

## Under The Fig Tree



### WEEK 44

The Book of Romans must not be read out of context. It does not stand alone. It was written by Paul, whose personal background equipped him in a special way. Paul was called to be an Apostle after years of careful study of Judaism under the best teachers of his day. He was fully integrated into Jewish society before being shown how the Gospel transformed the written Torah through the life of the Spirit. We must remember this background. Paul did not set out to write a book of theology for the Christian Church. There was no such concept at this time. Gentiles were coming to faith, grafted into the Covenant family that traced its heritage through many centuries. Paul turned away from lifeless interpretations of Torah, but not from either the Torah itself or from his scriptural heritage. This is why, in this Bible reading series, we have been careful first to lay foundations from the Tanach. We may not be ready to write a letter such as Paul did to the Romans, but we are ready to read it in context. Read this Book carefully and come back to it time and again in the future.

### Day 1

Romans Chapter 1. Paul addressed both Jews and Gentiles in Rome, with a balanced message for all. He desired to visit the disciples in Rome, knowing his spiritual authority. Verse 11 shows that he had the authority to impart spiritual gifts. This reminds us of the blessing Abraham gave to Isaac, Isaac to Jacob and Jacob to his sons. Such blessings have spiritual power and authority. The time would come when Paul *would* go to Rome, but that was not yet. Therefore, he wrote a letter which gives a broad summary of how the Gospel was the end point of God's overall covenant purposes. The first principle is faith. Paul quoted Habakkuk 2:4 (Verse 17). The principle of faith, a gift of the Holy Spirit, was known to those who went before. It was always the principle on which God was building His community.

Paul asked his readers to consider creation, pointing out that God first showed His character through what He made. This meant that no-one has an excuse for not seeking Him. Yet, the sinful nature of men and women caused them to divert from Him, rather than seek after Him. This resulted in increasing sin and evil so that God even turned them over to their evil lusts and so received the penalty of their wickedness. Paul's description of this decline since creation explains the state of the nations over history. These nations feature in the Tanach. They included the

Canaanites and other nations who had inhabited the Promised Land. They also included the Empires of Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome. God allowed every nation to fall, while He also prepared the way for the Gospel first to the Children of Israel. Paul's description of fallen nations and individual people applies to our day as well.

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Chapter 2. The entire world was allowed to fall on account of sin. That is the environment into which we were all born. Therefore, it is not for us to accuse one another, or take the moral high ground. All of us must come to repentance. This applies to Jews as well as to Gentiles. Jews received God's Law (Torah) but Law does not, of itself, save anyone. Indeed, *knowledge* of the Law reveals knowledge of sin. It is *keeping* the Law that is important. The history of the Jews demonstrates that this cannot be accomplished through human endeavour alone, and so both Jews and Gentiles need the gift of the Holy Spirit to overcome a sinful nature. Verse 29 defines a true Israelite. Such true Israelites have existed through the centuries. These are those who lived by faith. It is to this community of faith that Gentiles are added, saved through God's grace. Repentance and faith are the hallmarks of God's covenant community for both Jew and Gentile.

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Chapter 3. Paul brought balance to the understanding of the need of all men and women. He also knew the mindset of the readers of his letters. He knew that there would be those who would tend to an imbalance regarding Jews and Gentiles. He, therefore, emphasized the point that God had given the Jews a special place in His purposes and would not renege on His promises to them. Nevertheless, all are equal in terms of God's saving grace and there is no room for boasting.

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Chapter 4. Abraham is the father of faith to all who believe in God through the shed Blood of God's only begotten Son. Abraham was accounted righteous through faith and it is the same for all who seek righteousness. His faith did not depend on circumcision, which was given afterwards as a sign of the Covenant. Abraham is our pattern for righteousness before God. Through repentance and faith we will all be accepted by God as righteous. Circumcision continues to identify the Jews as Abraham's *physical* descendants and heirs of the Covenant promises, but circumcision does not save. Only righteousness imputed by God on account of His grace and the faith which He gives us through His Spirit is acceptable (Verse 16 is key). Study of Abraham's life gives us insight into how God took a man and built his faith step by step. Abraham became our example, and we are his "children" if we allow the Holy Spirit to do similar work in us. The Laws of God show us our tendency to sin, revealing our need for God's Spirit to transform us. God looks for those who turn to Him and trust in His help. This is true for all people on this earth.

