

LESSON 4 at StudyRomans.org

(10) To whom was Romans written?

At one level this question is very easy, but at another level this question is very difficult.

Let's start with the easy answer — Romans 1:7 tells us that the letter to the Romans was written “to all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints.” And so the letter to the Romans was written to the Christians in Rome! That's easy!

So what is the difficulty? The difficulty is trying to determine whether Paul's letter is addressed *primarily* the whole time or perhaps even *entirely* at some times to one of the two groups that we talked about earlier: the Gentile Christians and the Jewish Christians.

But why not just assume that the letter was written *equally* to *both* groups? While that answer would certainly be quick and easy, we may find that it suffers the fate of many quick and easy answers — it is not entirely lined up with the evidence!

For example, let's look at this verse from the first chapter of Romans, and let's ask ourselves who is the “you” being addressed here by Paul:

Romans 1:13 (ESV) — I want **you** to know, brothers, that I have often intended to come to **you** (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among **you** as well as among **the rest of the Gentiles**.

Who is the “you” in that verse? Doesn't a natural reading of verse 13 leave us with the impression that Paul is *specifically* addressing the

Gentile Christians in Rome? “Among **you** as well as among the **rest** of the Gentiles?” Elsewhere Paul is even more explicit:

Romans 11:13-14 (ESV) — **Now I am speaking to you Gentiles.** Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry in order somehow to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them.

But just a few verses earlier in Chapter 1, as we saw with our easy answer, it seems that Paul was talking to everyone.

Romans 1:7 (ESV) — To **all those** in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints.

And, of course, we know that Paul was also writing to at least *some* of the Jewish Christians in Rome for the simple reason that Paul greets a few of them by name in Romans 16. And, when it comes to the Jews, we also have verses such as these:

Romans 4:1 (ESV) — What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, **our forefather** according to the flesh?

Romans 7:1 (ESV) — Or do you not know, brothers — **for I am speaking to those who know the law** — that the law is binding on a person only as long as he lives?

So I certainly think it is wrong to conclude that Romans was addressed *only* to the Gentiles, but can we say that Romans was addressed *primarily* to the Gentiles? And, if so, why did Paul have that focus? Was it because his message was primarily intended for the Gentiles rather than the Jews? Or was it instead simply because the Roman church, at that time, just happened to be primarily Gentile?

For now, let’s answer all of those questions with a very definite “possibly”! And let’s keep this question in mind as we work through the

text: **to whom is Paul speaking?** We need to keep asking that question in every section of this letter. And, as always, we need to pay very close attention to those pronouns!

(11) How does Romans compare with Paul's other letters?

If we set the book of Hebrews aside, the New Testament contains 13 letters written by the Apostle Paul, from Romans to Philemon. By book count, that is about half of the New Testament.

But what about by *word* count? There are 32,408 Greek words in Paul's 13 letters. That is about 23% of the entire New Testament's Greek word count. So Paul's 13 letters make up about **half** the **book** count and about a **quarter** of the **word** count.

Romans is Paul's longest letter, with First and Second Corinthians being his second and third longest letters. Together just those three letters make up about 60% of Paul's total word count.

And what else do those three long letters have in common? They were all written at about the same time, in AD 56-57 during Paul's third missionary journey.

What can we say about Paul's letters to the Romans when we look at it from the perspective of all his letters? I think what we can say is that Romans seems quite different from the others. Why?

I think our immediate answer is likely the correct answer — Paul had never been to Rome. Paul did not know most of the Christians

in Rome. They and Paul did not have very many shared experiences. That fact alone is likely enough to explain the differences we see between Romans and Paul's other letters.

And, while it is true that Paul had also apparently not visited the Colossian church prior to writing that letter (Colossians 2:1), that situation was different. Unlike the church in Rome, the Colossian church had been established by someone working very closely with Paul, Epaphras (Colossians 1:7). Paul had no such historical connection to the church in Rome.

But if that is the *reason* for the differences, what are the differences? What is it about Romans that so often leaves readers wondering why it seems so different from Paul's other letters?

When we looked earlier at the question of why there are so many letters in the New Testament, we noted that letters are a perfect way to show the practical application of the law of faith to real-life problems. And while that is also true of Romans, I think it is *less* true of Romans.

Paul's other letters are filled with real-life problems, but we do not see that *as much* with Romans. Yes, we do see a problem between the weak and the strong, but much of Romans reads (at least on the surface) more like an academic theological treatise than do Paul's other letters.

