

THE LETTER OF PAUL TO THE ROMANS
Commentary by Rev. Msgr. Gregory R. Mikesch, M.Div., M.A.
Lesson 1 – Study Questions

Review: *From your experience at the opening Cornerstone meeting, share something that helped build your faith.*

Introduction: Before we begin our study of this short but powerful book of the Holy Bible, let us orient ourselves to the life and times of St. Paul and become more familiar with his major contributions to what we call the New Testament. For purposes of this lesson, you will want to refer to the excellent Commentary written for us by the Rev. Msgr. Gregory R. Mikesch, M.Div., M.A., currently Senior Associate Pastor of The Cathedral Basilica of St. Louis. Consider what you already know of Paul, his travels, and his writings. Now think about what more you would like to know! From the Shepherding Board and The Cornerstone, our prayer for each member is that this study will bring new knowledge and an informative walk with one of the greatest theologians of all time...and most importantly, a closer relationship with Our Lord, Jesus Christ.

We pray “ . . . that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the holy ones what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.” (Ephesians 3:17–19) Amen

DAY ONE

Read the Commentary, Introduction to St. Paul and His Theology, page 1

1. We begin by getting to know more about St. Paul. From the Commentary, paragraph 2, record a few facts about Saul’s (Paul’s Hebrew name) birth and background, noting in addition the approximate date of his birth in relationship to the time of Christ.
2. Record a definition of Pharisee, the sect to which Saul/Paul was born.
3. Sent to Jerusalem at an early age to study under one of the most famous of rabbis, Paul studied “at the feet of Gamaliel, educated strictly according to our ancestral law, being zealous for God, as you are today.” (Acts 22:3)

How does this statement help you understand the reason Paul may have become a persecutor of Christians?

4. We read that, as an adult, Paul became a tent maker by trade. What did having a trade allow him to do according to the Commentary, page 1? (see also Acts 20:33-35)

THINK: Does it surprise you that a missionary would also have a trade and that he continued to work at this trade during his missionary journeys?

5. Msgr. Mikesch notes in the fourth paragraph, page 1 of the Commentary, that it is unlikely that Paul ever saw Jesus before the Resurrection and yet he is among the greatest of the apostles. God knows the plans he has for each of us. Read and record Jeremiah 29:11.

6. CONNECTION: Paul's life as a young Jewish scholar and tradesman, even his persecution of Christians, helped to prepare him for his later missionary work for Christ and likewise, the profound theological reflections found in his writings. We, too, are molded and formed throughout our life's journey. Reflect on who you are now and how you are still changing. How would you briefly describe your faith journey to others in your small group?

Read Proverbs 19:21 and begin your prayer today asking God to continue to inspire you to be the person he desires you to be.

DAY TWO

Read Commentary, page 2

7. Paul acknowledges in many of his writings his intense persecution of Christians, even going so far as to travel to other cities to persecute them. This was the reason for his journey to Damascus around 34-35 A.D. According to paragraph 1, briefly describe his encounter with the Lord (Acts 9:1-19).

8. We sometimes think that Paul was converted and immediately began his preaching. Our Commentary notes that Paul spent several years in Arabia after his conversion. What does Msgr. Mikesch say that he was doing in Arabia during those years?

9. Paul was not immediately accepted by the Christian community. Read Acts 9:26-31 and summarize why Paul was not immediately accepted.

NOTE: Paul's conversion "led not to an immediate moral change but to an illumination: he speaks of revelation, because seeing from a new point of view – that of Christ – everything now appears different to him. He judges his life in such a new way that what best expresses his inner response to what Jesus tells him on the way to Damascus is this: I have been wrong about everything. I believed some things to be valid that were not, which led me to behave in a violent and, in the end, unjust manner. Glorifying in my own righteousness, I became an executioner of the innocent." *The Gospel According to St. Paul by Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini, S.J.*

10. Paul is credited with at least three major missionary trips (the fourth trip being his final journey from Jerusalem to Rome, in chains) to spread the Gospel to Asia Minor and Europe. From Rome the Gospel would be proclaimed throughout the world. (*Loyola Press, Paul's Journeys*) On the map below, circle Tarsus the city of his birth and Damascus, the site of his conversion.



