PAUL'S LETTER TO THE ROMANS

The King's Rescue Plan

Romans, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

The King's Rescue Plan: Paul's Letter to the Romans, Unfiltered

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All Scripture quotations in this book are from the NIV. Some are abridged, with omissions marked by ellipses; paraphrases are not placed in quotation marks.

Pronouns referring to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are capitalized for reverence in the author's own words. Inside Scripture quotations, capitalization and wording follow the 2011 NIV exactly.

AI Disclosure. This book was written by Bill McLeod with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools for drafting, research, and editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for it. Readers are encouraged to open the Scriptures and study them for themselves.

A WORD TO THE READER

Before You Start

If you've read the earlier books in this series, you know the saying by now: "If you want to get something done, hire a teenager while they still know it all." It's been in every book. It's not leaving now.

But this book is a little different, because Romans is a little different. Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Acts are stories. Romans is a letter. Nobody gets shipwrecked in it. Nobody walks on water. There are no prison breaks or riots. Instead, there's an argument, one long, carefully built explanation of what God has done through Jesus and why it changes everything.

Don't let that scare you off. Romans has changed more lives than almost any document ever written. A brilliant, wild young man named Augustine read a few lines of it in a garden in Italy and his life turned around. Martin Luther studied it, and what he found helped spark the Reformation. John Wesley heard someone read from Luther's preface to Romans and said his heart felt "strangely warmed." People who thought they knew it all have been knocked flat by this letter for two thousand years.

Romans answers the biggest questions people ask. What's wrong with the world? What's wrong with me? Is God fair? Can I ever be good enough? Why do I keep doing things I hate? Does God still care about the people who rejected Him? How am I supposed to live? Paul doesn't dodge any of them.

Here's the catch. You can't skim an argument. Each step builds on the one before it. If you skip chapter 3, chapter 5 won't make sense.

So take it slowly. Read a chapter of Romans, then read the chapter in this book that walks through it, then read Romans again. It's worth the effort. Romans is the King's rescue plan, laid out step by step.

How This Book Works

This book walks through all 16 chapters of Romans, in order, one chapter of this book for each chapter of the letter. Each one follows Paul's argument a step at a time, explains the hard words (justified, righteousness, grace, flesh), adds background about the world Paul and his readers lived in (Rome, its house churches, Jewish law and Roman life), and points out how each piece connects to the next.

Before chapter 1, a short section called Setting the Scene introduces Paul, the city of Rome, and the believers who first heard this letter read out loud. Don't skip it. Knowing who's in the room makes the letter come alive.

Each chapter ends with a Key Verse quoted word for word from the New International Version (NIV), the same translation used for every Scripture quotation in this book (pronouns for God are capitalized in the author's own words out of reverence; inside Scripture quotations, capitalization follows the NIV exactly); Real Talk questions to think through alone or argue about with friends; and sometimes a Try This challenge.

One more thing: this book is a guide, not a replacement. Keep a Bible open next to it and read each chapter of Romans for yourself. Paul wrote this letter to be read out loud to ordinary people, not to scholars. You can follow it. Don't take my word for it. Take His.

FOR THE ADULTS

A Note for Parents and Youth Leaders

Thank you for putting this book in a teenager's hands. Like the earlier books in this series, on Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Acts, it's written for readers who can smell a sermon coming a mile away. I've tried to write honestly, directly, with some humor, and with real respect for what these readers can handle.

Romans is the first letter in the series, so the format adapts. Instead of retelling events, each chapter traces Paul's argument through one chapter of Romans, in order, explaining key terms and connecting each step to the whole. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the New International Version (NIV); elsewhere I paraphrase and explain. Background on Paul, Rome, and the early house churches is included where it helps, and I've tried to stay with what's well established rather than speculation.

Romans includes some of the most debated passages in the Bible: God's wrath and judgment, the struggle in chapter 7, election and God's choosing in chapter 9, the future of Israel in chapter 11, government in chapter 13, and Paul's words about sexuality in chapter 1. I have tried to present what the text says plainly and fairly, to note briefly where faithful Christians have understood a passage differently, and not to turn this book into a debate manual. These are good passages to talk through together.

Where the NIV notes that a verse is missing from the earliest manuscripts (Romans 16:24), or offers an alternative reading that matters for understanding (for example, 3:22, 5:1, 8:28, and 9:5), I've said so briefly, so that students aren't surprised when they see those notes in their own Bibles.

The Real Talk questions are designed for discussion. They work well for a youth group, a small group, a family dinner table, or a car ride. Don't rush to the right answer. Let them wrestle. Faith that has been thought through tends to last.

My prayer is that every reader will understand, maybe for the first time, that the gospel isn't good advice for people trying hard to be good. It's good news for people who know they can't be, and that nothing can separate them from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE LETTER

Setting the Scene

Who Wrote It

The letter opens with its author's name: Paul. Before he met Jesus, he was Saul of Tarsus, a brilliant young Pharisee trained in Jerusalem, so serious about God's law that he hunted down Christians and dragged them to prison. Then, on the road to Damascus, the risen Jesus stopped him cold. (You can read the whole story in Acts 9.) The man who tried to destroy the church became its most famous missionary.

By the time he wrote Romans, Paul had been following Jesus for more than twenty years, and he had spent much of that time traveling the Roman world, planting churches in cities like Philippi, Thessalonica, Corinth, and Ephesus. He had been beaten, stoned, jailed, and shipwrecked. Thirteen of the New Testament's twenty-seven books carry his name, all of them letters. Romans is the longest, and most people would say it's the deepest.

When and Where

Most scholars date Romans to about AD 57. Paul was in Corinth, Greece, near the end of his third missionary journey (Acts 20 describes a three-month stay in Greece at about this time). He was staying with a believer named Gaius, and a man named Tertius wrote the letter down as Paul spoke it. That was normal. Letter writing in the ancient world often involved a trained scribe.

The letter was most likely carried to Rome by Phoebe, a leader in the church at Cenchreae, the port town just outside Corinth. Picture her traveling hundreds of miles by ship and road, carrying a scroll that would eventually change the world.

The City

Rome was the capital of the empire and the biggest city in the world, home to perhaps a million people. It had marble temples, public baths, chariot races, and the emperor's palace. It also had crowded, dangerous apartment blocks where most people lived, often several families to a building. A huge part of the population was enslaved, and many others were former slaves.

The emperor when Paul wrote was Nero. He was still young, and the worst of his reign was still ahead. About seven years later, after a great fire in Rome, Nero blamed the Christians and had many of them killed. Some of the people who first heard this letter read aloud likely died in that persecution. Keep that in mind when you read Romans 8 and Romans 13.

The House Churches

There were no church buildings. Believers met in homes, often in the house of a wealthier member who had room for a group. Romans 16 mentions a church that meets at the house of Priscilla and Aquila, and it greets several households and groups of believers. So the church in Rome was probably a network of small house churches spread across the city, maybe twenty to fifty people in each.

These groups were mixed: Jews and Gentiles, men and women, enslaved people and free people, all sharing a meal and worshiping together. That was unusual in the Roman world. It was also hard.

The Tension

Here's a piece of history that helps explain the whole letter. A Roman historian named Suetonius reports that the emperor Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome because of disturbances over someone he calls "Chrestus," which many scholars think is a garbled reference to Christ. Acts 18:2 mentions the same expulsion, in about AD 49. Priscilla and Aquila were among those forced to leave.

For about five years, the churches in Rome would have been mostly Gentile. When Claudius died in AD 54, Jewish believers began coming back. Imagine returning to your church and finding it run by people who eat different food, keep different days, and maybe think you're a little old-fashioned. Many scholars think this tension between Jewish and Gentile believers is a big part of why Paul wrote the way he did. Again and again, Romans says that God has no favorites, that everyone is in the same boat, and that Jews and Gentiles belong together.

Why Paul Wrote

Paul had never been to Rome. He hadn't started that church, and most of them had never met him. So why write them the longest letter he ever sent?

He tells us in chapter 15. He was about to take a gift of money to Jerusalem, and after that he planned to go to Spain, the far western edge of the known world. He wanted Rome to be his base and his support team. So he introduced himself by laying out the message he preached, carefully and completely. Along the way he dealt with the tension in the Roman churches and answered the objections people often raised against his message.

The Map

Romans is an argument, and it helps to see the whole shape before you start.

Chapters 1 to 4: The problem and the solution. Everyone, Jew and Gentile, has sinned and stands guilty before God. But God has provided a way to be made right with Him: by faith in Jesus, as a gift.

Chapters 5 to 8: The new life. What it means to be made right with God: peace, freedom from sin's control, the struggle that remains, and life in the Spirit, ending with the promise that nothing can separate us from God's love.

Chapters 9 to 11: The big question. If God's plan was always for Israel, why have so many of Paul's own people rejected Jesus? Has God's promise failed?

