

The Free Gift of Life

Romans 1-5



**8 INTERACTIVE BIBLE STUDIES FOR
SMALL GROUPS & INDIVIDUALS**

The Free Gift of Life

Romans 1-5

by Gordon Cheng

The Free Gift of Life

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How to make the most of these studies

1. What is an interactive Bible Study?

These ‘interactive’ Bible studies are a bit like a guided tour of a famous city. The studies will take you through Romans 1-5, pointing out things along the way, filling in background details, and suggesting avenues for further exploration. But there is also time for you to do some sight-seeing of your own—to wander off, have a good look for yourself, and form your own conclusions.

In other words, we have designed these studies to fall half-way between a sermon and a set of unadorned Bible study questions. We want to provide stimulation and input and point you in the right direction, leaving you to do a lot of the exploration and study yourself.

We hope that these studies will stimulate lots of ‘interaction’—interaction with the Bible, with the things we’ve written, with your own current thoughts and attitudes, with other people as you discuss them, and with God as you talk to him about it all.

2. The format

Each study contains sections of text to introduce, summarize, suggest and provoke. We’ve left plenty of room in the margins for you to jot comments and questions as you read.

Interspersed throughout the text are three types of ‘interaction’, each with its own symbol:



For starters

Questions to help you think about society and your own experience, in a way that tunes you in to the issues being raised by the Bible passage.



Investigate

Questions to help you investigate key parts of the Bible.



Think it Through

Questions to help you think through the implications of your discoveries.

When you come to one of these symbols, you'll know that it's time to do some work of your own.

3. Suggestions for individual study

- Before you begin, pray that God would open your eyes to what he is saying in the Bible, and give you the spiritual strength to do something about it. You may be spurred to pray again at the end of the study.
- Work through the study, following the directions as you go. Write in the spaces provided.
- Resist the temptation to skip over the *Think it through* sections. It is important to think about the sections of text (rather than just accepting them as true) and to ponder the implications for your life. Writing these things down is a very valuable way to get your thoughts working.
- Take what opportunities you can to talk to others about what you've learnt.

4. Suggestions for group study

- Much of the above applies to group study as well. The studies are suitable for structured Bible study or cell groups, as well as for more informal pairs and threesomes. Get together with a friend/s and work through them at your own pace; use them as the basis for regular Bible study with your spouse. You don't need the formal structure of a 'group' to gain maximum benefit.
- It is *vital* that group members work through the study themselves *before* the group meets. The group discussion can take place comfortably in an hour (depending on how sidetracked you get!), but only if all the members have done the work and are familiar with the material.
- Spend most of the group time discussing the 'interactive' sections—*Investigate* and *Think it through*. Reading all the text together will take too long and should be unnecessary if the group members have done their preparation. You may wish to underline and read aloud particular paragraphs or sections of text that you think are important.
- The role of the group leader is to direct the course of the discussion and to try to draw the threads together at the end. This will mean a little extra preparation—underlining important sections of text to emphasize, working out which questions are worth concentrating on, and being sure of the main thrust of the study. Leaders will also probably want to work out approximately how long they'd like to spend on each part.
- We haven't included an 'answer guide' to the questions in the studies. This is a deliberate move. We want to give you a guided tour of the theme of proclamation of the gospel in Romans 1-5, not a lecture. There is more than enough in the text we have written and the questions we have asked to point you in what we think is the right direction. The rest is up to you.

5. Bible translation

Previous studies in our Interactive Bible Study series have assumed that most readers would be using the New International Version of the Bible. However, since the release of the English Standard Version in 2001, many have switched to the ESV for study purposes. For this reason, we have decided to quote from and refer to the ESV text, which we recommend.

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Romans 1:1–17

The gospel according to Paul

Despite the massive number of commentaries on the book of Romans, it is not a hard letter to understand. That is to say, it is no harder than the gospel it contains, which is at one and the same time so simple that a child may be saved by it, yet containing all sorts of traps for those who don't want to hear what God says to them. The amount written over the centuries on the book of Romans could indeed be taken as an indication of how difficult it is to unlock Paul's meaning, and it is certainly true that there is a lot to be gained from studying Romans carefully and thoughtfully. But the books that have been written about Romans are better understood as an outpouring of gratitude for the kindness God has shown in so clearly teaching the message of the gospel through his servant Paul. Those who trust Jesus should approach this letter with a similar confidence to the original Roman recipients: the confidence that there is great blessing to be gained in what Paul, and Paul's Lord, desire to impart to us.

Investigate

1. By looking at the following passages, what clues can you discover about Paul and why he is writing to the Christians in Rome? What is occupying his mind?

Romans 1:1-17



Romans 9:1-6

Romans 15:14-33

2. What do we learn about Paul himself from the following verses?

Romans 1:1

Romans 15:14-33

Tricky words

v. 1 — ‘Apostle’: Paul says that he was called to be “an apostle”. We know from Acts 1:21-22 that an apostle is someone who was with Jesus in his earthly ministry and was a witness of his resurrection. Given the highly unusual circumstances of his becoming a witness to the resurrection, it’s not surprising that Paul would refer to himself as “one untimely born” and as the “least of the apostles” (1 Cor 15:8-9). Acts 9:1-16 gives a spectacular account of Paul’s commissioning as an apostle. Here we see just how unusual his coming to Christ was, and—very importantly—we learn that he will have a particular concern to bring the gospel news to the non-Jews (the ‘Gentiles’).

v. 1 — ‘Servant of the Lord’: this is a very humble title—the Greek word used here for ‘servant’ is the normal word for ‘slave’—but it also carries some weight of authority with it as well. The ‘Servant of the Lord’ is a figure whose mission of rescue of God’s people is prophesied in the second half of the book of Isaiah, and fulfilled by Jesus in his life, death and resurrection. Paul sees himself as fulfilling this same mission! (See Acts 13:47, citing Isaiah 49 concerning the Servant.) Even though the title is humble, then, it is also a claim that his mission is to be taken seriously, because it is an extension of the mission of Jesus.