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## Day 2

Chapter 5. Paul distinguished the sufferings within this world from the inner peace we have with God. He realised that, through perseverance in this world, our character matures and our confidence grows for eternal life.

Yeshua also suffered. His suffering was in order to free us from the consequences of our sin, now totally covered through the power of His shed Blood.

God's Covenant plan is for the entire world. The problem began with Adam's sin. This led to the condemnation of all people. All were born into a world under the sentence of death. Until the Law was given to Moses there was not a clear understanding of sin, but sin was present nevertheless. Some of these verses must be studied carefully. For example, Verse 20 does not imply that the Law caused sin, but that knowledge of the Law *identified* the abundance of sin in mankind, both Jews and Gentiles. It is important for us to know our need through studying God's righteous laws and how we fail, so that we realize our helplessness. Then we are in a position also to realize that nothing but God's grace is sufficient for our need – we are helpless, trapped in a sinful world, apart from that grace. The grace of Yeshua is free to those with faith in Him, and this is the complete solution to our problem.

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Chapter 6. We must not mistake the free gift of grace as being license to sin, as if the more we sin, the greater is God's gift! Our right response to God's grace is now to consider ourselves dead to the world so that we are alive to serve God. Baptism is a means of expressing this desire, recognizing a need of inner transformation through the indwelling life of the Holy Spirit.

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Chapter 7. Paul was absolutely clear about the New Covenant and we must be the same. He did not write against the Laws of God given through Moses, but realized that we do not have the ability to obey them by human will alone. If human beings were perfect, then the Laws of God would bring perfect order to our societies, but we were born with a tendency to sin. Therefore, the Laws of God simply showed us our sin and need. In Chapter 6, Paul exhorted disciples of Yeshua to die to their human nature inherited at birth, and live by the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit. This is the rebirth of the New Covenant. If we die to our fallen human nature then we no longer need the written Laws of God to direct us: we now have a perfect answer, simply to live the life of the Spirit within us. In this sense we are dead to the written Law and alive to God. It is not that we do not learn through meditating upon the Laws of God, which are within the Torah (teaching) of God. It is that we need not be in bondage to our sinful nature, which the written Laws were intended to expose. Verse 22 is an expression of this new and living way: *I delight in the law of God according to the inner man.*

Note Verses 24 and 25. In previous verses, Paul declared the purpose of the New Covenant. This is to be the supreme goal of Yeshua's disciples. These two verses show that there will be a

struggle against the flesh to achieve this perfect goal. Having stated the goal, Paul also reminds us of the reality of our struggle.

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Chapter 8. This then is our goal. We are to live in freedom as children of God. If we remain in the Spirit we will be free of condemnation and free of sin. We are adopted into His family, and joint heirs of the Kingdom. With this great truth, what shall we fear in this life? Yeshua is our High Priest. Through His sacrifice He has entered the Holiest Place and intercedes for us. If we are called to His purposes, and live our lives loving Him, the Holy Spirit will ensure that all things work together for our good. He has our eternal future in mind. Verses 29 and 30 are capable of several interpretations. It is beyond our ability to understand fully how God foresaw our lives and what He would do for us. What we do know, is that He helped us to respond to His call and brought us into His family. This is the family He had in mind when Adam and Eve fell, a body of people like us, saved through faith. As individuals He foreknew us. The concept of *knowing*, from a Hebraic perspective, is to *have relationship with*. God took the initiative to form a relationship with us, *foreknowing us*, with the plan in mind that He would woo us into a response whereby He would lead us to faith in His Son. When He began to form this relationship with us, He determined what our future would be – this is predestination. From God’s first gentle wooing, He has a plan for our eternal lives! He helped us to turn to Him, gently winning us to repentance and faith.

