

# The Righteousness of God Revealed



Study Notes for  
The Letter to the Romans

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## Dedication

These notes are dedicated to the pastors of Bhubaneswar and Gopalpur. I have learned so much from your faithfulness, compassion and love of Jesus and from your churches and all those in need. Thank you.

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## **Abbreviations of English Bible Translations**

NASB	New American Standard Bible
NIV	New International Version
ESV	English Standard Version
NET	New English Translation
KJV	King James Version
CSB	Christian Standard Bible
NLT	New Living Translation
TEV	Today's English Version
TKJV	Today's King James Version

### **Other abbreviations**

BDAG Greek-English Lexicon

### **Translation**

Unless otherwise stated, the translation used in these notes is from the English Standard Version (ESV)

# PART I: INTRODUCTION TO THE LETTER

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## Lesson 1: Introduction (1:1-7)

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### Introduction

Romans is one of the most fascinating and important books in the Bible. Many Christians think of Romans as a doctrinal presentation of the gospel. However, if we try to understand and interpret Romans based solely on being a profound doctrinal statement, we are likely to misunderstand it. Paul did not write Romans as a textbook on theology. He wrote Romans first and, most importantly, as a specific letter to a particular church to address particular problems and issues. It is not complete systematic teaching covering all aspects of God, humans and salvation. Of course, there is much teaching in Romans, but it is primarily written as a *pastoral* letter for the specific need and benefit of the Roman Christians.

So, to understand why Paul wrote, we also have to do our best to understand the concerns of the early Roman church. Once we understand the Roman church situation, we can safely obtain general principles true for Christians in all cultural and historical settings. And once we have a firm grasp of these principles, we can properly apply them to our specific individual and corporate lives and contexts.

### The Letter

Romans was written as a letter, so it involves two parties: the writer was Paul, and the recipient was the church in Rome.<sup>1</sup> So we will first try to understand Paul's situation and what motivated him to write this letter. And secondly, we will attempt to understand what the church in Rome was like; that is, who its members were, their difficulties, and the issues that concerned them.

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<sup>1</sup> The population of Rome was likely around one million people of which half were slaves. The physical size of Rome was relatively small, comprising about fifteen square kilometers.

### *Paul*

In many ways, Paul was the ideal evangelist for Jews and Gentiles. He was born a Roman citizen (Acts 22:28) and grew up in Tarsus, one of the largest cities in the Roman empire. He was well aware of Roman customs, religions and philosophies. He was also fluent in Greek, the primary language of the empire. However, Paul was educated as a Pharisee in the school of Gamaliel in Jerusalem. There he excelled beyond all the other students (Galatians 1:14).

Paul's letter to the church in Rome begins and ends as a typical letter. Paul opens with a lengthy description of himself (1:1-6). He ends the letter with personal issues about his travel plans (15:14-29), prayer requests (15:30-33), and specific greetings to individuals he knows personally in Rome (16:3-16). What is unique about this letter, compared to other letters, Paul has written is the amount of space he reserves for these remarks. This is not entirely surprising because Paul had not founded the church in Rome. In fact, to this point, he had not even visited. Of course, he knew people such as Aquila and Priscilla in his travels and work in other churches. By the time Paul wrote this letter, both Aquila and Priscilla were back in Rome attending church there (16:3). As well, it was through such friends and others that the church knew about Paul. At the end of the letter, Paul greets twenty-six people, twenty-four by name, all of whom he seems to know well. Still, it is most likely he had not met most of the members of the church.

Even though Paul has never been to Rome, he does believe he had the right and the authority to instruct the church. In 1:1-5, Paul states he is "**a servant of Christ Jesus**" and by doing so, equates himself with great Old Testament saints. This same phrase – servant of Christ – is often used of Moses as well as Joshua and David. Specifically, Paul received his authority as an "**apostle**" who was uniquely chosen and sent by the Lord himself (1 Corinthians 1:1; 9:1-2; 15:3-10; 1 Timothy 2:7). And, even more specifically, Paul was an apostle to Gentiles (1:5). Because Paul understands himself to be an apostle, he views all churches, including the Roman church, to be under his apostolic authority. He makes this point explicit in 1:14-15 and again at the end of the letter in 15:15-16. One of the most direct statements by Paul

saying he is speaking on behalf of God is in his letter to the church in Corinth: "If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord. If anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized" (1 Corinthians 14:37-38). So, Paul did not write as a 'touring' preacher, but one who had the duty and authority given to him by Jesus Christ to be an apostle to the Roman church.

At the end of the letter, Paul outlines his travel plans (15:18-29). The details in this section tell us where and when he wrote the letter. It is most likely Paul wrote the letter in Corinth at the end of his third missionary journey around AD 57 (Acts 20:2-3) while staying at Gaius' home in Corinth (15:25; 16:23; 1 Corinthians 1:14). The travel section also helps us to know why he wrote this letter and why he included certain specific arguments in it. Although commentators have given different reasons,<sup>2</sup> it is most likely he hoped the Roman Christians would assist him on his way to preach the gospel in Spain (15:24). Rome was the most important city in the empire. It was also the closest city to Spain. In this light, the entire letter is an extended introduction to the church in Rome, explaining what Paul believes and what he thinks is important. It is a personal doctrinal statement to establish the worthiness of their financial assistance.<sup>3</sup> Paul also desired their prayer support for his upcoming trip to Jerusalem (15:30-33). Of course, there is no doubt Paul wanted to help the church pastorally. Paul had a great love and concern for all Christian churches regardless of whether he founded the churches or not (e.g., the church in Colossae). Rome was the cultural centre of the Roman empire, so it would have been important to ensure the church had a solid footing in doctrine and Christian behaviour.

Paul's desire for the Roman Christians to support him and encourage them is clear. However, his other reasons for writing focus on the specific circumstances the Roman church was facing. By understanding what the church was like and its ethnic

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther stated, "this epistle represents the fundamental teaching of the New Testament and is the very purest Gospel." While more recently, there has been an emphasis on how Gentiles are integrated with the Jews as the one people of God.

<sup>3</sup> Douglas Moo, Romans, NIV Application Commentary, 22.

makeup, we can better appreciate the motivation for the particular teaching Paul has chosen to include in the letter.

*The Church in Rome*

Interestingly, the book of Acts does not describe how the church in Rome began.<sup>4</sup> However, Luke does tell us that on the Day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came and filled the disciples who were gathered together. There were also diaspora “Jews and proselytes” at that festival who were visiting from Rome (Acts 2:1-11; v. 5). It is not difficult to assume some of these Jews and proselytes were among the three thousand who were converted (Acts 2:37-41). These new Jewish converts likely returned to Rome to form the beginning of the Christian church. We also know there was a significant Jewish population in Rome during this time. Although the church would have been predominately Jewish, it would also have included gentile God-fearers.<sup>5</sup>

However, the Jewish character of these churches would have changed dramatically in 49 AD. At that time, Emperor Claudius had become utterly exasperated with the disputes among the Jews concerning a certain *Chrestus*. Many historians believe that *Chrestus* is a reference to Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ.<sup>6</sup> As a result of the arguments, he issued an edict expelling all Jews from

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<sup>4</sup> The Roman Catholic tradition understands Peter was the founder of the church in Rome. Jesus himself gave Peter the office of the “rock” on which the church of Christ was to be built (Matthew 16:18). However, there is little historical support for this tradition. Luke states Peter left Jerusalem for another place (Acts 12:17), but the specific location is not mentioned. We do know he attended the Jerusalem council held around 48-49 AD (Acts 15) and that he also taught in Corinth (1 Corinthians 1:12). As well, Peter’s reference to “Babylon” (1 Peter 5:13) is most likely a reference to Rome sometime during or after Peter was in Rome with John Mark. This would have been near the end of Peter’s ministry and life. Finally, it seems unlikely Paul would have written to a church in the way he did without any mention of Peter. For these reasons, it is most likely Peter did not reach Rome until after Paul had written his letter.

<sup>5</sup> Unlike proselytes, God-fearers were Gentiles who had not completely converted to Judaism. For example, they were not circumcised nor did they adhere to Jewish food laws. However, they attended the synagogue and followed some of the teaching of Judaism.

<sup>6</sup> In “The Life of Claudius 25.4” (ca. 110 AD), the historian Suetonius wrote, “As the Jews were making constant disturbance of Chrestus, he expelled them from Rome.”



Rome. This would have included Jewish Christians such as Priscilla and Aquila (Acts 18:2). In a short time, the Roman church would have become entirely Gentile. Eventually, Claudius' edict was reversed, and Jews were permitted back into Rome. So, by the time Paul wrote the letter, Jews such as Priscilla and Aquila had returned to Rome (16:3). It is not difficult to imagine the social tension created in these churches. The Jews, whose historical and religious heritage had formed the foundation of Christianity, were no longer the church's leaders. They were likely the minority with much less influence. This is one of the reasons Paul allots so much of the letter to the Jewish law and its relationship to the life of Jews and Gentiles who became Christians (7:1ff). It is also why he admonishes the Gentiles for their arrogance (11:18-23), including his teaching on strong and weak Christians (14:1-15:13).

It may be hard for us today to understand the depth of this Jewish-Greek tension. Paul taught that the Gospel did not introduce a new religion but fulfilled the Old Testament. As such, we can begin to comprehend the church's struggles in coming to a proper understanding of the relationship between the old covenant of the Law and the new covenant of grace. In addition, there was the great dilemma that most Jews did not accept Jesus as fulfilling their messianic promises. Why did so few Jews believe the Gospel if the good news of Jesus Christ fulfilled all their promises from their (Old Testament) Scriptures? This was a source of great sorrow for Paul, so he dedicated a significant amount of his letter to this issue (chapters 9-11).

### **The New Perspective on Paul**

Throughout the history of the Protestant church, the letter to the Romans has primarily answered the question posed by Martin Luther: How can I, as a sinner, have a relationship with a just God? Or, in other words: How can I be justified before God? Luther's argument was with the Catholic Church, whose answer to this question depended, at least in part, on proper obedience to the commands of God; that is, to some extent, right standing before God depended on personal effort. Instead, Luther found the answer in Paul's teaching. Justification is solely by God's grace received through faith.

Recently, however, Biblical scholars have wondered whether this was Paul's primary concern and argument. They concluded that Paul's primary issue concerned "how Gentiles are included as covenant people of God." They view Paul's criticism of the law as less about attaining righteousness by keeping it than Jews using the Mosaic law to *exclude* Gentiles. Certainly, this was a real concern for Paul. However, the way Paul answers this first-century question is the answer Luther saw in the letter: Jews and Gentiles are included as people of God the same way – only by the grace of God through faith in his Son. Therefore, these notes take the traditional Protestant view of justification.

### **Theme**

So, what is Romans all about? Certainly, it is about the gospel of grace and our justification to stand innocent before a righteous God. It is, therefore, about our need for salvation. But if we focus on that alone we might miss the bigger picture. Romans is *primarily about God*<sup>7</sup> who, though we were in sinful rebellion against him, loved us enough to provide a way for salvation from his wrath and judgment. As a result, we are to live to glorify him and to be in loving care of each other. So mostly, we will concentrate our attention on God.

In fact, it has been argued that no other New Testament book is so God-centred. Romans is all about the revelation of God, including the wrath and judgment of God on sinful man; it is all about the righteousness of God, including both his holiness and his Son's righteousness which he offers us; it is about our right response to God for this gracious offer of salvation, and it is about living a God-centred life pleasing to God. Our prayer throughout this study is that we will, with spiritual eyes, behold God's glory and beauty in all of his perfection, as revealed in Christ Jesus. And so, rejoice with inexpressible joy because we know the outcome of our faith, the salvation of our souls (1 Peter 1:8-9).

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<sup>7</sup> Leon Morris, "The Theme of Romans," W. Ward Gasque & Ralph P. Martin, eds., *Apostolic History and the Gospel. Biblical and Historical Essays Presented to F.F. Bruce*. Paternoster Press, 1970. Pp. 249-263.

## Structural Outline

Romans has been outlined in many different ways. The following is the outline and structure we will follow.

### I. Prologue (1:1-15)

1. (1:1-7) Salutation
2. (1:8-15) Paul and the Romans

### II. The Gospel of God (1:16-8:39)

1. (1:16-17) **Theme: The Righteousness of God**
2. (1:18-4:25) **The Gospel of Faith: Solution to the sin problem**
  - i. (1:18-3:20) *The Problem of Sin*
    - 1:18-32 God's wrath against pagans
    - 2:1-3:8 God's judgment against Jews
    - 3:9-20 God's judgment against Jew and Gentile
  - ii. (3:21-4:25) *Justification by Faith: Solution to the Sin Problem*
    - 3:21-26 Justification and God's Righteousness
    - 3:27-31 Justification by faith alone
    - 4:1-25 Justification of Abraham
3. (5:1-8:39) **The Gospel of Hope: Our eternal security in Christ**
  - i. (5:1-21) *Rejoicing in the Hope of glory: Result of Justification*
    - 5:1-11 Peace and hope with God through Christ
    - 5:12-21 Death in Adam, life in Christ
  - ii. (6:1-33) *Freedom from Sin*
    - 6:1-14 Union with Christ
    - 6:15-23 Freed from slavery to sin
  - iii. (7:1-25) *Freedom from the Law*
    - 7:1-6 Death of Christ frees us from the Law
    - 7:7-12 Purpose and value of the Law
    - 7:13-25 Life under the Law and Sin
  - iv. (8:1-39) *Freedom from Death: Our assurance of salvation*
    - 8:1-13 The Spirit of Life
    - 8:14-17 The Spirit of Adoption
    - 8:18-30 The Spirit of Hope
    - 8:31-39 Victory because God is for us

### III. Defense of the Gospel: The Faithfulness of God to Israel and Gentiles (9:1-11:36)

1. (9:1-24) **Gospel of Faithfulness: God's word has not failed**
  - i. (9:1-5) *Lament of Paul over faithless Israel*
  - ii. (9:6-29) *God's word has not failed*
    - 9:6-13 God's call
    - 9:14-21 God's sovereignty
    - 9:22-29 God's election of a new people
2. (9:30-10:21) **The Gospel of Christ: Christ, the fulfillment of God's word**
  - i. (9:30-10:4) *Israel pursued righteousness through the law*
  - ii. (10:5-13) *Why? Because their understanding was flawed*
  - iii. (10:14-21) *This resulted in their disobedience*
3. (11:1-36) **The Gospel for Israel: All Israel will be saved**
  - i. (11:1-10) *God's past faithfulness to Israel: The Remnant*
  - ii. (11:11-32) *God's future faithfulness: All Israel will be saved*
  - iii. (11:33-36) *Praise to God's sovereignty, grace, and faithfulness*

### IV. The Gospel of God (continued): Gospel of Love (12:1-15:13)

1. (12:1-21) **The Gospel of a Renewed Mind**
  - i. (12:1-3) *A living sacrifice*
  - ii. (12:4-8) *Unity in the body through the diversity of gifts*
  - iii. (12:9-15) *Love: The identity of a Christian*
2. (13:1-14) **The Gospel of the Law of Love**
  - i. (13:1-7) *A Christian's obligation to earthly governments*
  - ii. (13:8-10) *A Christian's obligation of love for his neighbour*
  - iii. (13:11-14) *A Christian's obligation to Christ*
3. (14:1-15:13) **The Gospel of Life in Christ**
  - i. (14:1-12) *A Christian's life with his brothers and sisters*
  - ii. (14:13-23) *A Christian's life not to judge a brother or sister*
  - iii. (15:1-7) *A Christian's life of mutual encouragement*
  - iv. (15:8-13) *A Christian's life filled with hope, joy and peace*

### V. Paul's closing (15:14-16:27)

1. (15:14-21) **Paul's mission to the Gentiles**
2. (15:22-29) **Paul's plans and request for prayer**
3. (15:33-16:27) **Paul's final instructions and greetings**

## Introduction (1:1-7)

The central theme of Paul's letter is an exposition of the gospel. Paul mentions the gospel four times in these opening verses (1:1, 9, 15, 16) and again when he concludes the letter (16:25) – eleven times in total. So, it is not surprising Paul's proclamation of the gospel of God, in all its dimensions, flows from his heart and is a central theme throughout his letter.

