REDEEMING GRACE CHURCH

A Study Companion for the Book of Romans

DOULOS

The Word Paul Chose

What it means that Paul called himself a slave of Christ Jesus

Romans 1:1

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BEFORE YOU BEGIN

How to Use This Booklet

This booklet exists for one reason: to let you keep going after Sunday. It walks through a single word in a single verse — the first word Paul uses to describe himself in the letter to the Romans — and it gives you the Scripture and the sources behind every claim, so you can check the work yourself.

Read it with a Bible open. Every passage quoted here is printed in full, but you will get far more out of it if you look up the surrounding verses and see where they sit. Each chapter is short enough to read in one sitting, and the last pages give you a week of readings with a question for each day.

You will also find places where this booklet says, plainly, that a popular teaching about this word cannot be supported. Those notes are here on purpose. We want you to be confident in what you believe about Scripture, and confidence is only worth having if it rests on what is actually there.

> **A word to parents and small group leaders: this booklet is written so that a high-school student can follow it. Nothing in it requires Greek or Hebrew.**

ONE

One Word in the First Line

Paul has sixteen chapters to write and a church in Rome he has never met. The first thing he does is tell them who he is. He uses three descriptions, and the order matters.

> *Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God,*
>
> **Romans 1:1**

The first description is the one every believer in Rome shared with him. The second is the one none of them did. The third tells what he was separated for. Paul did not have to open this way. He could have led with the office. He chose to lead with the word that put him on the same floor as the people he was writing to, and only then to claim the authority that would make them listen.

Behind the English word *servant* is the Greek word ***doulos*** (δοῦλος). It does not mean an employee, a helper, or a volunteer. It means a slave: a person owned by another, with no claim on his own time, his own body, or anything he earns.

And notice what Paul does six verses later with another word from the same line.

> *including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ,*
>
> *To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints:*
>
> *Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*
>
> **Romans 1:6–7**

Paul is *called* to be an apostle (v. 1). They are *called* to belong to Jesus Christ, and *called* to be saints (vv. 6–7). The same word, three times in seven verses, moving from the apostle to the congregation. Romans opens by handing its vocabulary over to the people reading it.

> **If the word Paul uses of himself is a word he hands to them, it is a word he hands to us.**

TWO

Why Your Bible Says “Servant”

Open almost any English Bible to Romans 1:1 and you will read “servant.” Open your ESV and look at the small letter beside it. The footnote reads:

> *For the contextual rendering of the Greek word doulos, see Preface.*
>
> **ESV footnote at Romans 1:1**

The preface explains the policy openly. The ESV uses “slave” where absolute ownership is in view — and it names Romans 6 as the example. It uses “bondservant” where the servitude is more limited, as in 1 Corinthians 7:21–24. It uses “servant” where the context suggests considerable freedom. And it says why it does not simply print “slave” everywhere: in modern English the word is bound up with the race-based slavery of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which was not the same institution.

What the versions actually do

Rendering at Romans 1:1	Versions
servant	KJV, ESV, NIV, CSB, NRSV, ASV, RSV
bondservant	NKJV, NASB (1977, 1995, current), Amplified
slave	NLT, HCSB, NET, Legacy Standard Bible, NABRE

If you want to hear the verse the way Paul wrote it, read it in the NET Bible or the Legacy Standard Bible, which render the word “slave” throughout.

The honest explanation

You will sometimes hear that the translators hid this word on purpose — that the sixteenth-century Reformers softened it to avoid a stigma. We could find no documentary evidence for that, and we are not going to repeat it. The true explanation is simpler and sadder.

In 1611, the English word “servant” covered a far wider range than it does today. It included bound service and indentured service — people who were not free to leave. The word has narrowed underneath us. Four hundred years later, “servant” suggests a paid employee, which is exactly what a doulos is not. The translators

were not hiding anything. The English language moved. But the result is that most English readers have never heard the word Paul actually wrote.

The seam in your own Bible

Here is something you can see for yourself in a single sitting. Your ESV prints “slave” at Exodus 21:5 and “slaves of sin” at Romans 6:17 — and “servant” at Romans 1:1. Same translators. Same Hebrew and Greek roots. Different English. Hold the pages open side by side and you will see the seam.

