

# INVITATION TO ROMANS

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The book of Acts reports how *all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia* heard the word of the Lord during the two years Paul spent in Ephesus, the capital and most influential city in that province (see p. 86). Since Paul and others had previously preached in the surrounding regions, the good news about Jesus had now been proclaimed throughout the entire eastern part of the Roman Empire. Paul understood that his primary mission was to bring the message about Jesus to places where it had never been heard before. So he began to make plans to travel to the western part of the empire.

Paul knew there was already a strong community of Jesus-followers in Rome that could provide a base of operations for his western trip. While he was in Corinth arranging for the delivery of the collection (around AD 57 or 58), he wrote to them, explaining:

*From Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ. It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else's foundation. . . . Now that there is no more place for me to work in these regions, and since I have been longing for many years to visit you, I plan to do so when I go to Spain. I hope to see you while passing through and to have you assist me on my journey there, after I have enjoyed your company for a while.*

But Paul had to do more than just ask for assistance, because the Roman church wasn't necessarily willing to help him. Even though it was made up of both Jews and Gentiles, its particular focus was on bringing the good news about Jesus to Jews. But Paul was well known as an apostle to the Gentiles. And so he had to make the case for why this church should support him. A woman named Phoebe, a leader in the church of Cenchreae (a small city near Corinth), was planning to travel to Rome, and this gave Paul the opportunity to send a letter with her asking the Romans to support his western journey.

Romans is the longest and most complex of Paul's letters, but it follows the same general pattern as the others. It has an opening section where Paul introduces himself and his key message, and a closing section where he explains his travel plans and sends greetings. In between, the main body of the letter has two basic parts. Like many of Paul's other letters, it begins with a teaching section. It then ends with a practical section that describes how this teaching should be followed in everyday life. A short song of praise to God comes in between these two parts and marks the division between them.

Opening Section: Introduction of Paul and His Message (p. 167)

Main Body: (pp. 167–185)

Teaching Section (pp. 167–182)

(Song of Praise) (p. 182)

Practical Section (pp. 182–185)

Closing Section: Travel Plans and Greetings (pp. 185–188)

Paul uses his opening self-introduction and thanksgiving to stress his main theme, namely, that *the gospel . . . is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile*. Paul proclaims boldly that he is an apostle, set apart to make the royal announcement about the Lordship of Jesus to the world, even to those in the capital city of the Roman Empire. Paul is calling the Gentiles to faith and obedience in the one true God. God's plan for the world has been revealed in the life, death and resurrection of a descendant of the renowned Jewish king David: Jesus the Messiah.

The teaching section itself is divided into three parts by the way Paul alternates between two approaches. He develops his argument for a time, and then he takes a step back to address anticipated questions and objections. This pattern is repeated three times. Paul always answers objections emphatically: "Not at all!" "By no means!" "Certainly not!" But he isn't just looking back on the argument he's developed and defending it. He's actually using his responses to keep advancing the argument itself.

The flow of this part of the letter echoes the themes of the ancient Jewish story of slavery and rescue. When Israel (Abraham's descendants) fell into captivity in Egypt, God came to save them. He gave them his law and brought them through the wilderness and into their own promised land as an inheritance. Now Paul explains that humanity is in slavery due to the entrance of sin and death to the world. But God has come to rescue both Jews and Gentiles through the death and resurrection of Jesus. A new worldwide family is being created. Baptism into Jesus breaks the power of evil and brings freedom. The Holy Spirit leads the way into this new life that will be complete in a new inheritance—a redeemed creation.

Next Paul faces the difficult question of why many within Israel itself fail to believe in Jesus as the Messiah. Within the larger purposes of God, it turns out that Israel's rejection of Jesus has actually brought life to the rest of the world. But even now the offer of this life through the Messiah is held out to the Jews.

Having explained and defended his teaching and mission, Paul concludes the main body of the letter with a practical section. He challenges the Romans to live the kind of new life, both individually and in community, that shows they've been restored to fellowship with God through Jesus Christ. *The night is nearly over; the day is almost here—so it is time to put aside the deeds of darkness.*

Paul ends this long letter by showing that the Jewish sacred writings always looked ahead to the inclusion of the Gentiles. He then shares his travel plans, formally asks for the church's support, and passes along greetings to and from mutual friends. He closes with a final wish that all the Gentiles might come to *the obedience that comes from faith*, exactly the phrase he uses at the start of this letter to the assembly of Jesus-followers living directly under the shadow of Caesar.

## | ROMANS |

**P**aul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God — the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures regarding his Son, who as to his earthly life was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord. Through him we received grace and apostleship to call all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith for his name's sake. And you also are among those Gentiles who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.

To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be his holy people:

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

**F**irst, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world. God, whom I serve in my spirit in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you in my prayers at all times; and I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you.

I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong — that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith. I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that I planned many times to come to you (but have been prevented from doing so until now) in order that I might have a harvest among you, just as I have had among the other Gentiles.

I am obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish. That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are in Rome.

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

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities — his eternal power and divine nature — have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.

Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator — who is forever praised. Amen.

Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error.

Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done. They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy. Although they know God’s righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.

You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge another, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things. Now we know that God’s judgment against those who do such things is based on truth. So when you,

a mere human being, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God's judgment? Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?

But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed. God "will repay each person according to what they have done." To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life. But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger. There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile; but glory, honor and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For God does not show favoritism.

All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law. For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous. (Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts sometimes accusing them and at other times even defending them.) This will take place on the day when God judges people's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares.

Now you, if you call yourself a Jew; if you rely on the law and boast in God; if you know his will and approve of what is superior because you are instructed by the law; if you are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of little children, because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth — you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? As it is written: "God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you."

Circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you break the law, you have become as though you had not been circumcised. So then, if those who are not circumcised keep the law's requirements, will they not be regarded as though they were circumcised? The one who is not circumcised physically and yet obeys the law will condemn you who, even though you have the written code and circumcision, are a lawbreaker.

A person is not a Jew who is one only outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly;

and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a person's praise is not from other people, but from God.

What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision? Much in every way! First of all, the Jews have been entrusted with the very words of God.

What if some were unfaithful? Will their unfaithfulness nullify God's faithfulness? Not at all! Let God be true, and every human being a liar. As it is written:

“So that you may be proved right when you speak  
and prevail when you judge.”

But if our unrighteousness brings out God's righteousness more clearly, what shall we say? That God is unjust in bringing his wrath on us? (I am using a human argument.) Certainly not! If that were so, how could God judge the world? Someone might argue, “If my falsehood enhances God's truthfulness and so increases his glory, why am I still condemned as a sinner?” Why not say — as some slanderously claim that we say — “Let us do evil that good may result”? Their condemnation is just!

What shall we conclude then? Do we have any advantage? Not at all! For we have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under the power of sin. As it is written:

“There is no one righteous, not even one;  
there is no one who understands;  
there is no one who seeks God.

All have turned away,  
they have together become worthless;  
there is no one who does good,  
not even one.”

“Their throats are open graves;  
their tongues practice deceit.”

“The poison of vipers is on their lips.”

“Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.”

“Their feet are swift to shed blood;  
ruin and misery mark their ways,

and the way of peace they do not know.”

“There is no fear of God before their eyes.”

Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held