

THE GRAND OPENING
A Prep Guide for Sessions 1 and 2
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The Apostle Paul's Letter to the Romans has started more fires than a serial arsonist. Strikingly, almost all the major revivals, renewals, and reformations of Christianity through the centuries have had their origin in a fresh encounter with the Letter to the Romans.

- ◇ A brilliant but wayward Augustine read Romans in the fourth century in North Africa, and, as his remarkable mind absorbed it, he raised the intellectual status of Christian theology as a major player on the stage of ancient ideas.
- ◇ An Augustine monk called Martin Luther read Romans in sixteenth century Germany, and the Reformation sparked by that reading revolutionized Christianity in the west.
- ◇ A couple centuries later, a despairing Christian seeker named John Wesley looked for guidance in his faith and his vocation, so he stumbled into a church in Aldersgate, London and heard Luther's "Preface" to Romans being read out. His "heart was strangely warmed;" before long English Christianity had changed and Methodism was born.
- ◇ Two more centuries forward, carnage from the first world war caused a liberal, socialist pastor from Safenwil, Switzerland to rethink his optimistic view of human nature. He read Romans and his new sense of God's reach to the world through Jesus Christ helped bewildered, disappointed post-war Christians across the world make sense of God again.

You get the picture. The Letter to the Romans should come with a warning label: "Caution – Ingestion of these contents may cause an eruption of vibrant Christianity."

RECEIVING THE LETTER

We don't know what kind of eruption Paul's letter caused among its first audience, the Roman Christians themselves. In 57 C.E., his words were read out among the several house churches of the capital city. Oh, to have been a fly on those walls! Our project as we read together these eight weeks will be to hear Paul's Letter to the Romans as if for the first time – as if we were in one of those ancient living rooms in Rome.

But as with Augustine, Luther, Wesley, and Barth, our project will not be simply antiquarian. Every good reading of the Letter to the Romans reckons with its ancient meaning and then pivots, in time, to the contemporary realities that it helps us address. Romans touches on questions of human nature, harm and forgiveness, life transformation, community formation, ethnic and gender strife – and, by the way, God's character as it is revealed in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

We'll go ancient and then move to our own times. It's what Paul would have wanted.

THE PASSION OF PAUL

If you had only one single message that you could give to the whole world, what would that message be? Think about it for a second. It's a high-pressure ask, like Aladdin's last wish, but make yourself answer. What matters most to you? Of all the things you know or have every experienced or believed, what would rise to the top?

The Apostle Paul asked this question before he wrote his letter to Christians in the capital of the Roman Empire. He was writing to the eternal city, Roma. If he had lived when Paul lived, Frank Sinatra would have sung about it what he sang about New York: "If you can make it there, you'll make it anywhere." It was, in a way, Paul's big chance. He couldn't start Christianity in Rome, but he could impact it. This was an important letter. What was most important to say?

Paul had options. If he wanted to impress his audience in Rome, he could have flashed his credentials.

- He had been a superstar rabbinic student and studied under one of the most famous "professors" of his time. That would have made a good headline.
- Because of his missionary work, he was an ancient version of a diamond club traveler. The folks from the big city might have found that suave and sophisticated.
- He also faced his share of challenges in life – persecutions, imprisonments, personal crises – that would have filled an epic memoir. This strength of will and resolve would have impressed some.

The apostle didn't choose these.

Instead, in his Letter to the Romans Paul chose to share the greatest news he had ever heard: Jesus Christ had literally turned Paul upside down and then used Paul to turn the world upside down. Paul chose to tell about that, and in his letter he starts with a bold claim:

Around the middle of the 1st century, a former rabbi turned Christian apostle named Paul wrote his longest letter to a church he had never visited, to let them in on a world-changing breakthrough in God's dealings with humanity. Had they heard the gospel this way before? We'll never know, because we have no remains of Roman Christianity prior to Paul's letter. But now, almost a quarter of the way through the 21st century, you and I get to listen to this letter and see how Paul's good news to the Romans is actually very good news for us, too.

