

Paul's Letter to the Romans

Romans

- A simple guide to the main themes in the letter
 - The power of the gospel in our lives today
 - The place of Israel in God's plans

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PAUL'S EPISTLE TO THE ROMANS

Many years ago, a very successful young man sat on a bench. He was disgusted with his life. His success could not hide his terrible failings. Lust and greed ruled his life. In despair, he picked up a book and read:

Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh (Rom. 13:13–14).

He awoke from his “slumber” (Rom. 13:11): “No further would I read, nor had I any need,” he said. “Instantly, at the end of this sentence, a clear light flooded my heart and all the darkness of doubt vanished away.”

The young man was Augustine. In the fourth century AD he became bishop of Hippo and one of the most influential Christian thinkers in the history of the church. Through the message of Romans, God transformed the life of that anguished young man and then used him in powerful ways. It is the same message we read today, and it has the same power to transform us.

Studying the letter to the Romans will help us understand what God has done in and through Christ, and letting the Word of God and the Holy Spirit shape our minds and hearts will transform our lives. Open your mind, your heart, and your will to the powerful words of this letter.

Paul's Journey to Rome, AD 57–62 (Acts 21:17–28:31)



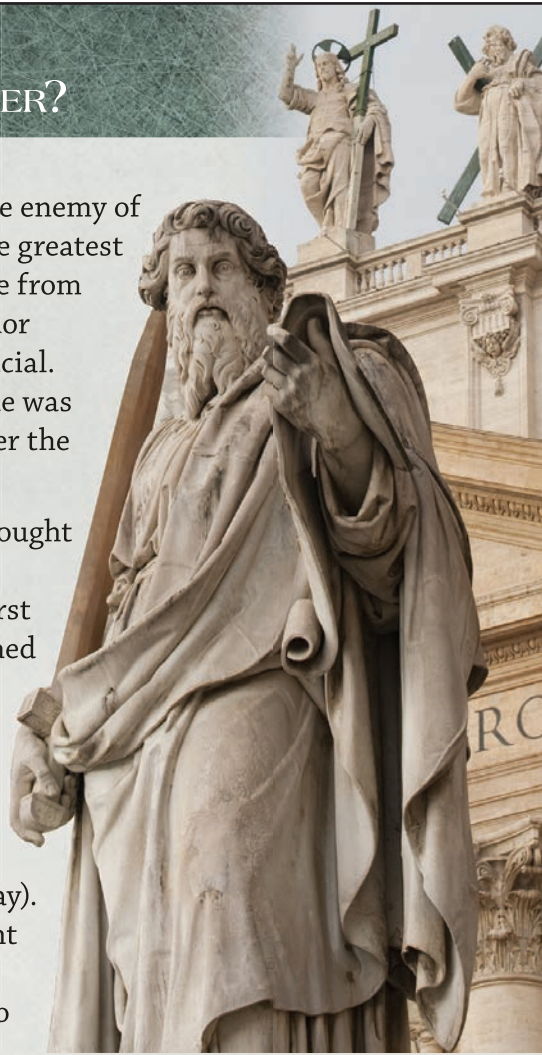
WHO WROTE THE LETTER?

Paul, the author of Romans, was a one-time enemy of Christianity who God transformed into the greatest Christian missionary of all time! Paul came from a well-respected Jewish family in Asia Minor (Turkey today) where his father was an official. As a young man, Paul—whose Jewish name was Saul—was sent to Jerusalem to study under the great teacher Gamaliel.

Paul, belonged to a group of people who thought the followers of Christ were dangerous. He hated Christians and participated in the first execution of a Christian leader, a man named Stephen. Paul was determined to destroy Christianity everywhere (Acts 7:54–8:3).

Paul hated Christians so much that he asked the chief priest in Jerusalem to give him authorization to arrest any follower of Jesus in Damascus (about 100 miles away). On his way from Judea to Damascus, a light from heaven blinded him. He fell to the ground and a voice said, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” Paul answered, “Who are you?” The voice said, “I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting. Get up! Go into the city, and you will be told what to do.” Paul went to a house and waited for a Christian man named Ananias to come restore his sight (Acts 9:1–12).