## Paul and the Gospel of God (1:1-5)

The letter begins in a similar way as most of Paul's letters. He follows the standard Roman custom of letter writing and includes an extended introduction. This was, as mentioned earlier, likely because he had not founded the church in Rome, nor had he visited. Therefore, he felt it necessary to introduce himself and the gospel he preached in more detail.

### *v. 1 Paul's self-understanding*

After introducing himself as "**Paul**,"<sup>8</sup> he immediately gives three personal descriptions to show he has both the responsibility and authority to write to the church in Rome. He states he is a "**servant of Jesus Christ**" and has been "**called to be an apostle.**" His calling as an apostle meant he was "**set apart for the gospel of God.**" These parallel designations identify Paul's Master, his calling, and ministry.

In the first self-description, "**servant of Christ Jesus**," Paul states how he understands himself in relation to Christ. It is his ordinary way of describing himself.<sup>9</sup> The word "**servant**" is often

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<sup>8</sup> Paul's name changed from Saul to Paul on his first missionary journey when they were in Cyprus (Acts 13:9). There is likely no more significance to this other than Saul was his Jewish name while Paul was his Greek name. However, others have noted a new name is often given after a significant spiritual event (Genesis 41:45; Daniel 1:6-7; and in the New Testament John 1:42; Mark 3:17).

<sup>9</sup> See for example 1 Corinthians 4:1; 2 Corinthians 11:23; Galatians 1:10; Philippians 1:1; Titus 1:1. Sometimes Paul states he is a servant of the gospel (Ephesians 3:7; Colossians 1:23), but since the gospel can be viewed as the life, death, resurrection, and exaltation of Jesus Christ, it is really the same thing.

translated “bond servant” (NASB) or even “slave”<sup>10</sup> (NET) because “servant” implies being paid for one’s services. In the Old Testament, great leaders such as Abraham (Genesis 26:24), Moses (Joshua 1:2) and Joshua (Joshua 24:29) called themselves slaves of the LORD. In the New Testament, the reference to the LORD has been transferred to Jesus (1:4, 7). A slave belongs entirely to his owner. It is in this sense that Paul is using the word. All followers of Christ have been purchased and redeemed (Matthew 20:28; 1 Corinthians 6:19-20; 7:23) from the “slavery of sin” to become “slaves of righteousness” (6:16-20). Yet, believers are not simply slaves, but God has made us his very own children by adopting us and giving us the “Spirit of adoption,” so we might call him “Abba, Father” (8:14-17).

Paul is also “called to be an apostle” (1 Corinthians 1:1; Galatians 1:1). The word “called” means chosen or appointed. The term “apostle” means messenger but refers specifically to Jesus’ choice and designation of the twelve apostles (Luke 6:12f). Paul is telling the Roman church he should be included as one of these Twelve, equal to Peter and John. To be an apostle meant he was directly and personally called by Jesus (Acts 9:3-19). It also meant he was an eye-witness of Jesus and, most importantly, saw him after the resurrection (Acts 1:21-26; 1 Corinthians 9:1; 15:8f; Galatians 1:15-16a). These Twelve were given the authority and power to represent Jesus and his gospel.

Describing himself as both a “servant” and a “called apostle” highlights his view that he is entirely under the authority of Christ and has the authority to proclaim Christ’s gospel. Paul continues his description, stating he was “set apart” by Christ for

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<sup>10</sup> Of course, “slave” is a very negative word. No one thinks in positive terms about slavery. Yet, in the New Testament, the word is used more than 130 times. Even in Revelation, when the angel shows John the new Jerusalem, he states that before the “throne of God and of the Lamb,” “his slaves will serve him.” (also v. 6). Of course, using “servant” or even “bond-servant” reduces the impact. New Testament use of the word means complete and total devotion, not the humiliation and degradation, which is normally the condition of a slave. Paul affirms, like the Old Testament saints, that he is entirely devoted to Christ without reservation. Today, we only partially understand what it meant to be a slave during the Roman occupation of Jesus’ day. But Jesus and the apostles completely understood slavery since it was all around them. Still, as Christians, we need to take the word and its meaning seriously.

the **“gospel of God.”** In Paul’s letter to the Galatians, he also writes that he has been set apart – using the same words – “before I was born” (Galatians 1:15). The words **“set apart”** mean “holy” in the Old Testament and refer to being set apart for God. This is very similar to how God called the prophet Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:5). Paul’s encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus was not only the time of his conversion from rabbinical Judaism to following Christ but also his commission to be an apostle; that is, to proclaim, explain and defend the gospel. Although God conceived and planned the gospel before eternity, he gave the apostles and all his followers the responsibility to preach and teach the gospel to all nations (9:14-17; Matthew 28:18-20).

*v. 2 Paul’s understanding of the Gospel*

Certainly, Paul’s calling was to proclaim the **“gospel of God”** to the Jews. But it was a calling specifically to Gentiles (1:5; 9:24; 11:13; Galatians 2:8; 1 Timothy 2:7). In vv. 2-6, Paul now gives the Christians in Rome his understanding of God’s gospel. The word ‘gospel’ means ‘good news.’ In Roman times this often referred to the news of victory in war. However, the gospel Paul proclaims is the good news **“of God”** – that is, the good news that comes from God and is about God. God is the *source* and *origin* of the gospel. He conceived, planned, prepared and accomplished it. The letter to the Romans is all about God describing both his justice and his love; that is, what he has done in restoring his own people to himself. A few verses later, Paul also equates Jesus Christ, the Son of God, with God by calling the gospel **“the gospel of his Son”** (1:9).

Although Paul calls the gospel of God **“my gospel”** (2:16; 16:25), he did not create or invent it. Instead, he was given the authority (**“called”** and **“set apart”**) to proclaim it to a sinful world. Christianity is not a human invention, nor is it just one more religion among many. In a certain sense, it is not a ‘religion’ at all; rather it is God’s good news to a suffering and rebellious world. It is the only way of restoring a relationship of peace with God so his children can live in his presence. And this gospel is the only way God himself has provided.

Paul describes the **“gospel of God”** as not a new thing. Rather, it was already promised a long time ago through the Old Testament prophets. As we pointed out, Christianity is not a new

religion but a fulfillment of all God **“promised beforehand through his prophets.”** The reference to **“holy Scriptures”** refers to all of the Old Testament since the New Testament Scriptures were not yet complete at the time Paul wrote this letter. Jesus himself affirms he was this fulfillment (Matthew 5:17-18; John 5:39, 46; Luke 24:25ff, 44f; Hebrews 8:5; 10:1).

This gospel, therefore, was not only the fulfillment of the promises but also the fulfillment of the law of Moses (3:21; 10:4; 2 Corinthians 1:20; Hebrews 7:23-24; 9:12). Paul does not tell us which passages he is referring to, but it may well have been to the section beginning in Isaiah 40:9 where Isaiah himself prophecies:

Go on up to a high mountain,  
     O Zion, herald of good news;  
 lift up your voice with strength,  
     O Jerusalem, herald of good news; {i.e. gospel}  
 lift it up, fear not;  
 say to the cities of Judah,  
     “Behold your God!”

Later in verse 15, Paul says he is **“eager”** to preach the gospel. The gospel is God’s message. Through his Son, he has declared those who put their trust in him just and righteous so they are no longer under his condemnation (8:1).

If we understand verse 2 to be a parenthesis between verses 1 and 3 (see KJV version), then verse 1 ends with **“the gospel of God,”** and verse 3 begins with **“concerning his Son.”** Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God, is at the centre of God’s gospel. In verse 9, Paul states that this gospel is **“the gospel of his Son.”** The gospel of God begins and ends with Jesus Christ. Adding or removing anything from the gospel diminishes who Christ is and what he has done. As John Calvin writes in his commentary, **“This is a remarkable passage, by which we are taught that the whole gospel is included in Christ so that if any removes one step from Christ, he withdraws himself from the gospel. Since he is the living and express image of the Father, it is no wonder that he alone is set before us as one to whom our whole faith is to be directed and in whom it is to centre.”**<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Calvin, 43.



Most Jews in Paul's day would have expected a saviour, a messiah. They believed God would send them a military saviour to deliver them from their Roman oppressors. Paul boldly states that this long-awaited messiah is actually God's "**Son.**" In the following two verses, Paul elaborates on what he means by this.

*vv. 3-4 Paul's understanding of Jesus*

Paul describes Jesus in two parallel statements: he is "**descended from David**" and "**declared with power to be the Son of God.**" Here Paul highlights the two natures of Christ: his humanity and his deity. First, the son of David was a messianic title (2 Samuel 7:12ff). The second title, "**the Son of God,**" was taken from David's psalm (Psalm 2:7). Jesus' own designation when he referred to the Father as "Abba, Father" (Matthew 14:36 and 11:27) indicates he was not just a human messianic descendent of David. Paul emphasizes these two natures (1:9; 5:10; 8:3, 32). That Jesus was a son of David causes no difficulty and underlines the promises made by the prophets. However, the verb "**declared to be**" raised questions in the early church, particularly when the phrase includes "**in power**" because the verb can also be translated as "**appointed**" (NIV, NET). However, the New Testament never speaks of Jesus being appointed or established as the Son of God sometime after his birth. Therefore, we follow the interpretation emphasizing "**in power**" as part of the reference to the "**Son of God.**" The full phrase then is "**the Son-of-God-in-Power**" or, even better, "**the only true powerful Son of God**" (BDAG, see also NET and CSB). "**Son of God**" was never a title for Jesus. Instead, it refers to the eternal *divine nature* of Jesus. Then, Jesus was declared, or better, shown to be the powerful Son of God by the Holy Spirit because of his resurrection.

The resurrection itself is, to humanity, evidence of his sonship.<sup>12</sup> These two parallel statements include the parallel phrases "**according to the flesh**" and "**according to the Spirit of holiness.**"<sup>13</sup> It may be best to understand these phrases to mean before and after Jesus' resurrection; that is, Christ in humiliation and Christ in exaltation, Christ in weakness and Christ in power.

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<sup>12</sup> Hodge, 18.

<sup>13</sup> The "Spirit of holiness" refers to the Holy Spirit (John 14:16-17, 26).

He is Jesus, the descendent of David, the **“Christ”** or **“Messiah”** in Hebrew. And he is also **“Lord,”** which in this context refers to God, the exalted Son of God. However, even after his resurrection, Jesus Christ retains both natures. Paul, then, brings this all together when he ends these verses with **“Jesus Christ our Lord.”** The gospel, therefore, has its *foundation* in our Lord Jesus Christ, the son of David, Son of God.

*vv. 5-6 Paul’s understanding of the scope, purpose and reason for the Gospel*

After this glorious description of Christ and the gospel, Paul returns to the responsibilities Christ has given him. Paul already stated he had received apostleship, but now he also adds grace.<sup>14</sup> Here, **“grace”** means Paul’s apostleship was God’s undeserved and surprising gift. Paul always appears astonished that he who had murdered and imprisoned Christ’s devoted followers would be called to follow the One he hated and be his apostle (Galatians 1:13-16a). Paul now describes his apostleship in more detail. He states its *scope* is **“among all nations,”** but it also includes the Roman Christians, those **“whom you too are called by Jesus Christ”** (v. 6). The *scope* of the gospel is universal, including both Jews and Gentiles.

The *purpose* of Paul’s preaching is to **“bring about the obedience of faith.”** This is an important expression since he uses it again at the end of his letter (16:26). There are several explanations for this phrase. First, it could simply mean believing and obeying the gospel; that is, **“obedience to the Faith”** (KJV). **“Faith,”** in this case, means the Christian faith or doctrine. Certainly, other New Testament passages are similar (6:17; 10:16; Acts 6:7; 2 Thessalonians 1:8; 1 Peter 1:22; 4:7). However, this use of **“faith”** treats it as a body of teaching, while the letter to the Romans consistently views faith as trust and hope in Christ and his grace. Secondly, **“obedience”** and **“faith”** can be linked so that it means ‘obedience *which is* faith’ (NLT). Again, faith in Christ demands obedience since they are two different things. A

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<sup>14</sup> It does not seem likely that the **“we”** would include the other apostles since he does not include them in the rest of the letter (Stott, 51).

particular emphasis of the letter is to highlight this difference.<sup>15</sup> The third, and most likely, the phrase refers to “obedience *that comes from faith*” (NIV).<sup>16</sup> The primary example of such faith is Abraham (chapter 4). Our obedience to Christ comes from or is derived from our trust, hope and love of Christ. However, it is also true that faith is not true saving faith unless there is obedience; obedience without faith is simply works (James 2:14-17). And even more importantly, faith that includes works but not love is only “a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal” in which nothing is gained (1 Corinthians 13:1-13).

Therefore, faith in Christ has as its *foundation* the love of Christ. This is the greatest of all commandments on which everything else hinges. This commandment was first given in the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 6:4) and affirmed by Christ (Mark 12:28-30). Our faith in the sense of believing in orthodox doctrine can be perfect, but if it is not grounded in our love of Jesus, it is worthless. See especially the warning to the church in Ephesus in Revelation 2:1-7.

Note as well, the obedience of faith is now for “**all nations.**” Before the coming of Jesus Christ, it was only for the nation of Israel. Now through the person and work of Jesus, the gospel goes out to all nations.

*v. 5b*

Paul has given the scope of the gospel and the *purpose* of the gospel. Now he provides us with the goal of or reason for the gospel. Paul states the goal, or reason, for faithful believers in all the nations is “for his name’s sake.” This reason for the gospel is at the end of the Greek sentence, indicating it is the most critical aspect of the gospel. Paul preached the gospel to exalt, honour and glorify the name of Jesus Christ. Christ’s name is above all names, and someday every knee will bow before him (Philippians 2:9ff). As John Stott writes, “we should be ‘jealous’ for the honour of his name – troubled when it remains unknown, hurt when it is ignored, indignant when it is blasphemed, and all the time anxious and determined that it shall be given the honour

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<sup>15</sup> Faith in Christ refers to our justification, while obedience as a Christian refers to our sanctification, life in Christ.

<sup>16</sup> Stott, 52.

and glory which is its due.”<sup>17</sup> The highest goal of the Great Commission and all evangelistic work to save sinners is not just to save them from the wrath of God (1:18), but primarily for the glory of Jesus Christ; “to the praise of his glory” (Ephesians 1:12, 14). This is the reason for the earliest missionaries and why we proclaim the gospel (3 John 7).

In summary, then, from these first verses, Paul begins his letter to the Roman Christians by clearly stating the gospel he preaches has its *source* in God, its *foundation* in the Lord Jesus Christ, its *demonstration* in the Old Testament Scriptures, its *scope* is for all people, its *purpose* is to bring all people into the obedience of faith. Its *goal* is to honour and glorify Jesus Christ.

### **The Christians in Rome (1:6-7)**

After his initial introduction of himself and the gospel of God, Paul addresses the Roman Christians. He first states they are “called.” The word “called” (vv. 1, 6, 7) does not simply mean invited, but to those who respond to the calling of God to the obedience of faith.

Second, he calls them “loved by God”; that is, God’s own children. All believers in his Son are loved by the Father (John 13:1; 14:21, 23; 17:26; 1 John 3:1; Jeremiah 31:3).

Third, he calls them “saints” (literally “holy ones” – those who are dedicated or consecrated to God), which is a standard Old Testament reference to the holy people of Israel. All God’s children, those who have put their hope and trust in his Son are called saints, regardless of their ethnic (Jew or Gentile) background. Paul mentions several of these saints at the end of the letter.

