



the RESILIENT church

A Spiritual Care Packet
from Paul's Letter to the Romans

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Paul's letter to the Romans is a letter to a church in crisis. The strength of the community is threatened by conflict. The Christians in Rome chose to come and see Jesus, they chose to embrace a relationship with the son, but they discover that acceptance of Jesus' invitation is more complicated than anticipated because it comes with a family. A diverse and strange family following Jesus in the midst of an unpredictable and threatening world. Paul's letter to the Romans invites us, the church in 2020, to consider what it means to follow Jesus as a unified and diverse community in the midst of a season of incredible instability. Paul invites us to be the resilient church because we are transformed by the gospel of Jesus Christ.

This packet provides weekly prompts, practices, and opportunities for engagement drawn from Paul's letter to the Romans. These activities will fall under the following categories: **Discover, Pray, Serve, Reflect, and Embody**. Each category invites us to deepen our relationship with God and broaden our awareness of God's presence in the midst of our circumstances. The activities are available for use at any time and frequency throughout the week.

Discover

**"Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God
How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out"**
Romans 11:33

Pray

**"In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness.
We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself
intercedes for us through wordless groans"** *Romans 8:26*

Serve

**"So in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member
belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace
given to each of us"** *Romans 12:5-6*

Reflect

**"Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit,
groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship,
the redemption of our bodies"** *Romans 8:23*

Embody

**"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*

w e e k 1 o n e

Discover

The Bible is our endless wellspring of guidance, insight, and wisdom that draws us deeper into knowledge of God and instructs us how to live in the fullness of life as Christ followers. So rich is the text that we read again and again the words on the page with each encounter revealing a clearer image of God and his presence in the world.

Paul's letter to the Romans is saturated in significance to a degree that Paul's words can leave us equally inspired and confused at every turn of the page. In order to understand Paul's compelling message to the church in Rome, we must remember that this message, these words, this text, was first born from the Spirit through Paul in a particular time and place, to share with a particular people. The Christ followers in Rome were the first recipients of these words and a clearer understanding of their particular strengths and weakness, triumphs and challenges, invites us, as the modern church, to become more aware of how the Spirit wants to speak in our particular time and place to us as a particular people.

It is with this intention at the forefront of our minds that we want to study Romans backwards because it is the later portion of the letter that places us directly in the path of Paul's first audience. Paul wrote to real people. Paul wrote to a real community plagued by division, their unity threatened by "the ethnic, cultural, and religious struggles between the Jewish and Gentile followers of Jesus." (Miller, vii)

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When we look through the eyes of the Christ followers in Rome we can discern more clearly how the Spirit is inviting us to be a resilient community in the face of our own obstacles. Let us begin our journey alongside the church in Rome by beginning with the end at the forefront of our minds.

“Teaching Romans Backwards: A Study Guide to *Reading Romans Backwards* by Scot McKnight” by Becky Castle Miller



Discover

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchreae. **2** I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of his people and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been the benefactor of many people, including me.

3 Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my co-workers in Christ Jesus. **4** They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them. **5** Greet also the church that meets at their house.

Greet my dear friend Epenetus, who was the first convert to Christ in the province of Asia. **6** Greet Mary, who worked very hard for you. **7** Greet Andronicus and Junia, my fellow Jews who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was.

8 Greet Ampliatus, my dear friend in the Lord. **9** Greet Urbanus, our co-worker in Christ, and my dear friend Stachys. **10** Greet Apelles, whose fidelity to Christ has stood the test. Greet those who belong to the household of Aristobulus.

11 Greet Herodion, my fellow Jew. Greet those in the household of Narcissus who are in the Lord. **12** Greet Tryphena and Tryphosa, those women who work hard in the Lord. Greet my dear friend Persis, another woman who has worked very hard in the Lord.

13 Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother, who has been a mother to me, too. **14** Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas and the other brothers and sisters with them. **15** Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas and all the Lord's people who are with them.

