

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

## Why Romans is the Greatest Letter Ever Written

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### How Important Is Romans?

Paul's letter to the Romans is arguably the single most important piece of literature in the history of the world.



- \* Martin Luther: "This epistle [i.e., Romans] is really the chief part of the New Testament, and is truly the purest gospel. It is worthy not only that every Christian should know it word for word, by heart, but also that he should occupy himself with it every day, as the daily bread of the soul. We can never read it or ponder over it too much; for the more we deal with it, the more precious it becomes and the better it tastes."<sup>1</sup>
- \* 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>
- \* John Piper: Romans is "the most important theological, Christian work ever written."<sup>4</sup>
- \* Ben Merkle: "No other letter in the history of the world has received as much attention or has been given as much consideration as Paul's letter to the church at Rome. ... Paul's letter to the church at Rome is the greatest letter ever written because of its

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, "Preface to the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans," in *Word and Sacrament I*, ed. E. Theodore Bachmann, vol. 35 of *Luther's Works* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1960), 365.

<sup>2</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, ed. and trans. John Owen (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1947), xxiv.

<sup>3</sup> J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, 20th Anniversary Ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 230.

<sup>4</sup> John Piper, "The Author of the Greatest Letter Ever Written: First in a Series of Messages on Romans," *Desiring God* (website), April 26, 1998, <https://www.desiringgod.org/>.

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great impact in history, its grand theology about Christ, and its practical instructions for Christian living.”<sup>5</sup>

Paul’s letter to the Romans is relatively short (it takes about sixty minutes to read aloud), and it is profound. It explains and exults in and applies the greatest news we could hear.

## Why Did Paul Write Romans?

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Some argue that Paul wrote this letter primarily to address a specific problem in the church at Rome ([Rom. 14:1–15:13](#)). Paul rebukes two groups: the “weak in faith” (probably mainly Jewish Christians) and the “strong” in faith (probably mainly Gentile Christians). Gentile Christians were becoming arrogant toward the minority of Jewish Christians.

But Paul likely did not write this letter primarily to heal the Jew-Gentile division. (1) Why would Paul wait to address the issue until near the end of the letter (chap. 14)? (2) Why doesn’t Paul address specific needs in the church at Rome the way he does in his other letters?

Instead of specifying one main purpose for Paul’s letter, it is better to recognize several purposes that arise from Paul’s missionary situation. He 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 (see [Rom. 3:8](#)).<sup>6</sup>

## What Is the Theological Message of Romans?<sup>7</sup>

*The gospel reveals how God is righteously righteous (i.e., justifying) unrighteous individuals—both Jews and Gentiles—at this stage in the history of salvation.*<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Benjamin L. Merkle, “Is Romans Really the Greatest Letter Ever Written?,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 11, no. 3 (2007): 31.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Will N. Timmins, “Why Paul Wrote Romans: Putting the Pieces Together,” *Themelios* 43 (2018): 387–404.

<sup>7</sup> A book’s *theological message* (What is the author’s overall burden?) is not always the same as its *content* (What is the author writing about?) or *purpose* (Why is the author writing?).

<sup>8</sup> 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 Historical, Biblical, Theological, and Pastoral Perspective*, ed. Matthew Barrett (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 214. Regarding the word *righteousing*, see comments on 1:16–17.

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How does that happen? By faith in Christ apart from the law covenant.

Why does that happen? Ultimately for God's glory ([Rom. 11:33–36](#)).

The word *gospel* (Greek: *euangelion*) and its related verb *evangelize* (Greek: *euangelizō*) are prominent in the letter's introduction and conclusion (see Rom. 1:1–2, 9, 16–17; 15:16, 19–20; 16:25), where we expect to encounter an overarching topic.<sup>9</sup> And *gospel* is foremost in [Romans 1:16–17](#), which states the letter's theme.

What is the gospel?<sup>10</sup> *Gospel* means “good news.” What do you do with news? You announce it. You proclaim it. So the gospel is news that we can announce. But what kind of news is it? It is good news that 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. God is the holy Creator who owns us and cannot simply overlook sin, and we are sinners whom God must condemn for our spiritual adultery, our rebellion and treason against God the King. But the good news 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.

Here's what Jesus did: *Jesus lived, died, and rose again for sinners*. This is God's solution to our predicament (i.e., that we are sinners and thus deserve God's wrath). Jesus lived and died *instead of sinners, in the place of sinners, as a substitute for sinners*. He lived a perfect life and took our punishment. That's why theologians describe his death as penal substitution. Jesus died for sins. But he was not guilty of a single sin. God punished him for *our* sins. He took *our* place. “For our sake he [God] made him [Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” ([2 Cor. 5:21](#)). Jesus removes our guilt (expiation) and satisfies God's righteous wrath against us (propitiation) (see [Rom. 3:21–26](#)). Our fundamental problem is our sin against God and that we are condemned under God's wrath, and the heart of Jesus's death is that Jesus *paid our penalty* (penal) *in our place* (substitution). All other pictures of what Christ's death accomplished depend on his penal substitution.<sup>11</sup>

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*Jesus lived and died instead of sinners, in the place of sinners, as a substitute for sinners.*

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Jeffrey A. D. Weima, *Paul the Ancient Letter Writer: An Introduction to Epistolary Analysis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016).

