



The Book of
ROMANS

Small Group Study 1: Romans 1–3

How to Use This Guide

Each study begins with some key verses and key principles for each passage, followed by a devotional introduction to prepare our hearts and minds. Then, the Study Guide section incorporates a series of questions specifically designed to help us engage the text of Romans in personal study and small group discussion, according to the H.E.A.R. method of Bible study:

- **Highlight:** Read and observe everything in the passage.
- **Explain:** Based on your reading, discover what the passage means in its context.
- **Apply:** Understand how the meaning of the passage affects your life.
- **Respond in Prayer:** Pray God's word back to him, asking to believe, share, and put the Bible into practice in your life and relationships.

Work on these exercises at any time throughout the week. Some may find it helpful to work through the exercises in sections—such as two or three blocks of 15 to 20 minutes each, while others may want to study the whole passage in one, hour-long sitting. Whichever approach you choose to take, please answer the exercises *before* your small group meeting. In small groups, we'll discuss our answers to the Bible study questions together. To maximize our study of God's Word and the impact it can have on our lives, we encourage everyone to work through *all* questions in each of the six weekly studies, but small group leaders may choose to focus on some questions more than others.

In addition to resources in this booklet, we also encourage you and your small group to take full advantage of the following Romans-specific resources.

Romans Scripture Journal

The Romans Scripture Journal is a special edition resource to aid your study of Romans in a few specific ways:

- The journal features larger font with extra spacing, wide margins, and blank pages and is designed to give you space to take notes and process what God is saying to you through his Word.
- The journal identifies key terms in bold that correspond with expanded definitions in a glossary at the back of the book.
- The journal includes recommended memory verses from each chapter of Romans, making it easier to hide God's Word in our hearts (Psalm 119:11).

Bible Reading Plan

Encounter God by reading his Word every day in 2023. In order to help us make daily Bible reading a priority, we have released a daily Bible reading plan for the people of City Awakening. Our reading plan usually covers one chapter per day, and our scheduled readings allow us to read Romans in its entirety three times throughout the year. The 2023 reading plan also features many books with connections to Romans. Some books represent Scriptures quoted by Paul in Romans (e.g. Genesis, Psalms, Isaiah), while other books represent related themes (e.g. Galatians, James, Hebrews).

Week One: (Romans 1:1–17)

Key Verses

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, first to the Jew, and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed ...” - Romans 1:16–17 (CSB)

Key Principles

- Romans is about God’s gospel.
- The gospel reveals both God’s power and God’s righteousness.
- The gospel is for all peoples.
- Paul is going to show us throughout this book that every nook and cranny of the gospel has been proclaimed by the Old Testament prophetic writings, long before he took on the job of apostle.
- Romans provides information that is vital to our growth in our relationship with God.

Read

Romans is a powerful book. The contents of its pages have changed the lives of many influential people in history (e.g. Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin, to name a few). One could even argue that much of Western history changed course because of the contents in this book. And over the next 12 months, we are going to study this book slowly to allow every ounce of its power to be unleashed in our minds and hearts as we go through it together.

This week, we will look at Romans 1:1–17. In the opening verse, we see that the Apostle Paul is the author of this letter (1:1), and these first 17 verses serve as the introduction of the book, where Paul: 1) introduces some key concepts about the gospel, 2) tells us the occasion for his writing, and 3) gives us the theme for his letter.

1) Key Concepts (1:1–6)

Paul wrote many of the letters in the New Testament, and he often began his letters in a similar pattern—introducing himself as an apostle of Jesus Christ for the sake of the gospel and providing a series of descriptive phrases that tell us more about the gospel and his mission.

In Romans, this introduction takes up the first six verses. After introducing himself to the Romans as “an apostle set apart for the gospel of God” (1:1), Paul moves on to descriptive phrases about the gospel and his specific mission in it. Much of what Paul uses in Romans 1:1–6 is different from how he describes himself and the gospel in his other letters. We learn much more about the gospel in this introduction, but three points are unique to Romans and essential for understanding message of this book.

First, Paul makes sure we know that this is God’s gospel. Other books of the Bible might mention phrases like the “gospel of Christ” (see Galatians 1:7; Philippians 1:27), and Matthew’s preferred phrase is “the gospel of the kingdom” (Matthew 4:23; 9:35; 24:14). But in Romans, Paul calls it the “gospel of God”—defining our relationship with God himself. Even more broadly, Paul describes how the nations of the entire world relate to God. Verses 16 and 17 add further detail, saying that the gospel is important because it reveals both God’s power for salvation and God’s righteousness. This is God’s gospel, not anyone else’s.

Second, this introduction tells us that the gospel has been God's idea from the beginning of time. Romans 1:2 explains that God had been promising this gospel would arrive one day, and the fact that we have seen it come to fruition means two things—God is faithful to keep his promises and is powerful enough to put them in motion. But this verse is also a foreshadowing of Paul's approach in writing the letter. Paul is going to show us throughout this book that every nook and cranny of the gospel has been proclaimed by the Old Testament prophetic writings, long before he became an apostle.

Third, the introduction declares that the gospel is for all nations (1:5). Sure, the gospel comes through Jesus, who is the direct descendant of the Jewish king David, but Jesus is also the Son of God who will receive obedience from every nation (1:5). Paul will spend a great deal of time showing how Jews, Gentiles (or "Greeks"; Paul uses these words interchangeably), and every human can take part in this gospel and what will happen to them if they do not.

2) Occasion (1:7–15)

Next, in Romans 1:7–15, Paul tells us why he is writing this letter. Paul longs to visit Christians in Rome and preach the gospel to them in person. He knows that such a visit would strengthen (1:11) and encourage (1:12) his brothers and sisters in Christ. However, Paul chooses to write a letter to the Roman church at this time because he sees a strategic opportunity to meet with Christians and raise relief funds in support of the church in Jerusalem and Judea. The church in Judea had fallen on hard times, and Paul believed that a collection of financial resources would strengthen relationships between Christians of diverse backgrounds—specifically, Gentile Christians and their brothers and sisters in Christ who were ethnic Jews.

