

R.C. SPROUL

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ROMANS

ROMANS: AN EXPOSITIONAL COMMENTARY

“R.C. Sproul,’ someone said to me in the 1970s, ‘is the finest communicator in the Reformed world.’ Now, four decades later, his skills honed by long practice, his understanding deepened by years of prayer, meditation, and testing (as Martin Luther counseled), R.C. shares the fruit of what became perhaps his greatest love: feeding and nourishing his own congregation at St. Andrew’s from the Word of God and building them up in faith and fellowship and in Christian living and serving. Dr. Sproul’s expositional commentaries have all R.C.’s hallmarks: clarity and liveliness, humor and pathos, always expressed in application to the mind, will, and affections. R.C.’s ability to focus on ‘the big picture,’ his genius of never saying too much, leaving his hearers satisfied yet wanting more, never making the Word dull, are all present in these expositions. They are his gift to the wider church. May they nourish God’s people well and serve as models of the kind of ministry for which we continue to hunger.”

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Teaching Fellow
Ligonier Ministries

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—Dr. W. Robert Godfrey
President emeritus and professor of church history emeritus
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—Dr. Derek W.H. Thomas
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“Dr. R.C. Sproul was the premier theologian of our day, an extraordinary instrument in the hand of the Lord. Possessed with penetrating insight into the text of Scripture, Dr. Sproul was a gifted expositor and world-class teacher, endowed with a strategic grasp and command of the inspired Word. When he stepped into the pulpit of St. Andrew’s and committed himself to the weekly discipline of biblical exposition, this noted preacher demonstrated a rare ability to explicate and apply God’s Word. I wholeheartedly recommend Dr. Sproul’s expositional commentaries to all who long to know the truth better and experience it more deeply in a life-changing fashion. Here is an indispensable tool for digging deeper into God’s Word. This is a must-read for every Christian.”

—Dr. Steven J. Lawson
Founder and president
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—Dr. Joel R. Beeke
President and professor of systematic theology and homiletics,
Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, Michigan

ROMANS

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R.C. SPROUL

Romans: An Expository Commentary

© 2019 by R.C. Sproul

Published by Reformation Trust Publishing
a division of Ligonier Ministries
421 Ligonier Court, Sanford, FL 32771
Ligonier.org ReformationTrust.com

Printed in China

RR Donnelley

0001019

First edition 2009

Reformation Trust edition 2019

ISBN 978-1-64289-188-1 (Hardcover)

ISBN 978-1-64289-189-8 (ePub)

ISBN 978-1-64289-190-4 (Kindle)

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Cover design: Ligonier Creative

Interior typeset: Katherine Lloyd, The DESK

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Sproul, R.C. (Robert Charles), 1939-2017, author.

Title: Romans : an expository commentary / R.C. Sproul.

Description: Orlando : Reformation Trust, 2019. | Originally published: Wheaton, Ill. : Crossway Books, 2009. | Includes index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019000109 | ISBN 9781642891881 (hardcover) |

ISBN 9781642891898 (epub) | ISBN 9781642891904 (kindle)

Subjects: LCSH: Bible. Romans--Sermons.

Classification: LCC BS2665.54 .S57 2019 | DDC 227/.1077--dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2019000109>

*To my beloved Saint Andrew's congregation
in Sanford, Florida, who faithfully attend the
exposition of sacred Scripture.*

