

ROMANS

A 12-WEEK STUDY



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Knowing the Bible: Romans, A 12-Week Study

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S E R I E S P R E F A C E

KNOWING THE BIBLE, as the series title indicates, was created to help readers know and understand the meaning, the message, and the God of the Bible. Each volume in the series consists of 12 units that progressively take the reader through a clear, concise study of that book of the Bible. In this way, any given volume can fruitfully be used in a 12-week format either in group study, such as in a church-based context, or in individual study. Of course, these 12 studies could be completed in fewer or more than 12 weeks, as convenient, depending on the context in which they are used.

Each study unit gives an overview of the text at hand before digging into it with a series of questions for reflection or discussion. The unit then concludes by highlighting the gospel of grace in each passage (“Gospel Glimpses”), identifying whole-Bible themes that occur in the passage (“Whole-Bible Connections”), and pinpointing Christian doctrines that are affirmed in the passage (“Theological Soundings”).

The final component to each unit is a section for reflecting on personal and practical implications from the passage at hand. The layout provides space for recording responses to the questions proposed, and we think readers need to do this to get the full benefit of the exercise. The series also includes definitions of key words. These definitions are indicated by a note number in the text and are found at the end of each chapter.

Lastly, to help understand the Bible in this deeper way, we urge readers to use the ESV Bible and the *ESV Study Bible*, which are available in various print and digital formats, including online editions at www.esvbible.org. The *Knowing the Bible* series is also available online. Additional 12-week studies covering each book of the Bible will be added as they become available.

May the Lord greatly bless your study as you seek to know him through knowing his Word.

J. I. Packer
Lane T. Dennis

WEEK 1: OVERVIEW



Getting Acquainted

The apostle Paul's letter to the Romans is the longest of his letters and is brimming with his exhilarating captivation with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Romans can be seen as an epic in one sense, not just because of its length but because of its breadth and sweep. Paul begins his instruction with words about creation and the natural order, and then proceeds to show how mankind's disobedience brought disruption to them. Then Paul moves methodically—but beautifully—through the story of the Bible itself, recounting God's justice and grace throughout history, from the days of the patriarchs until the time of his writing. At the same time, Paul lays out the “anatomy” of salvation, telling both the wide-lens story of God's work in history to restore fallen creation and the finer, narrow-lens story of how God saves sinners through the life, death, and resurrection of his Son Jesus Christ. Readers of Romans see both the wide-angle view and the close-up view of salvation.

All of this is even more remarkable when we consider that Paul probably wrote this letter in response to specific doctrinal and practical questions. How does law relate to faith? How do we as Christians relate to the pre-Christian era? How were those who came before Christ saved? How does gospel ministry to the Gentiles affect the Jews' standing with God? What unifies Jews and Gentiles in Christian practice? What divides them?

WEEK 1: OVERVIEW

Paul's letter to the Romans sounds many minor notes (which does not mean they are insignificant) but every note serves to create the symphony revealing God's righteousness¹ brought to bear in history through the saving work of Jesus. The major theme throughout this masterpiece is the powerful message of the cross of Christ, where God's wrath for sin and mercy on sinners finds its fulfillment and unity.

Placing It in the Larger Story

While Romans is not the earliest of Paul's epistles (letters) to appear in the canon of Scripture (1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and Galatians were probably written earlier) it serves as a foundation of sorts for all his other letters. This is one reason, in addition to its length, why it appears first in the canon's epistles. The major ideas of all of Paul's other letters—sin, Christ, and the gospel—find their fullest expression in Romans, even though there are some major ideas explored in the shorter letters which are not explored in Romans (doctrines of the church, the nature of Christ, the end times, etc.).

The letter of Romans serves as a grand theological blueprint for the gospel doctrine undergirding the rest of the New Testament. This includes the letters of Peter and the letter of James, who at first glance may appear to diverge from Paul's teaching on justification.² Appearing in the New Testament immediately after the four Gospels and Acts, Paul's letter to the Romans unpacks the significance of who Jesus is and what he did. Paul takes the Gospel narratives of Jesus and his apostles—as well as the Old Testament revelation they fulfilled—and reveals their doctrinal implications. In other words, Paul explains the theological meaning of the overarching story stretching from Genesis to Jesus and beyond, into the future.

