

ABOUT THE COVER IMAGE

“Conversion on the Way to Damascus” by Caravaggio

As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”

“Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked.

“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” he replied. – Acts 9:3-5

When Christ revealed himself to Paul, it knocked him to the ground in a flash of light. As the painter Caravaggio imagined it back in 1601, Paul fell off a horse and landed on his back with arms outstretched, as if in an unconscious association with Christ’s crucifixion. The painting places the horse strangely prominent on the canvas and the only other subject is the horse’s handler. Paul bathes in the glorious light, but the horse and handler look earthbound, unaware of Christ’s presence in the moment.

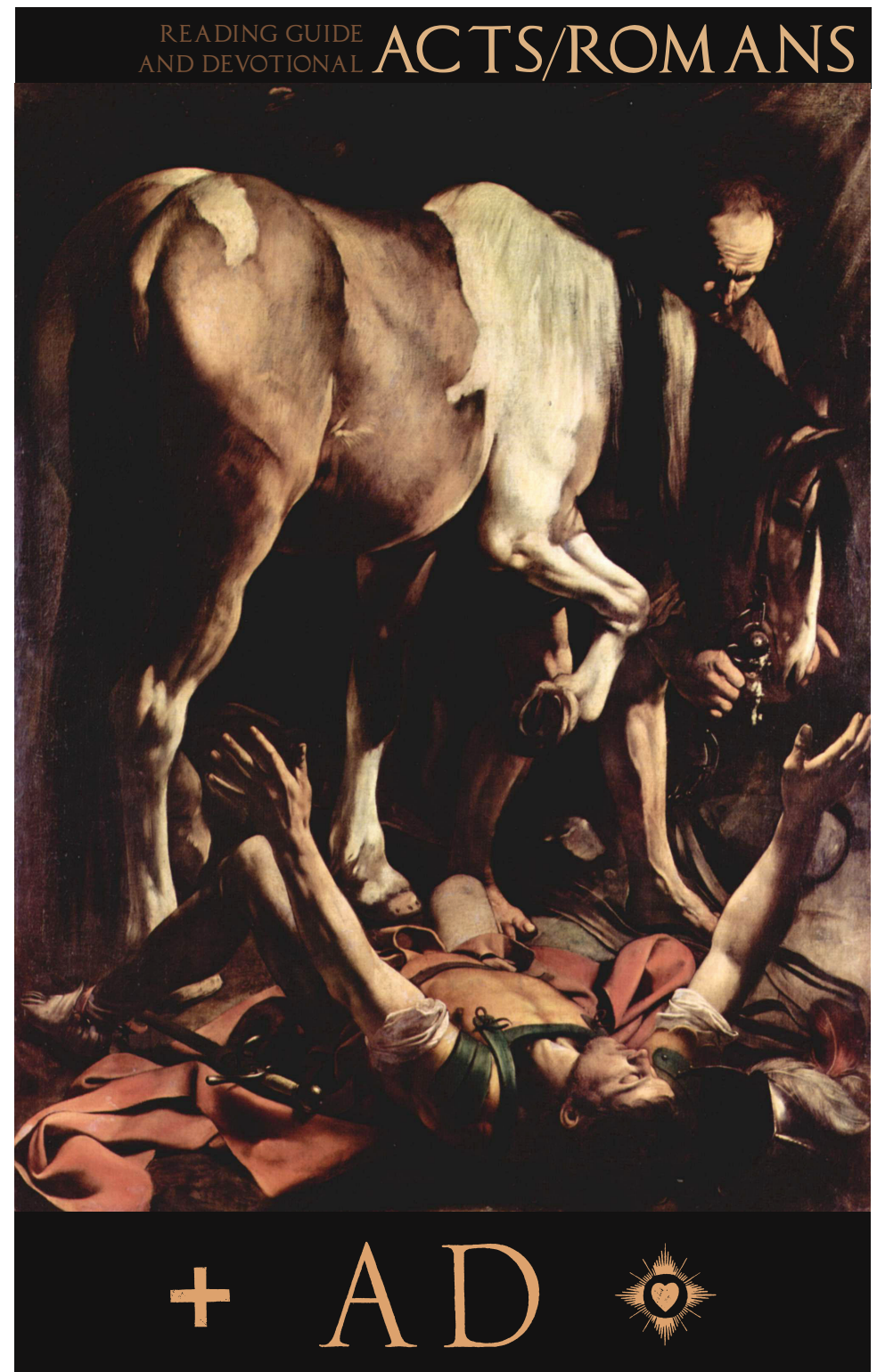


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WELCOME TO ACTS AND ROMANS

If you are reading one of these devotional booklets for the first time, welcome! This is part of a series of Bible-reading and reflection guides going through the New Testament. The whole idea is to help you read through the whole New Testament in 2010 by giving you a daily check-off list of readings and offering you some points of reflection along the way.

