precisely this complex of promises that defined most of the messianic expectations in the first century, and Paul makes them a vital part of his gospel exposition in Romans. From the start, he gives Jesus the title “Christ” (Rom 1:1), a reference to the “Anointed One” or “Messiah” of ancient Jewish theology.<sup>15</sup> Lest this go unnoticed, Paul affirms that Jesus was born of the royal line of David according to the flesh (1:3) and that God raised him to an immortal life of kingship as “Son of God in power” (1:4). Not only does this verify God’s faithfulness to Israel, who received the strongest assurances that the Lord’s covenant with David would not falter (e.g., Ps 89:34–36), but the Davidic kingship of Jesus has direct implications for the nations beyond Israel as well: “The root of Jesse shall come, / raised up to rule the Gentiles” (Rom 15:12), Paul reminds his readers, citing Isa 11:10. In Paul’s

15. The NABRE varies its translation of the Greek *Christos*. It is rendered “Christ” when used as a direct reference to Jesus, but “Messiah” when referring to the chief blessing promised to Israel (Rom 9:5). Readers should be aware that the underlying Greek term is the same in all instances and that Paul uses the title “Christ” with its full messianic significance intended.

vision, the risen Jesus is enthroned as Messiah and Lord “at the right hand of God” (Rom 8:34), where he intercedes for Israel and the nations and summons all to submit to his lordship (10:12) with “the obedience of faith” (1:5).

## 2. *The Reconciliation of the World*

Paul establishes in Romans not only the fact of salvation in Christ but also the need for salvation by all. He prepares to announce the good news by reviewing the bad news of human rebellion against God. Paul turns a spotlight on sin in several places in Romans, but especially in 1:18–3:20. Here, at the beginning of the letter, Paul rails against the idolatry and immorality that prevail in the non-Jewish world of Greeks and barbarians (1:18–32); but he brings charges against Israel as well (2:1–3:20). He agrees with fellow Jews that divine judgment rightly comes against pagan depravity (2:2); nevertheless, he contends that his Jewish brethren, by transgressions of the Torah, are likewise “under the domination of sin” (3:9) and in need of salvation (1:16; 11:26–27). This he establishes with multiple quotations from the Psalms (Rom 3:10–14, 18, 20) and Isaiah (Rom 2:24; 3:15–17), so that no one can dispute that “all have sinned and are deprived of the glory of God” (3:23). Ultimately, Paul traces humanity’s need for mercy and reconciliation with God back to the first man, Adam, whose primordial disobedience caused sin to infect his progeny on a universal scale (5:12). Thanks to him, death claimed lordship over the entire human race (5:17) and condemnation came to all (5:18). In this fallen state, the descendants of Adam—Jews as well as Gentiles—are branded “enemies” of God (5:10) and left “helpless” to do anything about their predicament (5:6).

But this is not a problem without a solution. For Paul, the tragedy of spiritual bondage is merely a backdrop against which the gospel shines brighter, for it reveals that “God delivered all to disobedience, that he might have mercy upon all” (11:32). Salvation has now come through Jesus Christ, whose sacrificial death brings forgiveness of sins (3:24–25) and opens the way for reconciliation between the Father and the family of Adam (5:10). Paul articulates this vision of salvation primarily in terms of justification and divine adoption. *Justification* is the action of God toward one who believes in Jesus (3:26), an action that pardons the sinner and makes him or her righteous in the sight of God (5:19). This is Paul’s way of saying that justification establishes the believer in a right covenant relationship with God. Indeed, he labors in Romans to distinguish the messianic age from the Mosaic age by stressing that membership in the covenant community is secured by faith in Jesus the Messiah and not by observance of

Mosaic ritual laws (3:20, 28). Rather than something that is merited or earned by legal practices such as circumcision (4:2–5), justification is a free gift of grace (3:24) bestowed on the circumcised and uncircumcised alike who believe (3:30). *Divine adoption*, though often underappreciated, is arguably the premiere blessing bestowed on the Christian.<sup>16</sup> Paul has important things to say about this in Romans, where he proclaims that believers united with Christ and led by the Spirit (8:10–11) are the sons and daughters of God (8:15–17). God’s adopted children are rescued from the fallen family of Adam, raised to a new standing in the divine family of the Father, and so counted younger siblings of Jesus, “the firstborn among many brothers” (8:29).

Strictly speaking, justification and adoption are two ways of describing the same thing. Not only do they represent two dimensions of a single reality—salvation by grace through faith in Christ—but a close reading of Paul also reveals that both are actualized in the liturgical context of baptism. It is in the sacrament that the benefits of Jesus’ dying and rising to new life are applied to the believer in a transformative way (6:3–4; see 4:25; 1 Cor 6:11; Titus 3:5). Once justified as adopted sons and daughters, the community of faith lives at peace with God (Rom 5:1) and is drawn forward by the hope of sharing the glory of God (5:2). Central to this future hope is the final justification of the faithful before the divine judge (2:6–7, 13) along with the resurrection and redemption of their bodies from suffering and decay (8:18–21, 23).

### 3. *The Restoration of Israel*

Romans also deals with the relation between the gospel and the people of Israel, a subject to which Paul gives focused attention in chapters 9–11. Reflection on this topic was occasioned by the fact that “not everyone” in Israel “heeded the good news” (10:16). Disbelief in Jesus as Messiah and Lord was common enough that Paul could speak about it in summary terms as Israel’s “transgression” (11:11) and “disobedience” (11:30). He charges that many of his kin had stumbled (9:32) and become like branches severed from the trunk of an olive tree “because of unbelief” (11:20). This was a source of “constant anguish” for Paul (9:2), who prayed and worked tirelessly for the salvation of Israel (10:1; 11:13–14).