And fourth, Paul then reminds the saints they have received “grace” and “peace.” This greeting sums up the gospel succinctly and perfectly. By grace, we have been saved and so have peace with God (5:1; Ephesians 2:5). The order is important. First grace is given and then peace is the result of the gift of grace. Here in this phrase we first learn what it means to have freedom in Christ. First, the freedom we have comes as a gift of grace, and second, it produces peace with God (Acts 10:36; Ephesians 2:14;

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

Colossians 1:20). In Galatians 5:1 Paul states, “It was for freedom that Christ set us free.” Freedom and salvation are similar: freedom from the bondage of sin and decay (8:21) and from its powers (Galatians 4:3) and the wrath of God’s judgment (5:9; Ephesians 5:6; Colossians 3:6). As a result, we have peace with God. When we have peace with God, we also have peace with our brothers and sisters, no matter their ethnic origin. Paul is writing to the Romans to instruct the church about the unity and peace the Jewish and Gentile Christians have with each other as one covenant people of God. As mentioned earlier, this was still a source of significant friction and misunderstanding and, sadly, as it has continued to be throughout the history of the Christian church. This grace and peace come **“from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”** Paul uses the personal **“our Father.”** Through the revelation of the Son, we can now call God *our* Father (Galatians 4:6).

## Questions for Reflection

### Study it

1. Where, when and what motivated Paul to write this letter?
2. If Paul never started the church, how do you think it began?
3. Most churches have problems, so it’s not surprising Rome also experienced some. What do you think were the tensions and issues in the Roman church? Is there anything in the first seven verses that help answer this question?
4. [1:1] List all the things which Paul says about himself. How was he “called”? In what sense is Paul an “apostle.”
5. [1:1-4] List all the things Paul says about Jesus Christ; and the gospel. How are they linked?
6. [1:4] What does it mean that Christ Jesus was “declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead”?
7. [1:1-7] Identify all the references (names and pronouns) to God. (Hint: there are 14). Would you agree that at least the first seven verses are all about God?

8. [1:1-7] Identify Paul's reference to the Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit).
9. [1:7] What does the phrase "Grace to you and peace" mean?

**Live it**

1. Do I view myself as a "slave" of Jesus Christ? What does this mean to you?
2. Paul goes on and calls Jesus "our Lord" twice. What does that mean? How is the lordship of Christ evident in your life? Paul was "called." How were you "called" (cf. Ephesians 1:4-6)?
3. How do you relate "obedience" with "faith"? Although we are saved by grace alone through faith alone, what role does obedience take in the life of a Christian?
4. How do you understand the purpose and goal of evangelism? How does it compare to Paul's goal?
5. Tensions existed between Christian Jews and Gentiles in the Roman church. What tensions exist in your church, and how might you resolve them?

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## Lesson 2: Paul and the Christians in Rome (1:8-17)

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After his introduction to the letter, Paul directly addresses the Christians in Rome. He is eager to explain how he feels about them. And he wants them to know more about what it means for him to be a “servant [slave] of Christ Jesus” and an “apostle” to them as well. He has quite a lot to say. He mentions twelve things about himself concerning his relationship to God, the gospel, and the Roman Christians.

### Paul’s Thanksgiving and Prayer (1:8-10)

v. 8

“First,”<sup>18</sup> Paul wants them to know he thanks his “God through Jesus Christ for all” of them. Paul’s possessive pronoun “my” indicates his personal relationship with God. Although Paul had not started the church and could not take any credit for their spiritual development, he is still grateful to God for them. As mentioned already, it is clear from the end of the letter, Paul personally knew quite a few of them. His love for them is evident here and at the end of the letter.

Paul’s relationship with them is “through Jesus Christ.” This is the ground and foundation of Christian love. Jesus Christ has created access to God allowing Paul to express his thanksgiving. As Jesus himself taught his disciples:

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. (John 13:34-35)

Later, Jesus expands on this in his special prayer for the whole church including all congregations throughout the world until his return. Amazingly, in this prayer, Jesus’ desire for his church is to be “one” just as God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit are One.

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<sup>18</sup> “First” is not followed by a “second, “third” etc. Most likely it refers to Paul’s thankfulness to God for their faith which had become known throughout the world rather than first in a list. So “first” means most important. There was nothing more important to Paul than God being glorified through his church. And for this he gives thanks to God.

And just as amazing, the Father loves the church as he loves his Son! Our union with Christ is not just as individual Christians but corporately as a church.

“I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become *perfectly one*, so that the world may know that you sent me and *loved them even as you loved me*. (John 17:20-23)

Paul thanks God because their **“faith”** is now **“proclaimed in all the world.”** The reference to the **“world”** is the known Roman empire. Rome was the capital and home of Caesar. The city of Rome represented imperial pride and power. People throughout the empire venerated Rome and Caesar. Although Paul had no part or responsibility in bringing the gospel to Rome, nonetheless, he was delighted and grateful for their public faith in Christ.

*vv. 9-10a*

Paul calls on God himself to be his **“witness.”** The term **“witness”** also means God knows Paul’s heart. Here, Paul is appealing to God’s perfect knowledge of the truth. This was not unusual for Paul when he wrote letters (2 Corinthians 1:23; Galatians 1:20; Philippians 1:8). The God who is called as a witness is the God **“I serve with my spirit.”** This declaration refers to Paul’s first statement in the letter, **“Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus.”** Once again, Paul is making it clear to the Rome Christians, Christ Jesus and God are the same, for he goes on to refer to the **“gospel of God”** as the **“gospel of his Son.”**

The phrase **“with my spirit”** is likely a reference to the Holy Spirit in union with Paul’s spirit. Paul serves Christ Jesus through God’s own Spirit.<sup>19</sup>

Paul is calling God to be his witness to tell the Christians how much he has been praying for them. Even though he does not know most of them personally, he still prays for them, mentioning them constantly or **“without ceasing.”** This is not a

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<sup>19</sup> Fee, 484-486.



superficial promise. Even though he cannot be with them, Paul expresses his deep love for them by faithfully praying for them. William Barclay, commenting on prayer, writes, "It is always a Christian privilege and duty to bear our loved ones and all our fellow Christians to the throne of grace."<sup>20</sup> He also quotes Gregory of Nyssa, an early pastor (ca. 370 AD) from the region of Cappadocia mentioned in Acts 2:9 and 1 Peter 1:1:

The effect of prayer is union with God, and, if someone is with God, he is separated from the enemy. Through prayer we guard our chastity, control our temper and rid ourselves of vanity. It makes us forget injuries, overcomes envy, defeats injustice and makes amends for sin. Through prayer we obtain physical wellbeing, a happy home, and a strong, well-ordered society ... Prayer is the seal of virginity and a pledge of faithfulness in marriage. It shields the wayfarer, protects the sleeper, and gives courage to those who keep vigil ... It will refresh you when you are weary and comfort you when you are sorrowful. Prayer is the delight of the joyful as well as the solace of the afflicted.

*v. 10b*

One of Paul's consistent prayers is, by "**God's will**," he might "**at last succeed in coming to**" them. Paul has desired to come to Rome, but, as yet, it has not been God's will. Paul's desire was not wrong; rather, it was not God's timing. Paul is submissive to God's will despite his longing to visit Rome. However, it appears to Paul that he will soon succeed in visiting Rome. Recall, Paul wrote this letter in Corinth just before his last visit to Jerusalem, where he was arrested and imprisoned. However, it would not be for another two years, and then in chains, that he would finally be able to come to Rome.

### **Paul's three purposes for visiting Rome (1:11-12)**

*v. 11 The First Purpose: to give them a spiritual gift*

The first reason he "**longs to see them**" is to bring "**some spiritual gift**" so they might be "strengthened." There has been much speculation about what this gift might be. It is unlikely it is one of the charismatic gifts (12:6; Ephesians 4:11; 1 Corinthians

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<sup>20</sup> Barclay, 19-20.

12:11) since God only gives those gifts. Most likely, then, he is referring to his preaching and teaching of the gospel since the gift is **“to strengthen”** the church.<sup>21</sup> To be strengthened means that their commitment to Christ and the gospel would mature despite all the opposition they were experiencing (1 Thessalonians 3:2; Ephesians 3:16). However, it would be a gift **“derived from the Spirit”** in grace and power; in other words, a spiritual blessing (15:27).

*v. 12 The Second Purpose: for mutual encouragement*

Paul also recognizes the Roman Christians have much to offer him. He describes this **“spiritual gift”** as **“mutual encouragement.”** Paul, the great apostle to the Gentiles, had seen and had been personally sent by Jesus. He was the greatest preacher, evangelist, pastor, and thinker of the fledgling Christian church. Through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, much of our New Testament Scripture comes from his pen. Yet, he is not too proud to realize he has much to receive in encouragement from their faith. Again, these are not just platitudes. The great apostle knows God has worked in the lives of these Romans just as God has worked in his own life. And so, he recognizes he can receive a blessing from them as well. Paul fully expected to be spiritually refreshed by his fellowship with them. This is what he desired. John Calvin, impressed by this response from Paul, writes:<sup>22</sup>

See to what degree of modesty his pious heart submitted itself, so that he disdained not to seek confirmation from unexperienced beginners. He means what he says, for there is no one so void of gifts in the Church of Christ, who is not able to contribute something to our spiritual progress.

Such a great teacher of the early church could be encouraged by those with much less knowledge than him. This faith has its basis in a personal relationship with God and is not simply based on theological knowledge.

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<sup>21</sup> Stott, 56.

<sup>22</sup> Calvin, 58.

*v. 13 The Third Purpose: to reap a harvest*

Paul also wants them to know he has been prevented from coming to Rome before this. He seems particularly concerned they will feel he is avoiding or ignoring them just because he had not founded the church. Paul may be addressing some criticism of him for not coming to Rome earlier. He tells them, “**I do not want you to be unaware**”<sup>23</sup> for he has “**often intended to come to**” them. He has already told them that he has been praying for a long time to come to Rome. While Paul was in Ephesus during his third missionary journey, Luke quotes Paul saying, “I must also see Rome” (Acts 19:21). But so far, he has not been able, not because he did not want to or lacked the will to come. The most likely reason is, he had not completed his missionary work in Asia (15:22ff). It was, therefore, not God’s timing.

He gives a further reason for coming to Rome: “**in order to reap some harvest.**” This “**harvest**” refers both to the mutual spiritual gift (“**among you**”) he had just been talking about; and “**as well as**” to the evangelistic work “**among the rest of the Gentiles**” – those who had not yet put their faith in Christ.<sup>24</sup>

### **Paul’s reasons to preach the gospel in Rome (1:14-16a)**

Paul also gives three reasons for his desire to preach the gospel in Rome, where he hopes to reap a harvest for Christ. He states first that he is “**under obligation**” to preach, he is “**eager to preach,**” and he is “**not ashamed**” to preach the gospel. Paul’s main emphasis in preaching the gospel is evangelism for the glory of God.

First, Paul’s sense of obligation or duty comes from the fact he has been called to be an apostle of Christ and has been set aside for the gospel of God. Jesus had entrusted him with the gospel. This obligation was told to him by Ananias who was given a vision of Paul as God’s chosen instrument (Acts 9:15). Paul’s obligation is clearer in his letter to the Corinthian church. There he writes:

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<sup>23</sup> This is a quote that Paul often used to introduce an important personal statement (11:25; 1 Cor. 10:1; 12:1; 2 Cor. 1:8; 1 Thess. 4:13).

<sup>24</sup> Osborne, 30.

For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting.  
For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the  
gospel! (1 Corinthians 9:16)

Therefore, Paul was indebted to fulfill this obligation to the  
“**Greeks and barbarians**” and the “**wise and the foolish.**” These  
four designations include all categories of Gentiles.

Secondly, Paul is not just obligated but is “**eager**” to preach  
the gospel. It is not simply a duty commanded by Christ but his  
joy and delight. It is worth noting Paul did not distinguish  
between duty or obligation and delight. Both these were evident  
in his service to God. This is a distinction we also should not  
make ourselves. Our service ought to be both a duty and a  
delight, even though one of these may be more pronounced than  
the other.

And thirdly, Paul is “**not ashamed**” to preach the gospel. We  
will say more about this third reason in the next section.

### **The Theme of the Letter (1:16-17)**

In verses 1 and 9, Paul states he was set apart to preach “**the  
gospel of God**”; that is, the “**gospel of his Son.**” In 1:3-4, he  
states this gospel is the gospel of Christ, the descendant of David  
and who is now, as the risen Lord, the Son-of-God-in-power. In  
vv. 14-15, Paul stated he is “**under obligation**” and “**eager**” to  
preach the gospel. In verses 16 and 17, he explains this power in  
four statements. This explanation is a central theme of the entire  
letter.

He emphasizes that he is “**not ashamed**” of the gospel and  
then gives additional reasons why he is not. Paul says, “**the  
gospel is the power of God.**” And the reason “**the gospel**” is the  
power of God is because it is “**salvation for everyone who  
believes**” and because it is the “**righteousness of God.**” He  
concludes by stating that this righteousness is “**from faith to  
faith.**” What does Paul mean by these four statements?

#### **1. I am not ashamed of the Gospel (v. 16a)**

Paul first states he “**is not ashamed of the gospel.**” It seems  
strange that Paul would begin such an important truth about the  
gospel this way. Jesus Christ had called and set Paul apart to  
proclaim the gospel to the Gentiles (1:5; 11:13; Acts 9:15). Paul had

taught that this gospel proclaimed salvation as a gift of grace through faith alone. As a result, he became a very contentious preacher among the Jews who remained loyal to the Mosaic law. Many Jews had accepted Jesus as their Messiah but also felt a Gentile must come under the Mosaic law to be saved. This would require Gentiles to be circumcised, follow the food laws, and keep the Sabbath. Paul would appear to be a traitor to Judaism (3:8).

There also would have been gentile Christians who thought he had not gone far enough in distancing himself from the Jews. Antisemitism was alive at this time. Since the Roman church contained Jews and Gentiles, he might have been aware or concerned he was being judged for the gospel he was preaching. To the non-believing Jew and Gentile, the gospel also appears as “folly to those who are perishing” (1 Corinthians 1:18; cf. 1:21, 23; 2:14; 3:18; see also 2 Corinthians 2:15-16).

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. (1 Corinthians 1:20-25)

So, Paul makes a point right at the beginning, the gospel he preaches is true. He will not back away from it to please the loyal Jew or the radical Gentile. Paul continues to preach a gospel of grace first given to Jews and then Gentiles. The relationship between the gospel to Jews and Gentiles and the relationship between Jews and Gentiles are addressed throughout the letter.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> It should be noted, however, other commentators have a different understanding of this phrase. They understand the phrase “I am not ashamed” to be a figure of speech called a *litotes*. What this means is Paul is actually saying the opposite: he really believes that it is a great honour to proclaim it (Bruce, 85; See also TEV translation). It is certainly true Paul takes great pride in proclaiming the gospel of Christ (v. 15). The

Although Paul was not ashamed *of* the gospel, he was undoubtedly shamed *for* the gospel by wicked men. In other words, to be shamed is what others do to the believer, but to be *a*-shamed is what a believer does to Christ and his gospel. Jesus was shamed for the gospel by the Roman soldiers and the Jewish leaders. In Hebrews 12:2, the writer tells us:

Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy<sup>26</sup> that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. (Hebrews 12:2)

Jesus predicted this when he told his disciples:

For he [Jesus] will be delivered over to the Gentiles and will be mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon. (Luke 18:32)

And this is what happened when the Roman soldiers shamefully treated him:

And they clothed him in a purple cloak, and twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on him. And they began to salute him, "Hail, King of the Jews!" And they were striking his head with a reed and spitting on him and kneeling down in homage to him. And when they had mocked him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. And they led him out to crucify him. (Mark 15:17-20)

Jesus "despised" this shaming but he was never *a*-shamed. Paul too was shamed for the gospel in the same manner. He relates to the Christians in Corinth:

Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a

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reason for this pride is yhe gospel contains the message of God's saving power for all who put their hope and trust in his Son. However, this way of understanding the phrase is unlikely.

