

Lesson 7 at StudyRomans.org

(18) What are the main challenges in studying Romans?

As we said back in Lesson 1, Romans is a difficult and challenging book. And, yes, every book of the Bible has its difficulties and its challenges, but even so Romans at times seems to be in a class by itself. But why is Romans so difficult? What challenges will we face in our study?

We have already looked at one reason — Romans is difficult because it uses a lot of difficult words! Faith, works, law, flesh, spirit, righteousness, election — and many more. And each time we see one of those key words for the first time in our study, we will spend some extra time looking at how that word is used elsewhere in the Bible. That is the best way to make sure we are properly understanding those words.

A second reason is that Romans is unusually dense. Romans is not light reading! Paul sometimes moves quickly from one difficult topic straight into another difficult topic, while we just try to keep up. And Paul loved long sentences! If you don't believe me, just read the letter's opening salutation. It is **not** "Dear Romans"!

A third reason is that Paul's arguments are complicated. We find questions and responses followed by objections and counter-objections. It is easy to imagine Paul dictating this letter as he paced around posing

questions and then answering them! A big challenge in studying Romans is just to follow Paul's train of thought.

A fourth reason that Romans is difficult is again something that we have already mentioned — Romans is difficult because of the Old Testament background of the book. Difficult questions about Romans very often turn out to include difficult questions about the Old Testament. Paul was steeped in the Old Testament, and so must we.

A fifth reason that Romans is difficult is our current historical distance from it. I suspect that the initial readers of Romans thought that the letter was difficult, and, again, I think we know that Peter saw it that way (2 Peter 3:16). But if the letter to the Romans was difficult for those who first received it, how much more difficult must Romans be for us reading that same letter removed 2000 years from its original cultural and historical context!

I think we will find other challenges in our study of Romans, but that list should be enough to sufficiently scare us! We have our work cut out!

How can we steer our ship through all of those mines? How can we keep from going wrong in our study of this difficult letter? One thing we can do is heed the warning left by those who have definitely gone wrong with Romans. Let's not do what they did!

(19) Why have so many gone wrong with Romans?

First, why do I say that many have gone wrong with Romans? How can I say that? Aren't we each entitled to our own view of Romans?

Am I really saying that there are wrong answers when it comes to questions about the Bible?

Yes, I am saying that. I can have my own view of Romans, but my view of Romans might not be the correct view. And, yes, I can come up with my own answers to those difficult questions about Romans, but my answers may not be the correct answers. In short, my view of Romans might be dead wrong!

Despite what the world would have us believe, it is possible to have a wrong view about the Bible. And Paul himself tells us that in this letter.

Romans 3:4 (ESV) — By no means! **Let God be true though every one were a liar**, as it is written, “That you may be justified in your words, and prevail when you are judged.”

What? Do you mean every single person on earth could agree on what Romans means and yet that completely unanimous view about Romans could be a completely incorrect view about Romans? Yes — “Let God be true though every one were a liar.”

There are wrong answers about Romans, and one way people have gone wrong with Romans is by failing to recognize that simple fact. Not every view is correct. In fact, I think we can say that most views are wrong — even most very popular views. Where else have people gone wrong with Romans?

One way people have gone wrong in their study of Romans is that they have entered into that study with an agenda.

Approaching the Bible with an agenda is always dangerous, but I think history shows us that it is especially dangerous with Romans. And why is approaching Romans with an agenda dangerous? Because of two words: **confirmation bias**.

Confirmation bias is the tendency to interpret information in a way that confirms your preexisting beliefs, while giving less attention to evidence that contradicts your preexisting beliefs.

In short, if I have confirmation bias then I see everything through the lens of my agenda, and that lens filters out anything that casts doubt on my agenda. When all I have is a hammer, everything else suddenly looks like a nail!

And those of us who have been in the church for a long time may be particularly susceptible to this danger. Why? Because when we have been studying the Bible for a long time, it becomes easier to assume that we know what it means.

