

LESSON 1 at StudyRomans.org

Introduction

(1) Why study Romans?

If ever there was a question that did not need asking, that is it! But let's ask it anyway: **why study Romans?**

One answer might be, that after studying six Old Testament books, it is finally time to study a New Testament book. But, of course, we spent a great deal of time in the New Testament in our study of those Old Testament books — and I suspect we will spend a great deal of time in the Old Testament in our study of this New Testament book. And that is especially true for Romans, which contains about 60 Old Testament quotes and perhaps another 30 allusions to the Old Testament that are not direct quotes. So, if you're hoping we won't spend much time in the Old Testament, I have some bad news for you!

But we still have our question: **why study Romans?** And I need to be careful about how I pronounce that question. I am not asking, **why study Romans.** I am asking, **why study Romans!**

What we are about to do will be very difficult at times. Why should we do it? **Why study Romans?**

We asked that question about Hosea before we spent 47 weeks studying it, and we asked that question about Joel before we spent 35 weeks studying that book — and some may still be asking those questions!

But I hope that after those two studies we can all see the many benefits that come only from a deep study of God's word.

As the Psalmist wrote: "I rejoice at your word like one who finds great spoil." (Psalm 119:162) And we know that great treasure is usually not lying out in the open for all to find. We have to search for it. We have to dig deep to uncover it.

And, yes, that process is hard work! But should we expect anything else? The creator and the sustainer of the entire universe has handed us a book — do we expect to find vague platitudes and fairy tales? Do we expect to have an easy time of it?

Yes, there is simplicity in Christ (2 Corinthians 11:3), but the word of God is most certainly not simple! No one who has studied it could ever think so. People do not spend their entire lives studying something simple. Daniel was not simple, Zechariah was not simple, Ezra and Esther were not simple, Hosea was not simple, Joel was not simple, and Romans is most certainly not simple.

In fact, Romans includes some of the most difficult passages in the Bible. How difficult? Well, here are 10 quick examples of some of the many questions we will face in this study:

- What are the law of works and law of faith in 3:27?
- How was Abraham justified in 4:2?
- What does the "groaning" mean in 8:22 and 8:26?
- How does Romans 9-11 fit in with Romans 1-8?

- What is the “partial hardening” in 11:25?
- What is “the fullness of the Gentiles” in 11:25?
- What is meant by “all Israel will be saved” in 11:26?
- What is “your spiritual worship” in 12:1?
- Who are the weak and the strong in Romans 14-15?
- Who and what was Phoebe in Romans 16:1?

One thing these examples show us is that the Bible is not simple. It wasn't simple to its original audience (2 Peter 3:16), and it certainly isn't simple to us, removed far in time from that initial audience.

But, with that said, we should always be very thankful to God that what we need to do to obey the gospel of Christ is simple. In fact, it is so simple that it can all be explained in a short sermon, as it was in Acts 2. But *after* we have obeyed the gospel, what then? What does the Bible tell us to do then?

We must **study** God's word (2 Timothy 2:15). We must **examine** it daily, using it to **test** what we are hearing (Acts 17:11). We must **move from milk to solid food** (Hebrews 5:12-14). And **study** is the way that we do all of that — diligent, careful study.

And, yes, study is difficult. Study takes time, and study takes effort. Solomon certainly understood that: “much study is a weariness of the flesh,” he wrote in Ecclesiastes 12:12. After all, if study was easy, then wouldn't more people do it?

But do we really need to study **every single word**? That will take forever! Can't we find some Cliff's Notes somewhere? Can't we just ask ChatGPT to tell us what Romans is all about?

Why every word? We study every word because every word was breathed out by Almighty God! That is what the word "inspired" means — breathed out by God. That word "inspired" is found in only one verse: 2 Timothy 3:16. And that verse applies to **all** scripture. All Scripture is breathed out by God.

And let's all note that it is the **words** of the Bible that are inspired, **not the human authors of those words**. We sometimes hear about the "inspired authors" of the New Testament writing this or that, but those authors were not breathed out by God. Instead, it was the words they wrote that were breathed out by God. **God breathed out words, not people.**

The words in Romans are words from God. God speaks to us with words. That is why our study is focused on words. That is why any study of the Bible and any sermon or lesson about the Bible must be focused on the words of the Bible.

When it comes to Bible study, I am often reminded of a quote that I found in my grandfather's Bible about how some approach the Word of God:

They are like a duck paddling across the surface of a large lake, taking in only an inch of water, completely unaware of the fathomless depths that lie beneath.

