

Session 1: Gospel.

How can we become confident in our faith?

Welcome to Session 1 of our teaching series on Romans. In this session you will find worship song suggestions, a sermon outline and a written prayer.

KEY VERSE:

‘For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes ...’

ROMANS 1.16 (ESV)

BIBLE READINGS:

Romans 1.1-7, 14-17

MAIN QUESTIONS:

What is the original context of Romans, how did this letter impact the early church and why is it relevant for us today?
How can we continue to be confident in the gospel in our times?

MAIN THEMES:

The gospel; Paul's identity and confidence; the righteousness of God.

Context:

Romans is one of Paul's best-known letters. It is a deeply theological, yet also deeply practical, letter. Although written for house churches in ancient Rome, the letter and its themes are profoundly relevant for us today. Paul wrote this letter with the aim of one day visiting the church in Rome. Although he ended up in Rome in chains (see Acts 28.16–20) and eventually died at the hands of the authorities there, his letter changed the church and continues to have this impact on lives today.

Summary:

The apostle Paul writes to the church in Rome. He identifies himself as a slave of Jesus Christ, and writes to a church made up of Gentiles and Jews, slaves and free people. Although the church is facing difficulties and persecution, Paul is confident in the message of the gospel and urges the Romans to remain confident as well.

WORSHIP SONG SUGGESTIONS:

- Good, Good Father
- How Great Thou Art
- How Great Is Our God
- Our God
- Here I Am To Worship
- O Praise The Name (Anastasis)
- In Christ Alone
- Yes And Amen

Reflections:

This first session is key as you begin your journey through Romans. Start with setting out the roadmap for the journey, and enable your congregation to get a glimpse of where you will be journeying together over the course of the series. Use chapters 1 and 16 to introduce the letter, its audience and why Paul wrote to this church. This introduction will then give a good foundation for the rest of the series. As well as anchoring the letter in its historical context, you can use this sermon to connect the broad themes of Romans (grace, unity, salvation by faith alone) to current themes and societal issues. Romans can be an intimidating letter for many, but if your congregation can get a glimpse of relevant issues in this first sermon, they will be able to see how the rest of the series will be relevant and applicable for them.

Paul's confidence in the gospel expressed in Romans 1.16 is key for this session, as the aim of this series is for the members of your congregation to join Paul in proclaiming the message of the gospel more confidently. Consider Paul's character and calling and reflect on the willingness and confidence of your members to share the gospel with those around them.

This session should give a good introduction to Romans and help your congregation feel they will benefit from the series. The concluding session will circle back to chapters 1 and 16, and should help you tie the whole series together, so remember to look back at this introduction when you draw the series to a close.

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Suggested sermon outline

INTRODUCTION

Romans can feel like a daunting letter for many people, but it is deeply rewarding and well worth the effort. It's the kind of book where many people finish it and can't wait to read it again!

Do you have a story that can illustrate this idea and create some excitement for the series? Perhaps you've attempted something that felt daunting – a mountain-climb, or a large project – but which you found to be more life-giving than you could possibly have imagined?

Are there particular reasons why you have decided to preach on Romans? You may want to share how this letter has been particularly meaningful for you, and what you hope the church will get out of it.

The main body of the sermon will give some background information about the letter, and help people get a sense of the journey on which you are about to embark.

KEY POINTS: THREE HARD TRUTHS

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1 The author: Paul (Romans 1.1)

- **Introduce Paul and give a brief biography of who he is and how he came to be a follower of Jesus.**
 You could draw from the various accounts of Paul's conversion, which provide plenty of background information (Acts 9; 22; 26). For more information on Paul, you may want to check out NT Wright's *Paul: A Biography*.
- **Paul introduces himself as 'a servant of Jesus Christ' (verse 1), literally a 'slave'.**
 Consider the significance of Paul's understanding of himself as a slave of Christ, showing how subversive an idea that was in a world where 30 per cent of Roman citizens were slaves, and every slave wanted to be free. Paul doesn't seem to be resentful about this idea; he proudly calls himself Christ's servant!
- **This idea was not only radical in Paul's day; it challenges the way we think about freedom today.**
 Our culture largely subscribes to an idea of freedom that says, 'freedom means the complete absence of restrictions – nobody can tell you what to do!' But Paul has a different understanding. For him, true freedom is found through submission to Jesus as the Lord of your life and devoting yourself to him. Slavery, freedom and devotion will be repeated themes as we journey through Romans.

