

296 What did Romans do for us?

Sixteen chapters, 433 verses and, in English (NIV), a smidge short of 10,000 words. How much time do you think Paul spent writing that? Many, many hours, and for why?

And after the millions of words Christians have written explaining what Paul meant by what he wrote in Romans, what actually *is* Romans all about? To find out, I looked at the summaries in two Study Bibles. In a minute, I'll quote what they say about its *purpose*, but why is that so important?

Think of novels written by, say, Austen, Christie, Dahl, Dostoyevsky... do they all have the same purpose? Clearly not. Therefore, we *read them all in different ways*. And if we read Dahl as if it were a Dostoyevsky or vice versa, we would get very confused! How we read and understand Romans depends on what we think (or are *told* to think!) is its purpose:

NIV Study Bible (1987) has three 'purposes': 1) sort out some practical stuff about visits, 2) 'to present the basic system of salvation', 3) 'to explain the relationship between Jew and Gentile in God's overall plan of redemption.'

NIV Life Application Bible (2011) has five 'megathemes' (with *my comments* and *theirs*): 1) Sin (*what I've done wrong*), 2) Salvation (*how God fixes it for me*), 3) Growth (*how I deepen my relationship with Christ*), 4) Sovereignty (*'how God can save whomever he wills'*). 5) Service (*how I 'show love and sensitivity to others'*).

These summaries were written by teams of theologians who know more about God than I've ever forgotten, so they must be right, OK? And I'm guessing that most people reading this would agree that this is indeed what we've always been taught.

Well, you know me, a rebel at heart, so might there be *another* way to read Romans? What if it's *not* about 'me and my salvation', not about 'how I can avoid the wrath of God?' What if it's not about *me*, but about *God*?

Romans was written to Christians, many of whom were Jews; so could it be that Paul was concerned that they had a *totally wrong view* of God? Maybe he wanted them to repent, to change their minds, to metanoia? What if Paul is trying to show that God's main concern is *not* about (how to avoid) God's retribution; what if it's about how to *restore* people and to rid earth of injustice ('thy kingdom come on earth')?

Now, why did the early church explode with new life? Was it because people were told how to avoid God's wrath and punishment? Certainly, that's how I've always faithfully presented 'the gospel'.

Maybe the explosion was because of the *really, really* good news that God was *not at all* like they had always been taught, and so they repented (totally changed their view of God) and saw God as the loving, self-sacrificing Jesus of Nazareth, who is now Jesus the King! Reading Romans like that makes it look very different.