

What's Romans all about?

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[0 : 00] But as I said, over the coming months I'd like us to spend a bit of time studying the letter to the Romans. And we can read again just the first few verses as I said today, we're going to just introduce ourselves to the letter.

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures concerning his son who was descended from David according to the flesh 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, 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, including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ, 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.

Now I want you to imagine that you are standing on the pier in Stornoway and somebody comes off the ferry and arrives in Lewis for the very first time and they come up to you and they say, I want to see the whole island but I'm not really sure where to start.

Can you tell me where is the most amazing part of the Isle of Lewis? Now obviously you would say to them, Carl away and you would send them straight over to the west side and perhaps in particular you'd send them to Dalmore because there you have a beach that is up there with the most spectacular in the whole country and when you go to Dalmore on a beautiful day you see Lewis in all of its beauty and splendour and glory and of course there are some other places too, not as good but there are some good places where you can go and you can see areas of particular splendour in the island.

Now the whole of Lewis is Lewis, everywhere you go in Lewis is Lewis but there are some parts that are, there is an increased intensity of splendour.

[2 : 28] Now imagine that somebody is standing in front of you holding a Bible and they're saying, I want to read and know all of the Bible but I'm not sure where to start.

Tell me, where is the most amazing part of the Bible? Well there's many places that you could suggest and the whole of the Bible is the inspired inerrant word of God just as the whole of Lewis is Lewis, absolutely and at one level the whole Bible is at the same standard but having said that there is no doubt that there are certain parts of the Bible that stand out and if you want to see part of the Bible where there is a particularly powerful manifestation of the glory and splendour of God's message, if you want to go to a place where you go to the heights of theological splendour, if you want that then the place to go is Romans and it's impossible to exaggerate how important Paul's letter to the Romans is. Now as I said I'm not saying that one part of the Bible is better than the other in a sense of quality, the Bible is equal, the whole of the Bible is God's word but what I am saying is that there are parts that give a particularly powerful revelation of some wonderful theological truths and Romans is an example of that and throughout history the importance of this letter has been recognised.

I'm going to quote some theological giants, William Tyndale who was a translator of the Bible at the time of the Reformation, he said, Romans is the principal and most excellent part of the New Testament.

Martin Luther who lived more or less the same time as William Tyndale said, Romans is the chief part of the New Testament and John Stott who was one of the most influential writers and preachers in the 20th century, he says, he's written a fantastic commentary on Romans and he says that Romans is the fullest, plainest and grandest statement of the Gospel in the New Testament.

[5 : 06] So it's clear, Romans is a colossal part of the Bible's message, it's absolutely saturated in crucial theology and it pours out vital teaching which we all need to study and learn.

Romans is hugely important and that's why it's a brilliant book to study together over the coming weeks.

But having said that, yes, Romans is incredibly important but you may be sitting there thinking, well yes, I know that Romans is really important and I know that I need to study it but in all honesty I find it really hard to understand.

You may well be sitting there thinking that and if you do think that then I have total sympathy with you because that is how I felt for many, many years.

I remember being told, Romans is this amazing book, it's so important, so wonderful, so much teaching and I used to think, well yes, I know that but when I read it I find it really hard to understand.

[6 : 18] And I would often find myself getting lost and getting a bit tangled up in all that was being said and I thought, well, I know this is good but I'm struggling with it a wee bit myself.

So if you feel like that then please don't worry because that's how many of us, many of us, have felt. And the whole reason why I want us to study Romans is for us to actually try and get a better grasp of it and to understand it a bit more clearly because the wonderful thing about Romans is that if we actually spend a wee bit of time looking at it we'll see that it's actually not too hard to understand at all.

It's really a glorious and a wonderful book for us to learn. So today I want us just to introduce ourselves to Romans.

I have to make sure I don't look at that clock otherwise my sermon is going to be about three hours long so I'll stick to that clock. Today I want us just to introduce the letter and we're going to ask a simple question.

What is Romans all about? Well in terms of structure we can divide Romans into two parts. It's 16 chapters long, it divides at the end of chapter 11 because in the first 11 chapters Paul gives us what we could really call doctrinal teaching, teaching about theology, about how the Gospel and how the biblical message is to be understood.

[7 : 48] So first part teaching then from chapters 12 to 16 it's much more focused on practical application. And that's a pattern that Paul very often follows. You read his letters, he gives teaching in the first part and then in the second part or in the last part he will apply it to our lives.