Key Passage

“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.” (Rom. 3:23–25)

Date and Historical Background

Paul most likely wrote his letter to the Romans in AD 57, while on his third missionary journey (see Acts 20:2–3), probably while in Corinth. Notes left by copyists at the end of two early manuscripts identify Corinth as its place of composition. Also, both Phoebe (Rom. 16:1–2) and Gaius (v. 23) had connections to Corinth.

The epistle to the Romans is one of at least two letters Paul wrote to a church he had not visited or founded. Perhaps the church had been founded by inhabitants of Rome who had been in Jerusalem at Pentecost in Acts 2, had become believers, and had then returned to Rome (see Acts 2:10).

The circumstances giving rise to the letter are not entirely clear, but it seems that Paul was addressing theological questions that had been posed to him. One main cause for these questions was simmering hostility between Jewish and Gentile believers in the Roman church. Paul intended to visit Rome (Rom. 1:11–13), and this letter was meant to serve as an introduction to his teaching. Paul also hoped his letter would give rise to a broader missionary operation with Rome as its home base.

At the time of Paul's writing, Nero was emperor. Rome was not just the base of the Roman empire but was considered the base of civilization itself. It is no wonder that Paul hoped to see his readers' world turned upside down for the sake of God's kingdom.³ Politics and paganism freely merged in the capital city. In its day, Rome was New York, Los Angeles, London, and Paris rolled into one. But in every way the claims of Paul's gospel transcended those of imperial Rome.

Outline

- I. The Gospel as the Revelation of the Righteousness of God (1:1–17)
- II. God's Righteousness in His Wrath against Sinners (1:18–3:20)
- III. The Saving Righteousness of God (3:21–4:25)
- IV. Hope as a Result of Righteousness by Faith (5:1–8:39)
 - V. God's Righteousness Extended to Israel and to the Gentiles (9:1–11:36)
 - VI. God's Righteousness in Everyday Life (12:1–15:13)
 - VII. The Extension of God's Righteousness through the Pauline Mission (15:14–16:23)
- VIII. Final Summary of the Gospel of the Righteousness of God (16:25–27)

As You Get Started . . .

What is your general understanding of the role of Paul's letter to the Romans? What do you think this letter uniquely contributes?

WEEK 1: OVERVIEW

How do you understand the contribution of Romans to Christian theology? From your current knowledge of Romans, what does Paul teach us about God, humanity, sin, redemption, and other doctrines?

Some of Christianity's more "famous" Bible verses come from the book of Romans. Which ones are you familiar with?

Romans contains some of the more provocative teachings of the Bible as well. Paul teaches on election and predestination, for instance, as well as the way of salvation for the Jewish people and his plan for Israel in the future. What perplexes you about Romans? Are there any confusing parts to this letter that you would like to resolve as you begin this study?

As You Finish This Unit . . .

Take a moment to ask for the Lord's blessing and help as you engage in this study of Romans.

Definitions

¹ **Righteousness** – The quality of being morally right and without sin; one of God's distinctive attributes. God imputes righteousness to (i.e., justifies) those who trust in Jesus Christ.

² **Justification** – The act of God's grace in declaring sinners fully acquitted and counting them as righteous before him on the basis of the finished work of Christ, received through faith alone.

³ **Kingdom of God** – The rule of God manifested in the long-awaited restoration of his people and indeed the whole world. When Jesus came two thousand years ago, he announced that the kingdom of God had arrived (Mark 1:15; Luke 17:20–21). Yet because of ongoing rebellion and rejection of Jesus and his rule, the kingdom still awaits its final consummation and fulfillment in Jesus' second coming (Mark 14:25). For this reason we pray for the kingdom to come (Matt. 6:10).

WEEK 2: THE GOSPEL AS THE REVELATION OF THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD

Romans 1:1–17



The Place of the Passage

This opening passage to Paul's letter sets the stage for all that comes after. In his customary style, a mix of theological richness and passionate self-disclosure, Paul incorporates the flavor of worship even in the way he greets the Roman church. He appears always to be exulting in the truth and power of the gospel.¹ He even manages to give a soaring summary of the good news between his identification of himself (1:1) and his addressing of his recipients (1:7). The description of the gospel in 1:16–17 then serves as the theme statement for the whole letter.