3) Theme (1:16–17)

Romans 1:16–17 function as theme verses for Paul. In these verses, Paul gives his topic for the letter—the gospel. The gospel reveals both God's power for salvation and God's righteousness to those who believe. And this gospel is for everyone (both Jew and Gentile).

Read Romans 1:16–17 a few times before each week's study to help keep you focused on Paul's main theme.

We're going to learn a lot about God's character by taking a deeper look at God's gospel in Romans. So, buckle your seatbelts, whether you're new to Christianity or you've been following Jesus for years, Romans provides information that is vital to our growth in our relationship with God.

Study Guide

The following study questions are meant to help us wrestle with the text of Romans and see how the gospel displays God's righteousness. Set aside some time this week to meet with God and answer these questions for yourself. Complete each question before your weekly small group meeting. Then, when you gather with your small group, be prepared to discuss your answers together.



Read Romans 1:16–17 to remain focused on Paul's major points. Then, read Romans 1:1–17 in preparation for this week's study.

Highlight

1. Reread Romans 1:1–17, keeping in mind that this is the introduction to a long letter. What might we expect to find in the rest of Romans based on this introduction?
2. Looking at Romans 1:8–15, what does Paul want for the Roman Christians? What different ways does Paul express his affections for the Roman believers?
3. Read Romans 1:1–6 again. Now, flip to the end of the book and read Romans 16:25–27. What similarities can we identify between the two sections?

Remember, many in Paul's audience would hear this letter recited out loud instead of reading it with their own eyes. And writers in Paul's time often repeated main ideas at the beginning and the end, which helped the audience remember key phrases and concepts.

4. In your own words, write a phrase or sentence that summarizes what you think the theme of Romans is.

We'll come back to this exercise when we have finished studying the entire book and compare your answers.

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Explain

5. Romans 1:2 declares that the gospel was promised beforehand by God's prophets in the Holy Scriptures. Why is this important?

6. Paul uses the terms "faith" and "belief" several times in Romans 1:1–17. What do we learn about faith from this passage?

7. Romans 1:1–17 contains a number of words that are important for Christians—"gospel," "salvation," and "righteousness." How are these words related to one another in Romans 1:1–17? Based on Paul's use of these three words in this passage, how would you explain each term?

8. What groups are mentioned by Paul in Romans 1:14? Why is Paul obligated to them and what must he do because of this obligation?

9. Why is Paul not ashamed of the gospel? How should this understanding affect our lives?

10. How is the righteousness of God revealed in the gospel?

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Apply

11. What do you think Paul means by the phrase “obedience of faith” in Romans 1:5? What does it look like to practice that obedience in our own lives?

12. Paul says clearly that he is “not ashamed of the gospel” in Romans 1:16. What would it look like to be ashamed of the gospel? How have you experienced temptations to hide what you believe about Jesus?

13. Reflect on the ways Romans 1:1–17 shows us that Jesus deserves our worship and respect. How do these truths encourage you to share the gospel? Share the practical steps you will take this week to display the gospel with your small group.

14. What does it look like to mutually encourage one another as believers like Paul desired to do in Romans? How can we do that as a small group?

15. Verse 6 says that believers are “called to belong to Jesus Christ.” What does it mean to belong to Jesus Christ? How is your life different because you belong to Jesus? What actions, decisions, or priorities is the Holy Spirit prompting you to consider?

16. What questions do you want answered about the gospel, faith, or the book of Romans during our study this year?

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Respond in Prayer

In Romans 1–3, Paul references specific psalms in order to grow our understanding of God’s righteousness. Each week of this Study Guide will include a recommended psalm that helps us focus on the righteousness of our great God. Set aside some time this week to read through the selected psalm and use the prayer prompts below as your guide. We recommend praying through this psalm on your own at home and together with your small group. And for those looking for more passages to pray, feel free to return to Romans 1–3 and pray through those passages as well.

This Week’s Prayer Passage: Psalm 143

Read Psalm 143.

Pray through the following prompts, according to the A.C.T.S. method.

- **Adoration:** Give God praise for these characteristics that you see in Psalm 143:
 - He is steadfast (143:8,12).
 - He is merciful (143:1).
 - He is righteous (143:1,11).
 - He is faithful (143:1).
 - He is what our soul truly needs (143:6).
- **Confession:** Plead with God for his mercy. The Lord has every right to judge us for our unrighteousness. Confess to God how we have not been steadfast and faithful like he has been to us.
- **Thanksgiving:** Thank God for the following blessings:
 - God lifts our souls and guides us when we are down.
 - God already has victory over our greatest enemies—sin, death, and the devil.
 - Thank God that he has maintained his relationship with us in his steadfast love.
- **Supplication:** Ask God that he would help lift our spirits where situations in our lives have made us downcast (143:3–4). Ask that God would guide us in your next steps in our lives (143:10). Ask that God would be our refuge (14

Week Two: (Romans 1:18–32)

Key Verse

“For though they knew God, they did not glorify him as God or show gratitude. Instead, their thinking became worthless, and their senseless hearts were darkened.”

- Romans 1:21 (CSB)

Key Principles

- God brings judgment against all unrighteousness and it is right for him to do this.
- Ignoring God prompts him to give people over to all sorts of problems and sins.
- The God of the gospel cannot be truly glorious to us without a profound understanding of our real problem.
- Those who have been forgiven much will demonstrate great love in return.

Read

There are a few recurring themes throughout the entire book of Romans that Paul brings up in the first three chapters:

- The profound equality that all of humankind shares in the eyes of God.
- God’s righteous judgment on all those who choose to worship creation over Creator.
- The sharp contrast between righteousness and unrighteousness.

As to the third theme, Paul ends Romans 1:17 with the sentence, “The righteous shall live by faith.” This quotation, referring to Habakkuk 2:4, raises the topic of righteousness, a recurring theme in Romans that Paul often uses to describe both God and faithful people who are in right-standing with God. A basic definition of righteous is morally right or virtuous. Righteousness, then, is an attribute, a characteristic, and a state of being—the extent to which one is morally right or virtuous. For example, when Paul mentions God’s righteousness, he is often describing how God is faithful, true, and just (Romans 3:1–8). Other times, Paul is talking about how God’s righteousness is a gift that he has given believers. Through Christ, we get to claim his righteousness, his right-standing with God, as our own. What an amazing gift! Throughout your reading, take note of how Paul uses the word “righteousness” and who it describes.

