



EXPLORE **THE BIBLE.**

Adults

Romans

Commentary

Fall 2026



ONE ROAD

“All roads lead to Rome.” It’s a familiar phrase. We understand it to mean that no matter what problem we’re facing, there’s probably more than one way to achieve a solution. Of course, thousands of years ago, it meant something much different.

During the days of the Roman Empire, the capital city was the hub of economic and cultural power. That included transportation. Justifiably, the Romans were proud of their roads. What’s more, many of those roads originated from a single spot, the Milliarium Aureum, the “Golden Milestone.” This large column was set up in the Roman Forum and served as the starting point for a vast network of highways that branched across the known world. As a result, all roads quite literally led to Rome.

Midway through the first century, the apostle Paul was hoping to take one of those roads and visit the church in Rome. In preparation, he wrote them a letter, an extensive explanation of humanity’s sin and God’s salvation. In it, Paul shared the meaning of the gospel and how Christ followers should apply it to their lives each day.

While many roads led to Rome, Paul was adamant that Jesus was the only road to God. He said that Jews and Gentiles alike were helpless to save themselves. Everyone needs Jesus as Savior. Things haven’t changed. We all still need Jesus if we’re hoping for a new relationship with God. If that’s where you find yourself today, here’s what you need to do . . .

- **Admit** to God that you are a sinner. Repent, turning from your sin.
- **By faith receive** Jesus as God’s Son and accept His gift of forgiveness from sin. He took the penalty for your sin by dying on the cross. Jesus also rose from the dead, making a new, eternal life possible for us.
- **Confess** your faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. You may pray a prayer similar to this as you call on God to save you: “Dear God, I know that You love me. I confess my sin and need of salvation. I turn away from my sin and place my faith in Jesus as my Savior and Lord. In the name of Jesus I pray, amen.”

After you have received Jesus Christ into your life, tell a pastor or another Christian about your decision. Show others your faith in Christ by asking for baptism by immersion in your local church as a public expression of your faith.

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*Evangelistic Emphasis

MEET THE WRITER



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FROM THE TEAM LEADER



Photos. Wedding invitations. Save the dates. Birth announcements. Our refrigerator doors often showcase important people in our lives and significant events. I put announcements on my refrigerator so I won't forget them and sometimes photos of past events are purposely left up because they bring me so much joy. Exciting milestones and photos of everyday moments are captured in one spot like a special collection to be reminded of and enjoyed over and over.

Good news and big announcements are hard to keep to ourselves. In the book of Romans, Paul wrote to believers meeting in Roman house churches telling them of the best news ever shared—the gospel. Paul expounded on who needs the gospel (we all do) and where we can find salvation (only in Christ!). Jesus, through His life, death, and resurrection, made salvation possible for us. We are “justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 3:24). The gospel truly is the best good news.

I hope this quarter of study brings a deeper appreciation of God's gift of grace and the new life we are offered in Christ. May this lead you to tell others this good news!

In Him,
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Explore

Discover



BIBLICAL BACKGROUND

The apostle Paul wanted to start a new work in Spain, so he wrote to the church in Rome seeking their support. He wrote to benefit them, but also to share the gospel as he preached it. Many in the church at Rome already knew Paul as a leader (Rom. 16). But he wanted the church as a whole to support him as he evangelized new territories and planted new churches in the western part of the Roman Empire. With him as the acknowledged leader, a clear message outlined, coworkers recruited, and the support of an established church in place, Paul would be well prepared to make an impact in Spain.

Writer

Virtually all scholars affirm that the book of Romans was written by the apostle Paul. The letter identifies Paul as its author in the opening verse (1:1). The self-designations “a servant of Christ Jesus” and “apostle” underscore Paul’s obligation and authority in the proclamation of the gospel. Near the end of the letter, Paul’s assistant Tertius, “who wrote this letter,” greeted the church (16:22). As was common at the time, the author (Paul) dictated the content while a scribe or “amanuensis” (Tertius) wrote the document. Pauline authorship is also clear in that the letter reflects Paul’s distinctive vocabulary and theological teachings. The description of the relationship between law and gospel, faith and works, grace and human responsibility, and the ethical demands of life in the Spirit are all consistently Pauline. The use of Scriptures, diatribe, and rhetorical questions are also characteristics of Paul’s other writings.