The Big Picture

In Romans 1:1–17, Paul expresses his desire to come to Rome and gives a stirring description of the power of the gospel.

Reflection and Discussion

Read through the complete passage for this study, Romans 1:1–17. Then review the shorter passages below and write your own notes on the following questions. (For further background, see the *ESV Study Bible*, pages 2157–2158; also available online at www.esvbible.org.)

1. A Gospel Greeting (1:1–7)

In 1:2–3, Paul references the Old Testament and its promise of Jesus. Jesus himself explained that he was the culmination of the whole Old Testament (Luke 24:25–27, 44–47; see also John 5:39–47). What are some Old Testament passages you can think of that promise or anticipate the coming of Christ?

Paul speaks of “the obedience of faith” in 1:5 (note also 10:16; 16:26). Most Christians are accustomed to speaking of faith and obedience as completely separate categories, and for very good biblical reason. What might Paul mean by “the obedience of faith”?

Paul is writing to the church in Rome in part to strategically carry out his desire to spread Christ’s name among all the nations (1:5). From what else you know about Paul and this specific letter, what are some other evidences of this desire of Paul’s?

2. Paul’s Gospel Obligations (1:8–15)

When we trust in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of our sins, being justified² by God’s grace in Christ received through faith, we are set free from the obligations of the law for justification. At the same time, we are set free *to* the obligations of the law for witness to God’s faithfulness. In other words, we are saved, not *by* good works but *for* them (Matt. 5:16; Eph. 2:10). What does Paul feel obligated to do “first” (Rom. 1:8)? How does this first impulse of his reflect the message of the good news?

Paul is never shy about sharing his feelings in his letters. But the feelings he expresses—whether joy or sadness or even anger—are always shaped by his ultimate desire. According to 1:11–15, what are some reasons he longs to visit Rome, and what is his ultimate desire?

Why would Paul, a Jew, believe he is “under obligation” to Greeks and barbarians (1:14)?

Reviewing 1:8–14, why does Paul say in 1:15 that he is eager to preach the gospel to the Romans?

3. The Righteous Shall Live by Faith (1:16–17)

Why is Paul “not ashamed of the gospel” (1:16)? How does this answer undercut shame, practically speaking?

How is the “righteousness of God” revealed in the gospel (1:17)?

Read through the following three sections on *Gospel Glimpses*, *Whole-Bible Connections*, and *Theological Soundings*. Then take time to reflect on the *Personal Implications* these sections may have for your walk with the Lord.

Gospel Glimpses

THE GOSPEL CENTER. We see in this opening greeting from Paul to the church in Rome how the good news of Jesus functions as the centerpiece for the Christian’s devotional life and evangelistic mission. In the very beginning, Paul says he is “set apart *for* the gospel” (Rom. 1:1), reinforcing what he has claimed elsewhere, that the gospel is “of first importance” (1 Cor. 15:3). All of Paul’s life and ministry flows from this blessed fixation: Jesus Christ crucified, dead, and raised to glory. So for Paul in Romans and elsewhere, the first obedience is the “obedience of faith” (Rom. 1:5). In other words, the first imperative (the thing to *do*) is to focus on the indicative (the thing that *is*) and then respond accordingly. By asserting the centrality of the gospel, Paul is really just asserting the centrality of Jesus Christ himself. It is “through Jesus Christ” that he is able to offer thanksgiving to God (Rom. 1:8), for instance.

THE GOSPEL’S POWER. In Romans 1:9, Paul says that he serves with his spirit “in the gospel.” He is implying here what he says explicitly elsewhere: the gos-

pel is not just the power for salvation at conversion but the power that sustains the whole of the Christian life, “from faith for faith” (1:17). Paul did not view the gospel as something beyond which mature Christians graduate. Rather, the gospel is the very power that drives the maturing process, which is lifelong.

