



Reformers Reading Romans

SUMMER BIBLE READING

Brought to you by the synod's Book of Faith
and Reformation 500 Task Groups.



North Carolina Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

“This letter is truly the most important piece in the New Testament. It is purest Gospel. ... It is impossible to read or to meditate on this letter too much or too well.”--Martin Luther *Preface to Romans*

Welcome to the *Reformers Reading Romans* summer Bible study. This study is co-sponsored by the NC Synod's Book of Faith and Reformation 500 Task Groups. It is the result of efforts from a variety of your fellow Lutherans from across North Carolina both clergy and lay. Many thanks to all those who took time to contribute to this effort.

As you can see from the above quote Luther held Paul's Epistle to the Romans in high esteem. It is Paul's longest epistle and in it he lays out the theology concerning our need for God's love and God's response. He clearly states the relationship of faith and grace which became a central point in Luther's theology. On this 500th anniversary of the Reformation it is appropriate for us to get back to the basics.

Following an introduction to Bible study and a specific introduction to Romans, each day's lesson includes a thought provoking devotional based on a section of Romans with questions and a prayer.

On behalf of the Book of Faith and Reformation 500 Task Groups, we hope the Holy Spirit will speak to you through *Reformers Reading Romans* to bring you closer to Jesus in your journey of faith.

Reformers Reading Romans **Reading 1—Encounter the Word**

*Open my eyes, Lord, we want to see Jesus.
To reach out and touch him and show that we love Him.
Open my ears, Lord and help us to listen.*

Open our eyes Lord, we want to see Jesus.

This hymn (#98 in the African American Lutheran Resource Book) is used by various races of people as the Gospel Proclamation in Sunday worship. The words of this powerful hymn guide us as we strive to encounter the living Word of Scripture.



Open our eyes, we pray. Oh Lord, let us see the will of God for us. Let us see with our mind's eye the wonderful work of God enfolded by the prophets in their words and deeds holding in tension the laws and the justice of God.

Open our eyes, we pray. Oh Lord, let us see the unconditional love of God for us. Let us see with our mind's eye the unconditional love and mercy of God visible in the work of Jesus to make that which is broken whole. We see it in the ultimate self-giving love of the crucified and risen Jesus.

Open our ears, Lord, and help us to listen. Oh, Lord, help us to hear; to listen deeply to the pain and troubles of the world.

Open our ears, Lord. Empower us to hear the proclamation of Jesus's love for us and for the world.

To consider:

- As we reflect on the words written in Romans, help us to see and to hear the living Word and what that message means for our lives. For when we are attuned to the Word of God, we strive to reach out and touch Him and say that we love Him.

*Open my eyes, Lord, I want to see Jesus. To reach out and touch him and show that I love Him.
Open my ears, Lord and help me to listen. Amen.*

--The Rev. Dr. Julius Carroll enjoys going to the movies, reading African American fiction and non-fiction, and watching his favorite professional football team, the Philadelphia Eagles.

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Reading 2—To Rome, with Love, from Paul

Reformers reading Romans. Indeed they did! Martin Luther claims in his preface to the Letter of St. Paul to the Romans that “This letter is truly the most important piece in the New Testament. It is our purest Gospel. “He goes on to say that ...therefore every Christian should make this letter the habitual and constant object of his study.”



Paul’s letter to the Romans was written before he had ever been to Rome, though he was eager to go there. The Christian Church in Rome was not founded by an apostle. We don’t know exactly how it came into being, but it’s possible that Jews traveling to Jerusalem for the festivals heard the witness of the apostles and believed. By the time Paul writes to them they are a thriving community and Paul greets many of their leaders by name.

Why was Paul writing to the Romans at all? He is hoping, he says to them, to have their support for a missionary trip to Spain—but first, he needs to go to Jerusalem to deliver the offerings taken for the saints there. He wants to introduce himself to them carefully in order to earn gain their trust. And he wants to see that they have the benefit of clear teaching. To that end he sends them the longest and most systematic of the epistles. These teachings on God’s grace, faith, and justification that were meant to strengthen the faith of the Roman church became a touchstone for the reformers, and can be that for us as well.

When Paul finally made it to Rome it was as a prisoner. He spent several years there under house arrest, training church leaders. Tradition says that he was beheaded as a martyr in Rome.

To consider:

- If you were writing to someone you had never met about the heart of your own experience of faith, what would you want to make sure to include?

Gracious God, may Paul’s words to the church in Rome bring clarity and grace to our own faith, and to our witness in the world.

--Pastor Beth Kearney is retiring after 25 years on the NC Synod Bishop’s staff. Her greatest joy has been watching the Holy Spirit call a new generation to proclaim the gospel. She is looking forward to life at Lutheridge.

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Reading 3—The Gospel is the Power of God

Read Romans 1:1-17.

In Romans 1:1-17, the Apostle Paul provides a snapshot of the world in which he lived and interpreted in the light of his encounter with the risen Christ. First Century Rome, the cosmopolitan imperial capital, is described by Paul in terms of polarizations: Greeks and Barbarians, Wise and Foolish, Greeks and Jews, and Christians and non-Christians.

Paul had not been in Rome and seemed to struggle to describe the city. Nonetheless, his description seems to fit the Greek/Roman culture he knew and intended to reach out with the gospel that he calls: “the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.”

Paul was an interesting character, a Roman citizen, a Hellenistic Jew, a former Jewish religious leader, and most-recently a converted follower and servant of Jesus Christ. Paul could cross over cultural and religious boundaries and systems, and integrate their most important values into one single identity: a slave who serves Christ. No wonder why Paul states: “I am not ashamed of the Gospel,” for it was countercultural to become and call oneself a slave. Only after Paul has self-described as a servant of Jesus Christ, he brings his Jewish credentials and Law-based theology of righteousness.

Paul, Augustine, Luther, and most recently Karl Barth, have explored the connection and meaning of these concepts of righteousness, faith, and salvation. Each one of them, in his own time, could rediscover perennial truths regarding God’s word and Gospel in relationship to us and to the world. It is liberating that Christians have never been called to holy culture war to impose ours to others, but to become slaves and servants of Christ because we have been touched and transformed by the gospel...the power of God. The gospel does not include a metanarrative of Christ for, against, or above any culture.

