



## Seeing a World of Difference

Lesson 5

by

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## The Meaning of Romans 1

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# The Meaning of Romans 1

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*“I am the apostle to the pagans.”* —The Apostle Paul (Romans 11:13)  
*“Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.”*  
—The Apostle Paul (1 Timothy 1:15)

## Meet Paul

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The celebrities of Paul’s day did not drive white Cadillac stretch limos. They rode white horses. Paul (called Saul at the time) arrived in **Damascus** as a scary religious superstar on a white horse. He had the full legal authority of official Judaism to imprison and execute Jews who followed the Jesus heresy. But something strange interrupted his journey. Jesus Christ appeared in all his divine glory before the Jewish academic-turned-thug. As in similar Old Testament events (when God appeared in visible, glorious form, scaring various prophets half to death), the force of the divine revelation knocked Paul off his horse and blinded him. He not only hit the rocks, he hit rock-bottom.

Immediately, this brilliant, leading light of Judaism was stripped of all self-importance. When he saw the resurrected Jesus, Paul instantaneously realized that most of what he had believed about God, and everything he had believed about Jesus, was false. In fact, he had just been confronted with the *triune* God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. His life would never be the same again. Of this he speaks in the first seventeen verses of Romans 1, where he is at pains to hold up the essential truth about God as a trinity of divine persons. He speaks of God the Father, (Romans 1:1,7–10), the Son of God (Romans 1:3–4,9), and God the Spirit (Romans 1:4), revealing the amazing, impenetrable mystery of the Trinity.

### Paul’s Credentials

Following the literary convention of his day, Paul introduces himself in the first verses of Romans 1, explaining who he is and by what authority he writes: “Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God” (Romans 1:1). Since the incident on the horse, Paul’s life had *really* changed. From being an “apostle” of the human High Priest, he was now “set apart” by a particular act of God as an “apostle” or “direct

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spokesman” of the divine Jesus Christ—an official emissary of the Creator and Redeemer of the universe. You may not believe that, but that’s what he claims to be.

The “gospel of God” for which Paul is set apart is “the gospel...promised [by God] beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures” (Romans 1:2). The connection with the Old Testament prophets is explicit. Like them, Paul met God directly and received a divinely revealed message—the same message that had *already* been disclosed by God in its promissory form to the prophets who wrote the Old Testament Scriptures. Shockingly, Paul claims to have equal authority with Moses and the prophets. He clarifies this when he uses parallel phrases to describe the gospel: a “hidden mystery now revealed,” or “the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past” (Romans 16:25).

The “mystery” of God’s saving plan is “hidden,” but where? In a cave in India? On gold plates buried in a wooden box in New York? In some guru’s mind? No, the mystery is hidden in the Old Testament, as St. Augustine wrote: “The New is latent in the Old; the Old becomes patent in the New.” The essential nature of the gospel is what the apostles, through the Spirit’s inspiration and their knowledge of Jesus’ teaching, discover in the pages of the Old Testament Scriptures as they are completed and fulfilled in the New Testament Scriptures for the growing Church.

But Paul throws us a curve ball. It is important to understand Paul’s use of the term “gospel.” The Church is bigger than what Christians first thought. In Romans 16:25, Paul speaks about “*my* gospel” which he calls “the proclamation of Jesus Christ.” He explicitly claims to make a personal contribution to the original gospel preached by the apostles before him:

Surely you have heard about the administration of God’s grace that was given to me for you, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God’s holy apostles and prophets. (Ephesians 3:2-5, NIV)

Paul has a particular insight into the mystery of the gospel that had not yet been clearly seen: “This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles (pagans) are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 3:6 NIV). The mystery is the inclusion of spiritually unclean pagans into Christ’s Church. Paul is called as “the apostle to the pagans” (Romans 11:13, NIV) and must instruct the Church in the theological implications of the pagan inclusion. Paul underlines this in Romans 1:5, in his introduction. He has a divinely given authority to teach the Christians in Rome in the name of Christ: “We received grace and apostleship to call people from among

all the pagans to the obedience that comes from faith” (Romans 1:5 NIV). Like Moses, who taught Israel, Paul teaches the Church. Paul’s gospel is a new “insight” because Paul fully comprehends the true nature and extent of grace, as it includes the most unworthy (the pagans). For the purpose of this study, it means that Paul, in Romans 1, will teach the Church, with divine authority, how non-Christian pagans think, so Christians can understand how to preach the gospel to them.