POSTAL PRACTICES

Like all ancient letter-writers, Paul "sent" his scroll by personal delivery. There was no Roman postal service, so people sent runners to deliver mail. A woman called Phoebe, a leader of the

Christian group in Corinth (from where Paul writes his letter to the Romans), did the honors this time and carried it to Rome for him. (Romans 16.1)

In writing it, Paul follows the conventions of his time. You and I put the addressee's name at the top and the author's name at the bottom of our letters; writers in the ancient Greco-Roman world put both at the top, with the author's name first. Here's normal form:

1. Author's Name + Something about the Author (1.1-6)
 - Paul emphasizes his credentials: slave of Jesus Christ, who has called and sent Paul to bring good news that meets the prophets' expectations.
 - Then Paul writes a brief description of Jesus that may have been standard and known by the Roman church.
 - Finally, Paul reminds the Romans that he's called to help them too.
2. Recipient's Name + Something about the Recipient (1.7)

If Paul is "called to be an apostle," the Romans are "called to be saints."
3. Greeting (1.8)
 - Greek letter-writers wrote "chairein" which is the Greek word for "Greetings!"
 - Paul punned on that word with the Greek "charis," which means "Grace." Then he added the Hebrew concept of shalom, "peace" from God and from "Jesus our Lord, the Messiah"

Knowing how most people wrote letters can help us better understand Paul's letter – in both its compliance with and its divergence from the norms of his time.

A COLD CALL CORRESPONDENCE

How are you at making cold calls? You know the kind of communication I'm picturing: walking up to someone you've never met and starting a conversation intended ultimately to sell them something – goods, a service, the message of Jesus... Salespeople do it all the time: they ring or visit or write or e-mail someone they haven't met, hoping to leave a good impression and open the door to a purchase. For most people, these encounters are terrifying. Rejection looms as a likely outcome. It takes a whole lot of self-confidence to put oneself out there and risk rejection time after time.

Paul made cold calls for a living. His job was to walk into a city and start Christianity there, where they had never heard of Jesus before. It's hard for you and me to imagine this, as we meet in a big building to attend Christian worship, and pass a handful of other big buildings where other Christians are worshipping. But Paul lived in a time when almost nobody in the world knew about Jesus of Nazareth.

That said, Paul did not normally cold call with his letters. Instead, he started in person, walking into a city, setting up in the part of town where his tentmaking guild did their work, building relationships, and then starting conversations to spread his good news. He made his cold calls face-to-face, except to the Romans. This letter is the only one he wrote to a group he hadn't started. Paul had never been to Rome when he wrote, and the Christians there had a different founder, whose identity is lost to history.

This letter is different because of Paul's unfamiliarity with the Roman church. It's not as close the ground, not as aware of the day-to-day challenges and victories of his audience. Bible readers who continue past Romans will see Paul call the Corinthians out on their bad behavior, help the Philippians solve internal conflict, chide the Galatians for abandoning the gospel, and compliment the Thessalonians on how quickly they are growing in Christ – all because he knows the communities intimately. Paul is not oblivious to what's happening among the Romans – in chapter 1 he says that their faith is being feted around the broader Christian community; and in chapter 16, he greets a long laundry list of Roman Christians by name. But he doesn't know them like he knows his other churches.

All of this unfamiliarity is our gain, in a sense. Since, Paul can't assume that the Roman Christians have heard anything that he plans to say. He can't rely on past conversations or times teaching among his audience, so he has to say everything here. The result is a *magnum opus*.

PAUL'S GOOD NEWS

English teachers LOVE to find a thesis statement in student essays. Many of them engrain in their students a three-part structure:

1. Tell 'em what you're gonna say;
2. Say it.
3. Tell 'em what you've said.

The first of these three parts is the thesis statement, and, I'll say it again, English teachers LOVE them.

Those thesis seeking English teachers would scour Paul's letters in vain – except in the Letter to the Romans. Here, Paul introduces the body of this letter with a bold claim:

I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.”

