

Read Mark Learn

Romans

St Helen's Church, Bishopsgate

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Introducing ‘Read Mark Learn’

Blessed Lord, who has caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

*(Collect for the Second Sunday in Advent
in the Book of Common Prayer)*

BEGINNINGS

Read Mark Learn is the title of a collection of small group Bible studies which has been developed, over a number of years, at St Helen's Church, Bishopsgate, in the City of London.

The original studies, undertaken for the first time in 1976, covered the whole of Mark's Gospel in one year. In subsequent years, studies in Paul's letter to the Romans were devised for those who had previously studied Mark; the aim was to provide a thorough training in Christian doctrine. Finally, a third-year study was established, consisting of a complete overview of the Bible. Thus, over three years, members of the church have the opportunity of gaining a firm grasp of how to read and understand the Bible. They are firmly grounded in Christian doctrine and practice from the Scriptures, and so they are equipped for a lifetime in the service of Christ.

READ MARK LEARN

After some years it was felt that a change was needed, and so material for studies in John's Gospel was written. As with Mark and Romans, this material was written primarily for the leaders of small groups, to help them prepare, but it may, of course, be useful to any individual undertaking a study of John.

In all the Read Mark Learn studies there is a commitment to consecutive Bible study, with Bible passages being studied within the context of the scriptural whole. This is based on the conviction that when God's Word is studied *in context*, God's voice is heard as His Holy Spirit speaks.

PRESENT ARRANGEMENTS

The format that we have found to work well is to have a pair of leaders for each small group, with eight to ten members in the group. The leaders are responsible for all the teaching over a period of three terms, each term running for about nine weeks.

Every member is expected to prepare for a study by reading the text carefully – there is no substitute for close and careful study of the text – and considering the discussion questions that have been handed out in advance. The leaders will do this preparation both individually and as a group, meeting together a week or so in advance of the study and using the study notes in this book. With the help of the suggested discussion questions, we study the passage that we will later teach. A key aspect of the leaders' preparation group is the time set aside for praying for each other and for the members of our groups.

TRAINING FOR LEADERS

We have found this preparation group to be a very helpful way of providing training for leaders, of supporting them in their ministry of leadership, and also, of course, of developing our understanding of the overall message of the book we are working on. In addition, there has been the long-term value of training people to lead house groups in the future.

The strength of Read Mark Learn depends, in human terms, upon the calibre of the leaders. Without the leaders' considerable

degree of commitment – as indicated above – the whole enterprise would fail. And so a high priority is given to training and encouraging leaders on a continuing basis. Information on RML Leaders' Training Material may be found at the back of this book.

Introducing the Study Notes

These notes were, for the most part, written during the academic year of 1998/99. They were used by our RML leaders as they led studies in Romans throughout that year. It should be stressed, however, that this present set of notes represents the fruit of over fifteen years spent studying and teaching Romans at St Helen's. During that time, several sets of leaders' notes were compiled and each of these has made a substantial contribution to the notes as they now stand. Equally significant is the fact that all our RML teaching material is created by means of studying the passage in groups, feeding back and, together, correcting and revising our understanding. And so, although these notes are intended to help people understand the message of Romans, it is essential that members of Bible study groups adopt the approach of the Bereans in Acts 17:11, examining the Bible for themselves to see if our interpretation is correct.

These notes are not intended to be a formal commentary on Paul's letter to the Romans. Rather, the aim is to explain the heart of his teaching in each passage, showing how each part fits into his line of argument, in the letter as a whole, and also how it contributes to the achieving of his purpose in writing the letter. For more detailed comment on specific verses or on difficult issues we would point readers to the books listed in the Bibliography at the end of this book.

STUDY PASSAGES

Romans has been divided into 23 passages, with a study for each passage and a review study at the end (for which preparatory

questions only are given in this book). The divisions correspond mainly to the apparent building blocks of Paul's argument. But there are some exceptions: Study 3, for example, covers a long passage which could well be divided to give two studies (on 2:1–16 and 2:17–29) if time permitted, whilst study 18 focuses on just two verses, at the beginning of chapter 12. The reason for this is that these verses represent a 'hinge' in Romans, and we have found that studying them separately provides a useful opportunity to review what has gone before, and also to understand the principles that underlie Paul's teaching in the rest of his letter.

Bible study leaders may feel, nevertheless, that some of the studies are too long for their groups. If this is the case, we would recommend that the group study the heart of the argument and that the leader summarises the surrounding material (particularly where much Old Testament background is involved).

SECTION NOTES

Paul's letter has four main sections which contain the main body of his teaching, and these sit within a frame consisting of an introduction and a conclusion. In these notes we have included Section Notes which are intended to give an overview of each section and also an introduction to some of its most important themes.

STUDY NOTES

Each study has the following headings:

Context: How the passage being studied fits in with the wider context of the whole letter.

Structure: How the text of the passage may be broken down into smaller parts. The main point of each part is stated and from the titles it should be apparent how each part relates to the overall main point of the passage.