Let's not be that duck! Yes, it's true that we will never reach the bottom of that lake, but that is no excuse to live only on the surface. Let's dive deep and see what we find!

It has been said that when you get Romans, God gets you!

That's why we study Romans! Our goal is to get Romans! And getting Romans requires diligent study! Our goal is not just to know *about* Romans — our goal is to **know Romans!** That is certainly my goal, and I hope it is your goal as well.

(2) What is the historical significance of Romans?

Let me start with a statement that I did **not** make about Daniel, Ezra, Esther, Hosea, Joel, or Zechariah when we studied those books. And here is the statement: I think that, from a **historical** perspective, the book of Romans is the most significant and influential book that has ever been written. (And, yes, in saying that, I am thinking of the Bible, just for the moment, as 66 books rather than as what it is in truth, a single book.)

So, am I saying that Romans is the most significant book in the Bible? Some certainly have said that, but, no, I'm not saying that. I'm not even sure what it would mean to say that or how we could ever determine such a thing. Who are we to rank the importance of the words breathed out by God?

But what about just from the perspective of **history**? When viewed solely from that perspective, I think Romans is the most significant and influential book ever written.

But when I say *history*, do I really mean **religious** history? No, I don't. Think, for example, about our own nation's history. To whom do we trace our religious freedom, our self-governance, and our perseverance? Isn't it the Pilgrims? But who were the Pilgrims? Why did they sail here on the Mayflower?

The answer is that the Pilgrims were just a part of a long line of Reformists, all tracing their history back to Martin Luther.

And what prompted Martin Luther to do what he did? The answer to that question is **the book of Romans**, and, in particular, Romans 1:16-17.¹ So, yes, if we want to start drawing connections, we can draw a straight line from the first chapter of Romans to the Mayflower Compact and the founding of the United States.

And the list goes on and on. Just to list a few more examples, we can draw a line from Luther's view of Romans to the English Civil War, we can draw a line from Luther's view of Romans to the American Revolution, and we can draw a line from Luther's view of Romans to the rise of public education.

And if Romans is that influential in secular history, it is even more so in *religious* history. A famous proverb says that all roads lead to Rome, but can't say the same about Romans? When it comes to religious questions, don't all roads often lead to Romans?

It certainly did for Martin Luther, it certainly did for John Calvin, and it certainly does for many today. For them, the book of Romans sits alone on a pedestal. Martin Luther said that Romans is "rightly **the**

¹<https://lutheranreformation.org/theology/luthers-breakthrough-romans/>

chief part of the New Testament,” and he called Romans the “purest gospel.”

And what happens when such a person finds a *perceived* conflict between something in Romans and something elsewhere in the Bible? What happens is that **Romans wins**. The other verse just gets tossed out the window.

Don’t believe me? Just listen to how Martin Luther responded to what he thought was a conflict between Romans and James about the relation between faith and works. Quoting Luther:

“In a word St. John’s Gospel and his first epistle, St. Paul’s epistles, **especially Romans**, Galatians, and Ephesians, and St. Peter’s first epistle are the books that show you Christ and teach you all that is necessary and salvatory for you to know, even if you were never to see or hear any other book or doctrine. Therefore St. James’s epistle is really a **right strawy epistle**, compared to these others, for it has **nothing** of the nature of the gospel about it.”

Yes, you heard that right. Martin Luther viewed the book of James as an *epistle of straw* compared with the book of Romans. And when Luther saw what he thought was a conflict between the two, Luther tossed James out the window rather than try to understand both books together as the inerrant word of God.

And, believe me, Martin Luther was not the last person to have ever done such a thing. He has many followers today. They may not all be as honest as Luther, who very plainly told us what he thought of James, but Luther is not alone in throwing out verses in the Bible that appear to them to be in conflict with Romans.

That is **not** how to understand the word of God. Instead, here is how a Bible believer must proceed: if what we determine about the book of Romans contradicts something found elsewhere in the Bible (either in James or in some other book), then what we have determined about Romans is **wrong**, or perhaps what we think about the other book is wrong — but something in our theory is amiss! **We can be completely certain that the correct view of Romans is a view that is in perfect harmony with the entirety of God's word.**

Yes, I completely agree that the book of Romans deserves to be on a pedestal, but there are 65 other books sitting right next to the book of Romans on that same pedestal. Every word in the *Song of Solomon* was also breathed out by God just like every word in *Romans*!

