For much of Christian history, especially since the Reformation, the book of Romans has been one of the most frequently read and discussed books of the New Testament. But this letter from Paul to the Saints in Rome is less familiar to Latter-day Saints. Perhaps that is because some who talk about salvation by faith do so in ways that are incompatible with the restored gospel. In any case, our neglect of the book of Romans is unfortunate because so much of what Paul teaches is also taught in the Book of Mormon.

Romans, indeed all of Paul’s writings, has a reputation for being difficult to understand, a reputation that began with Peter, who says:

And account that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation; even as our beloved brother Paul also according to the wisdom given unto him hath written unto you; as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things; in which are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction. (2 Peter 3:15–16)

Part of the problem is our unfamiliarity with King James English and, to add difficulty, the fact that the King James Version is sometimes too literal. Anyone who speaks a
foreign language knows that a literal translation is not always the most easily understood. Peter’s point in those verses is itself not easy to understand in King James English. Here’s an alternative translation:

Regard the steadfast endurance of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul wrote to you in all of his letters by the wisdom that was given to him—as he does in all of his letters, speaking in them about these things [the things Peter is discussing: that we should await the second coming by being clean, without fault, and at peace with God (2 Peter 3:14)]. In those letters are some things that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and the unstable twist to their own destruction, as they also do the rest of the scriptures.

Peter goes on to describe those who twist Paul’s letters and other scriptures as “wicked” (2 Peter 3:17). The Greek word is athesmos, literally “without law,” “without principle.”

Notice a couple of things: first, Peter says that some things in Paul are difficult to understand, not everything. Presumably things that are difficult to understand are not impossible to understand, and we may be well rewarded by taking the time to understand difficult things. Second, Peter says that ignorant, unstable, and unprincipled people twist those difficult things in Paul’s writings, just as they do the rest of scripture. Those points suggest that most things that Paul teaches are not difficult to understand and that we should beware of those who may be using some of Paul’s teaching for their own purposes.
It would be unfair to suggest that today any who disagree with us about Paul’s teachings are ignorant, unstable, and unprincipled. Besides, Peter may have been using hyperbole when he described those who twisted Paul’s teachings in his day. But the larger point remains: we should understand what Paul teaches within the wider teachings of the rest of the scriptures. If a particular interpretation of something Paul said is not in accord with the other teachings of scripture, then there are two possibilities. One is that Paul was wrong. The other is that the interpretation that puts him at odds with the rest of scripture is wrong.

Not all who have taught the gospel over the centuries have agreed with each other on every point. Some things that we understand today were not revealed in previous dispensations. Some have taught things that we have later learned were mistaken. So it is possible to read something taught by Paul and say, “On this point he’s wrong.” But we must be careful that when we do so we are sure we understand what he taught. It is always a good working hypothesis to begin by assuming that an interpretation that puts what he (or any other prophet) says at odds with the rest of scripture is mistaken. Give Paul the benefit of the doubt.

These study notes cannot cover everything in Romans, so they begin with an overview of the book as a whole and then take up questions concerning a few particular passages.

There are many ways to outline the book of Romans, but here is one that may be helpful. It shows that the book contains three interrelated discussions: first faith, then life, and finally covenant.1
I. Faith in its relation to justice and mercy (Romans 1–8)
   A. God’s righteousness (justice) assures the faithful of salvation (Romans 1:18–4:25)
      1. All are under condemnation because of sin (Romans 1:18–3:20)
      2. The atonement applies to all equally (Romans 3:21–4:25)

II. God’s love (mercy) assures the faithful of eternal life and glory (Romans 5–8)
   A. Christ’s death puts an end to the reign of death and gives us peace with God (Romans 5)
   B. I cannot loose myself from the spiritual hold of death (Romans 6–7)
   C. The Holy Ghost gives life to all who exercise faith (Romans 8)
      1. To live by the Holy Ghost is to be a child of God, to inherit jointly with Christ (Romans 8:13–18)
      2. To live by the Holy Ghost is to be one of God’s chosen people (Romans 8:28–33)

III. The covenant and the faithful life of the chosen people (9:1–15:12)
   A. God’s fidelity to his covenant with the chosen people, Israel: the enactment of God’s justice and mercy (Romans 9–11)
      1. Israel must have faith, must be faithful (Romans 9–10)
2. Salvation by faith does not undo God’s covenant with Israel (Romans 11)

B. God’s relation to the Church; the Christian’s obligations to obedience, our “reasonable service”: the enactment of human faith and justice in fidelity to our covenant (Romans 12:1–15:12)

IV. Personal messages (Romans 15:13–16:27)

All three of the major parts of this letter are equally important. Paul isn’t preaching only salvation by faith, though he is preaching that, as do all of our scriptures. He is also explaining what it means to live by faith and explicitly teaches that life by faith requires obedience. Faith saves, not obedience. But to be disobedient is to be unfaithful because faithful life is life in covenant with God and to disobey is to break that covenant.

Why do you think that Paul took these three topics—faith, eternal life, and covenant—to be so important for his audience of believing Christians in Rome? What was he trying to explain that they might not have understood?

Given this outline of the book, how would you explain the relation between faith and the law?

How might you outline the book differently, and what would that outline emphasize?

Romans 1

Verse 7: Why does Paul describe the Saints in Rome as “beloved of God”? Doesn’t God love everyone? If he does, why describe any particular group as beloved?
In verse 1 Paul said that he was called to be an apostle. In verse 6 he tells the Saints in Rome that they too have been called, and in this verse he tells them to what they have been called: to be Saints. What does the word saint mean? What does it mean to be called to be a saint? When do we receive that calling? How do we fulfill it?