And maybe we do, but, even so, that is a dangerous assumption. Why? **Because it doesn't take very much evidence to convince people that what they already believe is correct.** That is how confirmation bias works: it means that I interpret every fact in a way that confirms what I already believe.

Here is the crucial question — **what is fixed and unchanging?** The Bible or my beliefs about the Bible? When I see a conflict between the

text and my belief about the text — which one do I change? History is littered with those who changed the text — let's not be in that group!

When we interpret the Bible correctly, every part of the Bible will agree with every other part of the Bible. **But that will not be because we have forced it all to agree by twisting it and shaving off parts of it until we can get that square peg to fit into that round hole.** Instead, the Bible, properly understood, will always agree with itself **because truth cannot contradict truth** — and God's word is truth (John 17:17).

And so, if we have some sort of an agenda (even what we might think of as a good agenda!) we need to leave that agenda at the door as we embark on our study of Romans. We need to be guided by the text rather than by an agenda. If more people did that, then there would be more agreement about what the Bible teaches.

Another way people have gone wrong in their study of Romans is that they have misjudged its difficulty.

We have already said it, but let's say it again: Romans is an incredibly difficult book. We will face challenge after challenge as we work our way through the text. And we will almost certainly go wrong if we **underestimate those challenges.**

We will not be able to understand Romans if we fail to prepare. We will get nowhere if all we bring to the table are our unprepared, off-the-cuff thoughts about the text. If that is all we do, then we may end up like the people Peter described:

2 Peter 3:15-16 — And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he 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.

We don't want that to be us!

One way people go wrong about Romans is by **underestimating** its difficulty. But there is another way that people misjudge the difficulty of Romans — they **overestimate** its difficulty.

What do I mean? What I mean is that we can understand Romans! It will take some hard work, but we can do it. And, yes, we will face challenges, but we can overcome those challenges. Yes, Romans is difficult, but Romans is not intractable.

We can understand Romans with diligent effort, and we will be rewarded when we move from milk to solid food (Hebrews 5:12-14).

Another way people have gone wrong in their study of Romans is that they have relied too little on commentaries.

There is a common attitude in the church that we should not use any commentary that was not written by a member of the church.

When I hear that, I have to wonder how many of those brotherhood commentaries that person has read. In my experience, the allure of

brotherhood commentaries fades the more you spend time reading them. Yes, some are very good, but others are not very good.

And, no, I won't name any names, but here is the key point: as with all commentaries, the brotherhood commentaries are not infallible. The comments in those commentaries should not be blindly accepted simply because they were penned by the very famous brother so and so. And I suspect that the very famous brother so and so would be the first to agree with that warning.

But, some might say, if we teach from denominational commentaries, we will end up teaching denominational doctrines!

Well, we sing denominational songs every Sunday. Does that mean we are singing denominational doctrines?

Well, sadly, yes, sometimes it does. But that is only because we have not been careful enough about the songs we are singing.

And the same is true about those denominational commentaries. Do they have some wrong things to say about the Bible? Yes, they certainly do. Do they have some correct things to say about the Bible? Yes, they certainly do.

And if I can't read any commentary on Romans and separate the wheat from the chaff, then I shouldn't be teaching a Bible class on Romans! In fact, it would be very dangerous for me to teach a Bible class in that condition.

James 3:1 (ESV) — Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

Bible teachers have a tremendous responsibility! If I say something false that causes someone to go astray, I will answer for that on the day of judgment. That is what James 3:1 tells us.

Romans has been studied for 2000 years, and there is a tremendous amount of material available about the book. The commentaries on Romans shown on the Handout for Lesson 7 are the ones that I have in paper form and are just a few of the many that have been written.

We can learn a great deal about Romans from that material, but, of course, we must not accept any of it blindly.

Another way people have gone wrong in their study of Romans is that they have relied too much on commentaries.

