

a short guide to its history and message

# INTRODUCING THE NEW TESTAMENT

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*Introducing the New Testament*

An abridgment of *An Introduction to the New Testament*

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# PREFACE

Dear Reader,

You are probably using this book because you are convinced that the Bible is God’s Word—and, just for that reason, you are keen to understand it better. But, of course, God has chosen to reveal his Word to us in human words—words written by particular people, in particular situations, to particular people, and about particular problems and issues. Knowing about these particulars helps us to understand just what God in his Word is seeking to tell us. In this book, we outline the circumstances in which God’s New Testament Word was written in order to help you understand, appreciate, and live out that Word.

Few of you will read this book at one time from cover to cover. It is a reference book, one that you will want to consult as you read or teach portions of the New Testament. Each book (or, in some cases, a group of books) of the New Testament is profiled in its own chapter. These chapters provide a quick and readable overview of the circumstances in which the book was written, along with an outline of its contents. Other chapters address general topics that arise from a group of New Testament books—the Synoptic Gospels, the letters of the New Testament, the Apostle Paul. We especially encourage you to read, before turning to particular sections in the book, the opening chapter on “Thinking about the Study of the New Testament.” This chapter will provide an important orientation for what we say in the rest of the book.

This volume is a condensation of a longer and more detailed treatment of these same issues: *An Introduction to the New Testament* (D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo [2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005]). We encourage you to consult this longer treatment if you want to go more deeply into any of the issues we cover in this volume. Nevertheless, we are very grateful for the opportunity to put this larger work into a form that can be used by a wider audience. Andy Naselli did a remarkable job of providing an initial draft of this condensation, and we (Don and Doug) are very grateful for his careful

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work. All three of us hope and pray that as you learn more about the New Testament, you will come to know better and love more dearly the One whom the New Testament speaks of on its every page.

To God be the glory.

—D. A. Carson  
Douglas J. Moo  
Andrew David Naselli

# ABBREVIATIONS

BST	Bible Speaks Today
EBC	The Expositor's Bible Commentary
IVPNTC	InterVarsity Press New Testament Commentary
NAC	New American Commentary
NIBC	New International Bible Commentary
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NIV	New International Version of the Bible
NIVAC	New International Version Application Commentary
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version of the Bible
PNTC	Pillar New Testament Commentary
RSV	Revised Standard Version of the Bible
THNTC	Two Horizons New Testament Commentary
TNTC	Tyndale New Testament Commentary

# THINKING ABOUT THE STUDY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

People have been reading and studying the New Testament (NT) for as long as its documents have been in existence. Even before all twenty-seven NT books were written, some found the interpretation of the available documents more than a little challenging (see 2 Pet. 3:15–16 on Paul). A distance of two millennia and changes of language, culture, and history have not made the task any less difficult. Furthermore, the overabundance of writings on the NT across the centuries makes the task both easier and harder. It is easier because there are many good guides, and it is harder because the sheer volume and thoroughly mixed nature of the material are profoundly daunting.

## About This Book

This book aims to serve you as an introductory guide to understanding the NT. Its layout is straightforward, following the order of the NT books as they occur in our English Bibles. Chapters 2, 8, and 9 introduce groups of NT books, and the rest of the chapters discuss individual NT books, typically answering the following questions (though not always in this order):

1. Content: What is the book about?
2. Author: Who wrote the book?
3. Genre: What style of literature is used?
4. Date: When was the book written?
5. Place: Where was the book written?



6. Audience: To whom was the book written?
7. Purpose: Why was the book written?
8. Contributions: What does the book contribute to our understanding of the faith?

Most of the space in the chapters is dedicated to content and contributions. We suggest that you read this book with an open Bible, perhaps reading each NT book in its entirety as you work through the opening section on its content. The many headings and numbered lists make the material user-friendly with easy-to-find summaries of key points.

Each chapter ends by asking some questions for review and discussion and listing recommended resources for further reading. Below are some general resources that may aid you as you advance in your study of the NT.

## Recommended Resources

### Introductory

Blomberg, Craig L. *Jesus and the Gospels: An Introduction and Survey*. 2d ed. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2009.

———. *From Pentecost to Patmos: An Introduction to Acts through Revelation*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006.

Burge, Gary M., Lynn H. Cohick, and Gene L. Green. *The New Testament in Antiquity: A Survey of the New Testament within Its Cultural Contexts*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009.

Carson, D. A. "Approaching the Bible." Pages 1–19 in *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*. Edited by D. A. Carson, R. T. France, J. A. Motyer, and G. J. Wenham. 4th ed. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994. (This article gives a basic overview to interpreting the Bible.)

