

# THE GREATEST LETTER EVER WRITTEN

## ROMANS 1–16

### INTRODUCTION

**Today we start a journey** that will likely take us **a number of years to complete** as we study Paul's letter to the Romans.

It is a journey that I am **both humbled and excited by** because, even within the pages inspired Scripture, Paul's letter **stands alone as the greatest book in the Bible.**

That is certainly a bold claim, but I am not alone in my esteem for Paul's letter to the Romans.

**Martin Luther** wrote—*"This epistle is in truth the most important document in the New Testament, the gospel in its purest expression.*

*Not only is it well worth a Christian's while to know it word for word by heart, but also to meditate on it day by day.*

*It is the soul's daily bread, and can never be read too often, or studied too much.*

*The more you probe into it the more precious it becomes, and the better its flavour."*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin L. Merkle, "Is Romans Really the Greatest Letter Ever Written?," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*, volume 11, no. 3 (2007): 15.

**John Calvin**—“When any one understands this Epistle, he has a passage opened to him to the understanding of the whole Scripture.”<sup>2</sup>

**J. I. Packer**—“All roads in the Bible lead to Romans, and all views afforded by the Bible are seen most clearly from Romans, and when the message of Romans gets into a person’s heart there is no telling what may happen.”<sup>3</sup>

**Samuel Coleridge**—“I think that the Epistle to the Romans is the most profound work in existence.”<sup>4</sup>

**John Knox**—“It is unquestionably the most important theological work ever written.”<sup>5</sup>

**John Stott**—“It is the fullest, plainest and grandest statement of the gospel in the New Testament.”<sup>6</sup>

**R. C. Sproul**—“I really do believe that if there is any one individual book, out of the sixty-six, which God used to change lives more than any other, it is the book of Romans.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Andrew David Naselli, *Romans: A Concise Guide to the Greatest Letter Ever Written* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022), 19–20.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Merkle, *SBJT*, 15.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

**Benjamin Merkle**—“Paul’s letter to the church at Rome is the greatest letter ever written because of its great impact in history, its grand theology about Christ, and its practical instructions for Christian living.”<sup>8</sup>

To put it simply then, as a number of authors have claimed, **Romans is the greatest letter ever written.**<sup>9</sup>

So what makes Paul’s letter to the Romans so great?

Romans is the greatest letter ever written because it contains **the clearest and most detailed explanation of the greatest message ever proclaimed**—the gospel.

**It explains and applies and exalts in** the greatest news you could ever hear.<sup>10</sup>

Today we’re going to start our study of this **preeminent epistle** with an **overview**.

Over the course of the next few years, we will be getting into **all the glorious details of the letter**, but in doing so we never want to lose sight of **the bigger picture of Paul’s argument** as he **flows logically** from one detail to the next.

Sometimes we can misuse Scripture by thinking of it as a **pearl necklace**.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>9</sup> cf. John Piper, N.T. Wright, Andy Naselli.

<sup>10</sup> Naselli, *Romans*, 20.

We find tremendous value in the verses we study, but we view them like pearls on a necklace—completely separate and distinct from the other pearls around them.

Instead, we need to remember that Scripture is more like a **metal chain**—not only does each verse have value to it, but it is **inseparably linked** to the those that come before it and after it.

In other words, we should **remember the context** as we study the details of the letter because **the context explains the argument** that the author is building.

When we interpret Scripture, we speak of **the author's intent determining the meaning**—that is, the words mean what the author intended them to mean, not what the reader might like them to mean.

It is essential to remember the flow of the author's argument as we study Scripture so that we will **rightly interpret his intent** in writing what he did as we give attention to the finest details.

**So let's consider an overview of Romans**—the greatest letter ever written—so that we can **keep the big picture in mind** as we get into the details in future sermons.

## PROPOSITION

To give you the outline, then, of what we'll cover today, we're going to examine **four details of the letter** that we need to consider in order **to get an overview of its content and significance**:

1. The Writing of Romans
2. The Purpose of Romans
3. The Theme of Romans
4. The Theology of Romans

### 1. THE WRITING OF ROMANS

When we consider the writing of Romans, I'm using that heading to **gather together the questions** of **who, where, and when?**

Who wrote Romans? Who did he write it to? Where did he write it from? And when did he write it?