The devotional just finished two-months in the Gospels, the spiritual biographies of Jesus written by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. While the stories reflect the individuality of each author, their shared focus ties them together into a collective that's greater than the sum of their parts. Where one author summarizes, another amplifies and the end result is a gritty, compassionate, rounded portrait of the central figure of the Christian faith.

This portrait is the heart of the whole Bible – the culmination of everything before and the foundation of everything after. Fittingly so, each Gospel ends with Jesus' followers in wait, anticipating the next phase of God's unfolding mission. At the height of Jesus' time on earth, he promised to send his Spirit as their Counselor, to be with them forever (John 14:16). Acts opens as the disciples wait for this promise to unfold.

HOW DO ACTS AND ROMANS FIT INTO THE BIBLE?

Luke, who also wrote one of the Gospels, wrote Acts, picking up right where his Gospel left off – with Jesus ascending to heaven and reminding his followers to expect the Holy Spirit. Almost immediately, that expectation gets fulfilled in a big way and the church, the greatest movement in response to Jesus' Cross, is underway.

Acts is the final historical book of the Bible, the last with the chief purpose of recording actual events. So Acts gives us a unique and crucial window into what life was actually like in the years immediately following Jesus' death and resurrection – how communities formed and operated around the central idea of Jesus as Savior and Lord, as well as how people responded (both positively and negatively) to this new 'Way'. In that way, Acts serves as a map for responding to the entire message of the Bible.

Acts also presents Paul: Christian-hunter turned Christian leader. Paul wrote a huge chunk of the New Testament and Acts tells us what he was doing during most of his writings. We can take Paul's letters and place them in the context of Acts and find out what was going on in his life and how that informed and didn't inform his writing (Paul could have written a lot of 'woe is me', but he didn't). Acts gives us important context for the rest of Paul's (and other apostles') writings.

And then there's Romans. It's hard to imagine the Christian faith without the book of Romans. Truly, this book – considered Paul's masterpiece – offers the most complete, clear and logical explanation of the core truths of Christian faith and of the core attitudes of Christian life captured in any one book of the Bible. Romans explains the entire Bible in eleven chapters, and then frames the entire Christian life in the remaining five. It's pretty amazing.

WHY SHOULD I READ ACTS AND ROMANS?

If you're in a position to read this, then chances are you have asked yourself one or both of these questions at some point: What is a Christian? What is the church and why should I be a part? Perhaps you are asking yourself these questions right now (even if you consider yourself a Christian). Acts and Romans are good books for you to read with those questions.

Christianity and the church face a lot of accusations these days. 'The church is an organized religion with a political agenda. The church (and Christians) are judgmental and negative. The church is dominated by males and oppresses females. The church (and Christians) are homophobic. The church (and Christians) arrogantly claim that all other religions are wrong. The church is full of fundamentalists who take the whole Bible literally.'¹ A lot of these accusations stem from measuring Christianity by those who claim to be Christian, and measuring the church by groups that call themselves churches. This seems logical, right?

If you just looked at Christians and churches for your understand of faith and church, you would come away supremely confused. There's diversity among even healthy, faithful Christians and there are scores of branches on the church family tree. That's not to mention the charlatans and thieves who abuse Christianity in order to gain wealth and influence. No wonder people are confused about Christianity and the church!

All the confusion comes in with the question of 'how?'² How should a Christian live? How should a church operate? If people start taking their 'how' cues from culture, then this warps the understanding of what it means to be a Christian, to be a church. Just one example, a lot of churches tangle faith and politics (on the left and the right). Christianity and the church become all about how you vote and your political stance equals the marks of your faith. Anyone who has different political beliefs must not be Christian and all of the sudden you have judgmental Christians in exclusive organized religions, and a lot of confusion.

We've got the wrong measuring stick. It's like weighing a sack of potatoes with a stopwatch. We must measure Christianity and the church with the right tool: the Scriptures.

Acts and Romans offer clarity. Instead of starting with people and groups and drawing all sorts of conclusions about Christianity, the church and even the Bible, we should start with the Bible and then draw conclusions about all the rest. And Acts and Romans are two especially helpful books in understanding what the earliest Christians believed and taught and how they lived their lives. They can cut through all of the confusion to proclaim clearly, 'This is true Christianity and this is a true church,' and so give us an invaluable tool in approaching Jesus and His followers.

HOW CAN ACTS AND ROMANS RELATE TO ME?