16. See Trevor J. Burke, “Adopted as Sons (ΥΙΟΘΕΣΙΑ): The Missing Piece in Pauline Soteriology,” in *Paul: Jew, Greek, and Roman*, ed. Stanley E. Porter (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 259–87; Martin W. Schoenberg, OSC, “St. Paul’s Notion on the Adoptive Sonship of Christians,” *The Thomist* 28, no. 1 (1964): 51–75; J. M. Scott, *Adoption as Sons of God: An Exegetical Investigation into the Background of ΥΙΟΘΕΣΙΑ in the Pauline Corpus* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1992).

The widespread failure of Israel to accept the righteousness of God in Jesus (10:3–4) raises theological questions about the justice and reliability of God, which Paul is anxious to defend and clarify. As usual, he tackles these issues by turning to the Old Testament. There he finds a consistent pattern in the way God accomplishes his purposes in history. Paul demonstrates, for example, that the Lord advances his plan of redemption through an elect remnant of Israelites (9:27–29; 11:2–5). These are the chosen recipients of his mercy, while others among the covenant people are hardened (9:16–18). God, according to biblical teaching, is sovereignly free to dispense his blessings, just as a potter is free to determine the shape to be given a lump of clay (9:19–23). Indeed, he is now extending his grace to Gentiles as well as Jews (9:24–29), since he is Lord of both (10:12). The point of these observations is to demonstrate that God is not unjust in his ways (9:14) and that his word to Israel has not failed (9:6).

Paul's reading of Scripture is intended to show that Israel's stumbling in the present follows the pattern of Israel's stumbling in the past. One should not be surprised—much less skeptical of Christian claims—to witness Israel resisting the gospel, with only a remnant responding in faith (11:5–7). The Lord brings a “hardening” upon part of Israel (11:25) so that salvation might come to the Gentiles (11:11). But Israel is not thereby a rejected people (11:1–2). On the contrary, the chosen people are still “beloved because of the patriarchs” (11:28). In fact, as they watch the nations come to faith in the Messiah, God aims to provoke Israel to a jealous imitation of Gentile belief (10:19; 11:13–14) that will reattach them to the olive tree of the Lord's messianic community (11:23–24). Paul stands in awe of “this mystery” and its glorious realization when “all Israel will be saved” (11:25–26). He marvels at the way God uses even disobedience, first among Gentiles and then among Israel, to bestow his mercy on all (11:32).

#### *4. The Requirements of the Christian Life*

Intermittently throughout Romans, Paul translates his theological vision into practical instructions for Christian living. Speaking generally, he urges readers to walk “in the newness of life” they received in baptism (6:4). Believers must fight against the enslaving power of sin (6:12–14) and yield themselves to obedience, which leads to righteousness (6:16), sanctification (6:19), and ultimately eternal life (6:22). To achieve this, they must offer body and mind as a sacrifice to the Lord (12:1–2) and remain steadfast in prayer (12:12). Suffering plays a critical role in this as well, as Paul ascribes to it the power to sculpt a Christian's character (5:3–4) and conform the believer more closely to

Christ (8:17). Regarding particular attitudes and actions, Paul urges disciples to practice humility (12:3, 16) and generosity (12:13) and so conquer evil with what is good (12:21). As members of the body of Christ, believers are expected to use their spiritual gifts for the upbuilding of the whole community (12:4–8); as citizens in the world, they are bidden to pay taxes and to honor rightful government authorities (13:1–7). Those who observe these standards will become more like Jesus, who “did not please himself” (15:3) but made himself a “servant” to all (15:8 RSV).

Fundamental to Paul’s moral and spiritual catechesis in Romans is the conviction that Christian living is possible only by the grace of the Spirit (8:11). Once empowered from within, the children of God can finally put to death the sinful deeds of the flesh (8:13) that impede their ability to obey the law of God (8:7). In other words, the Spirit enables the baptized to fulfill “the righteous decree of the law” that was otherwise unattainable for fallen human nature (8:4). Paul appears to have in mind the specific decree to “love one another” (13:8), which constitutes the fulfillment of the law (13:10). This level of obedience, which comes from the heart (6:17), is the outworking of divine grace, since “the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the holy Spirit that has been given to us” (5:5). The love required by the law is a love powerfully and abundantly supplied by the Spirit.

## Challenges for Interpreting the Letter

Many readers find Romans to be almost as frustrating as it is fascinating. It is one of the most loved of the Pauline Letters, and yet it does not yield its secrets willingly. Critics say this is because Paul is a clumsy and confused thinker. The truth of the matter, however, is just the opposite. Paul is one of most brilliant theologians the Church has ever known, and so his thoughts frequently soar at an altitude that few others are able to reach or sustain.

Romans is a demanding read. This seems to have been evident already in apostolic times—possibly Peter had Romans in mind when he admitted that “there are some things hard to understand” in Paul’s Letters (2 Pet 3:16). All of us are sure to find parts of this letter that make for slow sledding. But this is not a bad thing. Taking the time to read carefully through Romans and to ask intelligent questions along the way can bring tremendous rewards. After all, Paul did not write with the intention of being obscure or of having his teaching misconstrued. He has precious wisdom to offer, but we won’t receive it without some exertion.

