

OneBook.

DAILY - WEEKLY

The Letter to the Romans

Ben Witherington III



A TWELVE-WEEK BIBLE STUDY

OneBook.

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Ben Witherington III



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WELCOME TO THE ONEBOOK DAILY-WEEKLY

John Wesley, in a letter to one of his leaders, penned the following:

O begin! Fix some part of every day for private exercises. You may acquire the taste which you have not: what is tedious at first, will afterwards be pleasant.

Whether you like it or not, read and pray daily. It is for your life; there is no other way; else you will be a trifler all your days. . . . Do justice to your own soul; give it time and means to grow. Do not starve yourself any longer. Take up your cross and be a Christian altogether.

Rarely are our lives most shaped by our biggest ambitions and highest aspirations. Rather, our lives are most shaped, for better or for worse, by those small things we do every single day.

At Seedbed, our biggest ambition and highest aspiration is to resource the followers of Jesus to become lovers and doers of the Word of God every single day, to become people of One Book.

To that end, we have created the OneBook Daily-Weekly. First, it's important to understand what this is not: warm and fuzzy, sentimental devotions. If you engage the Daily-Weekly for any length of time, you will learn the Word of God. You will grow profoundly in your love for God, and you will become a passionate lover of people.

How does the Daily-Weekly work?

Daily. As the name implies, every day invites a short but substantive engagement with the Bible. Five days a week you will read a passage of Scripture followed by a short segment of teaching and closing with a question for reflection and self-examination. On the sixth day, you will review and reflect on the previous five days.

Weekly. Each week, on the seventh day, find a way to gather with at least one other person doing the study. Pursue the weekly guidance for gathering.

Share learning, insight, encouragement, and most important, how the Holy Spirit is working in your lives.

That's it. When the twelve weeks are done, we will be ready with twelve more. Four times a year we will release a new edition of the Daily-Weekly. Over time, those who pursue this course of learning will develop a rich library of Bible learning resources for the long haul. Following is the plan for how we will work our way through the Bible.

The Gospels: Twelve weeks of the year the Daily-Weekly will delve into one of the Gospels, either in a broad overview or through a deep dive into a more focused segment of the text.

The Epistles: Twelve weeks of the year the Daily-Weekly will explore one of the letters, sermons, or the Acts of the Apostles that make up the rest of the New Testament.

The Wisdom Writings: Twelve weeks of the year the Daily-Weekly will lead us into some part of the Psalms, Proverbs, or prophetic writings.

The Old Testament: Twelve weeks of the year the Daily-Weekly will engage with some portion of the Books of Moses (Genesis–Deuteronomy), the historical books, or other writings from the Old Testament.

If you are looking for a substantive study to learn Scripture through a steadfast method, look no further. The OneBook Daily-Weekly will also be available through the OneBook App. To learn more about how to access the app, please visit OneBookApp.com.

WEEK ONE

Romans 1:1–17

Longing to See You

INTRODUCTION

At the outset of Paul's letter to the Romans we have a mixture of epistolary (letter) and rhetorical elements. Ancient letters would normally begin with the name of the addresser rather than the addressee, and then the name of the audience of the letter. In addition, there was normally a brief, perfunctory greeting, and possibly a brief health wish (i.e., "hope you are doing well") followed by the main substance of the letter. Paul has modified this format to suit his rhetorical and theological purposes. It is an interesting exercise to compare and contrast the various openings of Paul's letters not only with other ancient letters, but more particularly with Paul's other letters. In fact, there are various things that are salient when one makes such a comparison, as we shall see.

