

EDITED FROM THE STUDY BY
TIMOTHY KELLER
**ROMANS 1-7
FOR YOU**



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SERIES PREFACE

Each volume of the *God's Word For You* series takes you to the heart of a book of the Bible, and applies its truths to your heart.

The central aim of each title is to be:

- Bible centered
- Christ glorifying
- Relevantly applied
- Easily readable

You can use *Romans 1 – 7 For You*:

To read. You can simply read from cover to cover, as a book that explains and explores the themes, encouragements and challenges of this part of Scripture.

To feed. You can work through this book as part of your own personal regular devotions, or use it alongside a sermon or Bible-study series at your church. Each chapter is divided into two shorter sections, with questions for reflection at the end of each.

To lead. You can use this as a resource to help you teach God's word to others, both in small-group and whole-church settings. You'll find tricky verses or concepts explained using ordinary language, and helpful themes and illustrations along with suggested applications.

These books are not commentaries. They assume no understanding of the original Bible languages, nor a high level of biblical knowledge. Verse references are marked in **bold** so that you can refer to them easily. Any words that are used rarely or differently in everyday language outside the church are marked in **gray** when they first appear, and are explained in a glossary toward the back. There, you'll also find details of resources you can use alongside this one, in both personal and church life.

Our prayer is that as you read, you'll be struck not by the contents of this book, but by the book it's helping you open up; and that you'll praise not the author of this book, but the One he is pointing you to.

Carl Laferton, Series Editor

INTRODUCTION TO ROMANS

The letter to the Romans is a book that repeatedly changes the world, by changing people.

One man Romans changed was the English pastor John Stott. Stott's ministry and commitment to evangelism had a great effect on the church in the UK and US, and perhaps particularly throughout the developing world, in the twentieth century. He wrote of his:

“love-hate relationship with Romans, because of its joyful-painful personal challenges ... It was Paul's devastating exposure of universal human sin and guilt in Romans 1:18 – 3:20 which rescued me from that kind of superficial evangelism which is preoccupied only with people's 'felt needs.'”

(The Message of Romans, page 10)

Almost five hundred years before Paul's words called Stott to an evangelism which focused on our relationship with God, Romans changed two other men, in a way that would completely transform the church.

Martin Luther was a German monk who had been taught that God required him to live a righteous life in order to be saved. And so he had grown to hate God, for first requiring of him what he could not do, and then for leaving him to fail. Then Luther read and finally grasped the meaning of Romans 1:17—“In the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last” (NIV2011):

“I labored diligently and anxiously as to how to understand Paul's word ... the expression 'the righteousness of God' blocked the way, because I took it to mean that righteousness whereby God is righteous and deals righteously in punishing the unrighteous. Although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner ... therefore I did not love a righteous and angry God, but rather hated and murmured against him ...

“Then I grasped that the righteousness of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us

by faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise ... I broke through. And as I had formerly hated the expression 'the righteousness of God,' I now began to regard it as my dearest and most comforting word." *(Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans)*

Luther's breakthrough in Romans 1 would lead to the recovery of the gospel in Germany and throughout Europe, and so to the Protestant Reformation. One of the greatest theologians and pastors of that Reformation, the Frenchman John Calvin, who ministered in Geneva, Switzerland, spoke of Romans as his:

"entrance ... to all the most hidden treasures of Scripture ... The subject then of these chapters may be stated thus—man's only righteousness is through the mercy of God in Christ, which being offered by the gospel is apprehended by faith."

(Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul to the Romans, page 16)

Both Luther and Calvin made great use of the writings of an earlier church leader, Augustine, the fourth-century bishop of Hippo (in what is now Algeria). Augustine had a Christian mother, but he turned his back on her faith. He sought truth elsewhere, decided to live however he felt, and fathered a child out of marriage. But while living in Milan, he heard the preaching of Bishop Ambrose, a towering figure in the church. And he found himself unable to shake off what he had heard:

"The tumult of my heart took me out into the garden where no-one could interfere with the burning struggle with myself in which I was engaged ... I was twisting and turning in my chains. Suddenly I heard a voice from the nearby house chanting as if it might be a boy or a girl ... 'Pick up and read, pick up and read.' [I took] the book of the apostle [ie: Romans], opened it and in silence read the first passage on which my eye lit: 'Not in riots or drunken parties, not in eroticism and indecencies, not in strife and rivalry, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh in its lusts' (13:13-14). I neither wished nor needed to read further. At once, with the last words of this


sentence, it was as if a light of relief from all anxiety flooded into my heart. All the shadows of doubt were dispelled.”

(*Confessions*, Book VIII, chapter 12)

So God used the book of Romans to bring to faith the man who may well have been the greatest influence on the church between Paul himself and Luther a millennium later.

What is it about Romans that has proved so life-changing and history-shaping? It is because Romans is about the gospel. Paul was writing to the church in Rome in about AD57 because he wanted them first to understand the gospel, and then to experience the gospel—to know its glorious release. He was likely writing to them during his third missionary journey, quite possibly from Corinth, Greece. They were Christians he had never met, though he hoped to do so soon. They seem to have been a church suffering from tensions between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. But though Paul did not have first-hand knowledge of them, he knew what it was they most needed to hear—the gospel.

As both Luther and Calvin describe so powerfully, this “gospel of God” (Romans 1:1) was a declaration about God’s righteousness. It was the message that the perfection and holiness of God has been seen in the life and death of Jesus Christ; *and* that this perfection is offered to us, as a free gift, through the life and death of Jesus Christ. That is the “gospel” message of Romans and, as we will see, Paul shows us not only how God in the gospel makes sinners righteous, but also how this most precious gift of God is *enjoyed* in our lives—how it produces deep and massive changes in our behavior and even in our character.



Paul shows us how received righteousness is *enjoyed* in our lives.

Reading and reflecting on this letter today, we should be prepared to have our hearts shaped and our lives changed by God’s gift of

righteousness, just as so many others have been. Romans will prompt us to ask: *Have I, like Luther, “broken through” into the freedom and release the gospel brings me, both in terms of my future and in my life right now?*

Romans is perhaps the most written-upon book in the whole of Scripture—its structure and its approach have been the subject of debate throughout the history of the church. In the appendices, I have included a detailed outline structure for the first seven chapters of the letter, to help you see the overall flow and logic of Paul’s thinking; several pages on the biblical view of idolatry, which is foundational to Paul’s treatment of sin and righteousness in chapters 1 – 3; and a very brief description of and response to the recent debates about who Paul is writing to in Romans, and what he is saying to them.

But this resource is not intended to be an exhaustive, nor final, word! It is not a commentary; it does not go into the depth a commentary would, nor does it interact with historical and recent scholarship. It is an expository guide, opening up the Scripture and suggesting how it applies to us today. My prayer is simply that it will help you to, in Luther’s words, “break through”: in your understanding of the gospel message; or your experience of the gospel life; or both.

1. INTRODUCING THE GOSPEL

Romans is, at its heart, a letter about the **gospel**. It is written by a man whose life and work revolved around the gospel, showing the difference brought and worked by the gospel. Unsurprisingly, the beginning of the letter is all about the gospel.

Separate for the Gospel

As with all ancient letters, the writer begins by introducing himself. He is “Paul.” And first and foremost he is a Christian—“a servant of Christ Jesus” (**v 1**). Servant here is literally slave—*doulos*. Paul, like every Christian, has a Master. He is a man under authority. Second, Paul has been “called to be an apostle” (**v 1**). He is an *apostolos*—a “sent one.” This is not a job Paul selected himself for, or even applied for. He was “called” into it—he was **commissioned** and taught directly by the risen Jesus himself (see Acts 9:1-19). He has direct authority from Christ to teach. What he writes is Scripture. What follows is true.