During the early years of Christianity, Jesus’ disciples preached only to Jews, so most converts at that time were Jewish. As Jews scattered throughout the Roman Empire, they told their neighbors about Jesus. Many of these Gentiles (non-Jews) then became followers of Jesus too (Acts 11:19–21). While traveling throughout the Roman Empire, the apostle Paul preached and ministered to Gentile Christians. Paul became one of God’s powerful tools to spread the good news of Jesus.



When Was It Written?

Paul wrote the epistle to the Romans at the height of the Roman Empire, probably in AD 57, during the rule of Nero. He wrote it just after his Corinthian letters and just before he headed to Jerusalem with the relief fund gathered for the believers there (Rom. 15:25–27).

TO WHOM WAS THE LETTER WRITTEN?

Paul wrote this letter to the church in Rome. In the first century, Rome was the center of nearly all that happened in the Mediterranean world. The church at Rome during this time was a mix of both Jewish and Gentile believers. There was a large Jewish presence in Rome, as we learn from the expulsion order given under Emperor Claudius (Acts 18:2–3). Many Christian believers were already there before Paul made his first journey to Rome around AD 57.

Though there is no mention of who first brought the gospel to Rome, Christianity had spread quickly to the capital city of the Roman Empire, probably through travelers engaged in business, political, and religious activities. By the time of the great persecution under Emperor Nero (AD 64), the historian Tacitus could say a “great multitude” of Christians lived in Rome.

But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.— Romans 5:8

Outline of Romans

1. Introduction: An Apostle to the Gentiles (1:1–17)
2. God Is Right to Judge and Save (1:18–3:20)
3. The Power of the Gospel (3:21–8:39)
4. God’s Righteous Plan for Israel and Gentiles (9:1–11:36)
5. The Power of the Gospel in the Life of Believers (12:1–15:13)
6. Conclusion (15:14–16:27)



PURPOSES OF THE LETTER

Inspired by the Holy Spirit, and borne from his desire to visit the church in Rome, Paul wrote the letter with very specific purposes in mind:

- **Missionary.** Paul's ministry was, at its core, missionary—spreading the gospel throughout the world. Paul's travels describe an apostle profoundly involved with Jesus' commission to spread the gospel. The Epistle to the Romans reveals Paul's heart for missions. The apostle had not visited the church in Rome, yet he wanted to make it his church base for launching a missionary effort that would reach the end of the known world: Spain. Paul also might have wanted Roman believers to know the content of his missionary preaching—in other words, the message of the gospel.
- **Teaching.** Paul explained in detail many crucial topics of the Christian faith. The letter to the Romans is not a complete handbook of Christian beliefs. Rather, this book reveals an interest in themes like the human need for salvation, the relationship between Jewish and Gentile Christians, the death and resurrection of Jesus as the way of salvation, justification by faith alone, and the role of faith in people's lives.
- **Pastoral.** Paul's letter is not just a doctrinal letter; it is a personal letter. The apostle Paul sends personal greetings to many people, and he is aware of the different house churches in Rome. He is also aware of potential divisions and troubles. Gentile Christians might have lost view of the importance of their fellow Jewish Christians. With pastoral love, he writes to encourage and exhort Roman believers to unity and wisdom.

These three purposes develop a central concern in the letter, which is found in Romans 1:16–17:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

—Romans 8:28

1 INTRODUCTION: AN APOSTLE TO THE GENTILES (1:1–17)

Paul started the churches in Corinth, Galatia, and Philippi, but he did not start the church in Rome. The apostle Paul had to introduce himself to the Christians at Rome because they did not personally know him. Notice the descriptions he used:

1. ***A servant of Christ Jesus***—Here, Paul drew from the Old Testament concept of servanthood—Moses was the Lord’s servant, the kings of Israel and Judah were God’s servants, the prophets and priests were God’s servants.
2. ***Called to be an apostle***—Paul was “called to be an apostle” (v. 1) and the Roman Christians were “called to be his [God’s] holy people” (v. 7). Each one called for a purpose, and Paul’s purpose was a special one. An apostle is a messenger, one who brings his master’s will to others. Moreover, Paul was an apostle to the *Gentiles* (v. 5), such as to the Roman Christians who received his letter.
3. ***Set apart for the gospel of God***—Paul was “set apart” (v. 1) and the Christian Romans were “called to be his holy people” (to be “holy” is to be “set apart”). Paul’s main calling as servant of Christ Jesus and as an apostle was to be a witness to the gospel. Paul’s missionary heart comes through from the beginning of the letter.

