



## BIBLE STUDY

TO GOD'S BELOVED: PAUL'S LETTER TO THE ROMANS

### SESSION 1

# Be Mutually Encouraged

by Sarah Henrich

## Theme Verse

**Romans 1:16**

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.”

## Opening

### Hymn

“I Love to Tell the Story,” *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 661, verses 1 and 3

## Prayer

Gracious God, you call your people together that we may deepen our faith in you and fervent love toward one another by studying your word. As we gather, give us ears to hear these ancient words from St. Paul to believers in Rome. Open our hearts and minds with your Holy Spirit that his words may still today strengthen our faith and help to shape our daily lives. Give us patience and good humor with one another and with our brother Paul, the more fully to appreciate the depth and power of your gift to us in Christ Jesus. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

## Ancient Letters

“Did we get any interesting mail?” “Anything for me?” “Did the mail come yet?” At our house, we're always

eager to see what came in the mail. Never mind that e-mail and cell phones make communication easy. We still look forward to the mail coming to our house, bringing who knows what exciting news.

In this year's Bible study, we will read some mail—St. Paul's letter to the followers of Jesus in Rome. We are blessed to have this letter from the apostle in our New Testament. It allows us a glimpse into those very earliest years as believers gathered into little groups all around the Mediterranean world. What did Paul write? What did he think was important for the Roman Christians to hear? How do we read mail addressed to others so long ago and find strength and guidance for our own time? These and many other questions will be part of our study and conversation as we come to know more deeply this most prized letter from Paul.

1. Let's start in our own world. Have you ever thought about how much information you get about a letter even before you open it? A long white envelope with a machine-printed address label suggests that there's something official inside. What are some other sizes, shapes, and colors of envelopes that come to your house? What do you expect to find inside?

In Paul's world, letters were the only way to communicate with people at a distance. Hand-written letters were essential to maintain friendships, express sympathy, carry on business, even introduce family members to one another. It is no surprise that the New Testament is full of letters. In fact, 21 of the 27 books in the New

Testament are letters, sometimes called epistles. Other New Testament writings quote letters (see, for example, Acts 15:23–29 and Revelation 2:9–11).

These letters are the oldest Christian writings we have. A generation before the Gospels were written, letters were circulated among the small communities of believers to strengthen their faith, help them understand what it meant to follow Jesus, and to build a network, a united body of believers. We can only imagine how precious these letters were as they came to a house church, were read aloud to the community, and then copied and the copies shared further.

2. Ancient letters, like our own today, were written according to clear patterns. Take a moment and fill in the chart below to remind yourself how the greeting in a letter conveys meaning and creates certain expectations.

Few people in Paul’s time could read; most people heard letters read aloud to them. Knowing this, most letter writers followed a familiar four-part pattern; this made it easier for listeners. Paul uses this pattern in his own letters, so it will be helpful for us to be familiar with it too.

- Greeting. Most letters began with the name of the writer followed by the names of the addressees and then a word of greeting.
- Thanksgiving or prayer for the health of recipients.
- Body of the letter. This section varied in length

and style, depending on the type of letter.

- Closing. This section might include travel plans and greetings to be shared from and with others.

Paul takes advantage of this pattern to strengthen his communications. There are two important ideas to keep in mind as you read Paul’s letters.

- The ancients understood letters as a substitute for being there in person. Paul’s letters represent the presence of Paul himself.
- Most people in Paul’s day were not able to read or write. They would have *heard* these letters. The letters were written for the ear rather than for the eye.

If you have time, let’s look at a short example before we turn to Paul’s letter to the Christians in Rome. If not, feel free to skip ahead to “Paul’s Letters.”

3. Look at Paul’s letter to Philemon using the chart on the next page. Read the greeting section. How do you think you would have felt if you had been in Philemon’s house church and heard this section read aloud? Now read the thanksgiving section. What expectations might you have had upon hearing these words from Paul?

### Paul’s Letters

In the New Testament there are seven letters that scholars agree come from Paul himself: Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians,

<i>Opening</i>	<i>Kind of Letter</i>	<i>Expectation</i>
<i>Dear Mom,</i>		
<i>Mr. and Mrs. John Doe request the honor of your presence</i>		
<i>Dear Mrs. Smith:</i>		
<i>Hi Mary,</i>		
<i>Dear Sir or Madam:</i>		

Section	Verses	Expectations
Greeting	1–3	
Thanksgiving	4–7	
Body	8–20	
Closing	21–26	

and Philemon. They are arranged in our Bibles beginning with the longest and ending with the shortest. Six of these letters, including Romans, are addressed to groups of believers in cities. The letter to Philemon is the only letter addressed primarily to an individual. Even the letter to Philemon, however, is not a private letter. There are other addressees, including the assembly that meets in Philemon’s house.