Old Testament background: Romans contains many Old Testament ideas and concepts which Paul assumes we will understand. Here the most important ones are introduced.

I INTRODUCING THE STUDY NOTES

Text notes: A brief commentary on the passage. More difficult verses are touched on, but the primary aim is to see how Paul develops the main ideas.

Key themes & Application: A summary of the key ideas raised in the passage is followed by some suggestions as to how these ideas apply, both to the first readers and to us today. A danger in application is that we tend to look for things to do, but in Romans much of the application will involve a change in our thinking. We should not underestimate the significance of such a change, for if we think differently about God, about His purposes and about ourselves, our whole lives will be influenced as a result.

Unanswered questions: These are included to help us consider how the logic of Paul's argument flows from one passage to the next.

Aim: The main point of the passage is taken as the aim of the study. The Bible study leader should enter the study itself with a clear aim and this aim ought to correspond to the main thrust of the passage.

Suggested questions: Suggested questions for leaders to use in the group study. These are only suggestions. They have been tried and tested in RML groups, but Bible study leaders will need to adapt them to suit their own groups. In addition to these questions, which leaders use to help them lead, there are preparation questions to help all members study the passage before coming to the group, and these may be found at the back of the book.

Introducing Paul's Letter to the Romans

In the history of the church, Paul's letter to the Romans has been one of the most influential parts of the Bible. It was instrumental in the conversion of the great early theologian Augustine and crucial in Martin Luther's insights that led to the Reformation. Countless Christians, down the centuries, have come to a greater understanding of the glory of the gospel through reading and studying this epistle. But it is a long, sometimes complex letter, and this could easily put us off discovering its riches. The purpose of this Introduction, therefore, is to provide some background to Romans and also to give an idea of how the letter fits together, so that we will be encouraged to study this part of God's Word more closely.

GENERAL BACKGROUND TO PAUL'S LETTER

The letter claims to have been written by the apostle Paul (e.g. 1:1; 15:15) and there is no good reason to doubt that he (with the help of his scribe, Tertius, see 16:22) was indeed its author.

It is also clear that the letter was written in the latter stages of Paul's third missionary journey. Chapter 15 verses 23-29 tells us that, as he writes, Paul is planning to go to Jerusalem and then to Rome, and then eventually on to Spain. This final destination was because of his desire (expressed in 15:20) to 'preach the gospel where Christ was not known'. It seems likely that he wrote to the Romans while he was in Greece, before setting off on this three-stage journey (Acts 20:1-3). Subsequent to his letter, Paul did finally reach Rome

where, although under guard, he preached the gospel for two years (Acts 28:11–31).

It is not certain how the church in Rome was founded, although ‘the most likely scenario is that Roman Jews, who were converted on the day of Pentecost (see Acts 2:10), brought their faith in Jesus as the Messiah back with them to their home synagogues’ (Moo, p. 4). But the majority of the Jewish Christians would most likely have left Rome at the order of the Emperor Claudius in AD 49 (reported in Acts 18:2). By the time Romans was written, in about AD 57, some Jews would have returned, but overall the church in Rome would have comprised a majority of Gentiles and only a few Jews, and this seems to be reflected in some of the concerns of Paul’s letter.

THE PURPOSE OF PAUL’S LETTER

This has been the subject of much debate, for unlike many of Paul’s other letters, there seems to be no single issue that the letter as a whole is addressing. Nor is the church in Rome dominated by problems – various problems lay behind Paul’s two long letters to the church in Corinth. Indeed, at both ends of his letter the apostle acknowledges the spiritual well-being of the Roman Christians (1:8; 15:14), so why does he write to them at such length? Three purposes emerge from the letter, although none by itself is adequate as an explanation.

✍ *Paul is gathering support for his trip to Spain.*

Paul explicitly states this intention in 15:24. For his missionary trip to Spain he would have needed substantial support and ‘it would be natural for Paul to try to enlist the help of the vital and centrally located Roman community’ (Moo, p. 17). The rest of the letter, therefore, provides the background and the motivation for enlisting their partnership in his work, for only as the Romans understand the scope and wonder of the good news, of salvation for all people, will they fully support such an enterprise.

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➤ *Tension between Jews and Gentiles in the church.*

The Gentile majority and the Jewish minority are clearly not accepting one another as they should, but instead are looking down on one another for various reasons. Evidence for this comes in several passages. First, it appears that Jews may have been bragging about their spiritual heritage (2:17–20). Second, and more prominently, chapter 11 makes it clear that Gentile Christians are boasting over Jews because the gospel has largely been rejected by the Jews and is now spreading rapidly among the Gentiles (11:17–32). Third, Paul specifically addresses a Jew/Gentile point of conflict, in 14:1–15:13, as he urges them to avoid condemning or judging one another, in the situation where some Jewish Christians are still observing some food laws and festival days. In view of all this, Paul's careful explanation of the gospel – that it is powerful to save all people, both Jew and Gentile (1:16) – is the basis on which he urges the two groups to accept one another fully, so that each sees the other as part of the same Christian family. It is critically important that they do this, for their mutual acceptance will witness to God's work of building a united body of believers.

