

Session 1: The Obedience of Faith

Romans 1:1-17 · Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group discovers that Paul frames the entire letter, and the entire Christian life, as "the obedience of faith": the gospel is the power of God for salvation for everyone who believes, and believing means handing over the whole self, intellect and will, to God.

Catholic Touchstone. Faith is not mere intellectual agreement and not the opposite of obedience. The Catechism defines faith itself as "the obedience of faith," citing this very letter (CCC 143-144). From its first sentence, Romans holds believing and obeying together, a togetherness later controversies would read in sharply different ways.

What You Need to Know

Paul wrote Romans around AD 57-58, most likely from Corinth near the end of his third missionary journey, as he prepared to carry the collection for the poor to Jerusalem and then, he hoped, to travel on to Rome and Spain (Rom 15:24-28). Almost alone among his letters, Romans is written to a church Paul did not found and had never visited. That changes the letter's character: it is his fullest, most careful presentation of the gospel he preaches, offered as an introduction of himself and his message to a community he wants as a partner in mission.

The Roman church was a mixed community of Jewish and Gentile believers, and recent history had strained it. The Roman historian Suetonius records that the emperor Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome because of disturbances "at the instigation of Chrestus" (Life of Claudius 25), very likely, as most historians judge though the point is debated, a garbled reference to disputes over Christ; Acts 18:2 mentions the same expulsion. When Claudius died in AD 54 and Jewish Christians returned, on the common scholarly reconstruction they found congregations that had become largely Gentile in their absence. Who belongs, on what terms, and whose customs govern the common table: these questions sit underneath the whole letter, and Paul will address them head on in chapters 9 through 11 and 14 through 15.

Two phrases in tonight's passage carry the letter. The first is "the obedience of faith" (*hypakoe pisteos*, 1:5), the purpose Paul gives for his whole apostleship. Paul repeats the phrase in the letter's final sentence (16:26), so that Romans opens and closes with it, a deliberate frame around everything between. The second is "the righteousness of God" (1:17), which may name both something God possesses (his own justice and covenant faithfulness) and something God gives (the righteousness he works in those who believe): a both-and the rest of the letter will have to earn. What exactly Paul means by it is one of the letter's great questions, and the study will let it unfold rather than settling it tonight.

One more word deserves attention before the group meets: "gospel" (*euangelion*). In Paul's world the word was not private religious vocabulary; it was the language of imperial proclamation, the "good news" of a victory or an emperor's accession. Paul's word carries Isaiah's herald of good tidings (Isa 52:7) in its bones, and it also rang in the vocabulary of Caesar's heralds; he applies it to a crucified and risen Jewish Messiah, "descended from David according to the flesh" (1:3). The claim is public and total from the first line.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Habakkuk 2:4. Paul's thesis statement quotes the prophet: "He who through faith is righteous shall live" (1:17). Habakkuk had demanded to know how God could remain just while judgment loomed and the wicked prospered; God's answer to the prophet was that "the righteous shall live by his faith" (Hab 2:4). Paul hears in that answer the seed of the whole gospel. The group will find this passage themselves in the discovery moment, so do not reveal the reference in advance.

2 Samuel 7:12-16. Paul says the gospel concerns God's Son, "descended from David according to the flesh" (1:3). Behind that phrase stands God's covenant oath to David: an offspring whose kingdom God will establish forever. The resurrection, Paul says, is the moment this Son is "designated Son of God in power" (1:4): not made God's Son at that moment, but, as the tradition has loved to read it, publicly enthroned as the promised Davidic king. This too is a discovery passage; keep the reference back until the group finds it.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: ST. AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO

Romans is the book God used to break St. Augustine's last resistance. In the garden in Milan, in torment over his inability to change, he heard a child's voice chanting "take and read." He opened the apostle's letters and his eyes fell on Romans 13:13-14, ending in the words "put on the Lord Jesus Christ." He wrote that he needed to read no further; with the end of that sentence, as he tells it, it was as though the light of confidence flooded into his heart and all the darkness of doubt was dispelled (a faithful rendering of Confessions VIII.12). When Paul calls the gospel "the power of God for salvation," St. Augustine's conversion is what that power looks like in a single human life.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: ST. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM

St. John Chrysostom, who preached a celebrated series of homilies on Romans in the fourth century, teaches in substance that the proof of the gospel's power is in what it actually did: a message about a crucified man, carried by fishermen and tentmakers without armies or wealth, prevailed against the settled religions of the Mediterranean world. For St. John Chrysostom, Paul's "I am not ashamed" (1:16) is the boldness of a man who has watched weakness conquer strength and is no longer impressed by Rome.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: ST. THOMAS AQUINAS

St. Thomas Aquinas wrote a full commentary on Romans, and in its opening he teaches, in substance, that among all Paul's letters Romans is the one that treats the grace of Christ in itself, in its own nature, where other letters treat grace as it works in the sacraments or in the Church's members. That is why the Church has continually returned to Romans when the question is the deepest one: how is anyone saved? Reading Romans, on St. Thomas's account, is studying grace at the root.

Catechism Connection

CCC 143-144. The Catechism's definition of faith is built on tonight's passage: "By faith, man completely submits his intellect and his will to God." Scripture calls this response "the obedience of faith," and the

Catechism cites Romans 1:5 and 16:26 as its warrant. CCC 144 adds that to obey (*ob-audire*) means to listen to and submit freely to the word that has been heard, because its truth is guaranteed by God himself.

CCC 2087. The moral life has its source in faith: "Our moral life has its source in faith in God who reveals his love to us." The paragraph again invokes "the obedience of faith" from Romans as the first obligation the God of love lays on us. Faith grounds and calls forth behavior, which is Paul's point in 1:5 exactly.

THREAD WATCH (LEADER ONLY)

The inclusio. "The obedience of faith" appears at 1:5 and again at 16:26, sounding near the letter's opening and again in its closing doxology. Plant it tonight without announcing the payoff; it resolves in Session 15.

The righteousness of God. Introduced at 1:17 and left deliberately open tonight. It develops through Sessions 3-5 and comes to a head in the justification sessions.

To the Jew first. The phrase in 1:16 quietly opens the Jew and Gentile question that dominates chapters 9-11 (Sessions 10-11). Note it aloud once, then let it lie.

The sealed guess. Take-Home 1 carries the My Guess box: "In one sentence: what must a person do to be saved?" Collect nothing; participants seal their own. It opens in Session 8.

Session Goals

1. The group can explain who Paul is, why he wrote to Rome, and why this letter reads differently from his others.
2. The group discovers the Davidic promise (2 Sam 7) and the Habakkuk quotation (Hab 2:4) behind Paul's opening, finding both passages themselves.
3. The group can state Paul's thesis (1:16-17) in their own words and begin wrestling with "the righteousness of God."
4. The group encounters "the obedience of faith" (1:5) and can say why faith and obedience are not rivals in Paul's opening.
5. Each participant writes and seals a My Guess answer at home this week.

Timed Plan (75-90 minutes)

- Opening prayer and Win questions: 15 min
- Build questions 1-3 with the first discovery moment: 25 min
- Build questions 4-6 with the Habakkuk discovery and the steelman chain: 30 min
- Send questions, Live It This Week, memory verse, closing prayer: 15 min

If time runs short, pre-chosen cuts: drop the Dig Deeper box on euangelion, and compress Build question 4 (Paul's travel plans, vv. 8-15) into a single observation you supply. Never cut a discovery moment or the steelman answer.

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Romans 1:1-17 · Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Father, you have spoken to us in your Son, and your word is power: power to save, power to change what we could not change ourselves. As we open this letter, open our hearts with it. Give us honest questions, patient listening, and the obedience that comes from faith. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Win

1. Tell us about a time you got news so good you could not keep it to yourself. What did you do with it?
2. When you hear the word "obedience," what comes up for you: something positive, negative, or complicated? Where did that reaction come from?

Build

Read Romans 1:1-7 aloud.

1. How does Paul introduce himself in verse 1? What three things does he call himself, and what does each one claim?

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

"Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God" (1:1). Servant (*doulos*, literally slave) puts him wholly at another's disposal; called means the initiative was God's, not his; set apart marks him off for one purpose, the gospel. Before Paul says anything about the Romans or about doctrine, he defines himself entirely by belonging to someone else. A man introducing himself to strangers leads with achievements; Paul leads with belonging: servant, called to be an apostle, set apart (1:1).