Chapters 12 to 16: The way to live. How people rescued by grace treat each other, their enemies, their government, and fellow believers they disagree with. Then Paul shares his plans and says hello to a long list of friends.

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CHAPTER 1

Not Ashamed

Romans 1

Letters in the ancient world started differently from ours. You didn't write Dear Rome at the top and sign your name at the bottom. You put your name first, then the people you were writing to, then a greeting. So Romans opens with a name: Paul. Then he tells us who he is in three phrases. He's a servant of Christ Jesus. He's been called to be an apostle. And he's been "set apart for the gospel of God."

The word gospel means good news. Before Paul even says hello, he's already explaining what that news is about. It's about God's Son, who came as a human descendant of King David, and who was shown to be the Son of God with power when He rose from the dead. In other words, before he gets to anything else, Paul puts Jesus at the center.

Then he finally greets his readers: "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." Grace and peace. Keep those two words in mind. The whole letter is going to explain them.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Servant or Slave?**

The Greek word Paul uses to describe himself, doulos, can mean servant, but it often meant slave. In Rome, where a huge part of the population was enslaved, everyone listening would have known exactly what it meant. A doulos didn't belong to himself. Paul could have introduced himself by his education, his family, or his accomplishments. Instead he leads with this: I belong to Jesus.

Paul tells them he thanks God for them, because their faith is being talked about all over the world. He prays for them constantly. He's wanted to visit for years, but something has always gotten in the way. He wants to strengthen them, and then he quickly adds that he wants them to strengthen him too. He's not coming as a celebrity. He's coming as a brother.

Then comes the sentence many people think is the theme of the whole letter: "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."

Why would anyone be ashamed of the gospel? Think about it from a Roman point of view. Christians worshiped a Jewish man who had been executed on a Roman cross. Crucifixion was the most humiliating death the empire had. It was reserved for slaves, rebels, and the lowest criminals. Telling people in Rome, the capital of the world, that a crucified man was Lord sounded ridiculous. Paul knew it. He says it anyway. The message may sound weak, but it's actually God's power.

And it's for everyone who believes. Not everyone who's smart enough, or good enough, or from the right family. Everyone who believes.

In the gospel, Paul says, "the righteousness of God is revealed." That's a big word, and you'll see it over and over in Romans, so let's slow down. Righteous means right, the way things should be. God is righteous: He is completely right and good, and He always does what is right. But God's righteousness also means His way of making things right, including making wrong people right with Him. And the way it comes, Paul says, is by faith from start to finish. He quotes the prophet Habakkuk: "The righteous will live by faith."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Gentiles**
>
> In the Bible, the word Gentiles simply means everyone who isn't Jewish. For centuries, God's people Israel had lived as a separate nation, with the law of Moses, circumcision, food laws, and the Sabbath marking them off from the nations around them. One of the biggest questions in the early church was how Gentiles fit into God's people. Did they have to become Jewish first? Paul's answer runs all through Romans.

Then Paul turns a corner, and the tone changes fast. "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness."

Wrath sounds harsh, but think about it this way. A God who didn't care about evil wouldn't be good. If someone hurt a person you love, you'd want a judge who cared. God's wrath is His settled, holy opposition to everything that destroys what He made.

Before Paul can say how good the good news is, he has to explain how bad the bad news is. That's what the next three chapters are about.

He starts with humanity in general. People can't claim they never knew God existed, Paul says. Creation itself shows it. You can look at the stars, a storm, a newborn baby, or the way your own body works, and see that Someone made this. God's "eternal power and

divine nature" have been "clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse."

But people didn't respond by thanking Him. They pushed Him away. "Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools." They took the glory that belongs to God and gave it to idols made to look like people and animals. They traded the truth for a lie. Then Paul uses a phrase three times that's chilling: God "gave them over." He let them have what they wanted.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **A Hard Passage**
>
> Romans 1:26–27 is one of the passages in the Bible that speaks about same-sex sexual relationships, and today it's one of the most discussed. Most Christians throughout history have read Paul as saying such relationships go against God's design. Others today read the passage differently. Whatever you think, notice two things. First, Paul is describing all of humanity, not one group, and the list that follows includes gossip, greed, envy, arrogance, and disobeying parents. Second, Paul's very next words will turn to the people nodding along and say: you have no excuse either. Talk this passage through with a parent or youth leader you trust.

The chapter ends with a long list of what happens when people push God away. Greed. Envy. Murder. Lies. Gossip. Slander. Arrogance. Bragging. Inventing new ways to do evil. Disobeying parents. Having no love and no mercy. It's an ugly list, and if you read it honestly, you probably found yourself somewhere in it.

That's the point. Paul isn't describing those people over there. He's describing the human race. And he's about to make that very clear.

KEY VERSE

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.

Romans 1:16 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Have you ever been embarrassed to say you believe in Jesus? What made it feel that way?
2. Paul says creation shows that God exists. What in the natural world makes you think most about God?
3. Read the list at the end of the chapter again. Which item on it is the easiest to excuse in yourself? Why?

TRY THIS *Go outside tonight and look at the sky for five full minutes with your phone put away. Then thank God for one specific thing you see.*

CHAPTER 2

Pointing Fingers

Romans 2

Imagine you're in a house church in Rome, listening to someone read Paul's letter out loud for the first time. Chapter 1 ends with that long list of sins: idols, immorality, murder, envy. If you were a Jewish believer, or a Gentile who had cleaned up your life, you might be nodding along. Yes. Those people. That's what's wrong with the world.

Then Paul turns and points at you.

"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."

Paul has set a trap, and the judgmental reader just walked into it. It's easy to see other people's sins. It's much harder to see our own. And the very fact that we judge others shows that we know the difference between right and wrong, which means we're without excuse when we do wrong ourselves.

Paul warns that God's judgment is based on truth. You can't escape it by pointing at someone worse. And then he asks a question that should stop us all: "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?"

Some people think God's patience means He doesn't care. Paul says the opposite. God's patience is a gift. Every day He doesn't judge you is a day He's giving you to turn back to Him.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Repentance**
>
> Repentance isn't just feeling bad. The Greek word means a change of mind, and in the Bible it means turning around: you were walking away from God, and you turn and walk toward Him. Feeling sorry can be part of it, but the heart of repentance is a change of direction.

Then Paul explains how God judges. He will repay each person according to what they have done. To those who keep on doing good, seeking glory, honor, and immortality, He gives eternal life. To those who are self-seeking, reject the truth, and follow evil, there will be wrath. And He does this for everyone the same way, "first for the Jew, then for the Gentile." "For God does not show favoritism."

Wait, you might think. Isn't Paul going to say we're saved by faith, not by what we do? He is. But first he has to show that nobody actually meets this standard. If you could keep on doing good, all the time, from the heart, you'd be fine. The question is whether anyone does. Keep reading.

Paul says Gentiles who never had the law of Moses will be judged without it, and Jews who had the law will be judged by it. Having God's law isn't enough. Hearing it isn't enough. What counts is doing it. And Gentiles who don't have the written law still show that God's requirements are "written on their hearts." That's what your conscience is: a built-in sense of right and wrong that sometimes accuses you and sometimes defends you.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Law**

When Paul says the law, he usually means the law God gave Israel through Moses: the Ten Commandments and the hundreds of other commands in the first five books of the Bible. It covered worship, sacrifices, food, festivals, justice, and everyday life. For Jewish people, the law was a precious gift. It showed them who God was and how to live as His people. Paul never says the law is bad. His point is that having it doesn't make anyone right with God.

Now Paul speaks directly to a Jewish reader. You call yourself a Jew. You rely on the law. You brag about your relationship with God. You know His will. You think of yourself as a guide for the blind and a light for people in the dark. Great. Then Paul asks a series of hard questions. You teach others; do you teach yourself? You preach against stealing; do you steal? You say don't commit adultery; do you? You hate idols; do you rob temples? When God's people break His law, the Gentiles look at them and mock God. Paul quotes the prophets: "God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you."

That should make any religious person uncomfortable, including church kids. It's possible to know all the right answers, have a Bible app full of highlights, and still live in a way that makes people think less of God.

Then Paul talks about circumcision, the physical sign God gave Abraham's family. It has value, he says, if you keep the law. But if you break it, it's as though you were never circumcised. What matters is not the outside but the inside. True circumcision is "circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit." A person like that gets praise "not from other people, but from God."

Notice where the argument is going. In chapter 1, the irreligious world was guilty. In chapter 2, the religious world is guilty too. There's no group left to hide behind.

KEY VERSE

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?

Romans 2:4 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Why is it so much easier to notice other people's sins than our own?
2. Paul says God's kindness is meant to lead us to repentance. How is that different from thinking God's patience means He doesn't care?
3. Is there a way you live that might make people who don't believe think less of God? What would change if that changed?