CONTENTS

Series Preface	xi
Preface	xiii
1 Greetings (1:1–7)	1
2 The Gospel (1:8–17)	11
3 The Wrath of God (1:18–25)	21
4 Judicial Abandonment (1:22–32)	31
5 No Partiality (2:1–16)	41
6 Under the Law (2:17–29)	49
7 A Great Advantage (3:1–8)	59
8 Under Sin (3:9–20)	69
9 Righteousness Revealed (3:21–26)	79
10 Faith and Works (4:1–8)	87
11 Blessed (4:5–12)	97
12 The Righteousness of Faith (4:13–23)	107
13 Justified (4:23–25)	115
14 Peace (5:1–5, Part 1)	121
15 Hope (5:1–5, Part 2)	129
16 The Atonement (5:6–11)	135
17 Reconciliation (5:10–14)	143
18 Imputation (5:12–17)	151
19 The Reign of Grace (5:20–6:4)	159
20 Dead to Sin (6:4–11)	167
21 Slaves of Righteousness (6:12–23)	175
22 Delivered (7:1–6)	183
23 The Function of the Law (7:7–14)	191
24 The Conflict (7:14–25, Part 1)	199
25 The Will of Man (7:14–25, Part 2)	207
26 Set Free (7:19–8:2)	215
27 Spiritually Minded (8:1–11)	223

28	Adopted (8:9–17)	231
29	Subjected in Hope (8:18–27)	241
30	All Things for Good (8:28–30)	249
31	The Golden Chain (8:29–31)	257
32	God for Us (8:31–39)	267
33	The Doctrine of Election (9:1–5)	273
34	Jacob and Esau (9:6–13)	281
35	The Righteousness of God (9:14–16)	287
36	Predestination (9:17–20)	293
37	Vessels of Wrath and Mercy (9:20–24)	299
38	God’s People (9:25–10:4)	305
39	True Confession (10:5–15)	315
40	The Obedience of Faith (10:16–21)	323
41	A Remnant (11:1–10)	331
42	Grafted In (11:11–24)	339
43	The Fullness of Time (11:25–26)	347
44	Out of Zion (11:26–35)	355
45	All Things (11:36)	363
46	Holy Sacrifices (12:1–2)	371
47	Communion of the Saints (12:3–8)	379
48	Brotherly Love (12:9–15)	387
49	Regard for Good Things (12:16–21)	393
50	Church and State (13:1–3)	403
51	The Power of the Sword (13:4–7)	409
52	For Conscience’ Sake (13:5–8)	417
53	The Fulfillment of the Law (13:9–14)	425
54	The Weaker Brother (14:1–13)	433
55	Kingdom Life (14:14–23)	439
56	The Pursuit of Peace (14:19–15:13)	447
57	A Minister of God (15:14–33)	455
58	Final Greetings (16)	463
	Index of Names	473
	About the Author	479

SERIES PREFACE

When God called me into full-time Christian ministry, He called me to the academy. I was trained and ordained to a ministry of teaching, and the majority of my adult life has been devoted to preparing young men for the Christian ministry and to trying to bridge the gap between seminary and Sunday school through various means under the aegis of Ligonier Ministries.

Then, in 1997, God did something I never anticipated: He placed me in the position of preaching weekly as a leader of a congregation of His people—St. Andrew’s in Sanford, Florida. Over the past twelve years, as I have opened the Word of God on a weekly basis for these dear saints, I have come to love the task of the local minister. Though my role as a teacher continues, I am eternally grateful to God that He saw fit to place me in this new ministry, the ministry of a preacher.

Very early in my tenure with St. Andrew’s, I determined that I should adopt the ancient Christian practice of *lectio continua*, “continuous expositions,” in my preaching. This method of preaching verse-by-verse through books of the Bible (rather than choosing a new topic each week) has been attested throughout church history as the one approach that ensures believers hear the full counsel of God. Therefore, I began preaching lengthy series of messages at St. Andrew’s, eventually working my way through several biblical books in a practice that continues to the present day.

Previously, I had taught through books of the Bible in various settings, including Sunday school classes, Bible studies, and audio and video teaching series for Ligonier Ministries. But now I found myself appealing not so much to the minds of my hearers but to both their minds and their hearts. I knew that I was responsible as a preacher to clearly explain God’s Word *and* to show how we ought to live in light of it. I sought to fulfill both tasks as I ascended the St. Andrew’s pulpit each week.