Opening remarks are always important for understanding a crucial communication and this is certainly true when it comes to as complex a discourse as Romans. Here Paul will: (1) introduce himself to a largely new audience as both a servant and an apostle; (2) indicate who Jesus is both in the flesh and by the Spirit; (3) indicate he has been praying for them and intends to come to see them; (4) indicate what the essence of the gospel of God is; and (5) indicate the benefits of embracing such good news. All of this comes by way of preparation for Paul finally visiting Rome. This is something he has often longed to do, and even planned to do, but his plans heretofore had been thwarted. In a sense then, this discourse is the wake-up call to the audience that Paul is finally coming, and they need to get ready. Partly, Paul wants them to begin to prepare not merely to receive him, but as Romans 15:24 will make

clear, to “have [them] assist [him] on [his] journey there.” This is a technical phrase, which means to provide material and monetary resources for his journey to his next mission field—Spain. While we know Paul got to Rome, we honestly do not know if he ever made it to Spain.

ONE

Introductions

Romans 1:1–7 *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 earthly life was a descendant of David, ⁴and who through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord. ⁵Through him we received grace and apostleship to call all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith for his name’s sake. ⁶And you also are among those Gentiles who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.*

⁷*To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be his holy people:*

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

Understanding the Word. In the first place, Paul does not lead with the fact that he is an apostle, much less that he is this audience’s apostle. He leads with the affirmation that he is a servant of God. This term “servant” is, in fact, what the prophets of old were often called (see Jeremiah 44:4) and, of course, we have the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53. The term, then, is not randomly chosen by Paul. Notice, as well, that Paul does not say, “I am your apostle.” While Paul was not famous for his subtlety, here he is being careful at the outset of the document so that he might establish good rapport with the audience—an audience he had not visited or converted and mostly did not know. Furthermore, verse 2 shows that Paul was thinking about the prophets here at the outset as he says that the “gospel (good news) of God” was promised beforehand through the prophets. Usually Paul refers to the gospel of Jesus Christ, but here he refers to the gospel of God, and perhaps with good reason. Paul believes, as he will say in Romans 4, that the gospel was pre-preached to Abraham—the good news of how, if one trusted the true God, one’s faith could be reckoned as righteousness, or in other words, could give one right standing with God. But, of course,

Paul also knew that Jesus, God's Son, did not come on the human stage until "the time had fully come" (see Galatians 4:4). Hence, in Paul's view it was God's gospel, before it became more specifically the gospel about Jesus. The reason for stressing this is because Paul will go on to say that this good news was for the Jew first, long before it was for Gentiles like those in Rome.

Notice, as well, that Paul goes on to stress that Jesus was of Davidic descent, something that elsewhere in his letters he barely mentions. The emphasis is on the Jewishness of Jesus (see also Romans 9) for the very good reason that he must go on and argue in Romans 9–11 that God has not forsaken his first chosen people. This is perhaps what many anti-Semitic Gentiles might have assumed if they had swallowed the rhetoric of the emperor about the Romans now being the favored people of the gods.

Verse 4 is important and needs to be translated carefully as Paul does not think that Jesus became the Son of God at the resurrection. The proper translation of the Greek would be something like "indicated" or "vindicated" "the Son of God in power." Paul clearly believes (see Galatians 4:4) that Jesus was God's Son when he was born of a woman. Indeed, he believes Jesus was God's Son from before the creation of the universe (see Philippians 2:5–11)! The resurrection, however, did two things: (1) it indicated and vindicated that Jesus was indeed the Son of God despite being crucified; and (2) it was at the resurrection that Jesus became the Son of God in power, became the risen Lord. Previously he had been the Son of God in weakness and vulnerability, but after the resurrection he was immune to disease, decay, and death, suffering and sin.

Paul then indicates that it was through this same Jesus that he was called to be an apostle to the Gentiles unto the aim of producing "the obedience that comes from faith." He also reminds the audience they are among those Gentiles whom God has called to this high calling to belong to Jesus. Scholars have long debated what the phrase "obedience that comes from faith" means. Does it suggest faith is a form of obedience? Well, of course, trusting in God is a form of doing what God wants, to be sure. But it is more likely he is talking about an obedience that flows from faith, as we shall see. The Gentiles in Rome are loved by God and called to belong to him, and be his holy people, along with Jewish followers of Jesus. All of this is much more elaborate than any opening salvo one finds in a contemporary ancient secular letter, but that is because Paul is not just following epistolary conventions, he also has rhetorical purposes here to set up the discourse which follows.

