



# The Book of Romans

Using the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition  
(NRSVUE)

## Grace, Power, and the Shape of the Gospel

# Setting the Stage

"Romans is one of the earliest and most complete attempts to lay out a theology — a way of understanding God, salvation, and community — for the Jesus movement that would eventually become Christianity. Paul writes not from a settled institution but from inside a living argument, to a community that is already divided, already asking hard questions about who belongs, whose tradition counts, and what God is actually doing in the world."

This letter is not a dry doctrinal manual. It is a Spirit-breathed response to real people wrestling with urgent, life-defining questions — questions that still shape our faith today.



# The Big Idea

Many readers approach Romans as if it were a systematic theology textbook — a cold list of doctrines arranged in logical order. But Paul was not writing an abstract essay. He was writing a **pastoral letter to a divided church**, a community of real people in one of the most powerful cities on earth, torn between different traditions, backgrounds, and competing visions of what following Jesus actually meant.

## Unify

Bridge the deep divide between Jewish and Gentile believers who worshiped under the same roof but lived in different worlds.

## Clarify

Explain the relationship between law, grace, and faith — answering the hard questions tearing communities apart.

## Prepare

Equip the Roman church to partner with Paul's mission westward to Spain as a base of support and solidarity.



# Who Wrote Romans — and How

## The Author

The Apostle Paul — born Saul of Tarsus — is the author. A Jewish scholar, Roman citizen, and former persecutor of the church who became its most prolific missionary writer, Paul brought unique authority to both Jewish and Greco-Roman worlds.

## The Details

- **Dictated to Tertius** — Romans 16:22 names him as the scribe who physically wrote the letter down at Paul's direction
- **Written around 56–58 CE** — Near the end of Paul's third missionary journey
- **Written from Corinth** — A bustling port city, home to a diverse early church community

# Why Paul Wrote to Rome

Paul had never set foot in Rome, yet he wrote the church there one of the most theologically rich letters in all of Christian history. Understanding *why* he wrote shapes how we read every word.

## 1 Preparing a Western Mission

Paul's sights were set on Spain — the far western edge of the Roman Empire. He needed the Roman church to serve as a launching pad and financial base for this ambitious new mission territory.

## 2 Building Credibility

Because Paul had never visited, he needed to introduce himself and his gospel clearly and carefully. He could not rely on personal relationships. He had to let his theology speak for itself.

## 3 Calling for Unity

He had heard reports of deep division in the Roman community. He wrote to address those fractures directly, giving both Jewish and Gentile believers a shared theological foundation to stand on together.

# The World Paul Was Writing Into

Rome was the undisputed center of the known world — a city of over one million people, the beating heart of an empire that stretched from Britain to Persia. To understand Romans, we must understand the world it entered.



## Imperial Power

Caesar was lord. Roman religion, law, and culture radiated outward from this city. Every claim Paul made about Jesus as Lord was a direct — and dangerous — challenge to imperial authority.



## Social Hierarchy

Roman society was rigidly stratified: citizens over non-citizens, free over enslaved, Romans over provincials. The early church's vision of equality was countercultural to its core.



## Religious Pluralism

Dozens of gods, mystery cults, emperor worship, and synagogues all competed for devotion. Jews and Jesus-followers were a minority navigating a world of religious noise and political suspicion.

# A Church Already Divided

The Roman church was not a single congregation — it was likely a network of house churches spread across the city, drawing from two very different streams: Jewish believers who traced their faith back to the synagogue, and Gentile converts who came in from the surrounding pagan world. Their tensions were real, daily, and painful.

## The Background of Division

Around 49 CE, Emperor Claudius expelled all Jews from Rome. Jewish Jesus-followers left too. Gentile believers led the churches alone for years. When the edict was lifted and Jewish believers returned, they came back to communities that had reshaped themselves without them.

## The Points of Conflict

- **The Law:** Should Gentile believers follow Torah? Was the Jewish law still binding?
- **Food:** Could believers eat meat offered to idols or food not prepared according to Jewish tradition?
- **Identity:** Who were the real heirs of Abraham's covenant — Jews, Gentiles, or both?

# The Central Question of Romans

"Who belongs in God's people — and on what basis?"