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.—Romans 3:23

Paul offers an explanation of “the gospel of God.” Notice the terms he used:

1. ***Promised***—Paul declared that the life and ministry of Jesus were anticipated in the Old Testament. Jesus was the fulfillment of God’s promises in the Old Testament. The good news began in Genesis!
2. ***About Jesus***—Paul stated that Jesus is the heart of the gospel. All of salvation history centers on Christ: his divinity and humanity, his ministry on earth, death and resurrection. All of it testifies to Jesus’ lordship.
 - a. Jesus is God’s Son.
 - b. Jesus was a human, descendant of David.
 - c. Jesus was ministered by the Spirit of holiness.
3. ***Effects***—Paul explained that through the gospel we receive God’s grace. God’s grace makes all the difference in the world! The effects of the gospel are central to Paul’s letter. We, as Christians, also receive a calling: Paul was called to apostleship, but all Christians are called to belong to Jesus Christ.

2

GOD IS RIGHT TO JUDGE AND SAVE (1:18–3:20)

The message of the gospel brings salvation to the Jew first, then to the Gentile. This is an important point that Paul makes throughout the letter. The first step in his argument is to show that both Jews and Gentiles are in need of salvation.

Paul deals with the sinfulness and perversions found in the Gentile world in the first section, 1:18–32. The apostle Paul did not list all possible sins, or even the worst of them, that one could find in the Gentile world. If the Roman Christians had any feeling of ethnic superiority over the Jewish Christians, Paul's reasoning erased it. Paul's evidence is conclusive: the Gentile world is in need of salvation.

However, the apostle wasn't finished with unveiling the ugliness of human sin. He turned to the Jewish world: "You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge another, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things" (Rom. 2:1). Paul leveled the playing field for Jews and Gentiles! The main point of this section is this: humans, Jew and Gentile alike, with or without the law, share the same problem—sin—and equally need God's solution—the gospel. The apostle Paul arrives to a powerful conclusion: "Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law" (3:20).

For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.—Romans 6:23

God's Righteousness Is Revealed in His Wrath

God's anger is neither irrational nor capricious. Rather, human rebellion and willful rejection of the light God has given to both Gentiles and Jews are good reasons for his anger. God's wrath, however, is not revealed in what God *does* but in what he does *not* do. God allows humanity, Gentiles and Jews alike, to suffer the disastrous consequences of their own evil.

However, Paul's ultimate goal is to show that:

1. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile,
2. for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,
3. and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus (Rom. 3:22–24)

Paul wants to present the power of the gospel to his readers. Just as we can better understand the light when we contrast it with the darkness, so also the ugliness of human sin makes us long for God's gracious help.

The apostle Paul has shown that God is right in being angry. Human sin is destructive and offends God. As Paul explains God's solution to the horror of human sin, he focuses on a different side of God's righteousness.

God's Righteousness Is Revealed in His Plan of Salvation

In Romans 3:21–8:39, the apostle Paul explains what the power of the gospel achieves:

1. **Forgiveness** (3:21–4:25)—
Forgiveness of sin through the ministry of Jesus is a revelation of God's righteousness and of the power of the gospel. All the images the apostle used before—commercial, religious, and legal—point to this essential benefit. The benefits of the gospel, the apostle insists, are not something people earn or deserve. Rather, they come from God's grace, as a gift, and are appropriated by faith. Sin offends God's holiness and justice, breaks any possibility of a relationship with humanity, and brings death and destruction. The first step in God's amazing grace is to forgive people who do not deserve forgiveness.
2. **Peace** (5:1–21)—Because of God's gracious forgiveness, humanity can start a new relationship with God. The enmity that sin causes between God and humans is now overcome. The Roman audience understood the concept well because of the *Pax Romana*, the peace within the Roman Empire that allowed for consistent commerce, growth of cities, and peaceful travel. The peace that Christ brings, however, is just the beginning of a new life. It also includes perseverance, character, and hope. This peace also brings a new freedom that believers must learn to experience.