But why did the Lord call Paul to be his apostle? So that he would be “set apart for the gospel of God” (Romans **1:1**). The word translated “set apart” means “separated,” to be moved away and apart from everything else. Paul was set apart to spread the gospel, to pursue this one overriding aim. This is what Paul will “slave” for all his life; but it is also, as we will see (v 9, 11, 15), what he will rejoice in through

* All Romans verse references being looked at in each chapter are in **bold**.

† Words in **gray** are defined in the Glossary (page 173).

all his life. To Paul, this gospel is so great that he is willing to separate himself from *anything*—wealth, health, acclaim, friends, safety and so on—in order to be faithful to his calling.

The Gospel: Who, not What

What is this “gospel” for which Paul is willing to glory in being a slave? What gospel would make Paul happy to lose everything in order to share it? First, it is worth reflecting on the word itself. “Gospel”—*euangeloi*—is literally “good herald.” In the first century, if on a far-flung battlefield an emperor won a great victory which secured his peace and established his authority, he would send heralds—*angeloi*—to declare his victory, peace and authority. Put most simply, the gospel is an announcement—a declaration. The gospel is not advice to be followed; it is news, good (*eu*) news about what has been done.

The apostle Paul is the herald of this announcement. It is a good reminder that the gospel is not Paul’s; it did not originate with him and he did not claim the authority to craft it. Rather, it is “of God” (**v 1**). We, like Paul, are not at liberty to reshape it to sound more appealing in our day, nor to domesticate it to be more comfortable for our lives.

Neither is the gospel new; rather, God “promised it beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures” (**v 2**). The Old Testament is all about it. All the “Scriptures” point forward to this announcement. They are the scaffold on which Paul stands as God’s herald. Every page that God wrote before outlines what he has now declared in full color.

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The gospel’s content is “his Son” (**v 3**). The gospel centers on Jesus. It is about a person, not a concept; it is about him, not us. We never grasp the gospel until we understand that it is not fundamentally a message about our lives, dreams, or hopes. The

gospel speaks about, and transforms, all of those things, but only because it isn't about us. It is a declaration about God's Son, the man Jesus. This Son was:

- fully human: "as to his human nature" (v 3).
- the one who fulfilled the promises of Scripture: he was "a descendant of David" (v 3), the king of Israel a millennium before. God had promised David that from his family God would produce the ultimate, final, universal King—the Christ (see 2 Samuel 7:11b-16). And David's own life—his rule, suffering and glory—in many ways foreshadowed that of his greater descendant (see Psalms 2; 22; 110).
- divine: the Son was "declared with power to be the Son of God, by his resurrection from the dead" (Romans 1:4). Paul is not saying that Jesus only became God's Son when he was raised from the grave. Rather, he is outlining two great truths about the resurrection. First, the empty tomb is the great declaration of who Jesus is. His resurrection removes all doubt that he is the Son of God. Second, his resurrection and **ascension** were his path to his rightful place; to his rule at God's right hand (Ephesians 1:19b-22), sitting at "the highest place," given "the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow" (Philippians 2:9-10). God's Son had humbly become a man, tasted poverty, endured rejection and suffered a powerless death. The resurrection is where we see not only that he is the Son of God, but that he is now the Son of God "in power."

Not until the end of Romans 1:4 does Paul actually name God's Son: "Jesus Christ our Lord." God's Son is Jesus, the Greek version of the Hebrew name *Yeshua/Joshua*—"God will save," the fulfiller of all God "promised beforehand" (v 2). He is Christ, the anointed man whom God has appointed to rule his people. And he is our Lord, God himself. The gospel is both a declaration of Jesus' perfect rule, and an invitation to come under that perfect rule, to make him "our Lord."

Faith-fuelled Obedience

This is the gospel Paul announces. He has “received **grace** and apostleship” (v 5—ie: both his job as apostle, and the power to accomplish it, grace). And his specific role is “to call people from among all the **Gentiles**.” The gospel is for God’s ancient people, the Jews—but it is not only for them. God has commissioned Paul to take the message of his Son to those who are not Jews. He is God’s “chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel” (Acts 9:15).