I encourage you to approach Acts and Romans with your guard down. Maybe you've been burned by a church or a Christian friend and your reaction is to distance yourself from everything Christian. If you can, set that aside. Don't read these books through a lens of wanting them to be wrong. Try to read these books simply wanting to know what they say – about what it means to be a Christian, what it means to live as a Christian, what it means to associate with other Christians. I hope that, through Acts and Romans, you will see the precious, life-giving Savior at the center of Christianity and that you wouldn't throw that away in your reaction to your hurt, but that you would understand better how to respond to that Savior, both personally and with others. I hope that seeing faith and church through the lens of the Scriptures would reunite you with God and that he would enable you to engage with a broken world and broken Christians, and join the fight to defend the gospel from confusion and abuse.

¹ *The Like Jesus but Not the Church*, by Dan Kimball

² *The Reason for God*, by Tim Keller



FAMILY WORSHIP GUIDE: ACTS 1-9

By Jared Kennedy

Here are some simple ideas for studying the Acts 1-9 with your family. First, gather the family to hear from God by reading His Word then responding to Him through asking, praying, memorizing, and doing. Children should be involved as much as their age allows. Devotions should last around 15 minutes. Keep it simple. Everyone should participate. Turn off any distractions.

Step #1: Hear from God's Word—Read one chapter each time you gather together. If your children are confident readers, ask them to read portions of scripture from their Bibles. Prepare in advance to explain difficult concepts and words.

Step #2: Respond to God—Truly hearing from God involves responding to what he has said. Here are some ideas for leading your children to respond to God.

Ask: Ask your children questions about what you've read: Ask about the main characters in the story. Ask what verses stand out in each chapter. Chapters 1-9 follow the basic outline below. Ask your children to remember what God did in the chapter. Then, praise Him for what He did.

The Birth of the Church

CHAPTERS 1-5

- chapter 1: The apostles gather
- chapter 2: The day of Pentecost
- chapters 3-5: The church grows

The Church is Persecuted and Expands

CHAPTERS 6-9

- chapters 6-7: Stephen
- chapter 8: Philip
- chapter 9: Saul of Tarsus

Memorize: Take a month to memorize this verse as a family. Repeat the words aloud with your family, and put them in a prominent place in your home (like the refrigerator door) where family members can regularly see them.

Acts 1:8 (NIV) "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Pray: Draw a large circle with 2 smaller circles inside the larger circle.

Jerusalem is where the apostles lived. Write Louisville or your neighborhood in the center. Write of the names of three people in your neighborhood. Pray for them.

Judea and Samaria was the region that Jerusalem was a part of. In the second circle have your children write the name of the state they are in and some surrounding states. Pray for people that live outside of your immediate area.

The ends of the earth is the whole world. Explore the *National Geographic World Atlas* online (<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/kids-world-atlas/>). Write in the 3rd circle some names of countries. Pray for people there. Pray for Sojourn missionaries in Ethiopia (the Groces), in Italy (the Karrs), and Argentina (the Hess).

Do: Challenge your family to be intentional about investing in the people on your circle chart. Invite them into your home for parties, and invite them to celebrate Jesus with Sojourn at a Sunday service.



FAMILY WORSHIP: ROMANS

By: James Santos

Romans is a letter written by a man named Paul. Paul wrote this letter because he wanted the church in Rome to know the whole truth about Jesus Christ – starting with God's anger at our sin, but focusing on how Jesus Christ saves us. Gather to hear from God by reading His Word then respond to Him through asking, praying, singing, memorizing, and everyday talk. I would encourage your children to participate as their age allows. If this is your first time hearing about family worship, this is a great opportunity to begin and be blessed. Keep it simple and find a place to gather. This may be in the living room or bedroom, or around the dinner table together.

Step # 1: Hear from God's Word – Read Romans 8:31-39. If your children are confident readers, ask them to read portions of Scripture from their Bibles. Prepare by reading in advance to answer any questions, explain any words or concepts. God's Word in Romans 10:17 says, "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ."

Step # 2: Truly hearing from God involves responding to what he has said. Here are some ideas for leading your children to respond to God.

Ask: Ask your children questions about what you have read: What does it mean that God is for us? What does it mean that God did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all? What does intercede mean? How great is God's love? Can anything separate us from God's love? Write some of their response here:

Pray: Lead the family in a time of prayer. Fathers and husbands model how we are to praise, thank, confess and bring requests to God. Pray using the words of Romans 8:31-39.

Sing: There is something amazing when we can sing what we believe in Christ. Select a song that is familiar to your family. Sing with a guitar, sing with a CD or simply just sing. Choose songs that help you think of the gospel, Jesus' death and resurrection.