In other words, we need to consider all the details that have to do with **the writing of the letter**.

Let's start with **the first of those questions**—who wrote the letter?

As you have already heard in my introduction, we believe that it was the apostle Paul who wrote the letter.

For those who have **a high view of Scripture** and are convinced that it is **the inspired and inerrant Word of God**, that's a really simple question because the answer is found in the very first verse.

**Romans 1:1**—**Paul, a slave of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle, having been set apart for the gospel of God...**

Today, however, there are many **liberal scholars** who have a **low view of Scripture** and think it nothing more than the work of man.

However, the evidence for Paul's authorship of Romans is so strong that, as **one commentator** noted, "*No serious scholar today doubts that Paul wrote Romans.*"<sup>11</sup>

**So it is beyond doubt** that the greatest letter was written by **the greatest apostle**—Saul of Tarsus, as he was known to the Jews, or Paul as he was known to the Gentiles.

What is interesting to note is that Paul **made use of a scribe**, otherwise called an **amanuensis**, to record what the apostle dictated to him.

We see evidence of this in **Romans 16:22**—**I, Tertius, who wrote this letter, greet you in the Lord.**

So Paul wrote Romans, **using the help of a scribe** to record his dictation.

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<sup>11</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, Second Edition, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 2.

**The next question** we need to answer is who did he write the letter to?

Paul wrote the letter **to the church in Rome**, as we read in **Romans 1:7**—**to all who are beloved of God in Rome, called as saints....**

There is a **fascinating history** to the church in Rome, and it actually **helps us to understand some of the issues** that Paul addresses in his letter.

While we have **no definite evidence** concerning when and how the church in Rome began, it was evidently **not started** by the ministry of the apostle Paul.

We find his clear statement that he had not previously visited Rome in **Romans 1:13**—**I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that often I have planned to come to you (and have been prevented so far) so that I may have some fruit among you also, even as among the rest of the Gentiles.**

**Roman Catholic tradition** argues that it was the **apostle Peter** who planted the church, but that is also easily dismissed with a study of his movements as recorded in Acts.

Peter did apparently have a ministry in Rome, as he alludes to in **1 Peter 5:13**—**She who is in Babylon, chosen together with you, sends you greetings....**

However, the date of his letter is after that of Romans, so it doesn't indicate that Peter founded the church there.

Additionally, Paul writes in **Romans 15:20** that—**I make it my ambition to proclaim the gospel, not where Christ was already named, so that I would not build on another man's foundation.**

That seems to imply that Paul did not recognise the church in Rome as being **built by another apostle's ministry**, and indeed the **tradition of church history** affirms that too.

**The 4th-century church father Ambrosiaster** wrote that the Romans, “*have embraced the faith of Christ, albeit according to the Jewish rite, without seeing any sign of mighty works or any of the apostles.*”<sup>12</sup>

**The most likely scenario** of how that happened is found in what we read the amused statements of those who heard Peter preach at Pentecost in **Acts 2:8, 10**—

<sup>8</sup> **And how is it that we each hear them in our own language in which we were born?...**

<sup>10</sup> **Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the district of Libya around Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes....**

It seems **perfectly logical to infer** that a number of **Roman Jews**, who were converted on the day of Pentecost in Jerusalem, took their faith in Jesus as the Messiah back with them **to their home synagogues.**

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<sup>12</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 4.

What should be **particularly encouraging to us** is that the church was founded not through the miraculous signs and wonders of an apostle, but through **the simple sufficiency of the gospel**.

As Paul writes in **Romans 1:16**—**I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.**

The church would have been **predominantly Jewish** in its early years until the Jewish Christians were forced to leave Rome when the **Emperor Claudius expelled them** from about **AD 49–54**.

Luke refers that event in **Acts 18:2** when we read—

**[Paul] found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, and his wife Priscilla, who recently came from Italy because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to depart from Rome.**

During **the years of AD 49–54**, the church would have **consisted of only Gentile Christians**.