CHAPTER 3

Not Even One

Romans 3

At the end of chapter 2, a Jewish listener might be getting frustrated. Paul, if being Jewish doesn't make you right with God, then what's the point? Was God's promise to Israel worthless?

Paul answers in a rapid back-and-forth, like a debate. He often writes this way, raising objections someone might throw at him and then answering them. "What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew?" "Much in every way!" Above all, Israel was trusted with the very words of God. And if some of them were unfaithful, that doesn't cancel out God's faithfulness. "Let God be true, and every human being a liar."

Someone might push it further. If my sin makes God's goodness look even better by contrast, why should He punish me? Shouldn't I get credit for helping Him look good? Paul says some people even accused him of teaching, let's do evil so good can come of it. He doesn't waste time on it. People who argue that way deserve the judgment they get.

Then Paul gives his verdict. Jews and Gentiles alike "are all under the power of sin." He backs it up with a string of quotes from the Psalms and Isaiah, like a prosecutor reading the evidence. "There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands;

there is no one who seeks God." The quotes move through the human body: throats like open graves, tongues that lie, lips with poison, mouths full of cursing, feet quick to shed blood, eyes with no fear of God.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Building a Case**
>
> Paul was a trained Jewish teacher, and Romans 3:10–18 is a technique rabbis used: stringing together verses from different parts of Scripture on the same theme. Paul pulls from at least five Psalms and from Isaiah. His audience would have recognized the lines. He's showing that the Scriptures themselves say the same thing he's saying: humanity's problem isn't new, and it isn't limited to one group.

The law speaks, Paul says, so "that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God." Picture a courtroom. The defense has nothing left to say. Nobody can be declared right in God's sight by keeping the law, because the law's main job here is to show us our sin, like a mirror that shows you the dirt on your face but can't wash it off.

And then come two of the most important words in the Bible: "But now."

"But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known." After three chapters of bad news, the good news breaks through. God has made a way for people to be made right with Him, and it doesn't depend on keeping the law. It comes "through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe." "There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus."

Read that again slowly. All have sinned. That's the bad news, and it's universal. All are justified freely. That's the good news, and it's just as universal for everyone who believes.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Three Big Words**
>
> Justified is a courtroom word. It means declared not guilty, declared righteous. It's what a judge does. Grace means a gift you don't deserve. You can't earn a gift, or it isn't a gift. Redemption is a marketplace word. It meant buying back something, or paying the price to set a slave free. In Rome, where so many people were enslaved, everyone knew what redemption meant.

How can God declare guilty people not guilty without being a corrupt judge? Paul explains: God presented Jesus "as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood." The NIV footnote says the Greek word points to the cover of the ark of the covenant, the place in the temple where the high priest sprinkled blood once a year on the Day of Atonement. Jesus is where sin is dealt with and God's anger at sin is satisfied.

That's how God can be both "just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus." He doesn't pretend sin doesn't matter. He takes it seriously enough to pay for it Himself.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Faith in, or Faithfulness of?**
>
> The NIV says righteousness comes "through faith in Jesus Christ." A footnote gives another possible translation: "through the faithfulness of" Jesus Christ. The Greek can be read either way, and scholars disagree about which Paul meant. Both are true, and both are in Romans: we are saved by trusting Jesus, and we are saved because Jesus was faithful to God all the way to the cross.

So where's the room for bragging? Gone. "It is excluded." If we're made right by faith and not by our performance, nobody gets to show off. And since there is only one God, He is the God of Jews and Gentiles both, and He makes them right with Him the same way.

Does that mean the law is useless? Paul says no. Faith actually upholds the law. He'll explain how in the next chapter, using the most famous Jewish ancestor of all.

KEY VERSE

for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

Romans 3:23–24 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Paul describes sin moving through the whole body: throat, tongue, lips, mouth, feet, eyes. Why do you think he described it that way?
2. Some people think they're basically good. How would Paul answer them?
3. What's the difference between being forgiven by a judge who pretends your crime didn't matter, and being forgiven by one who paid your fine himself?

CHAPTER 4

Father Abraham

Romans 4

If you were a Jewish believer in Rome, you might have one more objection. Paul, this faith thing sounds new. Our whole history is built on Abraham, and Abraham was circumcised. Didn't God accept him because of what he did?

Paul's answer is brilliant. He goes right to Abraham's story in Genesis, the most respected example he could choose, and shows that Abraham proves his point.

"What does Scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.'"

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Credited**
>
> The word credited is a bookkeeping term. It means to put something on someone's account. The Greek word behind it shows up eleven times in this chapter. When you work a job, your paycheck isn't a gift. You earned it. But when someone deposits money into your account that you didn't earn, that's a gift. Paul says righteousness works the second way. God puts it on the account of people who trust Him.

If Abraham had been made right with God by his good works, he'd have something to brag about. But Scripture says he believed God, and God counted his faith as righteousness. Paul puts it this way: to someone who works, wages are owed. But to the one who doesn't

work but trusts God "who justifies the ungodly," their faith is credited as righteousness.

God justifies the ungodly. Not the people who've gotten their act together. The ungodly. That's the only kind of people there are, according to chapter 3, so that's very good news.

Paul brings in a second witness: King David. David knew what it was to fail badly. He had committed adultery and arranged a murder. And he wrote in a psalm, "Blessed are those whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered." David knew the happiness of someone whose sins the Lord doesn't count against them.

Then Paul makes a sharp point about timing. When was Abraham credited as righteous? Before or after he was circumcised? Before! Genesis 15, where Abraham believes God, comes years before Genesis 17, where he is circumcised. So circumcision wasn't what made him right with God. It was a sign, a seal of the righteousness he already had by faith.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Abraham's Story**
>
> Abraham lived around 2000 BC, give or take. God called him to leave his home in Mesopotamia and go to a land He would show him. God promised to make him into a great nation and to bless all the peoples of the earth through him. The problem was that Abraham and his wife Sarah had no children, and they were getting very old. Abraham was about a hundred and Sarah about ninety when their son Isaac was finally born.

That means Abraham is the father of everyone who believes, Paul says. He's the father of uncircumcised Gentiles who trust God, and the father of Jews who follow in the footsteps of his faith. He's not just the ancestor of one nation. "He is the father of us all."

This would have mattered a lot in Rome's mixed house churches. A Gentile believer could look at Abraham and say: he's my father too. A Jewish believer could look at a Gentile and say: we're family.

Then Paul describes what Abraham's faith was actually like, and it's worth noticing, because it's not wishful thinking. "Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed." He looked at the facts honestly. He knew his body was as good as dead and Sarah was past childbearing. He didn't pretend. But he didn't waver. He trusted God, the One "who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not."

Faith isn't believing something with no evidence. It's trusting Someone who has proven He keeps His word, even when the situation looks impossible.

The words it was credited to him, Paul says, weren't written for Abraham alone. They were written for us too, for everyone who believes in the God "who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead." And the chapter ends with a beautiful summary of what Jesus did: "He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification."

Chapters 1 through 4 are the foundation. Everyone has sinned. Everyone can be made right with God as a gift, through faith in Jesus, just like Abraham. Now Paul is ready to talk about what that means for the rest of your life.

KEY VERSE

Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised.

Romans 4:20–21 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What's the difference between a wage and a gift? Why does Paul say being right with God has to be a gift?
2. Abraham faced the facts honestly and still trusted God. Is there a situation in your life where that kind of faith is hard right now?
3. Paul says Abraham is the father of all who believe, whatever their background. How should that change the way Christians from different backgrounds treat each other?

CHAPTER 5

Peace with God

Romans 5

Chapter 5 begins with one of Paul's favorite words: therefore. When you see therefore in Romans, ask what it's there for. It means Paul is about to draw a conclusion from everything he's just said. Since we've been made right with God by faith, here's what follows.

"Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Peace with God isn't the same as feeling peaceful. It's a change in your relationship with Him. In chapters 1 to 3, humanity was at war with God, and God's wrath stood against our sin. Now, through Jesus, the war is over. You're not His enemy anymore.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **We Have, or Let Us Have?**
>
> The NIV footnote on 5:1 says that many manuscripts read let us have peace instead of we have peace. In Greek, the two words differ by a single letter, and they sounded almost the same when read aloud. Most modern translations go with we have, because it fits Paul's argument: peace with God is a fact Jesus has accomplished, not something we work up. Either way, the point stands. Through Jesus, the war is over.

Through Jesus we've also "gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand." In the ancient world, you couldn't just walk in to see a king. You needed someone to bring you in. Jesus brings us

into God's presence, and now we stand in grace. It's not a place you visit now and then. It's where you live.

And then Paul says something surprising. We don't only boast in the hope of God's glory. "We also glory in our sufferings." Really? Why would anyone celebrate suffering?

