

# How to use *explore*



## Issue 107

The 92 daily readings in this issue of *Explore* are designed to help you understand and apply the Bible as you read it each day.

## It's serious!

We suggest that you allow 15 minutes each day to work through the Bible passage with the notes. It should be a meal, not a snack! Readings from other parts of the Bible can throw valuable light on the study passage. These cross-references can be skipped if you are already feeling full up, but will expand your grasp of the Bible. *Explore* uses the NIV2011 Bible translation, but you can also use it with the NIV1984 or ESV translations.

Sometimes a prayer box will encourage you to stop and pray through the lessons—but it is always important to allow time to pray for God's Spirit to bring his word to life, and to shape the way we think and live through it.

## We're serious!

All of us who work on *Explore* share a passion for getting the Bible into people's lives.

We fiercely hold to the Bible as God's word—to honour and follow, not to explain away.

1

Find a time you can read the Bible each day

2

Find a place where you can be quiet and think

3

Ask God to help you understand

4

Carefully read through the Bible passage for today

5

Study the verses with *Explore*, taking time to think

6

Pray about what you have read

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# Welcome to *explore*

Being a Christian isn't a skill you learn, nor is it a lifestyle choice. It's about having a real relationship with the living God through his Son, Jesus Christ. The Bible tells us that this relationship is like a marriage.

It's important to start with this, because it is easy to view the practice of daily Bible reading as a Christian duty, or a hard discipline that is just one more thing to get done in our busy lives.

But the Bible is God speaking to us: opening his mind to us on how he thinks, what he wants for us and what his plans are for the world. And most importantly, it tells us what he has done for us in sending his Son, Jesus Christ, into the world. It's the way that the Spirit shows Jesus to us, and changes us as we behold his glory.

Here are a few suggestions for making your time with God more of a joy than a burden:

- ☑ *Time*: Find a time when you will not be disturbed. Many people have found that the morning is the best time as it sets you up for the day. But whatever works for you is right for you.
- ☑ *Place*: Jesus says that we are not to make a great show of our religion (*see Matthew 6:5-6*), but rather, to pray with the door to our room shut. Some people plan to get to work a few minutes earlier and get their Bible out in an office or some other quiet corner.
- ☑ *Prayer*: Although *Explore* helps with specific prayer ideas from the passage, do try to develop your own lists to pray through. Use the flap inside the back

cover to help with this. And allow what you read in the Scriptures to shape what you pray for yourself, the world and others.

- ☑ *Feast*: You can use the “Bible in a year” line at the bottom of each page to help guide you through the entire Scriptures throughout 2024. This year, the passages each day are linked, showing how God makes and keeps his promises. We're grateful to Katherine Fedor of [treasureinthebible.com](http://treasureinthebible.com) for her permission to use this Bible-reading plan. You'll find passages to read six days a week—Sunday is a “day off”, or a day to catch up!
- ☑ *Share*: As the saying goes, *expression deepens impression*. So try to cultivate the habit of sharing with others what you have learned. Why not join our Facebook group to share your encouragements, questions and prayer requests? Search for *Explore: For your daily walk with God*.

And enjoy it! As you read God's word and God's Spirit works in your mind and your heart, you are going to see Jesus, and appreciate more of his love for you and his promises to you. That's amazing!



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# ROMANS: Who and what?

*The letter of Romans is all about the gospel: what it is, why we need it and what difference it makes. The gospel dominates, from the very first verse.*

## The writer

### Read Romans 1:1-7

- ❓ *Who is the letter from (v 1)? To (v 7)?*
- ❓ *What is Paul's job, and passion (v 1, 5)?*

To be “set apart” is to be separated from other things, to pursue only one thing. The gospel is so great that Paul is willing to separate himself from anything in order to live for it and share it.