Amazing Grace by John Newton

In Christ Alone by Stuart Townend and Keith Getty

Memorize: Memorize verses 32, 38-39 of Romans 8. Read these verses out loud with your family. Write them down on 3x5 cards and place them where family members can regularly see them (bathroom mirrors or refrigerator door).

Everyday Talk: Model for your kids how to love God's Word throughout the day. How can you naturally bring up Romans 8:31-39 in your everyday lives as a family? While driving to the store? While taking a walk? While fixing dinner? Write some of your ideas here:



ACTS AT A GLANCE

WHO: Luke

WHAT: Acts essentially tells part 2 of Luke’s historical account of the extraordinary events surrounding Jesus. Luke’s Gospel ends with Jesus ascending to heaven, and Acts picks up with Jesus’ followers waiting for the Spirit that Jesus promised would come. In Acts 2, the Spirit is given and the rest of the book chronicles the initial spread of the gospel and the foundation of the church.

WHEN: A.D. 60-64

WHERE: as with Luke’s Gospel, likely researched in Palestine and written in Rome while Paul was in prison for two years, though possibly finalized in Greece a few years later.

WHY: Theophilus commissioned this work, as he did with Luke’s Gospel. Given that this would have been a very expensive project, and given that Luke addresses Theophilus as ‘most excellent’, the same way Luke referred to a Roman governor at the end of this book, scholars believe that Theophilus was an official in the Roman government. He therefore had much to lose for publically declaring his faith, so it’s easily imaginable that he commissioned Luke, an educated physician, to research the truthfulness of Christianity’s claims as well as the circumstances surrounding the movement that established the early church to both reassure himself and equip him to defend his faith.

As you read Acts, this chart will help you follow the timeline:

Focus	Witness in Jerusalem		Witness in Judea & Samaria		Witness to the Ends of the Earth					
	v. 1:1	v. 8:4	v. 8:5	v. 12:25	v. 13:1	v. 28:31				
Divisions	Power of the Church	Progress of the Church	Expansion of the Church	Paul's Three Journeys	Paul's Three Trials					
	v. 1:1	v. 2:47	v. 3:1	v. 8:4	v. 8:5	v. 12:25	v. 13:1	v. 21:16	v. 21:17	v. 28:31

Adapted from *Talk Thru the Bible*
Ken Boa and Bruce Wilkinson

WHAT'S NEW? ACTS

The book of Acts is full of generosity – from the major benevolence of Theophilus (which paid the way for a big chunk of the New Testament to be written) to the everyday sharing of the members of the early church. The overwhelming pattern we see is that God initiates a new work in the lives of people and they overflow with generosity towards others.

As you read passages like Acts 2:42-47, Acts 4:32-37, and Acts 8:26-40, spend some time brainstorming your own generosity.

How can you be more generous towards other believers?

How can you be more generous towards the church?

How can you be more generous with your time, being willing to drop what you are doing to share the gospel?

Write out a plan and/or some prayer points for how you can grow in generosity. Show your plan to a trusted friend. Pray that God would bless your desire to grow and give you concrete opportunities to exercise generosity of all kinds.



READING PLAN

We invite you to read through the first half of Acts this week using the following plan.

- Acts 1-2 Acts 9-11
- Acts 3-5 Acts 12-14
- Acts 6-8

DEVOTIONAL GUIDE

Day 1 – Acts 2

If you have questions or reservations about the church, what better place to go than what many consider to be the birth of the church – Acts 2. In this chapter, we see three important things in a very specific order. 1) God sends his Spirit. God always initiates – the church came directly from him, not some human moral construct. 2) God’s Spirit leads to people proclaiming God’s message. Again, God initiates – the message isn’t some myth or behavior modification seminar, but the good news of God’s salvation. 3) People come to faith and start to gather. People always respond to God. At its core, the church is simply a gathering of people who have a shared experience with Jesus. How can the idea that God initiates the process of church gathering – that church was his idea - affect your notion of what church is? Does it assuage any doubts? Today, reflect and fill in this blank: ‘If church is God’s idea, then...’

Day 2 – Acts 3:17-19

If you’ve ever had a good meal only to get food poisoning or a bout of flu, you know that you may never desire to eat that particular food again. It triggers too many bad memories. The same thing can happen if you’ve been burned by a church (or a churchgoer). It spoils your taste for church in general – maybe you think, ‘If church is God’s idea, then these people sure have messed it up.’ It would be tragic to let the hurtful actions of people deaden your response to something God initiated. Peter’s message to his fellow Jews in Acts 3 could have some bearing. He urged them to stop living in ignorance of who Jesus was and is. He might just as well urge burned-out Christians to stop living in ignorance of what Jesus’ church is – an ignorance brought on by hurt. Jesus’ church isn’t just a bunch of people, it’s God’s chosen way for his people to gather – and therefore it’s worth enduring hurt to take part. As Peter urges Jews to repent and come to Christ, listen for the call to be humble and take the worthy risk of hurt for the sake of taking part in the life of Christ’s church.

