

Sexuality AND GRACE



AN INTERACTIVE BIBLE STUDY IN ROMANS

3. WHO, WHAT, WHERE, WHEN, WHY?

WHO?

Written by **Paul**. He was a very religious Jewish man who had been putting Jesus' followers in prison before he had an experience where he heard Jesus speaking to him. Now he is travelling around starting and encouraging new churches. Delivered by **Phoebe**. She was a church leader.

WHAT?

It's a **letter** all about the good news of God's grace. It talks about God's holiness, human sin, rescue by Jesus, how we should live, and what to do when church members disagree.

WHERE?

Sent to the church in the city of **Rome** – the capital of the Roman Empire. The church had both Jewish people who understood Jesus as the fulfilment of God's promises in the Bible, and non-Jewish or Gentile people who were mostly new to the story of God. They didn't follow Jewish religious customs like avoiding certain foods.

WHEN?

Probably written around **57 AD**. About 25 years after Jesus' death and Resurrection.

WHY?

Paul had never visited the church in Rome even though he wanted to. Romans was written **because** Paul wanted to explain God's grace and address some tensions between the Jewish and non-Jewish (gentile) church members.

4. QUOTE: NT WRIGHT ON THE HISTORICAL OCCASION FOR ROMANS

Romans “addresses a community in which Christian Gentiles and Christian Jews find themselves in uneasy coexistence.”

They “would now be facing the difficult question of how to live together as one family with those who cherished very different cultural traditions, not least food taboos. Paul knows that this will not be solved overnight and stresses instead a doctrine of adiaphoria: there are some practical things over which Christians can legitimately disagree, and they should not impair common worship.”

N.T. Wright

Romans - The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, Abingdon, 2015.

Consider one or two of these questions:

1. How important is it to consider background context like original audience and reason for writing? Why?
2. How much can Paul's approach to the differences between Jews and Gentiles be applied to different approaches to human sexuality within the church today?
3. Aside from differences about human sexuality, what divisions and tensions within the church come to mind? Could these be considered matters of conscience?

Romans 1:18-32

¹⁸ The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness,

¹⁹ since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them.

²⁰ For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.

²¹ For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.

²² Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools

²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.

²⁴ Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another.

²⁵ They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator – who is for ever praised. Amen.

²⁶ Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones.

²⁷ In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error.

²⁸ Furthermore, just as they did not think it worth while to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done.

²⁹ They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips,

³⁰ slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents;

³¹ they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy.

³² Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practise them.

¹ 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.

² Now we know that God's judgment against those who do such things is based on truth.

³ So when you, a mere human being, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God's judgment?

⁴ Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience, not realising that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?

Romans 2:1-4

¹⁸ The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness,

¹⁹ since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them.

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8. WORD BANK

GRATEFULNESS ANXIETY CONVICTION AWE

ANGER COMFORT OVERWHELMED

CONFUSION JOY FEAR RELIEF

OTHER:

9. QUOTE: BEVERLY ROBERTS GAVENTA ON ROMANS

“Romans has surprises for its careful readers. And some of those surprises may even be offensive. Despite the innocuous way in which Paul's letters are often read and interpreted, they are far from innocuous. They usher us into a gospel far more vast than we usually imagine, and that gospel may well take us places we would prefer not to go.”

Beverly Roberts Gaventa
When in Romans, Baker Academic, 2016

Consider one or two of these questions:

1. How much have you found that Paul's letters are interpreted in an “innocuous way”?
2. Was there anything in the reading from Romans 1 that you found surprising or offensive?
3. When Gaventa says “that gospel may well take us places we would prefer not to go”, what might she have in mind?

10. DISCUSSION TOPICS - PART 1

Choose one or two of these topics and share your thoughts and questions with one another.

1. What parts of the text do you find encouraging?
What parts of the text do you find challenging?
What parts of the text do you find uncomfortable or difficult?
2. If this was the only part of the Bible you ever had, what would you think about God? Why?
3. How do you feel hearing the parts of Romans 1 that refer to sex?
What questions do you have about it?

11. CONTEXT - PART 1

● PAUL'S PURPOSE

In his introduction, Paul tells us part of his purpose for writing this letter to the Romans:

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.”

(Romans 1:16-17)

The word gospel is the Greek word euangelion εὐαγγέλιον. It means “good news”.