## The message

- ❓ *What do we learn about...*
  - *where we find the gospel (v 2)?*
  - *who the gospel is about (v 3-4)?*
  - *what the gospel produces (v 5)?*

Paul wants people to obey God—but the obedience he wants is one that springs from faith. What that means is one of the main themes of the letter; but, in short, it is an obedient heart and life that comes from knowing that we are accepted and righteous in God's eyes through our faith in his Son, Jesus Christ.

## Apply

The Christian life is not about obeying God to be accepted. Nor is it about being accepted and therefore not obeying him. It is about “the obedience that comes from faith”.

- ❓ *Do you ever obey because you think you have to, to stay forgiven?*

- ❓ *Do you ever disobey because you know you don't **have** to obey?*
- ❓ *How do you think faith in the Lord Jesus motivates us to want to obey?*

## The visit

### Read Romans 1:8-15

- ❓ *What is Paul's attitude to the Roman Christians (v 8-10a)?*
- ❓ *What is striking about this, given that Paul has never met them?*
- ❓ *Why does Paul “long to see” this church (v 11-13)?*

Paul, the great apostle, does not say in verse 12 “so that you may be encouraged by me”. Rather, he says so that “you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith”.

- ❓ *What does this tell us about what all Christians need?*

Notice Paul wants to preach the gospel (v 15) to the church in Rome, i.e. to Christians.

- ❓ *What does this tell us about what all Christians need?*

## Apply

- ❓ *This week, how can you...*
  - *allow others' faith to encourage yours?*
  - *use your abilities to encourage other Christians?*
  - *make sure you are reflecting on the gospel message?*

# Eager or ashamed?

There are two ways to feel about sharing the gospel: eager (v 15), or ashamed (v 16). In these two verses, Paul will help us to be “not ashamed of the gospel”.

## TIME OUT

❓ *Why is the gospel shameful, or offensive, to people?*

Here are four reasons. The gospel says...

- salvation is undeserved; it offends moral people who think their goodness means they don't need saving.
- we are all sinners; it offends the popular belief in the innate goodness of humanity.
- only Jesus can save; it offends those who think that all spiritual paths lead to the same place.
- the road to glory is one of suffering and sacrifice; it offends those who want following Jesus to be easy and comfortable.

## Read Romans 1:16-17

### I am *not* ashamed

❓ *Why is Paul not ashamed of the gospel (v 16)?*

❓ *What does it do (v 16)? Who for?*

This power goes to work in anyone and everyone who “believes”. Here we have the first explicit statement in Romans that the only way to receive the gospel and its saving power is through faith. Notice that the gospel does not come with power; it is power. It is the power of God in verbal form, and it has the power to change, transform, and give life to people. It does what no other power on earth can do; it saves us.

## Apply

- ❓ *Do you ever doubt or forget the power of the gospel? What causes this?*
- ❓ *What difference would it make to you if you had a real grasp on how powerful the gospel is?*

## What the gospel is

❓ *What is “revealed” in the gospel (v 17)?*

This is a positional word; it means to be in right standing with someone, to not owe them anything. It means to be completely acceptable to someone. So verse 17 is saying that right standing from God can be received from God (chapter 3 will show us how this is possible).

❓ *So why is this gospel about far more than simply “being forgiven”?*

The gospel is a complete reversal of both the natural tendency of the human heart and the universal thrust of other religions. Everyone else thinks of salvation as being about providing our own righteousness to offer to God. The gospel says salvation is all about receiving a righteousness from God.

## Pray

Thank God for this wonderful gospel. Ask God to make you so excited about what the gospel is, and does, that you are eager about living for it and sharing it.



# Why we need saving

*Verses 18 literally begins with the word “For” (ESV). The next chapters will answer the questions: Why do I need saving? Why do I need to receive righteousness from God?*

## God’s wrath

### Read Romans 1:18-20

- ❓ *What does verse 18 tell us about God’s “wrath”, his settled anger?*
- ❓ *Why are all people “without excuse” (v 19-20)?*

All of Paul’s confidence, joy and passion for the gospel rests on the assumption that all humans are, apart from the gospel, under God’s wrath. If you don’t understand or believe in the wrath of God, the gospel will not thrill, empower, or move you.

