

ROMANS

A Letter That Makes Sense of Life

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PREFACE

Basecamp

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'It's a dangerous business, Frodo, going out your door. You step onto the road, and if you don't keep your feet, there's no knowing where you might be swept off to'

J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*

Whenever we venture into wild places, our children know what's coming. The promise of a 'short walk' turns into an adventure – jumping in plunge pools, lighting fires, getting lost, foraging for food. They are plucky kids and we love exploring wild places together. One of my favourite memories is climbing a mountain called Skiddaw in Northern England. The original plan was to stroll up a foothill, aptly named Little Dodd. But our kids decided to head straight up the main mountain, which they renamed 'Everest'. It's amazing what children can do when it's their idea, isn't it? Fuelled by wild blueberries, gorse blossom (you can eat the yellow flowers) and water from a stream, we reached the summit and enjoyed spectacular views over the Lake District. Not bad considering they were three and five at the time!

For as long as I can remember, high places have been my happy place, where I find physical and emotional refreshment.

However, what you may not fully appreciate is that mountains hold spiritual significance too. Think about some dramatic stories in the Bible – the testing of Abraham and Isaac on Mount Moriah, the giving of the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai, Elijah taking on the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, the glory of Jesus revealed on the Mount of Transfiguration. Why did these iconic events take place at altitude? Perhaps the imposing nature of mountains demonstrates the distance between us and God? Or maybe the elevation helps to convey the scale of what’s unfolding? We can’t be certain.

However, one thing is clear. God often meets people in the great outdoors. Some of my most profound spiritual experiences have been while exploring rugged landscapes. Woodlands, lakes, mountains, coastline, moorlands. These are nature’s cathedrals that call forth praise to the Almighty. In wild places, my soul is tamed and God draws near.

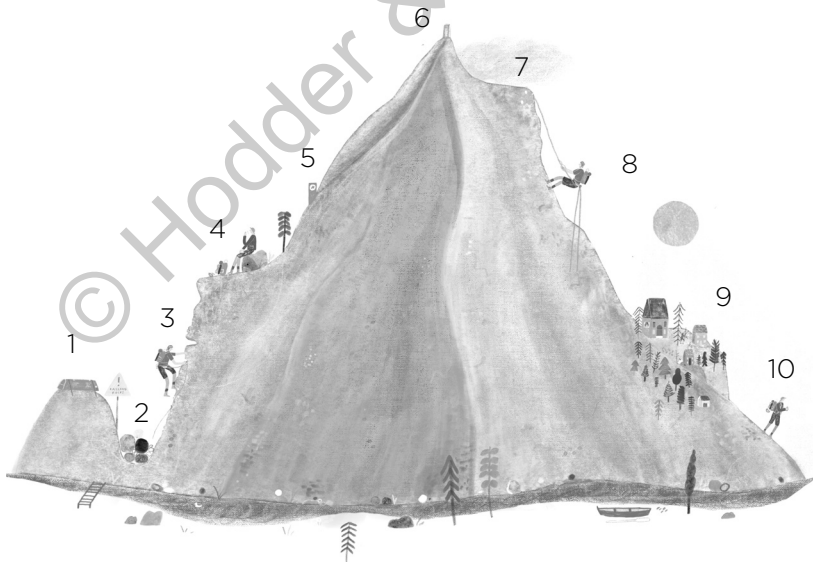
Recently, our family camped on a mountain in the Brecon Beacons. Once the children were asleep, I started reading the New Testament letter to the Romans on my Kindle. I couldn’t put it down. It revealed truths more majestic than the Milky Way that twinkled overhead. When I reached chapter 8, I became overawed by the sheer scale of God’s purpose: ‘creation itself will be liberated . . . and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God’ (8:21). As I sat by the campfire, I felt my heart strangely warmed by famous promises: ‘in all things God works for the good of those who love him . . . [nothing] will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord’ (8:28, 39). Romans is an incredible letter. No matter how many times I’ve read it, like a rugged landscape, it keeps revealing hidden vistas.

Inspired by my experience that night, I decided to write the book you are now reading.

PAUL'S LETTER TO ROME IS THE HIGH PEAK OF SCRIPTURE . . . ALL ROADS IN THE BIBLE LEAD TO ROMANS, AND ALL VIEWS AFFORDED BY THE BIBLE ARE SEEN MOST CLEARLY FROM ROMANS.

J. I. Packer¹

It's been said that if the New Testament were the Himalayas, Romans would be Mount Everest and chapter 8 would be the summit. Given my love of mountains, I couldn't resist drawing on this metaphor. Let's try to imagine Romans as a vast landscape – complex and challenging but highly rewarding. Together, we will take on the challenge of ascending to the summit, enjoying the view and then descending to put into practice what we've learned on the other side.² However, if you are afraid of heights or prefer the great *indoors*, don't worry – the mountain metaphor is just a visual aid to help us navigate Romans. Muddy boots and blisters are optional!