<sup>10</sup> What follows condenses Andrew David Naselli, *How to Understand and Apply the New Testament: Twelve Steps from Exegesis to Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2017), 296–300

<sup>11</sup> For example: (1) Representation: On what basis does Christ the obedient second Adam represent us and thus give us life and restore nonhuman creation ([Rom. 5:18–19; 8:19–25](#))? Penal substitution. (2) Slavery:

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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*. Turn (i.e., repent) and trust (i.e., believe, exercise faith). This is where you come in. This is where it gets personal. This is why the gospel is good news *for you*. The response God requires from you is repentance and faith. Turn from your sin and trust Jesus alone to deliver you. Trust that God will substitute Jesus's perfect record—his perfect life and sacrificial death—for your record and thus declare you to be righteous (i.e., justified). As the hymn says, "God the just is satisfied / to look on him [Jesus] and pardon me."<sup>12</sup> God will save you if you trust Jesus.

We can summarize the bad news and good news with four words: God, man, Christ, response.

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

Those four points do not appear in every Bible passage that talks about the gospel or about Jesus's cross-work, but they're often at least implied (see [Rom. 1–4](#); [1 Cor. 15:1–5](#)).

So what exactly is the gospel? Here's one way to define the gospel succinctly, capturing its very core: *Jesus lived, died, and rose again for sinners, and God will save you if you turn and trust Jesus*.<sup>13</sup>

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On what basis does Christ redeem us from our slavery to sin ([Rom. 6](#))? Penal substitution. (3) Relations: On what basis does Christ reconcile us to God ([Rom. 5:1, 10–11](#))? Penal substitution ([2 Cor. 5:18, 21](#)). (4) War: How does Christ conquer our enemies (sin, death, and cosmic powers)? By penal substitution—by satisfying God's righteous wrath by becoming a curse for us ([Col. 2:14–15](#); [Rev. 5:5–9](#)). (5) Worship: On what basis does Christ our high priest offer himself as a sacrifice to atone for our sins in our place ([Heb. 9:12, 15, 26](#))? Penal substitution. (6) Health: How does Christ heal our terminal spiritual sickness? Penal substitution ([Isa. 53:5](#)). (7) Discipleship: What gives meaning to Christ's moral example of love in his death ([Rom. 15:1–4](#))? Penal substitution ([John 10:15](#); [1 Pet. 2:21, 24](#)). Cf. J. I. Packer, "The Atonement in the Life of the Christian," in *The Glory of the Atonement: Biblical, Historical, and Practical Perspectives; Essays in Honor of Roger R. Nicole*, ed. Charles E. Hill and Frank A. James III (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 416.

<sup>12</sup> From my favorite hymn, "Before the Throne of God Above," which Charitie Lees Smith (later Bancroft, then de Chenez) wrote in 1863 (John Julian, ed., *A Dictionary of Hymnology* [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1892], 109).

<sup>13</sup> Some theologians distinguish between the gospel in a *broad* sense and a *narrow* sense. DeYoung and Gilbert refer to this as a wide-angle lens and a zoom lens. See Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What Is*

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Unfortunately, many Christians might think that once they become Christians, the gospel is completely behind them. So rather than focusing on the gospel, they *assume* the gospel and focus on relatively peripheral issues. But the gospel continues to be central good news for Christians—not merely because God will rescue you from hell and because you can enjoy the pleasures of heaven. It's good news because you can enjoy God himself like you never could in your shackles of sin.<sup>14</sup> And you don't need to try to earn God's favor. You can't. You should live a certain way ([Titus 3:1–2](#)) *because* of the gospel ([Titus 3:3–7](#)), not to placate God or put him in your debt. As Jerry Bridges shrewdly observed, “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>15</sup> <sup>15</sup> The glorious message of Paul's letter to the Romans is that the gospel reveals how God is righteously righteous unrighteous individuals—both Jews and Gentiles—at this stage in the history of salvation.

*This article is adapted from Romans: A Concise Guide to the Greatest Letter Ever Written by Andrew David Naselli.*

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*the Mission of the Church? Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom, and the Great Commission* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 91–113. I am defining the gospel here in the narrow, zoom-lens sense.

<sup>14</sup> See John Piper, *God Is the Gospel: Meditations on God's Love as the Gift of Himself* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005), especially 13, 15, 47.

<sup>15</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.