GRACE TO YOU. Paul’s customary greeting is “grace to you” (Rom. 1:7). Paul knows that “faith comes from hearing” (10:17), and so as he is writing these sacred words breathed out by God, he is reminding believers who God is—as Peter puts it, “the God of all grace” (1 Pet. 5:10). In short, when Paul writes “grace to you” at the start of his letters, he is indicating that the preeminent message he brings is one of grace. This is why Paul then closes his letters with the words “grace be *with* you.” Paul knows that the word of God’s gospel is powerful, bringing the irresistible call of salvation to those who belong to God and supplying the strength of our faithful God to sustain them all the way to their glorification,³ so he confidently bookends his letters with “grace to you” and “grace . . . with you” (Rom. 16:20).

Whole-Bible Connections

SON OF GOD. In Romans 1:4 Jesus is “declared to be [that is, disclosed as] the Son of God” through his resurrection from the dead. While the title “Son of God” is sometimes used (especially in John’s Gospel) simply to refer to Christ’s deity, the title here brings to fruition the Old Testament expectation of the son of God to come. In Luke 3:38 we learn that Adam was “the son of God.” But we know that Jesus is the “true and better” Adam (see Rom. 5:19). The Father even designated Israel as his “firstborn son” (Ex. 4:22). But Jesus becomes the redemption for the failure of that “son” too. Indeed, John 1:12 tells us that it is only through the true Son of God that others can also qualify to be called children of God. Jesus is the true and eternal Son, now incarnate, and those who trust him become children of God by adoption (Rom. 8:15–17). The biblical hope of sonship to the Father reverberates throughout the father-son stories of the Old Testament and echoes into the New Testament parables of fathers and sons (most notably the famous “prodigal son” story). These all find their unity and fulfillment in Jesus Christ, who on the cross was rejected and forsaken by the Father (Matt. 27:46) so that we sinners could be accepted freely by the Father as his own sons and daughters (1 John 3:1).

“FOR THE SAKE OF HIS NAME AMONG ALL THE NATIONS.” Paul expresses his missional concern in Romans 1:5. His desire in proclaiming the gospel of Jesus is that God’s name would be exalted among all the nations of the world. In doing this, he is participating in God’s ancient plan to make a name for himself in all the world. As early as the start of the Abrahamic covenant,⁴ God shares his plan that through the nation that comes from Abraham “all the

WEEK 2: REVELATION OF THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD

nations of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen. 18:18). In Isaiah 49:6, we learn that Israel is to be “a light for the nations.” This prophecy is picked up in Luke 2:32 and Acts 13:47 (and 26:23) and applied to the work of Jesus Christ, in whom there is neither Jew nor Greek, but all are one (Gal. 3:28). Paul’s articulation of gospel mission in Romans 1:5 is not an innovation but is in full accord with the grand design of God’s saving purposes down through history.

“THE RIGHTEOUS SHALL LIVE BY FAITH.” Salvation by grace received through faith, apart from works of the law, is not a New Testament invention. When Paul writes these words in Romans 1:17, he is quoting Habakkuk 2:4 and recalling the way of salvation from the beginning. As Paul will explain more fully in Romans 4, even for Abraham, the father of the Jewish people, it was not obedience but trusting faith that put him right with God (see also Galatians 3). When we exercise faith in Jesus Christ alone for the forgiveness of our sins, resisting the temptation to rely even in part on our own performance, we are “the sons of Abraham” (Gal. 3:7) and are blessed along with him (Gal. 3:9).

Theological Soundings

SON OF GOD. From the perspective of the whole Bible’s teaching, to call Jesus God’s Son refers both to his positional relationship with the Father (a functional subordination of child to father) and to his relationship of “essence” with the Father (a qualitative equality with the Father). The sonship of Jesus is eternal. He was not adopted by the Father. When the Scriptures say Jesus identifies himself as the Son of God, then, they are not just pointing out that Jesus is in relationship to the Father as a human son is to his father but that Jesus is in relationship to the Father as very God to very God. Even the Pharisees understood this: “This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God” (John 5:18; also 10:30). Biblically speaking, calling Jesus the Son of God is calling him God (John 1:1, 18.)