Elwell, Walter A., and Robert W. Yarbrough, eds. *Encountering the New Testament: A Historical and Theological Survey*. 2d ed. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005. (This book gives a trustworthy, readable overview with dozens of color pictures and an interactive CD-ROM.)

*The ESV Study Bible*. Wheaton: Crossway Bibles, 2008. (This Bible contains useful articles and concise introductions and notes for each book.)

*TNIV Study Bible*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006. (This Bible contains concise introductions and notes for each book.)

## Intermediate

- Alexander, T. Desmond, and Brian S. Rosner, eds. *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000. (This book has three parts: [1] twelve major introductory articles, e.g., D. A. Carson, “Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology,” pp. 89–104; [2] seven articles on the most important collections of biblical writings followed by articles on each book of the Bible; and [3] 140 articles on major biblical themes.)
- Evans, Craig A., and Stanley E. Porter, eds. *Dictionary of New Testament Background*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000.
- Green, Joel B., and Scot McKnight, eds. *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992.
- Hawthorne, Gerald F., and Ralph P. Martin, eds. *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993.
- Keener, Craig S. *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993.
- Martin, Ralph P., and Peter H. Davids, eds. *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997. (See especially D. A. Carson, “New Testament Theology,” pp. 796–814.)

## Advanced

- Black, David Alan, and David S. Dockery, eds. *Interpreting the New Testament: Essays on Methods and Issues*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001.
- Carson, D. A. *New Testament Commentary Survey*. 6th ed. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007. (Carson briefly evaluates hundreds of NT commentaries.)
- Thielman, Frank. *Theology of the New Testament: A Canonical and Synthetic Approach*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005. (This book is user-friendly for students, cautious, gentle, understated, and edifying.)

# ROMANS

## A. What Is Romans About?

Romans is Paul's longest letter and includes his most significant teachings.

1. The introduction (1:1–17) concludes with a transition that states the letter's theme: the gospel is the revelation of God's righteousness, which people can experience only by faith (1:16–17).
2. The gospel is the righteousness of God by faith (1:18–4:25). Sin has gained a stranglehold on all people that only an act of God—experienced as a gift received through faith—can break (1:18–3:20). The way to become innocent before God is through the sacrifice of his Son (3:21–26). This justification can be gained only by faith (3:27–31), as the story of Abraham clearly illustrates (4:1–25).
3. The gospel is the power of God for salvation in both our present earthly life and future judgment (5:1–8:39). Being justified results in peace with God and a secure hope for vindication on judgment day (5:1–11). The ground for this hope is the believer's relationship to Christ, who reversed the effects of Adam's sin (5:12–21). Christians must confidently battle the powers of this present realm: sin (6:1–23), the law (7:1–25), and death and the flesh (8:1–13). The Spirit assures Christians that they are God's children and will experience glorification (8:14–39).
4. The relationship between the gospel and Israel raises a question that requires vindicating God's righteousness (9:1–11:36): Does transferring covenant privileges from Israel to the church mean that God has spurned his promises to Israel? We are assured that that is certainly not the case (9:1–6a):

- a. God's promises were never intended to guarantee salvation to every Israelite by birth (9:6b–29).
  - b. Israelites failed to embrace God's righteousness in Christ (9:30–10:21).
  - c. Some Israelites, like Paul, are being saved (11:1–10).
  - d. It is only through Israel that salvation has come to Gentiles, and God's promise to Israel will come to full realization when "all Israel will be saved" (11:11–36).
5. The gospel transforms lives (12:1–15:13). God's grace should stimulate many forms of sacrificial service permeated by love (12:1–21). Christians may not ignore government's legitimate claims or the summarizing commandment to love their neighbors as themselves (13:1–14). Stronger and weaker Christians must respect and tolerate each other's views on observing certain dietary codes and rituals (14:1–15:13).
  6. The conclusion presents Paul's situation and travel plans, greetings to Roman Christians, a warning about false teachers, personal notes, and a benediction (15:14–16:27).

## B. Who Wrote Romans?

Romans claims to have been written by Paul (1:1), and there has been no serious challenge to this claim. Tertius was probably Paul's scribe (16:22).

## C. Where Was Romans Written?

Paul plans to travel to three places: Jerusalem, Rome, and Spain (15:22–29). He hopes to give Jewish Christians in Jerusalem an offering from the Gentile-Christian churches he has planted (15:25–27, 30–33), and he views his trip to Rome as a stopping-off point on his way to Spain (15:24, 28; cf. 15:19–20). Since Paul must be near the end of his third missionary journey as he writes Romans (Acts 19:21; 20:16), Corinth is the most likely place of writing (Acts 20:3 and 2 Cor. 13:1, 10; cf. Rom. 16:1–2, 23 and 1 Cor. 1:14).