Paul was not just an energetic missionary!

### Good News from God: The Gospel Concerning His Son

Paul develops a **cosmology** in Romans 1:18–32. Before he begins a deep discussion of the gospel (Romans 3), Paul lays out a worldview foundation that shows us who God is and what our human situation is. However, in his introduction of himself as a divinely appointed revealer of *the gospel*, we get a foretaste of what he will later say about the love of God, which is the ultimate answer to paganism’s misguided hopes for contact with the divine.

The answer to all human utopian hopes is found in the complex and unique person of Jesus—the mediator between the Creator and the creature. Paul knows that he is only an emissary, and so is determined to know nothing but Christ crucified. Jesus Christ is the central and significant character in the gospel story. As Paul presents his argument in Romans 1, he underlines three aspects of Christ’s person and work. In the first four verses, Paul speaks of Christ in three ways: the Son (Romans 1:3), the Son of David (Romans 1:3) and the Son of God in power (Romans 1:4). These three titles anticipate the main theme of Romans, already capturing the essential content and power of the gospel for which Paul will one day sacrifice his life, when he goes to pagan Rome without shame or fear.

### The Son

Some **heretical** theologians say that Paul here presents a human Jesus who is mystically adopted as the divine Son at the moment of the resurrection. They argue that Jesus was a human prophet who so impressed and amazed his followers that, once he was gone, they acclaimed him a “god”—just as pagans do. There are a number of problems with this approach.

Though pagans claim the contrary, one cannot *become* divine. You are either divine or you are not divine. “Divine” means, among other things, that you have always existed. But all of us have had a birthday. The argument that one can be divine is, at the very least, a profound

confusion of categories. We will examine the implications of this belief (as seen in Romans 1:25) in detail later.

Paul's terminology does not support such an argument. He refers to "His Son" (Romans 1:3) in absolute categories, referring to the eternal Son's *pre-existent* relationship with the Father, who *subsequently* takes on flesh in the line of David. From this perspective, and uniquely in the case of Jesus, divinity comes before humanity. Paul expresses this absolute understanding of the Son in other texts. In verse 9, he repeats the phrase, speaking of God, "whom I serve with my whole heart in preaching the gospel of *his Son*."

For Paul, the depth of God's amazing love is uniquely demonstrated in the death of "his Son." Had Jesus been a man only or an angel, his death would not have been a convincing proof of the infinite love of God. Paul says, "God *demonstrates* his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us," which he then describes as "the death of *his Son*" (Romans 5:10) or "his *own* Son" (Romans 8:3). The apostle John says the same thing, adding the word "only": "In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his *only* Son into the world, so that we might live through him" (1 John 4:9). There is only one Son like this. And both John and Paul say there is a "sending."

God sends *from somewhere* "his own Son in the likeness of sinful man" (Romans 8:3; Galatians 4:4). The "somewhere" becomes clearer in Paul's words to the Philippians. It is the Son's state of pre-existent divine glory with the Father: "Christ Jesus...being in very nature (or form) of God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature (or form) of a servant, being made in human likeness" (Philippians 2:5-7; see also Hebrews 1:3, 8).

Clearly, for Paul, the Son is first and foremost divine. But, he is also human.

## The Son of David

There are two very old and persistent heresies about Christ.

