

connect 360

BIBLE TEACHING GUIDE

And Then We Came to Romans

A STUDY OF PAUL'S "WEIGHTY
AND STRONG" LETTER

A STUDY OF ROMANS

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And Then We Came to Romans

A Study of Paul's "Weighty and Strong" Letter

A Study of Romans

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lesson 1

A Longing Apostle and the Powerful Gospel

MAIN IDEA

The gospel is good news for all people.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

How has the gospel changed my life?

TEACHING AIM

To lead participants to explore the transformational nature of the gospel for first-century and 21-st century people



Bible Comments

Understanding the Context

Unwanted communication floods our lives, from junk mail to e-newsletters, many of which we discard without opening. Yet many of us have desk drawers filled with letters that mean the world to us, whether letters of acceptance, encouragement, or love from someone we hold in the highest esteem. Countless Christians, from the famous to the ordinary, treasure a letter from an itinerant missionary named Paul, written to a church in the belly of the Roman Empire. Many Christians of a certain age were led along a path of Bible verses from Romans to professing faith in Jesus (the “Romans Road”). But how does this famous letter begin, and what is its core message?

In our passage today, Paul gave us a quick orientation to the contents of the entire letter. He told us about himself, a lowly servant enlisted to serve as Christ’s ambassador (1:1). In the first full sentence of the letter, Paul unveiled the lively reason for writing the letter—the “gospel” or “good news” about Jesus, who is both a human descendant of King David and the risen Son of God (1:2–4). Paul was a personal recipient of the gospel forgiveness Jesus had lavished on him, and he was also its tireless *advertiser* (1:5–6).

Paul’s job as an apostle could cause him to feel isolated, especially since he often ended up in prison. But Paul saw himself, not as a soloist but as a blessed participant in a great gospel “choir” of Christians and churches all over the world. He regularly thanks God for them and intercedes on their behalf. Paul’s great prayer was that this particular church in Rome might continue to live out their faith in Jesus and that Paul might personally meet and minister to them (1:8–12) and to other churches in largely Gentile regions (1:13).

Interpreting the Scriptures

Paul's desire to visit Rome was greater than merely a longing for fellowship (as important as that is). No, Paul had a holy agenda in mind. His agenda is captured by the vital word "gospel." What comes to mind when you hear the word *gospel*? Perhaps your first mental image is of a style of southern Christian music, or a tent filled with old-fashioned preaching and songs like "I'll Fly Away." Those images may be related to the gospel, but Paul had in mind something deeper. He spelled this out in verses 14–17.

The Gospel Is a Joyful Obligation (1:14–15)

1:14. First, Paul spoke of the gospel as a "debt" or obligation, to "Greeks and non-Greeks" (which, when you think of it, includes everybody!). The commentator John Stott once said that there are two ways to get into debt. One is to borrow money from someone and be obligated to pay them back. The second is to borrow money *for a third party*— Person A gives you money to *give* to Person B. Paul could never repay the debt of salvation he owed to Jesus, nor could we. But Paul had in mind the second type of indebtedness here. God had entrusted him with life-changing good news, and Paul dared not keep it in his pocket. God enlisted Paul to share it with all people, whether "wise or foolish." As far as Paul was concerned, the gospel is for everyone.

1:15. Paul did not resent this obligation. On the contrary, he was "eager" to continue to share this treasure of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection with others. A literal reading of verse 15 suggests that Paul was using the word for "gospel" as a verb—as if to say, "I long to *gospel* you in Rome." Paul had spent much time sharing the good news in Asia, but he was eager to push west toward Europe, including Rome and even Spain, since it had always been Paul's dream to "preach the gospel where Christ was not known" (Romans 15:20).

The Gospel Is Dynamite (1:16)

If chapter 1 of Romans were a song, we would hear a crescendo when we arrived in verse 16! Paul dramatically announced the theme for the entire letter.

Oddly, Paul declared that he was “not ashamed” of the gospel. If I said, “I am not ashamed of my friend,” or say my church or my child, that would seem to be a less-than-enthusiastic endorsement! We should read Paul’s wording in light of his context—Paul knew that some of his listeners, whether Jew or Gentile, thought the whole notion of a crucified Savior foolish, embarrassing, and impossible to grasp (see 1 Corinthians 1:18–25).