Day 3 – Acts 6:8-14

The story of Stephen shows us that resistance to Jesus’ message and the church is nothing new. What’s interesting to note is that the members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen never could find an adequate argument against him, yet they wouldn’t be persuaded. They simply dug in their heels and decided to frame

him of blasphemy against the Law. How do you respond to the message of the Bible? Do you have doubts? Hear this: doubts are OK. The church isn’t a place for people who have it all figured out. The church is a place to gather and engage with the Scriptures and seek truth. Our call today is to *not* treat our doubts the way Stephen’s opponents treated theirs – merely digging in our heels and resorting to unfounded resistance. Rather, our call is to approach Jesus and the church openly, willing to hear and consider.

Day 4 – Acts 9:1-22

‘You don’t know what I’ve done, you don’t know where I’ve been.’ People often think they are too bad to fit into the church. But the radical conversion of Saul of Tarsus in Acts 9 tells us nothing could be further from the truth. Saul was relentless in his drive to prosecute, persecute and execute Christians. He was about as anti-Christian as it gets. Yet he experienced a radical conversion *while he was on the way to persecute more Christians*. Saul didn’t get it together in order to come to Jesus. Jesus came to Saul in the middle of his sin and changed him completely. This radical change can be true for you – and has been true for countless Christians throughout the centuries. Becoming a Christian has nothing to do with what you’ve done or what you will do, but everything to do with what Jesus did on the Cross to save you. You simply cannot be too ‘bad’ for Jesus to save you. If there is some skeleton in your closet that is keeping you from coming to Christ, or from going deeper with the church and with other believers, I urge you to bring it out into the light of God’s grace. God is more than capable to forgive and more than ready to redeem you.

Day 5 – Acts 13:16-23, 26, 38-39

Paul intended to open the eyes of those who heard his message in Acts 13 to an enormous truth. God has been at work for thousands of years to save a people – and they were now in the time when God’s work of salvation was most clear. ‘Through faith in Jesus, the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you.’ Friends, Paul’s use of ‘you’ easily applies to me and to you. It’s universal. Through faith in Jesus, the forgiveness of sins is available to anyone and everyone who would believe. That is the core message of the church and that is the core of God’s message to you. The church isn’t and must never be a place where you have to perform to be accepted. The church isn’t and must never be a place where political party lines separate the sheep from the goats, so to speak. The church is and must always be a place where faith in Jesus is central to all hope and all belonging. If you are consider yourself not part of a church, I encourage you to take a chance on a church that proclaims the message of Jesus clearly and centrally. If you claim a local church as home, I urge you to do everything in your ability to make your church all about Jesus. We are fortunate to live in a time where God’s work to save people is abundantly clear – let’s cherish the clarity of the message of Jesus above all else.

READING PLAN

Finish Acts with us this week. Feel free to check off the boxes as you read.

- Acts 15-17 Acts 24-26
 Acts 18-20 Acts 27-28
 Acts 21-23

DEVOTIONAL GUIDE

Day 1 – Acts 15:1-11, 23-29

One of the most common misconceptions about the church is that it's all about rules – live right and you'll belong. Unfortunately, this misconception often arises because church members add to the gospel. This has been happening since the very beginning, when some Jewish believers insisted that Christians follow the Jewish Law (which included certain demands placed on the physical body). It happens now when some Christians say you mustn't drink, watch R-rated movies or vote Republican. The church is not about rules; it's about grace – the notion that nobody can perform well enough to be saved, but that everyone must receive their salvation as a gift from Jesus. These extra rules actually bring harm to the message of the church and must be set aside. 'But wait, don't the elders instate some rules at the end of their letter – rules about what to eat?' These restrictions exists for a very specific purpose. An alcoholic who has gone clean will abstain from any alcohol whatsoever because they know the risks of a relapse. Likewise, Christians who have come from very anti-God backgrounds will often place restrictions on themselves to avoid sins that they used to easily fall into. Pagan worship involved much sexual practice and sacrifice to idols, and so for the sake of not falling back into their old ways, the elders instructed the former pagan Christians to avoid the old things. These rules are not about earning some right standing, but about knowing yourself well enough to realize that if you want to live a new life in Christ, it's often best to avoid the old ways. So our question today is this: Am I truly only seeking Jesus' gift to make me right, or am I trying to earn my right-standing another way? Am I expecting others to earn theirs? How can I learn to rely on Jesus plus nothing?