A few things should be kept in mind when reading Romans: (1) Paul's writing style is terse and tightly packed. Few have the ability to stuff a maximum of meaning into a minimum of words like the apostle to the Gentiles. Consequently, the impression derived from a surface reading of his words rarely penetrates to the depths of what he is trying to say. This is an argument for mulling over Romans and reading it attentively several times over. (2) At the same time, we need to be careful not to lose sight of the forest for the trees by fixating on words and phrases to the neglect of the whole message of the letter or its larger units. Paul is notorious for building his arguments over the course of several chapters at a time. If we fail to see this, we risk missing the big picture of what Romans is all about. (3) From start to finish, Paul measures the truth of his gospel against the teaching of Scripture. In fact, of the whole collection of Pauline Letters, none is more densely concentrated with references to the Old Testament than Romans. And despite occasional charges to the contrary, he is not guilty of mere proof-texting—of plucking verses from the Bible that appear to support his assertions regardless of what they actually mean. On the contrary, Paul's biblical exegesis in Romans is contextual exegesis. This means, on the one hand, that Paul is aware of the original contexts and meanings of his scriptural references and, on the other, that he generally considers that information relevant. Readers who are less familiar with the Old Testament than Paul will need to go back and investigate the original contexts of his biblical citations. A precise understanding of his teaching often depends on our willingness to do this type of background work.

# Structure and Outline

The literary structure of Romans is simple and straightforward. In chapters 1–11 Paul presents readers with an *exposition* of Christian faith, and in chapters 12–16 he offers a range of *exhortations* regarding Christian life. Belief and behavior, or catechesis and conduct, thus form the two main panels of the epistle. These, in turn, are framed by a formal introduction (1:1–15) and a lengthy conclusion (15:14–16:27). For additional divisions of the letter, see the outline below.

- I. Introduction (1:1–15)
- II. Exposition of the Gospel (1:16–11:36)
  - A. Salvation for Jew and Gentile (1:16–4:25)
    - 1. The Power of the Gospel (1:16–17)
    - 2. The Depravity of the Gentiles (1:18–32)
    - 3. The Disobedience of the Jews (2:1–3:20)
    - 4. The Saving Righteousness of God (3:21–31)
    - 5. The Faith and Example of Abraham (4:1–25)
  - B. Salvation through Christ and the Spirit (5:1–8:39)
    - 1. Reconciliation with God in Christ (5:1–11)
    - 2. Adam Contrasted with Christ (5:12–21)
    - 3. Baptism and Sanctification in Christ (6:1–23)
    - 4. Sin and the Struggle to Keep the Law (7:1–25)
    - 5. Sonship and Life in the Spirit (8:1–17)
    - 6. Suffering and God’s Unconquerable Love (8:18–39)
  - C. Salvation for Israel and the Nations (9:1–11:36)
    - 1. The Freedom of God’s Word to Israel (9:1–29)
    - 2. The Failure of Israel to Heed God’s Word (9:30–10:21)

3. The Restoration of All Israel (11:1–32)
4. Doxology (11:33–36)
- III. Exhortations to Gospel Living (12:1–15:13)
  - A. Transformation of Life in Christ (12:1–13:14)
    1. Renewal of the Mind (12:1–2)
    2. Spiritual Gifts and Personal Relationships (12:3–21)
    3. Christians and Civil Authorities (13:1–7)
    4. The Call to Love and Vigilance (13:8–14)
  - B. The Weak and the Strong (14:1–15:13)
    1. Refraining from Judgment (14:1–12)
    2. Avoiding Scandal (14:13–23)
    3. The Example of Christ the Servant (15:1–13)
- IV. Conclusion (15:14–16:27)

# The Messiah and the Gospel of Salvation

## Romans 1:1–32

Romans begins with an unusually full introduction. This should not be surprising, since Paul is introducing himself to a Christian community that, for the most part, he does not know personally. The Apostle sets forth his credentials, recites a confession of faith, and is generous with compliments for the Roman believers. He concludes these formalities with a word of thanksgiving, and then begins the theological exposition of his gospel.

### The Opening Address (1:1–7)

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**<sup>1</sup>Paul, a slave of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God, <sup>2</sup>which he promised previously through his prophets in the holy scriptures, <sup>3</sup>the gospel about his Son, descended from David according to the flesh, <sup>4</sup>but established as Son of God in power according to the spirit of holiness through resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord. <sup>5</sup>Through him we have received the grace of apostleship, to bring about the obedience of faith, for the sake of his name, among all the Gentiles, <sup>6</sup>among whom are you also, who are called to belong to Jesus Christ; <sup>7</sup>to all the beloved of God in Rome, called to be holy. Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.**

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**OT:** 2 Sam 7:14; Ps 2:7

**NT:** Acts 2:29–33; 13:32–33; 2 Tim 2:8; Heb 1:2–5

**Catechism:** slaves of Christ, 876; risen glory of Christ, 445, 648; son of David, Son of God, 496; obedience of faith, 143, 2087

**Lectionary:** 4th Sunday of Advent (Year A)

Paul leads off with a salutation typical of those found in Greco-Roman letters: he names the sender, identifies the addressee, and expresses a greeting along with a wish of well-being for the recipient(s). But he adapts and expands the conventional format with Christian elements. To his name, Paul attaches titles and qualifications intended to resonate with believers in Rome; and instead of wishing readers good health or a windfall of material prosperity, he prays for an outpouring of grace and peace in their lives.

1:1 **Paul** introduces himself as a **slave** whose entire life is dedicated to serving **Jesus**. In a secular context the Greek term *doulos* might insinuate something degrading; but here Paul is using a term given to those many “servants” of the Lord whose faithfulness is celebrated in the Old Testament, figures such as Moses (Josh 1:1), Joshua (Josh 24:29), David (Ps 89:4), and the prophets (2 Kings 17:23).

But more than a servant, Paul is an **apostle**. He has seen the risen Jesus (1 Cor 9:1) and has received a personal commission from him to preach the gospel (Gal 1:1, 11–12). This makes Paul a royal messenger, an ambassador vested with the authority of the one who sent him.