However, Paul endorsed the gospel because he had seen its explosive “power” in his life and the lives of so many (the root Greek word for “power” gives us our English word “dynamite”). The Word of God, Scripture says, is incendiary like a fire (Jeremiah 23:29), piercing like a sword (Ephesians 6:17; Hebrews 4:12), and the source of “dead” souls coming alive (Ezekiel 37:7). The gospel demonstrates its power by piercing spiritual darkness, bringing the fiery purging of sin, and bringing dead sinners to a living salvation in Christ. We should never characterize gospel preaching as a mere collage of propositions and ideas. The gospel does things! The gospel turned the greedy cheat Zacchaeus into a philanthropist (Luke 19:1–10). The gospel turned Paul’s heart from persecuting Christ’s church to proclaiming Christ’s resurrection power.

The Gospel Is a Window (1:17)

Paul continued to expand on this powerful gospel. The gospel, Paul intimated, provides a window into one of the Bible’s most elusive and sought-after gifts: righteousness. Most importantly, the gospel displays the righteous character and activity of God the Father. This God who created the world and created a covenant people has not abandoned us in our desperate and sinful situation. By sending us His Son and filling us with His Spirit, our righteous God has clothed us with a righteousness we do not deserve and could never earn. The only way we participate in this transformation is through simple faith, what the NIV calls “faith from first to last.” Salvation begins when we place our simple trust in Jesus, and the life of the saved proceeds day to day by faith. This was true in the day of Habakkuk, who proclaimed “the righteous person will live by his faithfulness” (Habakkuk 2:4). Like that prophet, we will face painful suffering and confusing setbacks in this life. Neverthe-

less, as we continue to place our faith in Jesus, we know we will stand on God's grace throughout this life, until we stand forever with Jesus. Faith in the beginning, faith each day after the first day, until that day, as the hymn writer puts it, "faith shall become sight."

Focusing on the Meaning

Today, we begin to read a long epistle, sixteen chapters worth. This journey will thrill us and challenge us. But we don't have to read beyond the first 17 verses to comprehend the essence of this letter. This is a letter about the gospel, the good news of Christ's gift of salvation, new life, and eternal life to all of us who place our simple faith in Him. I wonder if sometimes it is easy for this "good news" to become "old news" for the Christian? "Yes, yes," we say in our hidden thoughts, "I'm grateful for the gospel, but I took care of that salvation-stuff years ago. What is the word in Romans 1 for me today?"

The old news is the good news is today's news. The faith that started us on this journey of the Christian life is called forth today. The power that turned us from Christ's enemy to God's redeemed continues to operate on our hearts and minds today.

I love the story often told about a 19th-century Welsh preacher named John Hutton and the miner he knew, a former alcoholic. The miner's drinking had bankrupted the household, pawning possessions to buy the drink he could not afford. His reckless actions had seriously harmed his family, yet his conversion to Christ sent the trajectory of his life in a sober and joyful direction. The man's old drinking buddies used to tease him about his newfound faith. "You don't believe all that stuff about Jesus and His miracles, like turning water into wine?" The miner did not profess to know everything there is to know about the ways and means of Jesus. But he said, "I do know this: in my house, Jesus has turned beer into furniture."

Countless Christians testify to similar, powerful gospel transformations. Jesus trades fear for courage, sorrow for joy, selfishness for self-sacrifice. The gospel continues to speak to us on hard days filled with pain and even doubt—we belong to Jesus, and He has given Himself for us. This same good

news also causes us to look around us and ask: Whom am I obligated to share this treasure with?

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Teaching Plans

DISCOVERY PLAN

Connect With Life

1. Before the group meets, make a paper copy of the sample Promissory Note document. Ask participants, *When a person borrows money to purchase a house or a car, what kinds of things does the lender usually require?* Allow a few moments of discussion about things like a down payment or a credit check, etc. Then hold up the copy of the sample Promissory Note and point out that the borrower usually has to sign a paper in which he or she acknowledges they are responsible for paying back to the lender the amount borrowed, along with interest. The borrower has incurred a debt that he or she is under an obligation to pay back. (A copy of this assignment is available in "Teaching Resource Items" for this study at www.gc2press.org.)
2. Call on a class member to read Romans 1:14 aloud to the class. As the verse is read, write **Greeks** and **non-Greeks**, **Wise** and **Foolish** on your markerboard. Point out that Paul used an expression that suggests he was in debt to these groups. Help participants see the contrast between Greeks those considered cultured and non-Greeks those who didn't follow Greek culture and between the wise or those highly educated and the unwise or the illiterate. Explain that this week's lesson will explore *why* Paul felt in debt to these diverse groups and what he intended to do about his debt.