1. *Jesus was not divine, but a mere human being.* (**Ebionitism** and modern day **Liberalism** are examples of this heresy.) By using the title "the Son," Paul rejects all forms of anti-supernaturalism.
2. *Jesus was not really human.* They believe in a mystical notion of Christ as a bodiless spirit. This heresy leads to thinking that the fleshly body is either evil or unimportant. (**Gnosticism** and **Docetism** are examples of this heresy.) By using the

title “Son of David,” he rejects all forms of matter-denying, physical body-rejecting Gnosticism.

This was his gospel to the end, as he says in one of his last letters, “Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, *the offspring of David*, as preached in my gospel” (2 Timothy 2:8).

### Why Is this Good News (Gospel)?

Paul clearly affirms the humanity of Jesus, as we see in the phrase “His Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh” (Romans 1:3). He literally speaks of the Son who is “from the (physical) *seed* of David,” to which he adds, “according to the flesh.” Paul’s use of the term “flesh” always refers to the human condition. When he says later, “I am speaking in human terms” (Romans 6:19), the literal wording is “I am speaking according to the flesh.” Of the future resurrection, he declares: “Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Corinthians 15:50); that is, human beings are incapable of producing the final glorified kingdom of the new heavens and earth. The reference to David also affirms that Jesus was sent as the Messiah, the human deliverer of God’s people. So, if the flesh is so weak, why this insistence on the human flesh of Jesus, and why is this good news? It is because the Messiah is first and foremost the deliverer from the consequences of sin. In Romans 8:3, Paul answers our question: “For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh” (Romans 8:3).

The major human problem is a sinful rebellion against the Creator. Sin has to be dealt with where sin took place, in *human* rebellion. So Christ deals with sin by taking on our flesh and absorbing sin’s punishment which we deserve in his body on the Cross. This is part of what Paul will call the gospel, which is “the power of God unto salvation” (Romans 1:16).

But, there is much more power involved.

### The Son of God in Power

The emphasis on the flesh is important not just because the good news offers the solution for human sin but because physical matter is the essence of God’s *good* creation. “Everything created by God is good” (1 Timothy 4:4), says Paul, to the great consternation of all Gnostics throughout history. This is good news about the first creation, in spite of the spoiling effect of sin. News about the second creation is just as good and involves another mighty demonstration of God’s power. The second or new creation shows that God will not allow sin to have the last word about the original creation he so carefully and beautifully made. If flesh and blood, that is, human beings on their own, cannot inherit the coming

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kingdom of God, it is because “the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power” (1 Corinthians 4:20). The power God used at the beginning to create the world is now deployed to transform it, shown, first of all, in the resurrection of Jesus. This is why Paul states: “His Son, who...was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord...” (Romans 1:3–4). Since Christ was already the divine Son, this phrase cannot mean that at the resurrection Jesus *became* the Son of God. In Jesus’ resurrection, the demonstration of unparalleled power, he is recognized for who he really is—both human Messiah and divine Son. Jesus knew this. Following God’s revelation concerning Jesus to Peter, Jesus says: “Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God after it has come with power” (Mark 9:1). Notice the reference to “power.” A week later, in anticipation of the **imminent** resurrection, Jesus is transfigured. His “clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them” (Mark 9:3, NIV). From heaven, God declares to Peter, James and John, “This is my Son whom I love. Listen to him” (Mark 9:7 NIV).

Not until the resurrection would Jesus’ disciples finally understand that he was the true human Messiah, raised bodily, and also the divine Son. The good news of the resurrection is not only that sin was defeated, but that new life was created. Paul says that our human bodies, “sown in weakness,” will be “raised in power” (1 Corinthians 15:43). That is good news, not just for the human Jesus, but for those who believe in him. Paul says later in Romans, “If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you” (Romans 8:11). Believers will be raised like Jesus. But that’s not all. The resurrection is good news for the physical cosmos: “The creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Romans 8:21). The original creation, cleansed from sin, will be re-made into an unimaginably glorious home for life in eternity. This is very good news, you must agree.