To consider:

- What could Paul’s concepts of being a slave and to serve God mean in our cultural contexts today?
- Paul valued his multicultural identity: What is your cultural identity and why do you identify with that culture(s)?

Gracious God, thanks for our cultural heritages. Thanks for calling faithful servants who throughout the history of our Faith, have led your people to your light and power. Let us hear your voice and be your faithful servants now. Amen.

--The Rev. Alfredo M. Oviedo is a first-generation immigrant from Mexico, and a pastor at Grace, Hendersonville, with a focus on multicultural ministry in that congregation. He is also a current D. Min. student at Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia.



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Reading 4—The Wrath

Read Romans 1:18-32.

Wrath is defined as ‘the emotional response to perceived wrong and injustice, ‘Often translated as anger, indignation, or irritation.

Here we have the wrath of God on His righteous people; they have turned away from Him and are seeking pleasures to fulfill their desires. It’s the same for us today when we lose our focus on God. We seek out things to fulfill our longings for something more, and then slowly we turn away from God. Our lives become unmanageable and we feel like something is missing. We have a void we are empty and life seems dull, hard and unpleasant at times. We have taken our eyes off God and put them on the world. So God in His irritation turns His eyes away from us until we repent of our sin. He never leaves us or forsakes us. He loves us so much. I believe this is why it is so important to live in a Christian community, so we can grow in our faith and knowledge of God. God loves us so much and like any parent He can’t wait to shower us with that love.



Just like a parent God wants to spend time with us, He wants a relationship. We must set aside time in solitude and silence with Him so He can direct our whole lives toward Him. This is most important that relationship between you and God. We must surrender daily to Him in order for Him to fill us up with wisdom, joy, love, etc.,...

Here are a few ways that help me focus on God. Solitude and silence meditating on God listening for what He has for me. I also read and study His word again listening for His word. I listen to Christian music in my car. I pray throughout the day. I love to worship God at church and in nature. It’s not always easy to stay focused but it is the most incredible and life giving journey.

To consider:

- Take a few minutes and meditate on this story. Read Romans 1: 18-32 through four times and just listen to God and what word or phrase He might be giving you.
- Now close your eyes and take three deep breaths as you put yourself in this story, what do you see? What do you smell?
- What chains are you holding on to that need to be broken? Surrender them to God and hold on for the most incredible ride of your life. I love you but best of all God loves you!

Loving God, we so often lose our focus on you and seek fulfillment of our desire for something more in ways that can only disappoint. Thank you for always calling us back in love to You who are the true fulfillment that we seek. Keep our focus on you amid the enticements of the world. Amen

--Celeste Thick is Celeste Thick is a mother of two, grandmother of one, and the spouse of one of Hickory's finest firefighters. She is a teaching assistant at her local elementary school as well as an adult leader for youth in her church and outside of her church. She is an outdoor enthusiast and more importantly a lover and follower of her Savior, Jesus Christ.

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Reading 5—Seeing Our Need

Read Romans 2:1 – 3:20.

It's hard to figure this out. It's hard to hear St. Paul say that God's judgment and wrath are upon those who do not act righteously, that God will repay each one according to their deeds, and that those who do good will have glory and honor (2:6-10). We call that "works righteousness," and it makes us squirm.

We Lutherans delight in pouring on the grace at every turn, so this kind of harsh language is difficult to read. It's difficult to square it with what we know of Jesus, of faith, of being saved by grace through faith! Many of us work hard in our congregations to help people un-learn the theme of God's wrath and judgment which permeated every stitch in the fabric of their childhoods. So, getting to Romans 2 and 3 is rough.

But, can we dwell here a bit? Can we remember that the wages of sin really are death?

St. Paul is telling the church in Rome about what God has done in Jesus. In order to grasp the full truth of what God has done in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, we have to remember what's at stake.

We do not live righteously all the time. We are guilty of hypocrisy and cheating (2:22), and we use our religious identity of "Christian" as a shield of faith when sometimes our hearts are anything but Christ-like (2:25). So, what we deserve is wrath, punishment, and agony.

Tomorrow, we will read the part that helps us breathe deeply and feel safe. Tomorrow we get to read about being justified by grace as a free gift (3:23-26), but today we are invited to sit in the muck of our sin and our inability to save ourselves from it. Today, we remember what we actually deserve. Let us not rush into the language of grace without pausing in the yawning space where our need of a Savior is laid plain.

To consider:

- Paul hopes to show his readers that, in the end, no one is righteous. *Everyone* stands in the need of the free gift of God's grace, whether they are pretty good or obviously wicked. Do you agree?
- When did you first truly sense your own need of God's grace? How did it feel?

Most merciful God, we confess that we are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves. We have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. For the sake of your son, Jesus Christ, have mercy on us. Forgive us, renew us, and lead us, so that we may delight in your will and walk in your ways, to the glory of your holy name. (ELW p. 95)

--Jennifer Shimota Krushas serves as the pastor at Emmanuel Lutheran Church in High Point. In this chapter of her life, she is discovering (perhaps remembering?) who God created her to be. Her grown children are her favorite people, and her dogs are teaching her much about the importance of play, rest, and snacks.



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Reading 6—Flipping Frames: The Faithfulness of Difference

Read Romans 3:21–31.

In these verses we Lutherans often hear strong echoes of our Reformation confessions around justification by faith. But just what that those echoes mean in Paul's world cannot be distilled so readily. An odd Greek phrase appears in verse 22, *dia pisteos Iesou Christou*. In Greek, the phrase is rich and complex, just like our experiences of God's grace, of faith, and perhaps most importantly, our neighbor's faith. This phrase, often translated "through faith in Jesus Christ," could just as easily be translated "through the faith of Jesus Christ," or "because of the faith of Jesus Christ," or "through the faith Jesus enacted," or "through the course of Jesus' life." All of these translations are accurate, but all of them also describe different, important aspects of what it means to be Jesus followers.