16 Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ send greetings. **17** 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. Keep away from them. **18** For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people. **19** Everyone has heard about your obedience, so I rejoice because of you; but I want you to be wise about what is good, and innocent about what is evil. **20** The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you.

21 Timothy, my co-worker, sends his greetings to you, as do Lucius, Jason and Sosipater, my fellow Jews. **22** I, Tertius, who wrote down this letter, greet you in the Lord. **23** Gaius, whose hospitality I and the whole church here enjoy, sends you his greetings.

Erastus, who is the city's director of public works, and our brother Quartus send you their greetings.

25 Now to him who is able to establish you in accordance with my gospel, the message I proclaim about Jesus Christ, in keeping with the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, **26** but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all the Gentiles might come to the obedience that comes from faith **27** to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen.



Discover

Who are these Christ-followers in Rome?

Phoebe is the likely carrier of this letter. Paul entrusts her with the safe passage of his message as the physical transporter of the papyrus but also as the one who embodied the word. It is likely that Phoebe read aloud the letter in crowded homes as the house churches gathered to hear these instructions from Paul. It was Phoebe's voice, her inflections, her tone, her expressions, the narrowing of her gaze to emphasize a weighty point, her eye contact with those gathered to listen, the movement of her free hand as she gestures, her entire body speaking aloud the words on the page. The word of God continued to be made flesh through the vessels of these first Christ-followers that carried the message of Christ Jesus into every corner of the world. Phoebe is named as a deacon, which is translated as servant, of the church in Cenchreae. In Acts a portion of the early church appointed deacons to serve in specific roles to bless the community. It is unclear what Phoebe's particular role encapsulated in the church but she is also named as a "patron of many" including Paul. It was common for men or women with excess resources and influence to provide financial support or speak to the authorities on behalf of those in challenging circumstances. We assume that Phoebe housed Paul in her home when he traveled to Cenchreae or sent money to fund Paul's missionary efforts. Paul asks the church in Rome to extend this same degree of hospitality and courtesy to Phoebe during her time in Rome.

Paul's second first greeting to the church in Rome is reserved for **Prisca and Aquila**. This is one of six occasions that this missionary couple is mentioned in the New Testament. Acts 18 tells us that Paul traveled and worked alongside this couple in Corinth. The first Christ-followers assembled together in homes to break bread together. We can infer that Prisca and Aquila were a wealthy couple because their home was large enough to accommodate such a gathering. The "churches of the Gentiles" praise Prisca and Aquila emphasizing the impact and influence of this couple beyond Rome.

A second pair greeted by Paul is **Andronicus and Junia(s)**. It is unclear if Junia(s) is a woman or a man. Junias could be a co-laborer alongside Andronicus or Junia could be Andronicus' wife. Either way, it is clear that they shared a special relationship with Paul as "fellow prisoners." Were Andronicus and Junia(s) imprisoned alongside Paul for sharing the good news or was their imprisonment another form of shared suffering? Paul acknowledges their maturity in the faith as they were Christ-followers before Paul chose the way.

Of the remainder of individuals greeted by Paul, the majority were likely slaves, former slaves freed from their servitude, or the children of slaves. We can discern their status because of their particular names. Your name identified your station in society or your place within a familial structure. Your name also marked your religious status. The majority of those greeted by Paul are Gentiles.

Men and women are listed among those commended by Paul. "Greet Tryphena and Tryphosa, those women who work hard in the Lord." Men and women are working and serving alongside one another.



Discover

This list of names represents only a portion of the Christ followers in Rome but reveals the diversity present in the community. Wealthy and poor, slave and free, male and female, Gentile and Jew make up the church in Rome. Diversity is beautiful. Diversity adds richness and texture to life and allows the body to thrive as every part serves the others. Diversity can also spark tension and conflict. The church in Rome was a community struggling to come together and gather at the same table as a diverse AND united people.