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## Day 3

Chapters 9 and 10. *They are not all Israel who are of Israel* (Verse 6). This is among the challenging verses of these Chapters. Paul saw clearly that the New Covenant was for Gentiles as well as for the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The Israelite that God counts in His family of faith, in terms of the New Covenant, is one who has faith in Yeshua HaMashiach. This is a mystery in part, because there were those who looked *forward* in faith to the coming of Yeshua. Some of these are listed in Hebrews 11. These are counted among the *Israel of God*. The Children of Israel were privileged to be those called to faith first, and now their faith must be fulfilled in Yeshua. In this sense they are no different from Gentiles who come to faith. In Paul's day, the Gospel was going out into the world and not all Jews responded to the invitation to faith in Yeshua. Many did, of course, as we considered through our study of the Book of Acts. Many more have come to faith in the succeeding centuries. God's plans for the Children of Israel will continue to be fulfilled up to the time of Yeshua's return.

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Chapter 11. This is a key Chapter in the letter. Paul was unambiguous in his exposition of the New Covenant, and uncompromising concerning Israel. Without the balance of Romans 11, we might fall into the error of many Bible teachers, who consider that believing Jews must now be integrated into a new body called the *Christian Church*. Paul sought to correct this view before it started to take shape. Using the metaphor of an olive tree, he showed that believers from the Gentile world are grafted into an existing family, not replacing it. It is true that physical descendants of the Twelve Tribes of Israel, if they do not have faith in Yeshua, are not members of this tree, but God will graft as many back in as obey His call. The olive tree reminds us of the Patriarchs and of the Covenants, all that we studied in the Tanach, including the promises of God for Israel and Judah: they will never be forgotten. God has kept a partial blindness on many of the Children of Israel, while giving Gentiles an opportunity to come to faith. In the climax of the ages He will bring many more of the physical seed of Abraham into their natural olive tree. It is important for Israel to continue to be identified in this world. God has promises to be fulfilled, and they are living witnesses of His faithfulness to all His promises. Consider this chapter carefully. It is growing in relevance today, when a remnant of Jews are back in the Land of Israel after nearly 2000 years.

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Chapter 12. Verses 1 and 2 must be considered prayerfully. This is what God is saying to all of Yeshua's disciples. As a consequence of what God has done through Yeshua, we must now live our lives in a manner pleasing to Him. The principles of the Covenant community are no different from those Moses taught, now transformed, through Yeshua, into New Covenant manifestation. The central role of the family, and the principles of ministry to one another in the community of faith, is the same as in Moses' day, made possible through spiritual gifts for service.

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## Day 4

Chapter 13. Here is more of Paul's teaching, helping us to maintain a balanced understanding of how to live in the world as well as in the believing community.

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Chapter 14. This is an important Chapter in regard to law and grace. God did not change His Laws when He gave us the Holy Spirit, but He gave us freedom to learn. Yeshua took the penalty for our sins upon Himself. Discipleship involves growing in our ability to follow the prompting of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit will direct us as to how to fulfill the Laws of God. When we help one another in this walk, we must show the same grace that God showed to us. Paul sums this up as walking in love (Verse 15). In other places Paul teaches about how to bring discipline when there are those who willfully sin in the believing community: he has some notable comments, for example, in Chapter 16, Verses 17 and 18. Here, he is assuming that he is writing to disciples *who desire to learn* and to grow in the Spirit. There is much to consider as we each seek to help one another on the road of discipleship. We have the entire Bible for reference. We have the Holy Spirit to guide us, and we have one another for encouragement along the way. We must learn how to hold all of Paul's teaching in balance.

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Chapters 15 and 16. With further exhortations, a little news and final greetings Paul ended his letter. Read the details carefully. There is no letter like it in all Christian literature!

