

Reading Guide for Romans

Introduction

Read two chapters of Romans each day of the week (you will need to read three chapters on two days). Then, use the reading guide and reflect on the reading questions to help you gain a good understanding of Romans as you read this important letter of early Christianity. Don't worry if you find it difficult—Romans is one of the more difficult letters in the New Testament. Keep in mind it's more important to read the word of God and reflect on what you do understand than worry about what you don't understand. The more that you read the word of God, the more you will begin to understand the larger story and the smaller sections you didn't totally understand will begin to become clearer.

Reading Guide

Imagine being part of a church where you had one group of leaders one day, but these leaders vanished overnight. How would such a church continue to function? It would do so by raising up new leaders. These new leaders would struggle, but would work towards godly leadership of the congregation, and would find success in doing so.

Now imagine if the first group of leaders reappeared and claimed their old leadership positions back. Suppose they argued that they had more knowledge of the congregation and had been around longer. These new leaders were just that—new. These newer leaders would likely argue in return that they did a fine job while the old guard was gone. No doubt members of the congregation would begin lining up behind either the old or the new leaders. Tensions would be high.

This is exactly the situation that the apostle Paul wrote to when he wrote the letter called “Romans” to the churches that existed in Rome. Around 49AD, Jews were expelled from Rome by the decree of the emperor, Claudius. There had been riots focused around Christianity, and because Christianity was still seen as a Jewish religion, all the Jews had been kicked out. This means that any Jews who were members of the Christian churches—including those who were leaders—disappeared. The Gentiles were left to fend for themselves, to develop their own ways of being the church and their own styles of leading the people.

Until, that is, around 54AD, when Nero (the emperor who replaced Claudius) rescinded the order and allowed the Jews to return to Rome. Those Jewish Christians who came back expected to merge back into the churches they had left, and also likely expected to resume leadership. Gentiles were rightly proud of what they had accomplished in the Jews' absence and were reluctant to give up their positions. This led to conflict, arguments of superiority, and racial tensions between the Jews and Gentiles. This is the situation Paul writes to teach on and correct when he writes “Romans.”

Paul begins his letter in chapter by detailing the foundation of their faith, both who Jesus is and how the gospel about Jesus works—“it is the power of God that brings salvation for everyone who believes: first to the Jews, then to the Gentile” (1:16). Paul's word choice is deliberate. The Jews have priority over the Gentiles because they were the chosen people of God. (This was a source of pride for many Jews and one of the reasons they expected to pick up where they left off when they returned to Rome.) Evidence of this is the litany of sins committed by the Gentiles (1:18-32). The Gentiles clearly rejected

God, though, Paul makes clear, they could have known God (1:18-20).

This was a typical Jewish argument—they were superior because God chose them and gave them the law while the Gentiles were just plain wicked. Yet, Paul surprisingly argues, the Jews were actually just as bad as the Gentiles because, even though they had the law, they still broke the law (2:1-16). Jews are not off the hook simply for possessing the law. They, too, will be held accountable. After all, Paul declares, true Jewishness is internal, not external (2:28-29).

This is a sign of God's fairness. God will not judge people differently. God will accept them all the same way. This is why he teaches (in chapter 3) that all have sinned. Every single one of us—and them, Gentile *and* Jew, both—has sinned and deserves to be judged by God. Yet, each of us—Jew and Gentile—can receive righteousness from God, not through the law, but through faith and the sacrifice of Jesus (3:21-31).

Abraham is proof of this (chapter 4). Abraham existed before the law was given, yet he is the father of faith for the Jews. Abraham was also declared righteous by God—before he submitted to the regulation of the law to be circumcised! This shows that righteousness is by faith, not by actions or nationality. It is God's love for us that brings us to salvation, not our actions (5:1-11). Another example of this is Adam, the first man (5:12-21). Through Adam's sin, sin entered into the world and infected everyone and everything. No one was exempt from this. And because everyone was affected, the law—or one's personal actions—is not able to save anyone. But through Jesus, righteousness is available to all, independent of one's nationality or religious actions, on the basis of faith.