RESURRECTION. Paul refers to Jesus’ resurrection from the dead (Rom. 1:4) as authentication of his sonship and lordship. The resurrection of Jesus was bodily; it was not just a temporary resuscitation. He truly died as the result of his crucifixion. He did not faint or swoon. And he truly came back to life (1 Cor. 15:20). At the same time, Jesus’ resurrected body was not the same as his pre-crucifixion body. In some ways, to be sure, it was the same, bearing the same wounds, for instance (John 20:27), and maintaining the ability to perform basic bodily actions such as eating (John 21:9–14). But in some significant ways, it was very different. He could pass through locked doors, for instance

(John 20:19), and apparently was not immediately recognizable to some of his closest followers (Luke 24:13–16). Paul elsewhere tells us about the uniqueness of a resurrected body: it is a glorified body (1 Cor. 15:42–47). Jesus' bodily resurrection, which guarantees ours, is the Christian's great hope—without it, we may as well give up the Christian faith (1 Cor. 15:16, 32).

Personal Implications

Take time to reflect on the implications of Romans 1:1–17 for your own life today. Make notes below on the personal implications for your walk with the Lord of (1) the *Gospel Glimpses*, (2) the *Whole-Bible Connections*, (3) the *Theological Soundings*, and (4) this passage as a whole.

1. Gospel Glimpses

2. Whole-Bible Connections

3. Theological Soundings

4. Romans 1:1–17

As You Finish This Unit . . .

Take a moment to ask for the Lord’s blessing and help as you continue in this study of Romans. And take a moment also to look back through this unit of study, to reflect on some key things that the Lord may be teaching you.

Definitions

- ¹ **Gospel** – A common translation for a Greek word meaning “good news,” that is, the good news of Jesus Christ and the salvation he made possible by his crucifixion, burial, and resurrection. Gospel with an initial capital letter refers to each of the biblical accounts of Jesus’ life on earth (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John).
- ² **Justification** – The act of God’s grace in bringing sinners into a new covenant relationship with himself and counting them as righteous before him through the forgiveness of sins (Rom. 3:20–26).
- ³ **Glorification** – The work of God in believers to bring them to the ultimate and perfect stage of salvation—full Christlikeness—following his justification and sanctification of them (Rom. 8:29–30). Glorification includes believers receiving imperishable resurrection bodies at Christ’s return (1 Cor. 15:42–43).
- ⁴ **Covenant** – A binding agreement between two parties, typically involving a formal statement of their relationship. This agreement includes a list of stipulations and obligations for both parties, a list of witnesses to the agreement, and a list of curses for unfaithfulness and blessings for faithfulness to the agreement. The OT is more properly understood as the old covenant, meaning the agreement established between God and his people prior to the coming of Jesus Christ to establish the new covenant (NT).

WEEK 3: GOD'S RIGHTEOUSNESS IN HIS WRATH AGAINST SINNERS

Romans 1:18–3:20



The Place of the Passage

Paul has now proclaimed the power of the gospel to save believing sinners, whomever they may be (1:17). He has also asserted in the same breath that this power working through faith has strength enough both to justify once for all time and to sustain Christian living. “The righteous shall live by faith.” Now Paul transitions into supporting evidence in service of his assertions. The first place he must go is to the harsh reality of sin and human sinfulness. With masterful skill, Paul in 1:18–3:20 lays bare mankind’s falling short of God’s glory while maintaining that God’s glory remains nevertheless undiminished. He also begins to explore God’s righteous wrath toward sin. This sets the stage for Paul’s exploration in Romans 3–8 of God’s grace in justifying and sanctifying sinners.

The Big Picture

Paul reveals the extent of our disobedience against the righteous God.

Reflection and Discussion

Read through the complete passage for this study, Romans 1:18–3:20. Then review the shorter passages below and write your own notes on the following questions. (For further background, see the *ESV Study Bible*, pages 2158–2163; also available online at www.esvbible.org.)

1. The Unrighteousness of the Gentiles (1:18–32)

Romans 1:20 is reminiscent of Psalm 19:1—“The heavens declare the glory of God.” How do “the things that have been made” give clear evidence of God’s “eternal power and divine nature”?

Throughout the passage, Paul uses phrases like “God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts” (1:24), “God gave them up to dishonorable passions” (1:26), and “God gave them up to a debased mind” (1:28). What implications do such proclamations have for the idea of “free will”?

If sinners “suppress the truth” (1:18), how can Paul say that the truth is “clearly perceived” (1:20)?