Romans 3

Verses 9–10: What does it mean to say that both the Jews and the Gentiles are “under sin”?

In verse 10 Paul quotes Psalms 14:1 and 53:1. How can Paul (or the Psalmist) be serious when he says that no one is righteous? For example, isn’t the living prophet righteous?

Compare these verses to verse 23. What is Paul’s point?

Verses 19–20: This is the Joseph Smith revision of verse 20: “For by the law is the knowledge of sin; therefore by the deeds of the law shall no flesh be justified.” Does that revision change the meaning of the verse or does it clarify it? Explain in your own words what the verse means.

According to these two verses, what does the law teach us? What does it mean to be justified? Justified before whom? Why can’t the law justify us?

Verse 28: Without in this verse means “separated from,” “outside of,” or “apart from.” (Compare the use of the word without in the hymn “There Is a Green Hill Far Away.”) The word translated deeds could also have been translated works. Using that information, put this verse in your own words. Can you explain what Paul is saying?
Compare this verse to 2 Nephi 25:23. Are Paul and Nephi saying different things? If so, explain how. If not, explain why not. (See also Luke 17:7–10 and Mosiah 2:21, as well as 2 Nephi 31:19.)

Romans 4

**Verses 1–3:** Paul’s argument in these verses is that in Genesis 15:6 we see that Abraham’s faith counted as righteousness *before* God gave him a law to obey: the Lord declared Abraham righteous before he could have declared him obedient. Therefore, obedience to law is not what makes one righteous. Do you think that argument holds? If not, where does Paul go wrong?

**Verses 4–5:** What does verse 4 tell us about those who work for a wage? How is that relevant to Paul’s discussion of our relationship to the law?

In verse 5, who is Paul speaking of when he mentions the ungodly? Who justifies the ungodly? See also Romans 5:6. Does that verse help make sense of what Paul is teaching here?

**Verses 6–9:** Paul cites scripture to back up his claim, Psalm 32:1–2. Does that scripture support Paul’s argument, or does it say something else?

Romans 5

**Verses 1–2:** What kind of peace with or in relation to God do we have? How has Christ given us peace with God?

What is grace? The Greek word here, *charis*, denotes attractiveness and favor. It can also mean “gift.”
What does it mean to say that we stand in grace (verse 2)?
Paul says that we “rejoice in hope of the glory of God.” What does that mean? Does it have anything to do with eternal progression?

Romans 6

*Verses 1–2, 11–15:* Paul doesn’t believe that the doctrine of salvation by grace and not by works means that we can do whatever we please if we are saved by faith. Explain why not.

When we argue with others about the relationship between works and faith, how much of our argument is a misunderstanding of the other person’s position? Of course, that will vary from case to case, but think about any particular experience of that argument you’ve found yourself in and use it to think about this question.

Romans 8

*Verses 1–2, 4:* If I don’t have to obey a set of rules, what do I have to obey? How is that different from obeying the law, the rules?

*Verse 13:* What does *mortify* mean? *Webster’s American Dictionary of the English Language* (1828) gives these definitions:

1. To destroy the organic texture and vital functions of some part of a living animal
2. To subdue or bring into subjection
3. To subdue; to abase; to humble; to reduce; to restrain
4. To humble; to depress; to affect with slight vexation
5. To destroy active powers or essential qualities.

The Greek word means “to put to death.” Which of the meanings from Webster seems the most accurate translation of the Greek meaning? What does Paul’s metaphor mean?

How is Paul using the word *flesh*? (See the first clause of verse 9 for help answering that.) What does Paul mean when he speaks of killing the flesh? Is he speaking of asceticism or self-torture? How do you justify your answer?

**Verses 15–17:** What is the promise to those who, through faith in Christ, live by the Spirit?

What does it mean to say that this promise is conditional, that to receive it we must “suffer with him”? How do we do that?

**Romans 12**

**Verse 1:** What mercies of God has Paul just described (chapters 9–11)?

What does it mean to present our bodies a living sacrifice? (Compare Omni 1:26.) Why is doing so our “reasonable service”? Christ made his body a living sacrifice. Is Paul asking us to imitate him? How would we do so since, presumably, we are not expected to suffer as he did in Gethsemane or be crucified?

Do the things that follow in this chapter and the next chapters tell us what it means to make ourselves a living sacrifice?
What does that suggest about “good works”? Why do we do them, for example?

What would the difference be between doing good works as a reasonable sacrifice and doing them in order to obtain salvation?

**Verse 2:** What does it mean to be “conformed to this world”? How would we avoid that? (See Alma 5, especially verse 14.)

What can transform us?

As used here, the word translated *mind* has a different meaning than we usually associate with that word. It refers to how we orient ourselves in the world, whether that orientation is explicitly conscious or not. What difference does that make to the meaning of the verse?

What does the word *prove* mean as it is used here?

Why do our minds (in Paul’s sense of the word) have to be renewed in order for us to know what is good, pleasing, and perfect according to the will of God? Does that help us understand why the law cannot save us?

Given what you have read of Paul, how would you explain the relation between works, grace, and salvation to an LDS teenage or young adult Sunday School class? To a child of primary school age? To a non-LDS colleague who is not a Christian?

If a non-LDS Christian challenged you, saying that Latter-day Saints don’t believe in salvation by grace, could you explain why he or she is wrong?