That of course is reminding us that Christian maturity is about knowing and doing. It's not just about growing in head knowledge, it's about applying that to our lives.

And so as we study Romans we I hope will learn a lot but that of course should shape the way we live because our maturity as Christians is not just about what we know, it's also about what we do. Now there's a slide here with a basic structure of Romans so you can just get an idea of what it's about. And as I said it's in two main parts and it's an introduction and a conclusion and the first part can be subdivided into three sections.

So we read chapter 1 verses 1 to 17 this morning, that's basically the introduction and we'll look at that in a wee bit more detail another time.

[9 : 03] Then from chapter 1 verse 17 right through to the end of chapter 11 you've got the first part which I've called knowing the gospel, it's teaching. And within that you've got three subsections which are just generally categorising what's been discussed.

Paul will first of all look at the problem of sin, it's a very very important passage from verse 118 right through to 320. Then he discusses the hope of the gospel and he goes through lots and lots of important aspects of the gospel and how it works and all that it means.

There's then a very interesting section from chapter 9 to the end of chapter 11 where he discusses the question of Israel and how Israel fits in to the gospel message.

And then we come to the second part which is we've called living the gospel. So there's part 1 knowing the gospel, part 2 living the gospel and here in chapter 12, 13, 14, 15 Paul gives lots and lots of helpful practical advice and then he concludes and he gives greetings and closing remarks from halfway through chapter 15 through into chapter 16.

So already I hope Romans is looking simpler. It's a long book, it's I think the longest of Paul's letters but if we divide it up like that we can see that it's not too complicated, it's fairly straightforward.

[10:32] And so your homework for this week, I said to the children there's no homework in the holidays so since the children have no homework grown up so you're getting homework. I want you to read through the whole of Romans this week.

Try and sit down and read through, it won't take you too long and just don't worry if there's bits you don't understand but just read through it and see if you can get an idea of the flow and bear this in mind.

The first part knowing the gospel, second part living the gospel. Another thing that I would say in terms of advice for reading Romans is sometimes it's really good to have two versions of the English Bible in front of you.

So many of you will maybe be used to reading the ESV or the authorised version and they are both fantastic translations of the letter to the Romans and they're very, very good at highlighting the detail contained in the verses.

But alongside that I would suggest reading through Romans maybe in the new living translation. If you don't have it in your, what would you call that, a real book, I shouldn't say real book, if you don't have a real book version of it you could get it on the internet, you could get it on your phone.

[11:49] And sometimes a translation like that can just help, you can help, you see how it flows, how the thought that Paul has runs through a chapter or through a paragraph.

And sometimes that can be a very, very helpful thing. Always remember that the best translation is not the ESV or the NIV or the new living translation, best translations, not a translation at all, the best version is the Greek, which of course we can't read.

And so that's why it's good to have various English translations to help us get the flow. So that's your homework, read Romans all the way through and if you want, try doing it in one or two of the English translations that we have.

As I said, today we're asking the question, what's Romans all about? And there's a lot we can say, what I want to do is just highlight four key things. And I've just listed them up here to get our bearings.

First of all, the letter to the Romans is about the Gospel. Secondly, the letter to the Romans is about the church. Thirdly, the letter to the Romans is about the world.

[13:01] And fourthly, the letter to the Romans is about the Christian life. And we're going to just look at these four in a little bit more detail today and we'll see how far we get.

We may not get through them all if we don't, we'll pick them up next week. So first of all, the letter to the Romans is all about the Gospel.

As I said, when you come to read the letter to the Romans, you might, it's very easy to feel a bit overwhelmed. You look at it, it's the longest of Paul's letters. In terms of theological teaching, it's probably the fullest.

It's a very dense letter. And for that reason, it can feel like the contents of Romans is quite complicated. But it's vital at first and foremost, we recognize the fact that the main theme of Romans is very simple.

In fact, if you were to ask the question, what is Romans talking about? You can answer that question in one word because the letter to the Romans is all about the Gospel.

[14:05] At the very start, Paul says, Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the Gospel of God. At the very end, Paul says, now to him who's able to strengthen you according to my Gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ.

Now in verse 16 and 17, which in many ways is kind of a summary statement of what the whole letter is about, Paul says, I am not ashamed of the Gospel.

It's the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes. So what is Romans about? Well, first and foremost, it is about the nature of the Gospel.