PAUL'S PROSECUTION

Anyone else like legal dramas on TV or in film? I'm captivated by them, from "Twelve Angry Men" in the 1960s to John Housman's "Paper Chase" from the 1970s to "LA Law" in the 1980s to the Law and Order empire in the 1990s, 2000s, to the BBC's "Silk" in the 2010s and straight up to a quirky French series called "Munch" that's streaming now on Amazon Prime. I love the way prosecutors build their case, strategically stringing witnesses and evidence to build a narrative of guilt deserving punishment.

So to me, the Paul of Romans 1.18—3.20 is the experienced prosecutor building his narrative about human culpability. Right after his promising preview of "the good news" of which he's not ashamed, which is "the power of God for salvation for all who have faith," which unveils "the righteousness of God" (1.16-17), just when we're expecting to sample some of this astonishing good news, Paul shockingly kills the buzz:

"For God's anger is revealed from heaven against all unrighteousness..." (Romans 1.18)

Right between the eyes! It turns out, God is mad. This is no new thing for people who have read the Old Testament, and Jesus talked about some things that tick God off. So...why is God angry? Who has enraged the Almighty? In this section, Paul will weave his prosecution into a deliberate but persistent argument that will capture Gentiles and then Jews in his net. Gentiles have chosen idolatry. Jews have fallen to judgmentalism and hypocrisy. And by the end he'll be able to claim that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

Part One – Life without God

First, Paul works on the Gentiles.

What happens when God gets angry? In the Hebrew Scriptures/Christian Old Testament, Israel suspected that God's anger caused floods and famines and defeats in battle. In the Book of Revelation, God's anger at the Roman Empire culminates in "Babylon the Great" (Rome) being tossed into a lake of fire in the last days.

Paul paints a different picture of how divine wrath works. He quickly turns topics from his thesis about "the righteousness of God" (1.16-17) to his explication of "the wrath of God." Humanity prompts God's anger by ignoring their

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and injustice of those who by their injustice suppress the truth. ¹⁹ For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. ²⁰ Ever since the creation of the world God's eternal

power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been seen and understood through the things God has made.

In this portrayal, all humans have all the evidence we need to (1) know that there is a God and (2) recognize that God's "eternal power and divine nature" – all by observing creation. When humanity refuses to recognize this and turns away, the rupture of that vertical relationship starts a domino effect that distorts our relationships with one another and with the earth as well. In other words, the consequences are the punishment. Like a wise parent who knows how this whole sequence turns out, when God gets angry, God simply gives idolatrous humanity what we want. (The phrase, "Therefore, God gave them over..." appears three times in this chapter.) We turn from God to idols, and the steps that follow lead us into all kinds of strife within the human community. So in Romans, God's anger looks, not like thunderbolts thrown from the heavens, but like human confusion and strife. Consequences are built into the cosmic system.

This is Paul's anthropology: people are created to honor and live in relationship with God. When we choose not to join that relationship and honor God, our "foolish hearts are darkened" and we begin to dishonor one another and ourselves.

The Issue of Our Times

The part of this section of Romans that is probably most familiar to casual Bible readers is 1.26-27, where Paul addresses homosexuality. Over the past three decades, every major Christian denomination in the U.S. has experienced schism over this issue. In this passage, Paul names men's and women's homosexual behavior one of these punitive consequences of turning from God.

Here's the wording:

For this reason God gave them over to dishonorable passions. Their females exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the males, giving up natural intercourse with females, were consumed with their passionate desires for one another. Males committed shameless acts with males and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.

Romans 1.26-27 is one of five passages in the Christian Bible that directly condemn homosexual behavior. (The others are Leviticus 18.22 and 20.13; 1 Corinthians 6.9-11; and 1 Timothy 1.8-11.) For most of the centuries of Christian history, each passage was understood to be an encompassing judgment against all homosexual orientation and behavior. But the current debate usually turns on defining what these authors mean to condemn – namely, whether these authors in mind, or even had any access to, the prospect of committed, monogamous homosexual relationships. In the Romans passage, for example, is the "natural intercourse" that females exchanged for "unnatural [intercourse]" even referring to lesbian sex? Or is the

passage describing some other heterosexual departure from Jewish sexual norms? And what are the shameless acts males committed with other males?

