Paul’s Letter to the Romans

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Thomas D. Stegman, SJ
with Little Rock Scripture Study staff



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Welcome

The Bible is at the heart of what it means to be a Christian. It is the Spirit-inspired word of God for us. It reveals to us the God who created, redeemed, and guides us still. It speaks to us personally and as a church. It forms the basis of our public liturgical life and our private prayer lives. It urges us to live worthily and justly, to love tenderly and wholeheartedly, and to be a part of building God's kingdom here on earth.

Though it was written a long time ago, in the context of a very different culture, the Bible is no relic of the past. Catholic biblical scholarship is among the best in the world, and in our time and place, we have unprecedented access to it. By making use of solid scholarship, we can discover much about the ancient culture and religious practices that shaped those who wrote the various books of the Bible. With these insights, and by praying with the words of Scripture, we allow the words and images to shape us as disciples. By sharing our journey of faithful listening to God's word with others, we have the opportunity to be stretched in our understanding and to form communities of love and learning. Ultimately, studying and praying with God's word deepens our relationship with Christ.

Paul's Letter to the Romans

The resource you hold in your hands is divided into six lessons. Each lesson involves personal prayer and study using this book and the experience of group prayer, discussion, and wrap-up lecture.

If you are using this resource in the context of a small group, we suggest that you meet six times, discussing one lesson per meeting. Allow about 90 minutes for the small group gathering. Small groups function best with eight to twelve people to ensure good group dynamics and to allow all to participate as they wish.

Some groups choose to have an initial gathering before their regular sessions begin. This allows an opportunity to meet one another, pass out books, and, if desired, view the optional introductory lecture for this study available on the "Resources" page of the Little Rock Scripture Study website (LittleRockScripture.org). Please note that there is only one introductory lecture for two-part studies.

Every Bible study group is a little bit different. Some of our groups like to break each lesson up into two weeks of study so they are reading less each week and have more time to discuss the questions together at their weekly gatherings. If your group wishes to do this, simply agree how

much of each lesson will be read each week, and only answer the questions that correspond to the material you read. Wrap-up lectures can then be viewed at the end of every other meeting rather than at the end of every meeting. Of course, this will mean that your study will last longer, and your group will meet more times.

WHAT MATERIALS WILL YOU USE?

The materials in this book include:

- The text of Romans, using the New American Bible, Revised Edition as the translation.
- Commentary by Thomas D. Stegman, SJ.
- Occasional inserts  highlighting elements of the chapters of Romans being studied. Some of these appear also in the *Little Rock Catholic Study Bible* while others are supplied by staff writers.
- Questions for study, reflection, and discussion at the end of each lesson.
- Opening and closing prayers for each lesson, as well as other prayer forms available in the closing pages of the book.

In addition, there are wrap-up lectures available for each lesson. Your group may choose to purchase a DVD containing these lectures or make use of the video lectures available online at no charge. The link to these free lectures is: LittleRockScripture.org/Lectures/Romans. Of course, if your group has access to qualified speakers, you may choose to have live presentations.

Each person will need a current translation of the Bible. We recommend the *Little Rock Catholic Study Bible*, which makes use of the New American Bible, Revised Edition. Other translations, such as the New Jerusalem Bible or the New Revised Standard Version: Catholic Edition, would also work well.

HOW WILL YOU USE THESE MATERIALS?

Prepare in advance

Using Lesson One as an example:

- Begin with a simple prayer like the one found on page 13.
- Read the assigned material for Lesson One (pages 14–26) so that you are prepared for the weekly small group session.

- Answer the questions, Exploring Lesson One, found at the end of the assigned reading, pages 27–29.
- Use the Closing Prayer on page 30 when you complete your study. This prayer may be used again when you meet with the group.

Meet with your small group

- After introductions and greetings, allow time for prayer (about 5 minutes) as you begin the group session. You may use the prayer on page 13 (also used by individuals in their preparation) or use a prayer of your choosing.
- Spend about 45–50 minutes discussing the responses to the questions that were prepared in advance. You may also develop your discussion further by responding to questions and interests that arise during the discussion and faith-sharing itself.
- Close the discussion and faith-sharing with prayer, about 5–10 minutes. You may use the Closing Prayer at the end of each lesson or one of your choosing at the end of the book. It is important to allow people to pray for personal and community needs and to give thanks for how God is moving in your lives.
- View the wrap-up lecture associated with each lesson (12–15 minutes). You may watch the lecture online, use a DVD, or provide a live lecture by a qualified local speaker. View the lecture together at the end of the session or, if your group runs out of time, you may invite group members to watch the lecture on their own time after the discussion.