NOTE: Both Tarsus and Damascus are located on the right hand (east) side of the map.

11. Thirteen epistles are attributed to Paul. How many of them can you name without looking them up? Do you have a favorite epistle of Paul's and why?

12. CONNECTION: The story of Paul's conversion assures us of God's love, understanding and forgiveness. We, too, may have conversions large and small during the course of our life's faith journey. There have been, and will be, times when we realize that we have been valuing the wrong things when the real treasure is elsewhere, or we may be in error, confused and in the state of sin. What can we do to stay ready and open to accept the actions, graces, or illuminations from God that occur in our life?

Read Isaiah 32:3 and write a prayer today asking God to help you, like Paul, to be moved by grace to open your heart to his guidance.

DAY THREE

Read Commentary, pages 2-4

13. By the time Paul begins his third missionary journey, approximately twenty years have passed since his conversion. In 51-52 A.D. he wrote his first letters. The letter to the Romans was written some time in 57-58 A.D. Around 58 A.D. he was arrested in Jerusalem. From the last paragraph, page 2, for what reason was he sent to Rome?

14. Paul's thirteen letters were written prior to 67 A.D. (during the reigns of Claudius and Nero). In Paul's time, Rome was the imperial capital of the Roman Empire and the most populated metropolis of the Mediterranean world. Exactly how Christianity reached Rome is still unclear. Read Acts 2:10 and note one possible source.

NOTE: In addition to Jewish pilgrims, "tradition also remembers the Apostle Peter ministering in the capital during the 40s. Whatever its first contact with the gospel, Rome had a glowing reputation for its faith by the time Paul wrote to the Christian community." *The Letter of Saint Paul to the Romans, Ignatius Study Bible*

15. While no portrait of Paul exists, tradition describes him as short in stature, balding, bowlegged, possibly with bad eyesight and yet, "a man of intense convictions." From paragraph 4, on page 3, what are some characteristics that would seem to evidence his intense personality?

THINK: There are many, many renderings of St. Paul in artwork, from mosaics to modern paintings. This photograph of a mosaic depicts St. Paul. Even Paul noted that his appearance was not appealing (2 Corinthians 10:10) and yet God chose him to be one of the greatest apostles. Can you think of others whom God has given a powerful voice for the Gospel in spite of a less than powerful appearance?



16. Paul's Jewish theology had a major impact on our Christian tradition. From the Commentary page 4, paragraph 1, select and record two or three foundational beliefs of Paul's Jewish faith.

17. Msgr. Mikesch identifies the primary belief of Christianity as: "Jesus is Lord!" (Commentary page 4, paragraph 2) Briefly suggest what this means to you.

18. CONNECTION: In Paul's encounter with the Lord on the road to Damascus, this small, possibly unattractive man who was dedicated to persecuting Christians, and therefore Christ, came to understand that Jesus was raised from the dead, was speaking to him, and was and is the long-promised Messiah. Paul was completely overcome with wonder at this experience. Do you have a conversion story of your own to share? Or is there a conversion story of another that inspires you in your faith?

Read and record Isaiah 44:22 and let this thought lead you to prayer.

DAY FOUR

Read Commentary, page 5

NOTE: Our Commentary continues with some of the major themes in Paul's writing which, as Msgr. Mikesch notes, flow from his experience on the road to Damascus. These themes include Substitution, Justification, Indwelling, The Body of Christ, and Charity. During our study of Romans we will explore these themes.

19. Msgr. Mikesch begins by reiterating the fact that Paul was a devout Jew who believed in the covenantal relationship between God and his Chosen People. How is a covenant different from a simple agreement or contract?

NOTE: "The covenant then is not a pact built on reciprocity, but rather a gift, a creative act of God's love." The Apostle Paul uses "covenants" in the plural to describe God's dealings with Israel (cf. Rom. 9:4). Ratzinger notes, in particular, that the Old Testament distinguishes the Noahite, Abrahamic, Mosaic and Davidic covenants. *Pope Benedict XVI's Theology of Covenant, CatholicCulture.org*

20. A belief of the Jewish people, with respect to the Old Covenant, was that if they lived following the Torah they would be with God in heaven. Note that not all Jewish sects believed in an afterlife but all did follow the Torah. What does our Commentary say was the substitute for the Torah in the New Covenant?