Recipients

Romans is addressed to the Christian communities in the city of Rome, the capital of the Roman Empire. Paul had never visited these believers, yet he expressed deep affection for them and a desire to visit them soon (1:8-15; 15:22-24,28). The origin of the church in Rome remains uncertain. Possibly, it was started post-Pentecost as recently-converted Jewish Christian pilgrims returned from Jerusalem (Acts 2:10).

The Roman church in Paul’s time appears to have consisted of both Jewish and Gentile believers. However, by the time Paul wrote his letter, the church may have been predominantly Gentile because of the expulsion of Jews from Rome under Emperor Claudius around AD 49 (18:2). Jews were allowed to return after Claudius’s death in AD 54. But the years of Gentile dominance may have created a church where the majority was not inclined to accommodate Jewish customs that they felt were not required within Christianity (Rom. 14).



Date

Romans is usually dated to AD 56–57, when Paul was visiting Corinth after his lengthy ministry in Ephesus (Acts 19; 20:1-3). Several internal clues support this dating. In Romans, Paul mentioned that he was preparing to travel to Jerusalem to deliver a financial collection made by Gentile churches for needy believers in Judea (Rom. 15:25-28). This is consistent with comments in 1 Corinthians 16:1-6 and 2 Corinthians 8–9.

The greetings in Romans 16 also indicate a connection to Corinth. Phoebe, “a servant of the church at Cenchreae” (a port city seven miles east of Corinth), is commended to the church in Rome, possibly because she carried the letter to them (Rom. 16:1-2). The letter also contains a greeting from Gaius and from Erastus, “the city treasurer” (v. 23). Though Gaius was a common name, Paul did baptize a man named Gaius in Corinth (1 Cor. 1:14). Also, a paving stone dated to the mid-50s AD identifying an Erastus as a city official has been found in Corinth.

The combination of names and circumstances mentioned in Romans provides strong indication that the letter was written from Corinth in the late 50s AD.

Purpose

Paul wrote to the Roman church for several key purposes. Clearly, Paul wrote in anticipation of his mission to Spain (15:23-24). He hoped to establish a relationship with the Roman believers so that they might support him in this projected mission. At the same time, Paul was concerned to promote the unity of a church incorporating both Gentile and Jewish believers. He emphasized that justification comes only through faith in Christ. Yet he also insisted on the continued significance of the Jewish people (chaps. 9–11). By presenting a balanced view of salvation, Paul hoped to heal tensions and foster unity.

Paul intentionally provided the most fully developed explanation of the gospel found in any of his letters. He did this for the benefit of the church at Rome. He did it to gain their support for his efforts to take the gospel to Spain. But Paul was also aware that his letters were shared beyond the church that received it (Col. 4:16). So, in some sense, Paul was also providing a presentation of the gospel for whoever might read his letter.

Romans also was intended to encourage godly Christian behavior. The latter chapters (chaps. 12–15) shift from theological argument to practical exhortation. Paul outlined how believers should live in light of God’s mercies: humbly, sacrificially, harmoniously, and with love that

fulfills the law. He addressed interpersonal relationships, spiritual gifts, hospitality, submission to governing authorities, conscience issues surrounding food and festivals, and mutual edification. All of this served to nurture the Roman church and promote faithful witness in the heart of the empire.

Key Themes

The Universality of Human Sin—Following an introduction, Romans 1–3 presents a sweeping presentation of the universality of human sin. Gentiles had rejected God’s self-revelation. Jews, though possessing the law, had failed to keep it. Therefore “all are under sin,” and subject to God’s wrath because “there is no one righteous, not even one” (Rom. 3:9-10).

Justification by Faith—At the heart of Romans 3–5 is the doctrine of justification by faith. God declares sinners righteous not on the basis of law-keeping, but through faith in Christ alone. Abraham serves as the ultimate proof, especially for Paul’s Jewish readers. Abraham was justified on the basis of his faith long before Moses delivered the law. Therefore, God justifies people by faith, both Jew and Gentile, not by their attempts to earn salvation by keeping the law.