And while most of Paul's letters are very personally tailored for the recipient congregations, much of Romans (at least on the surface) seems more impersonal — almost, at times, as if Paul was perhaps restating and memorializing things that he had taught elsewhere to others.

And, again, I stress that those are how things often look on the **surface**. As to whether that is also how things will look when we dig deeper into the text, let's save that question until after we have done just that. We may discover that Romans is much more personal than it might seem to us at first.

But just to give one example — here is a big question that we are going to have to figure out: **why do we have Romans 9-11?**

In those three chapters, Paul provides his most detailed and extensive discussion of the role of the Jews in God's plan of redemption — and in doing so, Paul leaves us with some very difficult and perplexing questions.

And here is perhaps the first of those perplexing questions: why did Paul include those three chapters in this letter? How, if at all, are those three chapters related to the chapters that precede them? How, if at all, are those three chapters related to the chapters that follow them?

We will look at those questions later, but for now let's just note that we don't often find ourselves asking such questions about Paul's other letters. His other letters seem to have much more of a flow from beginning to end, while Romans (at least on the surface) can at times seem a bit choppy.

Does Romans have a flow from beginning to end? Or is Romans, as some say, just a collection of miscellaneous teachings of Paul that have been sandwiched together between the letter's opening and closing? I know that we all *want* to say that the book has a flow, but

we need to do more than just say it has a flow — we need to identify it! What is the flow in Romans?

If there is no flow, then, yes, Romans is very different from Paul's other letters. But if we find a flow, then perhaps those differences have been exaggerated. So let's begin our quest for that flow by looking at the key words and themes of the letter.

(12) What are the key words in Romans?

In my experience, many and perhaps most legal disputes can be boiled down to an argument about the meaning of a word.

And that observation is particularly true in my particular area of legal expertise, which is patent law. The scope of a patent depends on the meaning of the specific words used in the patent to describe that scope — and the meaning of those words is determined by the Judge.

I think that, likewise, most religious disputes can be boiled down to a dispute about the meaning of words.

Have you ever noticed that in most arguments about the Bible, the arguing parties just seem to be talking past each other? I think that is because they do not have the same understanding about the words that they are using. It is as if they are each arguing in a different language — which then completely explains why they are talking past each other!

For example, we often hear that baptism is a “work.” But before we can agree or disagree with that statement, there is something very

important that we must know first — what is the meaning of the word “work”? How can we ever agree about whether baptism is a “work,” if we don’t first agree on the meaning of “work”?

“Work” could be viewed broadly — anything I do for whatever reason is “work.” Or we could view “work” more narrowly — anything I do to earn wages is “work.”

So how do we determine the meaning of the word “work” in the book of Romans? Is it used broadly or narrowly?

Well, in the exciting world of patent law, the first place we would look for the definition of a word is in the patent itself. And, likewise here, the first place we should look for the definition of “work” is in Romans itself. How does the letter to the Romans define the word “work”?

Romans 4:4 (ESV) — Now to the one who **works**, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due.

That does **not** sound like just anything that we do for whatever reason. There are plenty of things that we do for which we have no expectation of wages as our due for having done that thing. That verse, at least, seems to be using a *narrower* definition of “work.”

As for the details of Romans 4:4, we will look at that when we get there, but for now the point is this: **before we can ever agree about the meaning of any verse in the Bible, we first need to agree about the meaning of the words in that verse.**

Back in Lesson 1, I listed 10 questions as examples of difficult issues that we will face in our study of this letter. If we went back and looked at that list from Lesson 1, how many of those difficult issues do we suppose would revolve around the meaning of a word?

- 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?
- What is the “partial **hardening**” in 11:25?
- What is “the **fullness** of the Gentiles” in 11:25?
- What is “your **spiritual worship**” in 12:1?

All of those questions revolve around the meaning of one or more words. And if we try to understand Romans without first trying to understand the meaning of the words used in Romans, then our study will be fruitless.

And, of course, the best way to define those words is to let the Bible itself define those words, and that is the strategy that we will use in our study of Romans.

But what are the words? What are the key words in this letter? What words are the basis of the big disputes about Romans? We have already mentioned one of the key words, “work,” but what are the others?

If you look at the Handout for Lesson 4, you will find some candidates for the key words in each chapter of Romans.

I created those 16 images by counting the number of times each word in the chapter occurs and then removing the common words (such as “and” and “the”) from that list. I then sorted the remaining words to get the 10 most frequent words in each chapter.