What you hold in your hand, then, is a written record of my preaching

labors amidst my beloved Sanford congregation. The dear saints who sit under my preaching encouraged me to give my sermons a broader hearing. To that end, the chapters that follow were adapted from a sermon series I preached at St. Andrew's.

Please be aware that this book is part of a broader series of books containing adaptations of my St. Andrew's sermons. This book, like all the others in the series, will *not* give you the fullest possible insight into each and every verse in this biblical book. Though I sought to at least touch on each verse, I focused on the key themes and ideas that comprised the "big picture" of each passage I covered. Therefore, I urge you to use this book as an overview and introduction.

I pray that you will be as blessed in reading this material as I was in preaching it.

—R.C. Sproul
Lake Mary, Florida
April 2009

PREFACE

On the first page of Romans in my Greek testament, I have scribbled at the top of the page a few significant dates. The first one is the year AD 386. In the latter part of the fourth century lived a young man whose father was a pagan and whose mother was a devout Christian. This young man had devoted himself to immorality. He had already sired one illegitimate son, yet his mother continued to pray for his soul and sought the counsel of her pastor, Bishop Ambrose of Milan.

This young man was pacing one day in a garden where a copy of the New Testament was chained to a lectern. As he was walking, he overheard children playing in the grass, singing a refrain to one of their childhood games: *Tolle lege, tolle lege*, which means “take up and read.” So this young man, whose name was Aurelius Augustine, went to the Scriptures that were there. He allowed the volume of sacred writ to fall open where it would, and in the providence of God it fell open to Romans 13. Augustine’s eyes fell on this passage:

And do this, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep; for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand. Therefore let us cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light. Let us walk properly, as in the day, not in revelry and drunkenness, not in lewdness and lust, not in strife and envy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts. (Rom. 13:11–14)

As Augustine read these words, the Spirit of God took them and pierced between joint and sinew, bone and marrow, to the very depths of this young man’s soul. By the power of the Word of God with the Spirit attending it, Augustine was converted to the Christian faith, and we know him today as Saint Augustine of Hippo.

Later in church history, in 1515, an Augustinian monk who had diligently pursued his doctoral studies in the works of Augustine was consigned to a

university to be the professor of biblical studies. He had already delivered his first series of lectures on the book of Psalms, and now his task was to teach his students the book of Romans. As he was preparing his lectures on Romans and studying this epistle's first chapter, he found a notation from an ancient manuscript of Augustine defining the righteousness of Christ. Augustine said that when Paul speaks of the righteousness of God in Romans 1, it is not the righteousness by which God Himself is righteous, but the righteousness that He freely gives to those who put their trust in Christ. For the first time in his life, Martin Luther, whose conscience had been wounded by the burden of the law of God that daily exposed his relentless guilt, understood the gospel of Christ. The doors of paradise swung open and he walked through, and it was from Paul's teaching on the doctrine of justification by faith alone that Luther stood against the whole world in the sixteenth-century Reformation.

Another date I have scribbled in my Greek testament is the year 1738, when a man who was already ordained to the ministry in the Anglican church in England was listening to a message being delivered outside in London at Aldersgate. He mentioned later that as he was listening to the words of Romans, he felt his heart was strangely warmed. He said that was the moment of his authentic conversion, and it defined the life and ministry of John Wesley for the rest of his days.

I could mention the impact of Romans on John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards, and a host of others throughout church history, but as we come to it now, I simply remind you that God has richly blessed those who have devoted themselves to the study of this book.

