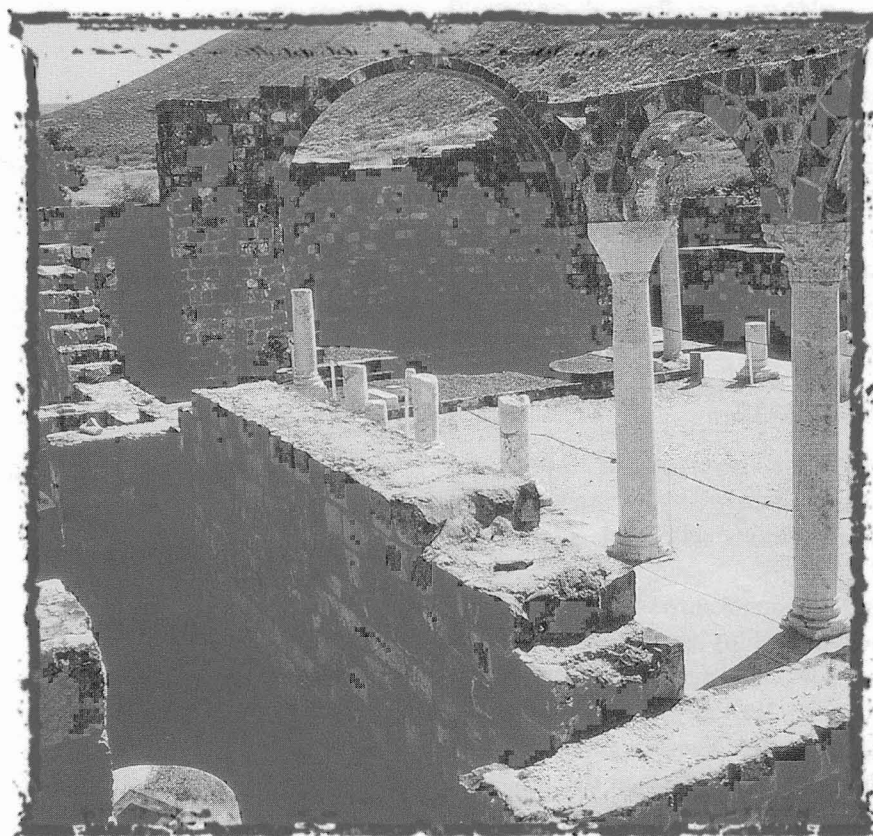


ROMANS



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Ruins of an early Christian church

So far in our study of the New Testament, we have examined the four Gospels and the Book of Acts. The Gospels tell us about the founder of the Christian movement, and Acts tells us about the history of the movement.

The remaining New Testament material is primarily letters, or epistles. Letters are usually written to specific people, addressing specific situations. Many of the New Testament letters attempt to deal with issues and problems that arose in local churches. So, as we study these letters, we will consider them in light of the problems and issues the letters address.

Of all Paul's writings, the Letter to the Romans is the best organized and the most general. It is not the earliest of his writings, but it is the longest. Romans sets out his understanding of Christianity in its fullest form.

Paul writes his letter to the Romans from the city of Corinth, near the end of his last missionary journey. The apostle has two main issues on his mind when he writes to the church in Rome—a church he did not found, in a city he has not visited. First of all, Paul has collected an offering from his various churches. This offering is to go to the church in Jerusalem, which is suffering from hard times primarily because of a great drought and famine in the area. Paul wants this offering to express the unity of the church, the unity between Gentile and Jewish Christians. He is apprehensive about his trip to Jerusalem, and he asks the Romans to pray that he be delivered from unbelievers in Judea.

Paul also wants to carry the gospel to the western part of the Roman Empire,

especially to Spain. He wants the church in Rome to support his missionary work.

Paul discusses both the collection and his planned work in Spain in Romans 15:14-32. He explains to the Romans that he has done all that he needs to do in the eastern Mediterranean area. Read Romans 15:23-25.

So Paul writes to the Romans to explain his understanding of Christianity and to encourage the Roman church's cooperation in his western missionary program.

ROMANS 1:1-15

The letter opens in verses 1 to 15 with an introduction. Paul greets his readers and makes an opening statement. Read Romans 1:1-6.

