

# Not Only

March 1, 2026

Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

John 3:1-17

As he sat down to write his letter to the church in Rome – or perhaps as he stood to dictate it to the scribe, Tertius, who offers greetings at the end of the letter – the Apostle Paul had an agenda. He planned a trip to Spain. He had travelled a lot in the years since the risen Jesus summoned him to proclaim this good news. He hoped to go even further, to the place Clement of Rome, writing at the end of the first century, called “the farthest west.”

Along the way, said Paul, he wanted to visit the Christian community in Rome.

Unlike his other letters in the New Testament, Paul wrote this letter to people he didn't know. He hoped for their assistance, I'm sure: a place to stay during his visit. He said he looked forward to preaching the gospel, so I'm sure he planned to do the same things he'd done in cities and towns across modern Israel, Syria, Turkey, and Greece. He wanted to meet people he'd heard good things of, names that had reached his ears across the Mediterranean Sea.

The Letter to the Romans was Paul on his best behavior, writing to strangers, trying to make a good impression.

Paul knew, and the Romans knew, that their church had had problems. A major one was that there'd been fights in the streets. The Emperor Claudius had banished Jews from the city of Rome on because of “disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus,” which most scholars interpret as dissension between Jews and Jews leaning into the new understandings of Jesus. The chances are very good that most if not all of the members of the Roman church had been shut out of the city, though it's unknown for how long.

That probably wasn't the Roman church's only problem. Romans has sixteen chapters. The last chapter is a long set of greetings. Chapters twelve through fifteen contain a typically Pauline set of advice including, “Let love be genuine,” and “Owe no one anything, except to love one another.” Except for his opening introduction, he gave the rest of the letter: his time, his consideration, and his considerable focused attention, to one question: What difference is there, if any, between God's relationship with Christians of a Jewish background and God's relationship with Christians of a Gentile background?

It was a knotty problem. As Dan Clendenin writes at [JourneyWithJesus.net](http://JourneyWithJesus.net), “In Romans 3:29 Paul asked a provocative question: is God the God of Jews only? Or is he not also the God of Gentiles? In contrast to every attempt to claim God as ours, and ours alone, Paul says that in

Abraham God loves all people equally. In the famous words of this week's gospel, God so loves all the world (John 3:16). Our tendency is to fear the other, to marginalize the strange, to dismiss all that is different from who and what we know."

That's true now, and it was true in the first century. Jews had long regarded their relationship with God as unique. God might have created the world, but had only entered into covenant with one group of people. On the other hand, Romans – especially those dwelling in the city of Rome – regarded themselves as the greatest people ever. Most people living in the Empire were not Roman citizens and lived under different laws. Roman citizens, for example, could be executed for treason but they could not be crucified.

The Roman church included both Jews and Romans. Some of the latter would have been citizens and some non-citizens, adding another layer of class distinction to an uncomfortable mix, with everyone wondering: How does God really feel about that person on the other side of the room?

That's why Paul got so excited about a revolutionary idea: that a relationship with God could be established not by living in the right place, not by divine selection, not through ritual observance, but through faith. Anyone could make the decision to trust in God. Anyone. "For this reason the promise depends on faith, in order that it may rest on grace, so that it may be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (who is the father of all of us)..."

Not only for me. Also for them. Not only for us. Also for them. Not only for the select of Rome. Also for Spaniards. Not only for the Jews. Also for the Greeks. Not only for the men. Also for the women. Not only for today's believers. Also for tomorrow's believers. Not only for people of the "Christian" nations. Also for the people of the non-Christian nations. Not only for the rich. Also for the poor. Not only for the powerful. Also for the marginalized. Not only for the respectable. Also for the discounted. Not only for the Americans. Also for the Iranians. Not only for the Republicans. Also for the Democrats, and the Independents, and the Greens, and the Libertarians, and so on. Not only for the people who agree with me. Also for the ones who don't.

Let's face it. God gets along better, with more people, than I do.

As Lucy Lind Hogan writes at Working Preacher, "Paul had experienced God's amazing, unbelievable, overflowing love and forgiveness. How could God, in Jesus Christ, have forgiven him for all the evil that he had done? How could God accept the one who had sought to murder the disciples of Jesus? Because that is who our God is. For Paul, justification by grace was a theological concept only after it had been a life changing, throw-you-to-the-ground, awe-filled experience. God had offered him new life, and he had believed."

These are anxious days. Hold on to that core of trust and faith: God loves you just as much as Paul or anyone. God loves you.

God also loves us. And God loves them. No matter who “we” are. No matter who “they” are.

Not only for us. Also for everyone.

Amen.

*by Eric Anderson*