Paul explains: "suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope." He's not saying pain is good. He's saying God uses it. Hard times build endurance. Endurance shapes who you are. And a person who has been through hard things with God learns that His promises hold. "And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit."

Remember who was listening. Christians in Rome lived with insults, poverty, and danger. Within a few years, some of them would die for their faith. Paul isn't writing greeting-card optimism. He's writing to people who knew what suffering was.

Then Paul shows just how big God's love is. When we were still powerless, at just the right time, Christ died for the ungodly. Think about how rare it is for someone to die for another person. Maybe, Paul says, someone might dare to die for a really good person. "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

Not after we cleaned up. Not because we were worth it. While we were still sinners. While we were enemies.

And if God did that for His enemies, Paul argues, how much more will He keep us safe now that we're His friends? If Jesus' death brought us back to God, His life will surely carry us all the way home.

BACKGROUND CHECK **How Much More**

Watch for the phrase how much more in Romans 5. Paul uses it again and again. It's a way of arguing from the lesser to the greater. If God did the hard thing (loved and saved His enemies), how much more will He do the easier thing (keep and protect His children)? The logic is meant to give you confidence.

The second half of the chapter goes all the way back to the beginning of the Bible. "Sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned."

The one man is Adam. In Genesis 3, Adam disobeyed God, and everything broke. Sin and death spread to the whole human race. Paul calls Adam "a pattern of the one to come," meaning Jesus. Adam and Jesus are like two heads of two families. Everyone starts out in Adam's family, which leads to death. But Jesus starts a new family.

Paul sets them side by side. One man's disobedience made many sinners. One man's obedience will make many righteous. One trespass brought condemnation. One righteous act brought justification and life. But the two aren't equal. "The gift is not like the trespass." Grace is far bigger than sin.

The law was added, Paul says, so that sin would show up for what it was. "But where sin increased, grace increased all the more." Whatever you've done, however much sin has piled up, God's grace is deeper.

KEY VERSE

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,

Romans 5:1 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What's the difference between feeling peaceful and having peace with God?
2. Paul says suffering can produce perseverance, character, and hope. Have you seen that happen in your life or in someone else's?
3. Christ died for us while we were still sinners. Why does it matter that God didn't wait for us to get better first?

TRY THIS *Write down one hard thing you're going through. Under it, write one way God might be using it to build perseverance or character in you.*

CHAPTER 6

Dead and Alive

Romans 6

Right after Paul says grace is bigger than sin, he knows exactly what some people will think. Great! If more sin means more grace, let's sin as much as we want. God loves to forgive, and I love to sin. It's a perfect arrangement.

"What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?"

"By no means!" Paul's answer is the strongest no he can give. Some older translations say God forbid. The NIV says by no means. It's a phrase Paul uses when an idea is so wrong it's offensive.

Why? Because "we are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?"

Paul explains using baptism. When people were baptized in the early church, they usually went all the way under the water and came back up. Paul says that's a picture of something real. When you were baptized into Christ, you were baptized into His death. You went down into the grave with Him. And just as Christ was raised from the dead, you came up to "live a new life."

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Baptism in the Early Church**
>
> In the first churches, baptism usually happened right after someone believed, often the same day, as you can see again and again in Acts. It was a public

way of saying, I belong to Jesus now. Going under the water pictured dying and being buried with Christ. Coming up pictured rising to new life. For Jewish and Gentile believers in Rome, it was the same baptism. Everyone went under the same water.

Here's the logic. Your old self, the person you were under sin's control, "was crucified with him." That person died. And someone who has died is set free from sin. A dead person can't be bossed around anymore.

So Paul gives a command. "Count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus." The word count is that bookkeeping word again, the same one he used about Abraham in chapter 4. It means to consider something true because it is true. You're not pretending. You're believing what God says about you.

That means sin doesn't get to be in charge anymore. Don't hand over your eyes, your hands, your mouth, or your phone to sin as tools for doing wrong. Instead, offer every part of yourself to God as tools for doing right. "For sin shall no longer be your master, because you are not under the law, but under grace."

Then Paul asks the question a second time, slightly differently. Since we're not under the law but under grace, can we sin? Again: "By no means!"

BACKGROUND CHECK **Slavery in Rome**

Paul's readers knew slavery from the inside. Some of them were enslaved. Others had been. In Rome, slaves did everything from scrubbing floors to managing businesses and teaching children. A slave was owned. Their time, their work, and their bodies belonged to someone else. When Paul talks about being slaves to sin or slaves to righteousness, he says he's using an example from everyday life. His point isn't to approve of slavery. It's that everyone serves someone.

Here's the hard truth Paul wants us to see. Nobody is truly independent. You will obey something. You might obey your desires, your friends, your fears, or your need to be liked. You might obey God. "When you offer yourselves to someone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one you obey."

So whose slave do you want to be? Paul asks what you ever got from serving sin. Things you're now ashamed of. And where does that road end? In death. But serving God leads to holiness, and the end is eternal life.

Then Paul sums it up in a single sentence, one of the most famous in the Bible: "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Notice the difference. Sin pays wages. You earn them. And the paycheck is death. Eternal life isn't a paycheck. It's a gift.

KEY VERSE

In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Romans 6:11 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Some people think that if God always forgives, they can do whatever they want. Why is that the wrong conclusion from grace?
2. Paul says everyone serves something. What are some masters teenagers serve without realizing it?
3. What would it look like this week to offer your phone, your mouth, or your free time to God as a tool for doing good?

CHAPTER 7

The War Inside

Romans 7

Chapter 7 is one of the most honest chapters in the Bible. If you've ever thought, why do I keep doing the thing I promised myself I'd stop doing, Paul gets it.

He starts with an example from marriage law. A married woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives. If he dies, she's free to marry someone else. In the same way, Paul says, you "died to the law through the body of Christ," so that you could belong to someone else: to Jesus, who was raised from the dead.

Then he anticipates another objection. If we had to die to the law to be free, is the law evil? "Certainly not!" The law isn't the problem. The problem is what sin does with it.

Paul uses his own experience. He wouldn't have really known what coveting was if the law hadn't said, "You shall not covet." But as soon as he heard the command, sin used it to stir up every kind of coveting in him.

You know how this works. Tell a kid not to touch something, and suddenly it's the only thing they want to touch. A sign that says wet paint, do not touch, practically begs you to touch it. The command is good. But something in us rebels against it. "So then, the law is

holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good." The problem is in us.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Flesh**
>
> The NIV often translates the Greek word sarx, which literally means flesh, as sinful nature. A footnote explains that in passages like this, flesh refers to the sinful state of human beings, often presented as a power in opposition to the Spirit. Paul doesn't mean your body is bad. He means the part of fallen human nature that pulls away from God.

And then comes the famous struggle. "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do." Paul wants to do good. He even delights in God's law in his inner being. But he sees another law at work in him, waging war against his mind, making him a prisoner of sin.

Read verses 15 to 23 slowly, and you'll probably hear yourself. I know I shouldn't say that, and I say it anyway. I promised I'd stop, and I didn't. I want to be different, and I'm not. It's frustrating, and it can make you feel hopeless.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Who Is the "I" in Romans 7?**
>
> Christians have debated this for centuries. Some think Paul is describing his life before he knew Jesus, looking back as a Jewish man trying to keep the law by his own strength. Others think he's describing the ongoing struggle of a believer who still battles sin. Others think Paul is speaking for Israel, or for anyone trying to live by the law alone. Good, faithful people hold each view. Whatever you decide, every Christian knows the struggle is real, and every Christian needs chapter 8.

Paul ends the struggle with a cry. "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?"

He doesn't ask what will rescue him. He asks who. And he answers right away: "Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!"

The answer to the war inside isn't a better technique, a stricter rule, or more willpower. It's a person. Jesus. And in the next chapter, Paul will explain how Jesus, by His Spirit, does what the law never could.

KEY VERSE

What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Romans 7:24–25 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Have you ever wanted to do the right thing and done the opposite? What was going on inside you?
2. Why do you think being told not to do something can make us want to do it more?
3. Paul asks who will rescue me, not what. Why does that difference matter?

CHAPTER 8

No Condemnation

Romans 8

If Romans were a mountain range, chapter 8 would be the highest peak. Many Christians call it their favorite chapter in the Bible. It starts with no condemnation and ends with no separation, and everything in between is about the Holy Spirit.

"Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

After the struggle of chapter 7, this is like sunlight. Condemnation means the guilty verdict and the sentence that goes with it. Paul says that for people who belong to Jesus, there is none. Not reduced. None. Your worst day doesn't change it. Your best day doesn't earn it.