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## Day 5

Philemon. Could you write a letter like Paul? Do you have the same concern as he had for believers whom you know? Here is a short letter to Philemon on behalf of a runaway slave named Onesimus, who came to faith when he met Paul. See what the Holy Spirit highlights as you read this letter. It is a brief glimpse into the concern Paul had for the community of believers.

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Colossians Chapters 1 to 4. Read the letter to the Colossians in one sitting. Epaphras brought the Gospel to the community and now Paul is following up with a letter. Read the letter as if addressed to you. With the background of all you have studied in the Bible, you are in the same position as the Colossians. Paul's responsibility was to show them how to grow in faith under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. His letter contains points to consider but he did not want to control them. This letter is founded on the principle that Yeshua HaMashiach is the Head of us all. We must learn to hear Him directly and order our lives together under Him. See what the Holy Spirit shows you.

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## Day 6

Ephesians Chapter 1. While Paul's letter to the Colossians exalted Yeshua as Head of the family of faith, Ephesians is focused more on the believers being one united body on earth, under Him. Read the letter, learning through Paul's approach to writing it, as well as what he said. In his letters, he covered topics applicable to the congregations to whom he wrote. He did not set out to cover every issue that will come up. Nevertheless, the sum total of his letters cover all the main questions we are likely to meet in interpreting Torah into the life of faith, within the New Covenant. Ephesus was a prominent city of the Roman Empire that had also been influenced by the Greeks. There were Temples to Greek gods to be found there. Many Jews lived in this city. The letter may have been addressed to a group of congregations in the area of Ephesus, both to Jews and Gentiles.

Wisdom was Solomon's special gift, and central to the Book of Proverbs, as well as knowledge and understanding. These same gifts come from the Holy Spirit to show us how to live in New Covenant faith. Paul prayed that the Ephesians would receive these gifts (Verses 17 and 18). Yeshua is the Head of His family and gives us these gifts so that we will conduct our lives in ways pleasing to Him.

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Chapter 2. This Chapter brings understanding of what Yeshua did for us in order to bring one family of faith together, united by His Spirit, sharing in His one Covenant purpose. Together with Romans 11, this provides a clear and balanced expression of God's purposes for Jews and Gentiles together in the New Covenant.

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Chapter 3. Before the Holy Spirit took the scales off Paul's eyes, the purposes of God were like a hidden mystery. The mystery is now revealed: God purposed that redeemed Gentiles would be co-heirs with the faithful remnant of Israel (Verse 6).

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Chapter 4. Paul's main purpose in the letter was to exhort the Lord's disciples to be united together. He likened them to *One New Man*. He explained how God had given spiritual gifts and ministries to help believers grow together as one.

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## Day 7

### A Day for Rest and Further Reflection

Ephesians Chapter 1 to 6. Reread Chapters 1 to 4 of the letter to the Ephesians and go on to complete the letter. If possible, do this in one reading. Paul urged the disciples to consider themselves as one united body, Jew and Gentile together in the faith. The gifts and ministries of the Holy Spirit were given so each would serve the one body, to order both individual families and the community as a whole. The teaching is parallel to 1 Corinthians 12 to 14. The *gifts* are manifestations of the Holy Spirit, so that we might serve one another and strengthen one another. The word *ministry* means *service*. God appoints us to identifiable areas of service whereby we learn to cooperate with Him. Through the inspiration and power of His Spirit, He uses us to order, maintain and equip His communities of disciples. We are servants of God and servants of one another. Paul saw the Lord's disciples on earth as one family built out of nuclear families. He likened the authority structure of the home to the authority structure of Yeshua's wider family, of which He is Head. We are to learn about the wider family of faith through the experience of the home, structured as Yeshua described it through Paul.

Paul also warned that there will be spiritual opposition from the dark powers of satan. He gave clear instructions how to defend against satan's attacks. We need to go back to Chapter 6 time and again. Paul learned these lessons from his own experiences in contending for the faith.

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