

Session 15: To the Only Wise God

Romans 15:14-16:27 · Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The final session lets the letter end as Paul ended it: mission (Spain, and the collection binding Gentile and Jewish churches in real communion), persons (Phoebe and the two dozen and more named saints of Rome's house churches), vigilance (mark those who oppose the taught doctrine), victory (the God of peace crushing Satan underfoot, the Bible's first promise kept), and doxology, in which the group discovers with their own eyes that the letter's last thought is its first: the obedience of faith. The study closes with a final-answer ritual and a commissioning.

Catholic Touchstone. The Catechism gives the study's title its final face: "The Virgin Mary most perfectly embodies the obedience of faith" (CCC 148). And the ending's texture is Catholic ecclesiology in miniature: a priestly ministry of the gospel, letters of communion between churches, a normative deposit of doctrine, material solidarity across the world, and a family of named saints: the Church visible and warm at once.

What You Need to Know

Movement one: the missionary (15:14-33). Paul names his ministry in liturgical vocabulary your group met in Session 12: grace was given him "in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable" (15:16). His ambition: "to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named" (15:20), which is why Rome was not his field of first evangelization, though he longed to preach among and strengthen them too (1:15), but his hoped-for staging ground for Spain (15:24, 28). First, though, Jerusalem, carrying the collection from Macedonia and Achaia "for the poor among the saints" (15:26), and note Paul's theology of it: the Gentiles "are in debt to them, for if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings" (15:27): communion is not a sentiment; it moves money. He asks their prayers for the journey (15:30-32); he knew Jerusalem was dangerous, and he was right: the trip ends in the arrest that eventually brings him to Rome in chains. He never reached Spain so far as we know; he reached Rome as a prisoner and watered it with his blood, and in the strange way of providence, the outcome can be read as exceeding the asking.

Movement two: the persons (16:1-16). First, Phoebe: "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deaconess of the church at Cenchreae... for she has been a helper of many and of myself as well" (16:1-2). Two honest notes. The RSV2CE's "deaconess" renders diakonos, a word Paul uses elsewhere for "servant" and "minister"; what precisely Phoebe's role was, Scripture does not define, and the Church, which has clarified that the ordained diaconate belongs to the sacrament of Holy Orders, does not read this verse as settling a question it does not address. What is very likely, as the Church has long inferred: Phoebe as the letter's carrier, since a commendation like this is what you gave the bearer. What is certain: a patron and protector of many (the word behind "helper" is strong), commended to the whole Roman church. Then the greetings: twenty-six names in the greetings, twenty-seven with Phoebe, plus households and unnamed kin: house churches ("the church in their house," 16:5), Prisca and Aquila who "risked their necks" (16:3-4), workers and beloved ones, many of them women, several of them slaves' names. On 16:7, be honest at the level the study has practiced: the RSV2CE prints "Greet Andronicus and Junias... they are men of note among the apostles," reading the second name as a man's; many ancient readers, St. John Chrysostom among them, read the name as Junia, a woman, and marveled at the honor; and scholars also debate whether the phrase means "notable among the apostles" or "well known to the apostles." The Church has not defined the verse; teach the certainties (an

honored, suffering, senior pair of Jewish believers, in Christ before Paul) and hold the disputed parts with open hands.

Movement three: vigilance and victory (16:17-20). One warning: "take note of those who create dissensions and difficulties, in opposition to the doctrine which you have been taught; avoid them" (16:17): there is a taught deposit, and charity toward persons never meant indifference toward it (last week's steelman, confirmed by the author). Then the promise your group will trace to the Bible's third chapter: "the God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet" (16:20). Movement four: the doxology (16:25-27), and inside it, the study's buried treasure: the mystery now disclosed to all nations "to bring about the obedience of faith." Do not say the phrase before the discovery moment; the group must find with their own eyes that Paul's last thought is his first (1:5), and then the study's title, threads, and fifteen weeks close in one turn of a page. The final ritual and commissioning follow; run them unhurried, and end on the benediction.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Genesis 3:15. Paul's promise that "the God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet" (16:20) reaches back to the Bible's first promise of redemption, spoken to the serpent in Eden: enmity between the serpent and the woman, between his seed and hers; "he shall bruise your head." The protoevangelium, the first gospel, and Paul's small addition is enormous: under YOUR feet; the Body shares the Head's victory. A discovery passage; guard it.

