

LESSON 1
*The Gospel is
Powerful*

FOCAL TEXT

Romans 1:1–17

BACKGROUND

Romans 1:1–17

MAIN IDEA

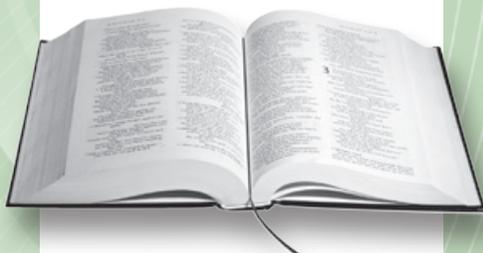
The gospel is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

How has the power of the gospel been revealed?

TEACHING AIM

To lead adults to comprehend the revelation of the gospel and its power



BIBLE COMMENTS

Understanding the Context

Paul completed his three missionary journeys and sat down in the city of Corinth in A.D. 57, across from Tertius, his writing secretary (Romans 6:22), to dictate the letter we now call Romans. Paul would soon be on his way to Jerusalem and feared his fate might be martyrdom (15:31). The Book of Acts records Paul's imprisonment in Caesarea and his appeal to Rome. The appeal was finally heard, and Paul would make his first visit to the city of which he was a natural born citizen (Acts 22:28). His purpose, as described in Romans, was to establish an anchor church in the west that could enable him to expand the Christian mission to Spain (Rom. 15:24, 28).

As one begins to read Romans, a growing sense of the importance of the gospel becomes evident, along with Paul's passion for bringing it to the people living in Rome. The Roman church was comprised of a mixture of Jews and Gentiles, since many Jews had been expelled by an edict of Emperor Claudius in A.D. 49. Among those expelled were Priscilla and Aquila (Acts 18:2). Paul mentioned them by name in his letter to the Romans, indicating the edict had been lifted at that time and that they had returned to Rome. There they would host a house church that would support Paul's ministry (Rom. 16:3).

Paul stated that he had tried to go to Rome previously but was "prevented" (1:13) and, for this reason, wrote a letter to the Romans instead. The letter was meant to establish a relationship with the Roman church in hopes that Paul would be able to build a base in Rome for future mission work. Undoubtedly, Paul wanted to write Romans to explain the gospel and to set the record straight regarding what he believed. The result of Paul's effort is his Epistle to the Romans.¹

Interpreting the Scriptures

Paul, Christ, and the Roman Church (1:1–6)

1:1–2. In these verses, Paul introduced himself as an apostle, a term meaning “one who was sent out.” God commissioned him to bring the gospel to Gentiles. Ironically God sent a Jew to Gentiles. A prominent Jewish man before his conversion, Paul would tell a Gentile world that God had a longstanding plan to save all people. At every turn, this gospel would be challenged, especially by those who wanted to maintain the “Jewishness” of the Christian faith. Those Jews argued that Gentiles needed to conform to Judaism in order to be “righteous” before God, a misunderstanding of the gospel.

1:3–4. Paul identified Christ Jesus as the Son of God who in his “earthly nature” was a physical descendant of David (see also 2 Samuel 7:14; Psalm 2:9; 89:27). By his resurrection, Jesus demonstrated his power over death and confirmed his lordship. Paul maintained that Jesus possessed both an earthly and divine nature. By using the phrase “was appointed” (Rom. 1:3), Paul did not imply that Jesus’ divinity was brought about by the resurrection, as later heretical views (including adoptionism) would claim. Rather, Paul’s idea was that Christ’s resurrection revealed his identity and confirmed his deity; the One who was human was also divine.

The word used for “power” (*dunamis*) is also used in Acts 1:8, where it described what enabled the apostles to become witnesses by the Holy Spirit. Paul used the same word in his letter to the Thessalonians, saying his message came to them not just in “word” but “power” (1 Thessalonians 1:5).