Day 2 – Acts 20:25-35

Today, reflect on wolves – those that would attack the church either openly, or in secret by sneaking in and stirring up discord and strife. If you are in the church, how are you equipping yourself to recognize false teachers that would harm the gospel message you hold dear? How are you equipping yourself to fight off such attack? It is so important for Christians to cling to the message of Jesus and constantly strive to keep that message central and guard it from anything and everything that would alter or abuse that message. If you are skeptical of church, consider that what you view skeptically could very well be the end result of an attack. If you would like to understand a church, consider engaging with members

Day 3 – Acts 21:27-22:21

The story of Paul's arrest and his response to the hostile crowd is loaded with good reflections for Christians and non-Christians alike. Paul's greatest defense of his faith isn't some logical argument. He simply said, 'My life was changed. I once was that way and not I'm transformed.' If you claim Christ, people will question you, and you can feel a lot of pressure to be convincing. But the best argument we could give for our faith is often just like Paul's: 'I've experienced a lot of good change in my life because of Jesus and through of forming relationships with other Christians in my church.' If you're not a Christian, have you seen Christians you know who seem to have truly experienced a good life-change, who truly seem to have peace in the face of adversity, who truly seem content in the midst of a culture of 'more!'? Today, consider these questions: What has God done in my life? What would I like to see God do in my life? How can trusting in Christ and forming relationships with other Christians enable God to work in my life?

Day 4 – Acts 24:24-26

Paul's words to Felix and Drusilla disturbed them to the point that they could bear no more. Notice that Paul started with Jesus and placing faith in His sacrifice and *then* went to living well, self-control and judgment. Felix and Drusilla didn't object to the message of Jesus, they objected to the idea of living according to a new way of self-control and they objected to the idea of judgment. Perhaps you look at Christianity and see it as a list of demands – don't have sex unless you're married, go to church instead of sleeping in, don't drink, study your Bible instead of watching TV. It's easy to think, 'If I give up what makes me happy now, I'll be miserable,' and it's easy to want nothing to do with Christianity and the church. Here's the thing: if we start with faith in Jesus, belief that he has released us from the burden of our sin, we will actually find greater joy in doing 'Christian' stuff that we found in pursuing pleasure. It's hard to see unless you've gone through that change, but it's true. It's like trading in cheap plastic pearls for the real thing. If the 'rules' of Christianity repel you, I urge you to take some time and talk to a Christian about the heart behind those 'rules'. If you are a Christian, I urge you to always remember that your way of life flows out from your new heart as a response to Jesus' work to save you, and that your actions can earn you God's favor.

Day 5 – Acts 28:23-31

Acts ends without much resolution. Paul is still spreading the message, Christians are still gathering, there's still resistance and the church is still subject to false teaching and attack. And that's pretty much how it still stands. Church can be messy, but if we want to pursue Jesus' Cross and message, we need to have the courage to step into the mess. Consider this passage from pastor and author Tim Keller.

'The church of Jesus Christ is...like the ocean. It is enormous and diverse. Like the ocean, there are warm and clear spots and deadly cold spots, places you can enter easily without danger and places that where it will immediately whisk you away and kill you. I realize how risky it is to tell my readers that they should seek out a church. I don't do it lightly, and I urge them to do so with the utmost care. But there is no alternative. You can't live the Christian life without a band of Christian friends, without a family of believers in which you find a place.'

ROMANS AT A GLANCE

WHO: Paul (formerly Saul), who formerly hated the church and Christians and ended up writing the bulk of the New Testament after meeting Jesus

WHAT: Romans is a letter from Paul to the church in Rome (where he had not yet visited). In the Roman church, there were both Jewish and non-Jewish believers both trying to understand Jesus together coming from radically different backgrounds.

WHEN: sometime between A.D. 55-57

WHERE: Paul likely wrote this letter while in Corinth (modern Day Greece), but he sent it to Rome, which was the heart of the greatest superpower of the day.

WHY: Paul had plans to visit Rome and so he sent this letter to introduce himself as a brother in the faith and as a missionary, in hopes that they would receive him and his teaching when he arrived. Paul felt a great burden to help the Roman church to understand the complete gospel and walk the line between not adding external requirements and still living transformed lives, and so he gave them this careful letter that presents the gospel clearly and persuasively.

As you read Romans, this chart can help you follow Paul's logic.