Because in this letter, Paul gives his most detailed explanation of what the good news of Jesus Christ is all about. Because if you imagine for a moment that you had never heard of Jesus, never heard of the Bible and never heard anything about salvation, if that was you, you would have a lot of questions that you would need answers to.

I've got some examples here, questions that we would want to ask. We'd say, well, what's wrong? Why do we need salvation? And if we do need salvation, how are we saved?

[15:18] Who is this salvation for? Who's the Gospel for? We've got this Bible, its Old Testament and New Testament. How do they fit together? What happens to us once we're saved?

How should we live our lives as Christians? How do we deal with problems and challenges in our Christian lives and in the church? And not only what happens in terms of our life, what about the future?

What does that hold for us as Christians? These are all vital questions and Paul answers them all in Romans.

And so in other words, Romans is telling us how the Gospel works. And that's what makes it such a wonderful book to study because as we look through this letter it will help us all understand the Gospel.

And that's a vital thing. It's vital that we understand the Gospel. And Romans is going to teach us or remind us about all the glorious stages of God's saving work.

[16:22] And in particular, Romans is reminding us of something vital. Romans is reminding us that the goal of salvation is not the forgiveness of sins.

And you might be thinking, what are you saying Thomas? The goal of salvation is not the forgiveness of sins.

It is far, far bigger and greater than that. Yes, forgiveness of sins is part of it, but the goal of God's saving plan is far greater.

God doesn't just want to forgive you. He wants to adopt you and he wants to sanctify you and he wants to bring you to be with himself forever so that ultimately you will be glorified with his Son.

God wants to unite you to himself in Jesus Christ. And so in Romans we really see the heights, the real heights of what it means to be a Christian and of all that God has planned for us.

[17:37] And we'll discover these or be reminded of these as we go through it. Romans is also going to show us how everything fits together, how Old Testament themes like the role of Abraham, the place of the law, the nation of Israel, how all of these things fit together and culminate in the Persian and work of Jesus Christ.

Romans is going to teach us key words. We hear important theological terms like grace, faith, wrath, righteousness, union with Christ.

Romans will explain what these words mean and help us to understand. And Romans will prepare us for eternity because as we learn about the Gospel we will discover more about what God has planned for all who trust in him.

So studying Romans will help us understand the Gospel but studying Romans will also help us explain the Gospel. And that's a vital point because we are surrounded by people who do not know or do not understand the good news of Jesus Christ.

And God has placed you here to reach them. He's placed us here as a church to bring good news to the people of Carlyway around us.

[19:03] And in order to do that we need to be able to explain the Gospel clearly. And that's something that sounds so simple and yet we all know that in reality it is so hard.

But Romans will help us and it's a wonderful book for highlighting the key truths of the Christian message. An interesting question to ask ourselves is if a friend, if somebody came up to me and said to me, can you explain the Gospel in two minutes?

I don't know if I could do that. If somebody came up to me and said what's Christianity all about and I just wanted to give them a two or three minute reply, I asked myself would I know what to say?

And I think to myself well I don't know if I could do that but I need to be able to. We all need to be able to because as time goes on we are going to be dealing more and more and more with people who've got very little background in the Gospel and we want to be able to explain the Gospel clearly to them.

So Romans is all about the Gospel. It will help us understand it and it will help us explain it to others.

[20:28] Secondly Romans is all about the church. In this letter Paul is writing to the Christians who are in Rome. We see that at verse seven, 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 from the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul is writing to a group of Christians and that's a very simple point but it reminds us of some really really important things. Reminds us first of all about the unity of the church and that's one of the great emphasis of Romans.

Paul highlights the fact that the Gospel message unites Jew and Gentile in one church. That's what he said in verse 16, not ashamed of the Gospel for it's the power of God for salvation to everyone

who believes to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

The Gospel has broken down that division between Jew and Gentile and God has established a united people of God. That is the new Israel. That is the true Israel of God.

And as Paul writes to this church, we are being reminded of the vital truth that the Church of Jesus Christ is one and that should always always always be at the heart of our understanding of the church.

[21 : 55] We should never ever forget that although there are many denominations, although there are many congregations, there is only one church and although we here dearly love the free church and we do, we love the free church, despite that our first love must always be the Church of Christ.

That church has spread across the whole world. Even in the first century, just a few years after the death and resurrection of Jesus, the church was already spreading across the Roman Empire.