In verse 28 we hear the great catch-phrase of Lutheran theology—a bumper sticker slogan for Lutherans, if you will—"we argue that people are made righteous by faith apart from works of the law" (my translation). What we often then *infer* into this statement is that those who follow the Jewish law do not understand faith as the basis for righteousness. But what we often miss is that Paul is NOT making a distinction between how Jews understand salvation and how Christians understand salvation. Rather his argument is about how *both* Jews and Gentiles who follow Jesus could possibly be worshippers of the same God. At that point in history, people of different ethnic/national/racial backgrounds generally did not worship the same gods. The problem was not Jews' continued adherence to the law, but rather how to understand Gentiles' (that's most of us) relationship with God, period. Paul wasn't trying to get everyone to simply give up the law because of Christ. Remember that Paul describes himself as thoroughly, righteously, and unapologetically Jewish (Phil. 6xxx). Paul and the churches at Rome were trying to figure out how Gentiles (Gentiles is actually a term for "different nations," not a term for "non-Jews") can be as thoroughly, righteously, unapologetically in relationship to God as he already is. In Galatians and elsewhere in Romans, Paul argues that our relationship to God begins with faith, just as it did with Abraham. This means that we need to re-consider how we characterize the faith of our Jewish brothers and sisters. Must our great hope, joy, and consolation in justification by faith be based on rejection of Judaism or any other Christ-following group? Do we really need to understand our faith *in contrast* to Judaism or other kinds of Christians? Or is there a way for us to think about the free gift of grace through faith as a gift without contrast or competition? Note that verses 30–31 suggest that even those who practice circumcision (i.e. follow the law) have faith as well. For Paul, faith is precisely what keeps the law in place. Our differences are part of our strength as followers of Christ.

To consider:

- What difference do each of the different translations make in terms of how you understand the relationship between people, God, and Jesus? What happens if you apply them to the similar phrase in verse 28 as well?
- In what ways do we describe our faith as the opposite of something? How might we begin to describe our faith, hope, joy in Christ in terms that don't rely on someone else being wrong?

Creator of the endless stars, you created faith as an equally endless gift. Give us grace enough to love our differences, to know faith in its fullness, and to share that faith without condemnation of others. Christ, be our guide, our reason, our example of faith, our hope in whom we trust. Amen.

--The Rev. Dr. Katherine A. Shaner is Assistant Professor of New Testament at Wake Forest University School of Divinity in Winston-Salem. She is also an ordained pastor in the ELCA. She enjoys digging in the dirt, whether in her garden or on an archaeological excavation. She also hikes, cooks, and listens to jazz with her spouse, Jonathan Miller, and her dog, Karl Bark.

Reformers Reading Romans

Reading 7—Revelation of God’s Righteousness

Read Romans 4:1-25.

Bouncing along the bumpy dirt road in a land cruiser, I looked out over the coffee fields of Nicaragua. I had learned so much in this week. I had met women who, due to the support of Lutherans, could now cook over clean gas stoves instead of smoky wood. I had met children who had received school supplies packed by the hands of Lutherans. I met coffee farmers who would be able to sell their crop to Lutherans at better prices so they can deliver on their dream of a better future to their children. Underlying all this is the incredible story of a country which just 27 years ago was engaged in a deadly civil war, but now farmers who were on opposite sides of the conflict come together in friendship to deliver on that promise for their children.



So much of the good work I saw was due to the faithful giving of Lutherans in the U.S. to Lutheran World Relief. As I reflected on this work on my flight home I turned to Romans 4 to begin to write. And there I was met by Paul’s words, “For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God.” Paul sure knew how to bring me down from this high of seeing the good works Lutherans have made happen in Nicaragua.

But there is gospel and grace to be found in Paul’s words. Paul does not dismiss works, but places them in their proper place. Without the grace of God’s righteousness given to us, as it was to Abraham, then works come from the law, the law which leads only to death. But because, “it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace,” the work God gives us to do in this world is separated from the law and becomes a joy. Not only are they a joy but an outward expression of what God has first done in us. As Luther says in his commentary on Romans, “all good works are only outward signs which flow from faith and are the fruits of faith; they prove that the person is already inwardly just in the sight of God.”

So whether it’s work you support around the world or in your local community, thanks be to God that the grace of Jesus Christ goes before it all, making service a joy and a witness to the glory of God.

To consider:

- How can your community be intentional about placing the good work that you do in its proper context with the grace that God gives?
- What does your community’s service tell the world about the righteousness that God has given?

God of righteousness, thank you for the promise of your righteousness from Abraham to future generations. You set us free to work in your world, work that is a joy and a witness. May we be good stewards of this joyful responsibility to reach out to those on the margins of society. In the name of the one who sets us free, Jesus Christ. Amen.

--Chandler Carriker is a deacon in the ELCA. He serves as Associate Director of Engagement and Outreach at Lutheran World Relief and worships at Morning Star Lutheran Church, Matthews, N.C.

Reformers Reading Romans **Reading 8—“Peace with God”**

Read Romans 5:1-21.

When our children were little our bedtime ritual included family time during which both children talked about their days, we said prayers, gave and received blessings from one another, and then when I tucked them into their beds I filled their palms with kisses. Both children would hold the kisses tightly and often fall asleep tiny fists clasp their kisses. The entire routine, but especially the kisses, assured our children that they were loved and that all was well in the world. This assurance invited them to relax and fall asleep.



In chapter 5 Paul continues what he began in the first four chapters of Roman; he lays out a theological history of what God has done in and through Christ Jesus. But in chapter 5 there is a shift. Note there are three major “therefores” in chapter 5. Here Paul points us to the “so what” of justification. Because we are justified by faith we have peace with God (vs. 1), because of Christ’s righteousness we receive God’s abundant grace (vs. 17), and because of the grace of God we will have the gift of eternal life (vs. 21). In other words, because of what God has done we are invited to relax and live into our reconciliation with God both now and in the future.

This promise does not guarantee an end to sleepless nights. In fact, Paul begins with suffering (a theme to which he will return in chapter 8). But he assures us that our suffering will not, cannot, thwart God’s will. We can live in hope for God’s future based on our assurance—our access as Paul says—to God’s grace. Because God has chosen to act in, through, and for us we will become what we are: righteous children of God.