And what is the gospel call? To obey Christ and trust Christ—to live by “the obedience that comes from faith” (Romans **1:5**). What does this mean? The rest of the book of Romans will explain it! But it is worth highlighting two things here.

First, it does *not* mean that Paul is teaching the Gentiles that, to be saved, they must both have **faith** and do obedience, as though both are necessary grounds of being right with God. This is an obedience that comes from faith—that springs from a wholehearted trust in Jesus, God’s Son. Obedience flows out of faith; it is a consequence of saving faith, not a second condition for salvation.

But second, it *does* mean that true faith in our hearts brings obedience in our lives. Why? Because the gospel is the declaration that Jesus is the promised King, the risen and powerful Son of God, who now invites us in, to enjoy the blessings of his rule. Again, we will see much more of why we need to be invited, how this invitation is possible, and how wonderful Jesus’ rule is, in the rest of Paul’s letter. Here,

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the point is that real “faith” is faith in a divine King, to whom we owe our obedience and of whom we (like Paul) are servants. There *will* be a joyful obedience that flows from truly trusting this King. As the great sixteenth-century **Reformer** Martin Luther put it: “We are saved by faith

alone, but the faith that saves is never alone." It brings about grateful, joyful, trusting obedience.

Why Paul Went to Rome

This life of faith and faith-fuelled obedience encompasses "you also," the church in Rome, Paul says. In **verses 6-7**, he describes these Christians in four wonderful ways. First, they have been "called to belong to Jesus Christ." Second, they are "loved by God." Third, they are "called to be saints"—literally, pure ones or set-apart ones. Fourth, they enjoy "grace and peace ... from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ."

Paul is moved to "thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world" (**v 8**). Paul himself has never been to this church, but he has heard a lot about it. He has been praying for them (**v 9-10**); and he has been praying that now he might be able to come to Rome in person (**v 10**).

Why does Paul want to visit this church, which is already clearly living out an obedience which comes from faith, and for whom he can thank God and pray from afar? "So that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong" (**v 11**). He wants to use his abilities of preaching and pastoring so that they can be encouraged in their faith (**v 12**). There is a surprise here. The great apostle does not want to visit simply so he can encourage them. He will visit so that they can encourage him, too—"that you *and* I may be *mutually* encouraged by *each other's* faith" (**v 12**).

This is striking! Since Paul sought out encouragement from other believers, and since if Paul sought that encouragement in the faith of other believers, how much more should we?! **Verses 11-12** begin to show us part of what the obedience that comes through faith is; it is obeying Christ by having the humility to serve, and be served by, his people. **Verse 11** teaches us to use whatever gifts the Lord has graciously given us to make others stronger in their faith. **Verse 12** teaches us to allow others to use the faith and gifts the Lord has given

them to build us up. We should never leave our church meetings, having spent time surrounded by beloved, distinctive people of faith, without feeling encouraged!

How can we know that encouragement in reality, Sunday by Sunday and week by week as we meet together, though? By remembering that God has declared that Jesus is his Son, raised with power to rule in power, and that by faith in him we enjoy grace from him and peace with him. When we spend time with other believers, we are spending time with those who say: *This is true* and: *This is wonderful* to that declaration. We can see faith, and the obedience that flows from it, all around us. We can see others using their gifts for others, and we can use ours for them. That is what encourages and strengthens us.

Questions for reflection

1. What is missing from the gospel you believe in if you forget or downplay the truth that God's Son is "Jesus" ... or "Christ" ... or "Lord"? Do you ever downplay one or other of these in how you think and live?
2. Where can you see the "obedience that comes from faith" in your own life?
3. What difference would it make if you went to church next Sunday consciously seeking to encourage others? Do you allow the faith and words of others to encourage you?