1

GREETINGS

Romans 1:1–7



Paul, a bondservant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated to the gospel of God which He promised before through His prophets in the Holy Scriptures, concerning His Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh, and declared to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead. Through Him we have received grace and apostleship for obedience to the faith among all nations for His name, among whom you also are the called of Jesus Christ; To all who are in Rome, beloved of God, called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The book of Romans begins with one word, **Paul** (v. 1). From the book of Acts we are familiar with the trials and missionary activity of the apostle Paul. He is well known to us. We consider him our mentor and friend. At the beginning of this letter he follows a custom practiced regularly in his day. In antiquity the author of an epistle usually identified himself by name at the beginning. Today we read “Dear Bill,” or “Dear John,” or “Dear Mary,” then wait to the end of the letter to find out who wrote it. Paul does not depart from the old custom and identifies himself as the author of the epistle in the first word.

Who Was Paul?

Paul starts by giving his name, but he then seeks to define who he understands himself to be. This self-identification is not just Paul's introspection or self-evaluation; the Holy Spirit superintends the apostle's writing, which is how we know that this is a true and accurate description of the author of the epistle.

Paul identifies himself as a **bondsman of Jesus Christ** (v. 1). I have never been satisfied with that English translation of this second phrase. Some translations have, "Paul, a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ." *Bondsman* is an improvement, but I think the proper translation should read, "Paul, a slave of Jesus Christ." The Greek word Paul used here is *doulos*. A *doulos* was not a hired servant who could come and go as he pleased. A *doulos* was a person who had been purchased, and once purchased he became his master's possession.

This idea of the *doulos* in Scripture is always connected to another descriptive word, *kurios*. If you have a Roman Catholic background or if you know something of sacred music in church history and high church liturgy, you have heard of the Kyrie. "Kyrie eleison, Christus eleison, Kyrie eleison." It means "Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy" because the supreme title given to Jesus by the Father in the New Testament is the title *Kurios*. *Kurios* translates the Old Testament *Adon* or *Adonai*, which means "the sovereign one," a name in the Old Testament that was reserved for God.

In the New Testament the title "lord" or *kurios* is used in three ways. There is a simple, common usage, where calling someone *kurios* is like addressing him as "sir," a polite form of address. The supreme use of *kurios* refers to the sovereign God, who rules all things. *Kurios*, "the name which is above every name" (Phil. 2:9), is the name given to Jesus, whom the Father calls the King of kings and the Lord of lords. There is yet a middle usage of the term *kurios* in the New Testament. It is used to describe a slave owner, which is an apt description of Jesus, and it is from this that Paul describes himself. He is not just a servant but a slave.

Paul, in addressing believers, said, "You are not your own. For you were bought at a price" (1 Cor. 6:19). We have been purchased by the blood of Jesus Christ (Acts 20:28). There is a paradox here: when the New Testament describes our condition by nature, as fallen people, it describes us as slaves to sin. We are by nature in bondage to sin, bondsmen of the flesh, and the only remedy for that, according to the New Testament, is to be liberated by the work of the Holy Spirit. For "where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty" (2 Cor. 3:17). Everyone born of the Spirit is set free from slavery to sin.

There is also irony here: when Christ sets us free from slavery to the flesh, He calls us to the royal liberty of slavery to Him. That is why we call Him Master. We acknowledge that it is from Him that we get our marching orders. He is the

Lord of our lives. We are not our own. We are not autonomous or independent. Unless people understand their relationship to Christ in these terms, they remain unconverted.

Paul makes a significant affirmation about himself and his mission: **called to be an apostle** (v. 1). In the early chapters of Acts, the church gathered to elect a new apostle, and it set forth the criteria for apostleship. The first criterion was having been a disciple of Jesus during His earthly ministry; the second was having been an eyewitness of the resurrection; and the third and most important criterion was having been directly and immediately called by Jesus (Acts 1:20–26).

On one occasion Jesus sent out seventy disciples. There were far more disciples than the Twelve. Not all those who were disciples became apostles. We tend to use these words interchangeably, as if *twelve disciples* and *twelve apostles* must mean the same thing, but a disciple is simply a learner or a student. Jesus was the Rabbi and enrolled in His school were many disciples. From out of that group He chose twelve to be elevated to the rank of apostle, those who were commissioned to speak for the Master. In the ancient world an apostle was like an ambassador who spoke on behalf of the king. The ambassador's message carried with it the authority of the one who sent him. The word *apostolos* in Greek means simply "one who is sent." "He who hears you hears Me, he who rejects you rejects Me, and he who rejects Me rejects Him who sent Me" (Luke 10:16).