<sup>26</sup> The "joy" that was set before Jesus was his exaltation to the right hand of the Father (Hebrews 1:3).

sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. (2 Corinthians 11:24-27)

Jesus also had strong words for those who were ashamed of him and the gospel. Speaking to the crowd and the disciples, he said:

For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels." (Mark 8:38)

But rather than being ashamed, Paul looked to the power of God, which is Christ. Paul would not alter, modify or water down the gospel to be more acceptable. There is no clearer statement than in his letter to the Galatian church. There he writes:

For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ. (Galatians 1:10)

Paul also instructs Timothy about being ashamed. Being ashamed is connected with a fear of suffering and harm.

Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God, [...] which is why I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that day what has been entrusted to me. (2 Timothy 1:8, 12)

This is as true for us as it has been true for Christians who have experienced shame, suffering and harm over the last two millennia. Only the gospel can bring true salvation and restoration. Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and even Judaism have no Saviour who can save us from the wrath of God. Only one gospel can do that; the one true gospel of Christ.

Certainly, Paul and many Christians have been shamed but they have not been *ashamed*. We, like Christ, are to "despise" the shame for the glory awaiting us in heaven (8:18; Hebrews 12:2; 1 Peter 1:3-9). Paul now gives the reasons he is not ashamed: "**it is the power of God for salvation**" and "**it reveals the righteousness of God.**"

## 2. The Gospel is the Power of God for Salvation (v. 16b)

The second statement in v. 16 explains *why* Paul is not ashamed. It is because the gospel has at its foundation Jesus Christ who “**was declared to be the Son-of-God-in-power**” (v. 4). Christ is “**the power of God**” who mediates our salvation. The word “**power**” refers to the Old Testament teaching that only God is powerful (Exodus 9:16, cited in Romans 9:17; Psalms 77:14-15). Although the Old Testament has many verses relating to the power of God, here in Paul’s letter, the emphasis is on the power of God “**for salvation.**”

This power is both effective and transforming. Therefore, the gospel is not simply a message and is certainly not a religious philosophy. Instead, God works through his Word (John 1:1-5, 15; Hebrews 4:12-13; 1 Corinthians 2:4; 4:20).

As Isaiah prophesied about Jesus:

“For to us a child is born,  
to us a son is given;  
and the government shall be upon his shoulder,  
and his name shall be called  
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” (Isaiah 9:6)

The New Testament’s use of the word “**salvation,**” and the way Paul uses it, often refers to the last day of judgment (5:9-10, and Hebrews 2:13). However, Paul also understands this salvation is *already* enjoyed in the present by those who put their hope and trust in Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord (8:24; 2 Corinthians 6:2). In these references, salvation is the absence of condemnation (8:1). Although we were once sinners under his wrath, all that has changed. We are no longer under his judgment. He has saved us from sin, Satan, everlasting death and hell. In other words, he has saved us from his wrath. He has saved us from the judgment and punishment reserved for all who are in the kingdom of darkness. God’s salvation means we have been rescued from the kingdom of darkness and transferred into the kingdom of light (Colossians 1:13).

Salvation is not only *from* condemnation, but it is *to* glory. We are filled with the Holy Spirit the moment we receive Christ as our Saviour. Chapter 8, as we will see, is the most significant exposition on the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. And as a result,



we know God uniquely and personally – this is ‘heart’ knowledge. Our relationship with God was broken but is now restored. God initiates this restoration and indwelling understanding. We know him only because he first knew us (1 Corinthians 8:3; Galatians 4:9). This is what it means for us to have eternal life (John 17:3). We can never truly know God on our own, even though all people have an inborn desire for God.

The indwelling of the Holy Spirit is also our *union* with Christ. Christ is in us, and we are in him. Salvation also means we have been adopted as his children. Adoption means that God is now our Father and fellow believers are our brothers and sisters in Christ (Galatians 4:5). Surprisingly, even shockingly, Scripture says Jesus the Son of God is our brother!<sup>27</sup> Since we are adopted children, we are fellow heirs with Christ. And this adoption is not just a legal statement; it initiates a Father-child relationship through his Spirit of adoption so that we can call him “Abba! Father!” (Galatians 4:6). We are no longer under God’s wrath but under his love; instead of experiencing his anger, we experience his love.

This present and future salvation are for **“everyone.”** This means there is nothing ruling anyone out. It does not matter which race, social class, family background or language; even more importantly, no one is excluded by any sin – all are included! However, it is essential to note there is a condition for this salvation. Salvation is only for those **“who believe.”** So, there is only one ‘rule’ excluding anyone from salvation. Believing or faith is strongly emphasized in these verses. Notice, the verb **“believes”** is in the present tense. Belief must be ongoing. Our present and future salvation depend on our

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<sup>27</sup> When we are “born again,” as Jesus tells Nicodemus (John 3:3), we become sons of God, and God becomes our Father (8:4; Galatians 4:4-6; 2 Corinthians 5:17). This is not just a nice metaphor; it is a physical and spiritual reality. Nowhere is this clearer than in the letter to the Hebrews. “For he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one source. That is why he is not ashamed to call them brothers” (Hebrews 2:11). In this letter to the Romans, Paul also says, **“For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, so that he might be the firstborn among many brothers”** (8:29). This last reference certainly does not mean Jesus was the first adopted son. He was always the eternal Son of God, and we can only call him our brother if we are in union with him.

abiding faith in Christ. This is not just a one-time event. That saving faith must be continual and active is taught throughout the New Testament (1 Corinthians 15:1-2; Hebrews 3:6, 14; James 2:17, 26). Faith that does not persevere to the end is not saving faith (11:22). Yet we also know this faith is not something we can produce on our own; faith itself is a gift from God (Ephesians 2:8; John 6:28-29, 44-45; Romans 12:3; Acts 3:16; Philippians 1:29; 2 Peter 1:1). Believing is not something we do (as work) but a response to God's grace.<sup>28</sup> And when God grants us faith, we can be sure he will carry us through until the final day (Philippians 1:6).

Because of the issues most likely existing between the Christian Jews and Gentiles in Rome, Paul also states that this gospel is **"to the Jews first and also to the Greek."**<sup>29</sup> But exactly what does he mean when he says the Jews are first? How are they first? John Piper points out that there are six ways in which Jews have priority and three ways concerning the gospel they do not:<sup>30</sup>

1. First, the Jews are God's special chosen people. In Genesis 12:1, the Lord chooses to only and specifically bless the individual Abram from all the pagans in the world. This was not because Abram was uniquely gifted or pious; it depended on God's sovereign choice (Nehemiah 9:7; Amos 3:2). Later in the letter, Paul, speaking about the Jews, writes, "As regards the gospel, they [Jews] are enemies for your [Gentiles] sake. But as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers. For God's gifts and calling are irrevocable" (11:28-29). Jews have priority over Gentiles simply because it is God's sovereign will. God

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<sup>28</sup> Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 67.

<sup>29</sup> Throughout the book of Acts, we see, whenever Paul comes into a new town, he always begins preaching in a synagogue. This is not just a tactical move or convenience but it relates to God's promises in Scripture for the descendants of Abraham. Even though Paul was anointed to be an apostle to the Gentiles, he was also a Jew for the Jews so he might "win the Jews" (1 Corinthians 9:20). We should never diminish the 'Jewishness' of Paul. He remained a Jew and understood the gospel to be a fulfillment (not a replacement) of the earlier covenants of Abraham and Moses (3:28-29). Gentile Christians were "**grafted**" into Israel and do not replace Israel (11:17-21).

<sup>30</sup> John Piper, *To the Jew First, and Also to the Greek*, Sermon, July 5<sup>th</sup>, 1998.

decided to set his love and favour on them and separated them from all other nations and peoples. This was God's free choice (Deuteronomy 7:7-8).

2. Jews are given guardianship of God's special revelation in the Old Testament (3:1; 9:4).
3. Jesus, as the son of David and the Son of God, was himself a Jew and came first to the Jews (1:3; 9:5; Matthew 10:5-6; 15:24).
4. As such, salvation itself is from the Jews. Jesus himself said to the Samaritan woman, "You worship what you do not know; we [Jews] worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews" (John 4:22). All salvation is through God's covenant with Abraham (Galatians 3:7).
5. Recognizing this, Paul always began first preaching the gospel to the Jews. In Antioch of Presidia, he tells the Jews there, "it was necessary that the word of God be spoken first to you" (Acts: 13:46).
6. Amazingly, Jews also have priority over Gentiles in their final blessing as well as judgment. Again, in Paul's letter to the Roman church, he writes, "There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honour and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek" (2:9-10).

Jews were, are, and remain God's chosen people. Yet, when it comes to the gospel itself, Jews do not have a priority.

1. Jews do not have a priority in righteousness or merit (3:9-10). Paul clarifies this when he says, "**There is no distinction; for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God**" (3:22-23).
2. Jews are not saved from God's wrath differently from Gentiles (3:29-30; 10:12; Galatians 3:26-29).
3. Jews do not have a special participation in God's covenant blessings (Ephesians 2:12-13; 18-19; 3:4-6).

Jews and Gentiles depend equally on God's faithfulness and mercy; neither are they exceptional in and of themselves. No race can state they have special access to God's grace. As he chose Abram, a pagan, entirely out of his mercy, love and grace, he now chooses us to be his children.

### **3. The Gospel is the Righteousness of God (v. 17a)**

As mentioned, salvation (v. 16) is from the wrath of God on all who are rebelling against him. But how exactly does the gospel show us how believers are saved? We know it does, so we rejoice in the salvation of the gospel. But the question remains: How does the gospel provide the plan to save us from God's wrath and bring us into an eternal relationship with him?

The answer to this question is in verse 17, "**for in it [the gospel] the righteousness<sup>31</sup> of God is revealed.**" Martin Luther struggled with understanding the phrase "**the righteousness of God**" for a long time. He thought it was terrible news because he understood "**righteousness**" only to be the justice of God. The Greek word for righteousness is also the same word for justice. He knew he was unrighteous and under God's wrath, so he also understood he was under God's condemnation by the justice or righteousness of God. God demands godly righteousness from us; that is, perfect obedience to his law. We are to be holy because he is holy (Leviticus 11:44-45; 19:2; 20:7; 1 Peter 1:16). But we are not. Not only that, there is nothing we can do to make ourselves righteous before God. So we stand condemned, guilty and alienated without hope of salvation since we are unrighteous (3:20, 23). Luther was right to be overwhelmed by his alienation from God in this sense.

However, the gospel, the good news, changes everything. The amazing good news is this absolute holiness and righteousness God demands of us – a righteousness that we can never attain for ourselves – is given to us as a free gift of grace. He himself gives what he demands. God declares us righteous (i.e., just) before him. We are no longer guilty in his sight. The

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<sup>31</sup> The word "righteousness" is a very important word in this letter. It is used at least thirty times. It is used in different ways. Each time our understanding must be based on the context in which it is used.

“**righteousness of God**”<sup>32</sup> is a righteousness *that comes from God* (genitive of source); rather than bad news, as Luther first thought, it is good news. When this truth dawned on him, he was overcome with joy. As Charles Hodge writes, “the righteousness by which we are justified is not due to anything done by us, but something done for us and imputed to us. It is the work of Christ, what he did and suffered to satisfy the demands of the law.”<sup>33</sup> This way of understanding the phrase – that God is the *source*, or *author*, of the righteousness imputed to us (Philippians 3:9) – has been the primary interpretation of the Protestant church.

However, the “**righteousness of God**” in this verse has been understood in other ways. There has hardly been a phrase more discussed and argued over. For example, some have said the phrase could mean God’s righteousness, in forgiving our sin, is in placing sin’s punishment as a substitutional atonement on Jesus. This way of understanding views “**righteousness**” is an attribute of God.<sup>34</sup> This emphasizes God’s faithfulness to his own righteous nature and transforming power to accomplish our salvation. Of course, this is undoubtedly true. However, Paul’s emphasis in this passage is not just on God’s righteousness as a description of who God is, but on a righteousness imputed from God to us.

Recently other interpreters have argued the phrase means God’s covenant faithfulness with Israel. God’s righteousness and his covenant faithfulness are closely linked. However, defining the phrase this way cannot be the central truth “**the gospel**” reveals. God’s righteous character toward Israel has already been revealed fully in dealing with Israel and the law.<sup>35</sup>

We agree, then, with Luther’s interpretation. Because Paul emphasizes the gospel, the phrase means “**the righteousness from God**”; that is, our right to stand before God without condemnation in his presence (8:1). This is the same emphasis in

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<sup>32</sup> The phrase occurs eight times in Romans (1:17; 3:5, 21, 22, 25, 26; 10:3 2x) and only in Romans, making it part of the special message of the letter.

<sup>33</sup> Hodge, 31.

<sup>34</sup> God is understood to be the subject and righteousness the object.

<sup>35</sup> Stott, 62. See also Schreiner, *Romans*, 69.

Paul's letter to the Philippian church, where he explicitly uses the word "from":

Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— (Philippians 3:8-9; see also Romans 3:21-22; 4:3-22; 9:30-31; 10:3-10; Galatians 2:20-21; 3:6, 21-22; 5:5)

And again, in Paul's letter to the church in Corinth:

For your sake, he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Corinthians 5:21)

This "**righteous**" is God's righteousness, a righteousness imputed to us. Although we have no righteousness of our own, God credits or imputes his righteousness to us through faith so we, too, can be called righteous (4:3).<sup>36</sup> All those who put their hope and trust – the active understanding of "believe" – in Christ receive the gift of God's righteousness. This is what justification by faith means and how the phrase has been understood throughout the Protestant reformation. When viewed within all of salvation history, beginning with Adam, "**the righteousness of God**" is God's plan of salvation being worked out to put his people into a right relationship with him.

But we might ask: how is it possible God can give us the gift of his Son's righteousness when we are sinners under God's wrath? We deserve condemnation, yet God's free gift to us is his own righteousness. The only way this is possible is because of the cross. Before we could receive Christ's righteousness, Christ received our condemnation. He took our sins and wickedness upon himself so justice would be done. For our sins justly deserve death. This is the Great Exchange: our sins are put on Christ Jesus,

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<sup>36</sup> There is also a parallel set of verses in 3:21-26 where the righteousness of God is mentioned four times. In 3:24-25 it is the blood of Jesus that is a propitiation for us which we receive by grace. "**This shows God's righteousness.**" Therefore, God is revealing his own righteousness by crediting his righteousness to us sinners when we put our faith in his Son. His righteousness becomes our righteousness.

and his perfect righteousness is put on us. This is grace – an undeserved gift from God – so we can now have peace with God; that is, in a loving relationship with him.

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### **Special Topic: The Righteousness of God**

The righteousness of God is a very significant theme in Paul's letters. In Romans, the nouns "righteous" or "justification" (these are the same word in Greek) are used thirty times and the equivalent verb "justify" another twenty times. As we have seen in 1:17, Paul uses the phrase "righteousness of God" to refer to the *saving redeeming* righteousness *from* God. God's saving righteousness is a gift of grace given to those who put their hope and trust in his Son, Jesus Christ. However, elsewhere, Paul also uses the phrase to mean God's *judging ethical* righteousness, behaviour pleasing to God (6:13, 16, 18-20). Those who obey the law of God (either the Mosaic law for Jews or the natural law given to every person) are righteous. That is, they have a right to stand before God. Those who break the law are unrighteous. Scripture is also clear no one can attain this righteousness (3:20, 23). Therefore, since God demands perfect obedience, no one is justified, i.e., righteous before God (James 2:10; Galatians 3:10; 1 John 1:8, 10). Human beings need his *saving* righteousness (grace) because of God's *judging* righteousness (justice).

Unfortunately, we often separate these two aspects of God's righteousness as two independent attributes of God. They are not. God's justice demands his saving mercy and love, and, at the same time, his compassion and love demand his ethical justice. Within the Protestant church, and particularly reformed theology, God's ethical and moral justice has been contrasted with his redeeming love. However, we must not separate them in this way but see them as one perfect whole; the holiness of God.