By the time Jewish Christians returned to Rome, the Gentile Christians were **more influential and likely looked down** on Jewish Christians.<sup>13</sup>

When Paul wrote this letter to the church in Rome, the church likely consisted of **both Jewish and Gentile Christians**, which is why he refers to “**all who are beloved of God in Rome**” in **Romans 1:7**.

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<sup>13</sup> Naselli, *Romans*, 21.

Paul directly addresses Gentiles as we read in **Romans 1:13**, and he does so again in **Romans 11:13** when he says—

**I am speaking to you who are Gentiles.**

In **chapter 16** he greets a number of Jewish believers who were presumably part of the church in Rome.

This mix of Jews and Gentiles together in the church is why Paul goes to great lengths to address the issue of **universal accountability** to God for sin in **Romans 1:18–3:20**.

He summarises his argument in **Romans 3:9-10**—

<sup>9</sup> **What then? Are we better? Not at all; for we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin;**

<sup>10</sup> **as it is written, “There is none righteous, not even one....”**

Furthermore, Paul address the apparent failure of the gospel to convert many Jews in **Romans 9–11**, and when he writes about the “**weak in faith**” in **Romans 14–15** it is most probably Jewish Christians that he had in mind.

So far, as we consider the writing of Romans, we’ve answered **the two “who” questions**—who wrote the letter and who did he write it to?

Let’s answer **the third question**—where did Paul write the letter from?

As Paul indicates in his letter, he planned to visit Rome on his way to Spain, as we read in **Romans 15:24**—

**Whenever I go to Spain—for I hope, passing through, to see you, and to be helped on my way there by you, when I have first enjoyed your company for a while.**

Paul had also been **collecting an offering** for the **Jewish Christians in Jerusalem** which he hoped to give them, as we see in **Romans 15:25-27**—

<sup>25</sup> **But now I am going to Jerusalem to serve the saints.**

<sup>26</sup> **For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to share with the poor among the saints in Jerusalem.**

<sup>27</sup> **Yes, they were pleased to do so, and they are indebted to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in their spiritual things, they are indebted to minister to them also in material things.**

Paul must have been **near the end of his third missionary journey**, as we discover from **Acts 19:21**—

**Now after these things were finished, Paul purposed in the Spirit to go to Jerusalem after he had passed through Macedonia and Achaia, saying, “After I have been there, I must also see Rome.”**

It is most likely, therefore, that Paul **wrote the letter from Corinth**.

This is further strengthened by the evidence of **Romans 16** where prominent members of the **Corinthians church** are named—**Phoebe, Gaius, and Erastus**.

We see in **Acts 20:1–3** that Paul **stayed in Greece for three months**, and Corinth is the most likely place that he stayed for that time.

That question of where Paul wrote the letter from is connected to **the fourth question**—when did he write it?

The answer depends on when he stayed in Corinth for three months.

**By comparing Romans and Acts** that is easily narrowed to the **period between AD 55–58**, but even within that range it seems that **the best option is AD 57**.<sup>14</sup>

**Those four questions together**—who wrote the letter, who did he write it to, where did he write it from, and when did he write it?—provide the first detail of Paul’s letter that we need to consider—**the writing of Romans**.

While that detail may at first sound a little academic, it is **foundational to our understanding** of the other three details we need to consider.

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<sup>14</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 3. See also, Naselli, *Romans*, 21.

## 2. THE PURPOSE OF ROMANS

**Paul does not explicitly state the purpose** of his letter, so we have to **attempt to discern** the letter's purpose by **examining its content** in light of what we know about the writing of the letter.

As **Carson and Moo** argue—

*“Multiple circumstances lead Paul to write a letter in which he carefully sets forth his understanding of the gospel, particularly as it relates to salvation and the historical question of Jew and Gentile, law and gospel, and continuity and discontinuity between the old and the new.”<sup>15</sup>*

In other words, **instead of specifying one main purpose** for Paul's letter, it is **better to recognise several purposes** that we can identify from Paul's circumstances as he wrote.

**Andy Naselli** is most convincing when he **discerns five purposes**.

Paul wrote the letter to:

- (1) apply lessons from his recent conflicts in Galatia and Corinth;
- (2) prepare for the looming crisis in Jerusalem;
- (3) secure a missionary base for his work in Spain;
- (4) unify the church in Rome around the gospel; and
- (5) defend his theology against accusations that he is anti-law and even anti-Jewish.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *Introducing the New Testament: A Short Guide to Its History and Message* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 84–85.