How? The law couldn't do it, because our sinful nature made us too weak to keep it. So God did what the law couldn't. He sent His own Son in a human body like ours to be an offering for sin. Jesus took sin's condemnation on Himself, so that God's righteous requirement could be met in us, as we live by the Spirit.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **The Spirit in Romans 8**
>
> In chapters 1 to 7, the Holy Spirit is mentioned only a few times. In chapter 8, the Spirit shows up again and again. The Spirit gives life, lives in believers, leads them, assures them they're God's children, helps them in weakness,

and prays for them. Paul is showing that the Christian life isn't you trying really hard for God. It's God living in you.

Paul describes two ways of living. One is set on what the flesh wants, and it leads to death. The other is set on what the Spirit wants, and it leads to "life and peace." And if you belong to Jesus, His Spirit lives in you. The same Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal body too.

Then Paul says something amazing about who you are. "For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God." You didn't receive a spirit that makes you a frightened slave. You received the Spirit of adoption. And by Him "we cry, 'Abba, Father.'"

BACKGROUND CHECK **Adoption in Rome**

The NIV footnote says the Greek word for adoption to sonship refers to the full legal standing of an adopted heir in Roman culture. In Rome, adoption was serious business. Emperors sometimes adopted the man they wanted to succeed them. An adopted son got a new name, a new family, and full rights as an heir. Abba is Aramaic for father, the word Jesus Himself used when He prayed. Paul says God has adopted you, with all the rights of a child.

And if we're children, then we're heirs, heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ. That includes sharing in His sufferings now, and sharing in His glory later.

Paul doesn't pretend life is easy. He admits we suffer. But "our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us." The whole creation is groaning like a woman in labor, waiting to be set free from decay. We groan too, waiting for our bodies to be made new. And when we don't even know how to pray, "the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans." On your worst night, when you can't find any words, the Spirit is praying for you.

Then comes one of the most loved verses in the Bible: "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

It doesn't say all things are good. Cancer isn't good. Divorce isn't good. Betrayal isn't good. It says God works in all things for good. He doesn't waste anything.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **A Footnote on 8:28**
>
> The NIV gives other ways to translate the Greek here, including that all things work together for good, or that God works together with those who love Him to bring about what is good. Scholars debate the exact wording. The heart of the verse is the same in each: nothing in the lives of those who love God is outside His good purpose.

And what is that good? Paul tells us. God's purpose is for His people to be "conformed to the image of his Son," to become like Jesus. Then he lays out a chain that can't be broken: those God foreknew, He predestined; those He predestined, He called; those He called, He justified; those He justified, He glorified.

Then the chapter rises to its climax with a series of questions. "If God is for us, who can be against us?" If God didn't spare His own Son, won't He also give us everything we need? Who can bring a charge against us? God is the one who declares us not guilty. Who can condemn us? Jesus died, rose, and is praying for us right now at God's right hand.

"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" Paul lists the things that could happen to the Christians in Rome: trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, sword. These weren't hypothetical. Within a few years, Nero would make some of them very real.

"No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us."

And then the finale. Paul says he's convinced that nothing, not death or life, angels or demons, the present or the future, any power, height or depth, or anything else in all creation, can separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Nothing. Not one thing.

KEY VERSE

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

Romans 8:28 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What's the difference between feeling guilty and being condemned? Why does Paul say there's no condemnation in Christ?
2. What does it mean to you that God has adopted you as His child, not just forgiven you?
3. Romans 8:28 is often quoted to people who are hurting. When is it comforting, and when could it be said in a hurtful way?

TRY THIS *Copy Romans 8:38–39 onto a card and put it where you'll see it every morning this week.*

CHAPTER 9

Breaking Heart

Romans 9

Chapter 8 ended on the highest note in the Bible. Nothing can separate us from God's love. And then, suddenly, Paul's tone drops. "I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart."

Why? Because of his own people. Paul was Jewish through and through. Most of his fellow Jews had rejected Jesus as the Messiah. Paul loved them so much that he says he could almost wish himself cut off from Christ, if it would save them.

That's not a small thing to say right after chapter 8. Paul has just finished explaining that nothing can separate believers from God's love. And now he says he'd give that up for his people if he could. It's the kind of love Moses showed when he asked God to blot him out instead of Israel. It's the kind of love Jesus showed on the cross.

And it raises a huge question, the question chapters 9 to 11 are all about. If God made all those promises to Israel, and most of Israel has rejected the Messiah, did God's promises fail? And if God's promises to Israel can fail, how can believers in Rome be sure His promises in chapter 8 won't fail them too?

Paul lists Israel's privileges. Adoption as God's children, His glory, the covenants, the law, temple worship, the promises, the

patriarchs. And from them came the Messiah, "who is God over all, forever praised!"

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **A Comma That Matters**
>
> Ancient Greek manuscripts had almost no punctuation, so translators have to decide where sentences end. In 9:5, the NIV reads that the Messiah is God over all, forever praised. The NIV footnote gives two other ways to punctuate the verse, which turn the last part into a separate praise to God. Many scholars think the NIV's main reading is the most natural one, which would make this one of the clearest places in Paul's letters where he calls Jesus God. Either way, the rest of the New Testament makes it clear who Jesus is.

"It is not as though God's word had failed," Paul says. Then he explains: "not all who are descended from Israel are Israel." Being born into Abraham's family has never been the whole story. Abraham had two sons, Ishmael and Isaac, but God's promise came through Isaac. Isaac had twin sons, Esau and Jacob, and before they were born or had done anything good or bad, God said the older would serve the younger. Then Paul quotes the prophet Malachi: "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated."

Why does that matter? Because it shows that God's choices depend on Him, not on our performance. "It does not, therefore, depend on human desire or effort, but on God's mercy."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Loved and Hated?**
>
> Paul quotes Malachi 1:2–3, and it sounds shocking. But in Hebrew, love and hate were often used to describe choosing one and not the other, not personal feelings. Jesus used the same kind of language when He said you must hate your father and mother to follow Him (Luke 14:26), meaning love Him far more. In Malachi, Jacob and Esau stand for the nations of Israel and Edom. The point is that God chose Jacob's line to carry His promise.

Paul knows how this sounds, so he raises the objection himself. “Is God unjust? Not at all!” God told Moses He would have mercy on whom He chooses to have mercy. Then Paul brings up Pharaoh, whom God raised up to display His power. God has mercy on some and hardens others.

Someone asks the obvious question: Then why does God still blame us? Who can resist His will?

Paul doesn’t give a philosophy lecture. He answers with a picture. “But who are you, a human being, to talk back to God?” Does a clay pot talk back to the potter? The potter has the right to shape the clay as he wants.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Hardest Chapter**
>
> Romans 9 is one of the most debated chapters in the Bible. Christians have argued for centuries about how God’s choosing (sometimes called election or predestination) fits with human choice and responsibility. Some believe God chooses individuals for salvation. Others believe Paul is talking mostly about God choosing nations or groups for a role in His plan. Faithful Christians disagree. But notice that Paul holds both truths together. Chapter 9 says God chooses. Chapter 10 says everyone who calls on Him will be saved, and people are responsible for not believing. Paul doesn’t try to make the tension disappear.

Then Paul turns to the Gentiles. God has called people “not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles.” He quotes the prophet Hosea, who said God would call people His people who weren’t His people before. And Isaiah, who said only a remnant of Israel would be saved.

Here’s the surprise at the end of the chapter. Gentiles who weren’t even looking for righteousness found it, by faith. But many in Israel, who worked hard pursuing righteousness through the law, missed

it. Why? "Because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works." They tripped over the stumbling stone. That stone is Jesus. Isaiah said God would lay a stone in Zion that people would trip over, "and the one who believes in him will never be put to shame."

KEY VERSE

It does not, therefore, depend on human desire or effort, but on God's mercy.

Romans 9:16 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Paul was heartbroken for people who didn't know Jesus. Who are you heartbroken for? If no one comes to mind, why might that be?
2. Is it comforting or troubling to you that salvation depends on God's mercy and not your effort? Why?
3. Paul doesn't try to explain everything about how God's choosing works. Is it okay for Christians to admit they don't fully understand something in the Bible?

CHAPTER 10

Beautiful Feet

Romans 10

Paul starts chapter 10 the same way he started chapter 9, with his heart. “Brothers and sisters, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved.”

He knows they’re zealous for God. Paul had been too. Before he met Jesus, he was so zealous that he persecuted the church. But zeal isn’t enough. Their zeal isn’t “based on knowledge.” They tried to build their own righteousness instead of accepting the righteousness God gives.

“Christ is the culmination of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.”

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Culmination**
>
> The Greek word here, telos, can mean end, goal, or completion. Older translations say Christ is the end of the law. The NIV says culmination, the high point everything was building toward. Think of a story: the last chapter doesn’t throw away everything before it. It’s what the whole story was heading for. Jesus is where the law was always pointing.

Then Paul contrasts two ways. The law says the person who does these things will live by them. You have to keep it all. But righteousness by faith says something different. You don’t have to climb up to heaven to bring Christ down, or go down to the realm of

the dead to bring Him up. God has already done that. Jesus came down. Jesus rose. "The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart."