When we look at God's *saving righteousness*, it includes two great gifts: the forgiveness of our sins (4:6-8) and Christ's own righteousness imputed to us (3:21-22; 4:3; 5:19; Isaiah 61:10). This is what Jesus did for us on the cross. We are guilty of sin and deserve the punishment of death. Jesus took this punishment

upon himself, paying the debt, once and for all, of our sin: past, present and future. As Paul wrote elsewhere:

And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by cancelling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. (Colossians 2:13-14)

And again:

For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith (Philippians 3:8b-9)

The apostle Peter states the same truth:

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God (1 Peter 3:18)

This means no matter what it is, every sin is forgiven by the saving sacrifice of the Son of God for those who put their hope and trust in him. This even includes murder. Apostle Paul knew this truth as an experienced reality since he was a murderer of Stephen (Acts 7:58). Some people believe anyone who dies with unconfessed sin will not go to heaven based on verses such as Mark 13:13 or Hebrews 3:14. Christian endurance to the end of life is a serious matter and must not be reduced in importance. Yet, God knows our hearts and knows who his own children are. If our salvation depends on our confession of every sin, then heaven would be an empty place for almost everyone dies with unconfessed sin. Thanks be to God this is not the case. Our salvation does not depend on us but only on the gift of righteousness, which is received through faith. Christ's death on the cross paid the price for all our sins. As Paul will say later in this letter:

For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38-39)



There is absolutely nothing separating a child of God from the love of their Father. In this love, we can take great comfort for ourselves and our loved ones.

But not only does Christ forgive all our sins, he also gives us his own righteousness. Because of this, we are declared – in a judicial sense – to be righteous in Christ Jesus. At the last judgment, we will stand without fear because our sins are forgiven and because we have been given Christ’s righteousness. The shocking, amazing, and wonderful truth of the gospel is that we imputed our sins and penalty to him on Christ’s cross. And he, in turn, imputed his perfect righteousness to us. As it is often called, this Great Exchange occurred at the *moment* of our conversion. We will never be more righteous than at that moment of salvation, no matter how much we have grown in spiritual maturity, because, at the moment of conversion, we receive the gift of Christ’s righteousness. This gift of righteousness is a *permanent judicial declaration of our righteousness status before God based on Christ’s own righteousness*. This Great Exchange is the most incredible, surprising and wonderful gift of all. It is where God’s love and justice meet. The earliest Christian pastors taught this amazing truth. Mathetes, a faithful disciple of Christ, writes in his “Epistle to Diognetus” around the 2nd century:

O sweet exchange! O unsearchable operation! O benefits surpassing all expectation! That the wickedness of many should be hid in a single righteous One, and that the righteousness of One should justify many transgressors!

It can hardly be said better! This is what *justification* means; this is what *righteousness of God* means.

Of course, there is an ongoing need to grow in maturity in Christ. The process of such maturity is referred to as *sanctification*. Although *sanctification* has as its foundation *justification*, these must not be confused. We are not justified because we are sanctified; we are sanctified because we are justified. During this time between our justification and entire sanctification, we retain our sinful condition and continue to struggle with sin. However, our justification in Christ Jesus is fixed and permanent. It is the basis by which we come before the judgment of God with confidence and assurance, “**there is**

therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (8:1).

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#### 4. From Faith to Faith (v. 17b)

Paul has also stated that this righteousness is "revealed from faith to faith." This phrase has also been discussed often within the church. What could Paul mean by this double reference to faith? The early church fathers understood it to mean "from the faith in the law to the faith in the gospel." Calvin and others thought it meant growing or maturing in the faith of the individual Christian. However, Paul is more likely that he is simply placing a strong emphasis on faith. In other words, the phrase means "from faith and nothing but faith."<sup>37</sup> This faith is only possible if it is "revealed" to us by the Holy Spirit. Apart from God's revelation to us, we cannot comprehend the truth of the gospel.

When we come into the presence of God, it is his Son's perfect righteousness that the Father sees. This is only possible if we receive this perfect gift through faith in Christ Jesus. This is why there is such a strong emphasis on faith in Paul's letters. Paul now points out the *requirement* of this faith by quoting the Old Testament prophet Habakkuk: "**The righteous [person] shall live by faith.**" Paul has used this quote before in his letter to the Galatians.<sup>38</sup> There, he writes:

So it is clear that no one can be made right with God by trying to keep the law. For the Scriptures say, "It is through faith that a righteous person has life." (Galatians 3:11 NLT)

So "**shall live**" refers to our ongoing life of faith and that our life of faith results in eternal life. But the emphasis is on the latter. This is "**obedience of faith**" (1:5; 16:26). As John Stott writes, "Paul's concern here is not how a righteous person lives, but how sinful people become righteous."<sup>39</sup> Habakkuk's promise of 'life' is fulfilled in the resurrection of Christ.

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<sup>37</sup> Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 76. See also 2 Corinthians 2:16 for a similar emphasis on this as well.

<sup>38</sup> The reference to Habakkuk highlights the harmony of Paul's teaching with the prophets. The writer to the Hebrews also quotes this verse.

<sup>39</sup> Stott, 65.

Verses 16 and 17 refer to four aspects of the gospel: the power of God for salvation, expressed as the righteousness from God, which is received by faith, resulting in eternal life. Paul is not ashamed of such a great gospel. Instead, Paul is proud and eager to preach it to everyone, both Jews and Gentiles.

### **Overview of vv. 16-17**

We may now summarize these verses as follows:

Paul is **not ashamed of the gospel**.

*Why* are we not ashamed?

Because the gospel reveals the power of God for our salvation. This salvation is available to everyone but is first given to Jews and then to others.

*When* is this power of God for our salvation revealed?

It has been revealed to us that God's own righteousness is given to us when we put our hope and trust in his Son.

*How* do we receive this righteousness?

Only by faith and nothing but faith.

*What* is the result of receiving this righteousness by faith?

We are given eternal life!

### **Special Topic: Why does God save us?**

It seems reasonable to ask why God would grant his people saving righteousness since the cost of this gift was so great to him. A good answer is that he loves his people (Deuteronomy 4:37; 7:7-8; John 3:16; Romans 5:8). But before he could love people, people had to exist. Why did he create humans in the first place, and why did he call a special people for himself from all the people in the world? To answer these questions, we need to begin with the creation account in Genesis:

So, God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them (Genesis 1:27)

That humanity was created in the image of God means we were created to reflect God's glory. In other words, we were created to glorify God. This is what an image does. However, it did not take long for humans to fail miserably in honouring and

glorifying God (Genesis 3; 6:5). So God tells us that he called out Israel, a people for himself for the glory of his name:

The LORD will not forsake his people, for his great name's sake, because it has pleased the LORD to make you a people for himself. (1 Samuel 12:22)

And in Isaiah, the prophet:

And he said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified." (Isaiah 49:3)

And again, in Isaiah:

I will say to the north, Give up, and to the south, Do not withhold; bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the end of the earth, everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made." (Isaiah 43:4-7)

So, God created Israel as a people for the glory of his name. This is revealed ultimately in God's preservation of Israel:

Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver; I have tried you in the furnace of affliction. For my own sake, for my own sake, I do it, for how should my name be profaned? My glory I will not give to another. (Isaiah 48:9-11; see also Jeremiah 13:10-11)

The New Testament agrees with this, for Paul, writing to the Corinthian church, states:

As grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God. (2 Corinthians 4:15; see also Ephesians 1:6, 12, 14)

So both God's ethical and saving righteousness are foundational to his desire to glorify his name. All God's people – whether Jew or Gentile – now exist to honour and glorify God; that is, to love the Lord our God with all our hearts, souls, and might. The fundamental sin of the Gentiles and the Jews was their failure to glorify and honour God's name (1:21; 2:24). Instead, they glorified themselves.

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## Questions for Reflection

### Study it

1. [vv. 8-15] Why does Paul give such a lengthy introduction highlighting that he has not visited them?
2. [v. 8] How does Paul know their faith was “proclaimed in all the world”? What does “world” mean?
3. [v. 9] What do you think Paul means by saying, “my spirit”? And what does it mean that Paul prays “without ceasing”?
4. [v. 10] There was likely nothing physical preventing Paul from going to Rome. Paul clearly desired to go to Rome. So how do Paul’s will (his decision not to go) and God’s will work together? (Hint: What was Paul’s greatest desire?)
5. [v. 12] How would Paul be encouraged by being in Rome?
6. [vv. 14-16a] Identify the reasons Paul gives for preaching the gospel. Are any of these your reasons?
7. [v. 16] Why does Paul say he is “not ashamed”? Why is salvation first for the Jews? Is this still the case today? Will it still be the case in the future?
8. [v. 17a] What does “righteousness of God” mean in this verse? Why did Martin Luther have such a hard time with this phrase? Was Luther right in having a hard time with it?
9. [v. 17b] What does “from faith to faith” mean? Why can it only be “revealed”? And how is it revealed?
10. [v. 17c] Why does Paul quote Habakkuk here? Why is this such an important verse in the New Testament?

### Live it

1. How comfortable are you in speaking about the gospel to others? Have you ever been ashamed? Have you ever been shamed because of it? Do Paul’s reasons for not being ashamed help you?
2. How important is the doctrine of ‘union in Christ’ to you?
3. How much do your prayers include thanksgiving? Do you remember answered prayers and thank God for them?

4. Do you think Paul's sense of obligation to evangelize applies to us (1 Corinthians 4:16; 11:1)?
5. How are evangelism and discipleship related? Is maturing in Christ and "obedience *from* faith" (1:5) equally important?
6. Paul never waters down the gospel. He taught that following Jesus will bring emotional and physical pain. But this has not always been taught in the church. What about you personally and your church corporately?
7. What does "saved" mean to you? What do "the righteousness of God" and "justification" mean to you personally? Are they just theological words, or do you rejoice in this Good News? What reason does Paul give for salvation?
8. Have you ever thought about what would happen if you suddenly died with unconfessed sin? On what grounds are you still saved?

## PART I: THE GOSPEL OF FAITH

### *GOD'S SOLUTION TO THE SIN PROBLEM (1:18-4:25)*

#### **The Bad News – “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (1:18-3:20)**

Paul has just given us an excellent introduction to the content of his letter. In just two verses (1:16-17), he has outlined the good news of God's salvation which offers us the gift of his righteousness through faith in him. And to live a life of “**obedience of faith**” because of our gratitude and love of God. We would now expect that Paul would provide a much fuller explanation of what this means and the blessings we would experience. But he does nothing like this. Instead, he tells us of God's wrath and our sin, disobedience, idolatry, debauchery, and judgment. Rather than telling us more about the love of God, he describes in no uncertain terms the wrath of God.

Why would Paul do this? No doubt Paul has preached a version of this message many times. And he understands that the glory and beauty of the gospel can only be understood adequately against a backdrop of sin, evil and judgment. To diminish this contrast is to lessen the glory of the cross. Only when we fully recognize the depth of human depravity can we realize the danger and trouble that humanity is in. To take the gospel seriously, we must take our sin seriously. And this remains true even for us who received the gift of Christ's righteousness. The cross of Christ will remain the foundation of our salvation for all eternity.

#### **The Good News – “while we were still sinners Christ died for us” (3:21-4:25)**

This does not mean a person comes to saving faith by first recognizing their alienation from God in every case. But ultimately, at some point, this must become very clear. God is amazingly patient, kind and forbearing. And he will lead us to a complete understanding of our depravity. Only when we repent of our rebellion against him can we fully grasp the gospel's splendour. We need first to know our need for salvation before the gospel of salvation can be fully appreciated.

When becoming Christians, we often use the phrase; we receive Christ as our “Lord and Saviour.” Christ becomes our “Saviour” when we receive the gift of his righteousness and are immediately declared just before God. This is our “justification.” However, for Christ to become our “Lord” often requires a longer process of growing in spiritual maturity, that is, our “*progressive sanctification*.” Sanctification means to be set apart for a holy purpose (Leviticus 11:44). Christ is both our Saviour and Lord (our justification or “*positional sanctification*”) when we are saved from God’s wrath. God is already working in us and through us to bring about our sanctification. However, we will never reach perfect holiness on this side of glory. Our sanctification is past, present, and future. We have been sanctified, we are being sanctified, and we shall be sanctified.

It is important not to confuse these two aspects of salvation. *Progressive sanctification* involves our growing and living a life pleasing to God. However, if we confuse *progressive sanctification* with justification, we can easily add good works to salvation.<sup>40</sup> And in fact, this has often been the tendency within churches. Growing in our Christian life and faith is evidence Christ became both Saviour and Lord of our life at the time of our conversion.

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### **Lesson 3: The Problem of Sin (1:18-3:20)**

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Paul’s primary purpose of this large section (1:18-3:20) is to clarify that Gentiles and Jews are in the same position; both are under judgment and God’s wrath. Stated positively, the section supports Paul’s statement, the “**righteousness of God**” only comes “**from faith to faith**.” Because of sin, humankind has no righteousness by which they can stand blameless before God. This is true for the pagan Gentile (1:18-32), the self-righteous moralist (2:1-16), or the religious Jew (2:17-3:8). Throughout this passage, the *overriding sin* is human pride—the most basic sin that takes the place of God. And the corollary to pride is ungratefulness. The result is a depraved mind. “**For although**

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<sup>40</sup> See chapter 6:19, 22 for more on sanctification.



**they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened” (1:21).**

Paul first addresses the pagan Gentiles in 1:18-32. He points out that even though they have not received the written law of Moses, they are still accountable. The reason is that they were created in the image of God and so are born with an ability to know God from both the creation around them and their own consciences. This is true for all human beings. No doubt, the Jews hearing this portion of Paul’s message would very much agree. They always viewed those outside the covenants as Gentile sinners. And, so they would concur, Gentiles were condemned. However, the Jews did not believe they themselves were condemned because they had the covenant of Abraham and the law and covenant of Moses. So by just keeping the law of Moses, including sacrifices, they would remain in God’s grace. But then Paul addresses the moralist and religious Jews in the section from 2:1-3:8, stating they are no different from the Gentile sinner.

To accurately explain the gospel to the Gentile and the Jew, Paul had to carefully explain how each group relates to the gospel. Then, after he has finished, he summarizes it all with this short, clear statement: **“we have already charged that all, Jews and Gentiles are under sin” (3:9)** and again, **“For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (3:23)**. Outside the saving gift of Christ’s righteousness, no one is righteous, not even one person, whether Jew or Gentile (3:10).

This extended passage emphasizes God’s relationship to people; both Gentiles and Jews.

- 1:18 **Thesis:** God’s wrath against ungodly Gentiles and Jews
- 1:19-32 God’s judgment against pagan Gentiles
  - 1:19-21a Reason for God’s judgment
  - 1:21b-32 Result of God’s judgment
- 2:1-3:8 God’s judgment on moralists and orthodox Jews
  - 2:1-16 Impartiality of God’s judgment
  - 2:17-29 Failure of the Jews to honour God
  - 3:1-8 Vindication of God’s judgment
- 3:9-20 **Conclusion:** Neither Gentile nor Jew are righteous

## God's wrath against pagan Gentiles (1:18-32)

*v. 18*

Verse 18 is the thesis statement for this entire lesson. It begins by stating that the “**wrath of God,**” like the “**righteousness of God**” (1:17), is now being “**revealed.**” God’s wrath against unrighteousness is why the saving righteousness of God is needed. His righteousness saves us from his wrath. Usually, the wrath of God refers to the end-time judgment (2:5), but in this section, Paul states that it is already present. God inflicts his wrath on all unrepentant sinners on the last day. Still, even today, God punishes the ungodly who reject the knowledge he has given to them either through nature (creation) or special revelation (Old Testament).

