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## The Gospel of God

When the second part of the Bible was being written – what is now called the “New Testament” – the Romans ruled the earth. They had established a powerful empire which had an iron grip on the developed world, in and around the Mediterranean Sea. Within that empire was the tiny but troublesome country known as “Israel”, which occupied the eastern coastline of the Mediterranean.

The nation of Israel has had a really up-and-down history. The Jewish people were descendants of Abraham. They had gone to live in Egypt where, after many years, they had been made slaves. From there God rescued them to become His people,<sup>1</sup> a nation that would be especially privileged. There were about 600,000 adult Jewish men in Egypt at that time, about 3500 years ago, and God asked them and their families to undertake a huge challenge.

He said that He would be their God if they would be His people, and they readily agreed. They made a formal agreement together – called a “covenant” or “testament” – which is what the first part of the Bible is all about. That’s why it’s called the “Old Testament”. It is mainly about God’s dealings with the nation of Israel, while the second part, the “New Testament”, is about God’s great offer of salvation to all nations. It’s really one Bible, in two parts, not two Bibles. And we need both parts to understand God’s message to us. That message came first through the people of Israel and then through the work of Jesus and his followers.

It is the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ that makes the difference and separates the two parts of the Bible. That difference was becoming clear when the apostle Paul picked up his pen to write a letter to believers who lived in Rome – the capital city of the Roman empire. He wrote that he

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<sup>1</sup> You can read all about this in the *Book of Exodus*, second book in the *Old Testament part of the Bible (the first part)*.

hoped to visit them but, before he did this, he wanted to explain his understanding of the purpose of God. Paul was a very colourful character and had become a believer in very dramatic circumstances.<sup>2</sup> The letter had a particular purpose when it was written and contains details about certain things that were happening at that time.<sup>3</sup> But because it contains Paul's detailed explanation of what he believed, the Letter to the Romans is a wonderful help to us today. It gives us a summary of the gospel as it was believed and taught by the apostles, so we can work out for ourselves just what true Christianity is all about.

Before we look at that summary, remember that this is about First Century Christianity. This is when Jesus was born and when he taught his followers, and the whole of the New Testament was written within sixty or so years of his death. That was a long time ago, but if you want to understand what Jesus and his immediate followers taught, you have to go back to their original words and not rely on what other people might tell you. If it turns out that Paul's teaching does not fully match up with what you believe, you will need to think that through. If you have no personal views or beliefs about Christianity at this stage, then everything will be new to you.

Here's a useful tip at the very start. Try to approach the Bible as though it was the first time you had ever read it. Be ready to learn what it teaches – not what you think it teaches – and there is every likelihood that you will understand it better than if you have already made up your mind about what it says. That's not always easy to do, especially if you already have strong views, but it will undoubtedly prove helpful if you can manage to do that.

## Letter to the Romans

You might want to take some time now to read the letter for yourself, before or after this summary. Notice how the letter begins and what the apostle is setting out to achieve. Here

<sup>2</sup> The record of Paul's conversion is contained in the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 9.

<sup>3</sup> See, in particular, Romans 15:14-16:23 where Paul writes about his own work, including a big fund-raising collection that was then being taken for the believers in Jerusalem, and all the personal greetings he sent to people he knew in Rome. In this part he encourages Jews and Gentiles to live peacefully together, which might suggest that they had been falling out.

are the opening verses:

*"[1] Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, [2] which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, [3] concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh [4] and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, [5] through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations, [6] including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ. [7] To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 1:1-7 ESV).<sup>4</sup>*

If you are not familiar with the Bible you may be pleasantly surprised how easy it is to read and how readily it can be understood. Notice also how much information it contains in just a few verses.<sup>5</sup> Here is a short summary of what we learn from these introductory verses. It illustrates how you can gain information, almost without realising what is happening.