In Romans 1–3, Paul begins his explanation of righteousness by describing what righteousness is not. In other words, in order to help us understand how righteousness works, Paul spends the next few chapters showing how unrighteousness works. And just like you would imagine, it is the opposite of all that is faithful, true, and just.

The first thing we need to know is that God judges unrighteousness. Romans 1:18 carries the message that God is currently against all unrighteousness, will actively thwart it in the present, and will destroy it completely in the future. At first glance, any of us might be tempted to excuse ourselves from being labeled “unrighteous.” After all, the description of unrighteousness in Romans 1:18–32 lists some of the worst sins and behaviors we could imagine. Yet Paul explains in Romans 1:18–32, that God’s wrath and judgment fall upon those who practice any of this unrighteousness. Let that idea sink in. When any of us do just one unrighteous act or think one unrighteous thought, we deserve to die (1:32). This means that all of us are guilty of practicing

unrighteousness and deserve God's judgment. And we deserve God's judgment because God is perfectly righteous, so any amount of unrighteousness is unacceptable for our righteous God.

But how can this be? How did we get like this? Did we really become slaves to all sorts of evil desires? First, God has made himself known through creation, so that we would worship him (1:19–20). All of us have foolishly worshiped creation instead of the Creator and now our hearts are darkened because of our rebellion (1:21). Though God has given us his matchless glory, we ignored him and settled for worshiping idols (1:23). Then, we started practicing all sorts of evil and unrighteous behavior, and we gave approval to those who did the same (1:32). It is a scary progression and one that we all are equally guilty of following apart from God's grace in our lives.

Paul repeatedly states that because God is a good and righteous God, he must judge all unrighteousness. They dishonored God, so he, in turn, dishonored their bodies by delivering them over to corrupt desires (1:21–24). They exchanged God for images and exchanged his truth for a lie. Thus, God gives them over to exchange their natural desires for unnatural ones (1:23–27). And because they did not think it worthwhile to acknowledge God, God delivered them over to a corrupt—literally translated as disacknowledged—mind (1:28). Every form of sin is met with an appropriate righteous judgment from God. Consider the sins listed in this section and how they are not only the cause of God's judgment but also the evidence of God's judgment on the world.

This means that the more we make it our practice to ignore God, the more we prompt God to give us over to different forms of unrighteousness. For example, when we sin with our words and lash out in sinful anger and bitterness against another person, God often gives us over to the consequence of friction in the relationship. Each of us can probably think of other practical examples in our own lives and communities. The seriousness of our unrighteousness and God's wrath can be seen in an illustration from 20th-century British author and professor C.S. Lewis. According to Lewis, God's judgment is not about a vindictive, malicious God tormenting innocent people. Instead, as Lewis metaphorically stated, "There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, in the end, 'Thy will be done.' All that are in hell choose it."¹ As we look around at unrighteousness in our

¹ C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 75.

world, and more importantly, our own lives, we should be sobered by the seriousness of God's righteous wrath.

In Romans, God does not offer us a superficial diagnosis of our problem. He mercifully teaches us that our deepest problems concern sin and wrath. All of us are sinful in rejecting God, and God himself has righteous wrath against us. Knowing the true nature of our problem will help us cherish God's kindness in the gospel. Romans 1:18–32 lays out the things that God must overcome in order to save us. He must remain righteous and true to himself, yet forgive and transform sinners. Can a good and righteous God ever simply let sinners walk away free? If God is righteous, he must offer exact retribution. Christ would take on every bit of the righteous wrath of God for those that would trust in him. What kind of God would do such a thing? The God of the gospel cannot be truly glorious to us without a profound understanding of our real problem.

Hopefully, taking a closer look at what happens to the unrighteous makes us realize the terrible and undesirable outcomes of consistently choosing unrighteousness. Paul explains that we are all equally lost without God's grace and we all have a desperate need for God's glorious gospel. Understanding this deep need for a Savior will help us appreciate how much Christ has done to save us. As Jesus himself explains, those who have been forgiven much will demonstrate great love in return; "but the one who has been forgiven little, loves little" (Luke 7:47). Consider this week how dark our paths were without Christ, how much God has given us in Christ, and how much we still need God's grace.

Study Guide

The following study questions are meant to help us wrestle with the text of Romans and see how the gospel displays God's righteousness. Set aside some time this week to meet with God and answer these questions for yourself. Complete each question *before* your weekly small group meeting. Then, when you gather with your small group, be prepared to discuss your answers together.



Read Romans 1:16–17 to remain focused on Paul's major points. Then, read Romans 1:18–32 in preparation for this week's study.

Highlight

1. What words does Paul use to describe the actions of unrighteous people in Romans 1:18–32? What words does he use to describe God’s actions? Do you see any similarities?

2. How are humankind’s actions related to God’s actions in Romans 1:18–32?

Hint: Notice the phrases “therefore” (1:24), “for this reason” (1:26), and “because” (1:28).

3. From what we know so far in Romans 1, contrast how Romans 1:18–32 describes an unrighteous person with what we might assume about a righteous person. Share your reflections with your small group.

4. What comes to your mind when you think about the wrath of God? Now, read Romans 1:18–32 again. How does Paul think about the wrath of God?

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Explain

5. According to Romans 1:18–32, what is idolatry and how does it come about?

6. How do people “suppress the truth” (1:18) of God by what they do and what they do not do?

7. Paul repeats three times in Romans 1:18–32 that God “gave them up” or “delivered them over” (1:24, 26, 28). What do these phrases tell us about God and about ourselves? What is Paul emphasizing through this repetition?

8. What does it mean to be “without excuse” (1:20) and why is this important for how anyone understands the gospel?

9. What is the overall point Paul is trying to make in Romans 1:18–32? How does this relate to what Paul said in Romans 1:1–17?

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Apply

10. Paul describes idolatry in terms of how it developed in ancient times, producing wooden statues and false gods. What are some of the ways that our culture expresses idolatry today? How do we worship things other than God?