THREE

The Words Paul Did Not Use

Greek was not short of words for someone who serves. Paul had a whole shelf to choose from, and he reached past every one of them.

Greek word	What it names	Example
doulos	A slave. Owned. No right to his own time, body, or earnings.	Rom 1:1; Phil 2:7
diakonos	A servant defined by the work he does, not by who owns him.	Rom 13:4; 16:1
oiketēs	A household slave — the place of the service, not the fact of it.	Rom 14:4
pais	A child, or a servant; a softer word, very common in the Greek OT.	Matt 8:6; Acts 4:27
hypēretēs	An under-rower; an assistant to a superior.	1 Cor 4:1
therapōn	An attendant. Used of Moses in Hebrews 3:5.	Heb 3:5
misthōtos	A hired man. He is paid, and he can leave.	Mark 1:20; John 10:12–13

> **A hired man is paid and can leave. A slave is owned and cannot. Paul chose the second word.**

That single contrast carries most of what this booklet is about. We are comfortable with the idea of serving God. Serving is something we do, and something we can stop doing. Being owned is something we are.

FOUR

What Rome Heard

We should say the hard thing plainly before we say anything else. There may be no word in human history with more blood on it than this one. Roman slavery was not a job. It was ownership of a person, enforced by violence, and the people in the Roman church knew exactly what it looked like, because some of them were living it.

Modern historians estimate that roughly one person in five in Roman Italy was a slave — somewhere near a million out of six or seven million people — and that the proportion in the city of Rome itself was higher still. Those are estimates, and careful scholars disagree about the range, but the order of magnitude is not in doubt.

What the law said

The Roman jurist Gaius, writing in the second century, states the legal position in one sentence:

> *Slaves are in the power of their masters… and whatever is acquired through a slave is acquired for the master.*
>
> **Gaius, Institutes 1.52**

Read that last clause again, and then read Romans 1:1. Everything the slave earns, the master owns. Everything Paul gains, Christ gains. Gaius has written the verse without meaning to.

Two more lines from Roman law fill in the picture. The Digest records that “so far as the civil law is concerned, slaves are reckoned as nobody” (50.17.32). And the jurist Florentinus defines the institution this way: “Slavery is an institution of the law of nations whereby someone is, contrary to nature, made subject to the ownership of another” (Digest 1.5.4.1). That phrase — contrary to nature — is Rome admitting, in its own law books, that the thing it was built on was wrong.

The Roman farm writer Varro gives the coldest line of all. Listing the equipment a farm needs, he sorts it into three kinds: the talking kind, the half-talking kind, and the silent kind. The talking kind is the slaves. The half-talking kind is the oxen. The silent kind is the carts (Res Rusticae 1.17.1).

Who was sitting in that room

When Paul reaches the end of the letter and greets people by name, two of his greetings point at slave households:

> *Greet my kinsman Herodion. Greet those in the Lord who belong to the family of Narcissus.*
>
> **Romans 16:11**

“Those who belong to the family of” is most naturally read as the slaves and freedmen of a great house. Several other names in Romans 16 — Ampliatus, Hermes, Nereus, Persis, Julia — are typical slave or freedman names. We should not press the point further than the evidence allows, but the likely picture is this: Paul opens his letter by calling himself the very thing that some of the people hearing it read aloud actually were.

> **Paul is not softening slavery. He is saying that the only ownership worth having is Christ’s — and that compared to being owned by sin, being owned by Christ is freedom.**

FIVE

Where Paul Got the Title

Paul was a Jew trained in the Hebrew Scriptures, and when he wrote doulos he was not only reaching for a Roman picture. He was reaching for an Old Testament title.

The Hebrew word is ebed. It occurs 803 times in the Hebrew Bible. Most of those are ordinary uses — a servant, a slave, a subject. But as a fixed title, “servant of the LORD,” the phrase occurs about three dozen times, and it is never casual. It is the highest honour the Old Testament gives a man.