Focus	Explanation of God's Plan to Save Mankind			God's Plan to Save Mankind is Mysterious and Good			Our Response to God's Work to Save Us	
	v. 1:1	v. 3:20	v. 8:39	v. 9:1	v. 11:30	v. 12:1	v. 13:14	v. 16:27
Divisions	Condemnation: Our Need for Jesus' Blood	Justification: Jesus' Blood Makes Us Right w/ God	Sanctification: Jesus' Blood Transforms Our Lives	Israel's Past: Election	Israel's Present: Rejection	Israel's Future: Restoration	Christian Living	Christian Freedom
	v. 1:1	v. 3:20	v. 8:39	v. 9:1	v. 11:30	v. 12:1	v. 13:14	v. 16:27

Adapted from *Talk Thru the Bible*
Ken Boa and Bruce Wilkinson

WHAT'S NEW? ROMANS

We find the biggest new thing in Romans in chapter 12

...be transformed by the renewing of your mind. (Romans 12:2)

Romans is all about the gospel of Jesus Christ – the good news that Jesus died so that we might live. The goal of the gospel and the evidence of faith is a renewed mind overflowing into renewed words, deeds and habits.

Read through Romans 12, paying special attention to Paul's instructions on character – his call to humility, hospitality, patience, love and devotion to good.

Based on what you read, write some areas you would like to mature in your character below – where would you like to see renewal in your mind and life? Share your list. Pray about your list. Remember that Jesus' blood has freed you from your old ways so that you can pursue these new ways in His grace!

READING PLAN

This week we will read through the first half of the book of Romans.

- Romans 1-2 Romans 6-7
- Romans 3-4 Romans 8
- Romans 5

DEVOTIONAL GUIDE

Romans Week 1, Day 1 - Romans 1:19-21

You can't get anywhere in understanding what it means to be a Christian without first having a fundamental awareness of God. Paul says that God has been made plain to us. At the very least, we can look around us and see indications of God in what has been made. Consider the sense of heart-rending beauty that you can get when you see something particularly beautiful in nature – a mountain range, a thunderstorm coming in across the ocean, a field of wildflowers in spring. Consider the extraordinary delicacy of life – complex ecosystems that hang in balance seemingly beyond belief. Those kinds of things cry out in our hearts that something greater exists. Paul is saying, if you look at the world and don't see God, look again. Keep looking. He's there. If you do see God, praise him. He is clearly powerful and capable of extraordinary beauty.

Romans Week 1, Day 2 - Romans 3:9-18

After acknowledging God, the next step in understanding Christian faith is knowing our present relationship with God. In Romans 3, Paul tells us that basically we are all against God. We have left the God who made us and gone after our own way and this has brought immense injustice, bitterness and suffering into the world. Perhaps you point at suffering in the world as a major objection to God's existence. The Scriptures tell us that God didn't bring the suffering, we did when we rebelled against him. Today, consider that the cruelty, the harshness, the coldness in life comes from the fact that you have rebelled against God and so has literally everybody else. If you can accept this truth, how might cruelty, harshness and coldness be repaired?

Romans Week 1, Day 3 - Romans 5:6-11

Understanding God, our rebellion against him and all the junk that has come as a result can be overwhelming. How on earth could things be made right? Here is the best good news the Scriptures have to offer – and it makes up the core of what it means to be a Christian: while we were in the midst of making a mess of everything through our sin, God took it upon himself to make things right and sent Jesus, his Son, to die (because our sin required this penalty from someone and Jesus graciously took it Himself even though He didn't deserve it) so that we wouldn't have to die. And what's more, Jesus' sacrifice has freed us to return to God and rejoice in new life. All Christians must reflect on this truth again and again

to be reminded of the core truth of their new life. Today, spend some time in quiet reflection on these three truths: 1) God is real, 2) we have rebelled against God and the consequences are terrible and 3) a way has been made for us (not by us) to be right with God again and to live a new life – the way is through faith in Jesus.

Romans Week 1, Day 4 - Romans 6:1-2, 12-14

Understanding that Jesus has paid the penalty for our sin – that we no longer face death – can lead to confusion. Is it ok to just keep on living the way we used to? Paul says, 'NO!' People err on both sides of this tension. On one hand, if I forget that Jesus paid my penalty, I can start living like I'm earning favor with God and this opens the church up to accusations of self-righteousness. On the other hand, if a I makes no effort to resist sin and just carry on without restraint, I send the confusing message that being a Christian really doesn't mean much, and I open the church to accusations of hypocrisy. Where might you fall on this spectrum? Do you tend toward self-righteousness? Total permissiveness? How you might walk the line between both – resisting sin while still enjoying God's free favor in Christ? There is a way to have favor with God and to enjoy a new life – have hope!

