



Really Useful Guides

# Romans

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Ernest Clark

Series editor: Derek Tidball

## **The Bible Reading Fellowship**

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**Ernest Clark**

Series editor: Derek Tidball



To the saints at St Andrew's Church, St Andrews,  
brothers, sisters, fellow workers and patrons.

Each Really Useful Guide focuses on a specific biblical book, making it come to life for the reader, enabling them to understand the message and to apply its truth to today's circumstances. Though not a commentary, it gives valuable insight into the book's message. Though not an introduction, it summarises the important aspects of the book to aid reading and application.

This Really Useful Guide to Romans will transform your understanding of the biblical text, and will help you to engage with the message in new ways today, giving confidence in the Bible and increasing faith in God.

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## 1

## Why read Romans? A personal reflection

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I first encountered Romans in bits. Memorising verses like 3:23 ('For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God') and 6:23 ('For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord') laid the foundation stones of my childhood theology: my sin and God's grace.

Over the next 30 years, Romans continued its role as my school master. In my first year of university, tutored by the ancient African theologian Augustine, Romans pushed me to acknowledge the corruption of the whole human person and God's radical freedom. And it expanded my gratitude for God's mercy toward me to a whole new dimension.

Twelve years later, as a postgraduate student, Romans schooled me again. It straightened up and tightened down some of my theological ideas that were coming loose. And, pointing me back to an earlier round of

lessons, it showed me again the extraordinary power of the Spirit's gracious action in my life, how he enables me to live faithfully and love truly.

But studying to write this book, I have encountered Romans as a wise friend.

I have tried to honour Paul by letting his letter set its own agenda in its own terms. I've restrained some of my theologian's instincts to pester Paul about one pet topic or another and instead just let him say what he wanted to say.

And our conversation has been quite different. I have heard in Paul's letter his love for his dear friends, and, through Paul's loving words, I have encountered God's love.

In this reading, grace has grown bigger, judgement is more real, yet mercy is warmer. God's freedom is grander, my hope is firmer and God's peace is fuller.

My prayer each day as I wrote this guide was that it really would be useful.

Chapter 2 lays out the things that are useful to know before you start reading Romans. It includes a



summary of the ‘ancient mystery’ in the Hebrew scriptures that Paul keeps referring back to. Don’t skip that bit. It really is useful for understanding where Paul is coming from and what he’s trying to get at.

Chapter 3 charts a path through Romans and then walks with you stage by stage. It should be useful in helping you think about what Paul was thinking about. His thoughts are grand and glorious – they could not be otherwise; he’s been tasked with writing about God’s grace and righteousness – but the guide should help explain what Paul means. Along the way, I also keep connecting each part of Romans with others. There really is a flow to Paul’s argument in this letter, and those connections are useful in helping us sense that.

Chapter 4 compares Romans with others of the earliest Jewish-Christian writings collected in the New Testament. Some of you may be interested in sorting out the tension between Paul and James on faith and justification. You can find their discussion there.

Finally, chapter 5 reflects on ways that Paul’s message in Romans continues to speak to us today. ‘Us’, of course, depends on who you are. I hope my comments connect usefully with you where you are. If they don’t,

do listen to the Spirit as you read and pray and also talk with others. He knows you best of all.

With God's help, this really will be a useful guide to Romans. May you find it so. And may it lead you, with Paul, through his grand letter right up to its majestic conclusion.

*To the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen.*

ROMANS 16:27

**Ernest**

Bengaluru, India

## 2

## Start here

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Sometime around AD57, a Jew named Paul wrote a letter in Greek and sent it from Corinth, in southern Greece, to a group of his close friends and their associates in Rome. The letter was carried by Phoebe, a deacon from the church at nearby Cenchreae, whom Paul called ‘sister’ and who had also been his patron. The letter crossed a sea and journeyed up a peninsula, and it was read, we may suppose, with the warmth and interest recipients would show who knew its sender variously as beloved and son, co-worker and teacher.

A letter was delivered, but a legacy had begun. Over other seas, through other lands, across 2,000 years and in even more languages, it continued to speak and to speak meaningfully. It has confounded and converted, instructed and encouraged with the same enduring significance that led its early readers to recognise it, in 2 Peter’s words, as ‘scripture’, a prophecy spoken from God as the Holy Spirit carried the person along (2 Peter 1:20–21; 3:15–16). Here, in Paul’s words

to his ‘brothers and sisters’ in Rome, readers have found God’s words to his beloved ones in every age and place.

## Paul’s brothers and sisters in Rome

To read Romans well, then, it is useful to start with knowing who Paul’s brothers and sisters in Rome were.

- 1 They were Paul’s friends.** Though Paul had not yet visited them in Rome, he knew many of them from elsewhere. Epenetus, Ampliatus, Stachys and Persis were beloved ‘dear friends’ of his. Rufus’ mother was a mother to Paul as well (16:5–13).

Paul’s relationship with the people to whom he wrote set the tone for the letter. From the opening words to the closing, Paul, though bold, is neither alarmed nor angry. Instead, he is filled with love for his dear friends (1:7; 15:14; 16:20).

*To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be his holy people: Grace and peace to you... The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you.*

ROMANS 1:7; 16:20

- 2 They were maturing believers,** people whose trust in God directed their attitudes and actions in everyday life. Through this faith, God had made them replete with goodness and ‘filled with knowledge’ (15:14). Some of them had used this knowledge to teach others: Priscilla (also called Prisca), Aquila and Urbanus had been Paul’s ‘fellow workers in Christ’. And Andronicus and Junia were apostles (16:3, 7, 9).

In light of their faithful character, Paul assumed at least two things when he wrote to them. First, he assumed that they were oriented on God, that they wanted to love God and do good (15:14). Second, Paul assumed that they knew Israel’s scriptures, especially Moses’ law (7:1). (The section below on ‘Disclosing the ancient mystery’ on page 21 below outlines some of the things Paul and his friends knew from the scriptures.)

- 3 They were people God loved.** This is the starting point of Paul’s correspondence, how he addresses them in the opening of the letter. And it is the foundation of Paul’s argument: God knew them and loved them first. God is their father; they are his beloved children and each other’s beloved brothers and sisters. For Paul, this love of God for his

children is the source of the grace, righteousness, mercy and holiness that he will discuss throughout the letter (5:1–11; 8:28–39). And it is this same love that draws us across two millennia into reading Paul's letter to his beloved brothers and sisters as God's letter to us, his beloved children (see 4:23–24; 15:4–6).

- 4 They were called to be holy.** This is the ending point of Paul's correspondence. Beginning with the identity his dear friends already have as God's loved ones, Paul wrote the letter to urge them to live as God's holy ones. They are called to be holy, to belong in a special way to God rather than to their age. And they are called to serve God in a special way, much as Moses' law instructed priests and temple servants to serve God (12:1; 15:16–21).

Next, to appreciate Paul's friends' life as a group, a short history of the church in Rome is useful.



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*A letter was delivered, and a legacy had begun. Over other seas, through other lands, across two thousand years and in even more languages, the letter of the Romans speaks and speaks meaningfully.*

This Really Useful Guide to Romans is an exploration of this complex letter to a church that Paul himself never visited. Ernest Clark covers many helpful aspects of the letter, from its intended recipients to its central themes. Emphasising that this is a message of grace and good news to God's loved ones as well as a profound theological treatise, he goes on to look at how Romans fits alongside other New Testament writings and what it means for us as believers today.

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