And here's what that word is: "If you declare with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Jesus Is Lord**
>
> In Rome, people were expected to honor the emperor, and he was often called Lord. Saying Caesar is Lord was a statement of loyalty to the empire. When Christians said Jesus is Lord, they meant it as their highest loyalty. Jesus is in charge, not Caesar. For Jewish believers, Lord was also the word the Greek translation of the Old Testament used for God's own name. Calling Jesus Lord meant something huge.

It's not a magic formula. Paul is describing real faith: believing in your heart, and saying it out loud. Faith isn't just private. It's something you're willing to say.

"For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile." The same Lord is Lord of all, and He richly blesses everyone who calls on Him. Paul quotes the prophet Joel: "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

Everyone. Not just the religious kids. Not just the ones from good families. Everyone.

Then Paul asks a chain of questions that has inspired missionaries for two thousand years. "How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can anyone preach unless they are sent?"

Read it backward. Someone is sent. They speak. People hear. People believe. People call on the Lord. People are saved. Somewhere along the line, someone told you about Jesus. Who's next on the chain?

Paul quotes Isaiah: "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" Feet aren't usually considered beautiful. But in Isaiah's time, the messenger ran on foot from the battlefield to the city with the news of victory. The people saw him coming on the mountains, and his dusty feet were the most beautiful thing they'd ever seen.

"Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ."

So why didn't more of Israel believe? Paul says they did hear. The message went out everywhere. And God had said through Moses and Isaiah that this would happen: that He would be found by those who weren't looking, and that He would make Israel envious through other nations. The chapter ends with a heartbreaking picture of God from Isaiah. "All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and obstinate people."

God isn't standing with His arms crossed. He's standing with His arms open.

KEY VERSE

Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

Romans 10:13 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Paul says zeal isn't enough without knowledge. Can you think of an example of someone being passionate but wrong?
2. Why does Paul say we need to say Jesus is Lord out loud, not just believe it privately?
3. Someone told you about Jesus. Who was it? Who might God want you to tell?

TRY THIS *Thank the person who first told you about Jesus. Send a message, write a note, or tell them in person.*

CHAPTER 11

Grafted In

Romans 11

Paul has been building up to a question, and now he asks it straight out. “Did God reject his people?”

“By no means!” Paul himself is proof. He’s an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin. And he’s a believer. So God hasn’t given up on Israel.

He reminds them of Elijah. Remember when Elijah thought he was the only faithful person left in Israel? He complained to God that everyone else had turned away. God told him, I have seven thousand others who haven’t bowed down to Baal. Elijah wasn’t alone. Neither is Paul. “So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace.”

And Paul adds a line that’s a great definition of grace: “if by grace, then it cannot be based on works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace.”

Then Paul asks the next question. Did Israel stumble so badly that they’ll never recover? “Not at all!” Instead, Israel’s stumble opened the door for the Gentiles. And the Gentiles coming in will make Israel envious and draw them back. If their stumbling brought riches to the world, imagine how much greater it will be when they come back. It will be like “life from the dead.”

BACKGROUND CHECK **Olive Trees**

Olive trees were everywhere in the Mediterranean world, and Paul's readers knew how they worked. Olive trees can live for hundreds of years. Farmers regularly grafted new branches into old trees: they cut a slit in the trunk or a branch and inserted a shoot from another tree so it would grow there. Usually they grafted good branches onto wild trees. Paul describes the opposite, grafting wild branches into a cultivated tree. He says that's contrary to nature. That's the point. It's grace.

Then Paul turns to the Gentiles in the Roman churches and speaks to them directly. And he gives them a picture to remember.

Israel is like an olive tree. Some of the natural branches have been broken off because of unbelief. You Gentiles, Paul says, are like a wild olive shoot that's been grafted in. Now you share in the nourishing sap from the root. But don't get proud. "You do not support the root, but the root supports you."

Remember the tension in Rome? Gentile believers had run the churches while the Jews were expelled. Maybe some of them were starting to look down on the Jewish believers coming back, or on Jewish people in general. Paul shuts that down. You didn't grow this tree. You were grafted in by grace. "Do not be arrogant, but tremble." If God didn't spare the natural branches, He won't spare you either. And God is able to graft the natural branches back in.

BACKGROUND CHECK **A Warning from History**

Sadly, Christians throughout history have often ignored Romans 11. For centuries, many treated Jewish people with contempt, blamed them for Jesus' death, and even persecuted and killed them, sometimes in the name of Christianity. Paul's warning is clear: Gentile Christians owe everything to the root God planted in Israel. Contempt for the Jewish people has no place in a Christian heart.

Then Paul reveals what he calls a mystery, something God has now made known. Israel has experienced a hardening in part, "until the full number of the Gentiles has come in, and in this way all Israel will be saved."

What exactly does all Israel will be saved mean? Christians understand it in different ways. Some believe there will be a large turning of the Jewish people to Jesus before He returns. Others think all Israel means the whole people of God, Jews and Gentiles together. Either way, Paul is certain that God hasn't abandoned His promises. "For God's gifts and his call are irrevocable."

Then Paul pulls back and shows the big picture. Everyone has disobeyed God: Gentiles first, then Israel. And God has used it all "so that he may have mercy on them all."

And at that point, Paul can't help himself. He stops explaining and starts worshiping.

"Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!" Who has ever known the mind of the Lord? Who has ever given God something so that God owes them? Nobody. "For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen."

That's a good place for hard theology to end. Paul has wrestled with the toughest questions in the letter, and he doesn't pretend he can see everything. But what he can see makes him want to praise God.

KEY VERSE

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!

Romans 11:33 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Paul says grace can't be based on works, or it isn't grace. Why do people find that so hard to accept?
2. The Gentile believers were tempted to feel superior. Where do you see Christians today feeling superior to others? Where do you feel it?
3. Paul ends three hard chapters by worshiping. What do you think that teaches us about questions we can't fully answer?

CHAPTER 12

Living Sacrifice

Romans 12

For eleven chapters, Paul has explained what God has done. Now he turns to what we do in response. And the hinge is one word you've seen before: therefore.

"Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship."

Notice the order. Paul doesn't start with rules. He starts with mercy. Everything you're about to read is a response to eleven chapters of grace. You don't obey God to get Him to love you. You obey because He already does.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Sacrifice**
>
> Paul's readers knew all about sacrifices. In the Jewish temple in Jerusalem, priests offered animals on the altar every day. In Rome, temples to the gods were everywhere, and animals were sacrificed in public ceremonies. In every case, the sacrifice was killed. Paul says something new: offer yourself as a living sacrifice. Not dead on an altar, but alive, every day, belonging completely to God. Worship isn't only singing on Sunday. It's your whole life.

Then comes a verse every teenager should memorize. "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind."

The pattern of this world is the shape everybody else's life takes, the pressure to think, talk, dress, post, and want what everyone around you wants. Conforming is easy. You don't have to do anything. Just go with the flow, and the world will squeeze you into its mold. Being transformed is different. It happens from the inside out, as God changes the way you think. Then, Paul says, you'll be able to figure out what God's will is, "his good, pleasing and perfect will."

Next Paul talks about the church as a body. Don't think of yourself more highly than you should. Each of us is like a part of one body. A body has many parts, and they don't all do the same job. In the same way, "in Christ we, though many, form one body." And each member belongs to all the others.

That means you have a part to play. God gives different gifts to different people: prophesying, serving, teaching, encouraging, giving, leading, showing mercy. Whatever your gift is, Paul says, use it. Teach, if you teach. Give generously, if you give. Show mercy cheerfully, if that's your gift.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **One Body in Rome**
>
> Imagine a house church in Rome. A wealthy Gentile homeowner. An enslaved woman who works in a kitchen across the city. A Jewish leatherworker just back from exile. A former soldier. A teenager. In Roman society, these people would never share a table. In the church, Paul says, they belong to one another, like parts of one body. Each one needs the others.

Then Paul gives a rapid-fire list of what love looks like, short commands that read almost like a text thread. "Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good." Be devoted to one another. Honor others above yourselves. Keep your spiritual fire burning. "Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer." Share with believers in need. Practice hospitality.

Then the list gets harder. “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.” Rejoice with people who are happy. Cry with people who are sad. Don’t be proud. Be willing to hang out with people others look down on.

And then the hardest one of all. Don’t repay anyone evil for evil. As far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Don’t take revenge. Leave that to God. Instead, if your enemy is hungry, feed him. If he’s thirsty, give him something to drink. Paul says that will “heap burning coals on his head,” an Old Testament picture from Proverbs that probably means your kindness will make him burn with shame and maybe change his heart.

