

# Study Guide: Romans Chapter 1 – Paul’s Letter to the Romans

This study guide is based on our conversation about Romans Chapter 1 from the New Testament. It covers a deep dive into the chapter’s content, its historical interpretations, and why churches in 2025 might be emphasizing it more than ever. I’ve included relevant statistics from recent research to highlight contemporary relevance, focusing on church trends, attendance, and cultural shifts. The guide is structured for individual or group study, with summaries, key points, reflection questions, and Scripture references (using the ESV translation for quotes). Use this to explore Paul’s theology, its evolution, and its application today.

## Section 1: Overview of Romans Chapter 1

### Summary

Romans Chapter 1 is the opening of Paul’s letter to the church in Rome (written around 55-57 CE). Paul introduces himself, his gospel, and humanity’s need for salvation. The chapter divides into:

- Verses 1-7: Greeting and introduction – Paul as apostle, Jesus as Son of God (human and divine).
- Verses 8-15: Paul’s desire to visit Rome and preach to all (Greeks, barbarians).
- Verses 16-17: Thesis – “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes... The righteous shall live by faith.”
- Verses 18-32: God’s wrath against sin – Humanity suppresses truth, turns to idolatry, leading to moral decline (e.g., sexual impurity, debased minds, list of vices).

Key themes: Universal gospel, faith over works, idolatry as root sin, God’s righteousness revealed.

### Key Verses to Memorize

- Romans 1:16-17: The gospel’s power and faith’s role.
- Romans 1:20: “For his invisible attributes... have been clearly perceived... so they are without excuse.”
- Romans 1:25: “They exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator.”

### Reflection Questions

- 1 How does Paul’s greeting show his authority and the gospel’s ties to Old Testament promises?
- 2 Why might Paul emphasize “not ashamed” in a Roman context of potential persecution?

## Section 2: Historical Development of Interpretations

Romans Chapter 1's understanding has evolved, reflecting cultural and theological shifts. Here's a chronological breakdown:

- Early Church (1st-4th Centuries): Focus on idolatry and original sin. Augustine saw verses 18-32 as evidence of humanity's fallen nature, needing grace. Origen interpreted "giving up" to passions allegorically as spiritual decline. Context: Christians as minority; used to critique pagan practices like temple rituals.
- Medieval Period (5th-15th Centuries): Focus on natural law and sexual ethics. Thomas Aquinas viewed "unnatural" relations (v. 26-27) as violations of procreation. Broader idolatry got less emphasis; chapter became a tool for moral regulation in a church-dominant society.
- Reformation (16th Century): Focus on justification by faith. Luther and Calvin highlighted verses 16-17 as freedom from works-based salvation. Wrath (v. 18) showed universal guilt, countered by gospel grace.
- Modern Era (20th-21st Centuries): 1980s-1990s historical-critical lens (e.g., Martti Nissinen) – Verses 26-27 critique exploitative Greco-Roman practices (pederasty, temple sex), not modern orientations. Conservative views (e.g., Robert Gagnon, 2001): Timeless condemnation of same-sex acts based on creation order. Existential theology (Karl Barth, 1919): Verses 16-17 as God's radical revelation in a broken world. New Perspective (E.P. Sanders, 1980s): Covenant inclusion – Universalism for Jews/Gentiles. Global South: Liberation theology (Gustavo Gutiérrez) – Wrath against systemic oppression.

### Reflection Questions

- 1 How has the focus shifted from idolatry to sexuality over time? Why?
- 2 Pick a historical figure (e.g., Augustine or Luther) – How might their context influence their reading?

## Section 3: Why Churches in 2025 Might Emphasize Romans Chapter 1

In 2025, churches are navigating cultural skepticism, moral debates, and institutional challenges. Romans 1's themes of bold gospel proclamation (v. 16), idolatry in modern forms (v. 23-25), and universal sin/accountability (v. 18-32) make it timely. Below are reasons, with supporting statistics from recent research.

- **Declining Trust and Attendance – Urgency for Revival:** Churches use Romans 1's "not ashamed" message to encourage bold faith-sharing amid skepticism. Gallup reports only 30% of U.S. adults attend religious services weekly or nearly weekly in recent years, down from 42% two decades ago. Confidence in organized religion remains near record lows; a 2025 Gallup poll shows Americans' overall confidence in institutions at around 28%. Another Gallup survey indicates 34% believe religion's influence is increasing slightly, but from lows. Progressive churches frame v. 16's inclusivity for outreach; conservatives use v. 18-32 to warn against spiritual drift.
- **Debates on Sexuality and Morality:** Verses 26-27 are cited in discussions on biblical ethics. Lifeway Research notes support for same-sex marriage among Protestant pastors has stalled at 21%. Overall U.S. support is at 86% (Gallup 2025, highest ever), but plateauing among Christians. Conservative churches use it to affirm traditional views; progressives contextualize as idolatry-linked, promoting inclusion.
- **Modern Idolatry and Cultural Pressures:** Verses 23-25 critique exchanging God for "created things" – parallels to materialism, tech, or ideologies. Barna Research shows Gen Z craves authenticity in faith; a 2025 study highlights rising belief in Jesus among young adults, but low "integrated disciples" (1% of Gen Z). Another Barna report notes 3 in 10 non-Christians have committed to Jesus, signaling openness amid anxiety. Churches address social media "idols" or relativism with Paul's list of vices (v. 29-31).
- **Church Closures and Sustainability:** Romans 1 inspires resilience and mission focus. Estimates suggest about 15,000 U.S. churches could close in 2025, per Thom Rainer and Church Answers. General trends: 4,000-10,000 close annually. Churches expect 10-15% member loss yearly. Pastors use the chapter for revival calls.
- **Global Shifts and Justice:** In the Global South, Romans 1 supports growth and anti-oppression messages. Pew Research projects dramatic growth in sub-Saharan Africa, where Christians could comprise a larger share by 2030. Overall, Christians rise 34% globally by 2050. Ties to justice: Wrath (v. 18) against systemic "suppressing truth."

### Reflection Questions

- 1 How do 2025 stats (e.g., 30% attendance) make Romans 1 feel urgent?
- 2 In your context, what "idols" does v. 25 address?
- 3 Discuss: Is Romans 1 more about condemnation or hope through the gospel?

## **Additional Study Tips**

- Group Activity: Role-play Paul's greeting or debate v. 26-27 interpretations.
- Further Reading: Barth's Romans commentary; Gagnon's *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*.
- Prayer Focus: Thank God for the gospel's power; pray for churches facing closure.

This guide captures our discussion – use it to deepen your understanding! If you need expansions, let me know.