## Human worship

### Read Romans 1:21-25

- ❓ *What do all people do instead of recognising God as God, and living in gratitude to him (v 21-23)?*

This is counterfeit-god construction. We were created to worship God; so, if we reject him, we will worship something else. Something must give our life purpose and meaning; and we serve that “something”. We will either worship the Creator or something he has created. And no created thing can satisfy us (because they’re not God); and so we find ourselves enslaved by them.

### Apply

Think of an idol you find it easy to worship, serve and obey instead of God.

- ❓ *Why is that thing attractive to you?*
- ❓ *Can you identify how it fails to deliver what it promises, and enslaves instead?*

### Read Romans 1:26-32

Verses 26-27 are the longest passage in the Bible specifically about homosexuality. Here, homosexuality is described as “against nature” (*para phusin*). This means it is a violation of the nature God gave us; a sin. But notice that it comes after Paul has identified the root of all sin: worshipping something other than God. And it comes before a long list of other sins, including envy and gossiping. Active homosexuality is no more or less sinful than these—all come from worshipping the created, rather than the Creator.

- ❓ *Do any of the outworkings of “a depraved mind” in verses 29-31 particularly surprise or challenge you?*

This whole section is about God’s present wrath, which is being revealed (v 18). In other words, God’s wrath is simply to “give us over” to the things we worship and want—yet which cannot satisfy or save us.

### Pray

Use this passage to confess to God ways in which you worship created things. Then use it to prompt you to praise God for who he is, and thank him for his gospel.

# The religious problem

*Some people—religious, good people—would read Romans 1 and say, “Yes, of course God’s wrath lies on the immoral. But we’re not like that.”*

## Self-judgment

### Read Romans 2:1-11

- ❓ *What does Paul say about people who “pass judgment” on someone else (that is, accept that others deserve God’s wrath, but don’t think that they themselves do)?*

The 20th-century theologian Francis Schaeffer called these verses “the invisible tape recorder”. It is as though there is a tape recorder around our necks, recording what we say about how others ought to live. At the last day, God will play the tape, judge us on the basis of what our own words say are the standards for human behaviour, and no one in history will be able to escape being condemned by their own words.

- ❓ *How is someone who thinks they don’t deserve judgment actually misunderstanding what God is doing (v 4)?*
- ❓ *What is this person doing (v 5)?*
- ❓ *Why is verse 6 surprising?*

Paul is not contradicting 1:17, where he said that we must receive righteousness, because we cannot “do” enough to become righteous ourselves. His point here is that on the day of judgment good works are the evidence of our salvation, not the basis of it. Just as the apples on an apple tree prove it’s alive, but don’t provide life, so the good works we do prove that our faith in Christ has made us alive.

- ❓ *What does Paul add about God’s judgment in 2:11?*

## Conscience-judgment

### Read Romans 2:12-16

This paragraph is complex! The basic argument is: we are judged by God’s law only if we have it (v 12-13); but those without the law sometimes know what is right, and therefore do it (v 14)—showing that the law is intuitively known (v 15). So when someone who hasn’t been taught God’s law knows what is right, yet doesn’t do it, their own thoughts accuse them—they are deserving of judgment.

Chapter 2 is all about Paul showing the Jews (and all religious people) that they have missed the whole point of the gospel. By relying on their own righteousness, they are running from salvation just as much as irreligious people, who rely on satisfying their appetites (1:18-32).

## Apply

Paul’s challenge is: if you do not feel like a hopeless sinner, whom God would have a perfect right to reject this minute because of the state of your life, you are denying the gospel.

- ❓ *How does this challenge you?*



# Call yourself a Christian?

*Remember, in this whole chapter Paul is addressing the religious person, who thought, "I am not like the pagan. I am moral and religious, so I am not under God's judgment."*

## Relying on goodness?

### Read Romans 2:17-24

❓ *What were the Jews of Paul's day proud of (v 17-20—I count six things)?*

All this boils down, basically, to a pride in their moral decency and virtue.

