

Sermons through

ROMANS

An Introduction and Survey

With Study Questions

*Pastor Paul Viggiano
Branch of Hope Church
2370 W. Carson Street, #100
Torrance, CA 90501
(310) 212-6999
pastorpaul@integrity.com
www.branchofhope.org
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Introduction

When I was a senior in high school a movie came out starring Steve McQueen and Dustin Hoffman entitled *Papillon*; the trailers dubbed it the greatest escape movie of all time. That was a bold claim considering a movie also starring Steve McQueen had debuted ten years earlier called *The Great Escape* which was the greatest escape movie of all time.

As a youngster I loved *The Great Escape*. It was based upon the true account of World War II prisoners organizing a highly technical escape from a Nazi prisoner of war camp. The music was good, as was the acting and excitement of chases and confrontations. I was looking forward to *Papillon* being even better—the same actor escaping from Devil's Island! I was disappointed.

I was waiting for the impressive, coordinated, calculated escape plan. It never seemed to come. The prisoner's efforts were clumsy and mismanaged. I was glad when the movie ended.

Years later, for some reason, I was roped into watching the movie again. I enjoyed it. I've watched it a couple of times since and enjoyed it even more. Perhaps I enjoyed it because I had much lower expectations. But why did I dislike it so much when I first saw it? It was because I was watching the movie with a certain expectation—a great escape movie rather than a movie about friendship or persistence. It was the way the movie had been billed—what I thought it was about.

My point here is that what we think a movie or book or song or poem is about will highly flavor how we understand the specific lines or scenes. It will also dramatically affect our interest. If I began reading the most boring poem imaginable I would lose your interest.

But if I told, afterward, that the poem was about you, you'd beg me to read it again.

As we embark upon our study of Romans, we must begin asking ourselves just what the Epistle to the Romans about. If we were to give this letter a title, what would it be? What would the trailer say about Romans? Have you ever considered what title you might give the Bible? After all, the word bible just means book—named after a Phoenician port where papyrus was exported. We add 'holy' that we might recognize that it is sacred or unique to all books. But what would you name it? What is the Bible about?

What you think the whole Bible is primarily about will have a dramatic impact upon how you read its parts. Is it about human empowerment? Is it about tolerance? Doing unto others as you would have them do unto you? Is it about saving souls? Is it about having an abundant life?

Whether we articulate it or not, the more we read the Bible the more we develop an idea of what it's about. This is one of the reasons it becomes clearer over time. This is also one of the reasons it becomes easy to identify verses and passages quoted out of context and misused.

As I mature in wisdom I might tweak this, but as it currently stands my title of the Bible would be something like: "The Glory of God" with the sub-title "A Demonstration of God's Attributes through the Course of Redemptive History," or something like that. That is a presupposition I'm inclined to bring to my reading of every page. If I'm wrong, then I will tend to misapply the text. As I read the Bible, I must be ever open to have my presuppositions or assumptions refined—as one elder conveyed "I must always give the Holy Spirit another shot at me."

I labor this because I've noticed (with others and myself) a tendency to feel comfortable going verse by verse through a book in the Bible, as if the mere exercise means we're succeeding in being biblically based church. But often, and almost inevitably, we use

certain verses or passages as a springboard into a topical study, leaving the context of the particular epistle far behind—we have thus produced in our culture a sort of 'sound-bite' Christianity.

Going back to my question—what is the Epistle to the Romans about? If we have no idea whatsoever then all the passages will be hanging in mid-air—poems with no subject. Light-heartedly we've tease about how long it will take to get to chapter twelve in this sermon series—where the exhortations begin—where Paul gives a significant **"Therefore"**—where we're told, in light of these things, here is how we ought to behave.

It may be years before we reach chapter twelve. Is this how the original recipients handled this letter? Did the church at Rome receive this letter from Paul in, say, 56AD only to reach chapter twelve in 59AD? I suspect not. I think it is a safe speculation to suppose that they read the entire epistle quite rapidly and understood the context all too well.

Of course herein lies the rub!

We're reading somebody else's mail and are left to try to figure out just what was happening in that church that would spur Paul, by the Holy Spirit, to write the things he wrote. What is Romans about? On top of that, we must then ask what difference it makes to us. What are the **"common to man"** problems that existed among **"all who are in Rome"** and where do we see these things in our own culture, church and lives?

There is significant disagreement regarding what Romans is about. A very broad and safe statement is to say Romans is about God. Leon Morris observes:

The word "God" occurs 153 times in Romans, an average of once every 46 words. This is more often than in any

other New Testament writing (except the short 1 John).¹

Romans is about a God who is faithful, a God who justifies, a God who elects, a God whose wisdom and knowledge are **“unsearchable”** and whose ways **“past finding out,”** a God who demonstrates His power that His **“name may be declared in all the earth.”**

This may sound obvious, but to approach the Epistle to the Romans as if it is a book about God rather than us will not merely produce greater accuracy, but I believe we'll find it to be a greater fountain. And we will find it to be a fountain addressing and revealing the righteousness, grace, power and will of God in a wide variety of issues. It's been proposed that...

...when any one gains a knowledge of this Epistle, he has an entrance opened to him to all the most hidden treasures of Scripture.²

Though we must resist the notion that Romans is a systematic theology or Paul's confession of faith (it is a letter to a church addressing specific issues in that church), it is certainly, in some sense, Paul's *magnum opus* (greatest work—if not merely in content, certainly in size). It addresses: man's nature, God's law, general revelation, special revelation, justification by faith, the purpose of tribulation, baptism, election, eschatology, unity in the church, etc. We will be pursuing numerous topics in our trek through Romans.