In the second half of verse 7 we finally have the proper greeting, and it is a typical Pauline one. By that I mean it involves two terms—“grace and peace.” The typical ancient opening Greek greeting was simply the word “greeting.” Interestingly, the term *charis*, which we translate “grace,” is a variant of the Greek word for greeting. And, of course, “peace” or “shalom” is the standard Jewish greeting, so Paul is greeting his audience in ways that would suit first Gentiles and then Jews in his audience. Perhaps the “grace” greeting comes first because Paul, speaking as the apostle to the Gentiles, is mainly addressing Gentiles.

1. Why is he less direct in asserting his authority in this letter than in other Pauline letters?
2. What is the point of stressing both Jesus’ Jewish descent and his new role as risen Lord since his death and resurrection?
3. Paul introduces himself to his audience as “servant of God” rather than “apostle.” If you were to introduce yourself without a title (more at the level of identity), how would you do it? (i.e., Who are you?)

TWO

Establishing Rapport

Romans 1:8–10 *First, 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 in my spirit 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.*

Understanding the Word. The exordium proper, or opening remarks that prepare for the argument which follows, can be found in verses 8–10 and it takes the form of a prayer report. Paul says he thanks God for the audience’s faith, which is well known in the Christian communities throughout the entire empire. This may be a bit of rhetorical hyperbole, but that was appropriate in the exordium, where the goal was to make the audience receptive to the discourse that was about to follow. First the speaker must establish his

ethos—his authority and right to address the audience—and he has done this in verses 1–7. Then he must establish rapport with the audience to make them open to hear what is to follow, and this he does in verses 8–10. Paul indicates he fervently and constantly prays for the Roman Christians, and then finally he indicates he has long wanted to visit them. This leads directly to the *narratio*, or the narration, of facts relevant to the coming discourse.

1. Why do you think Paul tells the audience what he has been praying about for them, rather than simply offering a prayer at this point in the letter?
2. What does Paul single out as the outstanding feature of the audience that many other Christians already had heard about, even if they lived a great distance away?
3. As you read this text today, who are you remembering in your prayers?

THREE

A Narration of Relevant Facts

Romans 1:11–15 *I 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 and sisters, 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. ¹⁵That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are in Rome.*

Understanding the Word. The *narratio* stretches from verses 11–15 and it is very interesting to see the sort of tap dance Paul does in these verses, carefully tiptoeing around the fact that while he is the apostle to the Gentiles, he has not yet established himself as the apostle of this particular largely Gentile audience and has not even yet visited them! Thus Paul first says, quite honestly, that he longs to come to them to impart some spiritual wisdom to strengthen their

faith. But then he realizes this might seem too direct an assertion of his role as their apostle, so he backtracks and says that what he means is he longs to come so that there could be some mutual sharing of benefit between Paul and this audience. Paul says that many times he had thought and purposed to come to Rome, but his plans up to the writing of this document had always been thwarted. (He does not say here by whom, but in Acts it is God's Spirit that does not permit Paul to go, for instance, to Ephesus in Asia or into Bithynia when he wants to do so. See Acts 16:6–7). Paul nonetheless comes clean at the end of the narratio as to his main purpose for coming to Rome: that he might convert some more Gentiles, and add to the Christian harvest of such folk that were already there.

As I said, this is a delicate dance between asserting authority, and recognizing that the audience does not yet recognize Paul as their apostle. This is the kind of rhetoric one uses in first-order moral discourse—the opening address to a new audience. Notice that Paul says he has an obligation to both Greeks and non-Greeks. It is interesting that Paul chooses here and immediately hereafter, to use the more specific term “Greek” rather than “Gentile” (cf. verses 14 and 16). Here Greek is contrasted with the non-Greek speaker or “barbarian.” The Greek term *barbaros* from which we get the word *barbarian* actually means someone who could not speak Greek. In verse 16, however, the contrast is between Jew and Greek. Paul's point is that he is obligated to evangelize all sorts of people, including all sorts of Gentiles, both Greek-speaking and non-Greek-speaking. But as for the gospel itself, it is for the Jew first, and also for the Greek speakers!