The reason the “**wrath of God**” is revealed is that “**the truth**” about God is “**suppressed**” “**by their unrighteousness.**” How they show, their unrighteousness is by suppressing the truth.<sup>41</sup> The verb “**suppress**” means to hinder the truth of something by hiding or denying it. That is, to suppress the truth, one must already have some understanding of the truth. This is particularly the case for those who hear the gospel and then reject it (John 3:17-21). But, as we will see, it also is true for those who have not heard the gospel. Paul makes it clear that the Gentiles do have knowledge of God (vv. 19, 21, 32).

As the psalmist writes:

The fool says in his heart, “There is no God.”  
They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds;  
there is none who does good. (Psalm 14:1)

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<sup>41</sup> God does not punish his children; those who have put their hope and trust in his Son. It is true that he disciplines his children (Hebrews 12:5-11) but he does not punish by inflicting pain as the penalty for sin (8:1). Jesus Christ, his Son, has already born all such punishment on the cross. However, sin is in our lives while on this earth (3:10, 23; 1 John 1:8-10). Therefore, we experience God's discipline for disobedience, and the God-willed consequences resulting from sin.

As well as the prophet Isaiah:

Woe to those who call evil good  
and good evil,  
who put darkness for light  
and light for darkness,  
who put bitter for sweet  
and sweet for bitter! (Isaiah 5:20)

Although this section is directed primarily at Gentiles, it is written to *all* people, including Jews, who reject God.

### **Special Topic: The Wrath of God and the Love of God**

How can we reconcile God's wrath with the love of God shown by Christ's death on the cross for us? From this verse and other passages in the New Testament, it is clear we must never underestimate or diminish its intensity. The wrath of God, like the love of God, includes emotion.

In defining God's wrath, it is helpful to state what it is not. We should never equate human rage with the wrath of God. God does not lose his temper. His wrath is not blind rage. Instead, it is the determined will and deep inward feeling of a holy and righteous God against all who dishonour him, rebel against him, and call him into question. It includes his will and his emotion, resulting in judgment, condemnation, and death. But, it is a 'secondary' attribute of God. We cannot say, 'God is wrath' the same way we say, "God is love" (1 John 4:8, 16). God is love in his nature. But wrath is not his nature. Instead, he responds in wrath against rebellion. So, it is a response to human sin and demonic powers external to himself. If there is no sin or wickedness, then there is no wrath.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>42</sup> There is, however, another sense in which God's wrath is related to his love. When Scripture tells us, "God is love," this means that God does all things for his glory (11:36; Colossians 1:16; Philippians 4:20; 2 Peter 3:18; Isaiah 42:8-7; 48:11 and many more). God created the universe, and all everything in it for his glory. His love is his glory revealed in creation and ultimately on the cross. Of course, even before God created the world God was love. For God to be love did not require humanity and

There is no fear [judgment, God's wrath] in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love. (1 John 4:18)

God responds to me in wrath *because* of my sin and who I am. And he also responds to me in love *not because* of who I am but *because* of who he is. God responds in "**wrath and fury**" (2:8) against the rebellious sinner.<sup>43</sup> Christ drained the cup of the wrath of God when he died for you and me on the cross (Matthew 26:39) so that we do not have to experience his wrath (14:9-10). Our sin demanded God's wrath and fury against us; instead, he inflicted it on his Son. On the cross, Christ not only took on himself our sin but the judgement of our sin. Paul described the meaning of the cross when he wrote, "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Jesus drank the cup of God's wrath for us so that he could offer us the cup of God's blessing and fellowship. The wrath we deserve was taken from us and given to the Son of God. Yet this is only half the Great Exchange. Christ, in his love, also gave us his righteousness.<sup>44</sup> Instead of wrath, we receive eternal fellowship with God when we are in union with Jesus Christ. Meditating and contemplating on this Great Exchange should result in our own doxology.

When I think of all this, I fall to my knees and pray to the Father, the Creator of everything in heaven and on earth. I pray that from his glorious, unlimited resources he will empower you with inner strength through his Spirit. Then Christ will make his home in your hearts as you trust in him. Your roots will grow down into God's love and keep you strong. And may you have the power to understand, as all God's people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is. May you

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all that is in the world. The Father's love for his Son and the Son's love for the Father existed and exist for all eternity. Therefore, God responds with justice and punishment (wrath) against what demises, damages, or corrupts his glory.

<sup>43</sup> The oft stated phrase that God hates the sin but loves the sinner is true only if the sinner responds to God's love in repentance. God will judge the unrepentant sinner with wrath on the day of judgement.

<sup>44</sup> See notes on vv. 16-17, "**The righteousness of God.**"

experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully. Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God.

Now all glory to God, who is able, through his mighty power to work within us, to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think. Glory to him in the church and in Christ Jesus through all generations forever and ever! Amen. (Ephesians 3:14-21 NLT)

*Common Misconceptions of the Old and New Testament*

Even among some evangelical Christians, it is a common view that God is a God of wrath and anger in the Old Testament but a God of love in the New Testament. One reason is that in the Old Testament, God deals with his covenant people in earthly ways in the form of famine, plague, siege, war, and slaughter. While in the New Testament, the emphasis seems to be on the love of God. One of the most famous verses is John 3:16. We are told that God loved the world in this way: He sent His only Son to die for us and give us eternal life. Also, Jesus tells us to love our enemies and forgive those who persecute us. Therefore, it is easy to misunderstand and think of God as described in the Old Testament as quite different from God as revealed in the New Testament.

However, we should never overlook the many Old Testament passages that stress God's grace, love and compassion. God's wrath is always delayed and is meant to bring us to repentance. God continually desires that rebellious Israel would return from wickedness to righteousness. As Micah, the Old Testament prophet, writes:

Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity  
and passing over transgression  
For the remnant of his inheritance?  
He does not retain his anger forever,  
because he delights in steadfast love. (Micah 7:18)

In the Old Testament, God's judgment primarily occurred in the temporary material world, while in the New Testament, his judgment and punishment are eternal. So rather than moving from wrath in the Old Testament to love in the New Testament, *both* wrath and love are revealed in a greater and more significant way as Scripture moves from the temporary to the eternal.

*At the Cross, the Wrath of God and the Love of God meet*

God would not be just or righteous if he simply overlooked our transgressions and sin. To forgive our sins, the penalty for our sins must be paid. Later in Romans, Paul also writes:

God put forward [*Jesus*] as a propitiation by his blood [*a sacrifice of atonement*], to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness [*justice*], because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness [*justice*] at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. (3:25-36)

God provided his covenant people with a sacrificial system in the Old Testament. However, we also know that "it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins" (Hebrews 10:4). Therefore, for His righteous justice to be satisfied, he had to provide a way for the full penalty of our sins to be paid (debt - cf. Matthew 6:12 in the Lord's Prayer).

So, it is only when we see God's judgment and love working fully together in the New Testament that we can properly understand the significance of the cross. Christ's substitutionary atonement on the cross for us has as its foundation God's wrath against all unrighteousness and wickedness. Jesus drank the cup of God's wrath meant for us at the cross. The horror of that moment was so great that three times Jesus asked for the cup to be removed (Matthew 26:37-44; cf. Luke 22:44).

The cup of God's wrath was a cup of sorrow (Matthew 26:37-38; Mark 14:34), it was a cup of loneliness; he was unaccompanied and completely alone (Matthew 26:36), it was a cup of judgment (Matthew 26:39a, 27:46), and it was a cup of willingness (Matthew 26:39b; cf. Psalm 40:8; Hebrews 19:5-7). In exchange, we are given the cup of blessing; instead of sorrow, we have joy and peace (John 14:27); instead of loneliness, we have fellowship (1 John 1:3); instead of judgment, we have pardon (Romans 8:1), and because Christ was willing, we are made willing (Philippians 2:13).

If we diminish the wrath of God, we also diminish the glory of the cross of Christ. If you want to see God's love, look at the cross; if you want to see God's wrath, look at the cross. John, in one of his letters, describes this as follows:

In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. (1 John 4:10)

Today, many people do not want to accept that Christ died in our place. They no longer believe the cross is where Christ took the penalty we deserved. They claim such an old view does not show the love of God. Even in Jesus' day, people did not believe him. They are so offended by the cross they reject it altogether. This is still true today. Yet it is only on the cross that we fully see the love of God and the judgment of God come together in their most significant achievement.

### **The reason for God's wrath (1:19-21a)**

As mentioned earlier, verse 1:18 acts as a heading or thesis for the entire section on humanity's sinfulness from 1:18 through 3:20. However, Paul breaks this long section by addressing two different people: the pagan Gentiles and the self-righteous, both Jew and Gentile. In 1:18-32, Paul refers primarily to pagan Gentiles who have not heard the gospel, God's special revelation.

At the end of verse 18, Paul tells us that God's wrath is revealed to those **"who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth."** It is clear from this statement that such people have access to the truth, but who **"suppress"** it? For it is not possible to suppress what one does not have. Then in verses 19 through 21, Paul points out three ways people should respond to the truth God reveals to them.<sup>45</sup>

*v. 19 "plain to them" "shown" "clearly perceived" "knew."*

First, Paul states in verse 19, it is **"plain to them because God made it known to them."** The reference to **"them"** is the **"ungodly and unrighteous men"** stated in verse 18; that is, the ones who suppressed the truth. Paul clarifies this later when he says, **"there is no distinction: for all have sinned"** (3:22). But what has God made plain? And how has he made it plain? Here we distinguish between two types of revelation: special and natural revelation. Special revelation is God's direct speech and recorded actions in Scripture. Of course, not everyone has had, or

<sup>45</sup> Moo, *Encountering the Book of Romans*, 39.

now has, access to the Bible. God has also revealed himself to all people in a general and indirect way but, nonetheless, in a real way. This is called natural or general revelation. Natural revelation includes observing the creation and our conscience – our sense of right and wrong. The psalmist said,

“The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words, whose voice is not heard. Their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.” (Psalm 19:1-4)

It is clear from this and other similar statements that creation itself points to the God of glory and that humans are created capable of understanding that creation points to God. John Calvin writes, “You cannot in one glance survey this most vast and beautiful system of the universe, in its wide expanse, without being completely overwhelmed by the boundless force of its brightness” and goes on to write, “But although we lack the natural ability to mount up unto the pure and clear knowledge of God, all excuse is cut off because the fault of dullness is within us. And, indeed, we are not allowed thus to pretend ignorance without our conscience itself always convicting us of both baseness and ingratitude”.<sup>46</sup> However, Paul is not speaking here about logical arguments that prove the existence of God. For Paul and the pagan Gentile, God’s existence was a given. Instead, Paul is saying that everyone is born with some understanding of God and, in particular, what is right and wrong. This understanding is what the pagan is suppressing and for which they are held accountable and liable. No matter how flawed, society has a general sense of right and wrong. The phrase “**plain to them**” can also be translated as “**manifest in them**” (KJV) or “**evident within them**” (NASB). And the reason why it is “**plain**” or “**evident**” is because God has “**shown it to them.**” Here “**it**” refers to a knowledge of God identified in the next verse. This knowledge is an internal witness within humans that either affirms or accuses (2:14-16).

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<sup>46</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 52, 68-69.



v. 20 “clearly perceived” “in the things that have been made”

Second, in verse 20, Paul states just *what* has been made plain. Surprisingly, he says that God’s “invisible attributes” are “clearly perceived.” What are some of these invisible attributes? Paul states that they are “his eternal power and divine nature.” So, these include that God is glorious (Psalm 19:1-3), powerful (Genesis 1:1), kind (Acts 14:15b-17; Matthew 5:44-55; 6:25-34), alive (Acts 17:28-29), and moral (2:14-16). All of these are plain from creation, that is, “the things that have been made.”

Of course, this does not include God’s plan of salvation nor the specific requirements of holiness demanded by God as revealed in Moses’s written law. But that is not Paul’s purpose; he wants to show that all people are under the power of sin, suppressing and distorting even their limited knowledge. Paul preached something similar when he was in Athens. There he states:

And he [God] made from one man [Adam] every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, [...] that they should seek God, and perhaps feel [grope] their way toward him and find him. (Acts 17:26-27)

In these verses, the word “feel” means “to look for something in uncertain fashion, *to feel around for, grope for*” (BDAG), which means to feel about in the darkness for God when the light of special revelation is not shining. Of course, in Athens, there was much groping around for God in their pagan religions, which always ended in idolatry and ignorance of God (Acts 17:16, 22–23). As Peterson writes, “Nevertheless, God’s purpose for humanity remains, despite the blinding and corrupting effects of sin. The possibility of seeking after God and finding him is based on the fact that God ‘is not far from any one of us’.”<sup>47</sup>

v. 20b-21a We are “without excuse”

Third, although people cannot understand the gospel of grace from the created world, they are still “without excuse.” Even though natural revelation is limited, it is sufficient to know the essential attributes of God. So, everyone is accountable and liable to God to respond to this knowledge appropriately. God has created people with the innate ability to instinctively know his

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<sup>47</sup> Peterson, 498.

existence and power by observing the created world. It is somewhat surprising that Paul would use the word “knew” (v. 21a). In Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, he states that “in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God” (1 Corinthians 121 NASB). Douglas Moo comments, “But this knowledge, Paul also makes clear, is limited, involving the narrow range of understanding of God available in nature.”<sup>48</sup>

The problem is that people do not even respond appropriately to the limited knowledge God has given them, which is to “honor” and “give thanks to him”; that is, to glorify his name. Instead, they hardened their hearts and so perverted the little knowledge of him. They distorted their knowledge, changing God into an idol to benefit themselves. Not honouring God is their fundamental sin by which they are condemned. We have to wait until later in the letter for Paul to tell us *why* they do not worship God (5:12-21).

Clearly, natural revelation is insufficient to produce an understanding of the gospel and God’s actions to accomplish their salvation. Still, people have enough knowledge that results in their justified condemnation if they suppress it. This limited knowledge encourages people to seek after God and humbly acknowledge his glory and sovereignty. However, because people willfully reject the knowledge they are given, they are culpable and remain under God’s wrath. In this respect, the righteousness of God includes his justice. God is just condemning those who reject him, even those who have not received special revelation.<sup>49</sup> The sad fact is that we are all under this condemnation since this is the universal power of sin (3:9-20). It is not just that some people are affected by sin; *all* people are under its domination. Saving faith can only be received by special revelation through preaching the word (10:14-17).<sup>50</sup>

One might ask: how can we so easily pervert our knowledge of God and turn to idol worship? All idol worship is a form of self-worship. It is a way of manipulating a god to do what we want. Idols do not have to be physical but can also be our desire

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<sup>48</sup> Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 106.

<sup>49</sup> This was certainly the view of Jews who believed all Gentiles, outside of the covenant, were destined for condemnation.

<sup>50</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 86.

for health, wealth, and happiness. We place all our energy and hope in obtaining these things. It is even possible to treat our LORD God in this way. The 'prosperity gospel' is just such a form of manipulation. Instead of serving and worshipping God for his honour and glory, we try to use him for our own self-serving desires.

### **The result of God's wrath (1:21b-32)**

*vv. 21b-22*

What happens when one does not glorify God by giving him thanks and honour? The result is that thinking "**became futile**" and hearts are "**darkened.**" But that is not how those who reject God view themselves. In fact, it is the very opposite. They think of themselves as "**wise**" but God says they are "**fools**" (Psalm 14:1; 53:1; Proverbs 1:7, 22; 10:23; 12:15; and many more in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes). The word "**heart**" in Scripture usually refers to thinking, reasoning and the ability to understand things particularly about God. So, rather than acknowledging God, a person's heart has become dark. A darkness that only the light of Jesus Christ can dispel (John 8:12; 9:5).

*vv. 23-28*

Paul now describes the destructive effect of this universal rejection of acknowledging God. Three times Paul uses the same pattern where human beings have "**exchanged**" (vv. 23, 25, 26) what they knew as right for self-seeking falsehood. So suppression of the truth in their heart and mind became the action of exchange. And as a result, "**therefore,**" God responds ("**gave them up**" vv. 24, 26, 28) with the consequences of not believing the truth about himself. They replaced what they knew was right with their own perversion. Paul identifies two of these perversions specially: idolatry (vv. 23, 25) and sexual depravity (vv. 24, 26-27). These two are often related to one another in Scripture.

