ALL ARE INCLUDED

Throughout Romans, Paul has outlined the central themes of the gospel and the practical life implications for the individual and the community. As Paul concludes his letter, he circles back to one of his main themes—the inclusion of the Gentiles in God’s plan (Romans 15:8–12). It’s as though Paul is saying, “All that I’ve spoken about God’s love, Christ’s death, and resurrection, the gospel, the law, the judgment, and a love-centered ethic is true. This message includes all people and must go to all the world, even Spain, the next stop on my pioneering church planting mission” (see Romans 15:20–24).

Through the coming of Jesus Christ, the promises of God have all come true (Romans 15:8). This includes His promise that the Gentiles would be singing praise to God for His mercy and that they would put their hope in God (Romans 15:9–12). At its heart, Christianity is fundamentally a missionary movement. The cross demonstrates that God’s love has always included all people. Since God’s love includes all people, the church is called to do its best to reach all people, so that all can be filled with joy and peace when they believe and that they may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit (Romans 15:13).
Write out Romans 15 from the Bible translation of your choice. If you are pressed for time, write out Romans 15:13. You may also rewrite the passage in your own words, or outline or mind-map the chapter.
THE SUCCESS OF THE MISSION

Paul was a man with a mission. He wanted to preach the gospel in places where the gospel had never been preached (Romans 15:20). His travels brought him from Jerusalem all the way to Illyricum (part of modern-day Albania and Croatia) (Romans 15:19). Paul planted churches everywhere in between. He took his inspiration from the Old Testament promises that God would reach those who didn’t know Him (Romans 15:21; Isaiah 52:15).

Paul was given grace and called to be an apostle to bring about the obedience of faith among the Gentiles (Romans 1:5). Paul took this call seriously and worked harder than anyone else (1 Corinthians 15:10) to reach the Gentiles with the gospel so that he might present them as an acceptable offering to God, set apart by the Holy Spirit (Romans 15:16). His ministry was accompanied by signs and wonders and by the power of the Spirit (Romans 15:19).

When Paul talks about his accomplishments, he isn’t bragging. He is only talking about the things Christ has accomplished through him (Romans 15:18). Paul shared his missionary success with the Romans because he is hoping that they will help him on his next missionary journey. Paul planned to stop by Rome on his way to Spain (Romans 15:24), but he would first go to Jerusalem (Romans 15:25).

Paul had already collected an offering from the churches in Macedonia and Achaia for the impoverished saints in Jerusalem (Romans 15:26; 2 Corinthians 8–9). This offering expressed in practical ways the outworking of God’s plan of salvation. God intended for the Messiah to be born to the people of Israel. The Jewish Messiah would bring mercy to all (Romans 11:32). As the Gentiles benefited from Israel’s spiritual blessings, Israel would now benefit from the Gentiles’ material blessings (Romans 15:27). After Paul delivered the gift to Jerusalem, he would make his way to Spain through Rome (Romans 15:28).

Until the time comes for Paul to meet the Romans in person, he has an urgent request. He pleads with them to strive together for him in prayer (Romans 15:29, 30). Paul knows that he has a perilous journey ahead with many enemies among those in Judea (Romans 15:31) and his only hope to complete his mission in Jerusalem and then travel to Rome and then on to Spain is the prayers of God’s people and the help of God (Romans 15:32).
Paul is convinced that the plan of salvation always included the Gentiles. He had plenty of Old Testament texts to support this conviction (Romans 15:8–12; 2 Samuel 22:50; Deuteronomy 32:43; Psalm 117:1; Isaiah 11:10).

If God always planned to include the Gentiles, why did He explicitly exclude them from the community throughout much of the Old Testament history? For example, if your mother or father was an Israelite but you were born of a forbidden marriage, which likely means your parent married someone who was not an Israelite, then you would be permanently excluded from the sanctuary worship (Deuteronomy 23:2). Ammonites and Moabites were also permanently banned from the sanctuary worship (Deuteronomy 23:3). Edomites and Egyptians were in a slightly better category. After three generations of faithful service to God, they could finally be included in the sanctuary worship of God (Deuteronomy 23:8).

The answer to this problematic question can be found in the nature of the plan of salvation. The plan of salvation has only one Messiah. Since there is only one Messiah, He can only be born in one place, in one family, at one time. Since His death is sufficient to save all humanity, He only needs to die one time (Romans 6:10; Hebrews 9:26).

Immediately after the fall, God promised that the Messiah would come from the seed of Eve (Genesis 3:15). God then had to choose the specific family from which Messiah should be born. God chose the family of Abraham, because Abraham was a friend of God and would direct his children in the way of the Lord (Isaiah 41:8; Genesis 18:19). God further narrowed His choice for the lineage of the Messianic king to the tribe of Judah (Genesis 49:10) and then to the family of David (2 Samuel 7:12–16). Preserving the family of Abraham so that the Messiah could be born to the predetermined family, in the predetermined place (Micah 5:2), and minister and die at the predetermined time (Daniel 9:24–27) was essential to the plan of salvation.

Many of the restrictions God placed in the Old Testament were designed to preserve the family of Abraham so that the Messiah, the Savior of all peoples, could be born as the Old Testament predicted. Intermarriage with unbelievers would jeopardize the integrity of the Messianic line. The choice of Israel for the unique mission of being the family through whom the Messiah came necessitated their protection from potential spiritual and political enemies (Psalm 121:4–5, 7; Zechariah 2:8).