Paul develops the standard parts of a letter to establish a tone and set an agenda. He makes especially good use of the Thanksgiving section of his letters to provide clues about the themes he will address. As listeners gathered to hear Paul’s letter read, they did not have to wait long for a phrase or sentence that would help them see what Paul would focus on—and neither do we.

We begin with Paul’s greeting, keeping in mind that Paul has not yet been to Rome. Belief in Jesus as

God’s Christ (Greek for Messiah) had been carried to Rome by others. In the first six verses, Paul carefully identifies himself.

**READ ROMANS 1:1–6.** *Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God . . .*

4. What points does Paul make about himself? Pick out the words he applies to himself.

The word translated *servant* in most Bibles really means *slave* in the original Greek. Paul not only serves Jesus Christ, he literally belongs to him. Paul spends most of these initial verses talking about God and Jesus. The beginning of Romans is like a capsule version of Paul’s creed—what Paul believes about God and about his own calling to bring all Gentiles, that is, non-Jewish people—to faith in Christ.

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Scholars have worked hard to figure out when and where Paul wrote his letters, but there is no firm agreement about either date or location. The earliest letter was probably 1 Thessalonians, written in about the year 48.

The letter to the Romans is believed to have been written in the mid-50s. We do not know

how or when Christians arrived in the imperial city, but we do know that by the time Paul wrote, there were already many small groups of believers in Rome. (See “When in Rome,” p. 16.)

There had been Jews in Rome for more than 200 years by the time Paul wrote. Among these Jews and their Gentile neighbors, some had come to believe that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah of God. It was to this mixed group

of Jewish and Gentile Christians that Paul directed his letter.

Many historians believe that it was a controversy among Jews about the new Christian ideas that led the Emperor Claudius to expel all Jews from Rome in the year 49 (see Acts 18:2). Paul wrote his letter after Claudius’ death in the year 54, when many Jews, both those who believed in Jesus and those who did not, had returned to Rome and settled back into their lives.

**READ ROMANS 1:7.** *To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

This is a short and sweet greeting. Paul does not speak of the Romans as part of an assembly (he does not use the Greek word *ekklesia*, a gathering of people for a meeting). No, the Romans are simply “all God’s beloved.” Paul is careful not to tread on anyone’s toes, as he might have if he had named groups or households of believers he does not know well.

5. Have you ever had to write a letter or helped someone else write a letter to an unfamiliar person or institution? How did you present yourself in the best light? Why do you think it matters?

#### **IF TIME PERMITS TWO MORE LETTERS**

Turn to 1 Corinthians and Galatians. Find the greeting section. Read and compare them in discussion. Go on to the thanksgiving section in 1 Corinthians. It is missing in Galatians. What themes do you see raised in 1 Corinthians? How do you think the Galatians might have felt when their letter from Paul lacked a thanksgiving section?

## **The Theme of the Letter to the Romans**

In 1:8–15, the thanksgiving section of the letter to the Romans, we are drawn into Paul’s theme. He tells the Romans how he has prayed to be with them for mutual encouragement of one another’s faith. He longs to proclaim the gospel among them, a gospel that it is his special call to bring to Gentiles (1:5, 13). If you had been one of the Romans listening to this letter, your ears would certainly have pricked up by now. Paul has mentioned the “gospel of God” several times already: immediately in verse 1, again in verse 9 (where God’s Son is brought into it), and yet again in verse 15. Our first question for Paul is, “What do you mean by that?”

He opens the body of the letter with his direct answer in verses 16 and 17.

*<sup>16</sup>For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. <sup>17</sup>For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, “The one who is righteous will live by faith.”*

Even this answer needs some explanation. We will work on three main phrases. You may feel that this is a lot of work for only two verses, but please have

Paul planted churches in cities. He did not stay long anywhere, but followed his call from one city to another. Why would such a busy man take the time to write such a long letter as Romans? He gives us many reasons. He wrote to seek the support—both spiritual and financial—of the Roman believers for his mission to Spain (Romans 15:22–24). He wrote also to recommend Phoebe, his co-worker (16:1) and possible donor, who

may have carried Paul’s letter. Because Paul was seeking assistance from the Romans, he also wrote to introduce himself and explain his theology.