11. God deserves our first and our best in everything, whether it is our time, our talent, or our treasure. What things in your life challenge God's place for the first and the best?

12. Where are you guilty of judging and condemning others for sins that you excuse in your own life? How might the gospel influence such tendencies?

13. How have you seen God's wrath at work in the world? In your own life? In your small group?

14. Is it hard for you to agree that, according to Romans 1:32, people deserve spiritual death? Why or why not?

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Respond in Prayer

In Romans 1–3, Paul references specific psalms in order to grow our understanding of God’s righteousness. Each week of this Study Guide will include a recommended psalm that helps us focus on the righteousness of our great God. Set aside some time this week to read through the selected psalm and use the prayer prompts below as your guide. We recommend praying through this psalm on your own at home and together with your small group. And for those looking for more passages to pray, feel free to return to Romans 1–3 and pray through those passages as well.

This Week’s Prayer Passage: Psalm 10

Read Psalm 10.

Pray through the following prompts, according to the A.C.T.S. method.

- **Adoration:** Praise the Lord for he is your King forever and ever (10:16). Praise the Lord because he is the helper of the weak (10:17–18). Praise God because he is the immovable, unchangeable I AM.
- **Confession:** Ask God for forgiveness for thinking that he is far away from you in your times of trouble (10:1). Confess to him your pride and all the ways that you have acted like he does not exist (10:4). Ask for forgiveness for the ways you have been puffed up by pride (10:3 ff.).
- **Thanksgiving:** Thank God that he does not forget the afflicted and brings justice to the oppressed (10:12–18). Thank God for his right judgment on the wicked (10:15). Thank God that he is an ever-present help in times of trouble.
- **Supplication:** Ask God that he would be near to you in the ways that you are experiencing trouble right now. Ask God to show himself in the midst of your present circumstances.

Week Three: (Romans 2:1–16)

Key Verse

“For there is no favoritism with God.” - Romans 2:11 (CSB)

Key Principles

- We are all equally guilty in God’s eyes and God’s judgment is righteous.
- The law did not produce righteousness in the Israelites.
- God has provided one way of salvation that unites diverse peoples.

Read

Before we dive in, it's worth noting that the word "law" can refer to multiple things in the book of Romans. First, law may refer to the entire Old Testament, as in Romans 3:19, where Paul quotes from the Psalms and Prophets. Second, Law with a capital "L" may refer to the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament (see Luke 24:44). Finally, law may refer to the Sinai covenant found within the Pentateuch (see Galatians 3:17).

In Week Two, we began looking at three themes that will keep coming up in these early chapters of Romans, themes which will also set a tone for the rest of what Paul wants to accomplish in Romans as a whole. Those three themes are:

- Humankind's equality,
- God's judgment, and
- The difference between righteousness and unrighteousness.

In Romans 2:1–16, Paul adds new insight to what he has already taught on these topics. He does so most pointedly in verse 11, with a bold statement that "there is no favoritism with God." This statement is actually a summary of a profound truth from Deuteronomy 10:17 and Job 34:19, where the Old Testament goes into detail about how God does not favor some—such as those with wealth or status—over others. We are all equal in God's eyes.

We cannot understand the gospel, and the rest of what Paul will be writing about in Romans, until we let this concept sink in. God shows no partiality. What does this mean? From God's perspective, there is nothing that we can bring to him on our own, or brag about with our own words, that will ever make him change his mind about us. This is both good news and bad news.

God's lack of favoritism begins as bad news in these early chapters of Romans. As we have seen in Romans 1:18–32, all people are unrighteous, and God looks upon unrighteous people as deserving of his wrath and judgment. It does not matter what station or job we are in, how much status or influence we have, what color our skin is, or even how rich or talented we may be. None of these things impress God. None of these things can fix our unrighteousness be-

fore a righteous God. God sees right through the surface, examining the core of who we are to determine whether or not we have truly chosen life in his name (see Deuteronomy 30:15–20).

But this same attribute—God’s lack of favoritism or impartiality—becomes good news for us in the gospel. Since we could never earn our standing before God on our own, God decided to give us righteousness as a gift, by his grace, and through faith in Jesus. And this gift is given to all people, regardless of status, merit, or ethnicity.

Paul will describe this more in the chapters to come, but he mentions God’s impartiality here in order to convince Jews and Gentiles (or “Greeks”; Paul uses these words interchangeably) that they must be unified in the gospel. Paul shows that they are all under condemnation; therefore, both groups must acknowledge their own sinfulness without boasting. The gospel is the only thing that could truly succeed in unifying them.

This message holds true today, just as it did back then. No matter what ethnicity, social class, or country we are from, all of us are under God’s wrath. But consider what our world would look like if the gospel message unified believers of all different ethnicities, socio-economic backgrounds, and political parties. Paul was writing to the Romans, but this truth is as powerful and life-changing today as it was when Paul first wrote those powerful words, “For there is no favoritism with God” (2:11).

Think about it. God has provided one way of salvation that unites diverse peoples. In the words of 1 Timothy 2:3–5, “This is good, and it pleases God our Savior, who wants everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and humankind, the man Christ Jesus.” The fact that we have one God and one mediator brings diverse peoples together in Christ. This means that all are equal in God’s eyes. All were at one time equally guilty and without hope. But through the gospel, God brings us together into his family, where we are all brothers and sisters, equally redeemed by Christ’s blood. Praise God!

Romans 2:1–16 presents two more points about God’s judgment. First, God’s judgment is right, true, and warranted (2:2). Second, God’s judgment is active. God is storing up judgment for those who persist in unrighteousness and continue walking in sin. Jesus took all of God’s wrath

for the sin of those who put their faith in him on the cross, so that leaves God's wrath to be poured out only on those who deny his Son. This is a warning to us. God's judgment is not just in the past, when Christ took our judgment upon himself on the cross; it's coming in the future when Jesus returns (2 Corinthians 5:10). We have to be clear with our friends and neighbors: Judgment from an impartial judge is coming.