2 The recipient: the church in Rome (Romans 1.7, 14–15)

- **To whom was Paul writing this letter, and what were the particular needs they had, which are addressed in this letter?**
 Give some background information about the Roman church. You may particularly want to emphasise their diversity (see the list of names in Romans 16, which include Greek, Latin and Jewish names, as well as those belonging to wealthy people and poor), and some of the challenges that arose between Jewish and Gentile believers, due to the expulsion of the Jews from Rome, and their return in AD 54 (see Acts 18.2). Unity is a key theme that will emerge through this letter, both through Paul’s explanation of the gospel, and the practical teaching he gives later.
- **How does Paul see the church in Rome?**
 Paul describes the believers in Rome as being ‘loved by God and called to be saints’ (Romans 1.7). But it’s also clear that Paul himself loves this church. You may want to draw out a few comments from Paul’s greetings in Romans 16, which emphasise how deeply Paul cares for this community. As we explore the letter, which contains some tricky passages, keep that in mind! Paul is not writing a dispassionate or theoretical letter; he is writing to people he loves and for whom he wants the best.
- **How does Paul see himself in relation to both God and the church in Rome?**
 In verse 1, Paul describes himself as a slave of Christ, set apart for the gospel, and in verse 14, he says he is under obligation to the believers in Rome – both Jew and Gentile. As one who has been entrusted with the gospel, he has an obligation to pass it on. Like a delivery man given a precious item, he is both under obligation to the one who entrusted it to him, and the one to whom it is meant to be delivered. But what is this message that Paul has been entrusted to deliver?

3 The message: the gospel (Romans 1.2–6, 16–17)

- **The gospel is promised in the Scriptures (verse 2)**
 The word ‘gospel’ means ‘good news’ and it is not new news, but the news that has been promised right through the Old Testament. This is a theme that we will see as we go through Romans, as Paul picks up many of the promises made in the Jewish Scriptures and shows how they find their fulfilment in Christ. You may want to take a moment here to give a hint of what is to come, showing how Romans is shaped around the story of Israel. Chapters 1–3 unpack the themes of creation, Adam and the fall from Genesis chapters 1–3; Romans 4 explores the call of Abraham; Romans 6–7 considers the exodus and the giving of the law, and Romans 8 depicts the arrival in the promised land.

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- **The gospel is proved by the resurrection (verse 4).**

These promises all come to their fulfilment in Jesus Christ, who was revealed to be the Son of God through his resurrection from the dead. Romans is not, ultimately, about some big and complicated ideas, but about a person – Jesus Christ. In him all of the promises of Scripture and longings of the human heart find their fulfilment. And this good news about Jesus is powerful to bring salvation to all people (verse 16).

CONCLUSION

How do we live in the light of this?

Below are some suggested points of application. Feel free to select a couple of points which are most appropriate to your setting.

- You may want to encourage people to set aside some time to read through Romans this week. It will take about an hour in one sitting. There is real value in reading the letter as a whole, rather than just in isolated chunks, to help you appreciate the sweep of Paul's argument. Tell people not to worry too much about understanding it all – this series will help with that!
- Consider some of the things that cause tension in your church community. The differences among you will be different to those in Rome, no doubt. Take some time to consider the diverse people that make up your church community, and some of the differences between you in how you practise your faith. Perhaps through this series you might want to find some practical ways to build deeper unity in your diversity.
- Paul sees himself as a slave of Christ (verse 1), under obligation to share the gospel (verse 14), of which he is not ashamed (verse 16). Would you describe yourself in the same way? Which bits of that description do you find most challenging? Don't worry if you find these descriptions hard to relate to, we will explore them more as the series goes on.



READING SUGGESTIONS:

- *Romans: A Letter That Makes Sense of Life* by Andrew Ollerton
- *The Message of Romans* by John Stott
- *Paul: A Biography* by NT Wright



WRITTEN PRAYER

Lord Jesus, thank you for Paul's wonderful letter and all we have heard today. Please be with us throughout this series as we explore the book of Romans. Open our eyes to the depth and beauty of the gospel so that we may have a richer grasp of all that you have done in the past and all that you continue to do in us today. Lord, help us not to be ashamed, confused or quiet about the gospel. Teach us through Romans so that we may be more confident in you and share our love for you more openly and widely. Amen.