The phrase "**gave them up**" should not be seen as passive permission. That is, where God simply removes his hands and permits seemingly 'natural' consequences to occur. Rather, it is an active judgment in which God sentences people to the sins

they themselves have chosen.<sup>51</sup> They are being punished with the very thing by which they sin.<sup>52</sup> God punishes their sin, with sin. "All experience also teaches us this. We see that sin follows sin as an avenger."<sup>53</sup> Man's punishment is to be abandoned by God. But this is exactly what man wants. Man wants to replace God's authority with his own (Adam and Eve's rebellion; Jonah; prodigal son parable). This punishment is not a future judgment but a present revelation of "**the wrath of God.**" The punishment received is the punishment desired. For, the punishment is their own desire for sexual immorality. However, we should also note that although God gives them up to the sin they desire, he does not give them up to eternal punishment if they turn, repent, and believe in his Son. As Peter writes, God "is patient towards you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance" (2 Peter 3:9).

*First exchange (vv. 22-24)*

In the first exchange, people replace their knowledge "**of the glory of the immortal God**" for idols that look like men, birds, animals and reptiles. This is a perfect example of what Paul called "**foolish**" but what people thought was "**wise**" (Psalms 106:20; Jeremiah 2:11). "An unfit mind is the fruit of seeing God unfit."<sup>54</sup>

In fact, all three exchanges show their foolishness while claiming knowledge and wisdom. Setting up such idols is the height of folly. However, such idols are not always pagan religion; it can also be human philosophy, technical and scientific advancement, and what is passed off as socially progressive. This can also include careers, family and even ministry. Anything that replaces knowledge of God and submission to that knowledge is idolatry since it replaces worship of God.

The result of this worship of idols is that they have lost all sensitivity and "have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity" (Ephesians 4:19). Scripture,

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<sup>51</sup> This is the meaning of "iniquity."

<sup>52</sup> Moo, *Encountering the Book of Romans*, 40.

<sup>53</sup> Hodge, 39. See also Ephesians 4:19 where it is viewed as the sinner's work.

<sup>54</sup> Schreiner, 93.

especially in the Old Testament, associates idolatry with sexual sin. And so, God has given them over **“to the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves.”** Idol worship is such a grievous sin because the idol worshiper has failed to honour God by glorifying him (v. 21). Because they did not honour God, God gave their bodies over to **“dishonor.”** This dishonour has affected God-ordained relationships between man and woman. So, all sexual immorality is a consequence of idolatry and idolatry is simply not honouring God as God.

*Second exchange (vv. 25-26a)*

This second exchange is similar to the first. Again, they exchanged **“the truth about God”** for **“a lie.”** Most of our translations use an indirect article. However, the original Greek has a direct article, **“the lie.”** This Big Lie is as old as the world when Satan first tempted Adam and Eve. This Big Lie is: God cannot be trusted to decide what is right and wrong. And the Lie continues to state: we humans are in a much better position to determine what is right and wrong. Satan denied the truth of God's judgment about eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (See Genesis 2:15-16; 3:4). This is the Big Lie Satan still continues to use to deceive us. We have so many ways of suppressing and diminishing this truth. Because of this lie, they **“worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator.”** This is, again, idolatry. And again, God gives them over to their sinful passions. The phrase **“dishonorable passions”** usually refers to homosexual relations (vv. 26b-27).

Why does Paul emphasize this sin? The most likely reason is that it provides an obvious mirror to the sin of idolatry. Humans were created to honour God by glorifying him; also, human beings were created to have relations between a man and woman within a marriage covenant (Genesis 2:24). Idolatry regularly leads to sexual immorality. Although both heterosexual and homosexual sins are identified, neither is described as worse than the other. Sexual immorality in all its forms is a physical reflection of the perversion of idolatry. As we will see in the vice list of 1:29-31, this does not mean every person who rejects God commits all these sins. In this whole section from 1:18-32, Paul's

main point is that Gentiles who reject God are under the wrath of God and, therefore, the judgement of God.

*Third exchange (vv.26b-28)*

Paul's third description is more specific, identifying these passions, including homosexuality. Men and women exchange "**natural relations**"<sup>55</sup> with unnatural ones. Jewish teaching, following the Old Testament, understood homosexuality to be against the created order of God (Genesis 1:27-28a; 2:24; 19:1-28; Leviticus 18:22; 20:13; Deuteronomy 23:17-18). Since "**natural**" refers to God's created order, homosexual activity is a rejection of God's order and so, in essence, idolatry. Homosexual activity is God's wrath on those who have rejected even the limited knowledge of him given to them. That is, God "**gave them up**" to what they already wanted.

As well, those who commit such "**shameful acts**" therefore "**receive in themselves the due penalty**" of God's wrath. Indeed, it is possible to equate all types of sexual diseases as this "**penalty.**" However, it is unlikely Paul had this in mind. The penalty is the sin of homosexuality itself. What Paul is emphasizing is that rejecting knowledge of God brings about judgment. The worst of this judgment is alienation from God in which the heart becomes dark and the mind sees foolishness as wisdom. Foolishness is one thing, but seeing foolishness as wisdom is a hopeless condition.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> It is important to remember that when Paul uses the term "natural" he means God's created order. Natural or nature in Scripture does not have a secular meaning such as 'mother nature.'

<sup>56</sup> Today there are many attempts to weaken this position in order to show that homosexual relationships are not always sinful. One such argument is people can be born as homosexual and, therefore, God created them as such. So for them "natural relations" (vv. 26-27) would be homosexual. Nowhere is there such an individualistic or psychological sense in Paul's writings. Paul's contention is that homosexuality is against the created order as given in Genesis. A second, more important argument, is that Paul is only referring to idolaters and not to Christians who accept Christ and honour God. In the West, there are now many churches who accept, as valid, the marriage of Christian homosexual couples. The primary bases for this argument is our understanding of God's Word advances with our understanding of human sexuality. Some supporters of this view state

In verse 28, Paul says that because they “**did not see fit to acknowledge God,**” therefore God gave them up to a “**debased mind.**”<sup>57</sup> More than anything else, rejection of God affects our understanding of divine things. And so, we have minds that cannot think clearly and correctly about God. In this condition, no one can seek after God. But thanks be to God that while we were such sinners, Christ died for us and sought us! Only by his mercy and grace has his light expelled our darkness.

*List of vices that humans are guilty of*

*vv. 29-31*

At the end of verse 28 Paul states such people “**do what ought not to be done.**” He then describes many of these things in verses 29 to 31, listing a wide variety of sins. All this is a result of rejecting the knowledge of God given as part of being human. If we do not relate to the previous sexual sins, we certainly must have a sense of our own sinfulness in this list. It was common to include vice lists in Roman writings. Paul does this here as well as in his other letters. However, Paul is not saying these vices are problems in the Roman church. Rather they are a general description of the fallen human condition. Paul, of course, is not stating that every single Gentile does all these sins but that in general, they do. The list of vices is divided into three sub-lists, but we do not have to make much of the divisions. Other than unbelief, Paul is not ranking one sin greater than another. What he wants us to understand is the full depth of the fallenness of human beings. This is similar to God’s indictment of Noah’s generation: “The Lord saw the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (Genesis 6:5).

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Paul, as a first century Jew, had a limited understanding and so his teaching on the subject can safely be replaced with modern concepts of sexuality. The Bible is then interpreted in light of current thinking rather than the original author’s intention. Such an interpretation must, therefore, be rejected.

<sup>57</sup> Paul uses a wordplay in the Greek. “Because people did not *approve* God in their thinking, God gave them over to minds *not approving* what is right” (Moo, *Encountering the book of Romans*, 42).

v. 32

Paul concludes by reiterating what he already said. In verse 19 he said it is “**plain to them**”, in verse 20 he said they “**clearly perceived**”, and in verse 21 “**although they knew they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him.**” Now again, he says they “**know God’s righteous decree**” and if these decrees are consistently violated (“**practice**”), then they “**deserve to die.**” It is clear that despite human fallen nature and rejection of God, we are very aware of God’s disapproval of this kind of behaviour. Humans, therefore, are born with an understanding of what is right and wrong and a sense of justice that God is just when he punishes those who consistently violate this knowledge (see notes on 2:14-15). As Schreiner writes, “It follows, then, that Gentiles, without specifically having the Mosaic law, are aware of the moral requirements contained in that law.”<sup>58</sup>

The passage ends on an even sadder note that sinful humanity finds perverse pleasure in doing and encouraging others to rebel against God. Tragically, their minds have become so foolish that they view sin as good, natural or even honourable. Paul’s indictment against the pagan Gentiles is complete, so he turns to the Jews. Again, the purpose of this is to show all people have a clear understanding of morality, that they have rejected this knowledge and so have become depraved in their behaviour. As a result, the wrath of God is justified and all people need salvation from his wrath.

### **God’s judgment against the self-righteous (2:1-3:8)**

In the previous section, 1:18-32, Paul charged the pagan Gentiles with sin even though they did not have the special revelation given to Israel. Now in this section, 2:1-3:8, Paul turns his attention to self-righteous Gentiles and Jews. The self-righteous Gentile believed his good and honourable life was sufficient for salvation. While Jews were most likely to judge Gentile pagan sinners and point to their own covenantal relationship with God as the basis of their righteousness.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 99.

<sup>59</sup> The reference to the law in verse 12 also indicates that Jews are also being addressed in this passage.



The primary theme is neither the moralist Gentile nor the Jew will escape judgment through obedience to the law. Paul shows that neither could keep the law perfectly and, therefore, both are under the same judgment as the pagan described in 1:20-32. Jews, like Gentiles, need the gospel: which is the “**righteousness from God**” received by faith. God’s judgment is impartial; both Jew and Gentile are “**without excuse**” (1:20; 2:1) because both are sinners.

Paul then goes on to state that unless a Jew or a Gentile possesses the Holy Spirit, they are unable to live a faithful life of obedience to God (2:29). And then, even more surprisingly, a Gentile whom the Holy Spirit transforms is also empowered to observe – although not perfectly – the law. Moreover, only such a person should be considered a true Jew (2:26, 29).

The entire argument against those who view their self-righteousness as sufficient for salvation can be divided into three parts:

1. In 2:1-16, God’s judgment is impartial since both Jew and Gentiles are sinners.
2. In 2:17-29, Paul shows that despite the covenants, Jews have failed to honour God.
3. In 3:1-8, Paul shows how God’s faithfulness is upheld despite the unfaithfulness of the Jews.

We should also note Paul often uses a style of writing called a diatribe. This type of writing was quite common in Paul’s day. Usually, it takes the form of a dialogue between the writer and a fictional opponent. The writer presents a question that an opponent might bring up as a challenge and then answers the challenge.

In this passage, Paul seems to be discussing with a moralist (2:1-16) and then a Jew (2:18-3:8). By the time Paul wrote this letter, he had preached the gospel over twenty years. Whenever Paul entered a town or city, he always went first to preach the gospel to Jews at their synagogues (see many references in Acts) and then to Gentiles. He, therefore, would have heard and responded to every conceivable argument made against the

gospel. Paul knows what to expect, and so here, he anticipates and responds to these objections.

### **1. God's judgment is impartial against the moralist (2:1-16)**

A Gentile who considered himself highly moral or a religious Jew would undoubtedly have agreed with Paul to this point in his letter. There are self-righteous Gentiles who might argue they do none (or at least very few) of the evils Paul mentions in the vice list (1:29-30). Unlike the pagan Gentile Paul referred to in 1:18-32, who only had natural revelation, the Jew had a special revelation. Jews thought non-Jews without the Torah (first five books of the Bible) were Gentile sinners. Paul also knew Jews viewed themselves as having a special relationship with God because they had the Torah, the Abrahamic covenant including circumcision, the Law of Moses, and the Mosaic covenant. Paul clarifies, in this passage, although this is true, these things do not result in righteousness before God.

Paul's argument is divided into three parts: in 2:1-5, Paul points out self-righteous people commit sin just like a pagan sinner and so are under God's wrath; then in 2:6-11, Paul clearly states the impartial judgment of God – if one does good works he will be rewarded with eternal life, and if one does evil he will experience God's final wrath; and third, in 2:12-16, Paul again makes it clear the simple possession of the Torah is not sufficient for salvation – one must keep the law perfectly not just be given it or have possession of it.

*Self-righteousness does not remove God's wrath against sin (2:1-5)*

*v. 1*

Paul ties his indictment by pointing back to his accusation against the pagan Gentiles. In 1:18-21, God's wrath was revealed against those who suppressed the truth. This truth is that there is judgment for those who disobey God. **"Therefore,"** the moralist Jew or Gentile is *also* without **"excuse"** (see 1:20) because **"in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself."** They have appointed themselves as judge in place of God. Like Adam and Eve, the moralist believes they are the final arbitrator of what is right and wrong. Moralists were no different from the pagan since they had no right to pass judgment on others as sinners themselves.

The reason Paul uses the word “**excuse**” for both the Gentiles (1:20) and the Jews (2:1) is that this is what so often is done. We seldom take responsibility for our sinful actions; instead, we minimize our sins while enhancing any small good we do while maximizing the sins of others.

The phrase “**do the same things**” (also v. 3) most likely does not refer to the vice list of 1:29-31. However, it is certainly possible for the moralist to do such things. In general, the moral life of Jews was different from the pagans; however, in a sense, the same sins were committed in different ways. Self-righteousness is an idol of self, and refusing to repent or even see that self-righteousness is a sin while at the same time encouraging others is no different from the pagan. This is also what Jesus taught (Matthew 7:1-4).<sup>60</sup>

*vv. 2-3*

Paul affirms God is right in his condemnation because God’s judgments are fair (“**rightly falls**”). Paul states again the Jew, like the Gentile, “**practice such things.**” The “**things**” that Paul is referring to are not the same as the Gentiles since Jews were not known to practice homosexuality nor – at least at the time of Paul – to practice overt idolatry. Paul is more likely referring to the vice list of 1:29-31. Paul identifies self-righteous Jews because of their hypocrisy and self-deception. In God’s judgment, they are no different from pagan Gentiles. Paul also may be thinking about their “preoccupation with the law as a kind of idolatry.”<sup>61</sup>

The argument of verses 1 through 3 can be summarized as follows:

1. God’s judgment falls on those who do “**these things.**”
2. The judgmental self-righteous person does “**these things.**”
3. Therefore, the self-righteous are under condemnation.

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<sup>60</sup> Abernathy, 125.

<sup>61</sup> Moo, Epistle to the Romans, 73.

Paul knows there is a great deal of self-deception among self-righteous people.<sup>62</sup> And so, without any compromise, he points out their inconsistent behaviour.

*vv. 4-5*

The source of the self-righteous person's problem is given in verses 4 and 5. They have misunderstood the "**kindness,**" "**forbearance,**" and "**patience**" of God, believing God accepted their behaviour. In fact, they are deceived. The purpose of God's kindness was to bring about their repentance. But, instead, because of their "**hard and impenitent heart,**" they are "**storing up wrath**" when God's "**righteous judgment would be revealed.**" God's patience is to bring about repentance, but there will come a time when God's patience will end.

This is what God is seeking. He could have judged the world long ago as he did in the time of Noah. The reason he does not is, he wants to lead us to repentance. He holds back his day of judgment so we repent. He wants all to come to a saving knowledge of his Son.

*God judges both the Christian Jew and Gentile impartially based on obedience (2:6-11)*

At times, in this section, it almost appears as if Paul is teaching justification by works (2:7, 13, 26). However, it is also clear from 3:28 (as well as his other letters) that Paul teaches justification is received by the grace of God through faith in Christ (1:16-17). Was Paul contradicting himself? By no means! There have been several ways of addressing this issue.