To consider:

- What difference does trusting in God make in your daily life, particularly in times of suffering?
- How might learning to relax, to rest in God, allow us to do the work God calls us to do?

Gracious Lord Jesus, your love for us exceeds our wildest imaginations making it sometimes so very difficult to trust. Help us to live in hope and so that we may live into the righteousness of our calling. Amen.

--Dr. Mindy Makant is a theology professor at Lenoir-Rhyne University, a deacon in the ELCA, the wife of a parish pastor, the mother of two quasi-grown children, and a child of God. She is grateful for the many opportunities she has to work in and on behalf of the church, the body of Christ.

Reformers Reading Romans

Reading 9—What then are we to say?

Read Romans 6:1-23.

“What then are we to say?” St. Paul urges us to respond in kind to God’s overwhelming grace; but instead of using our mouths to proclaim God’s love, we often use our speech to hurt others, to render judgments, to gossip. Profanity is spewed at black professional baseball players by fans, revealing the ingrained prejudice and racial insensitivity rampant in our society. We say what we shouldn’t, and those moments reveal how strongly sin has a grip on us. But we are baptized!



Our baptism into the death and resurrection of Jesus is contrary to our sinful behavior. Paul asks, “How can we who died to sin go on living in it?” For Paul baptism brings a change in the way we think, how we act, and what we say. Here Paul uses two images: our sinfulness is *drowned* beneath the baptismal waters; and even stronger, in baptism our sinfulness is “*dead and buried.*” The power that God gives in baptism changes how we behave toward others and what we say about others. Baptism frees us from those sinful acts to be the holy and faithful people of God.

There should be no doubt that the crucified Jesus is raised, that our sins were nailed to the cross in his death, and that his rising makes all of life, and everything in our life, NEW. “So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.”

There is deep concern expressed here for how we use our baptized bodies. Are they temples of the Holy Spirit dedicated to the Lord or do we abuse them? Do we use our bodies to abuse others through words or actions?

Baptism into Christ means that we are no longer slaves to sin, but free to lead holy lives as God intends. Yes, the end for us in Christ is life eternal; but that life begins now through baptism as we use our bodies, including our mouths and lips and tongue, as instruments of God’s grace.

“What then are we to say?” Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift in Christ Jesus our Lord!

To consider:

- How might you remember the meaning of your baptism each day?
- How does your faith in the Risen Lord inform the way you will speak to and about others today?

Thank you, Risen Lord, for the gift of baptism that changes and renews your people. Make us die to sin each day, and raise us every morning to be your holy and loving children. Keep us from speaking evil words to and about others. Fill our mouths instead with your praise and our hearts and minds with love for all. Give us your Holy Spirit so that we may be your Easter people now and forever. Amen.

--The Reverend Dr. Paul Weber is Professor Emeritus of Church Music and Director of the A Cappella Choir at Lenoir-Rhyne University. Dr. Weber served two congregations in western Pennsylvania prior to his call to teach at Lenoir-Rhyne. Although now residing in Staunton, Virginia, Dr. Weber remains on the roster of the NC Synod and serves as a member of the synod’s Reformation 500 Task Force.

Reformers Reading Romans

Reading 10—On the law



Read Romans 7:1-25.

We all know the feeling Paul describes in verses 15-24, that despite our best intentions, we end up doing the wrong things, even hurting the people we love. At the extreme is addiction, but all of us have hurtful habits and sinful ways of relating to others. These behaviors can feel impossible to change. And then there are times when in trying to help out, we only make a situation worse, because the larger circumstances are so messed up or our efforts were misunderstood. All this can be demoralizing and depressing, and sometime it makes people not even want to try.

But there is good news in this chapter, bound up with Paul's marriage analogy. First, it's good to know that our inner desire agrees with God's holy, just, and good "law." Our yearning for an end to this world's corruption, and our own part in it, isn't misguided. The problem came when this "spiritual" law was wedded to a weak spouse—us! But now we've gone through death and resurrection, and we've been betrothed to a *new* spouse—God. This is freedom and newness (Romans 8). In other passages, we learn that God always intended to write the law on human hearts rather than in written books imposed from outside. I think this means that God is in the business of transforming human beings from within, rather than imposing rules and then judging people on whether they adhere to the rules or not. That's good news, because we don't have to worry and sweat over producing some good thing. It will be organic, birthed in us and expressed through us in the world. In other words: God-with-us.

It isn't about struggling to do some impossible feat, grinding out teeth about our bad habits. It's about embracing the new life within us, letting it come to term and be birthed out in the world. That's freedom, joy, and peace!

To consider:

- Luther taught that Christians are simultaneously "saints and sinners." Where do you see the "law of sin and death" still at work, and where do you see God's new life in your life?
- Think of a time when something good happened because you listened to the Spirit's guidance. Was it a struggle to do that, and if so why?

Lord, thank you for the new life you birth in us daily. Open our eyes to see it, open our hearts to embrace it, and give us courage and grace to bring it to birth in the world. Through Jesus Christ, our life, Amen.

--Dr. Jonathan Schwiebert teaches religious studies at Lenoir-Rhyne University. A father of two young boys, he also plays guitar in his local church and writes about early Christianity and maintains a blog on the Bible (<https://biblesmart.wordpress.com/>).

Reformers Reading Romans

Reading 11—Astounding claims

Read Romans 8:1-17.

I'm typically astounded by the claims the Bible makes, especially claims it makes about Christians. And this passage is no exception. Consider 8:9 "But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you" (NRSV). What's the nature of the whopper being told of us here? It's not that we are no longer bodily creatures. When Paul says, "...you are not in the flesh," he's not suggesting that our "real" selves somehow exist apart from our bodily existence. Being Christian still means that we are "in the flesh" as bodily creatures. But as bodily creatures, Paul is claiming that the dominating influence in our lives is no longer "the flesh." What's he talking about? "The flesh," simply put, is life *trapped* in sin.