These points about unrighteousness and God's judgment are a vital aspect of the message of the gospel, and Romans 1–3 only gives us part of the full picture. As Paul will show us, for God to save unrighteous people, he would have to bring a righteousness to us that does not come from us. We'll read more about this, and who and where this righteousness comes from, later in Romans. But for now, it is enough for us to wrestle with the reality that our God is a righteous judge, and we are not.

Study Guide

The following study questions are meant to help us wrestle with the text of Romans and see how the gospel displays God's righteousness. Set aside some time this week to meet with God and answer these questions for yourself. Complete each question *before* your weekly small group meeting. Then, when you gather with your small group, be prepared to discuss your answers together.



Read Romans 1:16–17 to remain focused on Paul's major points. Then, read Romans 2:1–16 in preparation for this week's study.

Highlight

1. What do we learn about God's judgment from Romans 2:1–16? How does this compare to what we learned about God's judgment in Romans 1:18–32?
2. What does this passage teach about humankind's equality before God? What standard does the passage say God uses to judge everyone, both Jews and Gentiles?
3. What contrasts and comparisons do you notice in this passage? What differences do you see in this passage between righteousness and unrighteousness?
4. Summarize this passage in your own words. What themes are common in the answers provided by the members of your small group?

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Respond in Prayer

In Romans 1–3, Paul references specific psalms in order to grow our understanding of God’s righteousness. Each week of this Study Guide will include a recommended psalm that helps us focus on the righteousness of our great God. Set aside some time this week to read through the selected psalm and use the prayer prompts below as your guide. We recommend praying through this psalm on your own at home and together with your small group. And for those looking for more passages to pray, feel free to return to Romans 1–3 and pray through those passages as well.

This Week’s Prayer Passage: Psalm 36

Read Psalm 36.

Pray through the following prompts, according to the A.C.T.S. method.

- **Adoration:** Give God praise for these characteristics that you see in Psalm 36:
 - He is steadfast (36:5, 7, 10).
 - He is just (36:6).
 - He is righteous (36:6).
 - He is faithful (36:5).
 - He is our light (36:9).
- **Confession:** Ask God for forgiveness for the ways we have conspired to do evil with transgressors (36:1). Ask for forgiveness for the ways that you have harbored sin in your life, thinking that you would not be found out (36:2). Confess to God where you have been self-seeking and ask for a change of heart in these areas.
- **Thanksgiving:** Thank God that we can take refuge in his shadow (36:7). Thank God that he has let you drink from the fountain of life and shined his light on you (36:9). Thank God that feasting on him is the only sustenance that we truly need (36:8).

- **Supplication:** Ask the Lord to help you see his steadfast love as greater than anything else in your life. Ask him to keep you from arrogance and to give you a discerning spirit, to know when to run from evil and to run straight toward his fountain of life.

Week Four: (Romans 2:17–29)

Key Verse

“On the contrary, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and circumcision is of the heart—by the Spirit, not the letter. That person’s praise is not from people but from God.” - Romans 2:29 (CSB)

Key Principles

- The Old Testament taught that the law cannot save us.
- Having God’s Word is not a help to us in becoming righteous if we do not live by its words.
- We need God’s Spirit to live in a righteous way.

Read

We see in the Old Testament that God directly revealed to the Israelites what actions constituted righteousness in his eyes. He gave them the law, which was quite the advantage to knowing exactly what to do and what not to do to glorify God. Had they chosen to follow the commands of God's law, they could have been "a light to those in darkness" (2:19) and teachers of wisdom to the nations. But they could not, and their inability to attain righteousness on their own made them equal to those who had never heard God's Word.

The Jews of ancient times took pride in their "advantage." They valued circumcision because of what it meant—they were God's chosen people who had received God's law. But they failed to earn righteousness because they were only able to follow part of the law; they were not able to keep all of its commands. Paul says that they failed with things like stealing and adultery, which even the Gentile cultures knew were unrighteous. Thus, the supposed Jewish "advantage" when it came to attaining righteousness was practically not an advantage at all.

It's easy to read this section of Romans and think that these Jews were making decisions that were absurd. But doesn't this sound familiar? We have also been given a greater, unifying advantage: Jesus Christ! And although, as Christians, we claim his righteousness as our own, we still fail and give into sin. But praise God that through Jesus, our righteousness is counted as filthy rags and our unrighteousness was paid for by his blood. As believers, we get to put on the righteousness of Christ which not only saves us, but it serves as an equalizer as well. This is what we discussed in last week's study on Romans 2:1–16. Paul is building on the text in 2:1-16 to show that the Jews, in all their pursuit of holiness and superiority were missing the point that the righteousness they needed was not their own—it was Christ's. Paul will explain this later on in Romans 3:21–31, Week Six in this study series.

It is important to note that everything Paul is saying here about circumcision, the law, and needing a new heart is not originally his idea. He's taking several pages out of the Old Testament to make these claims. Consider these statements from the Old Testament:

- The idea of circumcision is really a matter of the heart (Deuteronomy 10:16; 30:6; Jeremiah 4:4).

- God has to put his Spirit inside us for us to have any hope of following his laws (Jeremiah 31:33–34; Ezekiel 36:26–27).
- Israel was supposed to be a light to the nations during the exile, but instead, they brought dishonor to God (Isaiah 42:6; 49:6; 52:5; Ezekiel 36:22–25).

Here is what these important passages teach us about the message of the Old Testament. First, the Pentateuch was trying to say so much more about faith and obedience to God than simply passing on a legal code of behavior. Second, the Pentateuch and the Prophets (books written by Old Testament prophets) both taught that the law would not be enough to save the Israelites. Third, the Old Testament clearly states that what it means to be truly circumcised has more to do with our obedience and relationship to God than what bloodline you come from. Thus, to truly be an Israelite is to be faithful to God, but the Prophets tell us that as time went on, the Israelites, like all of humankind, were unfaithful to God and were unable to do what God required of them.

And so, God would have to intervene to help heal this broken, sinful people. God would become the light to those in darkness and the teacher of wisdom to all nations. God would reach into the heart of his people and put his Spirit within them in order to make a way for them to become righteous. Only by doing this himself is he able to get the praise and glory he deserved from the beginning.