And today it has spread even further to the very ends of the earth and yet it's still one church. And this is such an important thing to remind ourselves of because it's such an easy thing to lose sight of because it is so easy for feelings of hostility to arise between Christians or between denominations.

It's so easy for us to look at our denomination and to think, well, we are the best and everybody else is not quite as good and people who are very different from us, they are very inferior from us.

It's easy to think like that. It's very easy to look at our brothers and sisters in the Free Presbyterian Church, in the RP Church, in the Church of Scotland, in the Pre-Church Continuing, in the Anglican Church, in the Baptist Church.

[23 : 31] It's very easy to look at all these churches and to have sentiments of rivalry or feelings of suspicion or a desire to keep these people at arm's length.

Now, if we feel like that, then we must make no mistake. We need to repent because they are our beloved brothers and sisters in Christ.

We are one church. One of the fascinating things about Romans is that Paul did not plant this church. It wasn't his as such, but he still had this sense of total unity and solidarity with the church in Rome.

That brings us to the next thing about the church that Romans teaches us. It reminds us about the connection of the church. One of the wonderful features of the New Testament is that although it was spreading out and it was dispersing geographically, there is a constant emphasis on the fact that the Christians across the different regions and across the nations made sure that they stayed connected with one another.

It's a very basic point, but if you look at the New Testament, if you look at the letters, we must never forget that they are letters.

[25 : 00] The reason they are letters is because Paul is separated from these congregations, but yet he remains deeply concerned for them and he wants to help them and address issues that have arisen in their congregation.

As I said, the amazing thing about Paul and the church in Rome is that Paul has never been there. As far as we know, Paul had never been to Rome and he talks about the fact that he longs to visit them in chapter 15 and he talks about how he wants to go to Spain and stop off in Rome on the way.

Although he knows one or two of the people in the congregation like Priscilla and Aquila who he had met in Corinth, yet most of the people would have been unknown to him and they were living in a city that he had never been to.

That reveals something remarkable. Paul writes this letter and it is full of an intense love and concern and interest in the recipients and yet Paul is writing to people that he has never met.

Now that's amazing. You look at him, he writes, he says, without ceasing, I mention you in my prayers that somehow I may at last succeed in coming to you.

[26 : 28] I long to see you. Do we feel like that about a congregation in England that we've never met?

This is an amazing example, people he did not know yet he was so, so concerned for them.

Romans is reminding us of this wonderful connection that exists in the Christian Church. Reminds us that we are part of a church that's spread across all the nations of the world and we are to have a concern and a love for our brothers and sisters in Christ.

That's why it's so important that we don't just pray for ourselves, but that we pray for missionary work, for fellow congregations and for our brothers and sisters who are struggling. Romans reminds us of the unity of the Church, the connection of the Church and it also reminds us of the ordinariness of the Church.

This is a really important point because when you read a letter like Romans with all the profound theology that it contains, it's easy to think, oh well, this is for the experts.

[27 : 38] A letter like Romans is for maybe somebody who's going in for the ministry. This is like a book of theology for students. But we must never forget that Romans was not the work of a professor writing to his students.

Romans is a letter from a pastor who is writing to ordinary Christians. And that's the beauty of the Church since the day it was established.

It is a family of ordinary people. And the astounding teaching that we will discover in the letter to the Romans is not reserved for the elite.

It's written for ordinary believers. In other words, it's written for people just like you and just like me. And if you go to the end of Romans, you see that Paul has this massive list of people to whom he sends greetings. And many of those are people that we know very little about. But that's the whole point.

[28 : 48] We don't know much about them because they're ordinary people, people who are just plodding on through the challenges of life, people who are ordinary, just like you and me.

And Paul is teaching us in this letter that ordinary Christians, ordinary people, have a vital part to play in the Church of Jesus Christ.

And as we study Romans, I hope that we'll all see that we have a role to play, every one of you, every single one of you, every single one of you, has a role to play in the Church of Jesus Christ. There is a space in the Church of Jesus Christ with your name on it. And God wants you serving in his family and God can do great things through us.

So Romans teaches us about the Gospel. It teaches us about the Church. It also teaches us about the world. Paul in verse 7 of chapter 1 says, to those who are in Rome.

[29 : 55] Now at one level that's just telling us the destination, but of course there is a special significance about the fact that this letter is going to Rome because Rome was not just anywhere.

Rome was the centre of the world at this time. It was the seat of government for the Roman Empire and it was the place where vital decisions were made, where political authority lay and it was the headquarters of the military power that controlled a vast empire.