❓ *What is the challenge to them at the beginning of verse 21?*

Paul asks them to consider three ways they may not be practising what they preach (v 21-23). The third is striking, because there is no record of Jews taking idol-statues from pagan temples. So this is likely figurative; Paul is saying that underneath their outward religiosity, the Jews are worshipping idols just as much as those who go to idol-temples. They may "abhor idols" outwardly, but if inwardly they find meaning in power, comfort, possessions, sex, etc. then they are idolaters.

❓ *What is the tragic result of this kind of hypocritical religion (v 24)?*

## Relying on ceremony?

### Read Romans 2:25-29

Circumcision was the religious ceremony in which a Jew was brought into the community of Israel.

❓ *How much does circumcision matter, does Paul say (v 25-27)?*

❓ *What "circumcision" matters (v 29)?*

No religious ceremony or observance can change the heart. Only the Holy Spirit can do this, and he isn't limited by whether or not someone is circumcised or baptised, etc.

### TIME OUT

Insert "Christian" for "Jew", and "baptism" or "church membership" for "circumcision", and then paraphrase v 17-20 and 25-29.

## Apply

Just because we call ourselves Christians, doesn't mean we have living faith. How can we tell if our faith is empty and we are facing judgment (even if we're an active church member)? Paul alludes to four signs:

1. A theoretical-only approach to the Bible (v 21). We don't allow ourselves to be challenged and changed by it.
2. A feeling of moral superiority (v 17). We look down on others, and are defensive when our weaknesses are exposed.
3. Lack of inner spiritual life (v 29). We don't pray, or know God loves us.
4. Hypocrisy (v 22).

❓ *Do any of these particularly challenge you?*

Re-read verse 29 and ask God's Spirit to work in your heart, increasing—or giving—living faith.

# Every mouth silenced

Paul now reaches his conclusion. Everyone needs saving—needs to receive God's righteousness—because "there is no one righteous, not even one" (v 10).

## Q+A

### Read Romans 3:1-8

**?** *What is good about being Jewish (v 2)?*

The questions of verses 3-8 may not be ones we would naturally think of as we read chapters 1 – 2—they're the objections of 1st-century Jews. But the fact Paul deals with them shows that he was a man who took time to think about the worldview of those he was speaking to, and who made the effort to deal with objections to the gospel.

## No one

### Read Romans 3:9-18

**?** *What is true of everyone—Jew and Gentile, religious and unreligious (v 9)?*

This is not to say that everyone is equally sinful. But all are equally condemned, because neither the religious person nor the unreligious person has a righteous heart.

**?** *In verses 11-18, how does sin affect our...*

- *minds?*                      • *motives?*
- *will?*                              • *tongues?*
- *relationships?* • *attitude towards God?*

How can it be true that "no one ... does good" (v 12)? Because the motive matters. If you help an elderly lady across the road (a good act) because you hope she'll give you money (a bad motive), you are not doing good! And if we do good deeds in order to be saved, we are doing good for ourselves,

and not for God. It is all selfishly motivated. Good deeds are not done for God—and thus are not truly good—unless a person has accepted and grasped the gospel. But once we know we are loved by God because of Christ, then we are freed to "do good"—to feed the hungry, visit the sick, clothe the poor, and all for their sake and God's sake.

## Apply

**?** *How does this idea of "doing good" both challenge you and motivate you?*

## Silence

### Read Romans 3:19-20

**?** *Why will "every mouth ... be silenced" (v 19) when judgment comes?*

**?** *What can the law not do? What can it do (v 20)?*

A silent mouth is a spiritual condition—the attitude which knows that we cannot save ourselves, has no defence to make, and no goodness to offer. Without a silent mouth, we will never come to God with empty hands to receive the righteousness he offers.