Romans 1:5. The session's second discovery is the letter itself: the doxology's "obedience of faith" (16:26) sends the group back to the first sentence they ever read in this study. Fifteen weeks of Scripture searching ends with the group discovering the study's own architecture. Do not rob them of it.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: ST. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM

St. John Chrysostom would not let his congregation skip the names. Preaching through Romans 16, he lingers over each greeting as over relics, and at 16:7 he marvels openly: "Oh how great is the devotion of this woman, that she should be even counted worthy of the appellation of apostle!" (Homilies on Romans 31), reading the name as Junia and the honor at full strength. And in his final homily on the letter he confesses what Romans had done to him: he loves Rome itself, he says, above all for this, that Paul wrote to the Romans in life and lies among them in death, and he longs to see even the dust of that body. The greatest preacher of the ancient Church ends the greatest letter with unashamed emotion over its people, which is exactly how a study of it should end.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: ST. LAWRENCE

The tradition recounted by St. Ambrose (On the Duties of the Clergy, Book II) tells how St. Lawrence, deacon of Rome, ordered by the prefect in 258 to surrender the Church's treasures, asked for three days, gathered the city's poor, the blind, and the lame, and presented them: these are the treasures of the Church. It is Paul's collection theology (15:26-27) made into a single unforgettable scene: the wealth Christians carry between churches and centuries is Christ in his members, and the poor of the saints are not the Church's burden but her treasury. The gridiron and the martyr's jokes come down through the wider tradition; the treasures scene is St. Ambrose's own account, and Rome has never forgotten either.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: ST. IRENAEUS OF LYONS

St. Irenaeus, the study's theologian of recapitulation, supplies the final session's deepest note: "The knot of Eve's disobedience was untied by Mary's obedience" (Against Heresies, Book III, quoted at CCC 494). What disobedience tangled in a garden, obedience loosened in a fiat: and the Catechism draws tonight's conclusion for us: "The Virgin Mary most perfectly embodies the obedience of faith" (CCC 148). The phrase your group has traced from the letter's first sentence to its last is not an abstraction; it has a face, a name, and a yes. Where Genesis 3:15 promised the woman's seed would crush the serpent, the obedience of faith is how the promise walks.

Catechism Connection

CCC 148. "The Virgin Mary most perfectly embodies the obedience of faith." The Catechism closes the study's title thread in a single sentence: the phrase Paul frames the letter with has its perfect human instance, and she said it in one word.

CCC 494. Carries the St. Irenaeus sentence (Eve's knot, Mary's obedience) and Mary's fiat as "the obedience of faith" in action: believing that nothing is impossible with God and consenting.

CCC 849-850. The missionary mandate: the pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature (CCC 850, drawing on Ad Gentes 2), sent to all nations. Paul's Spain ambition and the sending chain of 10:14-15 are not apostolic idiosyncrasy; they are the Church's permanent shape, and tonight's commissioning stands on this paragraph.

THREAD WATCH (LEADER ONLY)

THE INCLUSIO: HARVESTS TONIGHT. Fifteen weeks of restraint pay off in one discovery. Run it exactly as scripted, after the Genesis 3:15 discovery, and let a group member be the one who says "that's the first verse" out loud. Then, and only then, name the study's architecture: 1:5 and 16:26, the frame around everything.

Root of Jesse, closed. Last week's Isa 11:10 plant plus tonight's frame: descended from David (1:3) to the root of Jesse (15:12) to the obedience of faith among all nations (16:26). One sentence in the harvest.

Gen 3:15 and Session 6. The serpent-crusher promise connects Adam-and-Christ (Session 6) and Mary's obedience (tonight's St. Irenaeus Voice). Let the Voices carry it; no lecture.

The final ritual. Both written answers in hand (announced last week; message anyone who forgot to bring theirs, they can rewrite from memory). Third and final answer written tonight, all three kept. Close with the 15:13 benediction and the commissioning.

Session Goals

1. The group can describe Paul's mission logic (unreached fields, the collection as embodied communion) and what actually happened on the Jerusalem road.
2. The group meets Phoebe and the Roman saints, and can state the certainties and the honest open questions about 16:1-2 and 16:7.
3. The group discovers Genesis 3:15 behind 16:20 and the inclusio of 1:5 and 16:26 with their own eyes.

4. Every participant writes a final answer, keeps all three, and leaves commissioned: with one named mission field and the study's benediction.

Timed Plan (75-90 minutes)

- Opening prayer and Win question (one only): 10 min
- Build questions 1-2 (mission and collection; Phoebe and the names): 28 min
- Build question 3 with the Genesis 3:15 discovery, then the inclusio discovery: 20 min
- The final ritual and commissioning: 15 min
- Memory verse, closing prayer and benediction: 10 min

If time runs short, pre-chosen cuts: drop the Dig Deeper box, and compress 16:17-19 (vigilance) to one read-aloud with a single sentence of comment. Never cut the discoveries or the final ritual; they are the destination of fifteen weeks.