The size of each word in the image is an indication of how many times that word occurs. For example, in Chapter 1, the most frequent word is “God,” but in Chapter 16, the most frequent word is “Greet.” Images such as these are called “word clouds,” and they can be very helpful.

Here is a fun exercise — if I had scrambled these 16 word clouds and not included the 16 chapter numbers, how many of them could we have matched to their correct chapter number?

I think we would have immediately spotted Chapter 16 with the key word “greet.” And we likely would have spotted Chapter 13, with “taxes” and “authorities” being key words. But how many of the others could we have figured out? (Maybe we need a new game show: “I can name that chapter in 5 key words!”)

Now, one point we should note here is that a word can be a key word even if it appears only once. For example, the word “propitiation” appears in Romans only one time (Romans 3:25), but I think we would likely agree that “propitiation” is a key word. But, even so, I think we can say that *most* key words are also frequently occurring words.

What are some other key words in Romans? We will create our list as we work through the text, but I suspect that our list will at least include: gospel, grace, called, faith, law, justification, obedience, sin, gift, salvation, baptism, righteousness, election, flesh, and spirit.

One thing I want us to accomplish in our study of Romans is the creation of a glossary for this letter. And, of course, the very best evidence for the definitions in that glossary will be found in Romans itself, in Paul’s other letters, and in the rest of the Bible.

So let's keep all of this in mind — and let's start work on our glossary as soon as we get to the first verse!

Now, let's back up and answer Question #8!

(8) Why was Romans written?

This was the question that we skipped over earlier so we instead could look at it now, right before we look at the themes in Romans in the next question.

Paul had never visited Rome, so why did he write them a letter?

There are some things about which most commentaries on Romans agree, such as the identity of the author. But there are some other things about which many commentaries on Romans disagree — and we have now come to such an issue: **why was Romans written?**

How should we answer that question? Should we go through all the proposed answers now and try to figure out which one is the best? No. I think that strategy would be putting the cart before the horse.

I think a much better approach is to look briefly at the primary contenders now, but then we should leave the question open until we have enough evidence to answer it ourselves. We may end up choosing one of these proposed answers, or we may come up with a new answer. In any event, our choice will be guided by the text.

So, what are the most popular answers to the question of why Paul decided to write a letter to the church in Rome, which he had never visited?

(1) Paul may have written this letter to the church in Rome simply because he had a longstanding desire to visit them.

If that was the purpose, then this letter was simply Paul's way of introducing himself and letting the Christians in Rome know that he was doing everything he could to come and see them. And perhaps then, as some commentaries argue, Paul just pieced together in this letter some things he had taught elsewhere without any particular application in mind for Rome.

(2) Paul may have written this letter to the church in Rome simply because Rome was crucial to Paul's missionary strategy.

Paul wanted eventually to preach in Spain, and Paul planned to use Rome as a stopping off point and as a source of financial support. We know with certainty that this reason is at least a *partial* reason why Paul wrote Romans because Paul tells us so.

Romans 15:24 — I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be helped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a while.

But was that the only reason? If so, then perhaps, as some commentaries argue, Paul just pieced together in this letter some things he was planning to teach in Spain so that the Romans would be encouraged to support that effort.

(3) Paul may have written this letter to the church in Rome because of his concern for the church in Jerusalem.

Paul requests the prayers of the Roman Christians for this project in Jerusalem at the end of Romans 15, and Paul may have hoped that they would contribute some further financial support for the suffering saints in Jerusalem. That was almost certainly one reason why Paul wrote Romans, but was it the only reason? Was Romans just a fund-raising letter?

(4) Paul may have written this letter to the church in Rome because he had been made aware of the tension between the Gentile Christians and the Jewish Christians in Rome.

We know that Paul was specifically tasked by God with preaching to the Gentiles, and so he no doubt would have been very interested in helping with any issue that was hindering that mission or that was harming the Gentile converts. Paul may have written Romans to restore unity in what he had heard were divided congregations in the city of Rome.

(5) Paul may have written this letter to the church in Rome because he had become aware of some theological issues in Rome that required correction or clarification.

That reason could explain why Paul devotes so much time to the interaction of the law of faith and the law of works and so much time to the role of the Jews and the role of the Gentiles in the plan of God.

Perhaps Priscilla and Aquila had let Paul know about some problems that they had seen when they were in Rome.

I think we can say that most, if not all, of those reasons were, at least in part, reasons why Paul wrote this letter. But which of those reasons rises to the top? What was the primary reason why Paul wrote Romans?