Paul was **called** and **set apart** for this service by the Lord. He uses nearly identical language in Gal 1:15 to say that God consecrated him from his mother’s womb to be a minister of the Word, much as God had done for the prophet Jeremiah (Jer 1:5) and for the †Servant of the Lord who appears in Isaiah (Isa 49:1). Paul is aware, in other words, that apostleship is not volunteer work—something one does out of personal interest or a magnanimous desire to make the world a better place. Apostolic ministry is a vocation, a calling from the Lord that brings with it a solemn responsibility. Paul was “a chosen vessel” handpicked by the Lord to be a missionary for the Messiah (Acts 9:15 KJV).

Paul’s task was first and foremost to proclaim **the gospel**. Here the word “gospel” does not refer to the written Gospels of the New Testament (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John). Rather, the Greek term *euangelion* is a single-word summary for “the good news of salvation” accomplished by Jesus. In the ancient world, a *euangelion* was the announcement of a world-changing event, often a spectacular military triumph or the accession of a new ruler—the kind of screaming headline that would get wall-to-wall coverage in today’s media. Beyond that, the word evokes a prominent theme from the book of Isaiah (expressed by the related verb *euangelizō*) that speaks of the Lord redeeming his people Israel and extending his salvation to the ends of the earth (see the †Septuagint version of Isa 40:9; 52:7; 60:6; 61:1). These associations add dimension and depth to the good news announced by Paul.

But to understand Paul’s mission in life, one must ultimately consider the focus of his life, which is Jesus. And the first thing the Apostle tells us about Jesus is that he is the **Christ**. This word is familiar to us—maybe too familiar. We tend to think of it as a second name and forget, perhaps, what it signifies. “Christ” is a title meaning the “Anointed One” or “Messiah” of Jewish expectation, a title heavy with theological significance, as the texts and traditions of the Old Testament manifest. Although there was some variety in Jewish thinking, most of the messianic hopes in Paul’s day clustered around the promise of a future Davidic ruler, an ideal king from the dynastic line of David and Solomon.<sup>1</sup> Verses 3–4 will show that Paul attaches this messianic title to Jesus with a full awareness of its royal Davidic overtones.

Paul affirms that the gospel was **promised previously** in the texts of the **holy 1:2 scriptures**, what Christians call the Old Testament. The good news about Jesus is not a new story: he is the glorious realization of a divine plan set in place from the beginning. In fact, one of Paul’s aims in Romans is to show that his preaching is fully in line with the Scriptures of Israel, all of which prepare for this climax of history in some way or another. Roughly sixty times in Romans the Apostle will reference texts of the Old Testament, and in numerous other instances he will allude to their message or adopt their wording in more subtle ways.<sup>2</sup> Paul hopes that by the time he reaches the end of the letter, he will have shown how the mystery of salvation in Christ is “manifested through the prophetic writings” of the Bible (16:26).

Scholars frequently contend that verses 3–4 are taken from an ancient Christian hymn or confession of faith. This is a possibility but not a certainty. What- 1:3–4 ever their origin, Paul is strumming a chord of great theological importance. He makes two assertions about Jesus that constitute his messianic credentials: according to human genealogy, Jesus is a royal descendant of **David**; and since rising from death to new life, he has been designated **Son of God in power**.

Paul’s point is not that Jesus became the divine Son of God at his resurrection, a theological error known as “adoptionism.” Nor is he summarizing the Church’s faith in the human and divine natures of Christ, a theological truth known as “the hypostatic union.” Rather, Paul is centering his thoughts on the messiahship of Jesus in relation to the miracle of Easter.<sup>3</sup> In his mortal humanity,

1. Relevant texts of the Old Testament include Isa 9:5–6; 11:1–5; Jer 23:5–6; 30:9; Ezek 34:23–24; 37:24–28; Hosea 3:5. Extrabiblical witnesses include *Psalms of Solomon* 17.1–46 and the Dead Sea Scroll fragment called 4QFlorilegium (= 4Q174).

2. The figure comes from Steve Moyise, *Paul and Scripture: Studying the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 3.

3. Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 41–43.

Jesus fulfilled the expectation that God's Anointed would come from the royal line of David (2 Tim 2:8); and in his risen humanity, now rendered immortal by the glory of God, Jesus actually became the king that God swore would rule upon David's throne "forever" (Ps 89:4–5, 30–38; see Luke 1:31–33). Death had prevented every other Davidic successor from fulfilling this seemingly impossible oath. But ever since the dawn of the third day, "Christ, raised from the dead, dies no more; death no longer has power over him" (Rom 6:9).

The title "Son of God" thus has a messianic significance anchored in the Lord's covenant of kingship with David. Especially relevant are two passages, 2 Sam 7:14 and Ps 2:7, which describe David's anointed heir as a "son" adopted by God on the day of his coronation as king of Israel.<sup>4</sup> Paul contends that Jesus, raised and enthroned in his Davidic humanity, has come to occupy this permanent kingly office in fulfillment of the Lord's oath.<sup>5</sup> He now reigns forever "at the right hand of God" (Rom 8:34). Peter made precisely this point in his Pentecost sermon in Acts 2:29–36, and Paul himself touched on it in his inaugural preaching in Acts 13:30–37.

None of this means that the divinity of Jesus is unimportant to Paul or irrelevant to his remarks. On the contrary, the two assertions that delineate the status of Christ's humanity before and after the **resurrection** are both affirmations about the divine **Son**. One can therefore say that the risen humanity of Jesus has blossomed into a more perfect *image* of his divine Sonship and become a more perfect *instrument* of his divine sovereignty. From now on the splendor of the eternal Son of God is manifest in and through Christ the risen man.<sup>6</sup>

Paul further relates the Son's resurrection to **the spirit of holiness**, which is a Semitic way of saying "the Holy Spirit" (the Hebrew equivalent occurs in Ps 51:13; Isa 63:10–11; and multiple times in the Dead Sea Scrolls). Paul will explain in chapter 8 how the miracle of the resurrection will be replicated when the "Spirit" of the Father imparts glory and life to the "mortal bodies" (Rom 8:11) of all who are sons and daughters of God by adoption (8:15).<sup>7</sup>

4. Christopher G. Whitsett, "Son of God, Seed of David: Paul's Messianic Exegesis in Romans 1:3–4," *JBL* 119, no. 4 (2000): 661–81.