Discuss:

- Does the scripture we heard read (Romans 1:18-32) sound like good news or bad news?
 - What is the good news that Paul is talking about?
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● SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR IN THE ROMAN WORLD

Attitudes to sex in 1st century Rome were different to our time and place.

Self-discipline was considered a virtue, and men and women were expected to marry and have children, but it was considered acceptable for married men to also have sex with unmarried women, teenage boys, and male and female slaves. Slaves were the property of their masters and could be used sexually by their masters, or sold to others to make money.

Draw a box around any parts of the text you think this is relevant to.

Discuss:

- How would a slave who had been sexually exploited by their master feel hearing the words from Paul's letter?
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11. CONTEXT - PART 1

● IDOLS

Almost every culture, other than the Jews, made images or objects to represent gods. These were sometimes directly associated with sex like the Roman goddess Venus. Sometimes sex acts were part of rituals to worship the gods. Temples had both male and female prostitutes.

Circle the part of the text that talks about people worshipping images instead of God.

Discuss:

1. Do you think people in our time and place worship images associated with sex?
 2. What things do people in our time and place worship other than God?
 3. Can you think of any other ways that sexuality and worship are connected?
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● WRATH

The letter to the Romans was originally written in the Greek language. The word “wrath” in verse 18 is the Greek word *orge* – ὀργή. It means anger, hostility, agitation of the soul. Aristotle defined it as “desire, accompanied by pain.”

- Underline the word “wrath” in verse 18.

Discuss:

1. How do people feel about the idea of God’s wrath?
 2. Can you think of a time you felt desire accompanied by pain?
 3. What is God’s wrath against in verse 18?
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11. CONTEXT - PART 1

● DOWNWARD SPIRAL

Romans 1:18-28 describes a downward spiral of human behaviour. This is a pattern that appears in other books of the Bible like Genesis, Judges, Samuel and Kings.

- i. Paul begins by talking about creation;
- ii. then people worshipped things other than God ('idolatry') - so God "gives them over" to their desires, including lust.
- iii. Finally there is a list of destructive behaviour that results from worshipping other things.

- Draw lines to separate the text into these three sections. Label them: 'Creation', 'Idolatry' and 'Destructive Behaviour'.
 - Look at the list of destructive behaviour in verses 29-31. Are you surprised by what is included?
 - In Romans 1, all destructive behaviour comes from worshipping something other than God. Is that true of destructive behaviours you see around you?
 - Notice that "sexual impurity" is mentioned in the middle of this 'downward spiral', alongside idolatry, and before the long list of other destructive behaviours. Does this mean that other sin is considered worse than sexual sin? Does it mean that sexual impurity and idolatry are the root to all other destructive behaviours? Does it highlight a unique connection between sexuality and spirituality?
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14. DISCUSSION TOPICS - PART 2

Choose some of these topics to discuss:

1. Do you think this twist in Paul's letter came as a surprise to the listeners?
2. Romans points out that some of the listeners were being judgemental.
What are the problems with being judgemental?
Have you heard people being judgemental about the sexual behaviour of others?
Can people be unfairly considered judgemental because of their views on sex?
3. "We're all in the same boat. All equally in need of turning our lives around, and all equally experiencing the kindness of God."
What do you think about this description of Romans?

15. CONTEXT - PART 2

● ROMANS AND AMOS

The surprise turn that Romans 2 takes is a technique the prophet Amos used hundreds of years earlier. Amos begins by pronouncing God's judgement on the behaviour of seven different nations, before turning the attention onto the listener's own behaviour. Amos spends fifty times longer talking about the destructive behaviour of his audience than about any other nation. But like Romans, the message of Amos is all about hope – a call to turn to God and be transformed.

- Mark an * on the Romans text where you think the attention turns onto the listener's own behaviour.

Discuss:

1. Why do you think people like hearing criticism of others?
 2. Why do we struggle to hear criticism of ourselves?
 3. When can criticism be helpful?
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● GRACE FOR ALL

It's been said that the whole book of Romans can be summed in these two verses:
"For **all** have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,
and **all** are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus."

Romans 3:23-24

Discuss:

1. What can make people uncomfortable about the idea that all have sinned?
 2. What can make people uncomfortable about the idea that all are justified freely?
-

15. CONTEXT - PART 2

● REPENTANCE

- Underline the word “repentance” in verse 4.
- Discuss:
 1. Where have you most often heard the word “repent”?
 2. Does it feel like a positive or negative word?
- The word “repentance” in Romans 2:4 is the Greek word *metanoian* - μετάνοιάν.