Imagine a canary in a cage. Its movements are dominated by the contours of the bars that surround it: it is a slave to its cage. Life lived "in the flesh" is life lived in the cage of sin. But of course that cage could be opened. "For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death" (NRSV). Behold the whopper: the cage has been opened because Christians have been given a different dominating influence in our lives, a different spirit, *the Spirit*. What does this mean? We haven't been given a new teaching, a new way to think about God. Those could be adapted to cage life if only to cope with it. No, we have been given *God's very own life*, God's very own Spirit and this Spirit does not get on well with cages (cf. Galatians: 5:1 and 2 Cor.: 3-17). Of course, we can fly back in. But what a silly canary that's perched in a cage with an open door!

To consider:

- Lutherans tend to emphasize the grasp of sin, and there's good reason for this. After all, if we fail to grapple with sin's reality, we can easily fool ourselves. But, is there a risk in over-emphasizing sin's grasp? If so, how might this passage from Romans offer fresh insight?
- Simply ponder the fact that God's Spirit is "in" you for a moment. Choose which word(s) below best describes how this claim strikes you. Discuss with others why you chose the words you did. If a word not in the list comes to mind, run with it. [inspiring, strange, comforting, challenging, joyful, Pentecostal, invasive, intimate, puzzling, awesome]

Heavenly Father, you have given us the Spirit so that we can live anew. Stir up that Spirit within us so that we may have faith in your Son Jesus Christ to walk in Resurrection light. In His name we pray. Amen.

--The Rev. Jonathan Weant serves as pastor at Bethany, Boone, with his wife Pastor Laura Weant. They have two children, Bethany and Lukas.

Reformers Reading Romans

Reading 12—God is for us

Read Romans 8:18-30.

St. Paul tells us in Romans 8:15 that God's Spirit has made us Children of God. He continues to give us the Good News of what this means.

Sometimes we hear of the tragedy that either a parent or an adult child has disowned the other. It may be because one cannot bring himself to forgive the other. It may be that their lives have become incompatible. Unlike in human relationships, we can never be separated from our Heavenly Father's love (Romans 8:38-39).

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught his disciples to pray and encouraged his disciples to, "Ask, and it will be given you..." yet, sometimes we don't know what to pray. Things happen too fast; our emotions can cause us to freeze. When we are in need of prayer, we can know that God's Holy Spirit is already praying for us (Romans 8:26) and that Jesus Christ himself is interceding for us. (Romans 8:34) God loves us so much that having our needs met does not depend on our own eloquence.

To consider:

- Recall a time when you desperately needed to pray, but didn't know how to ask. Be thankful that you were not left out on your own.

O Lord, we are thankful that you give us gifts that exceed our imaginations, and love us in spite of our shortcomings. Amen.

--Janet Peace Meisenbach is a former lay member of NC Synod's Book of Faith Task Force. She was a Luther League Caravaner and a Youth Missioner for the LCA's Board of American Missions. She has held active membership at Emmanuel, High Point; Lutheran Church of the Epiphany, Winston-Salem; Westminster Lutheran (in California); and now Macedonia, Burlington.



Reformers Reading Romans

Reading 13—Nothing can separate us

Read Romans 8:31-39.

All afternoon a little boy tried to put together his birthday gift from his father, a picture puzzle. Some of the pieces were bright, some dark; some seemed to go together, others seemed to fit nowhere. Finally, frustrated, the boy gathered the pieces, put them in the box, and gave it to his dad. “I can’t do it,” he explained. “You try it.”



To his amazement, his father assembled the entire puzzle in a few minutes. “You see,” he said, “I knew what the picture was like all the time. I saw the picture in the puzzle, but you saw only the pieces.” Paul tells us here that God causes all things to work together for good. Those “all things” are the pieces. He then tells us *how* they work together for the good—according to God’s purpose. That is the picture.

Have life’s difficulties caught you off guard? Are you puzzled over how a frustrating, hurtful, or shocking development could *possibly* contribute to anything good?

As I look back at my life, I am amazed at how things have turned out. Certainly not what I planned! My life has had times that were very dark for what seemed an eternity. When I look back now, I can see how through these most difficult circumstances, I became so much stronger and able to handle anything that comes my way. I now know that the part of the puzzle I thought was lost, turned out to be one of the most important learning moments in my life. When you are going through a demanding time and you cannot see the light at the end of the tunnel, count the many ways that God has blessed you. God is working! Believe it. Wait for it. He will show you.

To consider:

- Try to define “good” in Romans 8:28. Clearly, it does not mean comfort or ease or health or prosperity. So what does it mean here?
- What are some past circumstances in your life that may have been hard, but God really worked for good? In what situations are you waiting to see how God works right now?

Lord, I realize as the apostle Paul did, that I do not know what to pray for as I ought. Thank you for Your Spirit’s constant intercession on my behalf and for insisting that I pray, even when I’m overwhelmed with my failures. Thank You for encouraging me that as I come to you empty, You fill me with Your love. Amen.

God made the picture your life is composed of, and he will complete it—if you will let him.

--The Rev. Judy Lewis Drysdale is currently pastor at Philadelphia, Dallas. Recently she served as Dean of the Northern Piedmont Conference and pastor of Lutheran Church of Our Father, Greensboro. She has served congregations in North and South Carolina for 28 years. Pastor Judy is a past chair of the Synod Education Committee, serves on the synod’s Renewal Team and Fall Convocation Planning Team.

Reformers Reading Romans

Reading 14—Where is God in this?

Read Romans 9:1-29.

A friend of mine had lost his wife, not to cancer, but to a reaction to the chemotherapy that was supposed to save her life. They were in their early 50s. Years after her death, he still struggled to understand. He said about his prayer life, "I tell God, 'I don't need to see the whole picture, but could you show me just a corner?'"



If you have ever tried to make sense of something that makes no sense, you know where Paul is in Romans 9-11. He has spent eight chapters outlining our need for mercy and God's grace in response to that need. He ends chapter eight with the great news that *nothing* can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

But so many of his Jewish brothers and sisters look to be separated from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. They cannot see that the God they know and worship, the God of Abraham, is the One who raised Jesus from the dead and who justifies both Jew and Gentile through him. The very people Paul would expect to be first in line to embrace Jesus as Messiah and Lord are not making the connection. How can this be?