In his writings, Paul's draws a firm line between Jewish and Christian sexual ethics, on the one hand, and the ways of Gentiles, on the other. In 1 Thessalonians 4.4-5, Paul exhorts the Thessalonian Christians "to control your own body in holiness and honor, not with lustful passion, like the gentiles who do not know God." And in 1 Corinthians 5, when Paul learns that "a man is sleeping with his father's wife," he gasps that this step-incense is so wildly immoral that you won't find it even "among the Gentiles." This stark distinction between Christian ethics vs the ways of surrounding cultures, Paul falls in line with the rabbis, who called for Jews to a sexual purity that they saw as distinctive and foreign to Gentile culture. As [William Loader](#) puts it, for the rabbis (as for Paul), "sexual issues were a key element of the demarcation between Jews and the wider community, alongside such matters as circumcision, food laws, the sabbath keeping." For Paul, the behaviors listed in Romans 1 are the direct result of a rejection of God.

The Closing Argument for Gentiles

Whatever our interpretation of what acts Paul is referring to in 1.26-27, we should note that these are not the bottom of the idolatrous spiral downward. That last step in decline for humanity that has not connected with God features a whole lot of attitudes and actions that a whole lot of us will recognize

Since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done. They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious towards parents,³¹ foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. They know God's decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die—yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practice them. (Romans 1.28-31)

Paul's anthropology is theological: all human decline and evil traces back to our decision to turn away from, instead of toward God. Idolatry breaks things.

Part Two – Here Come the Judges

How can we solve this human failing?

On first glance, it looks like we just need a little more moral exertion. Grit our teeth, stop doing "envy, murder, strife..." and so on, and everything will be fine. The moralist may already be gloating as Paul names these human failings – may already be saying, "Go get 'em, Paul! Go get those sinners!" But just as their self-righteousness hits its peek, Paul turns the tables:

Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things...Do you imagine, whoever you are, that when you judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself, you will escape the judgment of God? (Romans 2.1,3)

The Jewish moralist seems to bank on a relative ranking scale. He or she observes, “At least I’m better than *those* people,” and believes that superiority merits God’s favor. But Paul diagnoses their problem: “you, the judge, are doing the very same things.” Even the moralist’s failings place her or him under the judgment of God. The logic echoes Jesus’ simple rule: “Judge not, lest ye be judged.” (Matthew 7.) Relative superiority does not solve the problem, apparently, and judgment worsens it.

For the rabbis and other Jews of Paul’s time – and even for the pre-Damascus-Road Paul – the natural answer would be Moses’ Law. By Jewish training to obey God’s Law, we will succeed where others have failed, right?

Alas, Paul thinks not.

If you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast of your relation to God and know his will and determine what is best because you are instructed in the law, and if you are sure that you are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth, you, then, that teach others, will you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? You that forbid adultery, do you commit adultery? You that abhor idols, do you rob temples? You that boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? (Romans 2.17-23a)

Paul sees Jews, who are God’s people, saying one thing and doing another, and he knows that this hypocrisy dishonors God.

For, as it is written, ‘The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.’ (Romans 2.23b)

Like Jesus, Paul hates hypocrisy, and they both seem to hate it because God does. Here, Paul’s concern is that God’s name takes a hit when God’s people fancy ourselves righteous and then don’t live up to our promo. This failure also falls far short of God’s intention that Israel would be a light to the world, a blessing to all nations. (Genesis 12.1-4) Israel has failed. And Israel has failed, because, in Paul’s view, Moses’ Law has one fatal flaw: its many laws and ordinances don’t supply people with the ability to obey them. No power. Because of that, what was supposed to be a way of life ends up being an accuser, and Paul ends his “Bad News” section as bleakly as he began it:

“No human being will be justified in God’s sight’ by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin.” (Romans 3.20)

To summarize Romans 1.18—3.20: Gentiles fail to honor God, and Jews fail to honor God. We all fall short. This is bleak! As piercing and accurate as Paul’s prosecution may be, if the Letter to the Romans ended here, it would never have sold so many copies! The extent of his ruthlessness makes it all the more shocking when Paul walks across the courtroom to join us as counsel for humanity in 3.21. We’ll open with that turnaround in Session Three.