The rest of Romans will show us how God intervened to bring righteousness to all nations through the work of his Son, Jesus. Jesus is the light to those in darkness (John 1:5; 3:19; 8:12; 12:35; 12:46; referring to Isaiah 9:2; 42:16) and he has brought the New Covenant that allowed God's law to be written on our hearts. A covenant is generally a binding agreement between two people, and this idea of a New Covenant is God's way of declaring the unconditional relationship that he desires to have with his people in Christ. Keep reading Romans, and we will soon learn more about God's amazing gift to his people in the New Covenant!

Study Guide

The following study questions are meant to help us wrestle with the text of Romans and see how the gospel displays God's righteousness. Set aside some time this week to meet with God and answer these questions for yourself. Complete each question *before* your weekly small group meeting. Then, when you gather with your small group, be prepared to discuss your answers together.



Read Romans 1:16–17 to remain focused on Paul's major points. Then, read Romans 2:17–29 in preparation for this week's study.

Highlight

1. What are some false assumptions people make about obtaining God's approval? How does Romans 2:17–29 help us understand these false assumptions?
2. According to Romans 2:17–29, what is circumcision of the heart and how is it demonstrated?
3. Where do you see references to the Old Testament in Romans 2:17–29? List them below and discuss their significance with your small group.
4. Summarize this passage in your own words. What themes are common within your small group?

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Apply

9. Romans 2:17–29 identifies where some Jews are acting in a hypocritical way—many of them took pride in the law, but at the same time, they were breaking parts of it. How have we, as Christians, been guilty of a similar type of hypocrisy? Share and discuss what it looks like to follow God’s commands in a way that honors him and brings him glory.

10. Just like some Jews found purpose and meaning in their ability to follow God’s law, where are you tempted to find purpose, affirmation, or belonging in something other than God? What does it look like to satisfy your desires for belonging, affirmation, and purpose in God’s gospel?

11. How does reminding ourselves of the gospel prevent us from practicing any form of idolatry? How can we preach the gospel to one another in Christian community so that we do not become self-righteous?

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Respond in Prayer

In Romans 1–3, Paul references specific psalms in order to grow our understanding of God’s righteousness. Each week of this Study Guide will include a recommended psalm that helps us focus on the righteousness of our great God. Set aside some time this week to read through the selected psalm and use the prayer prompts below as your guide. We recommend praying through this psalm on your own at home and together with your small group. And for those looking for more passages to pray, feel free to return to Romans 1–3 and pray through those passages as well.

This Week’s Prayer Passage: Psalm 5

Read Psalm 5.

Pray through the following prompts, according to the A.C.T.S. method.

- **Adoration:** Praise God that, in his righteousness, he is opposed to all evil, wickedness, and deceit (5:4–6, 10). Praise God that he is our King, a king who upholds the righteous and deals justly with his subjects (5:7–8, 11–12).
- **Confession:** Ask God’s forgiveness for the ways you have distorted the truth or told lies. Ask God’s forgiveness where you have participated in evil and been an enemy of God. Ask for God to forgive you where you have used your words for death and not for life (5:9–10).
- **Thanksgiving:** Thank God that he hears you and listens to your prayers (5:1–3), even though you have been unfaithful. Thank God that his steadfast love is abundant. Thank God that he has made you righteous through the blood of Christ and that he will bless the righteous and be our shield (5:12).

- **Supplication:** Ask God to make your ways straight and to help you act in a righteous way to your friends, neighbors, family, and even your enemies (5:8). Ask God that you will be an agent for life in other people's lives. Ask God for the joy that comes with being part of his family (5:11).

Week Five: (Romans 3:1–20)

Key Verses

“There is no one righteous, not even one. There is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God.” - Romans 3:10–11 (CSB)

Key Principles

- We are faithless, but God is faithful.
- God’s judgment on the unrighteous is completely just.
- We are equally unrighteous in God’s eyes.
- Paul makes it overwhelmingly clear that everyone is unrighteous apart from faith in Christ.
- God’s righteousness shines all the more clearly amidst the rampant unrighteousness of humankind.
- May our own unrighteousness and sinfulness drive us to God, to cling to him as the only righteous person in the universe.

Read

In Romans 3:1–20, Paul finally addresses two points that he has been leading up to in the previous chapters: 1) the Jews had an advantage in their familiarity with the law and circumcision (3:1–2), but 2) when it comes to righteousness, the Jews are no better off (3:9).

Paul wants the readers to know that, without a shadow of doubt, “... both Jews and Gentiles are under sin, as it is written: There is no one righteous, not even one” (3:9–10). Using a litany of quotations from the Old Testament, Paul makes it overwhelmingly clear that everyone is unrighteous apart from faith in Christ. We are told through the Psalms that everyone—even David—is sinful (Romans 3:4), David’s enemies are evil (3:13), God’s people are unjust (3:10–14), and the irreligious who deny God are fools (3:10–14). And the book of Isaiah tells us that God’s people have no righteousness and justice was found nowhere in Israel (3:15).

Establishing that humankind is unrighteous is a necessary part of Paul’s argument throughout Romans 1:18–3:20, but it is not Paul’s main point in the whole book. Paul’s larger goal in Romans is to explain God’s righteousness. In Romans 3:1–20, Paul says that God’s righteousness shines all the more clearly amidst the rampant unrighteousness of humankind. Humankind has been unfaithful, but God has remained steadfast in his faithfulness. It’s simply a part of his righteous character: Faithful is who our God is.

Sadly, even with God’s faithfulness and righteousness clearly on display against the unrighteousness of humankind, some of Paul’s audience still didn’t understand. In Romans 3:5–8, Paul responds to two common questions. First, some were asking, Does God’s wrath make him unrighteous (3:5)? As we have already seen in this study, God’s righteousness warrants his wrath and judgment against all unrighteousness. Second, others were asking, Should we commit more unrighteousness and sin in order to let God’s righteousness shine more clearly (8:8)? Paul responds to both questions with brief exclamations, such as “Absolutely not!” in Romans 3:6.