This is not a theoretical question. For the people of Rome, the answer determined who shared your table, who you called family, whose prayers you trusted, and whether the God of Abraham was truly the God of all people — or only of some.

📌 Every major argument Paul makes in Romans flows from, and returns to, this single burning question. Keep it in front of you as you read.



# Key Themes at a Glance

Romans weaves together several major theological threads. None of them stands alone — they build on each other, forming a coherent vision of who God is, who we are, and what life in the Spirit looks like.

1

## Justification by Faith

We are made right with God through trust in Christ — not through our performance or heritage.

2

## Grace vs. Law

The law reveals sin but cannot remove it. Grace does what the law was never designed to do.

3

## Sin and Redemption

Sin is a universal human condition and a controlling power — but redemption in Christ breaks its hold.

4

## Unity Across Difference

Jews and Gentiles are welcomed equally into one body, one people, shaped by one gospel.

5

## Life in the Spirit

The Holy Spirit empowers transformed living, intercedes for us, and confirms our belonging to God.

# Theme: The Problem of Sin

When Paul talks about sin in Romans, he is not primarily compiling a list of bad behaviors. He is diagnosing a condition — a deeply embedded power that distorts human thinking, corrupts relationships, and cuts us off from our Creator.

"...since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God..." — Romans 3:23 (NRSVUE)

## Sin as Universal

Paul's argument in chapters 1–3 is relentless: no one is exempt. The Gentile world, the moralist, and even the Torah-keeper all stand equally under the same diagnosis. No background earns an exemption.

## Sin as Power

Paul personifies sin as a ruling force — something that enslaves, reigns, and controls (Romans 6). Understanding this frees us from mere guilt-management and calls us toward genuine liberation in Christ.

# Theme: Justification

**Justification** is one of Paul's most important words — and one of the most misunderstood. It is a legal and relational term drawn from the law courts of the ancient world. To be "justified" means to be declared righteous, acquitted, set right — not by proving your innocence, but because Another has stood in your place.

## Not Earned

Justification cannot be achieved by keeping the law, performing religious duties, or belonging to the right group. It is a gift received, not a wage earned.



## Through Faith

The instrument is faith — trusting in what God has done through Christ Jesus. This levels the ground entirely. No tradition, background, or ethnic identity provides an advantage.



## Rooted in Grace

The source is grace — God's unearned, unconditional favor. Grace is not a reward system. It is God's character expressed freely toward people who have no claim on it.

# Theme: Grace

"But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died through the one man's trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many." — Romans 5:15 (NRSVUE)

## God Moves First

Grace is entirely God's initiative. Before we sought, God acted. Before we deserved, God gave. Romans 5:8 says Christ died for us "while we were still sinners" — grace anticipates our need before we can even name it.

## Not Earned, Not Revoked

Grace is not a reward that can be lost through performance failure. It is a covenant gift secured by Christ's faithfulness, not ours. This is the foundation of our security in God.

## Creates New Identity

Grace does not just forgive the past — it creates a new present and future. Those who receive grace are no longer defined by sin, shame, or status. They are defined by belonging to God.

# Theme: A New Humanity

One of Romans' most powerful and overlooked themes is its vision of a **new human community**. Paul is not just saving individual souls — he is constructing a new kind of people, shaped by the gospel rather than by ethnicity, social class, or religious tradition.



## Jew and Gentile Together

The wall between Jewish and Gentile believers that divided the Roman church is dismantled by the gospel. Both are welcomed through the same door — faith in Christ — and both stand equally before God.



## One Body

Romans 12 pictures the church as a single body with many members — each contributing different gifts, but none more essential than another. Unity does not mean uniformity; it means mutual belonging.