Union with Christ—Next, Paul celebrated the union with Christ resulting from salvation. Believers are united with Christ in His death and resurrection. As a people given new life in Christ, believers should no longer live dominated by the flesh, but live guided and empowered by the Spirit (chaps. 6–7). And as God’s children, they can celebrate the unbreakable love of God in Christ and the certain destiny of believers (chap. 8).

The Role of Israel—The nature of salvation raises the question of the role of Israel in the economy of God. In a discussion of Israel’s unbelief, God’s sovereignty, and Jesus as the fulfillment of God’s promises, Paul affirmed God’s faithfulness to Israel and His inclusion of Gentile believers to create one people of God (chaps. 9–11).

The Transformation of Believers—Chapters 12–15 focus on the theme of the transformation of believers. By the grace of God, the work of the Spirit, and the teachings of Jesus, believers should be transformed into a humble, loving people devoted to doing good (chap. 12). Governing authorities, disagreements among believers, and Gentile/Jewish debates might test their resolve (chaps. 13–15), but love must prevail so the unity of the faith and the witness of the church can be maintained.

Romans presents readers with a monumental work. It combines profound theological insight with pastoral instruction and a passion for missions. Its wisdom has blessed the church for generations. And a careful study of its pages still holds the promise of blessing readers today.



Romans

- **I. Introduction** (Rom. 1:1-15)
- **II. The Universal Need of Righteousness** (Rom. 1:16-3:20)
- **III. Justification: The Imputation of Righteousness** (Rom. 3:21-5:21)
 - A. The righteousness of God in justification (Rom. 3:21-26)
 - B. Justification by faith excludes boasting (Rom. 3:27-31)
 - C. Justification and the Old Testament (Rom. 4:1-25)
 - D. Justification involves reconciliation (Rom. 5:1-11)
 - E. The Christ-Adam analogy (Rom. 5:12-21)
- **IV. The New Life in Christ** (Rom. 6:1-8:39)
 - A. The old self/new self and sin's dominion (Rom. 6:1-23)
 - B. The old self/new self and the Mosaic law (Rom. 7:1-25)
 - C. The old self/new self and the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:1-39)
- **V. The Mystery of Israel** (Rom. 9:1-11:36)
 - A. Israel's unbelief and the gospel (Rom. 9:1-29)
 - B. Israel responsible for its blindness (Rom. 9:30-10:21)
 - C. Israel's rejection is not final (Rom. 11:1-36)
- **VI. Exhortations about the Christian Life** (Rom. 12:1-15:13)
 - A. The living sacrifice (Rom. 12:1-2)
 - B. Spiritual gifts in the body of Christ (Rom. 12:3-8)
 - C. Christians and non-Christians (Rom. 12:9-21)
 - D. The believer's obligation to the state (Rom. 13:1-7)
 - E. The Christian's motivations (Rom. 13:8-14)
 - F. The strong and the weak in the church (Rom. 14:1-15:13)
- **VII. Epilogue: Greetings and Travel Plans** (Rom. 15:14-16:27)

True Power

THE GOSPEL ALONE HAS THE POWER TO REMOVE
THE GUILT OF HUMANITY'S SIN.

The Lord called me to ministry as a senior in high school. The next year, I entered Dallas Baptist College. That spring, I was invited, along with several others, to preach a weekend revival at a church in Detroit and gladly joined the team. I was invited back to serve with a church that summer in a ministry on the east side of Detroit. The church was situated near the river and close to several auto plants. The area was poor. Drugs and gangs were part of everyday life for many living in the area.

Over that summer, we engaged in many forms of outreach to a difficult and needy community. We offered a daily sports/activity ministry for children. We also offered a free lunch for those who participated. We organized a couple of music festivals in a nearby park. We witnessed in a larger park that was known as something of a drug market. We often went door to door meeting people and telling them about the activities at the church. I vividly remember a few times when homeowners met me at the door carrying weapons. Another encounter with a group of guys working on a car turned out to be a gang that did not take kindly to the interruption. The leader called them off before anything bad happened, and later he and some friends attended the music festival I had invited them to.

