

THE BOOK OF ROMANS

ORIENTING DATA FOR ROMANS

- **Content:** a letter of instruction and exhortation setting forth Paul's understanding of the gospel—that Jew and Gentile together form one people of God, based on God's righteousness received through faith in Jesus Christ and on the gift of the Spirit
- **Author:** the apostle Paul
- **Date:** ca. A.D. 57, from Corinth (cf. Rom 15:25–26 with 1 Cor 16:1–7)
- **Recipients:** the church in Rome, which was neither founded by Paul nor under his jurisdiction—although he greets at least twenty-six people known to him (16:3–16)
- **Occasion:** a combination of three factors: (1) Phoebe's proposed visit to Rome (16:1–2; which would begin in the house church of old friends Priscilla and Aquila, 16:3–5), (2) Paul's own anticipated visit to Rome and desire that they help him with his proposed mission to Spain (15:17–29), and (3) information (apparently brought by visitors) about tensions between Jewish and Gentile believers there
- **Emphases:** Jews and Gentiles together as the one people of God; the role of the Jews in God's salvation through Christ; salvation by grace alone, received through faith in Christ Jesus and effected by the Spirit; the failure of the law and success of the Spirit in producing true righteousness; the need to be transformed in mind (by the Spirit) so as to live in unity as God's people in the present

OVERVIEW OF ROMANS

This letter is arguably the most influential book in Christian history, perhaps in the history of Western civilization. But that doesn't necessarily make it easy to read! While theologically minded people love it, others steer away from it (except for a few favorite passages), thinking it is too deep for them. But the overall argument and the reasons for it can be uncovered with a little spadework.

At issue is tension between Jewish and Gentile Christians in Rome, who probably meet in separate house churches and who appear to be at odds regarding Gentile adherence to the Jewish law—especially over the three basic means of Jewish identity in the Diaspora: circumcision (2:25–3:1; 4:9–12), Sabbath observance, and food laws (14:1–23). What is at stake practically is whether Gentiles must observe the Jewish law on these points. What is at stake theologically is the gospel itself—whether “God's righteousness” (= his righteous salvation that

ca. *circa*, about, approximately

issues in right standing with God) comes by way of “doing” the law or by faith in Christ Jesus and the gift of the Spirit.

What drives the argument from beginning (1:16) to end (15:13) is expressed in the conclusion—that God might give Jews and Gentiles “the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had,” so that together “with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (15:5–6). The focus of the argument is on what makes such unity possible: God’s righteousness given to Jew and Gentile alike on the basis of faith in Christ Jesus and effected through the gift of the Spirit. This primary issue is surrounded by matters having to do with Paul’s hoped-for relationship with this church at the strategic center of the empire (1:1–15; 15:14–33), followed by a commendation of Phoebe (16:1–2) and greetings to friends (16:3–16), concluding with a final exhortation, greetings, and doxology (16:17–27).

The argument itself is in four major parts (1:16–4:25; 5:12–8:30; 9:1–11:32; 12:1–15:12), each of which concludes on a confessional note that also serves as a transition to the next part (5:1–11; 8:31–39; 11:33–36; 15:13). In turn the parts take up (1) the issue of human sinfulness, showing first its universality (Gentile and Jew alike, with the law offering no advantage to the Jew) and then the effectiveness of Christ in dealing with sin, so that right standing with God is based on faith alone—for which Abraham, the “father of us all” (4:16), serves as exhibit A; (2) how faith in Christ and the gift of the Spirit effect the kind of righteousness that the law intended but could not pull off, since it lacked the power to deal with human sinfulness; (3) how God is faithful despite Jewish unbelief, having a place for both Gentiles and Jews in the new “olive tree” (11:24); (4) what the righteousness effected by Christ and by the Spirit (thus apart from the law) looks like in terms of relationships within the believing community and beyond.

SPECIFIC ADVICE FOR READING ROMANS

The key to a good reading of Romans is not to get bogged down over the many bits of detail that beg for an answer. Rather, use “A Walk through Romans” to get the big picture, and then perhaps come back and, with the help of a good commentary, try to discover answers to its many pieces.

Knowing two things may help you as you read. First, the argumentation Paul employs in this letter is patterned after a form of ancient rhetoric known as the diatribe, in which a teacher tried to persuade students of the truth of a given philosophy through imagined dialogue, usually in the form of questions and answers. Very often an imagined debate partner (interlocutor) would raise objections or false conclusions, which, after a vigorous “By no means!” the teacher would take pains to correct.

You will notice as you read how thoroughgoing the diatribe pattern is. The imaginary interlocutor appears at several key places (2:1–5, 17–24; 8:2; 9:19–21; 11:17–24; 14:4, 10). Paul debates first with a Jew (2:1–5, 17–24), with whom he dialogues in most of the argument that follows, as he raises and answers questions and responds to anticipated objections (2:26; 3:1–9, 27–31; 4:1–3; 6:1–3, 15–16; 7:1, 7, 13; 8:31–35; 9:19; etc.). A Gentile interlocutor is finally introduced in 11:13–24. In both cases Paul begins by attacking ethnic pride (2:17–20; 11:18). Notice further how all of this is suspended when he comes to the exhortations that begin part 4

(12:1–13:14), only to be picked up again when the issue of Jew-Gentile relationships over food and days is brought to the fore (14:4, 10). Sometimes this form of argumentation can be dizzying, especially when in the course of it Paul makes some sweeping statements that may look contradictory. But in the end, all individual statements have to be kept in the context of the whole argument.

Second, the nature of the argumentation is such that it follows a logical sequence of ideas, but you should not think that this also represents a sequence of Christian experience (justification [chs. 1–5] followed by sanctification [chs. 6–8], as is often suggested). For example, even though the role of the Spirit is not examined thoroughly until 7:4–6 and 8:1–30, his role is already anticipated in 2:28–29 and 5:5. Likewise the inadequacy of the law is first presented in chapter 2, but in the context of the life of the Spirit it is raised again in 7:7–8:4 and hinted at again in 13:8–10. And what is said about the Spirit in 8:1–30 makes clear that his presence is presupposed in the argument of 6:1–14. Likewise the ethical specifics in chapters 12–14 presuppose the argument of chapters 6 and 8. The point is that Paul does not present the whole gospel at every turn; as you move forward in the letter, you will need constantly to try to keep the whole argument in view.¹

¹ Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, [*How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 317–320.