The chapter ends with a line that sums up how Christians are supposed to fight. “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

KEY VERSE

Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

Romans 12:2 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What are some patterns of this world that teenagers are pressured to conform to? Which one pulls on you the most?
2. Paul says each part of the body matters. What gift might God have given you to use for others?
3. Is there someone you'd like to get back at? What would it look like to overcome evil with good in that situation?

TRY THIS *Pick one person who's been unkind to you and do one genuinely kind thing for them this week, without telling anyone.*

CHAPTER 13

The Debt That Never Ends

Romans 13

Romans 13 starts with a topic you might not expect in a letter about grace: the government.

"Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established."

That's a bold thing to say to Christians living in Rome under Nero. But Paul's point is that God is above every ruler. Governments exist because God wants order instead of chaos. Rulers are supposed to reward people who do right and punish people who do wrong. Paul even calls them God's servants. So Christians should obey the law, pay their taxes, and give respect and honor to the people they owe them to.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Taxes in Rome**
>
> Roman taxes were heavy and often unpopular. Around this time, the Roman historian Tacitus reports, people complained so loudly about tax collectors' abuses that Nero considered abolishing some taxes altogether. Christians might have been tempted to think, since Jesus is our King, we don't owe Caesar anything. Paul says pay what you owe. Jesus said something similar: give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's.

Does that mean Christians must obey the government no matter what? Christians have wrestled with this for centuries. The rest of

the Bible shows that God's people sometimes have to say no to rulers, when obeying them would mean disobeying God. In Acts, when the authorities ordered the apostles to stop preaching about Jesus, Peter answered that they had to obey God rather than human beings. Paul himself was arrested many times for refusing to stop preaching. Romans 13 describes what governments are supposed to be. It doesn't say rulers can never be wrong.

Then Paul shifts from paying debts to a debt you can never pay off. "Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another."

You can pay off your taxes. You can pay back money you borrowed. But you never get to the point where you've loved people enough. That debt keeps going.

And love sums up all of God's commands. Don't commit adultery. Don't murder. Don't steal. Don't covet. All of those, and every other command, come down to this: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love never harms a neighbor. "Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Waking Up**
>
> In the Roman world, most work began at dawn. People went to bed early and got up before the sun. Parties, drinking, and the worst kinds of behavior happened at night, in the dark. Paul uses that picture. The night is nearly over. The day is almost here. Jesus is coming back. So wake up and live like it's daytime.

"The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed." Every day that passes, Jesus' return is one day closer. So put off the deeds of darkness like dirty clothes, and put on "the armor of light."

Don't live like the night crowd: partying, getting drunk, sleeping around, fighting, jealousy.

"Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ." Put Jesus on like clothes. Let Him be the first thing people see when they look at you. And don't spend your time thinking about how to feed your sinful desires.

These are the verses that changed Augustine's life, the brilliant young man from the beginning of this book. He was sitting in a garden in Italy, torn up inside. He had been living exactly the kind of life Paul describes. He heard a child's voice nearby, chanting a line over and over: take up and read. He picked up a copy of Paul's letters, opened it, and read these verses. Later he wrote that it was as if a light flooded his heart, and all the darkness of doubt disappeared.

KEY VERSE

Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law.

Romans 13:8 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think Paul told Christians to respect the government, even under an emperor like Nero?
2. When, if ever, should a Christian refuse to obey a law? How do you decide?
3. What would it look like to "clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ" at school tomorrow?

CHAPTER 14

Food Fights

Romans 14

You might think the biggest problems in the early church were persecution or false teaching. Those were real. But one of the problems Paul spends the most time on in Romans is food. And holidays.

Here's what was happening. Some believers in Rome ate anything. Others ate only vegetables. Some treated certain days as sacred. Others treated every day the same. And they were judging each other for it.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Why Food?**
>
> For Jewish believers, the law of Moses had food laws: no pork, no shellfish, meat prepared a certain way. They also kept the Sabbath and Jewish festivals. Many Jewish believers kept doing these things after they trusted Jesus. Meanwhile, much of the meat sold in Roman markets had been offered to idols first, and some believers, Jewish or Gentile, may have avoided meat entirely to stay away from anything connected to idols. Gentile believers who felt free to eat anything might look down on them. And the strict believers might judge the free ones as unspiritual.

Paul doesn't start by deciding who's right. He starts with how they treat each other. "Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters."

Disputable matters are issues where faithful Christians can disagree. Not the core of the gospel, which Paul has spent eleven chapters defending, but things the Bible leaves room on. The one who eats everything must not look down on the one who doesn't. The one who doesn't must not judge the one who does. Why? "For God has accepted them."

And then Paul asks a question that should silence a lot of arguments: "Who are you to judge someone else's servant?" Every believer belongs to the Lord, and answers to Him. "Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind."

"For none of us lives for ourselves alone, and none of us dies for ourselves alone." Whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. And one day "we will all stand before God's judgment seat." So stop judging each other. Each of us will give an account of ourselves to God.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Disputable Matters Today**
>
> In Paul's day, it was food and holy days. Today, Christians disagree about all kinds of things: music styles, what movies are okay, how to observe Sunday, worship styles, drinking alcohol as adults, and many more. Paul's principle still applies. On the central truths of the gospel, stand firm. On disputable matters, give each other room, don't look down on each other, and don't make your freedom someone else's stumbling block.

Paul says which side he's on. He's convinced that no food is unclean in itself. He's with the strong. But then he turns the tables. If your freedom hurts a brother or sister, you're no longer acting in love. Don't let your food destroy someone Christ died for.

That's strong. Your right to eat a burger is not more important than a person Jesus died for. "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of

eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit."

So, Paul says, "make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification." Edification means building each other up. If something you're free to do would cause another believer to stumble, it's better to give it up around them.

And the chapter ends with a principle about conscience. If you have doubts about whether something is okay and you do it anyway, you're going against your own conscience. "Everything that does not come from faith is sin."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Where Does the Doxology Go?**

Some ancient manuscripts place the final praise of the letter (what is now 16:25–27) right after 14:23. Others put it after 15:33. Most put it at the very end, where our Bibles have it. The NIV footnote on 14:23 mentions this. Scholars think the letter may have been copied in shorter and longer forms in the early centuries. It doesn't change anything Paul teaches, but it's a reminder that our Bibles have been carefully handed down through many copies.

KEY VERSE

Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.

Romans 14:19 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What's the difference between a core belief and a disputable matter? Can you give an example of each?
2. Have you ever judged another Christian for something that's really a disputable matter? Have you ever been judged that way?
3. Is there something you're free to do that you should give up around someone else, for their sake?

CHAPTER 15

One Voice

Romans 15

Paul keeps talking about the strong and the weak, and he makes it personal. “We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves.”

Why? Because that’s what Jesus did. “For even Christ did not please himself.” The strongest person who ever lived gave up His rights for the sake of the weak.

Then Paul says something about the Old Testament that applies to the whole Bible. “For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope.” The Bible isn’t just a history book. It’s written for you. It gives you endurance, encouragement, and hope.

Then Paul prays for the Roman churches. He asks God to give them unity, “so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Picture it. A house church where Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, slave and free, the strict and the free, all sing together. Not because they agree about everything, but because they all belong to Jesus.

“Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.”

That's the whole point of chapters 14 and 15 in one sentence. How did Christ accept you? Before you were perfect. While you were still a sinner. With all your weaknesses. Accept others the same way.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Gentiles in Scripture**
>
> In 15:9–12, Paul quotes four Old Testament passages, drawn from all three parts of the Hebrew Scriptures: the Law (Deuteronomy), the Prophets (Isaiah), and the Writings (the Psalms). Each one says the Gentiles will praise God. Paul is showing that welcoming the Gentiles wasn't a new idea. It was God's plan all along, and the Scriptures had been saying so for centuries.

Paul ends this section with one of the most beautiful prayers in the Bible. "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."

Then the letter turns personal. Paul tells the Romans that he's confident in them. He knows they're full of goodness and able to teach one another. He's written boldly to remind them, because of the job God gave him: to bring the good news to the Gentiles.

He describes his work so far. From Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, on the coast across the Adriatic Sea from Italy, he has fully preached the gospel of Christ. And he's always had one ambition: "to preach the gospel where Christ was not known." He doesn't want to build on someone else's foundation.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Spain**
>
> Spain was the western edge of the known world, the place where the Mediterranean meets the Atlantic. Rome had ruled much of it for about two centuries, but it was a long way from the Jewish communities where Paul usually started preaching. Paul wanted to be the first to take the gospel there. We don't know for sure whether he ever made it. Acts ends with Paul under

> arrest in Rome. Clement of Rome, writing near the end of the first century, says Paul reached "the limits of the West," which some think means Spain.

Now Paul explains his plans. He's finally going to visit Rome on his way to Spain. He hopes they'll help send him on his way. But first, he's going to Jerusalem with money that churches in Macedonia and Achaia (Greece) have collected for poor believers there.