That summer exposed me to the struggles that many in life face—struggles far greater than those evident in the middle-class neighborhood where I grew up. It demonstrated people's sin, but even more their need. I saw addicts desperate to break their habits and met a few who had with the help of the Lord. I saw a neighborhood volunteer in our children's program who had stolen free lunches and sold them come to the Lord, confess his theft, and become a tireless (and honest) servant of the church. In short, I saw crushing need, ensnaring sin, the power of the gospel, and the joy of transformation. This is the gospel we share at home and carry wherever the Lord leads. We should never be ashamed of it or hesitant to share it, for it is the greatest gift we can ever give to the many who need to hear of the hope, forgiveness, and new life it offers. Paul shared the same truth in his letter to the Romans.

Romans 1:1-32

Paul's letter to the Romans begins with the address typically used in first-century letters: naming the sender, the recipients, and expressing a greeting. But in his letters, Paul normally expanded on this by adding information about himself, his mission, and affirming the recipients. In Romans 1:1-7, Paul identified himself as a servant and apostle of the gospel (1:1). He then expanded on his mention of the gospel, emphasizing both its foundation in Judaism and the inclusion of the Gentiles (vv. 2-6). He then named the recipients and identified them as beloved saints of God (v. 7a). Finally, Paul replaced the regular letter "greeting" by expressing a desire that the recipients be blessed by grace and peace from the Father and the Lord Jesus (v. 7b).

Following the address, Paul's letters normally express his thanksgiving for the church and a prayer for them. The introduction to Romans follows Paul's norm, expressing thanks for them and assuring them of his prayers. Specifically, Paul told the church that he thanked God for their faith and the fact that it was reported "in all the world" (v. 8).

Paul also informed the church that he had prayed frequently for God to allow him to visit them (v. 10). He also shared three reasons for this desired visit. First, he wanted to "impart . . . some spiritual gift to strengthen" them (v. 11). Paul discussed spiritual gifts in more detail later in this letter (12:3-8), and his understanding of gifts as given by God through the Spirit (not by Paul himself) is conveyed clearly elsewhere (1 Cor. 12:4-11; see 1 Cor. 12-14; Eph. 4:11-16).

The second reason Paul wanted to visit the church of Rome was so that they might "be mutually encouraged" by one another's faith (Rom. 1:12). Paul was not arrogant. He knew that he personally still needed to grow in Christ (Phil. 3:12-15). Maturity breeds humility, and the mature believer values others and the contributions they bring to one another's Christian walk.

The third reason Paul wanted to visit the church in Rome builds on the first two. By him strengthening their ministry, and by them strengthening his, together they could have an even more "fruitful ministry" (Rom. 1:13) than they could separately. The focal passage of today's session expands on this desire and can help us understand better the nature and the power that are the foundation of a fruitful gospel ministry.

Gospel Power (Rom. 1:13-17)

The introduction of the letter continues through 1:15 as Paul stressed his desire to see the result of continued gospel ministry and continue his outreach to the Gentiles. Later in the letter, he would reveal that he wanted to partner with the Roman Christians to extend their joint ministry into Spain (15:22-24). The foundation for such efforts rested not just on his personal desire but also on the nature of the gospel itself as the power of God offering salvation to all people (1:16-17).

VERSE 13

Now I don't want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that I often planned to come to you (but was prevented until now) in order that I might have a fruitful ministry among you, just as I have had among the rest of the Gentiles.

Paul wanted the church to know that he had not simply neglected them out of a lack of interest. He had, in fact, **often planned** to visit and engage in ministry among them but somehow **was prevented until now**.

Acts makes it clear that Paul played no part in establishing the church at Rome. So, who actually founded it? Many point to the fact that the crowd present in Jerusalem during Pentecost included “visitors from Rome” (Acts 2:10). Presumably, some of these converted, returned to Rome, and founded the church there.

Also, the Acts account of Paul's ministry makes no mention of specific plans to visit Rome that were somehow thwarted. It does, however, stress that the leadership of the Spirit and numerous circumstances combined to focus Paul's ministry in the eastern part of the Roman Empire. After Paul's conversion and early years in Arabia, Jerusalem, and Tarsus, Barnabas recruited Paul to assist with the church in Antioch of Syria (9:1-31; 11:19-30; Gal. 1:17-18). The Spirit then directed Paul and Barnabas, along with various associates, to engage in ministry in the eastern part of the Roman Empire (Acts 13-20).