We might be quick to dismiss or overlook these questions as irrelevant for us today, but the truth is, many of us live in these ways, too. We question the necessity of God’s wrath and judgment. And how many times do we run toward sin, even as believers? How often do we take God’s righteousness for granted? We might profess with our mouths that such notions are absurd,

but we all have done similar things—we all have chosen the pleasures of sin and taken God’s righteousness for granted. Paul corrects this wrong thinking and puts the focus back on God’s righteousness, where it belongs, instead of our self-absorbed excuses for our unrighteousness. The real question in Romans 3 has nothing to do with our opinions. Rather, Paul asks, *How can this righteous God bring salvation to an unrighteous world?*

Paul explains God’s plan of salvation for the world by turning to the Old Testament. Everything Paul learned about God’s righteousness and man’s sinfulness comes from the Old Testament. The Psalms and other passages are intentionally chosen for Romans 3:1–20 develop a significant theology of God’s righteousness. They declare that God is righteous:

- In his judgments against the wicked (Psalm 10; 14; 53; 143).
- In his concern and justice for the poor (Psalm 10; 140).
- In his establishment of righteous words and decrees (Psalm 119).
- In his forgiveness to sinners (Psalm 51).

Conversely, people in these Psalms are, at many times, wicked and harmful to their fellow man. No one is righteous, but there is hope, forgiveness, and refuge for some. Who gets this refuge?

- Those who praise God (Psalm 5).
- Those who draw near to God (Psalm 143).
- Those who dwell in his presence and call on his name (Psalm 63).
- Those who get God’s Spirit on them and who receive God’s forgiveness (Proverbs 1:23; Psalm 51; Isaiah 59).
- Those who cling to God and are satisfied in him (Psalm 36; 63).

As we see in Romans 3:1–20, the blueprints for faith and salvation were already in the Old Testament. Paul used that rich tradition to show that God has been steadfastly righteous throughout all generations, and God’s salvation through Jesus will be the ultimate declaration of his righteousness. So, may our acknowledgments of our own unrighteousness and sinfulness drive us to God, to cling to him as the only righteous person in the universe. It is in his arms that we will find refuge from the wickedness of our enemies, the brokenness of the world, and mostly from our own sinful hearts.

Study Guide

The following study questions are meant to help us wrestle with the text of Romans and see how the gospel displays God's righteousness. Set aside some time this week to meet with God and answer these questions for yourself. Complete each question before your weekly small group meeting. Then, when you gather with your small group, be prepared to discuss your answers together.



Read Romans 1:16–17 to remain focused on Paul's major points. Then, read Romans 3:1–20 in preparation for this week's study.

Highlight

1. Read Isaiah 59. When God found a lack of righteousness in Israel, how did he respond? How does the end of this passage remind us of passages we read in Week Four, such as Ezekiel 36 and Jeremiah 31?
2. What do we learn about God's judgment and righteousness from Romans 3:1–20?
3. Notice all the questions that Paul asks in Romans 3:1–8 and Romans 3:1–20. How do they help us follow his argument? How do these questions address common objections to the Christian faith?
4. What key words stand out to you in Romans 3:1–20? Are there any words that you feel like you might know their meaning, but wonder if the Bible has more to say about them?

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Respond in Prayer

In Romans 1–3, Paul references specific psalms in order to grow our understanding of God’s righteousness. Each week of this Study Guide will include a recommended psalm that helps us focus on the righteousness of our great God. Set aside some time this week to read through the selected psalm and use the prayer prompts below as your guide. We recommend praying through this psalm on your own at home and together with your small group. And for those looking for more passages to pray, feel free to return to Romans 1–3 and pray through those passages as well.

This Week’s Prayer Passage: Psalm 51

Read Psalm 51.

Pray through the following prompts, according to the A.C.T.S. method.

- **Adoration:** Praise God for the following characteristics that we see in Psalm 51:
 - He is a God of faithful love and his compassion is abundant (51:1).
 - His judgments are blameless (51:4).
 - He is the teacher of wisdom (51:6).
 - He restores, sustains, and gives joy (51:12).
 - He is the God of our salvation (14).
- **Confession:** Let us ask God to bring to mind an awareness of our sin, that we might say along with verse 3, “For I am conscious of my rebellion, and my sin is always before me.” Confess your specific examples out loud as displeasing in the sight of God. Ask God to bring awareness to the devastating effects of sin. Acknowledge with your own words the harmful work your sins have done to yourself, to others, and to God himself.

- **Thanksgiving:** As surely as God is the one to provide awareness for our sin, he alone provides restoration and renewal through the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Raise your voice and express your confidence to God in the words of verse 7, in his willingness to purge us and make us clean and his ability to wash us whiter than snow. Thank God that he deals with our sin directly and also offers us forgiveness. Praise God for his grace and mercy toward his people.
- **Supplication:** Ask that God would grant you the grace to experience verse 8, “Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.” No matter how dark and deep the circumstances of your sin may be, ask God to restore to you the joy of your salvation. Verse 18 makes a request from the Lord, “In your good pleasure, cause Zion to prosper; build the walls of Jerusalem.” Pray for the work that God is doing in and through your local church in your community. Ask him to provide care for his people and ask him to rebuild what sin has destroyed. Ask God to do good in your city.

Week Six: (Romans 3:21–31)

Key Verses

“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. They are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” - Romans 3:23–24 (CSB)

Key Principles

- The righteousness of God does not come to us by “the works of the law” (Romans 3:20).
- The righteousness of God comes upon us because of what Christ did on the cross.
- We can only receive this gift of righteousness by faith.
- Because God set it up this way, we get unity and righteousness, God gets all the glory, and his righteousness is on display in the story of our lives.

Read

Romans 3:1–20, our study passage for Week Five, brings a great conclusion to the larger argument Paul has been making in 1:18–3:20. Here, beginning in 3:21–31, we are finally going to see how Christ’s work on the cross solves the problem of humankind’s unrighteousness. This provides us with the answer to the question that hangs over this section of Romans—*How can a righteous God save unrighteous sinners?*

Remember, as we discussed in Week Two, righteousness can be defined as the extent to which one is morally right or virtuous. Romans 3:21–23 serves to summarize what Paul has said earlier in Romans. We cannot create our own righteousness, and doing works of the law cannot make us righteous, so we need a righteousness to come in some other form. This righteousness will come *by faith*. We’ll read in Romans 4 that God had been declaring sinners, like Abraham, righteous in his sight because of their faith. This righteousness-by-faith all happened before the law came into existence, since the law came through Moses, and Moses arrived centuries after Abraham. What does this prove? Righteousness comes to us from something outside of ourselves and something other than the law. God has graciously provided the righteousness humankind needed all along and it is gained only by faith in the work of Christ.