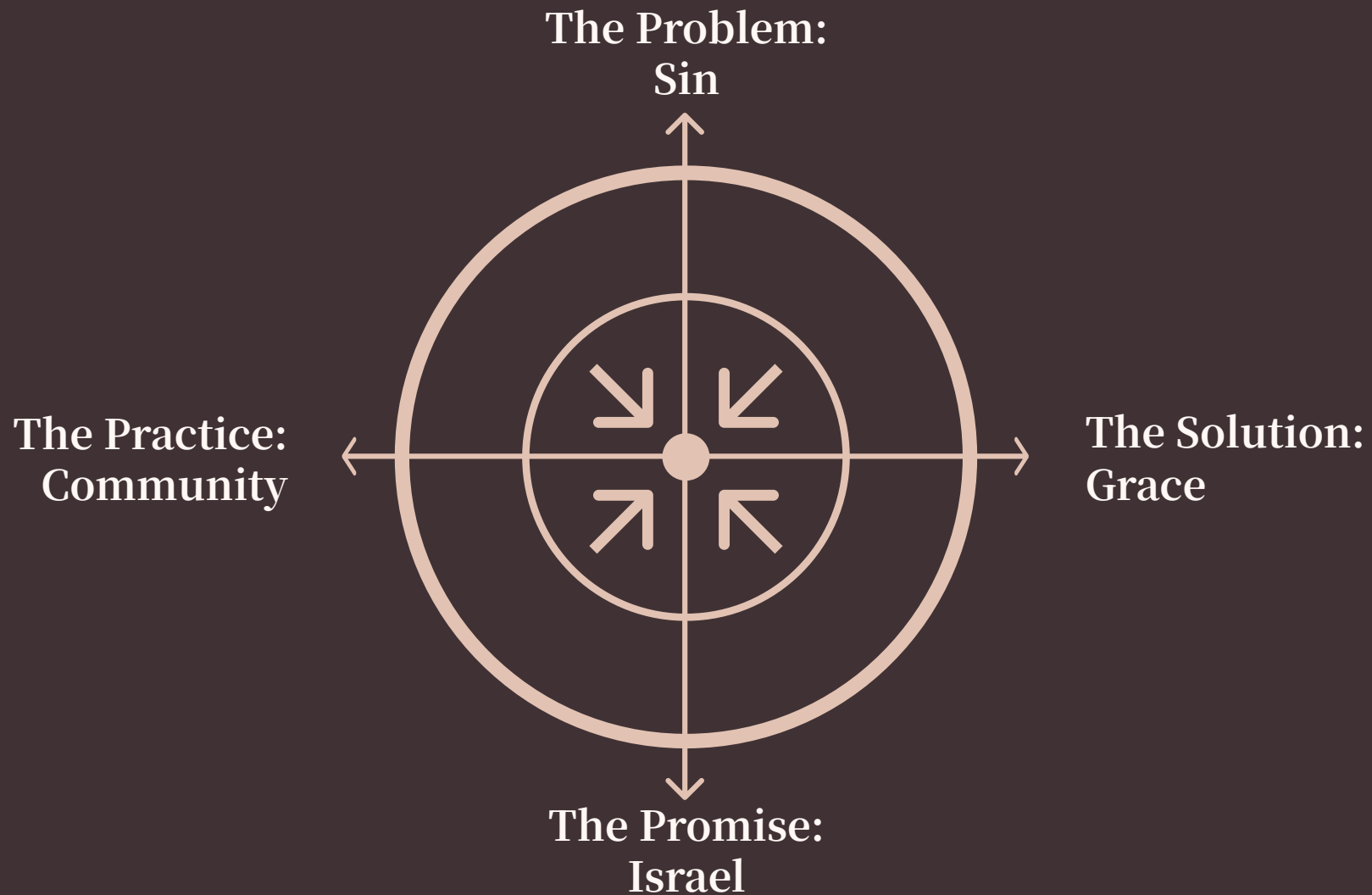


## One People of God

The promise made to Abraham was always meant to flow to all nations (Genesis 12:3). Romans shows how Christ fulfills that promise, forming one covenant family from every background and tradition.

# The Shape of the Letter

Romans unfolds in four major movements — each one building on the last. Together they form a complete theological arc, from the depth of human need to the height of transformed community life.



Notice how Paul does not jump straight to ethics or community advice. He first establishes the theological foundation — what God has done — before telling us how to live in response. Doctrine shapes practice, not the other way around.

# Romans 1:1–17 — Introduction and Thesis

"For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek."  
— Romans 1:16 (NRSVUE)

Paul opens with a careful, layered introduction. He establishes his identity as an apostle called by God, affirms his deep desire to visit Rome, and then — before getting into any argument — announces the thesis that will drive everything that follows.