Paul's introduction follows the common form in the world of his day. Unlike our letters where the writer identifies himself or herself at the end, Paul identifies himself in the opening words. He then summarizes some of the essential elements of the Christian faith.

Romans 1:1-7 is a part of the important introduction of the letter. These verses serve as a salutation. After reading this section, answer the following questions.

a. By what characteristics does Paul identify himself to the Christians in Rome? (1:1)

1.

2.

3.

b. Summarize in your own words what Paul says about Jesus in verses 3 and 4.

c. To what are the Christians in Rome called? (1:6-7)

1. (1:6)

2. (1:7)

d. What was Paul's desire for the Christians in Rome? (1:7)

ROMANS 1:16-3:20

After this summary Paul mentions the recipients of his letter and pronounces a blessing upon them. Finally he talks a bit about his coming to Rome and his desire to preach the gospel to those in Rome.

Beginning with Romans 1:16 and continuing through Romans 5:21, Paul discusses the nature of the Christian gospel and

Christian faith. Read Romans 1:16-17. These verses summarize the theme of Paul's letter.

Paul stresses the gospel as the means of salvation. Salvation comes by faith, and salvation comes first to the Jew and then to the Greek. Salvation comes through God's righteousness.

In his discussion of the gospel Paul first tries to show that all persons—Jew and Greek—stand under the wrath of God and are in need of salvation. The human predicament is such that a universal need for the gospel exists.

In Romans 1:18–2:29 Paul argues that all people possess a knowledge of God and are therefore accountable for their behavior and life. Creation itself testifies to the power of God. The world of nature reveals a knowledge of God. However, humanity has not lived by this knowledge. Persons worship and serve the creature and creation rather than the Creator. As Paul states in verses 22 through 23, "Claiming to be wise, they became fools; and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles."

Because of the religion and worship of the people of his day, God has given them over to their lusts, passions, improper conduct, and base minds. Their distortion of God's knowledge has its own consequences.

Paul also argues that humanity has a knowledge of God that comes through conscience. The law that is written on the heart will accuse and judge those who do not live by it. Even the Gentile can know God through two sources—the world of creation and the human conscience.

Beginning with Romans 2:7 Paul confronts the Jew who has knowledge of God through the law of Moses. The Jew is better off than the Gentile because the Jew has the law; but in the end, the Jew also stands condemned by the law. Thus Paul concludes in

Romans 3:9 that "all, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin."

Romans 1:16-17 is an important summary of the theme of the letter. For what two reasons was Paul not ashamed of the gospel?

a. (1:16)

b. (1:17)

ROMANS 3:21–4:25

Against this background of human need, Paul states that God's justice and righteousness make salvation available to all through faith in Jesus Christ. Read Romans 3:21-24. These four verses summarize Paul's point.

For Paul salvation is through faith and not through human achievement or obedience to the law. In Chapter 4 he gives the example of Abraham. Abraham, Paul says, lived years before the law was given. Even before he was circumcised Abraham accepted the promises of God on faith. God reckoned this faith to Abraham as righteousness. Thus all persons receive righteousness through faith. And all persons—Gentile and Jew—who live by faith are descendants of Abraham.

Romans 3:21-26 explains faith as the means of salvation. Read these verses, and answer the following questions.

a. What is the condition of all individuals before God?

b. How can a sinful person be justified before God?

ROMANS 5-11

With Chapter 5 Paul turns to the nature of the Christian life and the freedom it brings to people under the gospel. This discussion continues to the end of Chapter 8. Salvation brings peace and reconciliation with God. The redeemed are now part of a new creation, a new humanity. Christ is a second Adam, and Christians are citizens of a new age. The Christian lives in a new freedom—the freedom of the Spirit—which is also freedom from sin and death. Throughout this section Paul speaks of salvation as a past experience, a present reality, and also a future hope. Thus he can advise his readers that they are dead to sin and at the same time warn them not to let sin reign over them.

In Chapters 9 to 11 Paul speaks about the failure of his own people—the Jews—to believe in Christ. Paul refuses to believe that the Jews are no longer the chosen people of God. Instead he argues that God is bringing Gentiles to faith because Israel was unfaithful and also in order to make the Jews jealous. He holds out the hope that after the full number of Gentiles have come into the faith, Israel will be saved. In spite of his desire to answer the question of Israel's hardness of heart, Paul ends this section by simply saying that all things are in God's hand. Read Romans 11:33-36.