5. Interpretation hinges on the meaning of the Greek participle *horisthentos*, which the NABRE renders "established" and other contemporary translations render "designated" (RSV), "declared" (NIV), or even "proclaimed" (JB). Here the term most likely means "appointed," with an office or position in view, as in Acts 10:42; 17:31.

6. See F. X. Durrwell, *The Resurrection: A Biblical Study*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1960), 45–47, 131–33.

7. Resurrection of the dead is linked to the work of the Holy Spirit also in the Old Testament (Ezek 37:13–14) and in early rabbinic theology (<sup>1</sup>Mishnah *Sotah* 9.15).

Paul returns briefly to his accreditation as an apostle. This is not an office 1:5 that one merits or earns; it is a **grace** that God freely bestows. And the words **we have received** indicate that Paul is conscious of being part of a larger group. Others are apostles as well, such as the Twelve (Luke 6:13–16), along with a wider circle of individuals (1 Cor 15:5–7), some of whom were sent forth as representatives from local congregations in the earliest days (Acts 14:14; 2 Cor 8:23). As an evangelist and founder of churches, Paul holds an **apostleship** with plenary authority, on the level of the original Twelve.

His mission is to promote **the obedience of faith** throughout the world (see Rom 15:18). The expression forms a literary *inclusio*—a thematic statement that stands like two bookends at the beginning (1:5) and end of the letter (16:26). With this device Paul signals that “the obedience of faith” embraces and holds together much of his teaching in Romans.

The expression can be understood in different ways. Some argue that it means “the obedience that flows *from* faith.” Others contend that it means “the obedience that *is* faith.” Of the two options, the second is more likely Paul’s intended meaning, since he virtually equates obedience with believing in the gospel (see 10:16, where “heeded”—literally, “obeyed”—and “believed” both indicate acceptance of the good news). Conversely, the Apostle considers unbelief or rejection of the Christian message a form of disobedience (10:21; 11:23, 30–31).

Throughout Romans, “faith” and “obedience” stand in the closest relationship. Despite claims to the contrary, these terms are not polar opposites that represent competing ways of salvation—the true path of trusting acceptance of Christ’s redeeming work (faith) versus the prideful path of trying to gain heaven on our own power by following moral and religious commandments (obedience). There is some truth in this contrast, insofar as salvation cannot be attained by sheer human effort. But to emphasize faith to the exclusion of obedience is like saying that one wing of the airplane does all the flying or one blade of the scissors does all the cutting. Faith and obedience go together in Pauline preaching, just as they do in real life. This is why the Apostle praises the Romans for their Christian faith (1:8; 11:20) as well as for their Christian obedience (6:17; 16:19).

Finally, the introduction names the recipients: the believers **in Rome**. Paul 1:6–7 can pay them no finer compliment than to celebrate the blessings already bestowed on them. As Christians, they are an <sup>†</sup>elect people of God (**called**), an object of the Lord’s special affection (**beloved**), and a community set apart to glorify him through the witness of their lives (**holy**). Readers versed in the

## Among All the Gentiles

Often lost on modern readers is the connection between the coming of the Davidic Messiah and the destiny of the Gentiles. Scripture reveals this link when it describes the founding of the Davidic kingdom as a time when Israel first extended its dominion over Gentile nations. King David subjected several foreign states to Israelite rule (2 Sam 8:1–14); then King Solomon enlightened many pilgrims and dignitaries from distant lands with his wisdom (1 Kings 5:14; 10:1–7, 24). For this brief period, Gentiles were welcomed into fellowship with the God of Israel and encouraged to pray toward his temple in Jerusalem (1 Kings 8:41–43). Pious Israelites prayed that nations near and far would come to fear the Lord (Ps 2:11) and serve the royal son of David (Ps 72:11–13). Unfortunately, sin put an end to this outflow of grace, and it fell to Israel’s prophets to announce a more perfect and definitive kingdom to come. The Lord pledged to rebuild “the fallen hut of David” so that it might possess “all nations” (Amos 9:11–12). The future would bring “an everlasting covenant” in fulfillment of God’s loyalty to David (Isa 55:3–5), and the nations beyond Israel would once again seek the Lord’s instruction (Isa 2:1–3). That Paul is tapping into these hopes is clear from Rom 15:12, where he quotes Isa 11:10: “The root of Jesse shall come, / raised up to rule the Gentiles.” In Paul’s mind, bringing the nations to faith is a mission that flows directly from his conviction that Jesus is the risen Davidic Messiah.

### BIBLICAL BACKGROUND



Old Testament will recall similar descriptions of Israel as a people “holy” and “chosen” and “loved” by the Lord (Deut 7:6–8).

Ancient letters ordinarily offered “greetings” (Acts 23:26) or, in Jewish correspondence, wishes of “peace” (2 Macc 1:1). Paul’s prayer here for **grace** and **peace** to fill the hearts of the Roman disciples is uniquely Christian. He refers to the blessings that represent the cause (grace) and result (peace) of our reconciliation with God (Rom 5:1–2), blessings that come not from the world but **from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ**.