A note to individuals

- If you are using this resource for individual study, simply move at your own pace. Take as much time as you need to read, study, and pray with the material.
- If you would like to share this experience with others, consider inviting a friend or family member to join you for your next study. Even a small group of two or three provides an opportunity for fruitful dialog and faith-sharing!

PREFACE

Welcome to *Paul's Letter to the Romans*! I'd like to share a story with you about how this study came to be.

Fr. Tom Stegman, SJ, the author of your study, was a New Testament scholar and beloved professor who served for some years as dean of the Clough School of Theology and Ministry at Boston College. Fr. Stegman's expertise in Paul's letters was well-known. His enthusiasm for them was legendary. He thrived on helping others break open the rich treasury of Paul's letters and come to a fuller understanding of the life-changing reality of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

In 2019, Fr. Stegman was diagnosed with glioblastoma, an aggressive form of brain cancer. Over the next four years, Fr. Stegman's Jesuit formation, personal determination, lively sense of humor, and steadfast faith served him well as he wrestled with cancer and its debilitating effects.

Fr. Stegman loved to work, and he did not stop working until the very end. In 2022, he retired from Boston College and moved to Campion Center, which serves as home for Jesuits in need of specialized medical care. It was Fr. Stegman's wish to spend his time at Campion praying and writing.

And write he did. It was at Campion that Fr. Stegman wrote this commentary. He was so excited to dig into the project that as he waited for a desk to be moved into his room, he began working on it while sitting in bed with a computer on his lap! In the following months, typing errors became a common frustration as Fr. Stegman's illness progressed and certain mechanical tasks became increasingly difficult. "I can fix the typos," I told him. "Just write about Romans." It was clear that—typos aside—he was still writing beautiful commentary. He was still preaching the gospel.

Fr. Stegman loved St. Paul, and he loved Paul's Letter to the Romans. Some of his final days among us were spent pouring himself into the commentary you'll soon be reading. As you read Fr. Stegman's words alongside those of St. Paul, it is my prayer that both of these faithful men may bless you and lead you to a fuller understanding of the love of God in Christ Jesus, a love that has been poured into our hearts and from which nothing—neither death nor life nor any other thing—can separate us.

Amy Ekeh, Editor



The World of Paul

Paul's Letter to the Romans

LESSON ONE

Introduction and Romans 1:1–3:20

Begin your personal study and group discussion with a simple and sincere prayer such as:

Prayer

Loving God, send your Spirit upon us as we study the writings of your apostle Paul. Open our ears, our minds, and especially our hearts. Deepen your love within us, and transform us to embody and proclaim the good news you have revealed in your son Jesus Christ.

Read the Introduction on pages 14–16 and the Bible text of Romans 1:1–3:20, found in the outside columns of pages 17–26, highlighting what stands out to you.

Read the accompanying commentary to add to your understanding.

Respond to the questions on pages 27–29, Exploring Lesson One.

The Closing Prayer on page 30 is for your personal use and may be used at the end of group discussion.

INTRODUCTION

We are about to embark on a study of Paul's Letter to the Romans. This letter has been the subject of much of my teaching and research as a Scripture scholar for two main reasons. First, as part of the canon of the New Testament, this letter is not only *Paul's* word to the church in Rome, written nearly two thousand years ago; we also believe it is *God's* word directed to us. Indeed, and second, I find in this letter a great deal that applies to us now—as individuals, as members of the church, and as citizens. In Romans, Paul takes up topics that have an uncanny relevance today, such as:

- his emphasis on the importance of God's work of reconciliation and how the church should embody this reconciliation;
- his teaching about the transforming power of the Holy Spirit and how the Spirit assists us in prayer (in fact, the most extended treatment of the Spirit in the New Testament is found in Romans);
- his exhortations to the Roman Christians about how to resolve differences among them;
- his teaching about what constitutes true freedom; and his understanding of the effects of baptism.

In addition, Romans contains a depth of material about God and God's covenant faithfulness that is grounded in love. This divine love is revealed through Jesus, who:

- as God's Son and the Messiah (Christ), does what only God can do in bringing about our salvation: restores right relationship with God and one another;
- as the new Adam, reveals what authentic human living entails; and
- shows forth the richness of what salvation is and what it calls forth from us.