1:5–6. Paul described himself as a “servant” who was called to be an “apostle” to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15). The word “servant” (*doulos*) can be translated “slave,” a word Paul used often when describing himself. Because of the radical transformation in his life, Paul understood the debt of love he owed to Christ. In using this term, he was confirming his submission to the authority and lordship of Christ.

The Church at Rome (1:8–17)

1:8–10. It was no exaggeration for Paul to describe the reputation of the Roman church as famous. News traveled quickly in the ancient world, even across great distances. Sailors, soldiers, and merchants brought a regular flow of information from one city to another. One event in particular may have helped spread the message of the Roman church: the expulsion of Jews from the capital city of Rome in A.D. 49 because of the spread of Christianity among the Jewish communities. The Book of Acts seems to corroborate this explanation when it mentions that “Aquila and Priscilla” came to Corinth from Rome, because of the expulsion dictated by Claudius. Both Aquila and Priscilla were Christians before coming to Corinth. This means that Christianity had already arrived in Rome before Paul came to Corinth, which was between A.D. 51–52 (Acts 18:2).

One reason Paul said he wrote his letter to the Romans was because he wanted to expand his mission westward. A western expansion would require building an anchor church somewhere on the edge of the western empire. No place was better than Rome. After all, “all roads lead to Rome.” Eventually Paul hoped to take the gospel all the way to Spain, but he would need to have supplies and support nearby. Just as Paul relied on his relationship with his anchor church in the east—the church of Antioch—he would have to rely on the churches in Rome. It was always Paul’s intent to take the gospel to places it had never been proclaimed, so that he would not be building on “someone else’s foundation” (Rom. 15:20).

1:12. Paul stated that he wanted to be “mutually encouraged” by the Roman church. This was a reference borrowed from the culture of Paul’s day. At that time, a benefactor provided financial support to the lower classes, and in turn, those people paid back the benefactor in honor and support. This created what is known as a “patron-client relationship.” This is *not* the kind of relationship Paul wanted. Paul did not want to be seen as their benefactor. Instead, he wanted to develop a *reciprocal* relationship of mutual encouragement and support. Paul provided the Roman churches with a clear presentation of the gospel, and would ask them to partner with him in his mission and ministry. Frankly, he needed their financial support to accomplish his missionary task. He needed a reciprocal relationship, and he was making that clear in his letter from the beginning.

1:13–15. Paul’s visit to Rome had been delayed. Any number of factors could have caused the postponement: the impossibility of sea travel during the winter months; the needs of other churches demanding attention; or simply the travel costs. In spite of all of that, Paul wanted to come to Rome to preach the gospel to “all people.” This was the mission God had given him.

1:16. This verse has been called the heart of the Book of Romans. Here, Paul stated that he was not ashamed of the gospel. The use of the negative (“not ashamed”) is emphatic. Undoubtedly, the message of a crucified Redeemer was a major stumbling block in converting Jews and Gentiles to Christianity. Someone who had been crucified was considered an object of scorn and ridicule. However, Paul turned that idea on its head. Instead of being embarrassed in preaching the message of a crucified Messiah, he was emphatically not ashamed. By using the negative, he affirmed the gospel, gloried in the power of the cross, and confirmed his honor to proclaim it.

1:17. The phrase “the righteousness of God” is one of the most important concepts in Romans. Many interpreters see in this term a forensic image borrowed from the courtroom. God, the righteous judge, announces that the guilty are freed on the basis of “the righteousness of God.” While the terms “righteousness” and “justification” are used throughout Romans, they are both translated from the same Greek word. Paul interpreted this phrase (“the righteousness of God”) based on the Old Testament book of Habakkuk, where the prophet explained that God makes a person righteous on the basis of faith (Habakkuk 2:4), not on the basis of good works.

Focusing on the Meaning

The gospel is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes (Rom. 1:16). The word “everyone” reminds us that the gospel of Jesus Christ includes both Jews and Gentiles. God’s plan is to reach the entire world with his message of salvation.