<sup>16</sup> Naselli, Romans, 23.

Let's consider those purposes very briefly.

**First**, Paul wrote to **apply lessons from his recent conflicts** in Galatia and Corinth.

Paul's three-month stay in Greece came after **the resolution of intense battles for the gospel** in the Galatian and Corinthian churches.

Paul faced intense struggles against **the influence of Judaisers** who wanted Gentile Christians to become Jewish proselytes by practicing the Mosaic law, **especially circumcision**.

One might even say that **he defends the gospel** in the letter to the **Galatians** and **explains the gospel** in his letter to the **Romans**, so similar concerns are evident.

At least one of his purposes in writing to Rome was certainly to **take proactive steps to clarify the gospel** and protect the church from the heresy of the Jewish false teachers.

**Second**, Paul wrote to **prepare for the looming crisis** in Jerusalem.

We've already taken note of Paul's collection of financial gifts from the Gentile churches for the relief of the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem.

However, Paul saw this gift as **more than just a social concern**.

He viewed this collection as a **practical means to cement the fractured and sometimes bitter relationships** between Jews and Gentiles in the early church.<sup>17</sup>

Therefore, he asked the Roman church to **pray for the success** of his upcoming trip to Jerusalem to deliver the gift.

At the same time he **articulated his theological position** on the relationship between Jews and Gentiles and between the Old and New Covenants to the believers in Rome for their **clarity on the contentious issue**.

**Third**, Paul wrote to **secure a missionary base** for his work in Spain.

We've already read of Paul's ambition to proclaim the gospel throughout the Roman Empire in all the areas **where there was not yet a Christian witness** or **existing church to evangelise** those in the surrounding area.

By the end of **Paul's third missionary journey**, he had planted churches in the **strategic cities** of the Roman provinces of **Macedonia and Asia** and so he then aimed to go further west to Rome and Spain.

As we've read in **Romans 15:24**, Paul sought to **enlist the help and financial support** of the church in Rome in order to prepare for his mission to Spain.

A church-planting mission **so far from Paul's home church of Antioch** would create all kinds of logistical problems.

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<sup>17</sup> Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 16.

So it was **strategic** for him to seek the help of the church in Rome which was **centrally located and financially able** to support the mission.

To that end, Paul's letter would have given the church an **introduction to both Paul's doctrinal convictions and ministry aspirations** that would encourage their sponsorship.

**Fourth**, Paul wrote to **unify the church in Rome** around the gospel.

Paul writes with an eye on the **divisions within the church**, as we see in **Romans 14–15** specifically.

There was evidently a rift between those, mainly Jewish Christians, who thought they needed to **live out their righteousness in terms of the Mosaic law**, and those, mainly Gentiles Christians, who saw **no need to bring the law and Jewish traditions** into their Christian practice.

Paul makes a passionate appeal for unity in **Romans 15:7-9**—

**<sup>7</sup> Therefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God.**

**<sup>8</sup> For I say that Christ has become a servant to the circumcision on behalf of the truth of God to confirm the promises given to the fathers [that is, the Jews],**

**<sup>9</sup> and for the Gentiles to glorify God for His mercy; as it is written, “Therefore I will give praise to You among the Gentiles, And I will sing to Your name.”**

**Fifth**, Paul wrote to defend his theology against accusations that he is **anti-law and even anti-Jewish**.

We see evidence of these accusations in **Romans 3:8**—

**And why not say (as we are slanderously reported and as some claim that we say), “Let us do evil that good may come”? Their condemnation is just.**

**James and the other elders** of the Jerusalem church refer to these same accusations when Paul visited shortly after writing his letter to the Romans, as we read in **Acts 21:20-21**—

<sup>20</sup> **“You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed, and they are all zealous for the Law;**

<sup>21</sup> **and they have been told about you, that you are teaching all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs.”**

Therefore, Paul evidently wrote his letter with the purpose, among others, of **correcting these false accusations**.