Romans 3:24–26 declares the glorious redemption that Christ brings us. God’s righteousness comes to us as a gift. But make no mistake, it is a costly gift. For a righteous God to declare us righteous, he had to deal with our sinfulness somehow. Think for just a moment of all of the unrighteousness and sin that has existed in your life—and then imagine what it would take to right every single one of those wrongs. God, being rich in mercy, sent his Son to be a sacrifice for our sins. Through his great love, he paid for it all, and not just your sins, but the sins of the entire world. By his blood, Jesus died for our sins and redeemed us from being under judgment. This is the essence of what is meant by the words “atoning sacrifice” or “propitiation” in verse 25—our sins have been removed and our guilt has been dealt with through the self-sacrifice of Jesus. The atoning sacrifice of God’s own Son is the only way a righteous God can be in relationship with unrighteous humankind. More than that, God’s plans revealed in Christ (3:24) are actually a demonstration of God’s righteousness (3:25–26). By punishing Christ for all sin, God shows his righteousness and can also now declare us righteous by faith.

Romans 3:27–31 explains that our only part in receiving this gift is to have faith in Christ’s finished work of redemption. Thus, faith becomes our way to enter into God’s righteousness, showing God’s brilliance and great character. We have to be saved by faith, and not by works, because we do not have the capability of righteousness in our actions. We have to be saved by faith in Jesus Christ, so that God can receive all the glory for this wonderful salvation. It is through faith in Jesus Christ that Jews and Gentiles alike can be united equally through the same salvation, entering into one righteousness. Because God set it up this way, we get unity and righteousness, God gets all the glory, and his righteousness is on display in the story of our lives.

This week, as you wrestle with the text, look for moments to praise God for the redemption he’s provided through the gift of righteousness. As you reread the text, answer questions, and pray through a psalm, ask the Lord to open your eyes to how profound this gift truly is and to let it take root deep in your heart.

Study Guide

The following study questions are meant to help us wrestle with the text of Romans and see how the gospel displays God’s righteousness. Set aside some time this week to meet with God and answer these questions for yourself. Complete each question before your weekly small group meeting. Then, when you gather with your small group, be prepared to discuss your answers together.



Read Romans 1:16–17 to remain focused on Paul’s major points. Then, read Romans 3:21–31 in preparation for this week’s study.

Highlight

1. Summarize Romans up to this point by giving titles to the main sections we have looked at in our study. Write your summary statements next to each passage:

- Romans 1:1–17:
- Romans 1:18–32:
- Romans 2:1–16:
- Romans 2:17–29:
- Romans 3:1–20:

When you meet with your small group, share your summary statements and discuss the different nuances and ideas as a group.

2. How often is righteousness mentioned in Romans 3:21–31? What are the things that put righteousness on display according to this passage?

3. How do the first two words of Romans 3:21, “but now,” tie everything that has come before in Romans with what Paul is about to say in Romans 3:21–31?

4. How does Romans 3:21–31 say people can obtain righteousness from God? Why do we need it?

5. Paraphrase this passage in your own words. What themes are common in the responses of your small group?

6. Think back to Week One when we asked you to write a phrase or sentence to summarize the theme of Romans. What do you think the theme is now? Look back to your answer and compare it with your answer now.

Explain

7. Do all of Paul's uses of the term "righteousness of God" refer to the same thing? How might it be different in Romans 3:22?
8. How is Christ's sacrificial death an appropriate solution to the problems and questions Paul has been raising up to this point?
9. Romans 3:22 says that there is no difference or distinction among those who believe in God. List as many ways as possible that Romans 3:21–31 illustrates that there is no difference between people.
10. What everyday implications does Romans 3:24 have on our lives?

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Apply

11. In Chapters 1 and 2, some Jews are described as trying to uphold the law, but doing so cannot produce righteousness. At the end of Romans 3:31, Paul says that “we uphold the law.” What has changed to make this a possibility for people who join Jesus’s church?

12. Romans 1–3 teaches that we cannot find lasting significance on our own apart from Christ. Where are you tempted to find your identity or significance apart from Christ?

Hint: Where are you tempted to feel pride or boast in something other than Jesus?

13. How does believing the gospel humble us and enable us to be honest about ourselves?

14. Consider all that we’ve covered in this six-week study. What have been some of the most important takeaways for you from Romans 1–3? List at least one or two important applications of this study for your everyday life and share them with your small group.

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Respond in Prayer

In Romans 1–3, Paul references specific psalms in order to grow our understanding of God’s righteousness. Each week of this Study Guide will include a recommended psalm that helps us focus on the righteousness of our great God. Set aside some time this week to read through the selected psalm and use the prayer prompts below as your guide. We recommend praying through this psalm on your own at home and together with your small group. And for those looking for more passages to pray, feel free to return to Romans 1–3 and pray through those passages as well.

This Week’s Prayer Passage: Psalm 63

Read Psalm 63.

Pray through the following prompts, according to the A.C.T.S. method.

- **Adoration:** Praise God that he has reached down to his creatures to be in relationship with us. Praise God because of his steadfast love (63:3). Praise God that he is the ultimate answer to all our desires and hopes (63:1–2, 5–8).
- **Confession:** Confess to God where we have tried to justify our existence in ways that are separate from him and his will for our lives. Confess to God where you have tried to be satisfied with something other than your relationship with him. Confess to God where you have praised created things when you should have been praising the Creator.
- **Thanksgiving:** Thank God that he has saved us! Rejoice that God upholds us and exalts us when we cling to him (63:8). Thank God for satisfying our very souls when we reach out to him (63:1, 3, 5).
- **Supplication:** Ask God that we would see and understand how he is spiritually upholding us (63:8), even when we feel crushed by the enemy or worried about our lives. Ask God to remove the harmful idols that we try to cling to when we need to cling to him.