Paul will spend three chapters of Romans working on this problem. He will ask questions like those we ask when we are trying to understand something up that leaves a gaping hole at our center: Why? What are you doing, God? Have you abandoned your people? Is there a blessing—any blessing at all—in something that causes such anguish? I don't need the whole picture, God, but could you show me a corner?

For Paul, the apparent rejection of Jesus by many of his "kindred according to the flesh" (Romans 9:3) brings into focus the question of whether God can be trusted to keep God's promises. The source of anguish may be different for Paul than it is for us, but in times of heartbreak, his question is also ours, "Where is God in this?"

To consider:

- Have you ever puzzled over how God is working in some event or circumstance? Did you come to any conclusions?
- Paul cites many scripture passages as he works out how God is faithful even when it doesn't look like it. Are there verses or stories in Scripture that you return to when times are tough?

O God, we thank you for your grace, shown to all in Christ. When your presence and your will are hidden from us, sustain us. Help us to put our faith in you, for you are trustworthy. Amen.

--The Rev. Mary Hinkle Shore is the pastor of the Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd in Brevard. She was in ministry for more than twenty years in North Dakota and Minnesota, coming to the NC Synod four years ago. She serves on the synod's Book of Faith task group.

Reformers Reading Romans

Reading 15—Has God rejected or abandoned us?

Read Romans 9:30-11:12 (emphasis 10:1-4).

When I worked in Brooklyn I used to commute by subway. One day I was on the last car of the train and the lights went out. This by itself was not unusual, the lights always went on and off. But this time, the lights didn't come right back on and the train came to a stop.



At first, everyone just sat quietly in the darkness waiting for the conductor to tell us what was happening.

Soon people began talking to one another.
Some were irritated at the delay
Some were beginning to become afraid.
Some speculated about the problem.
But throughout it we remained calm...

Until a small boy looked out the front doors of the car and shouted.
“WHERE’S THE REST OF THE TRAIN? WE’RE ALL ALONE!”

And with that, all hell broke loose.
some began to cry
some to curse,
one man moved towards the closed doors to try to pry them open. “We have to get out of here,” he said.

Folks, there are times in our lives, especially during times of crisis, or grief, or illness, when we feel scared, alone, rejected. When we feel like we have to save ourselves because no one else is going to help us.

In this Romans text we are comforted knowing that God has NOT rejected or abandoned us and ALWAYS has a plan.

The people in the train’s control room knew exactly where we were, and there was already a plan to help and assist us. An engineer came with a flashlight, because he knew that some would be afraid. He came to assure us that we were safe and cared for and protected.

In this life things around us can seem uncertain, and lonely and, sometimes scary, but always remember that God has never rejected or abandoned us and sent Christ as proof that Salvation is for All.

To consider:

- When have you felt that you had to take matters into your own hands because God is not working fast enough?
- What does it mean for us to rely on the Grace of God rather than the works of our hands?

God of Grace and Glory, we know that your plans for us are for our salvation, and for our protection. Forgive us when we forget and seek by our own deeds to save ourselves, and remind us that you have loved us from the beginning, know exactly where we are and are constantly working for our good. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

--The Rev. Timothy Taylor is the pastor/redeveloper at Abiding Savior, Durham. He has just completed his first year in that ministry. Pastor Taylor is married to the Rev. Sharon Taylor (Holy Trinity, Raleigh). Pastor Tim comes with a vast history in youth ministry, outdoor ministry, and redevelopment ministry. He and his wife Sharon have developed workshops that are designed to help people explore “isms” in our society and how we can overcome them.

Reformers Reading Romans

Reading 16—Plot twists

Read Romans 11:13-36.

I've always loved plot twists...you know, those moments when you expect a story to go in one direction, and it goes somewhere completely unexpected.

This passage in Romans starts out by talking about who's "in" and who's "out," so to speak, using this analogy of breaking and grafting branches on an olive tree; according to Paul, many of the Israelites have been broken off of this olive tree "because of their unbelief" (v. 20) and the Gentiles to whom Paul is speaking have been grafted onto the tree in their place. It sets itself up to be a sort of "fire and brimstone" story, where the branches that have been broken off are discarded and burned, never to be seen or heard from again.



But then there's a plot twist in verse 23: "For God has the power to graft them in again."

And then another plot twist in verse 26: "All Israel will be saved."

This passage is complicated and dense and there's a lot to explore here, but if I were to sum up what I think is most important about this passage in a single sentence, I would say this: God is in the business of reconciliation and restoration. Lost sheep are returned to the flock, the sun always rises even after the darkest night, and broken branches are grafted back onto the tree of life to be nourished by the Spirit.

"For the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable," says Paul in verse 29. And no matter how many times we—the branches—are broken by disillusionment, betrayal, and all of life's storms, storms which make it hard to believe in *anything*, the truth remains that there is still room for us all on the olive tree.

That's one of the best plot twists I've ever read.

To consider:

- In verse 26, Paul declares that "all Israel will be saved." What do you think Paul means by this? To whom exactly is Paul referring when he says "all Israel?"
- What message might God be giving you to share with those "broken branches" who need to hear the good news that God is in the business of reconciliation and restoration?

God, as the author of all things, you've written some excellent stories, and perhaps one of the greatest plot twists of all time is that you make space for us all on the olive tree. Even as the storms of life bend and break us, you have the power to graft us back in again. We are thankful that you are in the business of reconciliation and restoration. Heal those of us who are broken, and help those of us who are not broken to shine with your light and your love, acting as a beacon of hope for those who need it the most. Amen.

--Michael Jones graduated with Honors from Catawba College this past May and plans to attend seminary or divinity school in January. A native of Salisbury, Michael has attended St. John's, Salisbury, since the age of three, where they have served as a youth member of the Church Council, a singer at the Nine Twenty Seven Contemporary Service, and a volunteer with Vacation Bible School and the Barnabas Connection.

Reformers Reading Romans

Reading 17—Serving God and loving others

Read Romans 12:1-21.

We live in a world fascinated by power and violence. Hatred and revenge are not only tolerated, but praised as strength and courage. We seek fame and reputation. We are expected to do what is necessary to get what we want. Those who do not follow this way are viewed with disdain.



These things hold us in captivity. As Christians we must ask: How do we free ourselves from them?