1. Why do you think Paul had been prevented from coming to Rome before the writing of this letter?
2. Does Paul view himself as simply the apostle to the Gentiles?
3. Paul has been sensitive to not assert too much authority in his opening address. What might you personally learn from Paul in his tactful approach to this new audience?

FOUR

The Thesis Statement (Part I)

Romans 1:16 *For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile.*

Understanding the Word. Then finally we come to verses 16–17, which are the *propositio*, or thesis statement, of this entire Roman discourse. It will require some close attention as the major theme of what follows is announced here. It is interesting that this thesis statement begins with a remark about what Paul is not ashamed of: the gospel. Why does he put it this way? Likely it is because of the content of this good news message, namely that a Jewish crucified manual worker from Galilee had been raised from the dead and was now the risen Lord of all! Many Gentiles would have thought that suggesting a Jew might be a world savior was laughable if not shameful. But more, certainly many more, perhaps most Gentiles' instinctive reaction to the idea of a crucified man being the savior was a shameful and ridiculous notion. Crucifixion was the most shameful way to die in antiquity, and no one thought it had any redeeming value. Thus it is that Paul says he is not ashamed of this message, and proclaims it boldly.

Why is he not ashamed? Because in fact this message has power, life-changing power, power to save “everyone who believes,” the Jew first, and Greeks as well. The emphasis on the word translated here as “everyone” will be echoed in various places later in the discourse, for instance in Romans 6:10. Jesus did not come to die for and to redeem just some prechosen elect group of people, whether Jewish or Gentile. He came to die for all, and salvation comes to all who believe, without prescreening. This is precisely why this message is good news for all persons with whom Paul shares the message.

1. Why does Paul start by telling the audience what he is *not* ashamed of?
2. What might have been seen as shameful about the gospel message?
3. Have you ever been ashamed of being a Christ-follower? What was the source of that shame?

FIVE

The Thesis Statement (Part II)

Romans 1:17 *For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.”*

Understanding the Word. Verse 17 is a controversial and much-debated verse so we will unpack it carefully. Paul insists that “the righteousness of God” has been revealed. This verse is clearly connected to the previous one by the word *gar*, translated as “for.” What is this “righteousness of God”? In the first place it likely refers to God’s moral character, which has been revealed in the Scriptures and more clearly in the death of Jesus for all sin. This word *righteousness* and its cognates—righteous, to make righteous, to set right, justice, to be just, and so on—will be the constant theme throughout the following discourse. The righteousness of God, however, refers not only to his justice (an example of which we see in Romans 1:18–32), but to his work of redemption as well. God is not merely interested in meting out justice in a wicked and sinful world, but he is also interested in redeeming that world. And so paradoxically we can talk about God’s redemptive judgments. He chastens those he loves, and any judgments prior to the final judgment are meant to be disciplinary, not punitive.

The next phrase literally reads in the Greek “from faith” or “the faithful one unto faith.” This is the phrase that Martin Luther surprisingly and wrongly translated “by faith alone.” More likely Paul means “from the faithful One (either God or Jesus) unto those who have faith.” This makes verses 16–17 more nearly parallel, both referring to the benefits that come from the gospel for those who have faith in it. This reading makes better sense, too, of another controversial phrase to be found and discussed later in Romans: “the faith of Jesus Christ,” which turns out to likely mean “the faithfulness of Jesus” (even unto death on the cross). That’s what the obedience of faith meant for Jesus.