As you can see, these topics are both wide-ranging and life-changing. Paul has much to say to us about the things that are most essential to Christian life: faith, salvation, relationships, and community.

Before looking closely at the text of the letter, it will be helpful for us to examine some preliminary issues.

AUTHORSHIP AND DATE

The New Testament contains thirteen letters attributed to Paul's authorship. Many scholars question whether all of them were produced by the apostle himself during his lifetime, but nobody doubts that the Letter to the Romans is from Paul—although it was penned by a secretary named Tertius (16:22). Romans is Paul's longest and one of his latest letters, written after his ministry and letters to the Galatians and Corinthians. In fact, the issues with which he dealt in those letters (e.g., the primacy of faith, the nature of life in the Spirit, and the need to strive for unity in the Christian community) are set forth in Romans in an amplified manner. That is, in Romans we're receiving Paul's mature teaching on these important themes. Given what we know about Paul's life and ministry, a good guess is that this letter was written in the late 50s CE.

AUDIENCE

Unlike most of Paul's letters, Romans was written to a church that Paul as a missionary had not founded. It is not clear when the gospel, or "good news," first came to the capital of the empire. Most scholars surmise that it was Jewish Christian missionaries who first proclaimed the good news in Rome. What we do know is that the Christians in Rome, at the time of Paul's writing, consisted of both Jewish and Gentile believers, and that they met in separate house churches. In all probability, these house churches formed along ethnic lines.

In the year 49 CE, the emperor Claudius expelled from the city a number of leading Jews, including some members of the Christian community, for civic unrest as they quarreled

over whether Jesus was truly the Messiah, God's Son who came to bring salvation. This exile was lifted before Paul wrote the letter. We should imagine a context in which those Jewish Christians who returned found that their Gentile brothers and sisters had taken on new roles in the community, including filling some leadership positions. Thus, there were tensions between the groups, and the apostle learned about these through members of the community whom he knew from prior ministry (16:3-16). These tensions included issues of worship and table fellowship.

PURPOSE IN WRITING

Near the beginning and end of the letter, Paul provides us with important information about his present circumstances and future goals. Paul had already founded churches in cities that ring the Aegean Sea (i.e., in present-day Greece and Turkey). Having established these communities, Paul now wished to turn to the west. As one who was called to proclaim the gospel where it was not yet known (15:20), he wanted to go to Spain, to the westernmost part of the empire. In order to minister there, he knew he would need help—e.g., financial support, assistance from translators, introductions to meet certain persons, and other logistical matters—and he hoped the Roman Christians could provide it.

In order to gain their trust in and support for his ministry, Paul sets forth his proclamation of the gospel. This historical context explains one of the unique features of Romans. Whereas in other letters Paul can allude to and refer back to things he has already taught, here he presents his gospel to the Romans for the first time. Moreover, he sends his co-worker Phoebe ahead of him and asks the Romans to cooperate with her as she tries to get things moving on gathering their assistance (16:1-2). It is likely that Phoebe brought the letter to the community and read it to them. It is also quite possible that she was the first interpreter of the letter, answering questions the Romans may have had when listening to it. (Indeed, it would be surprising if they didn't have questions!)

Paul doesn't only ask for assistance, however. As the apostle sent to the Gentiles (1:5), he also wants to bolster their faith and encourage them. Thus, the letter has a mutual function: Paul and the community need one another, a dynamic that remains true in the church today between ministers and those to whom they minister.

GENRE AND LITERARY CHARACTERISTICS

As we have already observed, Romans is unique in that Paul presents a systematic explanation of the gospel that he regularly proclaims



Features of Greco-Roman letters as found in Romans

Opening greetings	Includes name and title of sender, name of person or community addressed, and a greeting.	Romans 1:1-7
Thanksgiving	Gives thanks to God for a particular reason. (In Greco-Roman letters, sender gives thanks to "the gods.")	Romans 1:8-15
Body of letter	Includes everything between the opening and closing of the letter. Usually begins with a reason for writing, and often ends with a summary of the basic message of the letter.	Romans 1:16–15:13
Conclusion of letter	Often expresses a desire to visit (15:22-33). Includes mutual greetings (16:3-24) and a final blessing (16:25-27).	Romans 15:14–16:27

in his missionary work. But Romans is not simply a theological treatise per se. It is also a real letter containing all the features of a letter from this time: opening greetings, a thanksgiving paragraph, the letter body, mutual greetings near the end, and a final blessing. The best way to describe Romans is that it is a theological essay expressed in letter form.