The key to using commentaries correctly is to keep our eye on the ball. Our study of God's word has a purpose. Yes, Bible study can be fun, and yes, Bible study can be very interesting, and yes, we should approach the Bible with delight, **but Bible study is not just our hobby.**

- We study God's word with the purpose of learning more about God and being more pleasing to God (1 Thessalonians 4:1-2).
- We study God's word for our instruction and for our encouragement and for our hope (Romans 15:4).
- We study God's word for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training, and we study God's word so that we will be equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

If we ever lose sight of all of that, then we have turned our Bible study into just some sort of interesting weekend hobby. Yes, we should use commentaries, but we must always remember our study of the Bible has a purpose.

(20) What are the benefits for us today in studying Romans?

Some might be asking that question after 7 weeks of introduction!

Why we are going to put ourselves through all of that hard work. What will we gain from it? Yes, we will likely be able to run through the “Romans” column in Double Jeopardy — but what else? What’s in it for us?

Of course, we know the answer. All Bible students know the answer. We gain a great deal from our study of any book of the Bible — and no matter how often we study it, we can never exhaust the riches it has to offer.

But I also think we can point to some of those riches that are particularly applicable when we study the letter to the Romans.

Romans tells us how we, as God’s people, can be the unified people that God wants us to be.

No one will be drawn to the kingdom of peace led by the Prince of Peace when the people inside that purportedly peaceful kingdom are fighting like cats and dogs!

God wants his people to be a unified people — and not just unified in the sense that we are all meeting in the same building. God wants his people to be unified in the sense that they have the same mind and the same judgment.

1 Corinthians 1:10 — I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, **and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment.**

Creating and maintaining that sort of unity in the Lord's church is a central focus of Romans. Paul had seen the damage of division in Corinth, and Paul did not want that to happen in Rome.

We may think we have our differences today, but none of those differences comes even close to the differences between the Jews and the Gentiles in the first century. Everything about those two groups was different, and yet Paul told them in this letter that there was no distinction between them in the church (10:12) and that they were one body in Christ (12:5).

That is still God's will for the church 2000 years later! And if we want to know why that sort of unity is so important and whether that sort of unity is even possible and how that sort of unity can ever be achieved, then Romans is the book for us.

Another benefit we get from Romans is that Romans, perhaps more than any other book, lifts the curtain on the inner workings of God's great plan.

We started learning about God's great plan of redemption as soon as such a plan was needed.

Genesis 3:15 — I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.

And then we learned more about that plan with God's great promise to Abraham.

Genesis 22:18 — And in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.

And Moses was also told something about God's great plan.

Deuteronomy 18:18 (ESV) — I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him.

And King David was told even more about God's plan.

Psalms 89:4 (ESV) — 'I will establish your offspring forever, and build your throne for all generations.'

And, of course, we find glimpses of God's great plan in all of the prophets. For example, we saw glimpses of God's plan in our study of Daniel, Zechariah, Hosea, and Joel.

I think we can say that God was slowly raising the curtain on his plan, starting with Genesis 3 and continuing through the entirety of the Old Testament as God told us more and more about his plan to bless the entire world through Christ.

And then Christ came in Matthew, and we beheld the glory of God in the Word made flesh. And we learned more and more about the kingdom of Christ and the plan of God in those accounts of the life of Christ. And then we learned many more details in Acts, in the epistles, and in Revelation.

But is there any book of the Bible that throws open the curtain on God's great plan of redemption any wider than does the book of Romans?

Genesis 3:15 gives us a hint, but Romans gives us the details. What is the role of faith? What is the role of law? What is the plan for the Jews? What is the plan for the Gentiles? How did God use the Jews to bring about his plan? How did God bless the Gentiles with his plan? What is the role of baptism in God's plan? How does the church fit into God's plan? How are we to live in the kingdom of Christ? Romans answers all of those questions — in detail!

Peter tells us in 1 Peter 1:10-12 that the Old Testament prophets sometimes struggled to understand their own prophecies, and that even the angels longed to know more about what God was planning.