## Apply

**?** *Do you, deep down, think that when you stand before God in judgment, you will have something to say? Have you attained the spiritual condition of a silent mouth?*





# Exaltation and destruction

*It often feels as if God's kingdom is in retreat, overwhelmed by the forces of secularism and other religions. Is that right? Is Jesus overwhelmed by the forces that oppose him?*

## The King's exaltation

### Read Psalm 21:1-7

- ❓ *What has the Lord given the king of God's people (v 1-6)?*
- ❓ *Why has he given him these things (v 7)?*

### Read Philippians 2:5-11

- ❓ *How has Jesus reflected the attitude of the king in Psalm 21?*
- ❓ *How has the Lord responded to him, in keeping with the pattern set in the psalm?*

## ▼ Apply

When reading any part of the Bible, it's always really important for us to ask ourselves, "Who is this really about?" Often, our instinct will be to assume that it is all about us! But these kingly psalms of David are about God's King before they are ever about us. And so, ultimately, they point to King Jesus and speak of him. Once we have that clear, there are often practical personal lessons for us to learn. Here in Psalm 21, the king sets a model (which Jesus fulfilled perfectly) for us to follow.

The psalm reminds us that King Jesus rejoices in the Lord's strength (v 1) and trusts unshakably in the "love of the Most High" (v 7).

- ❓ *Is that the attitude of your own heart today? How/how not?*

Pray that it might be. After all, King Jesus proved by his resurrection and ascension that the Lord can be trusted!

## The King's victory

### Read Psalm 21:8-13

The Lord is clearly angry here.

- ❓ *Why is he so angry?*
- ❓ *How and where do you see verse 11 happening today?*
- ❓ *What will happen to the king's enemies? (Notice the very sobering pictures used here.) When will all this take place?*

## ▲ Pray

Using the words of verse 12 to get yourself started, praise and thank God for the sure victory of Jesus over his enemies.

Think of people you know who have not bowed the knee to King Jesus and who stand opposed to him. Ask the Lord to have mercy on them, turning their hearts from rebellion to repentance before it is too late.



# Righteousness revealed

For two chapters, Paul has been underlining the terrible truth that every human is under judgment. None of us is right with God. “But now...”

## Righteousness

### Read Romans 3:21-26

Righteousness is the crucial word in this passage; and the word “justified” is, in the Greek, the same word. Righteousness is a legal standing of acceptability which is the result of perfect behaviour (e.g. to be “right with the law” is to have completely obeyed it, so that it cannot charge you).

- ❓ *What do verses 21-23 tell us about being right with God?*
  - *Where it comes from.*
  - *Where it doesn't come from.*
  - *How it comes to us.*
  - *Why we need it.*

## The just justifier

But why does righteousness only come through faith in Christ Jesus (v 22); through faith in his blood, his death (v 25)? Why can't God just forgive people?

The two vital words are “redemption” (v 24—which means to free someone by paying a price), and “sacrifice of atonement”, literally “propitiation” (v 25—which means the turning away of someone's anger).

- ❓ *So what did Jesus' death achieve (v 24)?*
- ❓ *How (v 25)?*
- ❓ *What does the cross demonstrate (v 26)?*

- ❓ *How does Paul clarify what he means by this in the rest of verse 26?*

This is the wonder of the cross. In the very same stroke it satisfied both the love of God (that wanted to save people) and the justice of God (that demands punishment of sin). God is just—humanity is punished for sin; and God is able to justify (i.e. make righteous) sinners; the perfect man Jesus was punished in our place.

On the cross, God's wrath and love, his justice and justifying, are both demonstrated, expressed and vindicated completely.

If our view of God is as a God of love who does not insist on standards and does not punish wrongdoing, then God becomes uncaring and indifferent (as well as non-existent). We are spiritual orphans. But, on the other hand, a wrathful God without grace makes us feel crushed and despairing, or angry and defiant, never able to live up to his standards.

At the cross, we find that God is a God of wrath and grace. He is a Father worth having, and a Father we can have.

## Pray

Spend some time reading through the verses, using each phrase to meditate on what happened at the cross, and praising God for it.