By describing the gospel as salvation for *everyone*, Paul showed what God was doing in sending Christ as the sacrifice for sin; God was saving

us, not on the basis of our good deeds (which are nothing but filthy rags according to Isaiah 64:6), but on the basis of what Christ has already done for us. Our response should be to believe in Christ (Ephesians 2:8–10). In other words, what saves a person is not what they *do* but what God has already *done* in Christ Jesus.

Amazingly, this gospel is available immediately to all people who believe. The gospel is so powerful that even right now, at this moment as you read this, God has the power to save. God can work in the life of even the most hardened sinner. Consider the amazing story of John Newton, the author of the hymn *Amazing Grace*, whose life was forever changed as he experienced the power of the gospel. On his gravestone is written this epitaph that shows how the life of Newton, a slave trader, was changed into that of a lifelong pastor:

John Newton, Clerk,

Once an infidel and libertine,
A servant of slaves in Africa was,
By the rich mercy of our,
Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ,
Preserved, restored, pardoned,
And appointed to preach the faith he
Had long laboured to destroy . . .²

TEACHING PLANS

Discovery Plan

Connect with Life

1. Before class enlist a man to present the monologue, “Timothy’s Testimony.” (A copy of the monologue is available in “Teaching Resource Items” for this study at www.baptistwaypress.org.)

Timothy’s Testimony

(Based on Acts 20:1–6)

We all have someone in our lives who deeply influenced us—changed us—helped us find our calling. For me, Timothy, that person is Paul of Tarsus. For six or seven years I’ve been traveling with Paul and his team, learning as we go. Paul enlisted me in Lystra when he needed help for the journey through the mountains. I had no idea where we were headed—at that point Paul didn’t know either—but God led us northwest to Troas, and across the sea to Macedonia and Greece.

On that trip, Paul and Silas were beaten and thrown in jail. They healed a slave girl, preached on Mars Hill in Athens, started churches, and were run out of just about every town we visited. We walked, rode, sailed, and eventually did it all over again. Not much grass grows under your feet when you travel with Paul.

So here we are in Corinth again, waiting out the winter for spring sailing weather. For days Paul has been writing a letter to the Christians in Rome. He hasn’t been there yet, but he hopes to visit them soon. All of us want to go with him, but we need to go to Jerusalem first to take a love offering to the suffering Jewish believers there. Paul says it is important that we Gentiles help our Jewish brothers who brought us the gospel of Jesus Christ.

We were set to sail to Jerusalem for Passover in a couple of days, but Paul’s friends got wind of a plot to harm him on the pilgrim ship sailing out of Cenchrea. That changed everything. Now we are leaving tomorrow to travel back north and catch a later ship from another port.

The Roman letter? Oh, yes—Paul gave that to a trusted believer in Cenchrea who will be traveling to Rome soon. She will protect it and see that it gets to the believers there. Paul says it is the most important of all the letters he’s written.

Keep us in your prayers. We have a long road ahead.

2. Invite learners to look at the Table of Contents page of their *Study Guide*. Explain the importance of studying Romans and developing a Christian belief system using the article, “Introducing Romans: A Gospel-Centered Worldview.”

Guide Bible Study

3. Give a copy of the following quiz to each person. Encourage the class to work in pairs to define keywords from today’s lesson. After three minutes, discuss their answers. (Answers: D, C, A, E, B) (A copy of this quiz is available in “Teaching Resource Items” for this study at www.baptistwaypress.org.)

Keywords in Romans Chapter 1

(Match the words in column 1 with the correct definition in column 2)

_____	Calling	A. God’s gift of forgiveness and eternal life
_____	Power	B. Both Jews and non-Jews
_____	Salvation	C. The force that raised Jesus from the dead
_____	Gospel	D. God’s invitation to join him in his work
_____	Everyone	E. The message of salvation through the death and resurrection of Jesus

4. Call on a volunteer to read Romans 1:1–7 and explore the passage with these questions:
 - What was Paul’s calling and assigned task? (1:1, 5)
 - Compare Paul’s calling and ours: How are they similar or different? (Add insights from the sidebar, “Calling” found in the *Study Guide*.)
 - How did Paul describe the gospel? (1:2–4)

5. Divide the group into two teams. Direct Team One to search Romans 1:8–15 to discover reasons why Paul wanted to go to Rome. Direct Team Two to search Romans 15:23–29 to find more reasons Paul wanted to go to Rome. Enrich their findings with information from the section, “The Gospel’s Powerful Motivation” found in the *Study Guide*.