In this passage, Paul is revealing that even the irreligious—in this case, classified as Gentiles, or “non-Jews”—are aware of a holy standard. What are some ways in which even those who deny God demonstrate a tacit awareness of moral absolutes?

2. The Unrighteousness of the Jews (2:1–3:8)

Now Paul begins to focus more narrowly on those inside the religious community. It’s not just “those people out there” who are sinners, but “we insiders” too. Why does Paul say that when we judge others, we condemn ourselves (2:1)?

If tribulation will come to every evildoer, first to Jews and then to Greeks (2:9), and peace to everyone who does good, first to Jews and then to Greeks (v. 10), how can Paul say God shows no partiality (v. 11)?

In Romans 2:12–14 Paul *appears* to say that obedience will justify Gentiles. When we interpret any biblical text, we have to keep it in its context. How does 2:15–29 help to clarify what Paul is saying?

WEEK 3: GOD'S RIGHTEOUSNESS IN HIS WRATH AGAINST SINNERS

According to Romans 3:1–2, what advantage do Jews have?

3. The Unrighteousness of All People (3:9–20)

We are accustomed to speaking of unbelievers as “seekers.” There is indeed a sense in which all people are seeking God—in the sense that they are seeking to satisfy their need for God with all sorts of things that aren’t God. But what does Paul (quoting Ps. 14:1–3) mean when he says “no one seeks for God” (Rom. 3:11)?

How does Romans 3:18 relate to 3:11?

According to Romans 3:20, what might we call the “catch-22”—both the benefit and the detriment—of the works of the law?

Read through the following three sections on *Gospel Glimpses*, *Whole-Bible Connections*, and *Theological Soundings*. Then take time to reflect on the *Personal Implications* these sections may have for your walk with the Lord.

Gospel Glimpses

THE GOSPEL MAKES US “NATURAL.” In Romans 1:26–27, Paul comments on the sinfulness of homosexuality. He calls heterosexual relations “natural” and calls deviation from this “contrary to nature” and “shameless.” Here Paul is highlighting how the inward bent of sin creates such dysfunction and disorder that we defy the sovereign lordship of Christ, pursuing abnormal and unnatural relations as if they were natural and normal. Elsewhere Paul writes that before salvation we “lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind” (Eph. 2:3). In this same pattern, Jude writes that apart from Christ sinners will be “destroyed by all that they, like unreasoning animals, understand instinctively” (Jude 10). The corollary to this truth is that after salvation, even as we become more and more conformed to the image of Christ, we are also becoming more and more our true selves. As the fruit of the Spirit increases in us, God restores order within us. Our minds are renewed (Rom. 12:2). We learn to do the natural thing spiritually and the spiritual thing naturally.

GOD’S KINDNESS LEADS YOU TO REPENTANCE.¹ In yet another wonderful affirmation of where the source of power to change is found, Paul reminds us in Romans 2:4 that “God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance.” Not his law, not his berating, not his exasperation or his cajoling. His kindness! It is grace, that trains us to renounce ungodliness (Titus 2:11–12).

SPIRIT-WROUGHT INCLUSION. In Romans 2:29 Paul writes, “But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.” No act of obedience or merit, no matter how religious, earns us favor with God. Nothing we can do will earn us inclusion in God’s good graces. God’s good graces grant us inclusion! And so the identifying marker is not outward manifestations, which as in the case of the Pharisees may belie the deadness inside, but rather the spiritual work that takes place in the heart. God’s people are those in whom his Spirit resides, applying the atoning² work of Christ and sanctifying³ believers over time. By virtue of this action, God is saving both Jews and non-Jews, however irreligious they may at first be.

Whole-Bible Connections

IDOLATRY. Paul shows us that the fundamental problem of human existence is the worship of false gods. Idolatry is the root of sin. He outlines it this way: “Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. . . . They exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever!” (Rom. 1:22–23, 25). Human beings are never *not* worshiping. John Calvin has said that our hearts are “idol factories,” and the story of Israel in the Old Testament certainly bears this out, as God’s people continually struggle to trust the Lord but again and again lapse into idolatry.