And, so, yes, I think the book of Romans is unique when it comes to its impact on history, but that uniqueness has not always been a good thing. Yes, the book of Romans led to the Reformation, but the Catholic church needed much more than just a reformation.

And, as we will see, much of Calvinism comes from misinterpretations of Romans and from a misplaced emphasis of Romans over and above the other teachings of Scripture. **When we understand Romans correctly, we will understand Romans in a way that agrees with and is confirmed by the rest of the Bible.** And that is our goal — to understand Romans *correctly*.

(3) Why is Romans in the form of a letter?

If you were to pick up the Bible, having never seen it before, and start reading it from the beginning, you would work your way through the

Old Testament, seeing various kinds of books, and then you would suddenly arrive at Matthew. You would notice a difference immediately — perhaps just the cover page that says “New Testament,” but you would certainly sense some big changes as you moved from Malachi to Matthew, and you would keep reading.

But when you reached Romans, you would see something new that you had not seen before in either the Old Testament or the preceding books of the New Testament. And you would see that new thing continuing in 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, and beyond, almost to the very end of the Bible.

And what is that new thing you would see when you reached Romans? You would see a **letter** — an **epistle**. And then you would see more letters as you kept reading — real letters addressed to real people, letters from someone to someone else. And you would probably ask yourself: **Why? Why am I suddenly seeing letters?**

That’s not to say that there are no letters at all in the Old Testament. We saw several of them when we studied the book of Ezra. Ezra 7, for example, contains a verbatim copy of a letter sent to Ezra by King Artaxerxes. And Jeremiah 29 is a letter written by the prophet to the surviving elders of the exile. But there are no Old Testament books that are themselves letters. That was something new in the New Testament.

But, why? Why did God give us His Word in this peculiar form? Why did God choose letters to teach us about the law of Christ?

I think it will help us answer that question if we look at how lawyers are taught in law schools today. Many people, including myself be-

fore law school, picture legal education as opening up the codes and the statutes and then reading through them and studying the law systematically. Except for a few exceptions (such as the criminal code and the tax code), that is not at all how law school works.

I still remember my own first day of law school about 30 years ago. The very first thing we examined in my very first law school class was a court decision from the 1700's — and it wasn't even an American decision, but rather it was an English decision.

The case we looked at on that first day involved a poor street urchin in London who had "found" a piece of jewelry and taken it to a jewelry store to find out how much it was worth. The jeweler just kept the piece of jewelry, reasoning that the child must have stolen it, so he might as well have it rather than let the thief have it. The case somehow ended up in court, and it called upon the Court to decide who rightfully owned the jewelry — the street urchin who says he found it, or the jeweler who says he liberated it from a thief. And we then discussed just that one case for the entire class period. After you do that for three years, you're a lawyer!

Why is law taught that way? Why spend so much time discussing a strange case like that? Why not just point us all to some page in the property code so we could all read and memorize the answer? What's the problem with that strategy?

One problem is that the property code could not possibly consider every possible situation that could arise. We could come up with 10,000 laws, and then the very next case that we encountered would require law #10,001!

So what is the alternative? The alternative is to do what, in fact, is done. The alternative is to study actual court decisions to see how actual courts dealt with actual problems for which there was no clear-cut answer to be found in some statute somewhere.

Legal education is premised on the belief that the best way to learn the law, and more importantly learn to think like a lawyer, is to study how the law has been applied in **actual real-life situations**.

So, let's return now to our question: **Why do we have so many letters in the New Testament?**

I think the answer to our law school question is also the answer to our New Testament question. By giving us actual letters written from someone to someone else, God describes not only the **letter** of the law but also the **spirit** of the law, as we see the **law of faith** being applied to real-life situations.

And what do I mean by the **spirit** of the law? Jesus answers that question for us:

Matthew 23:23 (ESV) — Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: **justice and mercy and faithfulness**. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others.

When I speak of “the spirit of the law,” I’m referring to those underpinnings that Jesus mentions here—judgment, mercy, and faith—the foundational principles that support the law. Jesus calls them “the weightier matters of the law.”

If we approach God's law focusing only on the letter while forgetting the spirit, then we become Pharisees. That's precisely what they did. They neglected those weightier matters.

But if we embrace only the spirit while ignoring the letter, then we become liberals, who throw the commands of Christ out the window while singing, "love is all you need!"