### Paul’s Passion for Preaching the Gospel

Having met this stunning person and understood how he explains and solves the enigmas and problems of human history, Paul was daily fueled by an unquenchable desire to make the good news of Jesus known throughout the world. Paul had seen the transformation in a number of people in Rome, including some important people in Caesar’s palace (not the one in Las Vegas!). He was keen to visit them and to build up their faith (Romans 1:8–13). He thought big. He wanted to go to Rome to reap “a harvest among you, just as I have had among the other Gentiles” (Romans 1:13 NIV). Driven by the “obligation” to extend the call of Jesus “both to Greeks and non-Greeks” (Romans 1:14), Paul felt Rome (Romans 1:15),

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the very capital and religious soul of the pagan Empire, was indispensable. But it would also be a point of departure for Spain (Romans 15:24), the very edges of the Empire. The apostle's vision was unstoppable, but most scholars do not think Paul ever made it to Spain. Nero put Paul to death in AD 66. Others would take the gospel to Spain and elsewhere. Here is a description of Rome from Dr. Peter Jones, who had the occasion to visit it while serving as a missionary in Europe:

I once took part in a silent two-hour walk from the coastal Italian towns of the Forum of Appius and the Three Taverns to Rome, along the cobblestones of the Via Appia, the very road on which Paul had walked as a manacled Roman prisoner. Even without chains, I found the walk hot and tiring (though fascinating). Wealthy estates lined the road, and I wondered what Paul felt, stumbling wearily along. Then it happened. After two long hours, I turned a corner, to see, towering above me, the massive walls and gates of this fabled ancient city. The Jewish bandy-legged prisoner, chained to Roman legionnaires and headed straight for prison and execution, was not quaking in fear and shame. He was filled with courage and optimism, as he doubtless repeated to himself what he had told the Roman Christians: "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Pagan. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith." (Romans 1:16–17 NIV)

It was gospel power, not that of the vast armies of Syria or Greece, that overturned the Roman imperial megalith. That gospel power can promise a clean sheet, deliver a pure conscience and impart the gift of Christ's righteousness to those who believe. Such a message for pagan Rome—of freely imputed righteousness—filled Paul with the courage to face anything the pagan world could throw at him. This is how he ends chapter 8 of the Romans letter: "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:38–39)

### Why Does Paul Write Romans 1:18–32?

With indomitable confidence, Paul was ready to take on the whole world system of paganism of his day. He left us a brilliant account of that godless worldview (Romans 1:18–32). Since that same account fits our situation perfectly, get ready for a clear, logical description of our state from a highly trained lawyer. Paul's *argument* is a *tour de force*, unmatched in the writings of those who oppose it. The reasoning contains an explicit and implicit analysis of two worldviews, that of **theism** (Twoism) and that of paganism



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(Oneism). Twoism believes that God placed *distinctions* in the natural world, whereas Oneism rejects those distinctions.

Twoism believes that the main distinction is the one between the Creator and his creatures, whereas pagan Oneism confuses the two, making nature divine. Twoist spirituality worships and serves God by honoring him and giving him thanks, whereas pagan Oneism worships creation and the self. In the sexual arena, Twoism respects the “natural” order of the marriage union with its heterosexual distinctions, whereas Oneism erases sexual distinctions and produces, in the name of freedom, a culture of **pansexuality**. Notice how the *order of sane thinking* is overturned by making nature its own creator; the *order of divine worship* is overturned for the worship of images, and the *order of sexuality* is overturned for unnatural **sodomy**. For Paul, there are no half-measures and everything is ultimately simple. There are only two worldviews. They are opposed to each other and cannot be blended, interfaithed or syncretized. Paul’s “antithetical” awareness leads to these stark, **rhetorical questions**: “What fellowship has light with darkness, Christ with Belial, righteousness with lawlessness, a believer with an unbeliever, the temple of God with idols” (2 Corinthians 6:14–16 NIV)? Paul could have added explicitly but affirms implicitly in Romans 1:18–32: What fellowship has the truth with the lie? (Romans 1:25), “the natural with the unnatural” (Romans 1:26), heterosexual with homosexual, **heterocosmology** with **homocosmology**?