1 THE ROUTE OF THE GOSPEL **2** THE VALLEY OF SIN **3** THE CRUX OF SALVATION
4 THE PLACE OF PEACE **5** THE RIDGE OF FREEDOM **6** THE SUMMIT OF HOPE
7 THE CLOUD OF MYSTERY **8** THE DESCENT OF DEVOTION
9 THE RETURN TO COMMUNITY **10** THE ONWARD MISSION

This image captures the adventure that lies ahead. First, we will consider the original context of the letter and survey *the route of the gospel*. Then we must head down into *the valley of sin*, a low point from which we need rescuing. *The crux of salvation* reveals how Jesus has secured the way out, by faith. This brings us to *the place of peace*, where we take a breather and bask in the love of God. Then we will press on up *the ridge of freedom* – a narrow section with steep drops on either side. Suddenly, we will emerge onto *the summit of hope* and enjoy panoramic views of God’s eternal purpose. Next we must navigate *the cloud of mystery*. Here it’s easy to feel lost as we consider why God chose Israel and whether he still has a special purpose for them? Finally, then we head down into more practical teaching. *The descent of devotion* calls us to a life of radical love, and *the return to community* shows us how to make a difference in society. *The onward mission* will equip us to share the good news with others.

Through it all, I will be your guide, helping you navigate any challenges so you can experience the rugged beauty for yourself. Over the years I’ve realised many people want to take on Romans but feel intimidated by the complex theology, Jewish backstory and controversial teachings on sexuality. It’s easier to stick to the familiar foothills of the Psalms and the Gospels. However, as I’ve led groups of people through the letter, I’m always impressed by the impact it makes.

In case you are still wondering, ‘What has Romans ever done for us?’ (cue John Cleese), here are some reviews from those who have gone before you:

It’s amazing that an ancient letter is still so relevant (Hannah)

I experienced God’s love in a personal way (Alice)

The whole Bible makes more sense (Danny)

Romans gave me a new perspective on life (Simon)

As with any great adventure, the effort you put in is more than rewarded by the experiences you gain along the way. So don't be put off by the scale of the challenge. These chapters will guide you each step of the way. And just think . . . once you've conquered Romans, the whole Bible will be easier to explore.

Each chapter of this book is divided into two parts and follows a similar pattern. First, we *Look At* Romans to see what each passage meant in its original context. Then we *Look Through* Romans – as if through a lens – to see what it means today. This double movement ensures we do justice to the biblical text, allowing it to speak on its own terms. After all, the letter was not written in the twenty-first century. Ancient Rome was a very different society: rife with human trafficking and slavery, narrow streets with no refuse collection, blood sports in the arena and new-born babies discarded on rubbish heaps.

ROMAN HISTORY DEMANDS A PARTICULAR
SORT OF IMAGINATION . . . IT SEEMS
COMPLETELY ALIEN TERRITORY.

Mary Beard³

The more we understand Romans within the cultural context in which it was written, the richer the meaning will become. For example, the instruction, 'Greet one another with a holy kiss' (Rom. 16:16) sounds odd for those of us who are used to a culture of hugs and handshakes. But in the first century it was a sign of true acceptance. Imagine a wealthy Christian master being instructed to greet his slave with this sign of honour and respect! Customs and instructions that sound quirky to us were revolutionary for them.

It is also important to *look through* Romans. Imagine the letter like a pair of spectacles to wear. You don't so much look at

them as through them. They focus your whole vision. Romans is not just a piece of ancient correspondence; it is a pair of lenses that God has provided. We are by nature short-sighted about the future and prone to missing the point. But Romans is a letter that restores our vision and helps us make sense of life.

ROMANS IS ABOUT THEOLOGY, BUT
IT ISN'T MERE THEOLOGY – IT ISN'T
ABSTRACT THEOLOGY. IF YOU WILL, THE
THEOLOGY OF ROMANS IS ABOUT A WAY
OF LIFE, ABOUT LIVED THEOLOGY.

Scot McKnight⁴

In my experience, Romans has the wisdom we need to flourish in an ever-changing world. So make sure you explore the letter itself alongside this book. At the beginning and halfway through each chapter there are suggested passages to read from Romans. Complete these, and you will have read the whole letter. There are also reflection points within each chapter to help process what we are learning.

For me, an adventure is more enjoyable in the company of others. So why not invite some friends to join in so you can read and discuss together along the way?

Finally, before we leave basecamp, take a moment to gather the kit you will need – a modern translation of Romans (I will be using the NIV UK, 2011 edition⁵), a notebook to jot down any thoughts, and a sense of humour for when it gets challenging!

When you are ready, pull on your boots and let's get going . . .