### Words of Thanksgiving (1:8–15)

<sup>8</sup>First, I give thanks to my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is heralded throughout the world. <sup>9</sup>God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in proclaiming the gospel of his Son, that I remember you constantly, <sup>10</sup>always asking in my prayers that somehow by

God's will I may at last find my way clear to come to you. <sup>11</sup>For I long to see you, that I may share with you some spiritual gift so that you may be strengthened, <sup>12</sup>that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by one another's faith, yours and mine. <sup>13</sup>I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I often planned to come to you, though I was prevented until now, that I might harvest some fruit among you, too, as among the rest of the Gentiles. <sup>14</sup>To Greeks and non-Greeks alike, to the wise and the ignorant, I am under obligation; <sup>15</sup>that is why I am eager to preach the gospel also to you in Rome.

OT: 1 Sam 12:5–6; Dan 3:31–45; 7:1–28

NT: Rom 11:13; 15:22–25; Acts 19:21; 28:14–31; Phil 1:8

Catechism: prayer of thanksgiving, 2637–38; primacy of the Church of Rome, 834

Paul moves from his salutation to a prayer of thanksgiving, which he offers **through** the mediation of **Jesus Christ**, our intercessor at the Father's right hand (8:34). The Apostle is grateful not for some personal favor rendered by the Romans but for their public witness to the gospel. Their **faith** has become known and admired throughout the Christian **world**. Their heroic adherence to Jesus, especially in pagan Rome, can only inspire fellow believers to a deeper religious commitment.

Paul's statement that the Roman church's faith is **heralded throughout the world** seems to hint that the Roman church occupies a unique place in the plan of God. Rome was the seat of the greatest earthly power in history up to that point, and its Christianization could only send shock waves through the world about the claims of Jesus Christ. Rome's importance to Paul may also be traced to the book of Daniel, where the prophet envisions a succession of four Gentile empires oppressing the covenant people, the last of which falls in defeat before the messianic kingdom of God (Dan 2:31–45; 7:1–28). Daniel's prophecy is significant because, in early Jewish and Christian tradition, the fourth and final kingdom was identified as imperial Rome.<sup>8</sup> Did Paul sense that the Roman church, by advancing the kingdom of God in the heart of the pagan empire, was playing a role in the fulfillment of these visions? Perhaps. In any case, it is indisputable that the reputation and leadership role of the Roman church continued to grow from this point forward, not least because Peter and Paul were both martyred in Rome in the mid-60s. Christian writings from the second century describe the church in Rome as one that "presides in charity"

8. For Jewish texts, see 4 Ezra 11–12; *Leviticus Rabbah* 13.5; *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* 28; also Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 10.276. For Christian texts, see Hippolytus, *Commentary on Daniel* fragment 2; Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechesis* 15.13; Jerome, *Commentary on Daniel* 7:7.

(St. Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Romans*, salutation) and holds a place of “preeminence” as the standard-bearer of Christian orthodoxy (St. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.3.2).

1:9–10 Paul’s affection for the Roman community surfaces in his **prayers**. Using an oath formula—**God is my witness**—he insists on what cannot be verified by his readers, namely, that he turns his thoughts **constantly** to their well-being when he comes before the Lord. One of his petitions has been that, **by God’s will**, a way will be cleared for him to visit the Romans in person. By putting the matter in this way, Paul reaffirms his status as a “slave” (1:1). He can pursue his own aspirations only in the measure that God’s plan allows.

The language that Paul uses to describe his service to God is distinctively cultic, as commentators rightly note. The verb **serve** (Greek *latreuō*) frequently appears in Scripture to designate the service of divine worship (e.g., Matt 4:10; Heb 12:28; Rev 7:15). For the Apostle, serving Christ through prayer and **proclaiming the gospel** is a liturgy in which he plays the role of a priest offering the faithful to God. He will make this point explicitly in Rom 15:15–16.

1:11–12 Paul’s longing to see the Romans includes a desire to share **some spiritual gift** with them. He speaks specifically of a *charisma*, what he elsewhere calls a “manifestation of the Spirit” (1 Cor 12:7). This is a charismatic or ministerial gift that individual believers receive as a grace from the Lord, not primarily for private benefit but for the upbuilding of the Church. Paul will revisit the subject of spiritual gifts in Rom 12:6–8. Here he hopes for the mutual encouragement that comes when Christians encounter **one another’s faith**.

1:13 More than once Paul planned to visit Rome but was **prevented** by the demands of his missionary work (15:18–22). His desire was to **harvest** some spiritual **fruit** in the Roman capital, just as he had done **among the rest of the Gentiles**—that is, among the churches he founded in Asia Minor and Greece. Here he expresses optimism that an opportunity is **now** presenting itself. Unfortunately, things did not work out this way. Little did Paul know that during his planned stop in Jerusalem (15:24–25) he would be arrested and held prisoner for the next two years (Acts 21–26). When he finally set foot in Rome, it was as an accused citizen awaiting trial before Caesar (Acts 28:11–16).

1:14–15 Paul felt himself under **obligation** as “the apostle to the Gentiles” to evangelize the Romans (Rom 11:13), bound by God to take the gospel to **Greeks and non-Greeks alike**. The expression—literally, “both Greeks and barbarians”—is not one that Paul coined for the occasion. Other ancient authors used it to distinguish between those who were educated in the language and traditions of classical Greece

and those who were unenlightened by this cultural heritage.<sup>9</sup> The human race is thus swept into two categories: the civilized and the uncivilized, **the wise** and **the ignorant**. Paul uses the expression, not to say that Greeks are better than everyone else, but rather that “all Gentiles without exception” constitute his assigned mission field, regardless of their ethnicity, education, language, or social standing.