People often say, "I like to know what Jesus says; it is Paul I do not want to listen to." Almost all we know about Jesus is that which comes through apostolic authority, so such remarks set Paul against Matthew, or Paul against John. That may not be done with impunity because all of the apostolic writings carry the delegated authority of Jesus Himself. That is what it means to be an apostle. That is why the New Testament church is built on the foundation of the apostles.

In the three criteria for apostleship, Paul fails the first two tests: he had not been a disciple of Jesus during Jesus' tenure on earth, nor had he been an eyewitness of the resurrection of Christ. That is why there were some in the early church who seriously challenged the apostolic authority of Paul. The supreme qualification for apostolic authority was a direct and immediate call by Jesus. I believe that is why, in the book of Acts, the account of Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus, where Christ called him to be His apostle, is repeated three times. It is to remind the people that Paul is an authentic agent of revelation. He speaks with the authority of Jesus.

The next thing we learn about Paul is that he had been **separated to the gospel of God** (v. 1). In Latin *separated* means "segregated," set apart from the multitude to a specific, sacred, consecrated task. The phrase Paul uses involves a part of speech in the Greek language called the genitive, which indicates possession.

He is not saying, “I have been commissioned to announce a message or good news about God.” Rather, he is saying that the gospel he has been separated and called to proclaim is God’s gospel. God is the author and owner of it. Paul is simply the messenger whom God has called and set apart to proclaim to people a message that comes from God Himself.

If I said, “I have some great news for you,” it would pique your interest. If I added, “This great news comes from God Himself,” you may think that I am unhinged, but if you thought for a moment that I was sober in such a statement and that I did have a message from God Himself—some good news—you would want to hear it. That is what Paul is saying before he spells out the doctrines of grace. He says, “I have been commissioned to proclaim God’s gospel, the gospel that belongs to Him. It is His possession, and I am going to communicate it to you.”

The Promised Gospel

Paul has been separated for the gospel **which He promised before through His prophets in the Holy Scriptures** (v. 2). Sometimes we make an artificial separation or distinction between the Old and New Testaments. We talk about the Old Testament as law and the New Testament as gospel, as if there were no law in the New Testament and no gospel in the Old Testament. Paul says at the very beginning that the gospel is not a novelty; it is the same gospel that was promised numerous times before.

The first time the gospel was promised in the Old Testament was in the context of a curse. As a result of the fall, God cursed Adam and Eve as well as the serpent. God said that the seed of the woman would crush the serpent’s head, and in the process the seed of the serpent would bruise the man’s heel. Centuries before Christ was delivered to the cross, where He crushed the head of Satan while being bruised for our iniquities, the gospel of Christ was given in the promise of the curse of the enemy. That is the *protoeuangelion*, the first proclamation of the gospel (Gen. 3:14–19).

Paul, an expert student of the Old Testament, was aware of that, which is why he said that this gospel is what God “promised before through His prophets in the holy Scriptures.” The “sacred writings” is the actual phrase he uses here. Billy Graham successfully carried out crusades throughout the world in which he held up the Bible and said, “The Bible says . . .” He quoted the Bible and used it as the authority from which he called people to repent from their sins and to embrace Christ.

A few years ago I heard a professor say that the time is over when people can say, “The Bible says . . .” and expect to have any credibility, because the

criticism of academicians has been so severe. People have lost confidence in the trustworthiness of sacred Scripture. God has not lost confidence in the power of the sacred Scriptures. He has invested the Scriptures with the power of the Holy Spirit. He declared to Isaiah, “My word . . . shall not return to Me void” (Isa. 55:11). When God utters words, the earth melts. One poet put it this way:

Hammer away, ye hostile hands;
your hammers fail, God’s anvil stands.