The Lie begins with a rejection of Natural Law, by which we mean what is naturally obvious to every creature when they roll out of bed in the morning, put their feet on the floor and decide to take on another day. Understanding that everyone has broken these laws helps Christians to identify with unbelievers. Naturally, evangelism begins with an attitude of love and compassion, which leads to loving actions. We can speak of what God has done for us in our own experience, and on the cross. Sooner or later, however, the discussion comes down to a definition of who God is. Understanding the gospel depends on understanding the person of God the Creator and then understanding the fallenness of humanity. Only when we understand the dire need of salvation, can we see how good is the news of salvation.

The second half of Romans 1 is *pre-evangelism*. It tells us what we are all responsible to know— truths about the structures of creation that should call us to repentance and to Christ. Because all human beings know these things deep down, they are “without excuse” (Romans 1:20). This is precisely what many in the modern church avoid saying. They avoid it, as we saw in the last lesson, by laying the blame for opposition to the Christian faith on Christians for their judgmental, loveless attitudes. This explanation makes the truth and acceptance of Christianity depend on sentiments. Of course Christians should be loving!

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Judgmentalism from a sense of personal superiority is severely condemned in Scripture (See, for example, Matthew 7:3–5). We are *all* “without excuse.” Today’s situation cannot be explained in such a simplistic way. The modern world, now deeply infiltrated by the pagan spiritual idea of human beings as good and divine, *systematically refuses to hear* the description of its fallen state. Indeed, paganism is a religious system devoted to the suppression of any notion of human sin and guilt. But, as Paul will demonstrate in Romans 1, the Christian message to a fallen world *begins* with a clear description of how that world has bought the pagan Lie about existence.

Two enormous problems can be seen in the present difficulties of the Church:

1. The New Spirituality does not want to hear about the person and rights of the Creator and the rebellion of creatures because it is a religious system specifically and cleverly designed to reject them, and thus, it increasingly rejects Christian pre-evangelism as “hate speech.”

2. Many modern Christians, both liberal and evangelical, have lost their nerve, refusing to believe what Paul lays out so clearly in Romans 1. In much of Evangelicalism today, I fear that we short-circuit spoken witness for the sake of acceptance, in some cases taking giant steps towards **apostasy**. We start with God’s love or with “my experience of God’s love,” with “me and Jesus” and “how I feel loved,” but we forget to ask who offers to love us, and what kind of love he offers. We leave people with a vague Santa Claus in the sky who loves everyone. We dare say nothing about the dangers of mysticism or of deviating from the creational norms of sexuality.

Not so Paul. Before he gets to his exposition of the love God shows us in the gospel, Paul determines to show us the nature of God as good Creator, beneficent Sustainer and just Judge, as well as showing us the character of human culpability. This is not because Paul is motivated by hate, but because he is compelled by love. It is because the gospel of divine love only makes sense in this light. If we follow Paul’s example, it is clear that before the Church can take the gospel to the contemporary pagan world, believers must understand the pagan worldview. Daniel and his friends were commended by King **Nebuchadnezzar** for knowing the **Babylonian** culture ten times better than the magicians of the court. We Christians must, with sensitivity and courage, explain to unbelievers that their worldview is a consistent rejection of the goodness of the created order that makes human life possible. Only by understanding the concept of God’s great love and our need for a savior will unbelievers then seek to know the true God of saving grace.

In this lesson, we have examined briefly the foundation Paul laid in the first verses of Romans 1. The next lesson will analyze Romans 1:18–32.