- ❖ Paul introduces himself as someone who serves Jesus Christ and who has been called to be his spokesperson, or "apostle" (verse 1).
- ❖ He says that his function, as an apostle, is to explain the "gospel of God", which 'good news' was set out first in the Old Testament – the Jewish Holy Scriptures (verse 1 again).
- ❖ Central to this good news is what happened to the "Son of God" – the Lord Jesus Christ – who has a twofold ancestry. He was connected to the Jewish race because

<sup>4</sup> This book uses the **English Standard Version** of the Bible in most places because it is a recent English translation which combines accuracy of translation – from the original Hebrew and Greek in which the Scriptures were written – with ease of understanding. The choice of translation is something that will be discussed later, in Chapter 3, when considering how best to read the Bible.

<sup>5</sup> The whole of the Bible has been divided by translators into chapters and verses for easy reference: there were no such divisions when the original manuscripts were written.

he was King David's descendant – through his mother Mary. And he was connected to God both because God was his Father and because God raised him from the dead (verses 3 and 4).

- ❖ Jesus shows *favour* to all of us – the meaning of the word “*grace*” – provided we believe the gospel and obey his commandments. Through the gospel, or good news, we are all called to belong to Jesus and to separate ourselves to God. This invitation comes because God loves us, and because He wants to show us favour, however undeserving we might be. He is offering us peace, just as it was first offered to the believers in Rome (verse 7).

Notice how straightforward it is to understand what at first seems to be a difficult passage of New Testament teaching. This little example is typical of how to obtain information, either from:

- ✓ letters like the one Paul wrote to Rome,
- ✓ narratives – like the Gospels or Acts,
- ✓ poetry – like the Psalms in the Old Testament,
- ✓ historical records – like the book of Kings
- ✓ ancient prophecies – like the book of Isaiah.

The approach is always the same: to read carefully and to take note of what you are being told. A notebook can be helpful, especially if you are looking for teaching about a certain topic. For example, if you want to find out what the Bible says about any hope of life after death, a page of Bible references that you have written down for yourself as you have been reading will be of more direct help than a lot of comments made by someone else. This is because you will have been looking at the original material, uncluttered by what other people, with their own ideas, might want you to think.

Notice that writing out what a verse is saying is different from just writing out the verse itself, useful though that can be at times. Here we are trying to note down the teaching of a particular verse and this book contains several worked examples of how that might be done.

Regular Bible reading is by far the best way to understand Bible teaching and it is exactly the way God means us to come to understand His Word. A daily Bible reading planner is the best way to make sure that you work your way systematically through the entire library of books

which make up the Bible. There are 66 books altogether in the two Testaments. Two different planners are included later which you may like to try.<sup>6</sup> But before you begin a systematic study it is important to think about the best way to approach it, so that you understand what you are reading.

Here is one approach to try. If you sit down and read right through the letter the apostle Paul wrote to the believers at Rome and then write down the key points he makes, you might come up with something like this.<sup>7</sup>



<sup>6</sup> The first is in Chapter 3, on pages 34 & 35; the other is a more comprehensive daily reading table and that can be found in Chapter 28, on pages 436 & 437.

<sup>7</sup> If you want to stop and read the Letter and then summarise its teaching for yourself, you can then compare your findings with those listed below. But you may not be quite ready for that yet. Do what seems comfortable for you.

<b>Romans – Chapter and Verse</b>	<b>Summary of Contents</b>
<b>1:1-7</b>	Introduction – Paul is writing about the gospel of God to all in Rome who have been called by God to receive His grace through Jesus Christ.
<b>1:8-17</b>	He explains that he was hoping to visit them sometime and that he is preaching the good news about Jesus, because it can give salvation to everyone who believes it.
<b>1:18-32</b>	Now he says why that salvation is needed. God is angry with mankind because it ignores the evidence of His existence and is behaving in a godless and shameful way. Mankind is depraved: people not only do wrong but they rejoice in doing those things.
<b>2:1-16</b>	God is going to judge the world for its godless behaviour and that means individuals will be held responsible for their actions, unless they do something about it.
<b>2:17-29</b>	This coming judgement will affect Jews and non-Jews alike. <sup>8</sup> Having been born as a Jew, and having lived as a Jew, will be no protection. Something more than that is needed. What matters is what a person is like inside.
<b>3:1-20</b>	Jews were given a head start over the rest of mankind because they got to know God during Old Testament times. But their Scriptures explain that all mankind has disobeyed God (disobeying God is what the Bible calls “sin”). Everybody has broken God’s law; everybody is guilty before God.