Who	Where
Moses	Deuteronomy 34:5; Joshua 1:1, 13; 2 Kings 18:12
Joshua	Joshua 24:29; Judges 2:8 — given to him at his death
David	The titles of Psalms 18 and 36; 2 Samuel 7:5
Abraham	Psalm 105:42
The prophets, as a class	Amos 3:7; Jeremiah 7:25; 25:4; Daniel 9:6, 10
Israel herself	Isaiah 41:8

> *So Moses the servant of the LORD died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of the LORD,*
>
> **Deuteronomy 34:5**

> *“For the Lord GOD does nothing without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets.”*
>
> **Amos 3:7**

When the Jewish scholars translated the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek — the version Paul quotes from all through Romans — they did not always use doulos for ebed. Sometimes they used pais or therapōn. But in several of the most important places they did use it, and the full phrase “slave of the Lord” is well attested: Joshua at Joshua 24:29, Moses at 2 Kings 18:12 and Psalm 105:26, Abraham at Psalm 105:42, and the prophets at Amos 3:7.

Now look at what Paul does with it

The Old Testament formula is “slave of the LORD” — slave of Yahweh, the covenant name of God. Paul writes “slave of Christ Jesus.” He has put the name of Jesus in the place the divine name occupies in that phrase.

> **There is a claim about who Jesus is hiding inside the greeting. Paul tells you Christ is God before he has finished his first sentence.**

SIX

The Slave Who Would Not Go Free

There is one place in Scripture where a man chooses slavery, and it is one of the most moving pictures in the Law of Moses.

> *"When you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years, and in the seventh he shall go out free, for nothing."*
>
> *"But if the slave plainly says, 'I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out free,' then his master shall bring him to God, and he shall bring him to the door or the doorpost. And his master shall bore his ear through with an awl, and he shall be his slave forever."*
>
> **Exodus 21:2, 5-6**

> *"But if he says to you, 'I will not go out from you,' because he loves you and your household, since he is well-off with you, then you shall take an awl, and put it through his ear into the door, and he shall be your slave forever. And to your female slave you shall do the same."*
>
> **Deuteronomy 15:16-17**

Three words in the Hebrew carry the weight.

- "I love" is *ahav* — the ordinary, strongest Hebrew word for love. It is the same verb as "you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart" (Deuteronomy 6:5). His reason is not calculation. It is love.
- "Free" is *chofshi* — legally released. The freedom is genuinely his, lawfully, and he turns it down.
- "Slave forever" in Deuteronomy 15:17 is *ebed olam* — permanent, by his own word. The awl through the ear is irreversible. He cannot un-say it.

An honest note about this passage

Many good sermons connect this law directly to Romans 1:1, as though doulos were a deliberate echo of it. We want to be careful here, and being careful costs us nothing.

When the Hebrew of Exodus 21 was translated into Greek, the noun used in verse 5 was not doulos but pais, and in Deuteronomy 15:17 it was oiketēs. The verb form

of doulos does appear — “he shall be slave to him forever” in Exodus 21:6 — but the link is not a word link. And the Hebrew does not change before and after the awl: the man is an ebed on both sides of it. What the law distinguishes is a six-year term from a permanent one, not a “voluntary slave” from a slave.

So here is the honest and far better way to say it. Paul is not quoting Exodus 21. But Exodus 21 is Scripture’s own picture of a slavery chosen out of love and made permanent, and it belongs to the Bible that formed Paul. It gives us the category. It does not give us the vocabulary, and we do not need it to.

> **A man who is legally free, who stands at the door, and who says: I love my master, and I will not go out free.**

SEVEN

Paul’s Own Ground: He Was Bought

If we want to know why Paul thought of himself as owned, we do not have to guess. He tells us, in another letter, and it is not because he volunteered.

> *Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.*
>
> **1 Corinthians 6:19–20**

> *You were bought with a price; do not become bondservants of men.*
>
> **1 Corinthians 7:23**

This is the engine of the whole picture. Ownership rests on a transaction. Paul does not say “I signed up.” He says “I was purchased.” And Scripture tells us plainly what the price was:

> *Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.*
>
> **Acts 20:28**

> *And they sang a new song, saying, “Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation,”*
>
> **Revelation 5:9**

And the pattern is Christ’s own

There is one more thing to see, and it is the thing that keeps this from being grim. Before Paul ever called himself a slave, he had written this about Jesus:

> *Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.*
>
> **Philippians 2:5–7**

“The form of a servant” is morphēn doulou — the form of a slave. The Son of God took the status Paul then claims for himself. We are not asked to go somewhere Christ has not gone first.