¹ Morris, L. (1988). *The Epistle to the Romans* (20). Grand Rapids, Mich.; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.

² Calvin, J. (1998). *Calvin's Commentaries: Romans* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; Calvin's Commentaries. Albany, OR: Ages Software.

Survey

If I can dare a brief survey—pull out the binoculars and scan a thousand mile horizon with the mere shifting of my neck—here is what we'll see as we proceed through Romans:

Chapters 1-3

In chapters one through three Paul (after his introduction) seems to put all men in their place. All men know there is a God and choose, not to merely ignore, but aggressively reject what they know to be true. God, therefore, gives men over to their own debased mind resulting in their **"being filled with all unrighteousness."** Men know this behavior is deserving of death—yet they continue in it and approve others who practice the same.

Paul will teach that this is a universal truth—whether you're a Jew or a gentile, whether you have the Scriptures or not, men are without excuse. There is no partiality with God. Whether one is raised in the world or raised in the church, he must abandon the fiction of that he can obtain holiness according to his blood, will, nature, sacrament or anything else that finds its genesis in the efforts of man.

Paul will begin to touch on how the unbelief among Israelites is not a testimony against the faithfulness of God. The Christian faith hinges, not on the righteousness of man but on the righteousness of God—**"let God be true but every man as a liar."** Shortly after those words Paul gives a litany of passages designed to reveal what an open tomb the throat of man is—there is none righteous, no, not one.

The entire human race is on an equal playing field when it comes to the approval of a holy God. The church's lack of willingness to embrace this truth (total depravity) became the source of pride and factions.

Chapter 4

In chapter four Paul provides two examples of Old Testament saints to demonstrate that this is no new teaching. Abraham believed and it was accounted to him righteousness. David described the blessedness of God apart from works but by forgiveness—**“blessed is the man to whom the Lord shall not impute sin.”**

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 begins with the glorious words **“Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”** Here Paul will speak of the objective of tribulations—to produce a hope that does not **“disappoint because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit.”**

In this chapter Paul will also make the comparison between Adam and Christ—through one man sin and death entered and through the other justification and life.

Chapter 6

Lest we view this wonderful gift as a license to walk in sinfulness, Paul, in chapter 6, speaks of us as being baptized into Christ in such a way as to promote our walking **“in newness of life.”** We are no longer to live as slaves of sin. **“Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts.”**

Chapter 7

In chapter 7 we'll see Paul address how Christians **“have become dead to the law through the body of Christ.”** This is a highly misunderstood concept/chapter. Paul will give his own testimony of

how the law worked in his life. He also will write of his own struggle regarding sin and righteousness.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 is one of the great consoling chapters in all of Scripture. We learn there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ. What we could not do through the law, God did by sending His own Son. But the carnal minded man, through his best efforts, **"cannot please God."** Redemption is a spiritual enterprise accomplished by the work of the Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God.

It is in this chapter that Paul tells us of the glory which shall be revealed in us and he also writes of God's plan for His children which He predestined. It is on the basis of God choosing us rather than vice-versa that Paul launches into one of the great passages of the unseverable love of God.

Chapters 9-11

The first eight chapters leads to the natural question—a question which no doubt had been bantered about, stirring controversy—regarding Israel's unique place in redemptive history. In chapters 9 through 11 Paul will define the true Israel of God, making a comparison between them and Israel according to the flesh.

Paul here conveys his great love for his fellow Israelites and writes of them as one with great desire that they might be saved. He also clarifies what must have been an accusation against God that he has **"cast away His people."**

Chapters 12-16

A huge **“therefore”** appears in chapter 12—that Christians, in light of the mercy of God ought to present their **“bodies a living sacrifice.”** Paul's point here is that we ought to emulate to others the great love shown to us. It is as if Paul spent 11 chapters telling us who we are before telling us how to behave. How critical for Christians to grasp the heavenly machinations of their inclusion in God's covenant prior (at least logically prior) to setting their feet to good works.

In these chapters Paul will write of spiritual gifts, love “without hypocrisy,” blessing those who “persecute you,” repaying no one “evil for evil,” not taking matters of vengeance into our own hands but trusting that God will work through the authorities He has put in place.

Paul will encourage those who are strong in the faith not to despise the weak in the faith, especially as it relates to “doubtful things.” He will encourage us to imitate Christ who “did not please Himself” but bore the reproaches of men. He will again emphasize how this unity (of Jew and gentile) was always the plan of God as is evidenced by numerous Old Testament passages.

The epistle ends with many greetings to specific people, thus revealing Paul's intimate and pastoral heart. In that last chapter Paul will also caution the church to **“note those who cause divisions and offense, contrary to the doctrine which you have learned,”** that the simple might not be deceived by **“smooth words and flattering speech.”**

May God grant us wisdom in our study of this epistle—that we might be edified toward a godly unity and His name be lifted up in our lives and church.

Questions for Study

1. Why is it important to have an idea what a book is about while reading and studying it (pages 2, 3)?
2. If you were to give the Bible a name, what would it be (page 3)?
3. Why does the Bible become clearer to us the more we read it (page 3)?
4. As we begin Romans, do you have any notion regarding what Romans is about (page 5)?
5. Review and discuss what the various chapters in Romans are about (pages 6-9).