<sup>8</sup> Non-Jews are called “Gentiles” in the Bible.

<b>3:21-31</b>	God has an escape plan. Belief in Jesus Christ can enable a person to be saved from eternal death, but without this belief it is inescapable. Jesus died to set people free from sin and make them right with God. Jesus is at the centre of God’s plan.
<b>4:1-25</b>	Belief in God has been shown in the past to be what God wants. <sup>9</sup> It was the secret of Abraham’s success, when all else seemed hopeless, and it was the only thing that King David had left when his life went badly wrong. We should follow the example of these faithful men and learn from them.
<b>5:1-11</b>	If we believe in God we can live at peace with Him, because of what Jesus has done for us. Belief will give us hope and make life bearable, whatever happens. For we will come to realise that Christ died for us and that we can be saved through him.
<b>5:12-21</b>	Where the first man Adam failed, the Lord Jesus has now succeeded. Adam’s actions brought disaster upon the human race, but Jesus has made recovery possible. Through Jesus it is possible to obtain forgiveness so that we can be counted right with God which, in turn, can make eternal life available to us. <sup>10</sup>
<b>6:1-23</b>	Forgiveness comes by baptism, an act which identifies us with the work of Jesus. As he was killed, buried and then rose again, so in baptism we re-enact these actions. We are buried in water and raised to a new life, having resolved to put our past life to death. The outcome is that we promise to live for Jesus, not for ourselves, and to live holy or separate lives, seeking always to please God and the Lord Jesus Christ. Baptism is part of the way in which we escape from sin and death and find eternal life.

<sup>9</sup> The Bible term for belief in God is “faith” and Paul uses that word a lot in his writings.

<sup>10</sup> The technical term for being ‘right with God’ is that we can be made “righteous”. There are more than 40 occurrences of that phrase in this letter.

<b>7:1-25</b>	Things don't change overnight! We can expect there to be a lot of inward turmoil and tension. It's as though we lost one partner and found another, with all the upheaval that can bring. There is likely to be a struggle inside us, between our old and new natures. The old one tries to get us to carry on living as before and the new nature that is developing within us tries to get us to do right things. We will know what we ought to do, and sometimes will want to do that, but often we will do things that belong to our life before baptism. It can be a real struggle at times!
<b>8:1-17</b>	As our spiritual life develops and we get to understand more and more what God has done for us, through Jesus Christ, we will begin to develop a way of thinking and living which is increasingly pleasing to God. We will come to realise more and more what a privilege it is to be members of God's family - brothers and sisters in Christ.
<b>8:18-39</b>	All this will give us a better view of life, with all its present unfairness and hardship. We will understand that God doesn't want it to be like this: He wants everything set free from sin, suffering and death. God is at work to achieve things that are good and which will change the world for the better. He means to fill it with people who are like His Son, the Lord Jesus, and He can help us overcome all our difficulties. When the time is right God will destroy all that opposes Him and establish a free and perfect society.
<b>9-11</b>	Although God called Israel to be a special nation and gave it great privileges, the Jews rejected His offer of salvation. God has the right to choose whoever He wants and to reject whoever He chooses to; after all, God made everybody and He is in charge of everything! But the Jews' failure was due to their conviction that they could earn a place in God's favour simply by being descendants of Abraham. They did not understand that belief in God and His promises was the key factor.