21. What is the goal of the New Covenant according to Romans 10:4?

22. Our Commentary draws the conclusion that "Jesus exceeds the Torah." What does this phrase mean to you?

23. Msgr. Mikesch speaks of a theme of Substitution. This does not mean that Paul totally threw away his belief in the Torah. Read 2 Timothy 3:14-15 and note how Paul describes how we are to obey God through the New Covenant.

24. CONNECTION: Msgr. Mikesch says, "Paul will say that in Jesus we are not only shown how to draw closer to God, but also how Jesus makes this happen." Everything is from God through Christ out of love. Just as Christ gave Paul unconditional love and forgiveness, so too does he offer this to us. Consider how you draw closer to God. In what ways do you feel the presence of Christ's unconditional love and forgiveness?

Read and record 2 Corinthians 5:17 and let these words lead you into prayer.

DAY FIVE

Read Commentary, pages 5-6

25. Msgr. Mikesch then addresses the theme of Justification (or righteousness). He points out that in Paul's works justification isn't "being fair" or "giving people what is rightfully theirs." Rather, we are made "just" by being put in a right relationship with God. From page 5, briefly note how was this accomplished?

26. What do think are some characteristics of being in a right relationship with God?

27. The phrase "in Christ" will appear many times in Paul's writing. Our Commentary explains that for Paul it is participating in Christ's very being to the extent "we can call the Almighty God our Abba, our Father." Read and record John 14:6.

28. Next, the theme of indwelling of the power and presence of the Holy Spirit is examined. Acts 16:6 describes one way the Spirit directly affected the decisions of Paul and his companions on their journeys. How do you include the Holy Spirit in your decisions?

29. The fourth theme, the Body of Christ, reminds us that Jesus identified himself with his people, his Church. In what ways do you feel part of the Body of Christ?

NOTE: The comparison of the Church with the body casts light on the intimate bond between Christ and his Church. Not only is she gathered *around him*, she is united *in him*, in his body. *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) 789*

30. CONNECTION: Throughout Paul's epistles he offers prayers: some are in praise; some are for correction or unity; many reinforce his message of salvation through Christ. Always, he prays strongly for the people of Christ ... the Church. As a member of the Body of Christ, write a prayer for the Church as a whole and for the specific needs of your parish.

Read Paul's "Ephesian Prayer" found in Ephesians 1:15-23.

DAY 6

Read Commentary, page 7

31. The fifth theme covered in our Introduction is that of Charity. Many of us will recognize 1 Corinthians 13:1-13 as Paul's beautiful description of Christian love. Read these verses and record your favorite.

32. All of the themes we have just reviewed lead to what the Commentary refers to as the summary call of Jesus: "Love one another." (John 15:12) Do you specifically think of someone or a group of people when you hear these words? Share some thoughts on why they came to mind.

33. Msgr. Mikesch says in paragraph 3, that "Our charity toward others lets us know the degree to which we have allowed the Spirit of Jesus to enter our lives." Read and record one or more of the following verses:

Psalm 51:10

Ezekiel 36:26

1 Thessalonians 3:12

34. What are the fruits of the Spirit (see Galatians 5:22-23)? Can you feel the fruits of the Spirit in your life?

THINK: St. Basil has a beautiful description of the effects of living according to the Spirit: "Through the Holy Spirit we are restored to paradise, led back to the Kingdom of heaven, and adopted as children, given confidence to call God 'Father' and to share in Christ's grace, called children of light and given a share in eternal glory" *De Spiritu Sancto (of the Holy Spirit) by St. Basil of Caesarea, CCC 736.*

35. "Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor." (Romans 12:9-10) This is first among St. Paul's marks of a true Christian. What about this directive to us could be difficult?

36. CONNECTION: We have reached the end of the Introduction to St. Paul and his theology...but there is so much more to know! Next week we will begin our study of The Letter of St. Paul to the Romans, one of the most important sources of Catholic theology. Often called The Apostle, Paul is known primarily as the one who worked to announce the Gospel to all nations. Paul speaks Christ's message of salvation to and for every man and woman. Consider and share what your hope is for participating in this year's study.

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit (Romans 15:13). Let this be your prayer as you begin this study.

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