One caution worth printing. Paul says that Christ “emptied himself.” He never commands us to empty ourselves; what he commands is “have this mind among yourselves.” Romans has its own plain words for what we are to do, and we will meet them in the next chapter: reckon, and present.

EIGHT

Is This Only for Apostles?

Some have argued that because “servant of the LORD” was a title of honour for Moses, David, and the prophets, Paul’s doulos is a claim to commissioned office — a word for apostles, not for ordinary believers. It is a real position, held by serious people. But the New Testament does not support it, and the evidence against it is not subtle.

1. People who were not apostles wear the title

> *Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus,*
>
> *To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons:*
>
> **Philippians 1:1**

Timothy was never an apostle, and here he is, named with the title in the same breath as Paul. So are Epaphras (Colossians 4:12), James (James 1:1), and Jude (Jude 1).

2. Paul puts the word on whole congregations

> *and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.*
>
> **Romans 6:18**

> *For he who was called in the Lord as a bondservant is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise he who was free when called is a bondservant of Christ.*
>
> **1 Corinthians 7:22**

Add Ephesians 6:6 (“as bondservants of Christ”), Colossians 3:24 (“you are serving the Lord Christ”), 1 Peter 2:16 (“living as servants of God”), and Revelation, which calls the whole redeemed people “his servants” (1:1; 7:3; 22:3, 6). This is not apostolic language. It is church language.

3. Paul says there is no third option

And here is the verse that settles it, because it is Paul defining his own terms inside Romans itself:

> *Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness?*
>
> **Romans 6:16**

> **There is no category in Romans for a person who owns himself. You are owned by sin or owned by obedience. The only question Paul allows you is whose.**

John Stott draws the line this way in his commentary on Romans: “slave” is the general Christian word and “apostle” is the special one. Slave expresses humility; apostle conveys authority. Paul claims both in verse 1, and he gives us only the first.

One thing worth adding, because it is easy to miss. The title is not only about lowliness. A slave in the ancient world spoke and acted with his master’s authority, never his own. To belong wholly to Christ is to live under borrowed authority — which is a far weightier thing than being a volunteer.

NINE

The Word Through Romans

Paul does not use this word once and drop it. The doulos word group appears eighteen times in Romans, and the way it is spread through the letter tells its own story.

Where	What Paul says	Whose slave
1:1	Paul introduces himself	Christ Jesus
6:6, 16, 17, 19, 20	What they used to be	Sin, impurity, lawlessness
6:16, 18, 19, 22	What they have become	Obedience, righteousness, God
7:6	How the new life works	The new way of the Spirit
7:25	Paul’s own divided experience	The law of God / the law of sin
8:15	What they did not receive	A spirit of slavery — to fear
12:11	A command to the whole church	The Lord
14:18	The one God approves	Christ
16:18	The warning at the end	Their own appetites

Romans 6 is not a release. It is a change of owner.

This is the single most important thing to see. Paul never says “you were slaves and now you are free.” He says something stronger:

> *But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.*
>
> **Romans 6:17–18**

> *But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life.*
>
> **Romans 6:22**

In the Greek, “have become slaves” in both verses is a passive verb: you were enslaved. Something was done to you. And look carefully at verse 17, because both halves are there in the right order — “obedient from the heart,” which is real and willing and yours, and “to which you were committed,” which means you were handed over. The transfer comes first. The willing obedience follows it.

And the serving never stops

> *But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code.*
>
> **Romans 7:6**

“So that we serve” is the verb form of doulos. Release from the law does not end the serving. It changes what the serving runs on. And four and six chapters later, Paul is still using the word of the whole church — “serve the Lord” (12:11), “whoever thus serves Christ” (14:18).

How the letter ends

> *For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naive.*
>
> **Romans 16:18**

> **Romans opens with a man owned by Christ, and closes by warning about men owned by their own appetites. Those are the only two kinds of people in the letter.**

TEN

Slave and Son

One honest question remains, and it is the one most likely to trouble a careful reader. If we are slaves, how can Scripture also say we are sons? Two verses seem to pull the other way.