2. In verses 3-4, what two things does Paul say about Jesus, and what changed at the resurrection?

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Jesus was "descended from David according to the flesh and designated Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead" (1:3-4). Two statements: truly human, born into David's royal line; and truly the Son of God, designated in power by the resurrection, which the royal reading hears as his enthronement. Note carefully what the resurrection did not do: it did not make Jesus God's Son (he already was). It designated him, unveiling him, in the royal-Davidic reading, as the enthroned king God had promised. The next question uncovers where that promise was made.

Discovery moment. Say: "Paul says the gospel was 'promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures' (1:2), and he leads with 'descended from David.' Somewhere in the Old Testament, God made David a promise about a descendant and a kingdom. Find it." Give the group Bibles and a few minutes; steer toward 2 Samuel 7 only if they stall (a hint: it happens when David wants to build God a house).

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

2 Samuel 7:12-16. "I will raise up your offspring after you... and I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever" (2 Sam 7:12-13). God swears to David an eternal dynasty. Centuries later, at the Babylonian conquest of 586 BC, the monarchy collapsed and Israel spent centuries holding a promise with no king in sight. Paul's opening claim is that the promise did not fail: the resurrection can be read as the enthronement of David's greater Son. The gospel is not a new idea; it is an old oath kept.

3. Verse 5: Paul says he received grace and apostleship "to bring about the obedience of faith... among all the nations." What could that phrase, the obedience of faith, mean? Is faith something you believe or something you do?

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Let the group sit with the phrase before sharing this. The genitive can be read more than one way (the obedience that consists in faith; the obedience that flows from faith), and Paul likely means the whole of it: faith itself is an act of obedience, the handing over of intellect and will to God, and alive in the charity that forms it, it produces a life of obedience, though faith separated from charity can fail to bear that fruit (CCC 1814-1815). What the phrase cannot mean is faith as mere mental agreement with no yield in the will. The Catechism defines faith with exactly this verse: "By faith, man completely submits his intellect and his will to God" (CCC 143). Flag for the group that Paul will end the letter with this same phrase; keep an ear open for it.

Read Romans 1:8-15 aloud.

4. What is Paul's posture toward these Christians he has never met? What does he want from Rome, and what does he expect to give?

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

He thanks God for them, prays for them unceasingly, and longs to see them (1:8-11). He longs to see them so that he may impart "some spiritual gift" to strengthen them (1:11), then immediately corrects himself: "that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith" (1:11-12). The apostle to the Gentiles expects to receive from them, not only to give. He also calls himself "under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians" (1:14): the gospel entrusted to him is a debt he owes to Greeks and barbarians alike, believers included (1:14-15).

Read Romans 1:16-17 aloud, twice.

5. This is the thesis of the whole letter. What exactly does Paul claim the gospel is, and for whom?

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

"It is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (1:16). Not a record of power or an argument about power: the gospel itself is God's power, doing in its hearers what human effort cannot. And its reach is universal with an order: to the Jew first, then the Greek. Note that little phrase aloud and move on; it will matter enormously later in the letter. In it, Paul says, "the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith" (1:17). Leave "the righteousness of God"

as an open question tonight; the letter will teach the group what it means.

Discovery moment. Say: "Paul ends the thesis with a quotation: 'as it is written, He who through faith is righteous shall live' (1:17). That line comes from one of the minor prophets, a man who was demanding answers from God about injustice. Find the prophet and the verse." Hint if needed: the book is only three chapters long and its name starts with H.

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Habakkuk 2:4: "Behold, he whose soul is not upright in him shall fail, but the righteous shall live by his faith." Habakkuk had protested that God seemed to be doing nothing about evil, then that God's chosen remedy (Babylon) was worse than the disease. God's answer: judgment is certain and coming, and in the meantime the righteous one lives, survives, holds on, by faith. Paul takes God's answer to a prophet in crisis and hears in it the shape of salvation itself.