Again, let's leave those questions open as we study the book. Perhaps when we get to the final verse we will have a better handle on why Paul wrote this letter.

Our next question is closely related to the question of why Paul wrote the letter.

(13) What are the themes in Romans?

But, while related, this is not the same question we just answered. The reasons for the letter and the themes of the letter are separate questions.

Paul may have had many reasons for writing Romans, but he may have put them all under the umbrella of a single theme. For example, Paul could have used the theme of unity to both explain the role of Gentiles and Jews in the church and to explain the need to help the church in Jerusalem. Or, conversely, Paul could have explained the role of Gentiles and Jews in the church using many approaches and many themes. And so the reasons for the letter and the themes of the letter are not the same question, but they are related questions.

And so, I ask again: what are the themes in Romans?

For those of you who were here for our lessons on Daniel, Zechariah, Ezra, Esther, Hosea, and Joel, you will recall that we were constantly on the lookout for themes. We listed some potential themes prior to our study of those books, but then we looked for other themes all throughout our study — and we found them!

Why are themes so important?

Except possibly for the book of Proverbs, the books in the Bible are not just collections of verses that can be studied without regard to the verses that precede them and follow them.

Earlier we talked about the flow of Romans, and I think we could repeat that discussion here. The books in the Bible have a flow, which is just another way of saying that they have a theme, and often more than one. Books in the Bible have something that ties their verses together and that explains the topics addressed by those verses.

For example, in Romans 1-8, Paul explains how sinful man can be right before God. Then in Romans 9-11, Paul explains the role of the Jews in God's plan of redemption. And then in Romans 12-15, Paul explains how Christians must live in this world and in the church. Is there a single theme that ties all of that together, or should we look for three different themes? That is the sort of question that cannot be answered if we study each verse in isolation.

So, as usual, our plan is to look for themes as we study the book. But also, as usual, let's start off with some possible themes. Here is a list of 10 potential themes for the letter to the Romans:

1. The Nature of God

One theme that I know we will see in the book of Romans is the nature of God. All throughout the letter, Paul tells us about God, about Jesus, and about the Holy Spirit.

In the letter to the Romans, we find 163 references to God, 110 references to Jesus or Christ or the Son, and 30 references to the Holy Spirit. This is something we can see clearly on the Handout for Lesson 4.

Over and over again in this book, Paul will tell us what God is like, and so I think we must begin our list of themes with that all-important theme — the nature of God. And if we are looking for a theme that could tie the entire letter together, this theme may be the one.

And let's pause and note something about Paul when it comes to this theme about the nature of God — Paul's own view of the nature of God had recently been turned upside down. And so I think one reason why Paul has so much to say on this topic is that Paul himself had recently learned a great deal about it.

What do we suppose Paul, then Saul, would have said about Jesus being God in the flesh prior to meeting him on that road to Damascus? How would Saul have responded to someone who said that God the Father had sent God the Son to die on a Roman cross? We know what Paul would have said — he would have scoffed at such ideas. He would have seen them as blasphemy.

But then Paul learned the truth. Paul's eyes were opened, and when that happened Paul suddenly had a very different view about the nature of God than he had before.

And Paul understood something else — Paul understood that he *should* have known all of this already. Why? Because the Old Testament teaches us about the nature of God just as surely as the New Testament does — and the nature of God has not changed.

But Paul, then Saul, did not understand that, and I think Paul describes his own situation in another letter that he wrote at about the same time that he wrote Romans:

2 Corinthians 3:14 — But their minds were hardened. For to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away.

Paul tells us that that veil is taken away only through Christ. What that means is that it is not possible to properly understand the nature of God apart from Christ.

John 14:9 — Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’?”

What a wonderful verse! In God there is no un-Christ-likeness! If we want to know the nature of God the Father, we need to look at God the Son. Paul now understood that, and I think he wanted to make sure that the Romans understood that as well. A central theme of Romans is the nature of God.

2. Sin and Salvation

People who point out problems are sometimes criticized for not also pointing out solutions to those problems. No one could ever level that criticism at Paul! Yes, Paul tells us about a terrible problem (sin), but Paul also tells us all about God's wonderful solution (salvation).

I suspect if we took a vote, this theme of sin and salvation would come out on top. It is impossible to miss this theme when you read Romans.

Starting about half way through the first chapter, Paul starts presenting evidence to show the problem — that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (which is his conclusion in Romans 3:23). But then Paul describes the solution — “there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1). There can be no doubt that salvation from sin is a major theme of Romans. But is it the central theme? Is it the only theme?