

LESSON 1

The Gospel is Powerful

FOCAL TEXT

Romans 1:1–17

BACKGROUND

Romans 1:1–17

MAIN IDEA

The gospel is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

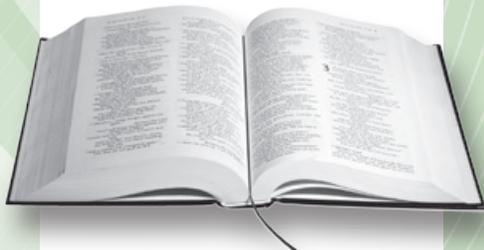
How has the power of the gospel been revealed?

STUDY AIM

To comprehend the revelation of the gospel and its power

QUICK READ

Like Paul, we should not be ashamed of the gospel, for it contains the power of God for the salvation our world so desperately needs.



Introduction

When I was eleven, I lived in a town of 200 people, three stores, and only one major business: an electric cooperative that supplied power to the entire region. Often high winds or wintry weather would knock down some of the power lines, causing large parts of the region to lose electricity. Our house was next door to the power station, though, so we always had electricity no matter how many lines were down. The lines from the station to our house were a conduit of constant power. Likewise, the gospel itself is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes. God saves through the good news of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.¹

ROMANS 1:1–17

¹ Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God—²the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures ³regarding his Son, who as to his human nature was a descendant of David, ⁴and who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord. ⁵Through him and for his name's sake, we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith. ⁶And you also are among those who are called to belong to Jesus Christ. ⁷To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

⁸First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world. ⁹God, whom I serve with my whole heart in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you ¹⁰in my prayers at all times; and I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you.

¹¹I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong—¹²that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith. ¹³I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I planned many times to come to you (but

have been prevented from doing so until now) in order that I might have a harvest among you, just as I have had among the other Gentiles.

¹⁴ I am obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish. ¹⁵ That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are at Rome.

¹⁶ I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. ¹⁷ For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."

The Gospel's Powerful Call (1:1–7)

Paul introduced himself by a powerful, threefold calling on his life: 1) to be a slave to Jesus; 2) to be an apostle; and 3) to proclaim the gospel of God. The letter begins *Paulos doulos*, which means "Paul slave." *Doulos* is sometimes translated as "bondservant" or "servant," but most scholars think he meant "slave." The first part of the call in his life was to be a slave to Christ. Jesus was his master, not just his teacher, guide, or friend. The tagline of Paul's life was "slave of Christ." His calling was based on his understanding of Jesus' authority and lordship in his life.

Another aspect of Paul's calling was to be an apostle of Jesus Christ. Paul came out of a life that was antagonistic to the gospel and into a life of preaching it. Seventeen years had passed from Paul's conversion to his first missionary journey, on which he served alongside Barnabas (Galatians 1:13–2:1). Paul's life is a reminder that sometimes God takes time to prepare us for the task he has for us. Moses wandered privately in the wilderness for forty years before he led the people of Israel out of Egypt and back into that same wilderness for another forty years. David became king about thirteen years after Samuel anointed him. Though God still calls us to specific offices today (preacher, teacher, evangelist, deacon, etc.), we often need a time of preparation for these roles.

Lastly, Paul was called to fulfill a unique and special purpose. God did not call him to help society or benefit people (although he did both), but to preach the gospel. The gospel is the good news that Jesus Christ

left heaven to come to earth, lived a sinless life, died for our sins, rose again, ascended back to his throne in heaven, and now waits to return to the earth for his people.

Jesus came to address humanity's sin and impending judgment. He came to give us abundant life, joy, and peace. Christ's message is the message of hope and reconciliation. Paul's task was to share that message. His calling was so great that he gave his entire life to it. God had done a miraculous work in his life and he was completely committed to God's purpose for him.

Likewise, God has a calling on our lives as well, in one of three ways: general, specific, or vocational. First, God calls on all people to accept his gospel message, and upon receiving Christ, to walk in obedience to him (Romans 1:5), to belong to Christ (1:6) and to be saints, that is to be sanctified (1:7). Additionally, all Christians also have a specific calling in their lives related to a spiritual gift, talent, role, or task (12:3–8). Finally, some people have been called to serve God as their vocation (career), including preachers, ministers, missionaries, professors, and other careers of Christian service (1 Corinthians 12:12–28; Ephesians 4:11–16).

CALLING

Calling (being called) in the Bible has three components. It begins with a divine summoning, similar to a father calling to a child, "Son, get in here now!" which sounds quite different from, "Son, could you come over here when you get a chance?" The former is the calling that God has on his people. We can choose to reject God's voice, but we are in immediate disobedience when we do.

The second part of a biblical calling is the effectual process of being prepared by God for a purpose or task. Much like Moses or Paul were prepared for their tasks, God does not summon us to do anything without giving us the talent, training, and skills to complete the task. The final part of God's calling is the commissioning, or being sent out. It may be soon after his summoning, or there may be a period of growing in faith and character to prepare us for the task ahead.

The Gospel's Powerful Motivation (1:8–15)

The gospel motivated Paul in four ways. Paul's first motivation for preaching the gospel was the people who needed to hear it. For example, he was motivated by the reputation of the Romans whose faith was being reported all over the world (1:8); he wrote about his desire to see them (1:13). Even in his absence, Paul devoted himself to pray for the Romans (1:10). Though Paul's passion in this text referred to the Roman people specifically, his passion extended to all people so that they would be saved. The need for others to hear God's message of salvation should motivate us as well.