Steelman: Is Faith Alone the Thesis?

Build it at full strength. Say to the group: "Here is how many of our Protestant brothers and sisters read the verses we just studied, and it is a serious reading, so let it land. Paul's thesis says salvation is 'to every one who has faith,' and his proof text says the righteous shall live by faith. Not by works, not by sacraments, not by obedience: by faith. Martin Luther read Romans 1:17 and said the gates of paradise opened to him. If Paul wanted to teach that we are saved by faith alone, apart from anything we do, could he have said it more plainly than this? And hear the position at its most careful: faith is the instrument, never the ground; obedience follows necessarily as its fruit; many who hold this keep the sacraments as real means of grace. The claim is not that obedience is optional, but that it adds nothing to the verdict." Pause. Let the group feel the force of it; someone may agree with it. Then press with the questions below.

6. Press: Stay inside tonight's seventeen verses. Has Paul already told us, before verse 16, what faith is for? Look back at verse 5.

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Yes. Before Paul ever says "the righteous shall live by faith," he has defined the purpose of his apostleship as bringing about "the obedience of faith" (1:5). Whatever faith means in the thesis, Paul has already ruled out reading it as the opposite of obedience. The faith that saves is the faith that hands over the will. Be honest with the group about the scope of tonight's answer: these verses do not settle the whole faith-and-works question, and this study will not dodge it. Chapters 3, 4, and 6 are coming, and the strongest Protestant texts will get their full hearing there. Tonight establishes only, but firmly, that Paul's own frame for the letter is faith that obeys. The door Luther walked through is real; the question is what lies on the other side of it, and Paul has sixteen chapters of answer.

DIG DEEPER

Caesar's word, Christ's claim. *Euangelion*, "good news," had deep scriptural roots (Isaiah's herald, Isa 40:9; 52:7) and was also public vocabulary in Paul's world: the proclamation of an imperial victory or an emperor's accession. A surviving calendar inscription from Priene, in Asia Minor, uses the word of the birthday of Augustus as good news for the world. Paul writes to the empire's capital and announces the

euangelion of another king, executed by Rome and raised by God. The word choice is not an accident; it is a claim about who actually rules.

Send

1. Paul says he is "not ashamed of the gospel" (1:16), writing to the most status-conscious city on earth. Where in your world is it costly to be identified with Christ, and what would unashamed look like for you there?
2. If faith means handing God your intellect and your will, which of the two is harder for you to hand over right now, and why?

Live It This Week

- Read Romans 1:16-17 aloud once a day, and each time ask in prayer: Lord, where am I ashamed of you?
- Name one concrete area where faith is asking for your obedience this week, one specific act, and do it.
- Tell one person one piece of genuinely good news about God this week, in your own words.
- On the Take-Home sheet: write your one-sentence answer in the My Guess box, seal or fold it, and bring it back every week. It opens in Session 8.

Memory Verse

"For I am not ashamed of the gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek."

Romans 1:16 (RSV2CE)

Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of David, Son of God, you kept a promise a thousand years in the making, and you have not stopped keeping promises. We give you what you ask: our minds, our wills, our week. Make us unashamed. Through the obedience of faith, make us yours. Amen.

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Leader Reference Card · Every Passage, In Order

- Romans 1:1-7 (read aloud: Paul's greeting; servant, called, set apart; vv. 3-4 the Davidic Son designated in power)
- Romans 1:2 (promised beforehand through the prophets; launches the first discovery moment)
- 2 Samuel 7:12-16 (discovery passage: the Davidic covenant; do not reveal in advance)
- Romans 1:5 (the obedience of faith; the letter's frame, planted tonight)
- Romans 1:8-15 (read aloud: thanksgiving, mutual encouragement, under obligation)
- Romans 1:16-17 (read aloud twice: the thesis)
- Habakkuk 2:4 (discovery passage: the righteous shall live by his faith; do not reveal in advance)
- Romans 13:13-14 (cited in the St. Augustine Voice, Confessions VIII.12; not read in session)
- Romans 16:26 (leader-only: the closing half of the inclusio; not read in session)
- CCC 143-144, 2087 (Catechism Connection)
- Memory verse: Romans 1:16