Here's an idea — the next time we read Romans, let's read it through the eyes of those Old Testament prophets. What if God had handed them a copy of Romans when they were struggling to understand their own prophecies? How would they have devoured Paul's letter

to understand what God was planning and what God had foretold through what they had penned!

Those prophets lived and died without ever seeing the book of Romans — but what would it have meant to them if they had seen it? How many of their questions would have been answered by Romans?

And we might also ask ourselves this question: can we imagine our own lives without the book of Romans?

We should thank God every day that we have his **complete** word. Many faithful people of God throughout history lived and died without ever enjoying that great blessing.

Another benefit from our study is that Romans tells us about the power of the gospel.

Romans 1:16 (ESV) — 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.

What if Christ had never come to this world? What if Jesus had never given himself as a perfect sacrifice on the cross? What if Jesus had never risen from that grave? What would our lives be like then? Paul answers that question in another of his letters:

1 Corinthians 15:17 (ESV) — And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.

Absent the gospel of Christ, our faith would be a futile faith, and we would all still be dead in our sins.

But God doesn't want that! God does not want anyone to perish (2 Peter 3:9). And yet if Christ had not come, then everyone would perish — and there would be no path to God and no path to eternal life. Yes, Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life — but if Jesus never came, then there would be no way, no truth, and no life for any of us.

In short, if Jesus had not come, then God would be **powerless** to save us. We would all still be lost in our sins, and no one can dwell with God in that condition (Psalm 5:4, Habakkuk 1:13).

But God is not powerless to save us. Why not? Because the gospel “is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” (Romans 1:16). That’s why. **The gospel of Christ gives God the power that he needs to save us from our sins.**

But I thought God is all powerful! I thought God can do anything! Well, if I thought that, I was wrong. The Bible tells us that there is at least one thing that is impossible for God to do.

Hebrews 6:18 (ESV) — So that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us.

And that fact means there are some other things that are also impossible for God. For example, God has said that evil cannot dwell with him. And, so, if it is impossible for God to lie, then it is also impossible for God to dwell with evil.

And so we have a problem. We are all sinners, but God wants us to be reconciled to him and to dwell eternally in his presence. How can God do that? What is the solution?

The gospel is the solution. The gospel of Christ is the **power** that God needs to allow sinners to dwell with him. The gospel gives God the power to do what he would otherwise be powerless to do absent the gospel.

And if anyone ever argues otherwise, they will be faced with a very difficult question. **If God could have saved us apart from the gospel of Christ, then why did Jesus die on that cross?** If there was any other way for us to dwell with God, then didn't Jesus die for no purpose? Yes, the gospel is the power of God, but that power came with a price (1 Corinthians 6:20).

We will learn many wonderful things about the gospel in the book of Romans, but nothing we learn is more important than this fact that we learn in the very first chapter — **the gospel is the power of God for salvation.**

And with that great truth we finally end our introduction to Romans!

Chapter 1

Perhaps it is fitting that we have reached the first chapter of Romans in the month of October. Why? Because the month of October is the month of Halloween, and the first chapter of Romans contains the most frightening phrase found anywhere in the Bible. And that most frightening phrase is found not just once or twice, but it is found three times in this first chapter of Romans.

And what is that most frightening phrase in the Bible? “**God gave them up.**” Is there anything more frightening than that? “God gave them up.” We will study that phrase in verses 24, 26, and 28.

What else will we see in this opening chapter? We will see Paul’s lengthy salutation in verses 1-7. We will see Paul’s travel plans in verses 8-15. We will see Paul’s great thematic statement in verse 16, and the Old Testament underpinning of that statement in verse 17. And then we will see a diatribe starting in verse 18 that is unlike any other diatribe we have ever read!

Romans 1:1

Romans 1:1 — Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God,

These opening verses are just a greeting from Paul to the Romans — can’t we just skip to verse 8? No, we cannot!

Although verses 1-7 are Paul’s salutation, this salutation is filled to the brim with doctrine and with previews of what we will see in the entirety of this letter.

Remember that list of key words that we looked at in our introduction? How many of those key words do we see in these opening seven verses?