Encourage Application

6. Write “Empowered or Ashamed?” on a dry-erase board or poster. Invite members to read together out loud Paul’s strong declaration in Romans 1:16–17. Ask, *Why are people ashamed of the gospel today?* Challenge the class to take time this week to begin to formulate a Christian worldview based on these two verses, and come prepared to share their thoughts and questions in your next meeting.

Discussion Plan

Connect with Life

1. Prepare (or ask a class member to prepare) a simple visual for the Romans study. Secure a wall map of today’s world. Cut out from brown paper an eighteen-inch cross. Tape the cross to the center of the map. On a separate piece of paper write, *Romans: A Gospel-Centered Worldview*. Overlay that paper on the center of the cross. Add lesson titles weekly by printing each title and Scripture passage on a strip of paper.
2. Write on a strip of paper today’s lesson title and Scripture and tape it to the theme visual. Ask, *What gets you excited about life?* List responses on a large sheet of paper (sport, hobby, parenting, money, music, their mate, sharing Jesus, etc.) Ask, *How do you share your passions with friends and others?* State that this study of the Book of Romans will help us develop and share our passion about Christ with others in our world.

Guide Bible Study

3. Invite someone to read Romans 1:1–7 and use the following questions for discussion:
 - What is the difference between being a *servant* of Christ and being an *apostle* for Christ? (Share information from the sidebar article, “Apostle” found in the *Study Guide*.)
 - What is the gospel, and why is it important?
 - Do you feel God has called you to do something related to the gospel?

Encourage responses, and enrich the answers with details from the *Study Guide* section entitled, “The Gospel’s Powerful Call.” You can also find an excellent definition of the gospel in “Implications and Actions” toward the end of this lesson.

4. Ask a person to read Romans 1:8–15 as class members listen for clues to Paul’s relationship to the believers in Rome. Ask the following questions:
 - Had Paul been to Rome and founded the church there?
 - What caused him to want to visit them? (Compare Paul’s response in Romans 15:23–29.)

List Paul’s four motivations for wanting to preach in Rome (these can be found in the section “The Gospel’s Powerful Motivation” in the *Study Guide*): 1) People need the gospel; 2) Love for God compels; 3) The gospel changes lives; 4) Paul embraced the obligation. Ask, *Which of these four motivates you most to want to share Jesus with your world?*

Encourage Application

5. Suggest that members highlight Romans 1:16–17 in their Bibles, and note that these verses summarize the theme of the book. Explore further by asking:
 - What people groups in our world need to hear and receive the gospel? (children, grandchildren, homebound, handicapped, street people, prisoners, neighbors, non-English speakers, work associates, friends on social media, etc.)

- Discuss situations and circumstances that might cause believers to be ashamed, afraid, or silent about their faith.
 - How have you seen the power of the gospel in the life of someone who believed and received it? (Find good illustrations of God’s activity in *The Baptist Standard* online (www.baptistandard.com), or in *Common Call* magazine.)
6. Pass around a stack or two of sticky notes. Challenge each person to take a sheet and jot down the initials of three people with whom he or she would like to share Jesus. Also direct them to write down the reference “Romans 1:16–17.” Encourage class members to put their notes on their bathroom mirrors as a daily prayer reminder. Explain that this Romans study will help them gain courage to share Jesus more freely.

NOTES

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations in lessons 1–7 are from the New International Version (1984 edition).
2. Wikipedia, “John Newton,” accessed Dec 23, 2014, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Newton#mediaviewer/File:Grave_stone_of_John_Newton.JPG