One of Paul's main arguments throughout his ministry in general, which is expressed in his letter to the Romans, is that God's offer of



The Good News

As Paul did in his letter, our presentation of the gospel has to move beyond noting what is wrong with our society, our neighbors, or young people. We must proclaim the good news: we believe in a God who has done something about the human problem, the solution is free and available to all, and it makes all the difference in the world.

salvation to all people is free. In other words, there is nothing people can do to earn or merit or influence God's decision to save us. Salvation is an undeserved gift from God. However, this important teaching raises the serious problem of so-called cheap grace—also known as *antinomianism*. Paul gives an answer to that problem in Romans, chapters 6 and 7. In the apostle's answer, it is clear that cheap grace and legalism—the teaching that we must obey the Law to be saved—are two sides of the same coin: both represent the inability to understand or accept the wondrous grace of God.

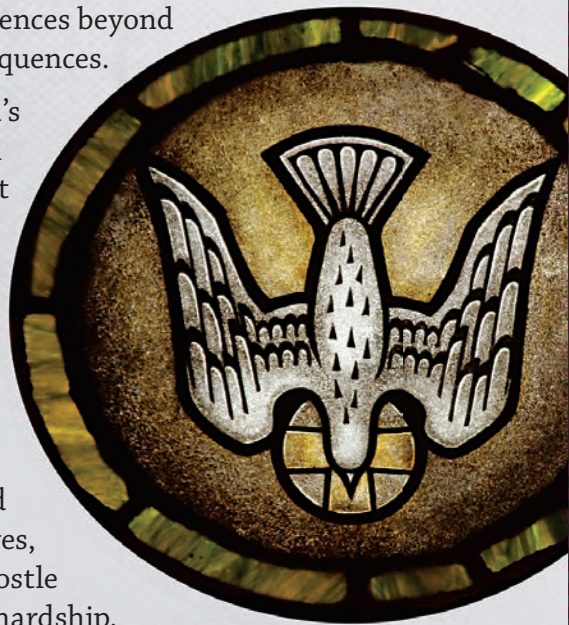
3. ***Freedom from the power of sin*** (6:1–23)—Believers are free from the power of sin. This does not mean that Christians do not sin at all. Rather, because of Christ's death, sin no longer controls us; we can choose not to sin. Returning to his image of slavery, the apostle Paul affirms that we are no longer slaves to sin. We “have become slaves to righteousness” (6:18). We are free to do what is right in a world where wickedness and injustice abounds. The following table¹ shows important contrasts the apostle makes in this chapter of Romans.

Rom. 6:	Dead to Sin	Alive in Christ
13	Instruments of unrighteousness to sin	Instruments of righteousness to God
14–15	Not under the law	But under grace
16	Sin unto death	Obedience unto righteousness
18	Free from sin	Enslaved to righteousness
19	Slave to impurity unto wickedness	Slave to righteousness unto holiness
20	Slaves to sin	Slaves to God
21–22	End is death	End is eternal life
22	Free from sin	Slaves to God
23	Wages of sin is death	Gift of God is eternal life

4. ***Freedom from the condemnation of the law*** (7:1–25). The law condemns us because of our sin. The law cannot remove the stain of sin nor transform our hearts so we can become free from the slavery to sin. But God has delivered us “through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (7:25).

5. ***New Life in the Spirit*** (8:1–39). Rather than condemnation, “the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death” (8:2). In chapter 8 of Romans, Paul neatly brings the arguments from the previous chapters to a closing; and a glorious closing it is. The apostle has concluded that God’s solution to the greatest human problem is found in Christ’s death and resurrection (chapter 5 and verse 6:4). How do we see the benefits of Christ’s death and resurrection in the life of believers? The answer is found in chapter 8: God gives us a new life in the Spirit. “For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God” (Rom. 8:14). This salvation that the Spirit makes active in the believers has consequences beyond the individual. It has cosmic consequences.

The entire universe groans for God’s deliverance, just as believers groan for God’s deliverance and the Spirit groans as he intercedes for us (8:22, 23, 26). However, even in this context of suffering in life, Paul offers encouragement and comfort by reminding us that we, as believers, are safe in God’s loving hands. Therefore, because of what Christ did on the cross and the presence of the Spirit in our lives, we can proclaim along with the apostle Paul, “in all these things [trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, sword (8:35)] we are more than conquerors through him who loved us” (8:37).



Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.—Romans 12:1

4 GOD'S RIGHTEOUS PLAN FOR ISRAEL AND GENTILES (9:1–11:36)

After teaching about the revelation of God's righteousness in judgment and in salvation, which is the heart of the gospel, the apostle Paul now deals with a vital and practical problem in the church: divisions between the Roman Gentiles and Jewish Christians.

Divisions within the body oppose the very gospel that Paul describes. For this reason, Paul refutes questions about Israel's place in God's plans. Did God's plans fail? Is God still faithful to his promises to Israel? Are Gentile Christians above the Jews now? If God's faithfulness to Israel changed, could his faithfulness to believers, as expressed in 8:31–39, also change? Are we truly safe in his hands?

Division Among Gentiles and Jews



For most of his ministry Paul dealt with the problem of Jewish Christians wanting Gentiles to follow Jewish Laws. In this letter, Paul deals with the opposite problem: Gentile Christians who seem to regard Jews as inferior. Paul's appeal to the Roman Christians, and to all believers, is a personal one: as an apostle of the Lord and as a Jew. In the previous section, Paul used examples from the life of Abraham and Adam to connect more directly with the Gentile experience. In chapters 9–11, Paul argues using many Old Testament quotations and allusions. Paul begins his argument alluding to Moses' own appeal on behalf of God's people in the aftermath of the golden calf catastrophe (Ex. 32:32): "For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people, those of my own race" (Rom. 9:3).

To explain the place of Israel in God's plans, the apostle presents a three-part salvation plan: God rejects Israel for the sake of the Gentiles (11:11–12), the Gentiles will be saved "until the full number of the Gentiles has come in" (11:25), and, then, "all Israel will be saved" (11:26).

Paul's conclusions:

1. First rejection of Israel is temporary and has a vital purpose. Paul's teaching is clear: "But if their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their full inclusion bring!" (11:12).
2. Second, Gentiles should not feel superior to the Jews. Salvation is not by works, so no one can boast about it. Gentiles' attitude toward Jews should be one of humility and hope. The beautiful doxology at the end of the section (11:33–36) suggests this attitude of humility before "the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!" (11:33).

So far, the apostle Paul has covered much doctrinal ground in this most impressive letter. But having explained the basis for his gospel, and the role of Israel in the history of salvation, he now turns to the consequences of all he has taught. The power of the gospel, Paul says, has concrete and decisive effects in the lives of believers.

- The basis for Christian living apart from the Mosaic law (12:1-2)
- The body of Christ as the social expression of God's people (12:3-8)
- Love as the fundamental moral rule in human relationships (12:9-21)
- **Christians and the powers that be (Romans 13:1-7)**
- Love of neighbor as the fulfillment of the law in human relationships (13:8-10)
- Christ as the pattern of Christian living (13:11-14)
- The basis for social interaction apart from the Mosaic law (14:1-15:13)

The power of the gospel is creative and transformative. The consequences are equally radical. In light of all he has written, the apostle Paul now appeals to his readers to become living sacrifices. The concept captures what he has hinted at before: If we are not bound to the law, which requires daily sacrifices, we are now bound to the law of love (see Rom. 13:8–10), which requires that we offer our whole selves to God. Our entire lives should be an act of worship to God.

But love is not all that the gospel demands. The apostle uses another radical concept: Our minds must be transformed and renewed. Paul means that we need a radical change in worldview. If we were once slaves of sin, we are now slaves of righteousness. This transformation begins with being made into a new creation, with the surrender of our bodies and our minds. The apostle teaches us a wonderful and hopeful idea: Transformation is possible, and it can occur in this life. This is good news indeed!

The following table shows the connections between this section and the beginning of the letter and it reveals the way God is solving the problem of human sin and its effects.²

1:24	degrading of their bodies	12:1	offer your bodies
1:25	worshiped created things	12:1	proper worship
1:28	a depraved mind	12:2	renewing of your mind
2:18	know his will and approve	12:2	test and approve what God's will is

The apostle provides several examples of how a renewed mind deals with difficult ethical and moral issues. He does not give us a comprehensive list. Rather, the apostle expects his readers to understand his examples and apply his insights to all areas of life. He expects us to exercise our moral muscles to develop renewed discernment. We can do that because now “we can test and approve what God’s will is” (12:2).