Guide Bible Study

3. Direct everyone to turn to Acts 26 and silently read verses 15–18, looking for the source of Paul's commission and debt. After they have time to read, point out that this was Paul's personal testimony given to King

Agrippa about his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus. Ask participants to share what they understand Paul said was his obligation to bring the good news about Jesus to everyone.

4. Ask participants to read silently Romans 1:15, then partner with one or two others sitting near them to identify what they consider to be the important words in the sentence, and what those words say about Paul's plans.
5. Allow groups a couple of minutes, then call for a representative to share what they consider to be one of the words they identified and explain why they thought it was important. Ask if other groups selected the same word and why they thought it was important. Then call on another group to share one of their words. Continue the process until everyone has had the opportunity to share. Help all to see Paul's passionate desire to fulfill his mission to Rome.
6. Ask participants to notice which word appears in verses 15 and 16, "gospel." Using content from the *Study Guide* and the *Teaching Guide* Bible Comments help participants see the breadth of what Paul meant by "gospel."
7. Have participants read verses 16–17 to identify why Paul considered the "gospel" to be such a crucial focal point for his proclamation. Ask participants to share what they understand to be the reason Paul gave for his being "unashamed" of the gospel.
8. Help participants see the strong link between what Paul identified as "gospel" and "righteousness" or being right before God and "faith." Apart from faith, a person can never experience being right before God. The good news, "gospel," is that people can experience God's righteousness by faith.

Encourage Application

9. Ask a member to read verses Romans 1:11–13 aloud to the class while everyone listens for the reasons Paul gave for his desire to go to Rome. Help them realize how much Paul wanted to share the gospel in Rome.
10. Have participants reflect on how strong their desire is to share the good news about Jesus with others. Lead the group in prayer, asking God to strengthen class participants' desire to be more like Paul in sharing the gospel with the people they encounter in the coming week.

DISCUSSION PLAN

Connect With Life

1. Ask participants to list various kinds of obligations people may incur in their life. As they call them out, list them on your marker board. Discuss the level of obligation incurred by the various suggestions. Ask, *Do some have financial penalties?*
2. Have everyone read Romans 1:14 looking for what Paul considered to be his obligation. Discuss the range of people reflected by the expressions Greeks and non-Greeks, wise and foolish and why Paul felt obligated to them.

Guide Bible Study

3. Call on a member to read aloud Romans 1:15. As the verse is being read, write on your markerboard *eager to preach the gospel in Rome*. Discuss the relationship between Paul's obligation described in verse 14, and his eagerness mentioned here in verse 15. (A copy of this assignment is available in "Teaching Resource Items" for this study at www.gc2press.org.)

4. Read aloud the first phrase of verse 16, “I am not ashamed of the gospel.” Ask participants to list some things that might cause a person to be ashamed. Now ask why “the gospel” might have caused Paul to be ashamed. Discuss with them some of the elements of the gospel story that might have offended people—Jesus, a lowly carpenter, who became an itinerant teacher, and was finally executed by Roman crucifixion, a most embarrassing punishment. None of these would have impressed someone hearing Paul’s preaching.
5. Now read aloud the second phrase of verse 16, “it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.” Help participants understand Paul’s reasoning. Rather than be embarrassed by the story of Jesus’ life and death, Paul knew that was how God was bringing people to relationship with Himself. Trusting in Jesus’ saving work was the only way people could experience God’s salvation.
6. Finally, read aloud the closing phrase of verse 16, “first to the Jew, then to the Gentile.” Use content from the *Study Guide* and the *Teaching Guide* Bible Comments to help participants understand God’s plan to bring the good news of salvation first to His people Israel, but also to include all humanity represented by the term “Gentile.” Point out that when Paul went into a new area, he would first seek out a synagogue of the Jews to proclaim the gospel but would ultimately share it with non-Jews (Gentiles) as well.
7. Before class, ask a member to locate Habakkuk 2:4 and be prepared to read it to the class when you call on them.

Encourage Application

8. Have everyone read verse 17 silently to themselves, looking for two words that appear at least twice in the verse. After they have had time to read, ask which two words they identified. As they reply, write on your markerboard the words “righteous” and “faith.” Call on the mem-

ber you earlier enlisted to read the Habakkuk passage. Point out that Paul identified an unbreakable link between faith and being right with God.