All these reasons were based on Paul’s self-understanding as “apostle to the Gentiles” (11:13). He had a mission to take God’s Good News in Jesus Christ to the Gentiles and create a people of faith (see 15:9–13 and 16:26).

However, his goal was not just

to bring individuals to belief in Jesus Christ—his goal was to create a people, one people. For that reason, he also wrote to stress how believers ought to live together (chapters 12–15) as a people in Christ. For Paul, a Jew deeply shaped by Scripture and God’s promises, it was of paramount importance to show that God’s promises were trustworthy, even though most Jews did not accept Jesus as the Messiah.

patience. These verses are crucial to understanding Paul's letter to the Romans.

- “Ashamed of the gospel.” With this phrase Paul uses his own Scriptures to help him express his confidence in God. The words *shame* and *ashamed* appear many times in the psalms and the prophets. Isaiah writes, “I know that I shall not be put to shame; [God] who vindicates me is near” (50:7–8). Paul makes clear that like those who announced God's presence and purposes in ages past, he too is bearing God's truth into his own time and place.
- “The power of God for salvation.” Paul talks about the gospel as power. It is an event, a real invasion of ordinary life by Jesus' death and resurrection. It is a power that has changed creation forever and is of God's making.
- “The righteousness of God is being revealed.” The idea of *God's righteousness* can be understood in three ways, all present at once. It can mean God's keeping of God's promises to Israel. It can also refer to God's justice in relation to the whole creation, including the Gentiles whom God created and wanted to redeem. Finally, God's righteousness is God's power and will to put things to rights. This will of God to make things right for all God's creatures is revealed, Paul says, in the powerful event of Jesus' death and resurrection. Paul spends much time in this letter explaining how this is, why it was necessary, and what it means for how humankind is called to live.

6. Have you ever been in a place or situation that needed to be put to rights? What was it? How did you feel when things were in order again? What do you imagine the world will be like when God has it fully put to rights?

If you have time, you might sketch a picture or create a collage that expresses your sense of everything put to rights.

All these thoughts are drawn together in verse 17. Paul uses a Greek word, *pistis*, often translated as *faith*. It can as well be translated *faithfulness* or *trust*. Paul's construction of this sentence is difficult to put into English, but a literal translation might be, “From faith/faithfulness/trust for faith/faithfulness/trust.” Paul helps us understand by quoting Habakkuk 2:4: “The righteous live by their faith” (or “by faithfulness”). This quotation caps our two verses, helping us understand what Paul means.

Yet even these words can have more than one meaning. Paul is almost poetic here. He reaches for language to express all that he wants to say about how God never gives up on God's people, and about Jesus, the Righteous One whose faithfulness to God brought humanity new life. At the same time, this quotation suggests that those who believe that God raised Jesus from the dead are called to trust God just as Jesus did.

#### IF TIME PERMITS TRANSLATIONS

Compare translations of Romans 1:17 in KJV, NIV, NRSV, and any other Bibles you might have on hand. How do the translations differ? Are you surprised by any of the translations? In what way?

Now you have gotten past the most difficult hurdle in reading the letter to the Romans—unpacking Paul's rich, poetic, compact language. Think of how hard it must have been for him to get his big ideas into a few memorable words. No wonder it is so demanding of us to hear him with understanding. But it is worth it.

So often we reach for words ourselves to express the deepest feelings and convictions we have, struggling to find the words and never feeling quite satisfied. Have you had the experience of looking at one card after

another in a store, rejecting this one as too silly, that one as too sentimental, searching and searching to find one that's just right?

Surely Paul reached out for familiar words to express his joy in God's costly faithfulness to God's own promises, his hope that God was bringing in a new day, a new creation. It is this that he wishes to proclaim to the Romans.

### **Discipleship: Gratitude and Listening**

We have been given the gift of overhearing Paul's thoughtful and passionate attempt to express his trust in God's gracious gift of redemption and reconciliation to all people. We will also hear Paul's humble conviction that neither he nor any other person knows God's timetable or God's methods for gathering Jews, Gentiles, and all creation together.

As disciples of this same God, indeed, as part of the very body of Christ, we are called to lives like Paul's in two main ways. First, Christian life is marked by deep-down gratitude. Even in the hard times, our bottom line is gratitude for God's persistent presence in this creation. (See "Attitude of Gratitude," p. 10.)