Think about how remarkable that gift was. Gentile believers in Greece were giving money to Jewish believers in Jerusalem, people they had never met. Paul says it makes sense. The Gentiles have shared in Israel's spiritual blessings. Sharing material blessings back is the least they can do. The gift was a picture of exactly what Paul has been teaching: Jews and Gentiles are one family.

Then Paul asks for prayer. "Join me in my struggle by praying to God for me." Pray that I'll be safe from the unbelievers in Judea. Pray that the gift will be accepted. Pray that I can come to you with joy.

Here's the ironic part. Paul did get to Rome, but not the way he planned. As you read in Acts, he was arrested in Jerusalem, imprisoned for two years, put on trial, shipwrecked, and finally brought to Rome in chains. God answered his prayer, but in a way Paul never expected.

KEY VERSE

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Romans 15:13 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Paul says the strong should bear with the weak instead of pleasing themselves. What does that look like among your friends?
2. How did Christ accept you? Who is someone you find it hard to accept?
3. Paul's plan to visit Rome happened, but not the way he planned. Has God ever answered a prayer of yours in a way you didn't expect?

CHAPTER 16

Names Worth Knowing

Romans 16

A lot of people skip Romans 16. It's mostly a list of names, many of them hard to pronounce. But if you slow down, this chapter is a window into the real church in Rome. These are the people who first heard the letter. They're not characters in a theology book. They're friends.

Paul starts with the woman who probably carried the letter. "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchreae." He asks the Romans to welcome her and help her with anything she needs, because she has been "the benefactor of many people, including me."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Phoebe**
>
> The NIV calls Phoebe a deacon. A footnote says the word can also mean servant, and explains that a deacon was a Christian designated to serve with the church's leaders in a variety of ways. Christians disagree today about what roles women should hold in the church, and this verse is part of that conversation. What isn't debated is that Paul trusted Phoebe with his most important letter and called her a benefactor, someone who used her resources to support others, including Paul himself.

Next he greets Priscilla and Aquila, the couple you met in Acts. They were tentmakers like Paul, and they had been forced out of Rome when Claudius expelled the Jews. Now they're back, and a church

meets in their house. Paul says they "risked their lives for me." All the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them.

Then come the names. Epenetus, the first convert in the province of Asia. Mary, who worked very hard. Andronicus and Junia, Jewish believers who were in prison with Paul and who became Christians before he did. Ampliatus, Urbanus, Stachys, Apelles. The households of Aristobulus and Narcissus. Tryphena and Tryphosa, women who work hard in the Lord. Persis. Rufus, and his mother, "who has been a mother to me, too."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Who Were They?**
>
> Many of these names were common among slaves and former slaves in Rome, which tells us the church included many ordinary and poor people. Some names are Jewish, some Greek, some Latin. Roughly a third of the individuals Paul mentions in verses 1–16 are women, and Paul praises several of them for their hard work. Rufus may be the son of Simon of Cyrene, the man who carried Jesus' cross. Mark 15:21 mentions that Simon was the father of Alexander and Rufus, as though Mark's readers knew them. Many scholars think Mark wrote his Gospel for Christians in Rome.

There's one more name worth noticing. Paul says Andronicus and Junia are "outstanding among the apostles." The NIV footnote offers another possible translation: they are esteemed by the apostles. Scholars debate which reading is right. Either way, Paul honors them highly.

Read the list again, and you'll notice Paul says something kind about almost everyone. My dear friend. My co-worker. Who worked very hard. Whose faithfulness has been tested. That's a great model for how to talk about people.

Then Paul gives a warning. Watch out for people who cause divisions and lead others away from what they've been taught. Stay

away from them. They use smooth talk and flattery to fool people. Paul wants the Romans to be "wise about what is good, and innocent about what is evil." And he gives them a promise: "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet."

That's an echo of Genesis 3:15, the first promise in the Bible, where God said the woman's offspring would crush the serpent's head. Jesus did that at the cross. And now His people share in His victory.

Then come greetings from Paul's companions in Corinth: Timothy, his co-worker; Lucius, Jason, and Sosipater; Gaius, Paul's host, whose home the whole church enjoys; Erastus, the city's director of public works; and Quartus. And in the middle of it, the man who actually wrote the letter down steps forward for a moment: "I, Tertius, who wrote down this letter, greet you in the Lord."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Erastus**

In 1929, archaeologists in Corinth found a stone pavement inscription saying that Erastus had laid the pavement at his own expense in return for his position as aedile, a city official in charge of public works and buildings. Many scholars think this may be the same Erastus Paul mentions in Romans 16:23, though not everyone agrees. If so, the church in Corinth included a wealthy city official sitting alongside slaves.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Missing Verse**

If you look at Romans 16 in the NIV, you'll see the numbers jump from 23 to 25. The NIV footnote explains that some manuscripts include a verse 24, a short blessing: May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with all of you. Amen. The earliest and most reliable manuscripts don't have it, so the NIV leaves it out of the main text. Nothing in Paul's teaching depends on it. The same blessing appears in verse 20.

Paul ends the letter the way he's been ending sections all along, with praise. He gives glory to God, who is able to make the Romans

strong through the gospel. This message was a mystery hidden for ages, he says, but now it's been revealed so that all the nations can believe and obey. And the last line of the letter says it all: "to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen."

Sixteen chapters. The whole story of the King's rescue plan. We were lost, every one of us. God made a way. Jesus died and rose. Everyone who trusts Him is made right with God, adopted into His family, and filled with His Spirit, and nothing can ever separate them from His love. And those people, Jews and Gentiles, slaves and city officials, men and women, sit in the same house church, call each other family, and greet each other by name.

KEY VERSE

The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you.

Romans 16:20 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Paul knew the names and stories of dozens of people. Who are the people in your church or youth group whose names you should know?
2. Paul said something kind about nearly everyone he named. What would change if you talked about people the way Paul did?
3. After reading all of Romans, what's one idea that changed the way you think about God or yourself?

TRY THIS *Write a short note to three people who've helped you in your faith, telling them specifically what they did and thanking them.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Now What? The Bottom Line

You've just walked through the whole letter to the Romans. Paul built his case carefully, one step at a time. For centuries, people have used a handful of verses from Romans to explain the good news in a few minutes. Some call it the Romans Road. You've seen every one of these verses already, in context. Here they are together.

Here's what the Bible says, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God is real, and He's not hiding.

Paul says the world itself shows God's power and nature. You weren't an accident. You were made by Him and for Him.

2 We've all turned away.

Not just the obvious bad guys. The religious people too. Everyone. The Bible calls it sin, and it separates us from God.

> *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,* **Romans 3:23 (NIV)**

3 Sin has a real cost.

God is good, so He doesn't shrug off evil. Sin pays a wage, and the wage is death, separation from God forever. But notice the second half of the verse.

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:23 (NIV)**

4 Jesus paid it.

God didn't wait for us to clean up our act. Jesus died in our place, taking the penalty we deserved, and God raised Him from the dead.

> *But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.* **Romans 5:8 (NIV)**

5 You can't earn it. You receive it.

This is the heart of Romans. We are made right with God by grace, through faith, not by trying harder. Abraham simply believed God, and God counted it as righteousness. The same is true for you.

> *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.* **Ephesians 2:8–9 (NIV)**

6 Turn and trust.

Paul says it's as close as your own mouth and heart. Turn from running your own life, and trust Jesus as your Savior and King. It doesn't mean you'll never fail again. It means you belong to Him now, and nothing can separate you from His love.

> *If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.* **Romans 10:9 (NIV)**

So what do you do with that? You don't need perfect words. Paul says the Spirit helps us even when we don't know what to pray. You can talk to God honestly, right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

God, I've been running my own life, and I've sinned against You. I can't fix that myself, and I can't earn my way back. I believe Jesus died for me and that You raised Him from the dead. I'm turning to You. Forgive me. I trust Jesus as my Savior, and I want to follow Him as my King. Fill me with Your Holy Spirit, change the way I think, and help me live for You. In Jesus' name, amen.

If You Just Said Yes

Tell someone. A parent, a youth leader, a pastor, or a Christian friend. Paul says faith is believed with the heart and spoken with the mouth. Start there.

Read the real thing. Read Romans straight through in a Bible, a chapter a day. Then read Galatians, a shorter, fiercer letter where Paul makes many of the same points.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Romans was written to a church, not to individuals. Ask about being baptized. Romans 6 explains what it means.

Talk to God every day. Be honest. When you don't know what to say, the Spirit helps. He can handle it.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Paul spent a whole letter answering hard questions because he knew people have them. Keep asking. Keep reading. Talk to someone you trust. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if Romans is true, then nothing in all creation, not your past, not your doubts, not your worst day, is strong enough to keep God's love away from someone who trusts Jesus. That's worth finding out for yourself.

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 8:38–39 (NIV)