3. In verses 1-4, Paul moves straight from his greeting to the heart of the gospel.

- Who is the gospel about?

- What do you learn about the person whom the gospel is about?

4. According to Romans 1:5:

- What is the right response to the gospel?

v. 4 — ‘Son of God’: At first glance, this looks like a claim that Jesus is God, as in ‘God, the Son’. While it is true that Jesus *is* God and that Paul believed it, it is not at the heart of what he means here. In the Old Testament, the Davidic King of Israel was from time to time referred to as God’s own ‘son’, who would rule forever over God’s kingdom (see 2 Sam 7:12-14; Ps 2:7; Ps 89:20-26). What Paul is saying here is that Jesus, descended from David, is the kingly ‘son of God’, who fulfils all the marvellous promises made by God about the Messiah. This also helps us understand how Jesus is *declared* to be the Son of God by his resurrection: he has always been God’s Son from eternity; but now, in his mighty resurrection, his authority as God’s appointed Messiah and Lord—the ‘Son of God’—has been sealed (cf. Acts 2:36).

v. 17 — ‘from faith for faith’: This slightly puzzling phrase could have a number of possible meanings. It could mean that an act of faithfulness on the part of God—the sending of Jesus to die on the cross—has the result or intention of producing faith in us. It could mean that Christian faith begins with the Old Testament faith and moves to the faith that we placed in Jesus. A number of other options have been suggested, but what is clearly excluded is any idea that being right with God is dependent upon human action. The option that might best reflect this is to reword the literal phrase “from faith to faith” as something describing a righteousness that is ‘completely by faith, with no other contribution from any good thing that we might imagine we have to offer’.

- Who is the gospel for?
5. Read verses 8-17. Why does Paul want to visit Rome? What is specific to him as an apostle, and what can we copy from his example?
6. Look carefully at how the repeated word 'for' links together the ideas in verses 15, 16 and 17.
- Why is Paul eager to preach in Rome?

 - Why is he not ashamed of the gospel?

 - Why is the gospel the power of God for salvation?

What's this letter about?

In Romans 1 we meet a massive racial divide—between those who are Jews, the sons of Abraham and the heirs of all God's Old Testament promises, and those who are not. The name given to non-Jews is 'Gentiles', sometimes translated (for example in 1:5) as "the nations". In this way, we are led into a number of major themes in the letter. These themes include:

- how knowledge of God is possible (through the gospel of Jesus);
- where God's promises to the Jews fit in (he keeps them, in Jesus);
- how the Gentiles will get right with God (the same way as the Jews: through Jesus);
- how the Gentiles will hear the gospel of Jesus (through God's apostle, Paul, with the financial help of the Romans, and ultimately through a mission that all who trust Jesus are a part of);
- how Jews and Gentiles should now live together;
- and perhaps the most significant theme of all: how can God declare that unrighteous people (both Jews and Gentiles) are *not* unrighteous but righteous, yet still remain true to his own righteous character?

The last of these themes—'righteousness'—is an extremely important concept in Romans, and it appears for the first time in Romans in the famous verses 16-17:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith".

What does 'righteousness' mean? We tend to think of a 'righteous' person as someone who is extremely moral or upright in character. This is true as far as it goes, but in the Bible, righteousness is essentially about being declared to be moral and 'in the right' before the judge. To be righteous is to be declared 'not guilty' in court; to be pronounced innocent and blameless before the law. It's to be publicly vindicated as having done what is right and lawful.

In normal circumstances, people are declared 'not guilty' because in fact they are not guilty. God himself, for example, is

perfectly righteous, because he is always in the right, keeping every single promise, and always acting in accordance with his perfectly good character. However, we are not righteous—quite the opposite. Were we to stand before God as our judge and give account for our behaviour towards him and towards others, we would be anything but blameless and ‘not guilty’.

How then can we ever be declared righteous by God? How can we ever stand before him without being condemned?

The key that helps us to unlock Romans is seeing that the *only* righteousness it is possible for humans to have is the righteousness that comes as a free gift, through Jesus Christ. It can never be a righteousness that comes through our own hard work in living up to the standard of God’s glory and perfect holiness. Once this is understood, the other blessings of Paul’s letter unfold to our great comfort and joy, and to the glory of God.

The other curious thing about verse 17 is its quotation of Habbakuk 2:4, “The righteous shall live by faith”.

Habakkuk is a short Old Testament book almost certainly written about how God calls up the ancient and wicked empire of Babylon to punish his own people. At first, it appears to Habakkuk as a cruel and unusual punishment—it seems almost like hiring a Mafia hitman to help instil a sense of family discipline.

By the end of the book, however, Habakkuk has been satisfied by the assurance God gives that this is not vindictive retribution against Israel. All unrighteousness everywhere—including Israel, including Babylon, and including all other people and nations—will be judged by a God who is personally angered and offended by human rebellion. Habakkuk may witness some of this destruction going on in his own lifetime but he, and all like him, will continue to trust that God will bring salvation and rescue out of the darkest sin and wickedness.

So the book of Habakkuk ends with Habakkuk rejoicing and continuing to look to God for his salvation, despite the sin, wickedness and divine judgement that surrounds him.

4. According to Romans 1:1-17, how are we saved? How should this view of salvation affect:

- our view of ourselves?

- our view of others?