When facing great need, a worker must choose a place to begin, and that choice can prevent ministry elsewhere. Paul's ministry began where God planted him in Antioch and led him to establish churches in the major cities of the eastern Roman Empire. Only after those tasks were completed was Paul able to turn his attention to Rome and points west. Visiting Rome was *prevented* by Paul's Spirit-led ministry elsewhere.

VERSES 14-15

I am obligated both to Greeks and barbarians, both to the wise and the foolish. So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

Paul felt **obligated** to go to Rome. His obligation to serve as the apostle to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15; Eph. 3:8) was not limited to the Gentiles in the east. It included Gentiles everywhere. In fact, the gospel itself is good news for the world (John 3:16) and requires ministry to all, in all places.

Paul stressed the breadth of the obligation he felt by describing it as **to Greeks and barbarians** and as **to the wise and the foolish**. Both pairs of descriptions could include all of humanity. Paul often used *Greeks* as a reference to all who were not Jewish (Rom. 1:16; 2:10). But *Greeks* can also refer to those who had been Hellenized, that is, Greek-speaking people who were considered the educated and cultured of society. *Barbarians* was commonly used of those who did not speak Greek and were thought of as uneducated. The phrase *Greeks and barbarians* then could stress Paul's obligation to share the gospel with all, regardless of their cultural or educational background.

Many think *the wise and the foolish* is simply repetition used to add emphasize to Paul's statement. Or, *Greeks and barbarians* may focus on language or culture only and still include all people, while *wise and foolish* could refer to a person's innate ability. Whether the two phrases are repetitive or not, together they communicate Paul's sense of obligation to minister to all people. As a result, he was **eager to preach the gospel**, not only in the eastern part of the Roman Empire but also in the western part of the empire (likely with Rome as his base of operations).

VERSE 16

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.

Paul felt obligated and eager to go to Rome and would do so gladly, not hesitantly, because he was **not ashamed** to share the gospel. Paul knew that evangelism could be met with a negative reaction (2 Cor. 11:16-33). Paul suffered numerous forms of rejection and ridicule, but none of it could convince him that he was wrong about the truth of the gospel or its importance. No one and no circumstance would shame him into silence.

Whatever others might think, Paul knew that the gospel is **the power of God for salvation**. The gospel reveals God's plan to accomplish

salvation for humanity. The gospel offers salvation to everyone who believes. It is the only way for them to escape the righteous wrath of God and be restored to right standing before the one true God. Everyone needs salvation, and through the work of Christ, it is available by God's grace to all who have faith in Jesus. While this message of Jesus came **first to the Jew** (Acts 1–8), God's design offers salvation by grace through faith **also to the Greek** (chaps. 9–28).

VERSE 17

For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith, just as it is written: The righteous will live by faith.

Through the gospel **the righteousness of God is revealed**. *The righteousness of God* could refer to a characteristic of God as the Righteous One. He is true to His word. Sin will be punished. At the same time His love for His creation is genuine. His grace makes forgiveness possible. God is faithful to His own nature and to His revealed Word.

The righteousness of God could also refer to the righteousness that God grants to believers through Jesus. By God's grace and through faith in Jesus, believers receive right standing before God. The gospel provides the only path to right standing before the Father.

God's righteousness has been *revealed* in the gospel. It is not something concocted by a person. The Christian gospel is not a changeable human philosophy or a mythology. The gospel has been *revealed*—it is God's revelation of the one true path to right standing before Him.

From faith to faith could refer to the gospel originating with God's faith (or "faithfulness") and making possible the believer's faith. Alternatively, Paul may have had in mind the spreading of the gospel from the faith of an evangelist and leading to the faith of a new believer. A third possibility is Paul had in mind the growth of a person's faith from an elementary faith to a more mature faith. The phrase might also be understood as a way of saying that right standing before God is a matter of faith from beginning to end, or it is entirely a matter of faith.

The righteous will live by faith comes from Habakkuk 2:4 and provides the scriptural foundation for Paul's assertion in 1:16–17. As translated, the statement asserts that faith is the foundation and the guiding principle by which the saved will live. Another possible translation, "He who through faith is righteous shall live" (RSV), asserts that only through faith can a person receive right standing before God and achieve true, spiritual life. As Paul elaborates on the thematic truths stated in 1:16–17 in the rest of Romans, we will discover that both are true.



