

Journey INTO THE Bible

Leader's Guide

The Letter to the Romans: Lesson Two

Romans 1—4

Introduction

Suggestion: While people are gathering, ask them to take a seat at any table and introduce themselves to those they might not know. When you are ready to begin the Bible study, start with an opening prayer. Use either the one below or a prayer of your own choosing.

Opening Prayer

Blessed are you, O God, for you gave Paul the mission of bringing your gospel to a waiting world. He did not let opposition deter him, nor did he permit hardship to keep him from fulfilling your will. Let us, whose lives are so much easier than that of Paul, be as courageous as he was. Grant us the insight we need to understand his teaching. We ask this in the name of Jesus the Lord.

Suggestion: Welcome everyone and make any important announcements, such as location of the restrooms. Remind participants to set cell phones to vibrate or turn them off. Then read “Setting the Stage.” You can introduce it as a brief word from the author of this Bible study to set the context for this lesson.

Setting the Stage

Paul introduces himself to the Christians of Rome by characterizing his apostolic mission from God as one which will “bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles.” He is very clear here, as he is in every other letter he writes, that God has called him to preach the gospel to non-Jews. Such a mission would not have struck any first-century Jew (or Jewish-Christian) as unusual.

Israel’s prophets had predicted that the gentiles would one day come to recognize the God of Abraham, Isaac,

and Jacob. Isaiah’s vision of pagans thronging to Jerusalem to worship the Lord and to beautify the Temple (Isaiah 60:1–17) had long inspired Jewish hopes that the rest of the world would come to know the graciousness and mercy of God. In fact, the translation of Torah into Greek during the third century BC was done, in part, to give Greek-speaking pagans access to Israel’s religious traditions.

So a mission to the gentiles would not have struck people as anything other than praiseworthy, as long as it was understood that the mission’s purpose was to bring people to worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and to adopt the works prescribed by the Law: circumcision, dietary restrictions, the liturgical calendar, endogamy, and Temple service. Good Jews believed that God wanted them as a special witness in the world, and that salvation would come first to the Jews in the world and then to the gentiles.

This is why Paul’s mission to the gentiles was so controversial. He preached a gospel free from the works prescribed by the Law. Paul believed that it was not only possible—it was preferable—that gentiles not be circumcised, that they not observe Israel’s festivals like Passover, that they not refrain from eating pork or shellfish, that they not be required to marry only other members of the community of faith, that they not make periodic pilgrimages to the Temple in Jerusalem. Paul’s position (which seems so normal from our vantage point two thousand years later) was so revolutionary that most Jewish-Christians in the first century rejected it as impossible and offensive.

What Paul is trying to do in the Letter to the Romans is to demonstrate how his understanding of the gospel is not only possible—it is, in fact, exactly what God wants.

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Preface, Thanksgiving, and the Gospel According to Paul

Suggestion: Read Romans 1:1–17 aloud to the group or have someone who feels comfortable reading in public do the first reading. Invite participants to read along in their own Bibles. Then invite the group to begin discussing this passage. Start with the questions that are posed in “Think about it/Talk about it” in this section of Lesson Two. Allow fifteen to twenty minutes for discussion. If the group finishes the discussion early, you might suggest one or more of the questions below for further discussion.

Think and Talk Questions

1. Why does Paul call the Christians of Rome “saints” (Romans 1:7)?
2. What aspects of the faith of the Roman Christians does Paul single out for praise?
3. How does Paul describe his understanding of the gospel to the Romans?

Break

Abraham as a Model of Faith

Suggestion: Read Romans 4:1–12 aloud to the group or have someone in the group do the reading. Invite participants to read along in their own Bibles. Then invite the group to begin discussing this passage. Start with the questions that are posed in “Think about it/Talk about it” in this section of Lesson Two. Allow fifteen to twenty minutes for discussion. If you see that a group has finished its discussion early, you might suggest one or more of the questions below for their further discussion.

Think and Talk Questions

1. What do you know about Abraham?
2. Of all the faithful figures who are mentioned in Torah—Noah (the one with the Ark...), Joseph (the one with the coat of many colors...), and Moses (the one with the tablets of the Law...), to name just a few—why would Paul single out Abraham as an example of faith?

Wrapping Up

Suggestion: With about twenty minutes remaining, bring to a close the discussion on the second text. Let the participants know they have fifteen minutes left in this session and ask if anyone wants to share with the whole group something he or she learned in the course of doing this Bible study. Instruct the participants to be brief, and bring the discussion to a close when time is up.

Closing Prayer

We give you thanks, gracious God, for opening our minds and hearts to the message of Saint Paul. He knew that all the peoples of the world are in need of the redemption that you, O God, offer us through your Son, Jesus. Let us always be mindful of your goodness to us. Let us always be faithful witnesses of your love for the world you have made, a world you sent your Son Jesus, to redeem. We ask this in the name of Jesus the Lord.

Suggestion: Remind participants about the next meeting time and place. Encourage everyone to read and work through Lesson Three before they come to the next Bible study session.