As we consider **these five purposes**, **Tom Schreiner** offers an important reminder when he writes—

*“Too many studies consider the purposes of Romans only at the sociological or horizontal level.”<sup>18</sup>*

In other words, we **should not neglect the vertical purpose**, which is **Paul’s ultimate goal**.

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<sup>18</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 26.

Every one of Paul's purposes serves the **ultimate purpose of glorifying God.**

As **Schreiner** writes, *"Unity is ultimately prized for God's sake. Unity is to be pursued so that the church worships God together in harmony. A harmonious church would bring honour and praise to God's name."*

And as we consider Paul's missionary purpose to proclaim the gospel to Spain, **Schreiner** further argues that, *"The bringing in of more worshipers redounds to the praise and glory of God. The salvation of many from both Jews and gentiles brings honour to God's name."*

As Paul writes in **Romans 11:36**, **"From Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen."**

So Paul's ultimate goal is the glory of God, but as we will see next, **the glory of God and the good of His people are inseparably intertwined.**

**We should not, therefore,** think of this as a sixth purpose of the letter, but rather as Paul's ultimate goal in every one of the five purposes with which he writes.

**Paul aimed to glorify God in all his purposes** as he wrote his letter to the Romans.

### 3. THE THEME OF ROMANS

With the details of the writing of Romans and the purpose of Romans now clear in our minds, let's consider **the theme of Romans**.

When we speak of the “theme,” we're referring to the **overarching topic of Paul's letter**.

It's the “heading” that can **summarise Romans as a whole**.<sup>19</sup>

So what is the theme of Romans? Scholars, of course, have **offered many opinions**.

What I believe is **most clarifying, though**, is to consider **the theme and the theology**—or the theological message—of the letter as distinct details.

Some of the leading commentators have suggested that the theme of Romans is **justification by faith**, or similarly, that it is **the righteousness of God**.

As we'll soon consider, the doctrine of justification **certainly features prominently** in Paul's letter, but I agree with **Moo** who argues—

*“Justification by faith is, I think, an absolutely vital teaching in the letter, but I don't think it is broad enough to ‘cover’ the content of Romans as a whole.”*<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 22.

<sup>20</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *Romans*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2000), 26.

I think it is **clearest and most accurate**, then, to speak of the **gospel as the theme of Romans** and the doctrine of justification by faith is the theological message of the letter.

The **grand theme, the overarching topic**, of Romans then is the gospel.

What is the gospel? **Gospel means “good news.”**

The gospel is the good news message that **God brings guilty sinners into relationship with Himself** and destines them to eternal life when they believe in His Son, Jesus Christ.

As Paul **explains and applies and exults in** the gospel—the greatest message ever proclaimed—throughout the letter of Romans, we come to understand that the good news of the gospel **presupposes corresponding bad news**.

**The bad news is very bad news for us for two reasons:**

(1) because of who God is and (2) because of who we are.<sup>21</sup>

God is the holy Creator who owns us and He cannot simply overlook sin because of His righteous character.

This becomes bad news for us when we consider that we are **sinners who rebel against Him**, refusing to worship Him or obey Him and therefore **stand condemned** under the wrath of the holy God.

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. Naselli, *Romans*, 24.

**But the good news of the gospel is very good news for us for two reasons:** (1) because of what Jesus did and (2) because of what will happen if we trust Jesus.

**This is what Jesus did**—He lived, died, and rose again for sinners.

This is **God's solution to our greatest problem**—we are condemned because of who God is as holy and righteous and because of who we are as guilty sinners.

So God the Father sent Jesus His Son to **die in the place of sinners, as a substitute for sinners.**

This is what we call **penal substitutionary atonement.**

The clearest statement Paul makes on this is found in **2 Corinthians 5:21** where he writes, **“He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.”**

When we stand condemned under God's wrath, the good news of the gospel is that **Jesus paid our penalty in our place** when He died on the cross.

**Paul elaborates on the good news** of what Jesus did in glorious detail in **Romans 3:21-26** in what commentator **Leon Morris** called,

*“possibly the most important single paragraph ever written.”*<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans, The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1988), 173.