7. How do you express yourself to God in prayer? Can you be truthful about what is happening in your life and how you feel about it?

A second mark of our lives as disciples is humble listening. Often when we listen patiently to someone trying to bring her ideas to speech, some small revelation can occur for us and for her. We can come to a better understanding of our sister or brother as a child of God. We may even see how God is at work in their lives. Now there would be a reason for gratitude. Listening for

God and living with gratitude weave together in our lives in amazing ways. (See "With Kindness and Good Cheer," p. 22.)

8. Can you think of a time you listened at length to someone and caught some glimpse of God at work? What were the circumstances? What did you learn?
9. What gets in the way of patient listening for you? What can you do to increase your ability to listen?

### **Closing Prayer**

Gracious God,  
Thank you for this time of patient listening to your word. Strengthen us to hear you through our sisters and brothers in daily life. Fill us with gratitude for your patience and mercy with us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

### **Hymn**

"Will You Come and Follow Me," *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 798, verse 1

### **Looking Ahead**

In our next steps with Paul, we will hear him tell us why he believes that the world so desperately needed God's merciful rescue. Paul assures us of God's faithfulness even though all people have wandered away to serve other gods.

You may want to read Romans 2 and 3, especially 3:21–26, before the next session. Practice that patient listening with our beloved St. Paul! 🌸

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*Watch Sarah Henrich discuss this Bible study on video.*

Go to [www.lutheranwomantoday.org](http://www.lutheranwomantoday.org).

## BEGINNING A NEW BIBLE STUDY

Our ancestors in faith believed that studying Scripture was not only a way to learn, but a way to be in the presence of God, a way to pray. As we gather for study, we thank God together.

### PREPARATION

Tell people in advance that the group will pray together to rejoice in the gift of Bible study before the session begins. This ritual will take no more than five minutes.

Create a focal point in your meeting room by spreading a cloth on a table in the front or center of the room. On the cloth, place a candle, a glass bowl of water, a cross, and a Bible open to Paul's letter to the Romans. Have ready matches or a lighter.

You may also wish to place a few *LWT* subscription envelopes and promotional brochures, as well as Women of the ELCA individual partnership brochures, in a basket by the door so that participants may pick them up as they leave. (Call 800-638-3522, ext. 2730, to request materials.)

### OPENING

**SPEAKER 1:** The Lord be with you.

**ALL:** **And also with you.**

**SPEAKER 1:** Jesus our Savior promised us that where two or three

are gathered in his name, he is here with us. (Light the candle.) Let this flame remind us of his presence in our hearts, in our words, in our Scriptures (touch the Bible), in our sacraments (touch the water), and in our gathering together.

**ALL:** **Amen.**

**SPEAKER 2:** God's inspired word in the Bible is ever ancient, ever new. Over the centuries, God's word has touched the hearts and souls of millions of people all over the world.

**ALL:** **We thank God together for God's great gift.**

**SPEAKER 1:** Our ancestors in faith saw study of God's inspired word in the Bible as a way to be in God's presence; they saw study of Scripture as a way to pray.

**ALL:** **We thank God together for God's great gift.**

**SPEAKER 2:** Lutheran women have gathered to study the Bible together for generations. This rich tradition is a great gift to the church.

**ALL:** **We thank God together for God's great gift.**

**SPEAKER 2:** As we gather today, we know that we are united with Lutheran women all over the country in studying this same text.

**ALL:** **We thank God together for God's great gift.**

**SPEAKER 1:** Our Lord told us to go out and preach the Good News to all people. Our studying Scripture together empowers us to do that.

**ALL:** **We thank God together for God's great gift.**

Pause

**SPEAKER 1:** Each one of us knows at least one woman who would rejoice in being welcomed to study the Bible in community.

**SPEAKER 2:** Each one of us knows at least one woman who would rejoice in being welcomed to our community of women.

**ALL:** **We ask God, what shall we do? How shall we take action?**

Pause

**SPEAKER 2:** Let us pray.

Blessed Lord, you bring us together in community around your holy Bible. We offer thanks and ask your blessing on all the women who gather to feast upon your word through this Bible study. Now inspire us, we pray, to generosity in sharing your many great gifts, so that we may be mutually encouraged by one other's faith. In the name of Jesus our Savior, we pray. Amen.

**ALL:** **Amen.**