Explore Further

Read “Romans, Letter to the” on pages 1376–1381 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. Some consider Romans to be the most important of all Paul's letters. Given the observations in this article, what is the central message of Romans, and why is that message so important?

Divine Revelation (Rom. 1:18-20)

In what many consider the thematic statement of the letter (1:16-17), Paul asserted the importance of the gospel. It is the means by which God offers salvation to all people, the only way that people can achieve a right standing before God. In the verses that follow, the universal need for this gospel is stressed. Without the salvation available through the gospel, all who have rejected God and suppressed His truth are subject to His wrath.

VERSE 18

For God's wrath is revealed from heaven against all godlessness and unrighteousness of people who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth,

The message of how to achieve righteousness before God is essential because **God's wrath** falls upon all the ungodly and unrighteous. God is love and desires the salvation of all humanity (John 3:16). But God is not passive or impotent in the face of sin. God's nature and commands reveal sin—behavior that is contrary to His will and unacceptable in the face of His laws. And when sin occurs, it separates the sinner from God and subjects the sinner to punishment (Isa. 59:2). Thus, the origin of *wrath* is the sinful, rebellious behavior of humanity. Evil actions properly earn God's wrath, not because God is spiteful but because God is just.

The **godlessness and unrighteousness of people** also earn wrath by the damage they do to others. By their denial of the truth and by their bad example they hinder others who, but for their influence, might have accepted the truth and followed the way of righteousness. Those who by their words and example **suppress the truth** are doubly guilty. Their own sin and the sin they encourage in others earn divine wrath.

VERSES 19-20

since what can be known about God is evident among them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, that is, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen since the creation of the world, being understood through what he has made. As a result, people are without excuse.

Partly on the basis of these verses, many see Paul asserting that God has revealed Himself in two ways. “Natural revelation” or “general revelation” refers to various truths about God that people can see in God’s **creation**, the natural world. We see this concept expressed in Paul’s assertion that even for the ungodly and unrighteous, **what can be known about God is evident among them**. The phrase *among them* can also be translated “in them” (KJV). Thus, many point to *the creation* as providing evidence of the existence and nature of God as well as to God’s self-revelation within a person—their conscience, their sense of truth, their guilt for their sin—as God revealing Himself.

“Special revelation” refers to specific revelatory acts such as the words of the prophets or the written Scriptures, the Person and message of Jesus, and the teachings of the Spirit through the words and writings of the apostles. The recipients of special revelation are also responsible for how they respond to revealed truth. So, when people reject God’s truth, however it is delivered to them, they are subject to the wrath of God (v. 18). Whenever a person rejects the light that he or she has received, God deals with that person according to his or her actions.

God’s **eternal power** and **divine nature** are evidence of His presence **since the creation of the world**. Anyone who looks closely and honestly at what God **has made** should see evidence pointing to Him and should drive a person to seek the Creator and Sustainer of it all. Since God has revealed Himself in multiple ways, **people are without excuse**. They cannot plead ignorance and so have earned the wrath of God.



Explore Further

Read the article “Revelation of God” on pages 1351–1353 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. How would you describe “general revelation,” and how might it be used to point others to God?

Worthless Thinking (Rom. 1:21-25)

Although God has revealed Himself in a multitude of ways, people have turned away and earned the righteous wrath of God. The act of turning away from God initiates a downward spiral of sin. People separated from their Creator suffer a multitude of self-inflicted wounds and ultimately the wrath of God.

VERSE 21

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.

Rejection of God leads to corrupt ways of thinking and living. Although people **knew God**, they refused to **glorify him as God**. Glorifying God starts with recognizing Him as God and affirming His greatness and His goodness. God has revealed His power in creation. He is worthy of glory. God has revealed His kindness too. The rain falls and the sun shines on the evil as well as the good (Matt. 5:45). Yet the beneficiaries of God's good creation did not **show gratitude** to Him.

Paul lamented the sad state of those who have turned away from God. Rather than living in His revealed truth, **their thinking became worthless**. *Thinking* refers to a person's process of reasoning or sometimes the conclusions a person reaches after considering evidence and options. Corrupt thinking leads to corrupt conclusions and bad decisions.