Paul warns against those who “cause division and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned.” There are those in the community who distort and deceive confusing what is good and what is evil. Paul does not name the diversity present within the church as the culprit that is threatening this community. It is division and not diversity that Paul warns the church to avoid.

In sharp contrast, it is the God of peace who will crush the evil that lurks beneath this community. Peace, God’s peace, will destroy any strife between brother and sister in the church in Rome. Peace is rarely associated with victory. War, dominion, vengeance, oppression these are our weapons of choice to prove ourselves superior to others. Defensiveness, hatred, slander, these are our weapons of choice to prove ourselves right when confronted by differences of perspective and practice. In the aftermath of conflict, we settle for division instead of peace. We settle for living apart, separate, detached, avoidant and call it peace.

Peace is not passive or inactive. Peace is not an armistice. Peace is not a ceasefire. Peace is two people sharing a meal together equally known and loved, respected and valued by the other person. Peace is confession and forgiveness. Peace is conversation even when it is uncomfortable and challenges us. God’s peace confronts division. God’s peace does not settle for division. God’s peace gathers a diverse people and invites them to be a family



Pray

Monday

Paul begins his closing remarks with a request that the members of the church in Rome welcome Phoebe “in a way worthy of the saints.” I love this phrase because it showcases the interconnectedness of all followers of Jesus. I invite you to pray today that we too can interact with others in a way worthy of the saints, in a way that honors the followers who have gone before us, in a way that reflects the character of those who Paul addresses in this letter.

God, I ask that you help me to engage with others today in a way worthy of the saints...

Tuesday

I invite you to pray by name for specific members of our community.

God, I bring before you members of your family. I lift up their names to you and ask that you be with each one, that your presence be felt among them...

Wednesday

I hesitate to call this portion of a letter “a list” because it is so much more than a cold dictation. This is an overwhelming cluster of gratitude and thanksgiving for Paul’s co-laborers serving the church in Rome. I invite you to pray a prayer of gratitude for those who serve the church in any capacity.

God, I am so grateful for those who serve your people in every capacity. I am thankful for those who use their gifts to bless the church. I praise your name for...

Thursday

Paul warns the church in Rome against those who cause division. These do not seek to serve “our Lord Christ.” Paul emphasizes that God is a god of peace. It is this god of peace who “will soon crush Satan” not those who cause division and “create obstacles.”

God, you are the god of peace. Beneath your reign, we discover the only peace that can unite us as the children of God. I pray for your peace...

Friday

Paul closes the letter with a beautiful doxology. I invite you to picture in your mind a person that you want to pray over with these words.

God, I hold before you _____. Now to you, God, who is able to strengthen _____ according to our gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith - to you, only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen.





Serve

Write a Letter

It is so beautiful that the bulk of the New Testament was written in the form of letters. Do you still keep tucked away a cherished hand-written letter or postcard from a friend or family member? I love plopping down on the floor and shifting through a colorful array of birthday cards, thank you notes, and letters that I received over the years. How remarkable that a friend's handwriting, sloppy script in black ink, instantly sparks the image of a face, the steadiness of their embrace, the sound of their voice emanating from the page. Letters are intimate extensions of ourselves shared with another soul. A time capsule of our words, our thoughts, and our desires in the form of a simple envelope.

I marvel that God chose to speak to the church in Rome through a human being and, equally marvelous, Paul chose to share this message from God through words on a page. God's words shared through a letter to new and old friends.

In this season of social distancing, feelings of loneliness and isolation cling to us like the slick humidity that lingers just after a storm. It is easy to settle into those emotions and neglect to reach out to others for mutual encouragement. This week, I invite you to take a moment to pen a letter to a member of our community. As you write your letter, reflect on Paul's purpose and intention we glimpse in the first chapter of Romans. How can you encourage your recipient to experience the power of the gospel? What words does God want to impart to your recipient through you?