➤ *The importance of understanding the gospel*

It is striking that, although the Roman Christians have, as we learn, an international reputation for their faith and obedience (1:8; 16:19), Paul's message to them is essentially the gospel of salvation; he boldly reminds them of what they already know (15:15). Another purpose behind Paul's letter, therefore, seems to be that these Christians should fully understand the gospel that has saved them, the gospel that he is preaching.

These three strands could well be closely related. The Roman church will have a key part to play in the spread of the gospel, not only because they will provide support for Paul's trip to Spain, but also because they sit at the centre of the most powerful empire of the day. This church is in a position of the greatest influence in the

known world, and it is therefore vital that its members be fully and accurately grounded in the gospel. They need correct understanding and, as a result of such understanding, their lives should witness to the power of the gospel of Christ – and in the first century nothing would have demonstrated this more vitally than the unity among Jewish and Gentile Christians.

THE IMPLICATIONS FOR US

The urgent focus on the gospel in Romans has important implications for us, since our usual inclination may be to think that once we understand the gospel, we can move on to other matters in our Christian lives. Paul's inclination, however, is not to move on elsewhere but, rather, to go deeper into the gospel itself. Since we ourselves need to understand more and more the scope and magnitude of God's mercy, however long we have been believing, we should meditate on what Paul has written, trusting it and seeking to live in the light of it. Then, the things that Paul most desires to see – lives being transformed in obedience to God, a church that is genuinely united, the gospel being spread to all people and, above all, God being glorified – will start to become our highest priorities too.

John Calvin said that 'if we have gained a true understanding of this epistle, we have an open door to all the most profound treasures of Scripture'. The aim of this study course is that, with the help of the Holy Spirit, we will grow towards such an understanding.

STRUCTURE AND OUTLINE OF THE LETTER

Romans is about the salvation that God has revealed in Jesus Christ. At its simplest, the letter fits together like this: following his introduction, Paul gives a short thesis for his argument in 1:16–17. He then sets up the problem, tells us the solution, explains the solution, draws out some of the implications, and signs off.

When studying Romans, it is easy to get lost in the detail and fail to see how the passage being studied fits into the big picture. The fuller outline given below is designed to give us a view of the big picture at the outset, before we start to look at the detail. The letter has four main sections, containing the substance of Paul's

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teaching, and these sit within a 'frame' formed by an introduction and a conclusion.

1:1–17 Introduction

1:1–5 A summary of the gospel

1:6–15 Paul's relationship with the Romans

1:16–17 Paul's thesis: God's gospel is powerful to save all who believe

1:18–4:25 The problem and God's solution

1:18–3:20 The problem: God's wrath at our unrighteousness

1:18–3:2 All humankind is facing God's wrath, both now and, ultimately, in the future, because we have all rebelled against Him

2:1–3:20 There are no exceptions and no excuses; even the Jews are sinners who face God's wrath

3:21–4:25 God's solution: justification by faith

3:21–26 God has revealed a way by which he justly makes people righteous through Jesus' death if they have faith in Him

3:27–4:25 Faith is what God has always wanted – it is the only means by which a person may inherit God's promises

5:1–8:39 What it means to be justified by faith

5:1–11 If we are justified, we will be saved from God's wrath

5:12–21 Through His death, Christ has established a realm of righteousness which will supersede the realm of sin and death (established by Adam) in which all humankind naturally lives

6:1–7:6 Christians are now in the realm of Christ, as a result of being united with Him in His death and resurrection, and so are no longer under the reign of sin or the Law that condemns

7:7–8:17 Yet we currently experience a struggle with sin, because we will live in both realms until we are physically raised

8:18–39 God's plan to glorify us in the future is unstoppable despite suffering and persecution now

9:1–11:36 The reason why so few Jews have been saved (An explanation of why this does not call into question God's commitment to His plan of salvation)

9:1–29 God's Word has not failed. He never promised that all Jews would be saved

9:30–10:21 Where the Jews went wrong, i.e. the reason they are not being saved

11:1–36 God will save everyone he chooses, including all the Jews he intends to save

12:1–15:13 How the gospel should impact on Christians' lives

12:1–2 Key principles

12:3–13:14 Relationships revolutionised by the gospel

14:1–15:13 An important case of the relationships revolution: relating to Christians with whom you disagree over disputable matters

15:14 Closing section

15:14–33 Paul explains his ministry to the Gentiles

16:1–27 Greetings, warnings, messages, and glory to God!

AN OVERVIEW

The best way to get started in Romans is to read it! Set aside some time when you can read the whole book at one sitting. Read fairly rapidly, trying to get a feel for the book as a whole: the main themes, the structure, the language. (You may like to keep in mind the 'overview' questions, which are printed at the beginning of the prep questions at the end of this book.) The point of this exercise is to take in the big picture, so don't worry about understanding all the details at this stage. At the end, note down your first impressions. If you struggle to make mental notes, jot down a few very brief comments with references as you read, but don't lose your momentum.