Paul says we become free by opening ourselves to God for a liberation that we cannot achieve. God then reforms us by transforming our minds. In that transformation we find a new way to live: LOVE. Paul then describes that liberating way of love.

We must ask, do we value this way? When was the last time you heard of someone being called a hero for following Paul's prescription found in verses 14-20?

It is hard to follow God's way because we desire society's praise. Luther wrote that part of our liberation is in putting our desires to death. This love of society's affirmation is something from which we must ask God to free us. For only when we value God's praise over society's will we do what God values and society condemns.

To consider:

- What specific loving actions does Paul ask of us?
- In what specific ways might a Christian be condemned by our society for undertaking such actions?

Lord, help us to find freedom in the life of love that you give. Help us to turn from the way of power and revenge to the way of love and service to all, even to our enemies. Help us to be steadfast in love even when it brings the condemnation of our society.

--Richard Johnson, a Sunday school teacher at Macedonia, Burlington, is a middle school teacher in North Carolina, where he enjoys "slow bike" cycling and spending time with his wife Kay. In the summers he works for the New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park.

Reformers Reading Romans

Reading 18—On governing authorities, love, and conduct

Read Romans 13:1-14.

I traveled to the border this May with eight Lutheran Campus Ministry-Raleigh students. We went to learn more about our nation's immigration system by listening to the stories of our neighbors, government employees and migrants alike. We sat by the Rio Grande and listened as Border Patrol agents explained their work. We broke bread with a family who risked everything so their children could have a better life. We witnessed court proceedings of men caught crossing the border illegally and spoke with the judge about the legal process. We heard the joy and sorrow of a fellow disciple called as a pastor and negotiating the immigration system.



In all this listening and watching, wondering and talking, the Holy Spirit swirled within me. How do we live as disciples of Christ—called to love our neighbors, care for the orphan, and welcome the stranger—while simultaneously living as citizens of a nation with laws that at times feel in direct opposition with our baptismal life together? This tension resounds in this text for me as well.

Yet I am encouraged by Paul's words, "Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law" (v. 10). Governments around the world may fall short of doing the good God calls us to do, but as the church universal empowered by the Spirit and rooted in Christ, we get the chance to embody the radical love of the Holy One with each breath. Yes, we will fall short. Yes, we will disagree. But we are freed in Christ to love God, ourselves, and our neighbors boldly. We are free to disagree about the process while working toward and living out God's love here and now.

Because Love Incarnate fulfilled the law through his life, death, and resurrection, we are freed to continue his ministry of love and mercy. The Spirit empowers us to go to the borders and share the good news of Jesus. "For he [Christ Jesus] is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is the hostility between us," writes Paul (Ephesians 2:14). Thanks be to God!

To consider:

- How do you negotiate living as a disciple and as a citizen?
- Paul writes that "Love does no wrong to a neighbor" (v. 10). How is the Spirit calling you as a disciple and us as the body of Christ to love our neighbors more boldly?

Three-in-One and One-in-Three, you are eternal and rooted in love. Ground us in your love and saturate us with your wholeness. Equip us to love as Christ loves us. Amen.

--Jennifer Manis is a candidate for ordained ministry who serves as the campus minister at Lutheran Campus Ministry-Raleigh and Holy Trinity, Raleigh. She loves to explore big questions with the college students she serves and gives thanks for the dance of the Spirit in all creation. A good day for Jennifer includes belly-laughter, playing with words, listening to a neighbor's story, coffee, chocolate, and the sun tickling her skin.

Reformers Reading Romans

Reading 19—Mutual upbraiding or upbuilding?

Read Romans 14:1-23.

Church fights are the worst, right? Because the stakes are high for my spiritual life and because sin makes it all about me, I have to win. In order for me to be right, in, or saved, you must be wrong, out, or damned. You get the picture.

We know from Acts that Paul and Peter don't see eye to eye on how the faith calls us to behave. Peter says you have to be circumcised and observe dietary and ritual purity laws and festivals; Paul says no. Basically, Peter says belonging to and following Christ requires becoming thoroughly Jewish first. Paul, the quintessential Jew himself, balks at that notion as it reeks of or leads to works righteousness.

Just as we have our divisive issues in the life of the church today, especially moral, sexual, and justice ones that polarize and threaten not just the unity but the very existence of the body, so were these issues in the early Church seen as threats to the very Gospel of grace in Jesus Christ and thus of the essence of the Church itself.

Then, and now, Paul is trying to wave that banner of grace as highly as possible while acknowledging that there will be all sorts of differences. Amid these differences, we are to "welcome one another" (14:1), not demonize, belittle, shame, etc. All of us by merely existing "live to the Lord and die to the Lord." Christ is thus the glue who holds us all together in community despite our differences, and the power of the Holy Spirit (v. 17) can and will, through her gifts, bring righteousness, peace, and joy.

Mutual upbuilding rather than mutual upbraiding is our calling in Christ (v. 19), which sets us free to serve!

To consider:

- Assuming that what sort of food people eat isn't the source of deep division that threatens the unity of Christ's Church, then what are some of the sources of that division?
- What do you think, if anything, God does "require" of us? Why?

Gracious God, our tendency is always to judge others while thinking more highly of ourselves and our own righteousness than we ought. Grant us humble and welcoming hearts, we pray, and wise discerning of those things that perhaps are important but not essential to the unity of your Church. We pray this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

--The Rev. Dr. Timothy M. Smith is the current bishop of the NC Synod. Prior to being bishop, he served as pastor to St. Paul's, Startown; Grace, Boone; and Redeemer, Atlanta. He and his wife have three grown children and three one-year-old grandsons.



Reformers Reading Romans

Reading 20—Christ’s welcome as model



Read Romans 15:1-13.

As I read this text, the single word that stood out to me the most was hope. As a 17-year-old senior in high school, I would like to consider myself a fairly hopeful person; I have optimistic views for my future and the goals I have for myself. Parts of this passage make me super-excited and ready to take on the world and fill me with, you guessed it, hope! Paul’s prayer at the end is so uplifting and positive, you can’t help but feel ready to take on whatever tomorrow has to bring.