DIVINE SOVEREIGNTY. There are many provocative claims in Paul’s letter to the Romans, right from the start. Consider these verses from Romans 1: “Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity” (v. 24); “For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions” (v. 26); and “God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done” (v. 28). God is “giving up” unrepentant sinners to their sin. In allowing sin to persist and harden in a person’s heart, God maintains his sovereignty⁴ in a way that does not negate human responsibility. One of the clearest places we see this is in God’s dealing with Pharaoh in the book of Exodus. Several times we read that Pharaoh hardened his heart (Ex. 8:15, 32), but we also read that *God* hardened Pharaoh’s heart (Ex. 4:21, 7:3, 9:12). So which was it? In the mystery of God’s sovereignty and human responsibility, we learn that in effect the answer is “both.” Sinners are responsible for their hard hearts, yet God is sovereign over human activity.

Theological Soundings

GENERAL REVELATION. Romans 1:19–20 sounds very similar to Psalm 19:1. The theological concept at work there is commonly called the doctrine of “general revelation.” This idea, drawn from the Scriptures, is that God effectively reveals himself in the created world. The doctrine of general revelation does not claim that everything we need to know about God and his gospel in Christ is intelligible from the natural world—gospel knowledge necessitates what is called “special revelation,” which refers to God’s Word in the flesh (Jesus) and God’s Word written down (the Bible). General revelation does mean, however, that there is enough of God’s glory revealed in creation to leave sinners “without excuse” for their idolatry and unbelief (1:20).

“OBEY THE TRUTH.” Romans 2:6–8 posits another counterintuitive truth. The truth of the gospel is not law or instructions or advice. It is news. It is

not essentially something to obey but something to believe. Yet here Paul uses the curious phrase “obey the truth.” The phrase “obey the gospel” appears elsewhere in the Scriptures (Rom. 10:16; 2 Thess. 1:8; 1 Pet. 4:17). What is meant here? Perhaps this: the first thing to *do* is to keep foremost in our minds that the saving work is already *done*. Let us obey—let us *heed*—that truth. Let us believe and live in a way that demonstrates that we believe the gospel is true.

NATURAL LAW. In Romans 2:12–16, Paul indicts all people under the reality of indwelling⁵ sin. The special revelation of God’s commandments explicitly reveals what is right and what is wrong. We hear clearly in the law what honors God and commends his holiness. And yet even those without the law have some awareness of right and wrong. We call this reality “natural law” because it tells us that even unbelievers are fundamentally and innately aware of justice, fairness, transgression, and morality.

Personal Implications

Take time to reflect on the implications of Romans 1:18–3:20 for your own life today. Make notes below on the personal implications for your walk with the Lord of (1) the *Gospel Glimpses*, (2) the *Whole-Bible Connections*, (3) the *Theological Soundings*, and (4) this passage as a whole.

1. Gospel Glimpses

2. Whole-Bible Connections

3. Theological Soundings

4. Romans 1:18–3:20

As You Finish This Unit . . .

Take a moment to ask for the Lord's blessing and help as you continue in this study of Romans. And take a moment also to look back through this unit of study, to reflect on some key things that the Lord may be teaching you.

Definitions

¹ **Repentance** – A complete change of heart and mind regarding one's overall attitude toward God and one's individual actions. True regeneration and conversion is always accompanied by repentance.

² **Atonement** – The reconciliation of a person with God, often associated with the offering of a sacrifice. Through his death and resurrection, Jesus Christ made atonement for the sins of believers. His death satisfied God's just wrath against sinful humanity, just as OT sacrifices symbolized substitutionary death as payment for sin.

³ **Sanctification** – The process of being conformed to the image of Jesus Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit. This process begins immediately after regeneration and continues throughout a Christian's life, finally resulting in glorification.

⁴ **Sovereignty** – Supreme and independent power and authority. Sovereignty over all things is a distinctive attribute of God (1 Tim. 6:15–16). He directs all things to carry out his purposes (Rom. 8:28–29).

⁵ **Indwelling** – In Scripture, the word refers to the presence of Christ and the Holy Spirit within believers (Rom. 8:9–11; Eph. 3:16–19). This presence enables Christians to love (1 John 4:8–12) and to overcome sin, which also indwells believers but no longer defines them (Rom. 8:4–11).