Application Questions:

- Reread Romans 1:16–17. What is power of the gospel? How does it accomplish God’s purposes in the lives of people?
- How have you seen that power at work in your own life?
- What are the dangers of valuing God’s creation more than the Creator himself (see especially Romans 1:21–29)? In what ways have you struggled with this?
- How should our inability to “be declared righteous in God’s sight by the works of the law” (Romans 3:20) affect our attitudes toward God? toward others?
- How should Paul’s arguments regarding the Jews throughout this section give us reassurance about our own salvation?
- Reread Romans 10:9–15. What is our role in spreading the gospel, and why? What are some different ways we can fulfill that?
- Reread Romans 12:1–8. Practically speaking, what does it mean to be “a living sacrifice” (verse 1)? How does it enable us to know God’s “good and pleasing and perfect” will—and actually do it?
- How does a sacrificial attitude help us relate better to those who are built differently from us (see also Romans 14)?
- What’s your reaction to Paul’s statement in Romans 15:14, that your “brothers and sisters... are full of goodness”?
- How would (or does) believing Paul’s statement change the way you approach and work together with your “brothers and sisters”?

6

CONCLUSION (15:14–16:27)

After sending extended greetings to many people in Rome, the apostle offers a final exhortation: “I urge you, brothers and sisters, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned” (16:17).

Notes:

1. Adapted from Dunn, James D. G. WBC Vol. 38A, *Romans 1–8*.
2. Adapted from Dunn, James D. G. WBC Vol. 38A, *Romans 1–8*.



Three Important Themes

Redemption/Ransom. Many of the people Paul addressed in Rome were or had been slaves. At this time in history, slavery was a reality most people experienced on a daily basis. Most domestic workers, teachers, low government functionaries, and manual laborers were slaves. In New Testament times, slaves had many protections and freedoms. In fact, slaves could become free people and, in some cases, even Roman citizens. One way to acquire freedom was simply to buy it, though the price for one's freedom was very high. A ransom—often money—was the payment for a slave's freedom. Redemption occurred when someone else, a master or another slave, paid the ransom for a slave. The freed person was redeemed. Paul knew that his audience would readily understand this image, and so he used it to speak of what God had done in Christ. Christ's sacrifice on the cross and resurrection from the grave redeems us from our bondage to sin and death. God makes us free!

Atonement. The origin of the English word *atonement* has been attributed to William Tyndale, the sixteenth-century English Bible translator, to express what Jesus accomplished on the cross: the cancellation of sins and reconciliation of God with humanity. The word has two parts: "at" and "onement." Atonement, then, is God's way to bring reconciliation and restoration to the problem of human sin and its effects.

Justification. In Christ, God has justified us and opened the way to serve him and love him. Justification is a word that comes from the courts of law. Paul uses this word to explain to the Romans—well acquainted with the court system—the effects of Jesus' death for believers. In Christ, God has declared us just, or acceptable, before God.