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Romans 15:14-16:27 · Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Father, fifteen weeks ago we opened a letter; tonight we finish it changed. Thank you for every discovery, every hard question you did not fear, every mercy the apostle showed us. Give us tonight the joy of the ending, the honesty of the open questions, and the obedience of faith to carry out the door. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Win

1. Fifteen weeks in one breath: what is the single moment of this study you will still remember a year from now?

Build

Read Romans 15:14-33 aloud.

1. Find Paul's job description (15:16), his ambition (15:20), and his itinerary (15:24-28). What is the collection, and what does Paul's "debt" logic in 15:27 teach about what communion between churches actually is? Then: did Paul's travel prayers (15:30-32) get answered?

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The job: "the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable" (15:16), Session 12's liturgical vocabulary describing evangelization itself. The ambition: virgin soil, "not where Christ has already been named" (15:20), hence Spain, with Rome as the sending base he hopes will speed him (15:24). The collection: Gentile Macedonia and Achaia sending relief to the poor among Jerusalem's saints, and Paul's logic makes it more than charity: the Gentiles "are in debt," having shared Israel's spiritual blessings, so material solidarity is communion made visible and payable (15:27): the olive tree (Session 11) with a treasury. And the prayers: Paul asked to be delivered from the disobedient in Judea and to come to Rome with joy (15:31-32). He was arrested in Jerusalem, spent years in custody, and reached Rome in chains, where tradition holds he was beheaded under Nero. The prayer can be read as answered sideways and greater: Rome got Paul for good, his martyrdom sealed his witness, and "we know that in everything God works for good" (8:28) got its author as its proof. Let the group sit with that honestly: unanswered prayers and over-answered ones can be the same prayers.

Read Romans 16:1-16 aloud, all the names, slowly; do not skip or stumble past them.

2. Meet Phoebe (16:1-2): what is she commended as, what has she done, and what is she almost certainly carrying? Then scan the list: what kinds of people make up Rome's churches, and what surprises you? Handle 16:7 honestly: what is certain, and what is disputed?

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Phoebe: "our sister... a deaconess of the church at Cenchreae," to be received "as befits the saints," "a helper of many and of myself as well" (16:1-2). A commendation like this is what a letter-bearer carried, so Phoebe is very likely, as the Church has long inferred, the one entrusted to deliver Romans itself: the

greatest letter ever written traveled in her luggage. Honest precision, as this study has practiced it: "deaconess" renders diakonos, a word Paul uses for servant and minister broadly; what her role involved, Scripture does not define, and this verse does not settle questions about Holy Orders that it does not address; her greatness needs no inflation and tolerates no erasure: patron, protector, trusted courier, saint. The list: twenty-six named in the greetings, twenty-seven counting Phoebe, plus households and unnamed kin: house churches (16:5), tentmaker missionaries who "risked their necks" for Paul (Prisca and Aquila, 16:3-4), many women laborers ("Mary, who has worked hard among you," 16:6), names common among slaves and freedmen beside possible aristocrats: a cross-section of the empire, kissing in greeting (16:16). And 16:7: the RSV2CE reads "Andronicus and Junias... men of note among the apostles." Certain: a Jewish pair, imprisoned with Paul, in Christ before him, held in honor. Disputed, and honestly so: many ancient readers, St. John Chrysostom gladly among them, read the second name as Junia, a woman; and the phrase itself may mean notable among the apostles (in the broad sense of commissioned missionaries) or well known to the apostles. The Church has not defined it; hold the open parts with open hands, and honor what is certain: the earliest Church's front line was full of households, couples, women, slaves, and people of no worldly standing whom heaven knew by name.

Read Romans 16:17-20 aloud.

Discovery moment. Say: "'then the God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet' (16:20). Crushing a serpent underfoot is the Bible's first promise of redemption, made in a garden, to a snake, about a woman and her seed. Find the Bible's first gospel, in Genesis 3."

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Genesis 3:15: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel." The Church calls it the protoevangelium, the first announcement of the gospel: from the wreckage of Eden, a promise that the woman's offspring would crush the serpent's head at the cost of a wounded heel. Paul, eleven chapters after retelling Adam's fall (5:12), applies the victory Christ has already won and anticipates its final crushing, with one staggering adjustment: "under YOUR feet." The victory is Christ's, and the Body shares the Head's triumph: the ordinary saints just named can be seen as the feet in the sentence. And notice who stands beside the promise from its first utterance: the woman. Tonight's third Voice will finish that thought. First, one more discovery, the study's last.

Read Romans 16:25-27 aloud, slowly. Then run the study's final discovery.