The thinking of persons who reject God is thus, in the end, *worthless*. Such thoughts might be nonsensical, foolish, or futile. Rejecting God, for example, can lead to the worship of idols—the senseless act of worshiping things imagined and made by flawed human beings. Rejecting God also can make people think and behave as if sin is not real and will not be punished—an error with immense negative consequences.

Rejecting the light of God leads to living in darkness. **Senseless hearts** result from rejecting God's revelation. Being *senseless* refers to having a lack of understanding, being ignorant or foolishness. The *heart* was considered the center of a person's entire inner life and could refer to emotions, intellect, or desires. A *senseless* heart not only fails to provide guidance but actively leads a person astray (Prov. 4:23). Such a person would not be walking in the light but stumbling about in the dark. Errors, bad decisions, and self-destructive behavior would be the common results. When we see these in our world, we are seeing the inevitable results of lives lived apart from God.

VERSES 22-23

Claiming to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man, birds, four-footed animals, and reptiles.

Tragically, persons who reject God, embrace false gods, and live according to worldly lies think they are being **wise**. They think they understand the true nature of reality and how the world works. But in fact, by rejecting the truth revealed by God, they have embarked on a path of error and have themselves become **fools**.

One specific foolishness Paul had in mind was the adoption of idolatry. The creation itself reveals **the glory of the immortal God**. Creation is too grand, too immense, too complex to be the work of the false gods commonly worshiped in Paul's day. Echoing the warnings of the prophets before him, Paul declared the foolishness of worshiping gods made by human hands. By creating **images resembling mortal man** or some sort of animal, people invariably sought to elevate some part of creation to the level of Creator—a foolish act doomed to fail. Yet this alternative was embraced by many because they had rejected the one true God.

VERSE 24

Therefore God delivered them over in the desires of their hearts to sexual impurity, so that their bodies were degraded among themselves.

God's love is seen in the gospel. It is also seen in His longsuffering. People rejected Him, but the immediate result was not destruction. Rather, God **delivered them** or “gave them up” (ESV) to **the desires of their hearts**. *Desires* translates a word often rendered “lusts” (ESV, KJV). While the word is not always negative, frequently Paul used it of what he termed the desires of the flesh (Rom. 13:14; Gal. 5:16; Eph. 2:3). **Sexual impurity** renders a single word used of any sort of moral corruption. All sorts of immorality could be in mind. But the added comment that their bodies were **degraded** [or “dishonored,” NASB] **among themselves** indicates that Paul had improper sexual relations in mind.

VERSE 25

They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served what has been created instead of the Creator, who is praised forever. Amen.

Jewish writers tended to summarize the evils of the Gentile world as idolatry and immorality. Paul here echoes this valid critique. Rejecting **the truth of God**, for whatever reason, leaves a person with nothing to endorse except for **a lie**. Rejecting the true God leads to idolatry, the elevation of something lesser, something **created**, to the status of a god. People might worship and follow some imagined superior being or create mythologies with multiple gods or might imagine themselves as in control of their world and their fate. All such imagined alternatives to the true God share one characteristic—they are false.

Since such gods are human creations, they also share human failings and are used to excuse or even endorse sinful human desires. Little surprise then that idolatry leads to every imaginable impure behavior. Paul expands on this reality in Romans 1:26-32.

While the sinfulness of humanity apart from God is offensive and distressing, Paul did not present this truth as a way to dismiss such people as stupid and unworthy of his concern. Rather, his comments identify the self-deception and moral blindness of a people in desperate need. Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, was called to help such people because God loves them and desires them to turn to Him. People may reject, debate, and ridicule the truth of the gospel, yet the gospel itself asserts that these are people in need of godly empathy, and God through His church holds out a loving hand to draw them back to Him. While rejecting the world's error and sin, believers must also embrace God's love, patience, and hope for the salvation of even those who have made themselves God's (and our) spiritual opponents.



Explore Further

Christians often find the non-Christian world offensive and are tempted to retreat from it. While lamenting the sinfulness so typical of the world, Paul clearly worked to engage non-believers for their benefit. Take time to pray for those trapped in sin and unbelief. Ask God to give you a genuine concern, even for the worst of these, and insight into how to approach them with the gospel.