## D. When Was Romans Written?

When Paul wrote Romans depends on the date of Paul's three-month stay in Greece, which depends on the chronology of Paul's life and ministry. The best option is about A.D. 57 (see the table in ch. 9).

## E. To Whom Was Romans Written?

Paul addresses the letter to “all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints” (NIV 1:7; cf. 1:15). We have no definite evidence concerning the origin of the church in Rome or its structure at the time Paul wrote to it. The most likely scenario is that Jews who were converted on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:10) were the first to bring the gospel there. When Rome temporarily expelled Jewish Christians, those Gentiles who had been attracted to Christianity would have taken over the church. When Jewish Christians later returned, they would probably be in a minority and perhaps viewed with some condescension by the now-dominant Gentile wing.

There are at least three options for Paul’s audience:

1. Entirely or mainly Jewish Christians
2. Entirely or mainly Gentile Christians
3. Both Jewish and Gentile Christians

Although the second option is more likely than the first (cf. 1:5–6), the third option is most likely (1:7). While Paul’s audience certainly includes Gentiles (1:13; 11:13), it presumably includes the Jewish Christians he greets in chapter 16 as well, and the “weak in faith” (14:1–15:13) are quite possibly a Jewish-Christian faction.

## F. Why Was Romans Written?

What was Paul’s purpose in sending such a heavy theological letter to Roman Christians? The letter does not explicitly state its purpose, and the only remaining method of determining its purpose is to fit its contents to its particular occasion. Opinions on Paul’s motivations in writing tend to emphasize the circumstances of either Paul or the Christian community in Rome.

### The Situation of Paul

Views that single out Paul’s own circumstances as decisive may be divided according to the places central to Paul’s concerns.

1. Spain. According to some scholars, Paul’s primary reason for writing this letter is to establish a relationship with the Roman Christians so that they would financially support his mission to plant new churches in Spain (15:24–29). Had this been Paul’s overriding purpose, however, we would have expected mention of Spain long before chapter 15. Nor does this adequately explain Paul’s select

treatment of theological topics from a perspective that traces the history of salvation regarding the law and gospel, Jew and Greek.

2. Galatia/Corinth. Other scholars would say that Paul's chief reason for writing this letter is to share his mature views on Jewish issues, which he dealt with in his struggle with Judaizers in Galatia and Corinth. This view, while partially right, leaves one crucial question unanswered: Why send this theological dissertation to Rome?
3. Jerusalem. Still others believe that Paul's principal reason for writing this letter is to "rehearse" the speech he anticipates giving in Jerusalem when he arrives there with the collection (see 15:30–33). The objections to the previous two views both apply here: (1) it leaves the purpose of the letter separate from Paul's desire to visit Rome (which Paul emphasizes in both the introduction and conclusion), and (2) it does not explain why Paul sends this theological treatise to Rome.

## The Situation of the Roman Christians

Other views emphasize the circumstances of the Roman Christians, particularly the one passage in Romans in which it appears that Paul has a specific problem in mind (14:1–15:13). This section rebukes two groups for their intolerance toward each other: the "weak in faith" (probably mainly Jewish Christians) and the "strong in faith" (probably mainly Gentile Christians). The rebuke focuses on the Gentile Christians, who are becoming arrogant toward the shrinking minority of Jewish Christians. This text, it is argued, is the center of Romans.

Although one of Paul's purposes in writing this letter was to heal this division in the Christian community in Rome, we doubt that this was his primary purpose.

1. It is hard to understand why Paul would have waited until chapter 14 to make a practical application of this theology.
2. The content of chapters 1–11 does not serve as a basis for the exhortations in 14:1–15:13.
3. Paul does not necessarily address the specific needs of the Roman church exactly as he does in other letters.

## Several Purposes

Paul's purpose in Romans cannot be confined to any of these specific suggestions. It may be better to speak of Paul's *several* purposes in Romans. A number of intersecting factors come together to form

what we might call Paul's missionary situation, and it is out of that situation that he writes to the Romans. Multiple circumstances lead Paul to write a letter in which he carefully sets forth his understanding of the gospel, particularly as it relates to salvation and the historical question of Jew and Gentile, law and gospel, and continuity and discontinuity between the old and the new:

1. Past battles in Galatia and Corinth
2. The coming crisis in Jerusalem
3. The need to secure a missionary base for the work in Spain
4. The importance of unifying the divided Christian community in Rome around the gospel
5. Misguided attacks against his theology as being anti-law and perhaps anti-Jewish (see 3:8)

## G. What Style of Literature Is Romans?

Although Romans is often viewed as a timeless treatise for every generation of Christians, its message is embedded in a document written to a particular audience in a definite situation (1:1–17; 15:14–16:27). To put it simply, Romans is a letter.