Another motivation for Paul was his love for God. Paul had experienced an incredible outpouring of God's mercy and grace despite his sin. In turn, Paul's love for God became the motivation that compelled him to serve Jesus. With all that God has done for each of us, we should also be driven to serve him. He has loved us, forgiven us, and blessed us greatly. We should express the same devotion as Paul by serving God in any way he may call us.

A third motivation for Paul was to see changed lives. He knew God's message and gifts would change the lives of the Romans by giving them strength (1:11). Strength can be measured in different ways. Some need strength to endure difficulties, trials, or persecution. Paul would eventually meet the Romans face-to-face and experience martyrdom for the sake of the gospel. He would embody for them the very strength he wanted to give to them. Strength also means to be bold in faith, rich in love and kindness, and steadfast in the face of temptation.

Changed lives become encouraged lives (1:12). The encouragement that the gospel gives us is not a simple wish for a happy life, but instead is fueled by eternal hope that changes our worldview. There are two meanings of hope: 1) We might get lucky and something good may happen to us; or 2) A certainty that we will experience something for our good. Because of all that Christ has done and has promised, believers have certainty that God will do something good for us in the future. Our hope is focused on the future, not our present circumstances.

Finally, Paul was motivated out of obligation (1:14), which was not a somber task of drudgery, but a call that Paul eagerly accepted (1:15). He was obliged to serve Jews and Gentiles, wise and foolish, and everyone else because of his love for God, his love for others, his experience of salvation, and his witness to the practical power of the gospel.

The Gospel's Power for Salvation (1:16–17)

Paul was setting up the rest of his letter in Romans 1:16–17. The gospel message to which Paul was called is the hope for all humanity. Paul knew this because he had both seen and experienced this hope for himself. He experienced it in his conversion and then he had seen hope arise in countless others who had given their lives to God through faith in Jesus Christ. Paul had endured incredible difficulties for the sake of the gospel (see 2 Corinthians 6:4–5, 11:23–33), yet he confidently said, “I am not ashamed of the gospel” (Rom. 1:16). His life demonstrated his belief in the power of the gospel to change people and sustain them in times of hardship.

Paul listed the two powerful effects that the gospel brings: salvation and righteousness. The initial act of the gospel is to bring redemption from sin, its immediate control, and its eternal consequences. Throughout the rest of his letter to the Romans, Paul laid out the damage sin causes and the judgment that follows. Jesus’ sacrificial death satisfies the need for judgment. Christ also empowers us to be transformed (12:1–2) so that sin does not control us. However, the ultimate form of salvation is the freedom from death and eternal separation from God (5:1).

Salvation is available to all because all people need it. Even though salvation is available to all, not everyone will receive it. It is free but not automatic. It is only effective for those who believe. Paul added that stipulation as the step of faith every person must choose to take. We must believe (trust in the work of Christ) in order to participate in God’s salvation (10:9–10).

The second effect of the gospel is righteousness. Our efforts to become righteous are not sufficient. Isaiah 64:6 declares that human-based righteousness is like filthy rags. This is a hard thing for some people to hear. We like to think we are acceptable or good enough. We are irritated at the notion that we have shortcomings; we don’t like our actions to be judged. However, our sin taints us so that we cannot enter the presence of a holy God, no matter how much we try to clean ourselves.

Romans 3 describes how all people fall short of God’s glory and his expectation of righteousness. But God loves us so much that he still made a way for us to enter his presence (5:8). He saves us and makes us righteous so that we can remain in his presence. In this new righteousness, we are no longer living life under our own inadequate power, but

APOSTLE

Apostolos means, “messenger.” The word can be used in two ways. In one sense, it means someone who carries a message. In the religious meaning, the term is the functionary title of one of the early Christian leaders who had seen Jesus in person and who were called to the initial task of advancing the gospel. This meaning is usually designated by the first letter of the word being capitalized, similar to titles like Ambassador, Governor, or Senator.

Peter, John, and the rest of the disciples were Apostles because they walked with Jesus. Paul attained his apostleship on the road to Damascus as “one abnormally born” (1 Corinthians 15:8). Although we can be messengers of the gospel and thereby be called apostles (little “a”), the title Apostle (capital “A”) is reserved for those early Christian leaders. Successive generations of Christians did not take the title for themselves.

through the power of God’s Holy Spirit in us (Romans 8). Just as we received salvation by our belief, we also receive our new righteousness by faith. We cannot achieve righteousness ourselves, but we can take hold of what God has given to us by faith.

Implications and Actions

God has demonstrated his power and his love in the gospel message. Our sin has led us away from God. We are powerless to reach him by ourselves. The gospel explains how God remedied our situation. Jesus was God. He became human. He lived a righteous (perfect) life. He died as the sacrificial substitute for all who would believe and receive his salvation by faith. He also extended his righteousness to us. Have you received salvation by faith in Jesus? Do you trust God by faith to make you righteous? If you have experienced the power of the gospel, how can you help others to do the same?

QUESTIONS

1. Compare being a “servant of Christ” to being a “slave of Christ.” What does it mean to you that Paul called himself a “slave of Christ?”
2. Remembering that apostle means “messenger,” how can we be “apostles” today?
3. Do you feel God has called you to do something specific for him? Explain.
4. What motivates you to share the gospel? How do your motivations compare with Paul’s?
5. What is the difference between the gospel bringing us salvation and it bringing us righteousness?

NOTES

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations in lessons 1–13 are from the New International Version (1984 edition).