My second time reading the passage, I noticed some things that were slightly less cheery. In the beginning of this reading, Paul focuses on how we should live more like Christ and build up our neighbors, which is a common theme throughout scripture. The part that gives me some anxiety is the third verse: “For Christ did not please himself; but, as it is written, ‘the insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.’” How can I ever live a life like Christ, without insulting or hurting those around me and, as a result, hurting Jesus?

Luckily for us, we can find comfort in the liberating word that is central to this passage: *hope*. We aren’t perfect people and no matter how hard we try, pray, or serve, we likely never will be. But with the hope that we have in Christ, this is okay! We can start each day with the hope that we will be just a little better than the day before: a little kinder, a little less judgmental, and a little more loving. And when we stumble, God’s love is always there to pick us back up and nudge us in the right direction.

To consider:

- Have there been times in your life where you were left feeling hopeless?
- What were some things that helped restore your hope, and how can you use that experience to help others who may be feeling defeated?

Dear God, please fill us all with a renewed spirit of hope each and every day. Help us to seek you and to live our lives like Christ, sharing your love, grace, and peace with everyone around us. In your holy name we pray, Amen.

--Camryn Kepley is a rising freshman at UNC-Chapel Hill and is planning on majoring in Psychology. She served on the LYO Board for two years, serving as the president her senior year.

Reformers Reading Romans

Reading 21—Paul’s plans

Read Romans 15:14-33.

In this passage from the epistle, many question if Paul was suspicious of his own impending demise as he writes, “join me in earnest prayer to God on my behalf” (Rom. 15.30). Whether true or not, Paul does not tremble, but instead resorts to bold speech in every sense. He boldly prepares to travel safely through Jerusalem, on to Rome into the hands of those who persecute him, and through Rome onto Spain, often considered the farthest possible place to travel in Paul’s world. When faced with adversity and tempted with death, Paul’s resolve becomes even stronger. Why?



Returning to the first part of the reading, Paul makes it clear that he does not boast of his own will, but by the power of the Spirit and with confidence in what Christ has accomplished. Paul makes it clear to his reader, he is a man called by God and sent out (an apostle) of the Gospel of Christ Resurrected. For Paul, his ability to speak boldly comes not of human volition but by the Grace of God (Rom. 15.15).

As Lutherans, we tend to emphasize the dominance and priority of grace. As preachers of the Gospel, however, we may instead give focus to the right words for a sermon (or a book study guide). In this reading, Paul tells us that our ability to share the Good News comes not from proper study, reading, or a well-articulated oration on a Sunday morning. Instead, our power to live out a calling from Christ Jesus to spread the Gospel comes from the power of the Holy Spirit.

To consider:

- Paul made plans to travel to Spain. What is a “reach goal” you may find inconceivable right now in your own ministry?
- Paul wanted to preach, “not where Christ has already been named” (Rom 15.20). Where is a place in your context that Christ has not been named? How could you preach there?

Holy Trinity, We thank you for the example of ministry you have given us in the Apostle Paul. We thank you for his bold speech and his faith in Christ. May we similarly live out faithful lives. We ask for the gift of bold speech. May it strengthen the sharing of Your Good News. We ask for hope in the future of our ministries. May our hope be encouraged by the faith of Christ. Be with us as we are sent out to preach the Good News. Amen.

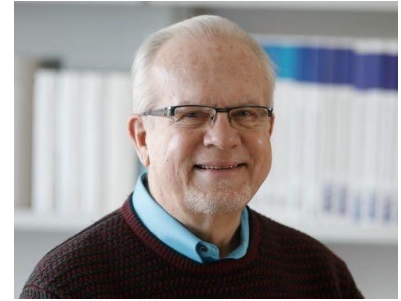
--William Dawn is a recent graduate of NC State in Raleigh with a B.S. in Nuclear Engineering, minoring in Religious Studies. He is an active participant in Lutheran Campus Ministry - Raleigh at Holy Trinity, Raleigh. William's favorite place to be is outside. Camping, hiking, swimming, running, William likes to live love in creation and take as many pictures as possible along the way!

Reformers Reading Romans

Reading 22—“See all the people”

Read Romans 16:1-27.

“See all the people.” You may remember this line from the children’s rhyme that teaches how to make a church with your fingers. The rhyme ends with open doors showing the people while the building falls aside. In the last chapter of Romans the apostle Paul makes the same point. Instead of buildings his “churches” are the friends and co-workers to whom his travels had brought the gospel of Jesus Christ. They gathered for worship in homes or wherever they could. The Greek word for church is gathering or assembly and those who worship together in every age are the church.



As the Reformation began, Lutherans did not build new churches but worshiped in the same buildings that were Catholic churches before Lutherans took over. The interiors were renovated to conform to Lutheran theology but many of the buildings are still intact. The point is: buildings are just buildings, but the church is the generations of those who worship inside. Martin Luther agreed. When he dedicated a medieval chapel that had been revamped for Lutheran worship, he told the congregation if they no longer wanted to worship inside, they could gather “outside by the fountain or anywhere else.”

This emphasis on believers is a fitting climax to the first fifteen chapters of Romans. They explain the gospel of salvation and how it is available to both Jews and non-Jews through faith in Christ instead of by keeping the law. The theology is sometimes heavy, but Luther recommended it because it tells us what we need to know about “law, gospel, sin, grace, faith, righteousness, Christ, God, good works, love, hope, the cross.” As important as knowledge, adds Luther, it teaches us who are the church “how to conduct ourselves toward everyone, righteous or sinner, strong or weak, friend or foe, and even toward ourselves.”

To consider:

- When you hear the word church, what comes first to your mind?
- Many of us treasure the church buildings in which we grew up and were taught the gospel. How have other churches in which you worshiped, both the building and the people, nurtured your faith?

Almighty God, remind us constantly that we who believe and are baptized are the church. We thank you for the buildings in which we can worship, but keep us mindful that we and all those who came before us are the true church that you love and sustain. In the name of Christ our Lord, Amen.

--Scott Hendrix is an ELCA pastor whose ministry was mainly teaching Church History in seminaries. He is the author of a recent biography of Luther entitled, “Martin Luther: Visionary Reformer.” Scott is retired and lives with his wife in Ferrington Village, NC.