**Martin Luther** described the paragraph as, “*the chief point, and the very central place of the Epistle, and of the whole Bible.*”<sup>23</sup>

Listen to this glorious good news of God’s solution to our greatest problem—

**21 But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets,**

**22 even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction;**

**23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,**

**24 being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus;**

**25 whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith, for a demonstration of His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed;**

**26 for the demonstration of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.**

The good news is very good news for us **not only because** of what Jesus did.

It’s good news for us **because of what will happen** if we trust Jesus.

God saves sinners who **turn and trust Jesus.**

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<sup>23</sup> Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 237.

**The gospel calls for a response** from us in the form of **turning**—that is, repenting from our sin—**and trusting**—that is, placing our faith in the promises of God and the work of Jesus Christ.

So we can **summarise the bad news and good news** of the gospel with **four words—God, man, Christ, response.**

- **God:** God is the holy Creator.
- **Man:** We are sinners.
- **Christ:** Jesus lived, died, and rose again for sinners.
- **Response:** God saves sinners who turn and trust Jesus.

As **Jerry Bridges** so wonderfully applies this by pointing to **your need for the gospel**, he writes—

*“Your worst days are never so bad that you are beyond the reach of God’s grace. And your best days are never so good that you are beyond the need of God’s grace.”<sup>24</sup>*

This good news message of the gospel—the greatest message ever proclaimed—is **the theme of Romans**, and we see that in **the way in which it summarises Paul’s argument** throughout the letter.

If we look at the “big picture” of Romans, we see that Paul explains and exults in and applies the gospel in **five steps**:

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<sup>24</sup> Jerry Bridges, *The Discipline of Grace: God’s Role and Our Role in the Pursuit of Holiness*, 2nd ed. (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2006), 19.

1. We all need the gospel because we are all sinners (1:18–3:20).

2. The heart of the gospel is that faith alone in Jesus is how God will justify us—that is, declare us righteous (3:21–4:25).

3. The gospel provides us with the assurance of salvation, which includes several results:

- God reconciles us to Himself (5:1–21),
- He frees us from sin’s dominating power (6:1–23),
- He frees us from the Mosaic law’s binding power (7:1–25),
- And He gives us assurance and security (8:1–39).

4. The relationship between the gospel and Israel calls the reliability of God’s Word into question, so Paul defends God’s character and promises (9:1–11:36).

5. The gospel transforms how we live and produces righteous living (12:1–15:13).<sup>25</sup>

**So the theme of the letter of Romans**—the greatest letter ever written—**is the gospel**—the greatest message ever proclaimed. It is the good news of **the greatest plan of salvation ever conceived** that leads to **the greatest display of the glory of God ever possible**.

That brings us to the **fourth and final detail** to consider in our overview of the letter.

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<sup>25</sup> Cf. Andrew David Naselli, “The Righteous God Righteously Righteouses the Unrighteous: Justification according to Romans,” in *The Doctrine on Which the Church Stands or Falls: Justification in Biblical, Theological, Historical, and Pastoral Perspective*, ed. Matthew Barrett (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 214.

## 4. THE THEOLOGY OF ROMANS

The theme and the theology of Romans are **as inseparably intertwined** as the glory of God is with the good of His people.

Nevertheless, it serves the purposes of clarity and accuracy to consider the two details distinctly.

We find Paul's statement of both the theme and theology of his letter when he writes in **Romans 1:16-17**—

**16 I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.**

**17 For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "But the righteous will live by faith."**

If the theme of Romans is the gospel, then the theological message of the letter **centres on justification by faith**, or as **John Stott** has **put it better than anyone else**—

*"In the gospel God's righteous way of 'righteousing' the unrighteous has been revealed."*<sup>26</sup>

**Andy Naselli** borrows from **Stott** when expands his words to say—"The glorious message of Paul's letter to the Romans is that the gospel reveals how God is righteously righteousing unrighteous individuals—both Jews and Gentiles—at this stage in the history of salvation."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Romans: God's Good News for the World*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 37.

<sup>27</sup> Naselli, *Romans*, 27.

That is **exactly what Paul means** when he writes that the gospel **reveals the righteousness of God from faith to faith**.

The “**righteousness of God**,” as Paul puts it, is a **key phrase** within the letter of Romans Paul uses to **communicate the theology of his letter**.