But then finally, Paul offers a somewhat edited proof text from the Old Testament, which in this case comes from Habakkuk 2:4. As we have the quotation here the Greek reads “just as it is written ‘but the righteous from faith (or faithfulness) shall live’” (author’s translation). There are several possible

ways to interpret this: (1) but those who are righteous by faith shall live; (2) but those who are righteous shall live by faith; (3) but those who are righteous shall live from faithfulness; (4) but the righteous one shall live from (his) faithfulness. This last interpretation would be the one closest to the Hebrew text of Habbakkuk 2:4, which simply says, “but the righteous person shall live by his faithfulness” (author’s translation). One possible reason to prefer option number four is because Paul will go on in Romans 4 to tell the story of Abraham who “believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness.” That is, both the faith and the righteousness were Abraham’s. There was no substituting of someone else’s righteousness for Abraham’s. Abraham’s faith was reckoned as Abraham’s righteousness.

In terms of the Greek word order, most scholars think that the phrase “by faith” modifies “the righteous” rather than “shall live,” and I would suggest this is probably correct. If the example of Abraham is already in mind then the point would be that one has right standing with God like Abraham by trusting God, as Abraham did. The verb “[shall] live” here then would refer to everlasting life, not physical life without trouble or trauma. In other words, salvation and everlasting life are gifts that come to the believer who trusts in God and in the good news about Jesus Christ. Having established the theme of the following discourse, Paul will then show how this truth plays out for Jews, Greeks, and even “barbarians.”

1. What does Paul mean by “the righteousness of God”?
2. Why is “the righteousness of God” such a crucial concept for Paul?
3. Consider this statement: “He chastens those he loves, and any judgments prior to the final judgment are meant to be disciplinary, not punitive.” How might this comment shape your understanding of God? Have you ever wondered if God was punishing you? What might be the difference between being punished versus being disciplined in love?

COMMENTARY NOTES

General Comments. One of the real problems in the study of the book of Romans is that the whole book has been examined profusely by Christians through the ages, read and read again. In the modern era very little account has been paid to the rhetoric of Romans until the last two decades or so. The document has, on the one hand, been read as just a Pauline letter (even though it is nothing like most ancient letters except at the margins of the document), and on the other hand, it has been read as if it were some sort of compendium of Pauline theology, ignoring its specificity in addressing unique social and congregational issues in Rome. As it turns out, Romans is both a highly rhetorical document and highly specific in addressing the social situation in the Roman church. Furthermore, the theologizing and ethicizing we find in Romans is done from and into a specific context and with specific purposes. This is not a one-size-fits-all discourse that was intended to be handed to any and every sort of Christian audience and situation. This of course, in itself, makes it a challenge for the modern reader and user of Romans. What happens when we are reading and studying Romans with an audience nothing like Paul's audience in this letter? What happens if our concerns and major interests are not those of the apostle to the Gentiles? Unfortunately, what usually happens in the race to the application finish line is that we misuse

this precious document and misapply its lessons. Hopefully this study will help us to avoid these pitfalls.

Fortunately for us all, there are not a lot of technical text-critical problems in Romans, unlike many other New Testament documents. Only rarely do the variants we find affect interpretation and meaning in any significant or dramatic way. This is especially good news because the actual challenge of the substance of this discourse is so considerable that it is with a sigh of relief that we do not have to deal with all sorts of viable textual variants that change the whole way we read a passage.

Day 5, verse 17. Here is a good place for a comment about the controversial phrase *dikaiousune theou*, "the righteousness of God." Sometimes this phrase has been taken to refer to God's covenant faithfulness, perhaps especially in light of some of the things Paul says in Romans 9–11. In other words, it is a catchphrase that does not denote what it seems to on the surface of the words. There are problems with this whole approach to the matter. In the first place, the main audience of Romans, as almost all scholars agree, is Gentile. It is not addressed to a largely Jewish Christian audience. As such, it needs to be kept in mind that the God of the Bible had no prior obligations to Gentiles. He had no covenant with them before the new covenant. So it would hardly be apt for Paul to begin

addressing the largely Gentile audience in Rome and talk to them about God's wonderful covenant faithfulness which he did not owe to them! Secondly, while Paul will go on to say that God has not forgotten nor forsaken his first chosen people, the Jews, at the same time Paul is well aware and affirms that the Jews have broken the Mosaic covenant, again and again, and especially so in rejecting their own Messiah! When a covenant is broken, God has no longer an obligation to keep it. All covenants were conditional in nature and led to promises like the following one: "if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land" (2 Chron. 7:14). Notice the condition.