Because we have this righteousness, we are dead to sin in our bodies. Through our baptisms, we are called to live holy lives; we have crucified ourselves to sin. And yet, we still experience sin in our lives. (chapters 6-7). It is the experience of sin in our lives that points out to us the failure of the law—and the failure of our attempts to be “good.” Sin is like a power in the world that works against us at all times. When we hear a law or command—Paul uses the example of not coveting—sin begins working in us to make us want to do what we were commanded against. And this affects all of us. And because it does, each of us must rely not on ourselves but on the Lord Jesus Christ—in him there is no condemnation! In him, and only in him, we have been set free from the power of sin. We now live by the power of the Spirit, which holds us to God so we will never be separated from him (chapter 8).

Having established that Jews and Gentiles are on equal footing and that they all need Jesus, what, then, is the purpose of Israel? Paul deals with this question in chapters 9-11. In essence, because Israel as a whole rejected God by focusing more on the law than on trust in God, God made some of them hard-hearted and offered salvation to the Gentiles in order to make some Jews jealous. In the end, God will save all Israel by bringing those who accept Jesus into his people.

The result of all this is to encourage these believers to live transformed, changed lives (chapter 12). Their differences are petty (though they seem large and difficult at the time). They have much in common: they are common sinners in need of God's grace. They all need to be transformed. And the transformed life focuses on the common good—how to function as one body that has many parts, how to love each other, and how to get along with society and the governing authorities (chapter 13).

One larger problem that occurs when two different cultures come together is the “clash” of these cultures. The Jews and Gentiles experienced this over eating and religious habits. Some believed in holy days while others didn't; some believed in eating any kind of meat while others didn't. Paul teaches them to focus on what leads to peace and to be willing to give up their opinion (even if they are right) for the sake of others (chapters 14-15).

Paul concludes with this thought: “Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God” (15:7). This sentence is key to understanding the whole letter. The basis of our actions towards others always emerges from what Christ did first for us. We only respond. Christ initiated. And because Christ accepted us, we accept each other—faults, disagreements, and all. This act of acceptance brings praise to God.

Study Questions

1. What three ways does Paul describe who Jesus is (1:3-4)?
2. What is the gospel and what does it do for us (1:16-17)?
3. What are some examples of the ways that wicked people have rejected God (1:18-32)?
4. Are religious people off the hook? Can they judge the wicked (2:1-11)?
5. What evidence does Paul put forward of God's impartiality and fairness (2:6-16, esp. v. 11)?
6. What matters more—our religious knowledge or our transformed hearts (2:17-29)?
7. How is God's impartiality on display by how he judges and punishes people (3:1-8)?
8. If we are all sinners, how are we accepted by God (3:21-31)? How does Jesus' sacrifice demonstrate God's fairness and justice (3:21-31)?
9. How is Abraham an example that we are made righteous by faith, rather than by works of law (chapter 4)?
10. How does Abraham tie together both Jews and Gentiles (4:11-15)?
11. How is God's fairness described or seen in Paul's teaching in 5:1-11?
12. What comparisons and contrasts does Paul make between Adam and Jesus? How does this show that God works outside works of the law? How does it demonstrate God's fairness? (5:12-21)
13. If death exists because of sin, and we need God's mercy to overcome sin, how is sin's power over us broken? (chapter 6, esp. 6:15-18)
14. But if we have been set free from the power of sin, why do we still sin? (chapter 7)

15. How do we overcome the sin that is still in us? (chapter 8) Are we accountable for it (8:1)? What power do Christians live under (8:9-17)?
16. How does God give us hope and glory through Christ and in our present situations (8:18-30)?
17. But why, then, hasn't Israel been saved? (chapter 9) Does Paul think that God's choice to make some Jews hard-hearted is fair to some but unfair to others?
18. How could Israel be saved and become the chosen people of God? (chapter 10)
19. What two reasons are given for why God offered salvation to the Gentiles (11:11-12)?
20. How does Paul use a tree to describe how the Gentiles received salvation and how some Jews might receive salvation? (11:13-24)
21. How do the detailed instructions in chapter 12 flow from a transformed sacrificial life (12:1-12)? How does the image of a body teach disagreeing people how to get along (12:3-8)?
22. How do the instructions in chapter 13 indicate we should interact with the authorities and others?
23. How should a transformed person deal with differences between believers (chapter 14)?
24. What is the key to getting along with each other (15:1-9)?
25. What is the purpose of Paul's greetings at the end of this letter (15:23-16:27)?

Notes, Observations, and Other Questions