Chapter 8 describes the Christian life in the Spirit. Skim the chapter, noting the verses listed below, for the answers to the following questions.

a. From what has the law of the Spirit of life set us free? (8:2)

b. On what do those who live according to the Spirit set their minds? (8:5)

c. To what does the Spirit bear witness with our spirit? (8:16)

d. How does the Spirit help us in our weakness? (8:26-27)

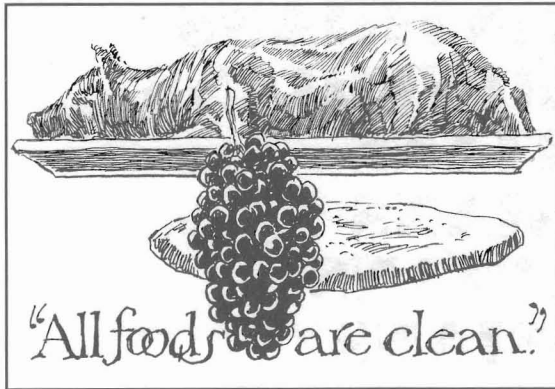
ROMANS 12-16

In Chapters 12, 13, 14, and the first part of Chapter 15, Paul offers ethical advice to the Romans on a number of issues. This advice ranges from relationships within the church, to relations with the government, to questions of clean and unclean food.

The last half of Chapter 15, which we mentioned earlier, talks about the collection for the Jerusalem church and Paul's visit to Rome. The final chapter, Chapter 16, contains a number of personal matters. Paul sends special greetings to persons in the church at Rome. He commends Phoebe, a deaconess, to the congregation. Paul closes with a benediction. Read Romans 16:25-27.

In the Letter to the Romans, Paul gives his clearest statement on the gospel as he understands it. He strongly emphasizes that we are all sinners—saved by faith, not by works or the law.

Romans 12:1 begins an important section of practical teaching. Read the verse, and explain in your own words what spiritual worship is.



Romans 14:20

SUMMARY

Three main parts of the Letter to the Romans that are important to remember are listed here.

- (1) Paul's introduction of himself and the essential elements of the Christian faith (Romans 1)
- (2) Paul's explanation of Abraham as one who was justified by his faith (Romans 4)
- (3) Paul's discussion of the failure of the Jews to believe in Christ (Romans 9–11)

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. The New Testament letters are best studied in light of the problems and issues they address. What problems and issues does Paul's Letter to the Romans address? If you were to write a similar letter today, what problems and issues would you address in that letter?

2. In Romans 1:18-23, Paul argues that humankind has not lived by the knowledge of God, but has worshiped the creation rather than the Creator. Persons have "exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles" (verse 23). What kinds of idol worship would Paul accuse us of today?

3. The role of faith in salvation is often emphasized (see Romans 3:21-26 and 5:1-5). But Paul's teaching on baptism (Romans 6:1-14) is usually overlooked. In the early church the symbolism of baptism was that of burial. Early Christians would dress in their finest clothes for baptism, as they would for a funeral. In baptism we identify with the Lord, sharing in his death, burial, and resurrection. New, victorious life in Christ means walking in newness of life because we have died to our former state. We have resurrection power as a result of our death, burial, and resurrection. Read this passage and discuss with the group the symbolism of baptism. What does baptism mean for you? What does it mean for your children? How can a clearer understanding of Paul's teaching here help us to live a victorious Christian life?

4. Romans 13:1-7 teaches us that we should be subject to the governing authorities. As long as the authorities over us do not force us to break God's law, we should obey them. But if the authorities force us to break the Word of the Lord, we should say, "whether it is right in God's sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge" (Acts 4:19). After reading these verses, discuss whether we should be subject to the government all the time. Explain your responses.

DAILY READINGS FOR FIRST AND SECOND CORINTHIANS, GALATIANS, EPHESIANS, PHILIPPIANS, AND COLOSSIANS

- Day 1: 1 Corinthians 12:1-13
 Day 2: 1 Corinthians 13:1-13
 Day 3: 2 Corinthians 1:1-14
 Day 4: Galatians 3:19-29
 Day 5: Ephesians 1:1-14
 Day 6: Philippians 2:1-11
 Day 7: Colossians 1:15-29