	For the moment, they have stumbled and lost their way; but it is part of God's purpose that the nation should be reinstated to favour. Jerusalem and the Jewish people still have an important part to play in the purpose of God.
<b>12-15:13</b>	God's gracious purpose has become known to us and we should live in a way which shows true appreciation for all He has done. We should live in a way that properly honours and worships God. Every day we should try to purify our minds and find out what God wants of us. We should use our God-given abilities to His glory, learning to love one another and becoming submissive and obedient. We should live as good citizens, accepting the rule of law and complying with what the state requests (provided it accords with God's law, which is our first priority). We should help one another, be understanding and tolerant of one another's weaknesses and failings, live at peace, and seek to live a Christ-centred and Christ-like life. Our lives should seek to glorify God in all things.
<b>15:14-16:27</b>	<i>Conclusion:</i> Paul explains his own position as someone who has been commanded to preach, especially to Gentiles. He tells the congregation at Rome that he hopes to come to see them soon, asks for their prayers and sends lots of personal greetings to believers whom he has met elsewhere on his travels. Thus the letter ends by giving us an insight into the Christian family of believers and the warmth and affection they felt towards one another.



*“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (Romans 1:16)*

## Checklist

This brief summary of the Letter to the Romans serves at least three purposes.

- 1 It demonstrates how you can work your way through the Bible and broadly summarise the main teachings it contains. There is, of course, a lot more contained in the Letter to the Romans than is summarised here – as our earlier more in-depth look at the Introduction (Romans 1:1-7) showed. But it gives an overall view of the apostle’s preaching – what he calls the “gospel of salvation”.
- 2 It enables you to look for yourself at the various parts of the letter to see if the summary is fair and accurate. Remember the aim of this book is to help you understand the Bible for yourself. Your own Bible reading is a vital part of that process. You are only going to be convinced about Bible truth when you have seen it for yourself in the pages of the Bible. This book can help, but it is not a substitute for your own reading and thinking.
- 3 It provides a checklist of teachings against which you can compare your own beliefs. For example, ask yourself these questions:
  - a Do you know why belief (or “faith”) is so important to God, and what it is that we must believe, if we want to please Him?
  - b Do you know who is to blame for the depraved state of mankind, and whether or not God will count us responsible for that?
  - c Do you know what Abraham and David believed, which made them right with God? Do you believe those things, whatever they are?
  - d What exactly was the result of Adam’s failure and how did the death of Jesus put things right?
  - e Is baptism essential for salvation and, if it is, what must you believe before being baptised? <sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Notice that in Romans chapter 6, Christian Baptism is defined as a burial in water, not an act of sprinkling or pouring.

- f Does the nation of Israel, or the city Jerusalem, feature in your present understanding of God’s purpose in its final phase? If not, why not?

You may find some of those questions a bit baffling at this stage, but don’t worry. This book is going to look in some detail at those issues. Because the Letter to the Romans sets out what Paul understands the gospel to be all about, we will use that letter as the framework for our thinking.<sup>12</sup>

We will work step-by-step through the apostle’s explanations and follow his argument. The journey to explore what First Century Christianity is about will take us to many other parts of the Bible, as all 66 books of the Bible are part of God’s message to mankind. In that way we shall find the key to eternal life.

## Things to Read

-  Why not read right through the Letter to the Romans, all 16 chapters?
-  If that’s a bit much at this stage, pick one section of the Letter that looks interesting – using the Summary of Contents above – and read through that. See if you agree with the suggested summary for that part. If not, write your own.

## Questions to Consider <sup>13</sup>

- 1.1 What did Paul say to the Roman believers (Christians) about where the good news from God (the gospel) had first been promised? (Romans 1:2)
- 1.2 What did he say about the origin and nature of the Lord Jesus Christ? (Romans 1:3-4)
- 1.3 How did he describe the gospel, and what effect did he say it could have in our lives? (Romans 1:16)

<sup>12</sup> Paul calls the gospel: “the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” (Romans 1:16).

<sup>13</sup> The questions at the end of each chapter are to help you think things through for yourself. There are answers, in Chapter 30, should you want to check your findings, or you can correspond with someone if you want to discuss things or get further help. More details can be found on page 451.