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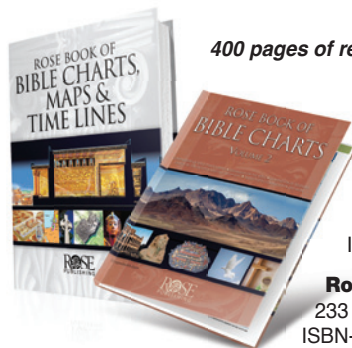
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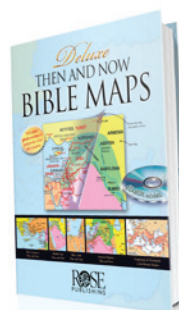
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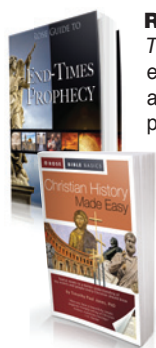
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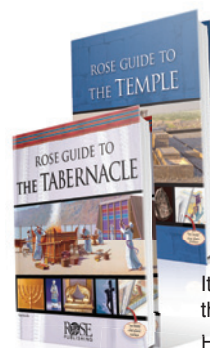
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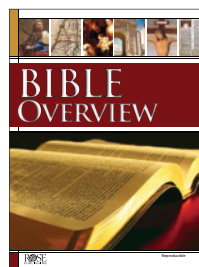
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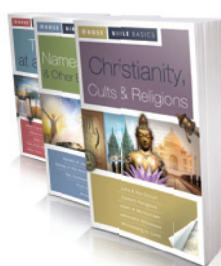
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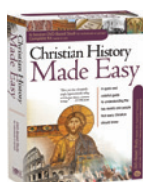
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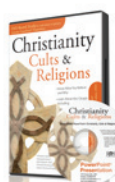
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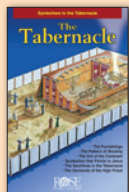
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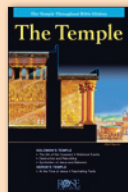
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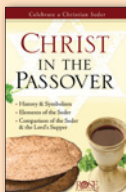
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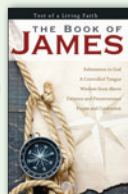
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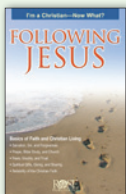
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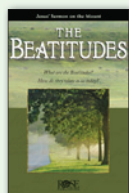
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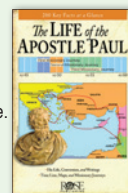
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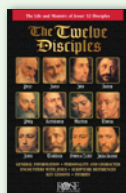
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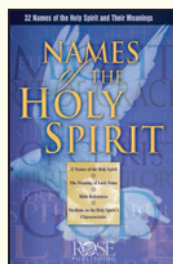


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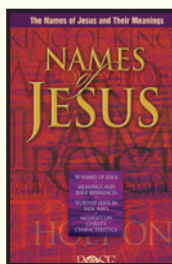


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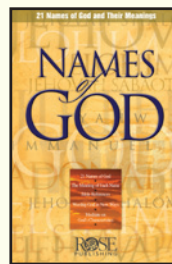


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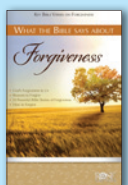
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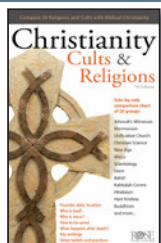
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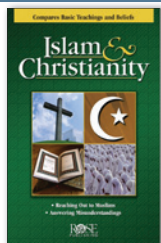
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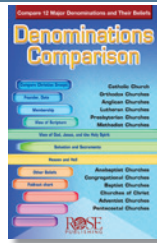
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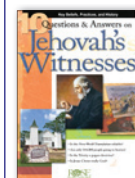


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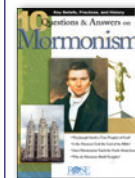


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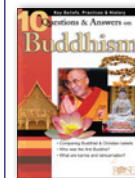
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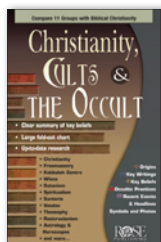
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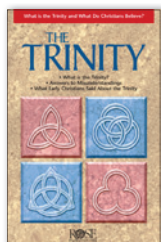
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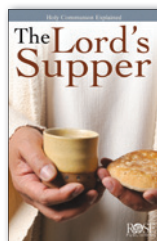
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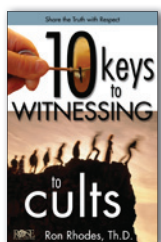
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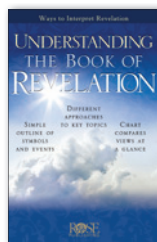
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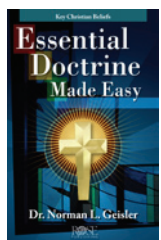
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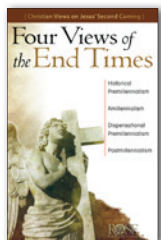
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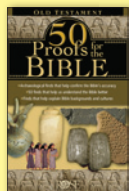


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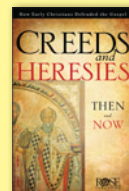
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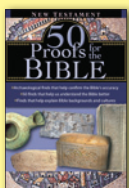
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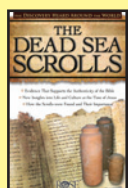
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