

Chapter Summary: Romans

A woman named Phoebe stood to address the gathering of Jesus' followers in the city of Rome. She was a respected leader of the church in Cenchrea, the port city for Corinth, where the apostle Paul was collecting an offering for the poor in Jerusalem. It's likely that Phoebe had been about to travel to Rome and Paul had chosen her to carry a letter from him to the believers there.

Paul had worked long and hard to announce the Good News about Jesus to the eastern part of the Roman Empire. But now in AD 56, though Paul had not even visited the church in Rome, he writes to the believers there:

"I have finished my work in these regions, and after all these long years of waiting, I am eager to visit you. I am planning to go to Spain, and when I do, I will stop off in Rome. And after I have enjoyed your fellowship for a little while, you can provide for my journey."

In anticipation of a visit to Rome on his way to Spain, Paul writes the longest of his letters. In this letter to the Roman believers he makes the case for the world-transforming news about Jesus – news that welcomes both Jews and Gentiles together into God's family. This Good News is the plan God reveals through the entire story of the Bible, to bring His blessing and salvation to all nations. The Roman church, a mixed congregation of Jews and Gentiles, exists as a result of this Good News. And as Paul's letter is read, these believers are invited to support the continued expansion of the Good News.

Paul's message to the Romans follows the usual pattern of his letters, including the opening and closing greetings. He starts with a clear and strong statement expressing the heart of the royal gospel about Jesus and of his own mission as an apostle.

Following this, Paul presents a substantial teaching section in the first part of the main body of the letter. This section is as long and complex as anything we find in his letters, so it's worth saying a little more about how Paul structures the flow of his thought here. Paul regularly taught his churches, comprised of both Jews and Gentiles, the story of God's people in the First Testament. In this section, he builds his presentation of the Good News directly on the sequence of ancient Israel's calling, captivity, rescue, and promised inheritance.

Paul writes that God created all people to worship Him and to serve His purposes in the world, but this human vocation was disrupted by the intrusion of sin and death. Abraham's family was chosen as the means by which God would reclaim His original purpose. Through Abraham's descendants, God sent his Son as Israel's Messiah to rescue them and fulfill their mission. In His death and resurrection, Jesus is shown to be the Savior of the whole world, bringing life and restoration to all peoples on earth. God's people look forward to receiving their promised inheritance when they are raised from the dead and all of creation is set free from death and decay.

The second part of the main body of the letter then follows, detailing what new life in Christ should look like within a believing community of Jews and Gentiles. For example, Paul explains how they should accommodate Jews who wish to continue observing their Jewish dietary regulations and festivals while not requiring Gentiles to participate in these activities.

Between the two major sections of the main body, Paul inserts a short hymn of praise. The scope of God's restorative work through Jesus is stunning, and Paul shows us that the only fitting response is worship: "Oh, how great are God's riches and wisdom and knowledge!"

While concluding his letter, Paul asks the Roman church for help so he can continue to share the Good News with all people. He both opens and closes his letter with the hope that "all Gentiles everywhere" will hear the Good News about Jesus "so that they too might believe and obey him."