Jesus just told us that **we need both.** That is what Jesus said: "These ought ye to have done, **and not to leave the other undone.**" We must have **both** the letter of the law *and* the spirit of the law.

The epistles accomplish that result beautifully by repeatedly applying divine principles from the law of faith to real-life situations and real-life problems.

And, in some ways, these New Testament epistles resemble ordinary letters of the day. For example, they share similar formats with other letters that have been found — although the New Testament epistles do tend to be longer.

And the letters in the Bible are not just theological treatises wrapped inside a salutation and a valediction. Instead, the letters in the Bible are often deeply personal. Paul, for example, describes his travel plans, refers to people throughout by name, and describes specific events and circumstances in his own life.

And so the first thing we should understand about Romans and the other letters in the Bible is that in many ways they are **like an ordinary letter.**

But, the second thing we should understand about Romans and the other letters in the Bible is that they are completely **unlike** any other correspondence in human history.

Why? Because these letters are the inspired word of God. These letters carry eternal significance far beyond their immediate application. These letters are written as much to us as they were to those who first opened them.

But did Paul know he was writing the word of God? Some commentators suggest that he did not. They say that Paul was focused entirely on his immediate audience without any consideration for future generations, never imagining that his words would later become Holy Scripture.

But I have to ask: **Have those who say such things actually read Paul's letters? Have they bothered to ask Paul whether or not he knew he was writing down the words of God?**

1 Corinthians 2:13 (ESV) — And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.

1 Corinthians 14:37 (ESV) — If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that **the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord.**

1 Thessalonians 2:13 (ESV) — And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received **the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God**, which is at work in you believers.

If I wrote you a letter tomorrow claiming that my own words were commandments of the Lord, you would question my sanity. **But Paul made that claim.** Why? Because it was true—Paul knew that he was writing the words of God. And the other New Testament authors knew that as well. How? Because Jesus had told them that.

Matthew 10:20 (ESV) — For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.

Paul, Peter, and the other inspired writers knew they were penning, not the words of man, but the words of God.

So far we have looked at why we have letters, we have looked at how Biblical letters are similar to other letters, and we have looked how Biblical letters are unlike all other letters. Another thing we should note is that Romans is made even more difficult by being given to us in the form of a letter.

Letters present unique interpretive challenges that we don't encounter in other biblical books. And I think we notice that as soon as we start studying those letters. Sometimes reading an epistle feels like hearing just one side of a telephone conversation—we need to understand the recipients and their circumstances to really grasp what's happening.

If you change the context of a letter, you can change the meaning of the letter. J.R.R. Tolkien once gave an excellent example of that.

He told the story of a young man who wanted to purchase a birthday gift for his girl friend. Eventually, he decided to buy her a pair of gloves, and, as his sister had some shopping to do, he went with her to a dress shop. While he was buying the gloves to be delivered to

his girl friend along with a note, his sister bought a pair of drawers to be delivered to herself. As you might expect, the packages were swapped — and so the young man's note to his girl friend was delivered with the underwear purchased by his sister rather than with the gloves he had purchased. And here was the note:

Dear Velma, This little gift is to remind you that I haven't forgotten your birthday. I didn't choose it because I thought you needed them, or because you haven't been in the habit of wearing them. ... No doubt many other gentlemen's hands will touch them before I get a chance to see you again, but I hope you will think of me every time you put them on. I had the lady clerk try them on and they looked very neat on her. I did not know the exact size, but I should be capable of judging nearer than anyone else. How I wish I might put them on you for the first time! Lovingly yours, John

As I said, when the context changes, the meaning of the letter changes.

Like ordinary letters, epistles can likewise be difficult to understand when removed from their context. Peter acknowledged this:

2 Peter 3:16 (ESV) — As he *Paul* does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures.

So we have more work to do when it comes to a letter in the Bible than we do when it comes to a book of the Bible that is not a letter.

As you know, I like long introductions! I like to spend a lot of time looking at what we plan to study before we ever get to the first verse.

I think that approach is always helpful — but it is especially helpful when it comes to letters.

A thorough introduction becomes especially important when studying epistles because of the nature of letters. **We need to understand the conversation that we are joining.**

Who wrote the letter? To whom was it written? Why was it written? What circumstances prompted Paul to write it? Was he responding to reports he had received? Was he addressing specific theological questions or practical problems, and, if so, what were those questions and what were those problems?

We will look at all of those questions as we continue our *lengthy* introduction of Romans!