## The Power of the Gospel (1:16–17)

**<sup>16</sup>For I am not ashamed of the gospel. It is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: for Jew first, and then Greek. <sup>17</sup>For in it is revealed the righteousness of God from faith to faith; as it is written, “The one who is righteous by faith will live.”**

OT: Gen 15:6; Hab 2:4

NT: Mark 8:38; Luke 9:26; Acts 3:26; Gal 3:11; 2 Tim 2:8; Heb 10:38

**Catechism:** the gift of faith, 1814–16; eternal life for the righteous, 1038, 2002

Verses 16–17 constitute the thesis statement of Romans. They are Paul’s way of punching in the coordinates for the rest of the letter, setting its trajectory, plotting its course. Much of what he says hereafter will elucidate this important announcement in one way or another.

Paul transitions from introduction to exposition by centering attention, yet again, on the **gospel** (1:1, 9, 15). Here he intends the fullest meaning of the term, which covers the whole gamut of Christian revelation and redemption made effective in the lives of believers. Paul is **not ashamed** of it, despite the mockery and opposition that greet him wherever he goes. Some think Christianity is an absurd way of life and worship; others find it boorish and unsophisticated (1 Cor 1:22–24). Either way, Paul is not embarrassed to spread the faith boldly, nor is his ministry hamstrung by a fear of personal rejection. 1:16

For Paul, the gospel is **the power of God** in action. Proclaimed in words, administered through sacraments, and received as grace, it changes the world from above. Miraculous transformations take place when hearts and minds are touched by **salvation**, and Paul has witnessed these firsthand. He will explore the wonders of God’s work in us in chapters 5–8.

These benefits are **for Jew first, and then Greek**. Notice that Paul has shifted from the Hellenocentric (Greek-centered) perspective of verse 14 to a

9. E.g., Plato, *Theaetetus* 175a; Strabo, *Geography* 16.2.38; Philo of Alexandria, *On Abraham* 267; Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 4.12.

Judeocentric (Jewish-centered) perspective in verse 16. In this worldview one is either a Jew or a non-Jew, a follower of the one true God guided by his law or a pagan stumbling through life in spiritual darkness. Though Paul himself is “an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin” (11:1), he adopts a Jewish way of speaking to say something quite different—namely, that God is now offering salvation to **everyone who believes**. Christianity is to be a faith of international and global proportions.

Nevertheless, the equality of the Greek (= Gentile) as a candidate for salvation does not cancel out the priority of the Jew. Salvation history leading up to Christ was God’s long-term investment in the nation of Israel, and it is unthinkable that the Lord would cast aside his covenant people and replace them with Gentiles (11:1). The historical privilege of the Jews puts them first in line to receive the blessings of the Messiah, even as these are extended to Gentiles as well (15:27). This conviction helps to explain why Paul, each time he ventured into a new missionary territory, preached in synagogues before taking the gospel out to the wider world (e.g., Acts 13:5, 14; 14:1; 17:1–3).

1:17 The gospel also manifests **the righteousness of God**. This is a theme of supreme importance in Romans. Much of the epistle represents Paul’s effort to explain what this means (see the sidebar “The Righteousness of God”).

Paul further indicates in verse 17 that God’s righteousness proceeds **from faith to faith**. Some argue that this is an idiom of emphasis, meaning “by faith from start to finish,” but the assertion is problematic.<sup>10</sup> The preposition sequence (Greek *ek . . . eis . . .*) tends to designate either a *progression* from one state or degree to another, or else a *range* from one point of time or space to another. For this reason, some commentators say that Paul is summarizing the work of salvation as something that originates with God’s faithfulness manifested in Christ’s redeeming work and culminates with the believer’s faith in Christ. Most likely, the expression designates the Christian’s progressive growth in faith as the basis for growth in righteousness. Later Paul will forward Abraham as a model of growing strong in faith (4:19–21) and will urge believers to advance in righteousness (6:16–19).

To verify the saving power of faith, Paul cites the words of the prophet Habakkuk: **The one who is righteous by faith will live** (Hab 2:4). Few passages of Scripture state more clearly that God promises life to those who are righteous by faith. Paul will expand on this theme in the next chapter by affirming that “eternal

10. Charles L. Quarles, “From Faith to Faith: A Fresh Examination of the Prepositional Series in Romans 1:17,” *NovT* 45, no. 1 (2003): 1–21, was unable to find a single instance in ancient Greek literature where the two prepositions Paul employs here are combined to form an emphatic idiom.

## The Righteousness of God

BIBLICAL  
BACKGROUND



The Letter to the Romans is punctuated with the language of “righteousness” (in Greek, *dikaiosynē*). Most scholars agree that Paul has in mind the Hebrew notion of *tsedeq* or *tsedaqah*, which signals “conformity to a standard or norm.” In the Bible, the standard of measurement is typically the covenant, the bond that unites God with his people and spells out the obligations that govern this relationship.

Scripture speaks of righteousness when a covenant relationship is in good order, with its stipulations observed and upheld by the partners involved.<sup>a</sup> The righteousness of God, then, is another way of speaking about God’s covenant faithfulness. The Lord displays his righteousness when he keeps his promises (Neh 9:8) and renders just judgment on human actions (Ps 50:6; Dan 9:14). Even more, he reveals it through mighty acts of deliverance. God shows himself righteous when he exercises his power and will to save, as noted especially in the Psalms (Pss 31:2; 71:2; 143:11) and Isaiah (Isa 45:8; 56:1; 61:10).