Paul is not reticent about where his authority lies with respect to the gospel God “promised before through His prophets in the Holy Scriptures.”

To my mind there is no greater source than the Word of God. No other source gives me more confidence or possesses more credibility. I am impressed by rational arguments on certain points and by the power of logic and the formal truth of mathematics. I am impressed when empirical science verifies hypotheses in amazing ways. However, nothing moves my soul and my mind to acquiesce in its certainty like finding it in the pages of sacred Scripture.

It annoys me when I see the bumper sticker that says: “God said it, I believe it, that settles it.” We must get rid of that middle term. If God says it, it is settled, whether we believe it or not. There is no higher court of appeal than the voice of God. So it is perfectly appropriate for the apostle Paul, when defending the gospel he has been commissioned to proclaim, to say, “It is found in Scripture.”

Our Lord Himself, as He walked with people on the road to Emmaus after His resurrection, “beginning at Moses and all the Prophets” (Luke 24:27) opened up the Old Testament text to them, showing that they should not have been surprised by His resurrection. Jesus’ identity was still hidden from these people. When they sat down to break bread together, Jesus left them, and they then realized who He was. Their response was, “Did not our heart burn within us while He talked with us on the road, and while He opened the Scriptures to us?” (Luke 24:32). It is good for our hearts to burn when we see the power of sacred Scripture authenticating God’s truth.

Jesus Christ Our Lord

This gospel, Paul continues, is that **concerning His Son Jesus Christ our Lord** (v. 3). In this brief passage Paul calls Jesus the Son of God, and he calls Him the Messiah of Israel, which is what the term *Christ* means. *Jesus Christ* is not His name. *Jesus* is His name. His full name would be Jesus bar Joseph or Jesus of Nazareth. The word *Christ* is His title, and the title Jesus Christ means “Jesus Christos,” or “Jesus Messiah.” God’s Son is the Christ, **who was born**

of the seed of David according to the flesh (v. 3). This is important to the Jew, because the Old Testament prophecies of the coming Messiah said He would be from the lineage of David. Luke spends much time on the nativity of Jesus, bringing us to Bethlehem, the city of David, because the Old Testament prophesied that the Messiah would be born from the loins of David. He was to be David's son yet at the same time David's Lord.

Paul reminds the recipients of this epistle that Jesus Christ was descended from David *kata sarka*, "according to the flesh." This is another important phrase in the New Testament. The Greek language uses two different words to refer to the physical nature of our humanity, words that are sometimes, but not always, used interchangeably. The more common word for *body*, or the physical makeup of people, is the word *sōma*. When psychiatrists and psychologists talk about psychosomatic illnesses, they are referring to illnesses that have their genesis in some aspect of one's psychology. It is not that the illnesses are not real—they are real, and they affect the *sōma*, the body.

In addition to the term *sōma*, there is the word *sarx*, which also refers to the physical dimension of human life. Paul says elsewhere that he did not meet Jesus in the flesh. He met Him in the power of His resurrection on the road to Damascus, but he never met Him personally during His incarnation in this world. That is what Paul is getting at here. Elsewhere the term *sarx* is loaded with theological content. It is used to describe our fallen, corrupt nature. When Jesus said, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (John 3:6), or, "The flesh profits nothing" (John 6:63), He was talking about our fallen condition, not about our skin and bones. He was talking about our corrupt nature, which Scripture frequently sets in contrast to the spirit.

There is a war in the Christian life between flesh and spirit. We still battle with the flesh, but the battle is not with our physical body. It may include that, but the battle between the flesh and the spirit is the battle between the old man, who is fallen and corrupt, and the regenerated person, who is now living by the Spirit of God. Paul will talk about that later in the epistle, but now he is saying that "according to the flesh," in His physical humanity, Jesus was "born of the seed of David."