- We see “called” in verses 1, 6, and 7.
- We see “gospel” in verse 1.
- We see “obedience” in verse 5.

- We see “faith” in verse 5.
- We see “grace” in verse 5.
- We see “saints” in verse 7.
- We see “peace” in verse 7.

And that's not all. We also see the entire Godhead in these 7 verses: God, the Son of God, and the Spirit of holiness.

Anything else? Yes. In these opening verses, Paul will tell us about Christ's connection with King David, about the relation between the gospel and the Old Testament, about the centrality of the resurrection in the plan of God, and about Paul's own apostleship.

Yes, Paul discusses all of that just in the opening seven verses! While we might have just written “Dear Romans” — Paul did not! Instead, Paul jumped immediately into his message for Rome even in his greeting to Rome. Let's read verse 1 again.

Verse 1: “Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God.”

One advantage of having a seven week introduction is that sometimes we can just point back to what we said earlier. I think we can do that with the very first word in verse 1 — “Paul.”

We have already looked at Paul and his unique background. We know why Paul was the perfect person to take the gospel to the Gentiles, and we saw how God was planning for Paul long before Paul was even born. And we have already looked at when and where Paul wrote this letter.

But verse 1 does tell us something about Paul that we did not discuss in our introduction — Paul was “a **servant** of Christ Jesus.”

Throughout my professional life, I often found myself reviewing resumes from job seekers. And one thing you notice in reviewing a lot of resumes is that the most impressive credentials almost always appear up near the very top of the page. For example, if the candidate is a Nobel prize winner, you likely will likely learn that fact long before you reach the bottom of the page!

These opening verses of Romans are a bit like Paul’s resume. Who is this guy? Why should we care what he has to say to us? Who put him in charge? Paul’s salutation answers all of those questions.

But what credential does Paul list first? What is Paul’s most impressive credential? “I am Paul who is BLANK.” What did Paul put in that first blank? What is the very first thing that Paul told the Romans about himself? I am Paul — “a **servant**”! I never reviewed any resumes that started that way!

Why not start with “I am Paul, a Roman citizen”? Why not start with “I am Paul of Tarsus”? Why not start with “I am Paul, a student of Gamaliel”? Why not start with “I am Paul, an apostle” as he does in Galatians and as he saves for second place here in Romans? Why instead does he start with “I am Paul, a slave”?

And that is the word used here — “slave.” The word “servant” is a bit too soft. The Greek word *doulos* means “slave,” a state with which the Roman world would have been very familiar.

And when I see that description of Paul, I have some difficult questions for myself before we leave the first few words of verse 1! Who

runs things when it comes to my life? Who is in charge? Is it me? Am I in charge? What is the role of Christ when it comes to what I do in my life? What is my role? Are we both simply on some sort of committee where we are jointly in charge of me?

If we asked Paul those questions, his answer would be the same answer we read right here — Jesus is the master, and Paul is the slave. There is no committee. Paul has no role to play other than to do whatever his Master tells him to do. That was the role of the slave in first century Rome, and that is the role that Paul applies to himself first in this letter to Rome.

Why start that way? Well, one reason to start that way is that it answers a lot of questions right off the bat.

Paul, why did you say that? Paul, why did you do that? Paul, why are you planning to do that? If Paul is a slave of Christ, then the answer is the same for all three questions — Paul said that, Paul did that, and Paul planned that because that was the will of his Master. That is the only reason a slave did anything — because it was the will of his Master.

Why is this point so important? It is so important because many commentaries on Romans and the other epistles of Paul act as if Paul was some sort of rogue element in the church, teaching things that were at odds with the rest of the church and doing things his own way without regard for anyone else in the church.

We know that is not true. And how do we know that? We know it because of how Paul opens this letter — Paul, a slave of Christ.

There were no rogue slaves. Slaves did not exercise their own will. Instead, they lived only to do the will of their Master. If we don't understand that very first fact about Paul, then we are going to have a very hard time understanding the rest of this letter.