In the spirit of Paul's letter to the Romans, I encourage you to begin your letter using the words of Romans 1:7. "To _____, who is loved by God and called to be a saint: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."



Reflect

The following questions are designed to help you reflect more deeply on the themes we explore together as we journey through Paul's letter to the Romans. I invite you to make space to sit with these questions without any need for a quick or clear answer. As you settle into a quiet and comfortable space, I encourage you to discuss these questions with God. Ask God to prompt you, to guide your thoughts, or bring up new questions that could be more helpful to you.

- 1 What do you hope to gain through our study of Paul's letter to the Romans?
- 2 The church in Rome was a diverse community. What points of diversity do you encounter in the church, in your neighborhood, in your own family?
- 3 What challenges do you predict arise in the church in Rome due to their differences?
- 4 What challenges do we encounter due to the diversity present in our communities?
- 5 If you previously studied Romans, how does a closer look at the community Paul is addressing impact or shift your understanding of the letter?





Embody

Moving from Resistance to Openness

Each time we take a first step down a new path, it is natural to encounter feelings of excitement as we anticipate the good that is to come and feelings of resistance as we anticipate new challenges or possible pitfalls. Our journey deeper into Paul's letter to the Romans is a natural point where we experience these varying emotions side by side. We want to approach scripture with a posture of openness and a listening ear to receive and hear what God is trying to share with us through our study.

I invite you to embody this transition from a state of distraction or resistance into a state of openness and awareness. First, take a moment to place your body in a state that conveys that you are closed off or shut out from the world around you. You could bring your knees to your chest, wrap your arms around your legs, and pull your head down. Another option is to fold your hands across your chest or form your hands into fists. As you place your body in any position of your choice to convey restriction, tightly clench your muscles. Hold this position and engage your muscles for a moment. Do not forget to breathe while holding this posture. Consider what is causing any fear or apprehension to rise in you as we begin this new season. Slowly release your muscles and adopt a posture that represents the exact opposite of this previous pose. What position conveys openness and a desire to fully accept all that God wants to graciously pour into you? You could lay flat on your back with your arms outstretched leaving your chest open. Another option is to lift your arms up and out, or turn your palms upward and rest them on your knees. As you assume this posture, ask God what God desires to share with you during this journey through Paul's letter to the Romans. What does God desire to share with you during this challenging and strange time of life?

After discovering your posture of resistance and posture of openness, I encourage you to slowly move your body between these two positions. Engage this practice for as long as it feels helpful for you and reflect with God on the questions posed during this exercise.

This practice is adapted from an exercise...

The Prayer of Opening and Closing, by Celeste Snowber Schroeder in *Embodied Prayer: Harmonizing Body and Soul*.



families corner

Hello parents and grandparents! Each week in our Romans study packet, you'll find a few ideas of how to engage your children in our Romans study. These suggestions are to help our children's hearts love and be loved by God.

Prayer

Children's prayers are powerful and adored by God. It is important that we teach our children that their prayers matter to God and that they are just as capable of talking to God as we are. God wants to and delights in talking with them. This week, talk with your children about the people they love. Ask your children what they appreciate about certain people and how God has shown his love to your children through these special friends and family members. Then invite them to tell God how thankful they are for each person and why. Pray out loud together taking turns thanking God for the people in your life.

Serve

Who's heart is not moved by a letter from a child? This week carve out some time (maybe around the breakfast or dinner table, or as part of your bedtime routine) to write a letter to someone special in your life. Include in the letter the reasons you are thankful for them. Tell your child how their words to another are words of life and a blessing from God. Encourage your child to also draw a picture for that person. If your child can't write yet, you can be Tertius, and write as your child dictates.

Teach

For older children and teens, read Romans 16 together. Explain who Paul was writing too. Ask what stands out to your child about how Paul addresses those this letter is written to. Share with them the context of Romans from the Discover section above. Discuss how the context of Romans might be similar to and different from our own context. What insights does your child have to share with you?