9. Suggest that to many people, especially to first-century Jews, righteousness implied doing the correct religious things—obeying the Ten Commandments, attending worship, making offerings, etc. While these are all important activities of those who are in relationship with God, Paul stressed the link between faith and being righteous.
10. Ask participants to reflect on their lives in the past week. Have them evaluate how well their faith led them to live God-honoring lives.
11. Close with prayer asking God to guide participants to lives of faithful obedience in the coming week.

YOUTH PLAN

Connect With Life

1. Opening Moment

Say, Take a minute and think about the last great movie you saw or the last time you went to a really great restaurant. Think how excited you were to tell someone. When people have a great experience, people want to share that experience with others.

2. Opening Activity

Have a few movie plots written down using only a few words and say them aloud, having the students guess what the movie is. Use these or make up your own. (See the "Movie Plots Game" in the "Youth Resource Items" for this study at www.gc2press.org.)

Or have a few pictures on a piece of paper and have students give one-word clues to the audience to see if they can guess. You can also divide into teams and have them guess too. (See the "Guess Pictures

Game” in the “Youth Resource Items” for this study at www.gc2press.org.)

3. After the activity, get your students’ thoughts:
 - What was difficult or easy about trying to describe the different things?
 - What was more frustrating, not being able to describe something properly or the other people not getting what you were describing?
4. Connection Moment

Say, *The apostle Paul had the same issues when trying to talk about Jesus with the people at the church in Rome. Paul had once been a person who was against Jesus, but Paul’s life changed when he met Jesus, and now Paul was trying to describe what following Jesus means.*
5. Open with a prayer asking God to help students be excited to experience Him.

Guide Bible Study

6. Have a student read Romans 1:14–17. (For more background on verses 14–17 see the Bible Comments in Lesson 1 of the *Teaching Guide*.)
7. Connection Moment

Say, *Paul had been hearing reports of how the people in the Roman church had great faith in Jesus, and how Paul really wanted to see them in person but was unable. Paul sent this letter to tell the church the gospel or “good news” about how Jesus is the One people should put their faith and trust in.*
8. Students’ Respond. Ask the following questions:
 - What does it mean to be “obligated?” What are some things students are obligated to?
 - Why was Paul was so eager to tell the church about Jesus?

9. Have a student read Romans 1:16–17. Ask the following questions: (For more background on verses 16–17 see the Bible Comments in Lesson 1 of the *Teaching Guide*.)
 - Why do you think people could be “ashamed” or scared of telling others they believe in Jesus?
 - Paul said that being able to make the right choices comes from FAITH in Jesus. What does the word faith mean, and how is it tied to the word believe?
10. Say, *Our One Big Point for this week is that Faith in Jesus Compels Us to Share Jesus. Since Paul’s life was completely changed by his faith in Jesus, so too are our lives changed. Paul had to tell everyone about Jesus, so too do we.*
11. Bible Activity

Have a stool or chair up front and have a student come forward. Offer the student to sit in a chair, but quietly say out loud, “I won’t pull it out from under you.” If the student is hesitant, reassure them that you will not pull it out from under them. If they sit, remember DO NOT PULL the chair out from under them.
12. Ask the student sitting in the chair and/or the audience:
 - Was it difficult to trust in the chair or the person? Why?
 - How did you know that the chair was going to hold you?
 - Why was there doubt and how much did doubt play into making the choice to sit?
13. Connection Moment

Say, *Sitting in the chair is just a small example of how faith is woven into our lives without us knowing. A person can see the chair with their own eyes and can even study everything about the chair until they know everything. But until they trust the chair enough to sit on it, to put their full body weight on it, then all that knowledge does not benefit them. This is why Paul was writ-*

ing to the church. Until the people fully trust or put their faith in Jesus, and the good news of Jesus, then they will miss the life God gives to them.

Encourage Application

14. Say, *This lesson started with talking about describing something that was your favorite or most memorable. But if I asked you to describe your connection to Jesus, would you be able to use as many words as possible? Or even get just as excited?*
15. Ask your students to think of one person this week they could share the love of Jesus with. Challenge them to boldly tell one of their friends about their faith, even if their friend doesn't believe in Jesus.
16. Close in prayer, asking God to help the students in the room who have doubts about believing in Jesus and to help students have the boldness to share Jesus this week!
17. See the "Small Group Follow Up Time" and the "Take Home Lesson" sheets in the "Youth Teaching Resource Items" for this study at www.gc2press.org.