> *So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.*
>
> **Galatians 4:7**

> *No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you.*
>
> **John 15:15**

And in Romans itself:

> *For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.*
>
> **Romans 8:15–17**

Read the qualifier Paul himself attaches

Romans 8:15 does not say "a spirit of slavery." It says "a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear." Paul tells us what he is ruling out, and it is the fear — the cowering of a man in front of a master who is not his father. He is not ruling out belonging to God, because in the same letter he says they were made slaves of God (6:22), that the new life is itself a form of serving (7:6), and he calls himself a slave of Christ in the opening line.

Galatians 4 is about bondage under the law and the elemental principles of the world. John 15:15 contrasts the slave's ignorance with the friend's knowledge — Jesus does not say "you no longer belong to me"; he says "I no longer keep you in the dark." In each case, what changes is the master, or the terms, or the knowledge. Not the belonging.

And notice the direction Romans 8 runs

This matters for how we say it. Paul writes that we have received the Spirit of adoption — received, not achieved. The Spirit bears witness that we are children. And verse 14 says, “For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.” Being led — being under another’s direction — is the mark of a son, not the fee for becoming one.

So the self-giving is real and it is commanded. The same verb Paul uses in Romans 6 for presenting yourself to a master he uses again in chapter 12:

> *I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.*
>
> **Romans 12:1**

That command is addressed to people who are already sons. The presenting is not what purchases the adoption. It is what adopted sons do.

> **A son is more than a slave. But he is never less than one.**

Scripture itself puts a limit on how far this picture can be pressed — John 15:15 and Galatians 4:7 are that limit, and we should not run past them. We are owned and we are adopted. And Romans 8:17 gives us the thing no slave could ever have had: “heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ.”

FOR FURTHER STUDY

A Week in the Text

One passage a day, with one question. Read the passage out loud if you can — these were letters, and they were meant to be heard.

Day 1 · Romans 1:1–7

Paul uses three words of himself in verse 1. Which one does he share with you, and which does he not? Why do you think he leads with the one he shares?

Day 2 · Romans 6:15–23

Paul offers exactly two options and no third. Write down, in your own words, what he says the third option would be — and then find where he rules it out.

Day 3 · Exodus 21:1–6 and Deuteronomy 15:12–18

The man is legally free and chooses not to go. What reason does he give? Note how many times love appears in the two passages.

Day 4 · 1 Corinthians 6:12–20

Paul gives a reason we are not our own. What is it, and what does he say should follow from it in the very next sentence?

Day 5 · Philippians 2:1–11

Paul says Christ took the form of a slave. What exactly does he command us to copy in verse 5 — and what does he not?

Day 6 · Romans 8:12–17

What one word does Paul attach to "spirit of slavery" in verse 15? What does that qualifier change about the verse?

Day 7 · Romans 1:1 and 16:17–20

Read the first verse and the last warning together. Who is served in each, and what does the letter assume about everyone in between?

Three claims you may hear, that we are not repeating

These are popular in preaching on this word. We checked each one and could not support it, so we leave it out. You should know why.

- “There were twelve million slaves in the Roman world.” This number cannot be traced to any historian. The defensible statement is roughly one person in five in Italy.
- “Slavery was abolished in the fourteenth century.” It was not.
- “The Geneva Bible translators, including Calvin and Knox, chose ‘servant’ because ‘slave’ was too offensive.” We found no documentary support for this. The explanation in chapter two is the one the evidence will carry.

SOURCES

Where This Came From

Everything in this booklet can be checked. Here is where to go.

Primary texts

The SBL Greek New Testament; the Hebrew Bible (Westminster Leningrad Codex); the Septuagint, the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament; and the ESV. Greek and Hebrew word counts were made from those texts directly, not from a concordance summary.

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- John MacArthur, Slaves for Christ (sermon 80-321) and Servant or Slave? (GTY129), at gty.org — where many of us first heard this word opened up.

Roman legal and agricultural sources

Gaius, Institutes 1.52; the Digest of Justinian 1.5.4.1 and 50.17.32; Varro, Res Rusticae 1.17.1.

Translation policy

The ESV Preface, at esv.org, explains the policy behind “servant,” “bondservant,” and “slave.” It is worth reading once in full; it is short.

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