Romans Week 1, Day 5 - Romans 8:18-30

Truly, it's hard to be a Christian. It's not easy to admit you're wrong on the most fundamental level. It's not easy to admit that you can do nothing to fix that wrong. It's not easy to accept such an immense, free gift as the one Jesus gives. It's not easy to resist sin without feeling self-righteous and legalistic. It's not easy to accept that you will still fail and sin even though you are a Christian. The Christian life is a struggle on all accounts. But Paul's words in Romans 8 provide so much comfort and promise. All this suffering creates eager expectation in our hearts for that day when we will be more than conquerors through the power of the Spirit, by the blood of Jesus. Christians and non-Christians alike, hear this good word today. Let the picture of all things working together for good – of life having meaning and purpose – capture your imagination. Come to Jesus and experience this meaning and purpose day by day!

READING PLAN

Spend the next week finishing reading the book of Romans.

- Romans 9-11 Romans 14
- Romans 12 Romans 15-16
- Romans 13

DEVOTIONAL GUIDE

Romans Week 2, Day 1 - Romans 11:33-36

Romans 9-11 are some of the most challenging chapters in the Bible. Paul lays out one of the most controversial topics in the debate both between Christians and non-Christians and between Christians themselves: predestination. Paul also deals with the topic of Christ and the Jewish people. These chapters can be confusing and some of the truths presented are difficult to accept at best. So we must hear Paul's final word on the subject as our model for response to the times when truth is hard, and hard to see. God's ways are rich and deep. We are utterly incapable of fully understanding his purposes because he is God. But since he is God, and so great and so beyond us, we simply must praise him. Do your doubts, your difficulty in understanding God's ways, do they lead you to praise God as an infinitely higher being than yourself, or do they lead you to turn from God? Who could you talk with to help you respond to God in praise?

Romans Week 2, Day 2 - Romans 12:1-2

When thinking about how a Christian ought to live, one fundamental truth must be held tightly and right in front of us always. We must beat it into our heads. Paul uses the word 'therefore', which means 'because of what I've just written, you should believe this.' This could apply to Romans 9-11 (God chose to rescue us without us having anything to do with it), Romans 11:33-36 (God is worthy of our praise), or it could apply to all of Romans up to this point (Paul's wonderfully articulate presentation of our sad state and God's wonderful rescue through Jesus). In any event, the key truth in living a Christian life is that it's *always* a response. God has done enormous good for us, and this should lead our hearts to overflow with desire to serve him. We don't serve God to get saved, we serve God *because Jesus saved us*. Today, reflect on God's actions for you and your response to God.

Romans Week 2, Day 3 - Romans 13:1-2, 7-10

Paul gives all sorts of practical ways to live well as a Christian. His thoughts in Romans 13 seem especially applicable to Christians today. In Romans 13, Paul talks politics. Paul's first instruction is radical - you should submit to your government because God placed those leaders in power. Paul doesn't say, 'Only support Christian government.' Paul says your political leaders, in the end, were placed there by God and to rebel against them is the same as rebelling against

God. How might our political landscape be *radically* different if we lived in light of this truth? Today, consider how you might give everyone what you owe them - respect, taxes, honor or payment - regardless of how you voted.

Romans Week 2, Day 4 - Romans 14:1-12

One of the biggest temptations for Christians is to add stuff to the message of Jesus. 'I know that only Jesus saves people, but you really shouldn't drink alcohol/ eat meat/get a tattoo/shop at Wal-Mart.' On the contrary, since only Jesus saves us, we have freedom in disputable matters. What a blessing! If you see Christianity as a dry life of harsh do's and don'ts, hear this teaching - whatever you do, do so giving thanks to God. But remember, you will have to give an account to God for your actions. There's freedom, but Christians are still called to resist sin. So perhaps this looks like enjoying wine without getting drunk. Or on the other hand, perhaps this looks like avoiding R-rated movies because they burden your heart. For the Christian, there's a closed fist and an open hand. In the closed fist, there's things like *not* going against clear biblical commands (e.g. having sex with someone other than your spouse, and only once they are your spouse). But in the open hand, there's freedom to enjoy what the Scriptures offer leeway on, to the glory of God. A healthy Christian will know both. Don't put your life on auto-pilot, assuming that you have to say no to everything, or that you can say yes to anything. Engage with the Scriptures, engage with others, and enjoy the freedom found in Christ.

Romans Week 2, Day 5 - Romans 15:1-6

The other side of Christian freedom is this: bear with those who are different than you. If someone doesn't drink and you do, don't let that divide you. If the church is healthy and full of healthy Christians, it will be marked with unity and diversity - unity around Christ and diversity on issues of freedom. It's perfectly healthy, and even necessary to debate. Christians can and should help each other develop godly habits in all areas. But, in the end, if a person has godly conviction and the Scriptures don't explicitly forbid something, we ought to celebrate the gift of freedom God has given each of us. We don't all have to look just like each other in everything, and that's wonderful. Praise God for setting us free in Christ Jesus!