Paul is not denying the virgin birth. Christ did not receive His deity from Mary or from Joseph. He brought His deity with Him from heaven. The virgin birth bypassed the normal human reproductive process; nevertheless, concerning His human nature, He descended from David. With respect to His divine nature, of course, He came from the Logos of heaven. He was born of the seed of David according to the flesh and declared to be the Son of God. Paul summarizes the

whole life and work of Jesus here: He is “born of the seed of David” and **declared to be the Son of God with power** (v. 4).

Paul makes clear in his next breath the way in which the declaration was made: **by the resurrection from the dead** (v. 4). When God the Holy Spirit raised the corpse of Jesus from the tomb, God was announcing to the world the sonship of Jesus. By what evidence do we believe that Jesus is the Son of God? By the testimony of God, who has declared Him to be His Son through the power of the resurrection. Paul debated with the philosophers on Mars Hill at the Areopagus, where a monument was erected to an unknown god: “These times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead” (Acts 17:30–31).

As we will see later in Romans 1, Paul labors the point that God has manifested Himself so clearly to every human being that nobody has an excuse for denying Him. When Jesus is declared to be God’s Son through the power of the resurrection, that declaration may be all we ever get. We might be like Thomas and say, “Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe” (John 20:25). We do not want to say that to God on judgment day, because He has manifested the reality of Jesus through the power of the resurrection. That is the appeal Paul is making here. He is saying, “I’m not the one declaring to you that Jesus is the Son of God. God has declared that to you by the Holy Spirit in the power of the resurrection.”

Called through Christ

Through Him we have received grace and apostleship (v. 5). Paul says that Jesus is the source of his apostleship, but he does not stop there: the apostles had received grace and apostleship **for obedience to the faith among all nations for His name, among whom you also are the called of Jesus Christ** (vv. 5–6). Paul moves quickly from his own call as an apostle to the call shared by every Christian in the church at Rome and by every Christian in every church in every age. The Bible calls them elect, “the called out ones.” The church is the *ekklesia*, a Greek word that comes from the verb *kaleo*, meaning “to call,” and the prefix *ek-*, meaning “out of.” Every Christian is called out of the world, out of bondage, out of death, and out of sin, and into Christ and into His body. Paul is not the only one who has been called. All who are truly part of the church have been called out, separated by the power of the Holy Spirit.

What are you called to be? **To all who are in Rome, beloved of God, called to be saints** (v. 7). That is your vocation.

“What are you studying?”

“I’m studying to be a saint. Do you think it will ever happen?”

“It has already happened if you are in Christ Jesus.”

You are already numbered among the saints. The word for *saint* in the New Testament is the word that means “sanctified one,” one who has been set apart by the Holy Spirit and called inwardly by Christ to Himself. If you put your trust in Christ, you are right now a saint. You are set apart. You are part of the invisible church, which is beloved of God.

Finally in this section Paul expresses his traditional greeting: **grace to you and peace** (v. 7). In Old Testament times the Jews greeted one another the same way they do today: *Shalom aleichem*, “Peace be unto you.” The response to the greeting was *Aleichem shalom*, “Peace also to you.” Our Jewish friends say prayers for the peace of Jerusalem, and the Jewish benediction for centuries has been this: “The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make His face shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up His countenance upon you, and give you peace” (Num. 6:24–26). This peace is “not as the world gives,” said Jesus in His final will and testament before leaving the world (John 14:27). He left us His peace, a peace that transcends earthly peace, a peace that is permanent and eternal, one in which the warfare between the sinner and God is over.

Isaiah was directed by God to say:

“Comfort, yes, comfort My people!”

Says your God.

“Speak comfort to Jerusalem, and cry out to her,

That her warfare is ended,

That her iniquity is pardoned;

For she has received from the LORD’s hand

Double for all her sins.” (Isa. 40:1–2).