For Paul, the righteousness of God is a double-sided concept. On the one hand, it refers to the righteousness *demonstrated by God* in the events of salvation history. Divine righteousness in this sense is an “attribute of divine activity.”<sup>b</sup> On the other hand, the righteousness of God designates the gift of righteousness that *comes from God* in the form of grace imparted to the believer.<sup>c</sup> It is his merciful gift of putting sinners right once again by establishing them in a covenant relationship and entitling them to his blessings. Believers who receive the gift of God’s righteousness are forgiven and “made righteous” before him (Rom 5:19; 2 Cor 5:21; Phil 3:9).<sup>d</sup> These two aspects are tightly interwoven in Romans, especially in 3:21–26, where we learn that God manifests his righteousness precisely by justifying (= making righteous) the one who puts faith in Jesus. Thus, the righteousness of God in Romans is the covenant faithfulness of God experienced as salvation by his people.

a. On the language of “righteousness” as covenantal language, see Stanley E. Porter, “The Concept of Covenant in Paul,” in *The Concept of the Covenant in the Second Temple Period*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Jacqueline C. R. de Roo (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 269–85.

b. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *SJ, Romans*, AB 33 (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 262.

c. St. Augustine, *On the Trinity* 4.15; St. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Romans* 1.6.102.

d. The Dead Sea Scrolls also connect the righteousness of God with the forgiveness of sins. See, e.g., the *Community Rule* (1QS 11.2, 12).

life” awaits the faithful at the final judgment (Rom 2:7). A preview of this future scenario presented itself in Habakkuk’s day, when Israel faced the chastening judgment of God. The prophet foresaw the Babylonian invasion and conquest of Judea in 586 BC as a manifestation of the Lord’s wrath against his errant people,

a wrath that only the person who kept faith would escape. Paul likewise sees faith as the path to deliverance and life on the coming day of judgment.

### Reflection and Application (1:16–17)

Probably few of us can say as adamantly as Paul, “I am not ashamed of the gospel.” At one time or another we have all felt timid, maybe even terrified, before the world’s seething disdain for Christianity. The gospel is frequently mocked in cultural and political discourse, and much of the secular media jumps at the opportunity to poke fun at its most cherished truths and expressions. At the very least, a line is drawn in the sand that makes our options clear: we can shrink with embarrassment before this onslaught, or we can stand up and be counted. To be ashamed or not to be ashamed—that is the question.

It is tempting to think that Paul faced opposition that was less determined and less diabolical than we face today. But history indicates otherwise. Every generation of Christians has had to count the cost of following Jesus. Every believer has had to internalize the Lord’s words: “Whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this faithless and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of when he comes in his Father’s glory with the holy angels” (Mark 8:38).

But the gospel of Jesus Christ does not cease to be good news, no matter how many denounce or oppose it. Paul understood this well. Everywhere he witnessed “the power of God” transforming people’s lives for the better. There is no shame in working for the salvation of others. There is great satisfaction in watching God renew the face of the earth through our feeble efforts. The challenge before us is one of courage. Yes, much of the world will reject the gospel and its messengers with hostility. But our lot is thrown in with Jesus, who has already “conquered the world” (John 16:33).

### Idolatry: The Corruption of Religion (1:18–23)

<sup>18</sup>The wrath of God is indeed being revealed from heaven against every impiety and wickedness of those who suppress the truth by their wickedness. <sup>19</sup>For what can be known about God is evident to them, because God made it evident to them. <sup>20</sup>Ever since the creation of the world, his invisible attributes of eternal power and divinity have been able to be understood and perceived in what he has made. As a result, they have no excuse; <sup>21</sup>for although they knew God they did not accord him glory as God or give him thanks. Instead, they became vain in their reasoning, and their

senseless minds were darkened. <sup>22</sup>While claiming to be wise, they became fools <sup>23</sup>and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for the likeness of an image of mortal man or of birds or of four-legged animals or of snakes.

OT: Deut 4:16–18; Pss 19:2–5; 106:20; Wis 13:1–10

NT: John 3:36; Acts 14:15–17; 17:26–28; Eph 4:17–19

**Catechism:** knowledge of God from creation, 31–35, 1147; the virtue of religion, 1807, 2125; idolatry, 2113

Starting with verse 18, Paul begins a long section in Romans, running to 3:20, in which the entire world is shown guilty before God. The corruption of religion, leading to the corruption of personal and social morality, is the tragic story of our race that both Gentiles and Jews played a part in. And neither had a legitimate excuse: Gentiles had the natural revelation in creation to light their way (1:18–32), and Jews had the supernatural revelation of the Torah as a lamp unto their feet (2:1–3:20).

No sooner does Paul declare that the righteousness of God is revealed in the gospel (1:17) than he adds that the **wrath of God** is likewise **revealed from heaven**. Technically, the notion of divine wrath is an *anthropopathism*, a metaphorical description of God as though he had human passions and emotions. In reality, God is eternally unchanging; he does not lose his cool or boil over with rage as you and I sometimes do. Hence, when Scripture speaks of divine indignation or anger, it means God’s fixed response to sin—sin being completely at odds with his justice and holiness.<sup>11</sup> The Bible routinely employs such humanlike descriptions for the purpose of making the infinite mystery of God more understandable to finite minds.

Paul says that heaven’s wrath is provoked by **wickedness** and **impiety**, particularly of those who **suppress the truth** about God. It is a question not of ignorance but of people’s willful efforts to smother the truth under a heap of sinful choices and distractions. Failure to acknowledge a personal God—one Supreme Being, Lawgiver, and Intelligence—is first and foremost a moral problem. Only secondarily can it be called an intellectual problem.

Notice too that God’s wrath is manifesting itself in the present flow of history. It is true that Paul forecasts a “day of wrath” in connection with the last judgment (2:5). But the Lord’s just response to sin is not simply held in reserve until the end of time. Even now it is painfully visible in the degeneracy of human society. Paul will explain the meaning of this when he relates how God hands sinners over to their wanton desires in 1:24, 26, 28.

11. St. Thomas Aquinas holds that “wrath” is metaphorical when attributed to God and interprets it to signify the divine “punishment” that comes upon the sinner (*Summa Theologiae* 1.19.11).