- ① **The Gospel = God's Power** (δύναμις / **dynamis**) — Paul does not say the gospel is merely good information or a helpful teaching. It is *power* — the active, transforming energy of God at work in the world, available to every person who trusts it, regardless of background or status.

# Romans 1:18–3:20 — The Universal Problem

Before Paul can announce the good news, he must establish why good news is necessary. This long, often uncomfortable section of Romans is Paul's indictment of the entire human race. No group escapes. Every tradition, every culture, every moral framework is placed under the same searchlight.

1

## The Gentile World

Romans 1:18–32 — The nations suppressed the truth about God revealed in creation and turned toward idolatry. The result was moral and relational disorder.

2

## The Moralist

Romans 2:1–16 — Those who judge others while committing the same things are equally guilty. Self-righteousness is not a shield against judgment.

3

## The Torah-Keeper

Romans 2:17–3:20 — Even those who possess the law of Moses are not thereby saved. The law reveals sin; it cannot cure it. "No human being will be justified in his sight by deeds prescribed by the law."  
(3:20)

# Romans 3:21–4:25 — Justification by Faith

"But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through the faith of Jesus Christ for all who believe." — Romans 3:21–22 (NRSVUE)

Here Paul's argument turns like a hinge. After establishing the universal diagnosis, he now announces the universal cure — not a new law, but a new act of God in Christ.

## Abraham as the Pattern

Paul turns to Genesis 15:6 — Abraham "believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." Abraham was justified before he was circumcised, before the law existed. Faith has always been the way in. Torah did not create it, and Torah's absence does not block it.

## Faith Over Law

The point is not that the law was bad — it was holy, just, and good (Romans 7:12). But the law was never designed to justify. It was designed to reveal. Justification by faith is not a Plan B. It was always the plan, written into the story from the very beginning.

# Romans 5–8 — Life in Christ

These four chapters form the devotional heart of Romans. Having established that we are justified by faith, Paul now explores what that justification produces — a whole new way of existing in the world, shaped by freedom, the Spirit, and hope that endures even through suffering.



## Freedom from Sin

Chapter 6 — We have died with Christ and been raised to new life. Sin no longer has the final word over us. We are not slaves to it anymore.



## Power of the Spirit

Chapter 8 — The Holy Spirit dwells within us, gives life, intercedes for us in our weakness, and assures us that we are God's beloved children.



## Hope in Suffering

Chapter 5 and 8 — Present suffering does not contradict God's love. It is the very ground where hope and endurance are formed, and nothing can separate us from God's love.

- ✔ Romans 8:38–39 is one of the most beloved passages in Scripture — Paul's triumphant declaration that neither death, nor life, nor anything in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

# Romans 9–11 — What About Israel?

This section is one of the most debated in all of Paul's writing. After eleven chapters of building a gospel for all people, Paul turns to face a painful question he cannot avoid: If the gospel is for everyone, what has become of the Jewish people — the very community through whom God brought it?

## God Is Still Faithful

Paul insists that God has not rejected Israel (11:1). God's purposes cannot be undone. The gifts and calling of God are "irrevocable" (11:29). Divine faithfulness is not contingent on human failure.

## A Remnant and a Future

There has always been a remnant preserved by grace (11:5). Paul points to himself as evidence. The current situation is not the final word — God's purposes for Israel are still unfolding.

## Inclusion Without Replacement

Gentile inclusion does not mean Jewish rejection. Paul uses the image of an olive tree (11:17–24): Gentile branches are grafted in; they do not replace the original tree. Both belong to the same root.

# Romans 12–16 — How to Actually Live It

The final movement of Romans is not an afterthought — it is the destination. Paul has been building toward this all along: **a community whose daily life reflects the gospel it has received.** Chapters 12–16 are theology lived out in kitchens, marketplaces, and house churches.

01

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## Offer Yourself (12:1–2)

Begin with surrender — presenting your whole self as a living offering to God, refusing to be conformed to the world's patterns.

03

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## Welcome the Weak (14:1–15:13)

Those with different convictions about food, days, and practice are to be welcomed — not judged. The strong carry the burdens of those who struggle.