But what kind of letter? There were many types of letters in the ancient world, ranging from brief requests for money from children away from home to long essays intended to reach a wide audience (see ch. 8). Paul's letters generally fall somewhere between these extremes, but Romans is farther toward the latter end of the spectrum than any other of his letters (with the possible exception of Ephesians). Romans is a treatise that formally and systematically unpacks a theological argument, which Paul develops according to the inner logic of the gospel. Not once in chapters 1–13 does Paul allude to a specific circumstance or individual within the Roman Christian community.

## H. What Does Romans Contribute to Our Understanding of the Faith?

It is possible that Romans does not have a single theme, but rather has recurring motifs within several distinct topics. If we are to single out one theme, however, a good case can be made for "the gospel."

1. Gospel. Opinions vary about the "central" theme of Romans. The focus has tended over time to move from the beginning to the end of the letter: justification by faith (chs. 1–4), union with

Christ and the work of God's Spirit (chs. 6–8), the history of salvation and of Jews and Gentiles within this history (chs. 9–11), and practical exhortation to unity (14:1–15:13). Each of these four positions is alive in current scholarship, though sometimes in modified form.

- a. This word and its related verb “to evangelize” are prominent in the introduction and conclusion, where we might expect to encounter any overarching topic.
  - b. “Gospel” is foremost in 1:16–17, which is often (and probably rightly) taken to be the statement of the letter's theme.
  - c. Romans grows out of Paul's missionary situation, which would make a focus on the gospel quite natural.
2. Theological focus. Although Romans is not a timeless summary of Paul's theology, it is much less tied to specific first-century circumstances than almost any other book of the NT. Its unfolding of the gospel is systematic and accessible for readers today.
  3. Continuity and discontinuity. Romans addresses the most important issue that the early church had to face: the degree of continuity and discontinuity between Israel and the church. Romans supplies the basic building blocks for the foundation of a *Christian* theology.
  4. Individual salvation. Paul's gospel has important implications for the relation of Jews and Gentiles, but Romans 1–8 makes clear that Paul's gospel targets individual human beings, locked up under sin and in need of the redemption available only in Jesus Christ.
  5. Justification. Justification by faith is a critical component of Paul's presentation of the gospel. To be “justified” is to be declared right with God. This verdict, Paul insists in Romans, is a manifestation of pure grace on God's part and therefore can be attained by sinful human beings only through faith. The contemporary theological climate challenges this Reformation understanding of “justification by faith” at a number of points, but a careful reading of Romans reaffirms its truth and reminds us of its critical importance for the power of the gospel.
  6. Practical application. Romans is the greatest work of theology ever written, so it is understandable that the tendency when explaining its significance is to dwell on its theology. But Romans insists that the gospel is both thoroughly theological *and* practical. As the phrase “the obedience of faith” suggests at the beginning of the letter (1:5 NRSV; cf. 16:26), the gospel



Paul presents in Romans is a life-transforming message. Faith in Christ must always be accompanied by obedience to him as Lord. Chapters 12–16 are not an afterthought or appendix to Romans; they are present precisely because the gospel is not truly understood or responded to unless it has changed the people it addresses. The lordship of Christ and the indwelling of the Spirit must inevitably change the way we “think” (12:2) and, thus, ultimately, the way we live.

## I. Questions for Review and Discussion

1. How is the literary style of Romans different from most of Paul’s other letters? How does that affect how you read Romans?
2. What are Paul’s purposes for writing Romans? Why is it helpful to be aware of these purposes?
3. What are some major themes that people have suggested for Romans? What do you think is the central theme?
4. If Romans 1–11 is primarily theology, then the rest of the letter is primarily application. What is the relation between theology and application? Should one be valued more than the other? Is one expendable?
5. What specific passage in Romans is especially precious to you? How does that passage relate to the letter as a whole?

## J. Recommended Resources

### Introductory

- Edwards, James R. *Romans*. NIBC. Peabody: Hendrickson, 1992.
- Moo, Douglas J. *Encountering the Book of Romans: A Theological Survey*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002.
- Stott, John. *Romans: God’s Good News for the World*. BST. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994.

### Intermediate

- Moo, Douglas J. *Romans*. NIVAC. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000.

### Advanced

- Moo, Douglas J. *The Epistle to the Romans*. NICNT. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996.
- Westerholm, Stephen. *Understanding Paul: The Early Christian Worldview of the Letter to the Romans*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004.