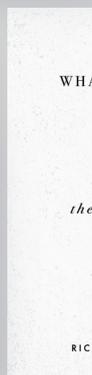
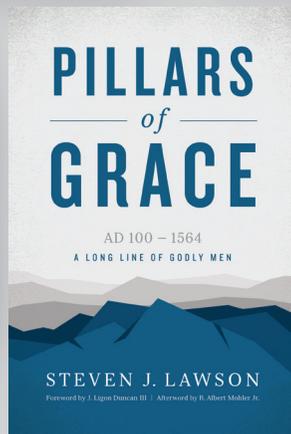
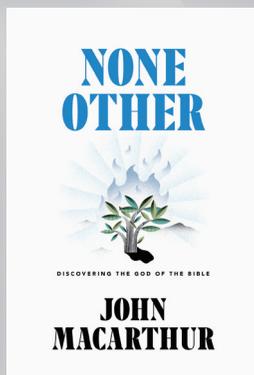
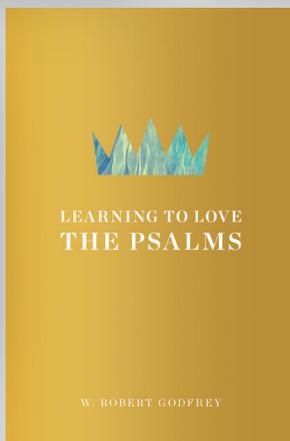
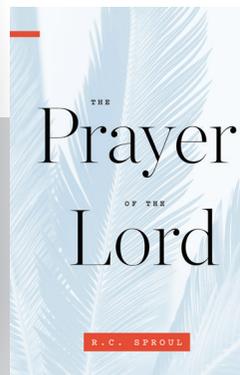
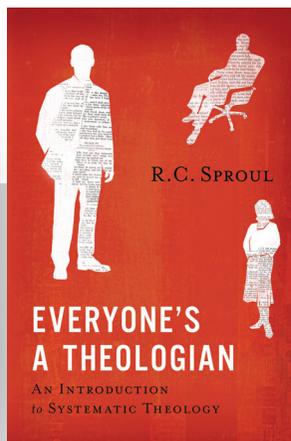
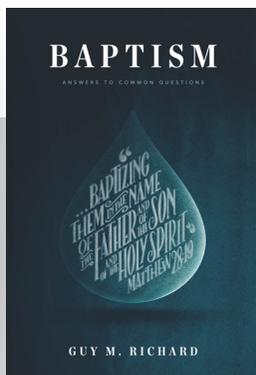
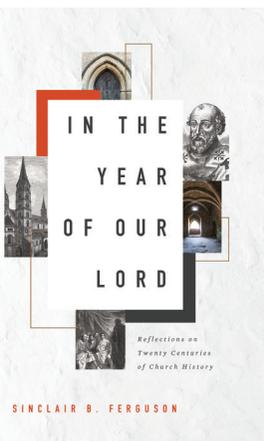
That cry is pronounced for every Christian, which is why Jesus is the consolation of Israel. He is our Paraclete because He is the One who comforts us; He gives us the peace of God that cannot be revoked. It is not an uneasy truce. God does not rattle the sword every time He is distressed with our behavior.

Having been reconciled, justified, we possess that peace right now—and forevermore—which is integral to the apostolic greeting, “Grace and peace.” They go together because the peace of God is not something we can ever earn

or merit or deserve. The peace that comes from God is by His grace. Paul wishes that his friends in the church at Rome would receive the grace of God.

It is my deepest prayer for each of you that you will know the grace of God and the power of the resurrection of Jesus, and that you will know His peace today and forevermore.

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R.C. Sproul was founder of Ligonier Ministries, founding pastor of Saint Andrew's Chapel in Sanford, Fla., and first president of Reformation Bible College. He was author of more than one hundred books, including The Holiness of God.



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