He uses it to **explain and apply and exult in** the doctrine of justification by faith, as he introduces it in **Romans 1:17**.

However, we should be aware that while **justification** is Paul’s **primary reference** when he uses the phrase, it does also mean more than that in the letter.

There are, in fact, **at least three basic options** of what Paul intends to communicate when he uses the phrase, “**the righteousness of God**”:

**1. What God is**—God’s attribute of being righteous or just.

**Wayne Grudem** defines this perfection of God in this way—

*“God’s righteousness means that God always acts in accordance with what is right and is himself the final standard of what is right.”*

**2. What God does**—God’s activity of saving sinful people. He rights what is wrong, in the sense of establishing what is right.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 74.

**3. What God gives**—God’s gift of a righteous status to sinful people.

This idea is based on the metaphor of a **court of law** and refers to righteousness in a **judicial sense**.

That is, this gift is God’s **legally declaring people** to be righteous before Him—it does not morally make them righteous by gradually infusing righteousness into them.<sup>29</sup>

Of these three options, Paul uses “**the righteousness of God**” **primarily in this third sense**.

In other words, Paul uses the phrase most commonly to refer to **the doctrine of justification by faith**.

However, **Stott** remarks, “*I have never been able to see why we have to choose, and why all three should not be combined.*”<sup>30</sup>

Now, the phrase cannot be combined to mean all three options at one time, but we certainly do see all three senses featuring in Paul’s letter to the Romans.

As **Stott** and **Naselli** observed, the theological message of the letter **centres on justification by faith**—

“*The gospel reveals how God is righteously righteousing (i.e., justifying) unrighteous individuals...*”

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<sup>29</sup> Naselli, *The Doctrine on Which the Church Stands or Falls*, 216–217.

<sup>30</sup> Stott, *The Message of Romans*, 63.

As Paul develops this theological message, he **answers two critical questions.**

**1. How does this happen?** The answer is by faith in Christ, apart from the Mosaic law, as we read again in **Romans 3:21-22**—

<sup>21</sup> **Now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets,**

<sup>22</sup> **even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe....**

This is what I referred to earlier as **the greatest plan of salvation ever conceived.**

**2. Why does this happen?** The answer is that God justifies sinners ultimately for His glory, as we see Paul triumphantly proclaim in **Romans 11:33-36**—

<sup>33</sup> **Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!**

<sup>34</sup> **For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counsellor?**

<sup>35</sup> **Or who has first given to Him that it might be repaid to him?**

<sup>36</sup> **For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.**

As I said, Paul describes the gospel as the greatest plan of salvation ever conceived that leads to **the greatest display of the glory of God ever possible.**

**Thus, the glory of God and the good of His chosen people are inseparably combined in the gospel.**

## CONCLUSION

As we conclude, **we've examined four details** of Romans that help us gain an **overview, or "big picture,"** that we should keep in mind as we study the details of Paul's letter:

We've considered the writing of Romans, the purpose of Romans, the theme of Romans, and the theology of Romans.

In doing so we've discovered Romans to be the greatest letter ever written because it **explains, applies, and exalts in** the greatest message ever proclaimed—the gospel.

The gospel is the good news of the greatest plan of salvation ever conceived that leads to the greatest display of the glory of God ever possible.

**It is no surprise,** then, that the letter has **found such significance throughout the history of the church.**

**However, you must not fail to find its significance for you personally.**

As **J. I. Packer** said, "*When the message of Romans gets into a person's heart there is no telling what may happen.*"

That is **precisely what must happen** though—the greatest message ever proclaimed **must get into your heart.**

The gospel is the power of God for salvation, but **you must respond** to that good news by **turning from your sin and trusting in Jesus Christ** as you join with Paul in understanding, applying, and exulting in the gospel—**all to the glory of God.**

## BENEDICTION

### Romans 16:25-27—

<sup>25</sup> Now to Him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which has been kept secret for long ages past,  
<sup>26</sup> but now is manifested, and by the Scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the eternal God, has been made known to all the Gentiles, leading to obedience of faith;  
<sup>27</sup> to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, be the glory forever. Amen.