



## ROMANS 101

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul's biography reads as one of the all-time great stories of transformation and conversion. In his early life, he was known as Saul. A devout Jew, he threw himself wholeheartedly into the persecution of early followers of Christ, even witnessing the stoning death of Stephen, one of the first martyrs of the church. Given his background, Saul is an unlikely candidate to become one of the most important figures in the history of Christianity. But God often works in mysterious ways.

While on a road trip to Damascus, Saul has a vision of the resurrected Jesus. He falls to his knees and is struck blind. The Book of Acts recounts how Ananias, a disciple of Jesus, reluctantly but obediently lays hands upon Saul, and the "scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored."

Saul is baptized and in his new community, he takes the name Paul. He sets out to share with all who will hear (and some who don't want to) the Good News of the Risen Lord. Paul embarks on several major missionary journeys and becomes a prolific writer. Of the twenty-seven books in the New Testament, thirteen are attributed to Paul. Historical accounts say Paul died sometime between 64 and 69 CE.

### ABOUT ROMANS

Paul wrote this letter (often called an epistle) to the people of Rome around the spring of 57. The letter had several purposes:

- To prepare the people for his visit
- To explain salvation
- To articulate the relationship between Jews and Gentiles

Of the many letters Paul wrote, Romans is the most theologically advanced. It explores themes of salvation, sin and death, righteousness, sanctification, redemption, justification, and resurrection, among others. Paul also quotes the Old Testament scriptures extensively in this epistle to the Romans.

"From start to finish, the letter [to the Romans] argues for the transforming power of the proclamation of God's grace...This power can change not only individuals, not only this congregation, but can change the world."

—Jay Sidebotham, Author of *Conversations with Scripture: Romans*



## **ROMANS SOUNDBITES**

The Book of Romans isn't quite as popular as John 3:16 (and citations from it aren't often scrawled across banners at sporting events), but many verses may sound familiar to you. Here are a few of the top soundbites from Paul's letter to the Romans.

"All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Romans 3:23

"We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him." Romans 6:9

"For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." Romans 6:23

"We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose." Romans 8:28

"Nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Romans 8:39

"If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." Romans 10:9

"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. Romans 12:2

"Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor." Romans 12:9-10

"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." Romans 15:13

## **MAJOR THEMES**

Discussion of each of these themes and principles in Romans could (and has) taken hundreds and thousands of pages. Here, we provide succinct and accessible explanations of these themes, and we encourage you to go deeper into your study of these vital aspects of the faith, in conversation with clergy and lay teachers, in Bible studies, and in your own research and reflection.



*Sin:* Paul explains humans are dominated and exploited by the power of sin when they act in ways contrary to the will of God. Jews and Gentiles alike find themselves enslaved by sin: "For though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened" (Romans 1:21). Paul is clear: We are all sinners. We have all fallen short of the glory of God. We sin when we say or act in ways that move us away from God.

*Justification:* Fortunately, we are not left to our own sinful devices. Jesus came to earth and died on the cross to deliver us from our sins. With his death and resurrection, Jesus' ultimate sacrifice offers us the gift of grace and redemption. The theological concept of justification can be a sore point among Christians. In fact, differences of opinions about justification played a pivotal role in the Protestant Reformation. But for our purposes, we'll focus on what Paul tells the people of Rome. When Christ dies on the cross, he triumphs over the power of death and sin. Jesus doesn't do this for himself but for all people, across all time.

*Righteousness:* The word itself is easy to understand: Righteousness essentially means "rightness." Paul explains the concept of righteousness as being right with God, or being before God as we ought to be. Righteousness is not something earned by being an A+ Christian nor by following the letter of all of God's laws. Rather, righteousness is the result of the salvific (leading to salvation) work of Jesus Christ applied to our lives.

*Redemption:* Most are familiar with the word redeem, as in "redeem this coupon or gift card" for something of value. In the Christian tradition, redemption builds off that understanding, with a meaning of "buying back" or "repurchasing." We are redeemed by Christ whose great act of self giving on the cross breaks the power of sin and death in our lives.

*Sanctification:* This theological concept is related to justification—but with an important difference. Justification describes how Jesus breaks the power of sin over humanity. Sanctification is about how we learn to live without the control of sin in everyday moments through the work of the Holy Spirit. In being justified by faith, we believe that Christ died for our sins and that we are forgiven. In being sanctified by faith, we believe that Christ grants us freedom from the power of sin so that we might live in righteousness—in rightness with God.

*Grace:* At the root of each of these complex theological principles is the grace of God. In the context of Romans, grace means "unmerited favor." We are forgiven, not because we deserve it, earn it, or buy it, but because God loves us and gives Godself for us. God is relentless in pursuing humanity with this gift of grace. We will – again and again – fail, in words and deeds, in things done and undone – and yet, God's grace is extended to us every time. That's why Paul is so earnest and passionate in all of his letters and especially in the book of Romans. He knows the extraordinary, unparalleled gift of God's grace, and he desperately wants all of us to know and experience this same grace for ourselves.