As such, Romans has certain characteristics to which we should be alert. One is the dialectical quality of Paul's approach, or the way he expresses or explains his ideas. Because the content of the "gospel of God" (1:1)—a reference to the good news about what God has done in sending his Son and the Holy Spirit—is so profound, the apostle takes several steps in setting it forth. In doing so, he refers to earlier material in the letter and intersperses a good deal of explanatory material.

One of the ways Paul explains is through the use of *diatribe*. This term refers to a literary device in which an imaginary interlocutor or conversation partner is allowed to raise questions and even possible objections. These interjections allow Paul to give more precision to his presentation and to clarify possible misunderstandings. As contemporary readers, it will be helpful to understand and anticipate the use of this technique as we read and follow Paul's explanations.

Another notable feature of Romans is Paul's ample use of Scripture. (Note that the Scriptures of Paul and Jesus were what we now call the Hebrew Bible or the Old Testament.) In fact, over half of the Old Testament references in the Pauline corpus are found in Romans. Sometimes Paul cites Scripture directly, while at other times he alludes to it. In citing and alluding to Scripture, Paul presumes that we are familiar with the context of the passages at hand. At times, we will have to pay close attention to this feature.

KEY THEME AND LETTER STRUCTURE

A phrase we will encounter many times in Romans is "the righteousness of God." This phrase refers both to an attribute of God and to the divine activity that emanates from it. In short, it points to God's covenant faithfulness and to the divine commitment to make right what has gone wrong and, in mercy, to restore right relationships between God and human beings, and within the human community itself.

In the six lessons of our study, we will explore how Paul proclaims this theme, following the basic outline of Romans below:

- Address (1:1-15); Humanity Lost Without the Gospel (1:16–3:20)
- Justification Through Faith in Christ (3:21–5:21)
- Justification and the Christian Life (6:1–8:39)
- Jews and Gentiles in God's Plan (9:1–11:36)
- The Duties of Christians (12:1–15:13)
- Conclusion (15:14–16:27)

I: Address

CHAPTER 1

Greeting

[1]Paul, a slave of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God, [2]which he promised previously through his prophets in the holy scriptures, [3]the gospel about his Son, descended from David according to the flesh, [4]but established as Son of God in power according to the spirit of holiness through resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord. [5]Through him we have received the grace of apostleship, to bring about the obedience of faith, for the sake of his name, among all the Gentiles, [6]among whom are you also, who are called to belong to Jesus Christ; [7]to all the beloved of God in Rome, called to be holy. Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

continue

ADDRESS

Romans 1:1-15

1:1-7 Greeting

Paul begins by using the conventional Greco-Roman letter opening: sender to recipients, and greetings. A bare-bones opening would be "Paul, to the church in Rome, greetings." But Paul adds details to these elements and makes other adaptations. It is important to pay attention to these additions and adaptations because he tends to foreshadow key themes through them that he will take up in the letter itself.

In identifying himself, Paul's description takes four full verses (1:1-4; compare, e.g., 1 Thess 1:1). This is no surprise given that he has yet to step foot in Rome and most in the community have not met him in person. His first self-description, "slave of Christ Jesus," can be jarring, especially in our cultural context today. In Paul's time, slavery was an accepted institution, but he is not glorifying it. What he



intends to express via this imagery is that he belongs completely to Jesus and is fully committed to doing his will. Later in the letter, he will express the paradox that, in choosing to serve Christ, he experiences true freedom.

As is typical of Paul, he then identifies himself as an apostle. Though he was not one of the Twelve whom Jesus called during his earthly ministry, Paul's title signals that he has had an encounter with the risen Lord and has been "sent" (the meaning of the word "apostle") by him on a particular mission. His use of the phrase "set apart" evokes the calls of the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah (Isa 6:7; Jer 1:5). He has been set apart for the work of "the gospel of God." Throughout the letter, Paul makes clear that *God* is the one who has acted through Jesus and the Spirit, and who continues to work through ministers like himself.

The word "gospel" means "good news," and we will see shortly how the apostle appreciates the salvific nature of the term (1:16-17). The gospel that Paul proclaims is about Jesus, about whom Paul says two important things. First, Jesus is descended from David; hence, he is the long-awaited Messiah (the Hebrew equivalent of the Greek term for "Christ," which means the "anointed one"). This is the earliest attestation in the New Testament of Jesus' physical descent from David. Second, Jesus is God's Son, shown by his being raised