And so in one sense, Rome was the city that ruled the world. But very quickly it became the city that was hostile to Christianity.

About seven years after Paul wrote Romans, there was a huge fire in Rome and the emperor at the time, Nero, blamed Christians for it.

And as a result, began a fierce persecution against the church and that persecution continued on and off for almost 300 years. And tradition tells us that it was Rome that was the city which executed Paul himself.

[31 : 01] And so Rome is a city full of power, full of the achievements of humanity and yet at the same time it's a city that is hostile to God and it's at the centre of a world that does not want to be under the authority of Jesus Christ.

And of course, although the Roman Empire has long since disappeared, we know that the world around us is still exactly the same. Because we live in a world full of amazing achievements, full of all sorts of nations, companies, groups who have accomplished remarkable things and who exercise enormous influence.

We live in a world that is full of empires. Of course, the Roman Empire was a military empire. We've got empires today that are largely commercial, I suppose the big empires of the world today are companies like Apple and Amazon and Google and media corporations.

They're still hugely, hugely influential. And some of that is for good, but much of it is in direct opposition to what the Bible teaches. And that's why Romans is so important, because it's written into exactly the same kind of world that we live in today.

Because when we look at the world today, we see that it's a world dominated by greed, that is a tangled web of confusion and chaos in terms of morality and personal conduct.

[32 : 32] We live in a world where evil is called good and good is called evil. And as we look at this letter, we'll see that Rome was exactly the same.

And that means that what the Christians needed then is what we need now. And it teaches us about the world.

Last of all, very briefly, Romans teaches us about the Christian life. So Romans is about the Gospel, Romans is about the church, Romans is about the world, and Romans is about the Christian life.

We go back to verse seven, it says, to all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints. And here Paul uses a beautiful description of these Roman Christians.

He says that they are called to be saints and they are loved by God. And in many ways that statement sums up what Paul is going to try and do in the rest of this letter.

[33 : 28] Because as Paul sets out the theological truths contained in this letter, the great emphasis and climax of his teaching is the fact that at the heart of the Gospel, there is the astounding and immeasurable love of God.

Romans is going to show us just how much God loves us. And in his love, God has called us to be saints.

Now remember, the word saint simply means holy one. And it's reminding us that God has called us to live lives that have been transformed by the Gospel so that we stand out as people who live in a new way, who live in God's way.

And so for these Christians who lived in Rome and for us Christians who are living today, Paul is going to give us teaching about how we are to live the Christian life. And as we said at the start, that's mainly from chapter 12 to chapter 15.

And at the heart of that, again, is a very simple truth. That the heart of living the Christian life is loving one another.

[34 : 42] In Romans 13, Paul says, for the commandments you shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not covet, and any other commandment are summed up in this word. You shall love your neighbour as yourself, loved as no wrong to a neighbour.

Therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law. The Christians in Rome are loved by God and are called to be saints who love one another.

And it's here that we discover what our goals are going to be as we study Romans together. As we look at the great theological truths of this letter, we are going to see how much God loves us.

And our goal is that we would love him more. And as we learn about the Christian life as part of a Christian church in a hostile world, our great goal is that we would love one another more and more. And so that's really where we see that Romans is not as complicated as we think. Because in the first half, we are shown how much God loves us. And in the second half, we are given instruction about how to love one another.

[35 : 53] And that's what our goals are as we study it. That we'd love God more. That we'd love one another more. And of course, as Jesus said, there's no other commandment greater than these.

That's what Romans is all about. That's what being a Christian is all about. Let's pray.

God our Father, we thank you that your word is open before us today. And as we begin to study this great letter to the Romans, we pray, Lord, that as we learn, we pray that we would love you more and love one another more.

And how we thank you, Lord, that we too can say that we are loved by God and called to be saints.

And we ask, Lord, that in your mercy, you would just help us all to hear that call and to follow it.

We thank you, Lord, that you have blessed us with such rich and relevant and just and...

[37 : 11] and just such amazing teaching as is contained in the letter to the Romans. And we pray, Lord, that you would bless us and help us as we seek to read it and study it and understand it together in the months ahead.

And, Lord, we acknowledge and pray that that would not just be simply for the sake of learning about Romans. And that's not what we want. Our desire is that we would learn about you, that we love you more, that we love one another more.

So help us, Lord, and bless us and may it all be to your glory. In Jesus' name, amen.