No, Paul is not talking about God's covenant faithfulness in using the phrase "the righteousness of God," he is talking about God being true *to his own character*, his own nature—both just and merciful, but fair and compassionate, both righteous and loving. Furthermore, he is talking about God's intent not merely

to judge the world's sin, but also his intent to set right the sinner! It is not an either-or matter. It involves both judgment and redemption, and indeed redemption through judgment on the cross. We can even use the phrase redemptive-judgment to talk about God's dealings with his people, including the Gentiles. God's ultimate aim is the rectifying of the situation in a fallen world, where all are like Adam and have sinned and lack now the glorious presence of God in their lives.

This leads to a further key point. Since Paul is largely addressing Gentiles and talking about them until Romans 9–11, not surprisingly it is not the story of Israel or the Mosaic covenant or Moses that figures largely in the discussion in Romans 1–8. It is rather the story of Adam (see Romans 5:12–21), a more universal story, a story which resulted in the devastations described in Romans 1:18–32. Paul is quite deliberately putting the gospel on more universal footing by comparing and contrasting the first Adam and his race, and the last Adam, who is Christ, and those who are "in him." This is the story one must keep in view in the reading of Romans 1–8.

WEEK ONE

GATHERING DISCUSSION OUTLINE

- A. Open session in prayer.
- B. View video for this week's readings.
- C. What general impressions and thoughts do you have after considering the video and reading and the daily writings on these Scriptures?
- D. Discuss questions based on the daily readings.

1. **KEY OBSERVATION:** In Romans, we have a well-travelled, world-weary apostle who nevertheless is eager to get on with evangelizing the rest of the Gentile world in the western part of the empire. Sometimes reading Paul's letter, and sensing his indefatigable spirit, can just make one tired.

DISCUSSION QUESTION: Where did all that eagerness, earnestness, and energy come from?

2. **KEY OBSERVATION:** After his conversion, Paul knew all too well that zeal without knowledge can be a dangerous and even deadly thing. Whenever Paul speaks about things he regrets about his past, the one thing that keeps coming up is his zealous persecution, prosecution, and even advocacy of the execution of Christians (see Galatians 1:13 and 1 Corinthians 15:9).

DISCUSSION QUESTION: What do you notice about Paul's zeal after his conversion? To what did his zeal lead after his conversion?

3. **KEY OBSERVATION:** Paul understood that the church was a voluntary society. People were free to join or to leave. There was nothing compelling them to join the new Jesus movement. This being so, persuasion, powerful persuasion, was often needed to correct or direct a congregation in the ways it should believe and behave.

DISCUSSION QUESTION: What can the church today learn from Paul's example?

4. **KEY OBSERVATION:** Any kind of justice system is an accountability system, and it can be no accident that justice is one of the things on the mind of Paul when he refers to the righteousness of God, and then goes on to tell the tale we hear in Romans 1:18–32.

DISCUSSION QUESTION: In what way is a justice system an accountability system?

5. **KEY OBSERVATION:** One of the important things to stress from the outset about Romans is that you need to hear the discourse from start to finish before you really try to evaluate it in detail. It is meant to be heard as it was written out, and its effects are intended to be cumulative.

DISCUSSION QUESTION: If you have not done so, read Paul's entire letter to the Romans in one sitting. What insight have you gained by doing this?

- E. What facts and information presented in the commentary portion of the lesson help you understand the weekly Scripture?
- F. Close session with prayer.