It means:

- change your mind,
- a change of heart,
- a new perspective,
- an about-turn.

Read the final part of Romans 2:4 replacing the word “repentance” with one of the translations above:

“God’s kindness is intended to lead you to...”

- change your mind,
- a change of heart,
- a new perspective,
- an about-turn.

- Discuss:

How does it feel reading each translation?

16. GENESIS IN ROMANS

Morna Hooker detects a “remarkable parallelism” of Genesis 1 language in Romans 1. Tim Mackie explains Romans 1:18-32 as “a long, creative retelling of Genesis 3-11” – the downward spiral of idolatry, sexual sin, and a flood of destructive behaviour.

1. What Genesis language or patterns can you see in Romans 1:18-32?
2. If Paul is using Genesis as a scheme, could the women referenced in 1:26 be a reference to Lot’s daughters in Genesis 19?
3. How might a Genesis scheme behind Paul’s writing colour our understanding of this text, especially regarding sexuality?

References:

Tim Mackie

Romans 1-4: The Gospel Reveals God’s Righteousness

<https://bibleproject.com/guides/book-of-romans/>

Morna Hooker

From Adam to Christ: Essays on Paul. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press., 1990

20. DISCUSSION TOPICS - PART 3

Choose two or three of these topics to discuss:

1. What does grace feel like?
2. “God’s kindness is intended to lead you to repentance.” (Romans 2:4)
Where do you experience God’s kindness?
Where have we seen God’s kindness modelled by people in the conversations in the Church about sexuality?
How can we model the kindness of God?
3. In what ways does knowing the context of Romans change how we hear the parts about sexuality?
4. What parts of this scripture apply to our lives? How?
5. What can churches that are divided learn from Romans?

22. RESPONDING

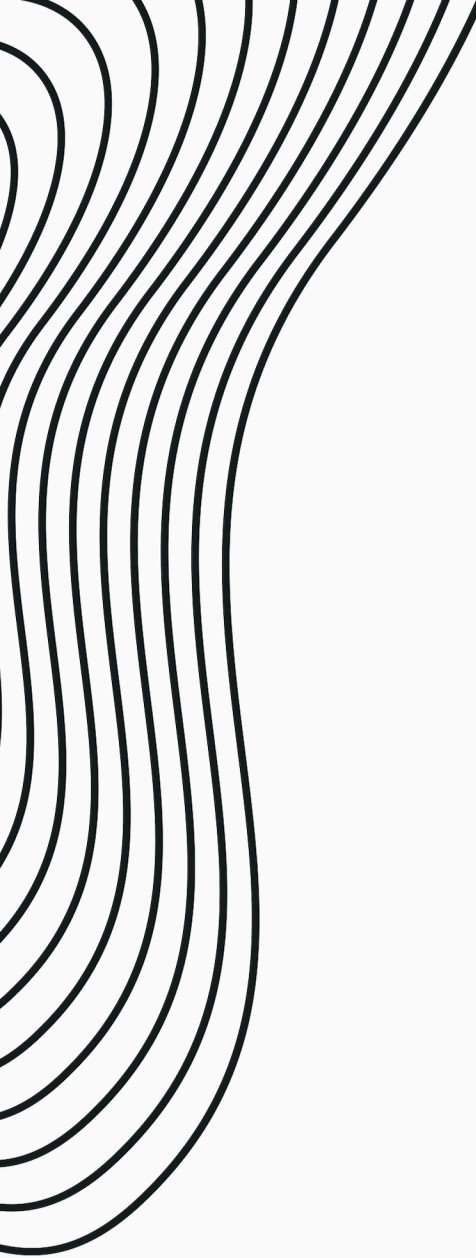
Responding to Scripture.

This week, ask yourself:

- Where have I judged others?”
- Where is God’s kindness leading me to repentance?”

You might want to respond in some more ways. Here are some suggestions:

- Write a personal prayer responding to what you’ve heard in the scripture.
- Create something: a poem; a painting; a list; a sculpture; a meal; a photograph; a wordcloud.
- Read or listen to all of Romans at BibleGateway.com.
- Choose just one word or phrase and think about what it means.
- List some personal commitments that you want to make in the coming week.
- “God’s kindness leads you to repentance”. Repeat these words slowly, emphasising a different word each time.



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