02

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## Love Genuinely (12:9–21)

Love without pretense, honor one another above yourselves, weep with those who weep, and refuse to repay evil for evil.

04

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## Pursue Unity (15:5–7)

"Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God." Unity is not optional — it is an act of worship.

# Romans Through the Centuries

Few letters in history have produced as much theological transformation as Romans. Again and again, at decisive moments in church history, a serious encounter with this letter has ignited reformation and renewal.



## Augustine of Hippo (354–430 CE)

Reading Romans 13:13–14 in a garden in Milan shattered Augustine's resistance to Christianity. His subsequent theology of grace, shaped deeply by Romans, defined Western Christian thought for over a millennium.



## Martin Luther (1483– 1546)

Luther's commentary on Romans, and his discovery that "the righteousness of God" in 1:17 was a *gift* rather than a demand, ignited the Protestant Reformation and reshaped the entire Western church.



## John Wesley (1703–1791)

At Aldersgate Street in 1738, while hearing Luther's preface to Romans read aloud, Wesley felt his heart "strangely warmed." The Methodist revival — which would transform communities across Britain and America — was born in that encounter with Romans.

# Romans in the World Today

Romans has not stopped shaping the conversation. It remains at the center of the most important debates in contemporary Christian theology — debates that have direct implications for how we understand justice, salvation, and what it means to belong to God's people.

## Protestant Theology

Justification by faith alone (*sola fide*) — drawn directly from Romans — remains one of the defining convictions of Protestant Christianity worldwide.

## Grace and Salvation

How does grace work? Are people saved before or after they respond? Can grace be resisted? Romans drives ongoing debates between Calvinist and Arminian traditions.

## Law and Ethics

What is the role of moral law for believers today? Is the law abolished, fulfilled, or reframed in Christ? Romans 7 and 8 keep this question alive and unresolved.

## Justice and the Gospel

Theologians in the Black church tradition have long read Romans through the lens of liberation — asking what God's righteousness demands of communities where injustice is structural and daily.

# Romans and James: A Famous Tension

Few questions in New Testament studies are more debated than the apparent disagreement between Paul and James on the question of justification. On the surface, these two apostles seem to say the opposite thing:

PAUL — ROMANS 3:28

## Justified by Faith

"For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law." — Romans 3:28 (NRSVUE)

Paul is writing to people who believed that keeping the Torah — circumcision, dietary laws, religious observance — was what made you right with God. He is pushing back against earned religion.

JAMES — JAMES 2:24

## Faith Requires Works

"You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone." — James 2:24 (NRSVUE)

James is writing to people who claimed faith but showed no evidence of it in their daily lives — ignoring the poor, showing favoritism, letting their profession outpace their practice.

# Tension or Complementary Truth?

The apparent contradiction between Paul and James dissolves when we understand the **different problems each writer was addressing**. They are not debating the same thing — they are both fighting distortions of the same gospel from opposite ends.

## Paul's Target: Legalism

Paul was confronting people who believed they could earn God's favor through religious performance. His answer: You cannot buy what was already given freely. Faith — not law-keeping — is the door.

## James's Target: Lazy Faith

James was confronting people who used "grace" as a reason to do nothing — claiming belief while ignoring their neighbors in need. His answer: Real faith produces real fruit. Dead faith is no faith at all.

- ✔ **The synthesis:** Paul and James are not contradicting each other — they are protecting the same gospel from two different threats. Together, they give us the full picture: we are saved by grace through faith alone, and that saving faith is never truly alone. It always produces love, justice, and action.

# The Final Frame

"Romans teaches how we are made right with God. James teaches how right people live."

These two letters, read together, give us the whole gospel — its roots and its fruit, its foundation and its expression. Romans declares: *You are free*. James responds: *Then live like it*.

## For Your Study

As you read Romans, ask yourself: Where do I hear the echo of the Roman church's struggles in my own community? Where do I need to receive grace more fully — and extend it more freely?

## For Your Faith

Romans 8:1 is a word for every season: "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." Let that settle in your spirit every single day.

## For Your Community

Romans 15:7 is the call to action: "Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God." The gospel always builds community, never walls.