Discovery moment: the inclusio. Say: "Paul's doxology says the mystery is now made known to all nations for a purpose: 'to bring about the obedience of faith' (16:26). That phrase should sound familiar. Paul has used it exactly once before, in a sentence you have known for fifteen weeks. Find it." Then wait. Let someone turn to the first page of the letter and say it aloud.

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Romans 1:5: "to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations." The letter's first thought and its last thought are the same thought: Paul framed sixteen chapters, justification, baptism, the Spirit, Israel, the living sacrifice, the welcome table, inside one phrase, and this study took its name from the frame. Now harvest the whole arc aloud, briefly: faith that submits intellect and will (Session 1; CCC 143); Abraham, whose faith set out, grew strong, and was completed (Session 5); the Son

whose obedience undid the disobedience of Adam (Session 6, 5:19); hearts made "obedient from the heart" at the font (Session 7, 6:17); the law fulfilled as love by the Spirit (Sessions 9 and 13); a body offered as a living sacrifice, since to obey is better than sacrifice (Session 12); and now the mystery published among all nations for exactly this: the obedience of faith. The question your sealed guess asked, what must a person do to be saved, has spent fifteen weeks becoming this answer: receive everything, grace, Christ, Baptism, the Spirit, by a living faith that hands God everything, works through love, and perseveres, all of it supplied, sustained, and crowned by God himself. To the only wise God be glory for evermore through Jesus Christ (16:27).

The Final Answer: Closing Ritual

Everyone takes out both written answers: the Session 1 sealed guess and the Session 8 revision. Read your own two answers silently, in order. Then, at the bottom of tonight's Take-Home, write your third and final answer to the same question, dated: In one sentence, what must a person do to be saved? Keep all three together somewhere you will find them in ten years. Then two rounds aloud, brief, voluntary: (1) one sentence: how did your answer travel from the first writing to the last? (2) one sentence: what will you do differently because of this letter? Close the sharing by reading Romans 15:13 over the group as a benediction, by name if the group is small. Then the commissioning below.

The commissioning. Say: "Paul looked at a map and saw Spain: the place where Christ was not yet named, that he was built to reach. Before we pray, name your Spain silently: the person, place, or work where your obedience of faith is being sent, and be specific. The chain of 10:14-15 does not end in this room unless we end it." Allow thirty seconds of silence, then close with the prayer below.

DIG DEEPER

Why the names matter (a last word for the road). Romans ends in a crowd on purpose. The letter that scaled the highest doctrines in Scripture lands in a room of particular people: a courier, a tentmaking couple, a hard-working Mary, prisoners, households, a woman Paul calls his own mother too (16:13). Doctrine that does not land in named people has not landed; and every parish directory is Romans 16 continued, the communion of saints in its working clothes. St. John Chrysostom lingered over these names as over relics; the least we owe them is to read our own list the same way.

Send

The Send questions are the ritual and the commissioning above; nothing further is needed tonight.

Live It From Here

- Keep all three answers together, dated, and reread them yearly: on the anniversary of tonight, or on your baptismal date from Session 7.
- Take one first concrete step toward your Spain within seven days, and tell one person from this group what it was.
- Read Romans again, alone, one chapter a day for sixteen days, and watch how much of it now reads you.

- Entrust the whole of it to the one who most perfectly embodies the obedience of faith (CCC 148): one Memorare or one decade, for this group, tonight.

Memory Verse

"Through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations."

Romans 1:5 (RSV2CE)

Closing Prayer

Now to him who is able to strengthen us according to the gospel we have studied: Father, we thank you for this letter and this table, for every question you answered and every one you outrank. Crush Satan under our feet soon; send us to our Spains; and work in us, all our lives, the obedience of faith. May the God of hope fill us with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit we may abound in hope. To the only wise God be glory for evermore through Jesus Christ. Amen.

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Leader Reference Card · Every Passage, In Order

- Romans 15:14-33 (read aloud: priestly service; Spain; the collection; the travel prayers; cf. Rom 8:28)
- Romans 16:1-16 (read aloud, all names: Phoebe; Prisca and Aquila; the house churches; 16:7 handled honestly)
- Romans 16:17-20 (read aloud: mark the dissenters; the God of peace will crush Satan)
- Genesis 3:15 (discovery passage: the protoevangelium; do not reveal in advance)
- Romans 16:25-27 (read slowly: the doxology; launches the inclusio discovery)
- Romans 1:5 (the inclusio discovery's destination; the group finds it themselves)
- Romans 15:13 (the benediction, read over the group in the ritual)
- CCC 148, 494, 849-850 (Catechism Connection)
- Memory verse: Romans 1:5