When the Messiah came, He was to be the Savior of the world (1 Timothy 4:10). With the coming of the Messiah, Israel’s first mission was complete, and an expanded mission of proclaiming the saving love of God for all humanity was given to the church. The earlier restrictions on Gentiles were no longer necessary. In fact, they were counterproductive to the inclusive saving message of Jesus.
What relationship do the following verses have with the primary passage?

Isaiah 2:2–4
Isaiah 19:23–25
Galatians 3:26–29
Ephesians 2:11–22

What other parables come to mind about reaching the world with the message of salvation?

Review your memorized verse from Romans 15–16.
Discipleship is fundamentally relational. Jesus gathered the twelve disciples to be with Him (Mark 3:14). They spent every day with Jesus learning what it means to be His follower. By spending time with Jesus, they learned about prayer, ministry, compassionate service, and many other valuable lessons. Jesus commissioned His disciples to go and make more disciples (Matthew 28:18–20). In response, they implemented a relational disciple-making process similar to the one they experienced (Acts 2:41–45). Just as the twelve disciples grew in discipleship within the context of relationships, their converts did the same.

Early Christianity took on the fundamentally relational character that was modeled by Jesus. The relational nature of early Christian discipleship is seen in Romans 16. There, Paul personally greets men and women by name. His personal relationship with so many people in a city he had never visited demonstrates the relational nature of early Christianity. Paul knew Phoebe, Priscilla, and Aquila because they partnered together in ministry at other churches (Romans 16:1–5; Acts 18:1–3). Paul knew Epaenetus because he was one of his converts (Romans 16:5). Paul knew Andronicus and Junia because they had a reputation for outstanding apostolic ministry (Romans 16:7).

The relational nature of early Christianity is also displayed in the way the early Christians related to one another. They called each other “brother” and “sister” (Romans 16:1, 23). This wasn’t just a meaningless title. It embodied the relational character of the early Christian church and the discipleship culture Jesus created. The early Christians understood that they were God’s children and were family (Romans 8:14–16). The early Christians treated each other like brothers and sisters, greeting one another with a holy kiss (Romans 16:16) and treating each other with tender affection (Romans 12:10). They even risked their lives for each other (Romans 16:4). The relational character of the early church is evinced by Paul’s desire to go to Rome so that he could enjoy their company and be refreshed together with them (Romans 15:24, 32).

The early Christian relational model of discipleship, empowered by the Spirit, produced authentic Christians whose faith and obedience were known throughout the world (Romans 1:8; 16:19) and who would continue Jesus’ mission by crushing Satan under their feet (Romans 16:20). This doesn’t mean that early Christianity wasn’t without its problems. Some acted contrary to the teachings of Jesus and the apostles and caused division and offenses (Romans 16:17). These people served their own passions rather than Jesus. Through their smooth talk, they deceived the simple (Romans 16:18). Part of discipleship is learning how to avoid these disruptive people (Romans 16:17). Discipleship is relational, but it doesn’t make us gullible. It teaches us to love like family but also to know that sometimes the loving thing to do is to avoid spiritually toxic people.

Meditate on Romans 15–16 again and look for where Jesus is.

In what ways could you cultivate a family-like culture in the church?

How do you see Jesus differently or see Him again?

Prayer: How do you respond to seeing Jesus in this way?
THE FIRST TWELVE

“The Saviour longed to unfold to His disciples the truth regarding the breaking down of the ‘middle wall of partition’ between Israel and the other nations—the truth that ‘the Gentiles should be fellow heirs’ with the Jews and ‘partakers of His promise in Christ by the gospel.’ Ephesians 2:14; 3:6. This truth was revealed in part at the time when He rewarded the faith of the centurion at Capernaum, and also when He preached the gospel to the inhabitants of Sychar. Still more plainly was it revealed on the occasion of His visit to Phoenicia, when He healed the daughter of the Canaanite woman. These experiences helped the disciples to understand that among those whom many regarded as unworthy of salvation, there were souls hungering for the light of truth.

“Thus Christ sought to teach the disciples the truth that in God’s kingdom there are no territorial lines, no caste, no aristocracy; that they must go to all nations, bearing to them the message of a Saviour’s love. But not until later did they realize in all its fullness that God ‘hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation; that they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after Him, and find Him, though He be not far from every one of us.’ Acts 17:26, 27.

In these first disciples was presented marked diversity. They were to be the world’s teachers, and they represented widely varied types of character. In order successfully to carry forward the work to which they had been called, these men, differing in natural characteristics and in habits of life, needed to come into unity of feeling, thought, and action. This unity it was Christ’s object to secure. To this end He sought to bring them into unity with Himself. The burden of His labor for them is expressed in His prayer to His Father, ‘That they all may be one; as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be one in Us;’ ‘that the world may know that Thou hast sent Me, and hast loved them, as Thou hast loved Me.’ John 17:21, 23. His constant prayer for them was that they might be sanctified through the truth; and He prayed with assurance, knowing that an Almighty decree had been given before the world was made. He knew that the gospel of the kingdom would be preached to all nations for a witness; He knew that truth armed with the omnipotence of the Holy Spirit, would conquer in the battle with evil, and that the bloodstained banner would one day wave triumphanty over His followers.”

inQuire

Share insights from this week’s memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

Who has been the most significant discipleship influence in your life?

How do you relate to the people in your church as brothers and sisters?

Is the faith and obedience of your local congregation talked about in the broader community? If so, why? If not, what needs to change?

What do you do to financially support mission work?

How could you help your church to be more inclusive as the Roman churches were?

In what ways does your church need to grow into the missional attitude of the early church?

In what ways has faith in Christ brought joy, peace, and hope to your life?

How has this study on Romans been a unique blessing to your spiritual development?