Some commentators have suggested Paul teaches a two-covenant theology: Gentiles are saved by faith, but that Jews are saved by keeping the law. However, we reject this position entirely. Another approach is that Paul is stating what pious Jews think about salvation. Such a Jew understands he has a special relationship with God by grace simply because he was born a Jew. But to *remain* in God's grace, he must obey the Mosaic law as best he can. However, it is unlikely this is Paul's intent since

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<sup>62</sup> A self-righteous person is one who believes their behaviour is sufficient to stand righteous before God. But it also means they believe others, unlike themselves, are not able. Such a person could be a Gentile as well.

his overall purpose is to show Jews, just like Gentiles, are under God's wrath. Both Jews and Gentiles can only be saved by receiving justification from God by faith (1:16-17).

However, there are three valid ways of understanding this passage to resolve this tension. The first is that Paul is thinking about the hypothetical case where someone might live their entire life in perfect obedience to the law. If such a person existed, and Paul makes clear there is no such person (2:13), then they would receive eternal life. This is probably the most dominant interpretation today. However, the main difficulty with this approach is that it does not take seriously that every person is born with the imputed guilt and punishment of Adam's transgression (See notes on 5:12-21).

A second approach is to view these people as pre-Christian Jews who try to follow the Mosaic law but know they cannot and offer the sacrifices for forgiveness as prescribed by the Law. Since Paul is speaking to both Jews and Gentiles, it is unlikely this is what was meant.

The third approach is to view the person as a Christian who has received circumcision of the heart "**by the Spirit**" (2:29) and so is able to "**keep the law's requirement**" (2:26 NIV, NASB). This approach understands "**works**" in this passage to mean good works resulting *from being filled with the Spirit*. It does not refer to "**works of the law**" (3:20) which are done to be righteous before God. Paul teaches good works by the power of the Spirit are a necessary result of justification (14:10-12; 1 Corinthians 4:4-5; 6:9-11; 2 Corinthians 5:10; Galatians 5:21; Ephesians 6:8; 2 Timothy 4:8). Such good works result from the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit in the life of a believer. But Paul also teaches no one is justified by their good deeds (3:20). These are two different "**works**" which should not be confused but often are.

This third option seems to fit the context best. We need to keep in mind, though, that this is not the main point of this paragraph: Paul's purpose is to show God will judge every person either on their faith in Christ which leads to obedience or on their 'righteousness' coming from their good deeds. In the first case, the result is "**eternal life,**" while the second is "**wrath and fury.**"

This passage (vv. 6-11), is a self-contained unit arranged in a ring structure or chiasm as follows:<sup>63,64</sup>

- A. God will judge everyone equally (v. 6)
- B. Those who do good will receive eternal life (v. 7)
- C. Those who do evil will receive wrath (v. 8)
- C'. Tribulation and distress for those who do evil (v. 9)
- B'. Glory and honour to those who do good (v. 10)
- A'. God judges impartially (v. 11)

v. 6

Throughout the Old Testament, Scripture states God “**will judge everyone according to what they have done**” (2:6 NLT) (Psalm 62:12; Hosea 12:2; Proverbs 24:12). And this teaching does not change in the New Testament (Matthew 16:27; 2 Corinthians 3:8, 10-14; 11:15; 2 Timothy 4:14; 1 Peter 1:17 and others). This is the meaning of retributive justice of God: *God will deal with man, as man has dealt with God*. If we repent, he will save us; he will condemn us if we rebel.

As already mentioned, we understand Paul refers to Christians since only those who have received the Holy Spirit can live a life of obedience to Christ (2:26). Only through our union with Christ can we produce works acceptable to God. And ultimately, it is only through our union with Christ that God views the perfect righteousness of Christ as our righteousness. Such a person has been given a circumcised heart (2:29; Ezekiel 36:26-27). These promises have been fulfilled in the new covenant beginning with Jesus’s death and resurrection and then by the coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1–41).

The fruit of true faith is good works even though our works are often pathetic. All our works are mixed with sin. But when God looks at our works done in Christ Jesus, he forgives what sinfulness is in them. But he also recognizes his own righteousness in them, so he delights in them. True faith, therefore, seeks after Christ’s glory and honour in everything we do.

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<sup>63</sup> However, unlike most chiasms whose main point is in the centre, here the main point is at the beginning and the end; that God judges and will judge impartially.

<sup>64</sup> Osborn, 59.

*vv.7-11*

There are two possible outcomes: “**eternal life**” for those who have received the Holy Spirit and so seek Christ’s honour (1:21);<sup>65</sup> but “**wrath and fury**” for those who persist in disobeying the truth because they are motivated by selfishness (cf. 1:18-19). As in other places in Scripture, there are only two types of people: those who receive eternal life and those who receive eternal wrath. Then, Paul repeats these two contrasting judgments in reverse order in verses 9 and 10. Paul also mentions a reward for those who seek the honour and glory of Christ. They receive honour (God’s approval), glory (revealed splendour of God’s infinite worth), eternal life (the unfading joy of God’s presence), and peace (reconciliation into the Father’s love resulting in being adopted as sons).

Although this is true, this passage's main point is verse 11: “**God shows no partiality.**” Paul is trying to instruct both Jews and Gentiles that God is just in all his judgments, so he does not show any partiality by giving preference to Jews concerning eternal life. For Jews, salvation will not be given because they are circumcised and belong to the covenant of Abraham. For Gentiles, salvation will not be given because they have been moral from a human perspective. When it comes to obedience, the motivation of the circumcised heart by the Spirit is what counts (2:29).

*Possession of the Torah does not help the Jew (2:12-16)*

This paragraph begins with the word “**for,**” which connects it to God’s impartial judgment, which was the main point of the preceding paragraph. Here again, Paul defends this principle against any charge by the Jews that they are in a favoured position concerning salvation because they possess the Mosaic law. Paul’s reason is, it is the *doing* of the law which is important and not simply its possession. Second, even the Gentiles who do not have the Mosaic law in written form also know what is right

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<sup>65</sup> The phrase, “**seek for glory and honour and immortality**” refers to blessing of the age to come; the new heaven and earth. But it reflects the attitude of a Christian who is seeking not one’s own glory and honour but the glory and honour of Christ. This is contrasted with the person who is “self-seeking.”

and wrong because God has given them this ability “**by nature.**” Paul calls this natural law “**a law to themselves**” (v. 14).

*v. 12*

Those “**without the law**” are Gentiles, and those “**under the law**” are Jews. So, the “**law**” here refers to the law of Moses.<sup>66</sup> Paul is not condemning Gentiles for being lawless but highlighting the special blessing the Jews experienced. For a Jew, the only way a Gentile could come into this blessing is to come under the burden of the law since, for them, there is no concept of salvation outside of the law. Paul addresses this head-on. He makes it clear that from the point of view of human sinfulness, the possession of the Mosaic law makes no difference. Either way, whether outside or under the law, all people are under the condemnation of sin and need the gospel.

*v.13*

This verse returns to the question of whether Paul is talking theoretically or about Christians who, in union with Christ, are able to keep the requirements of the law. We have decided in favour of the latter. Nowhere does Scripture teach that all one needs to do is give intellectual assent to the gospel to be saved. Saving faith includes believing and obedience to God (Matthew 7:24; Luke 8:21 and 11:28; John 13:17; James 1:22–23, 25). So, when Paul states, “**it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God,**” he is using the word “**hearers**” in the narrower sense of those who know the law but do not obey the law. On the other hand, when he says “**the doers of the law will be justified,**” he refers to Christians living a life of “**obedience of faith.**” On the contrast between hearing and doing, see James 1:22-25. Only those who persevere in their faith will be saved in the end. However, such saving faith is itself a gift of God. As Paul writes to the Philippian Christians:

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<sup>66</sup> For a Jew, the “**law**” was not just the Ten Commandments, but the whole “**Torah.**” That is, the whole historic teaching of how God chose Abraham right up to entering the Promised Land. This would include the books of Genesis through to Deuteronomy. The particular emphasis is that God uniquely chose Israel to be his children, setting them apart from all other peoples and nations.



I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. (Philippians 1:6)

It is, therefore, because of what God has done in our hearts through the indwelling Spirit (2:29) – and not our own efforts – that we are able to be obedient to him. As C.E.B. Cranfield comments, “Paul is thinking of that beginning of grateful obedience to be found in those who believe in Christ, which though very weak and faltering and in no way deserving God’s favour, is, as the expression of humble trust in God, well-pleasing in His sight.”<sup>67</sup>

*vv. 14-15*

Paul again introduces Gentiles to strengthen his argument that mere possession of the law does not give the Jew a saving advantage. The Gentiles Paul is referring to are unbelievers who occasionally obey the law. However, this partial obedience is also not sufficient for salvation.<sup>68</sup> We all know of unbelievers who have some knowledge of God’s moral demands as given in the ten commandments. God has created all people with a sense of right and wrong, an unwritten natural law in their hearts. If Paul had believers in mind, he would not have used the phrase “**by nature**” but rather “by grace.”<sup>69</sup>

Paul also states, such unbelieving Gentiles “**are a law to themselves.**” While not having the Mosaic law, they have a general sense of morality. For example, they know they should not murder, rob, or even commit adultery. And because God has given the unbelieving Gentile this ability, they are on the same level as the Jew; both know about doing the will of God. Although this is true, neither the Jew nor the Gentile does what they know. As Martin Luther writes, “Hence both are sinners, no matter how much good they may have done: the Jews, because

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<sup>67</sup> Cranfield, *Romans, Volume I*, 155.

<sup>68</sup> Other interpreters view these Gentiles similarly to those included in verses 6 through 10; that is, Gentile Christians who do the law because of their relationship with Jesus Christ. The reason is that 2:6-10 is similar to 2:13. 2:14-15 follow immediately after with a “For” connecting word. However, we understand the Gentiles to be unbelievers connecting them to the phrase “**without the law**” in verse 12a (Moo, *Epistle to the Romans*, 149).

<sup>69</sup> Moo, *Epistle to the Romans*, 150.

they fulfilled the Law only according to its letter; the heathen because they fulfilled the Law only in part and not at all according to its spirit."<sup>70</sup>

And Paul's statement that this moral understanding is "**written on their hearts**" means unbelievers can express love and concern for each other (cf. 13:8-10). When they do what they know is right, their conscience "**even excuses them,**" and they think all is right in their relationship with God. But then, when they violate what they know is right, their consciences "**accuse**" them. Again, Luther comments, "This witness is favourable when it concerns good deeds, for, in that case, their thoughts excuse or defend them. It is a condemning witness when they do evil works, for then their thoughts accuse them and their conscience torments them."<sup>71</sup>

*v. 16*

Although the Gentile unbelievers have some knowledge of God's moral requirements, they still do not do them and so are still under God's judgment. No one does the law they are given perfectly; neither the Jew who has the Mosaic law nor the Gentile who has a general moral sense of right and wrong. Conformity to whichever law one has is not just external behaviour but includes "**the secrets of men.**" So even their secret thoughts will condemn them. This teaching echoes Jesus's own teaching (Matthew 6:4, 6, 18). All one's external deeds, known or unknown, and all our thoughts will be judged "**by Christ Jesus.**" This is what Paul has been preaching all along.

Remember, however, Paul is primarily addressing the pious Jew. His main point in this paragraph is that possessing the Mosaic law is no saving advantage to the Jew since unbelieving Gentiles also have a moral law they occasionally obey. The self-righteous Jew would certainly not think this would be of any saving help to such a Gentile. Paul's point then is that inconsistent obedience to the Mosaic law, in the same way, is no help to the Jew.

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<sup>70</sup> Luther, 59.

<sup>71</sup> Luther, 60.

## 2. Jews have failed to honour God (2:17-29)

Paul now explicitly identifies the self-righteous Jew who thinks possession and best efforts obedience to the Mosaic law will save him. Again, Paul uses the diatribe style. The advantage of having the Mosaic covenant – both the law and circumcision – will only benefit them if the law is kept perfectly. In 2:17-24, Paul points out that Jews transgress the Mosaic law, and in 2:25-29, he reminds them that the simple act of circumcision is no benefit without obedience to the law.

### *Transgression of the Law (2:17-24)*

#### *vv. 17-18*

Paul gives three privileges of having the Mosaic law in verses 17 and 18. First, Paul agrees with his representative Jewish debating partner that calling themselves Jews is good. This is significant since it identifies the person under God's special favour. They have an advantage because of God's covenant with Abraham. Jewishness is not a disadvantage, as Paul will state clearly in 3:1-3. And to "**reply on the law and boasting in God**" – that is, claiming a special relationship with God – is also a good thing (Jeremiah 9:23-24); even Christians should do that (1 Corinthians 1:31; 2 Corinthians 10:17).

The problem is that Jews "**relied**" on the law as a means of righteousness and, thereby, putting God in one's debt. The same is true of "**boasting**." To boast about the possession of the law and the special relationship Jews had with God ultimately means boasting about one's own achievements rather than glorifying God. This underlines Paul's entire argument that being a Jew – simply being born as one – does not guarantee salvation, no matter how privileged that position is. Later, Paul redefines true 'Jewishness' in spiritual terms (2:28-29).

Two more advantages are given in verse 18, for a Jew knows God's will and believes God's will is excellent. That is because, since childhood, he has been taught these things. However, as Paul has already pointed out, knowing God's will and doing it are two different matters (v. 13).

#### *vv. 19-20*

Having identified these spiritual privileges enjoyed in vv. 17 to 18, Paul now lists three blessings the Jew has because of God's

covenant with them. These blessings are to be shared with the Gentile. For the Jew was given the privilege to be **“a guide to the blind,”** to be **“a light for those in darkness,”** and to be an **“instructor of the foolish”** and **“teacher of children.”** It was Israel's responsibility to teach the Gentile (Isaiah 42:6-7). Because of all these advantages and blessings, the Jew is without excuse (2:1).

Interestingly, after Jesus points out that they – the teachers of the law – are blind guides (Matthew 15:14), he commissions Paul **“to open their eyes, so they [both Jew and Gentile] may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me”** (Acts 26:18).

*vv. 21-22*

Continuing his diatribe, Paul asks four accusatory rhetorical questions. Paul is accusing the self-righteous Jew of profound hypocrisy by these questions, saying one thing but doing another.

This accusation is found already in the Old Testament (Psalm 50:16-21) and Jesus's teaching (Matthew 23:3). The accusation against stealing and adultery is clear enough, but what did Paul mean by robbing temples? There have been many attempts at finding an answer. A possible solution is that Jews in the diaspora such as Rome, Corinth or Ephesus were buying and selling metals used as idols which might have been stolen from the pagan temples.<sup>72</sup> However, it could also be Paul is referring to the law itself and the traditions surrounding them as effectively being an object of worship. They placed such things above the will of God (Matthew 15:1-9; 23:1-36). In any case, all three of these examples are serious violations of the Mosaic law. Paul is most likely highlighting these, not because they are done frequently but because Jews teach strongly against them. And yet, to some extent, these violations are being done with

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<sup>72</sup> The general principle is benefiting financially or socially because of the sins of others. We tend to excuse ourselves because we did not commit the original sin. But benefiting from another's sin makes us liable as well. An example is American Christians who deplored the slave trade but then benefited from slave labour. The question remains for us as well. How do we benefit from the sins of others?

impunity. In other words, he is contrasting the *teaching* of the law and the *doing* of the law, which was Paul's main point in this chapter; that is, although they had the law, they did not adequately do the law.

*vv. 23-24*

This contrast between *having* and *doing* the Mosaic law is again highlighted in verse 23. Although the self-righteous Jew is very proud – “**boasting**” – of the law, the law itself holds them accountable when they “**break the law.**” As Moo writes, “It is not boasting in the law that brings honor to God but obedience to it.”<sup>73</sup> Note again, the importance of honouring God (1:21). These people were just like the pagan Gentiles they despised.

*Circumcision of the heart (2:25-29)*

*v. 25*

Of course, Paul's debating partner would have objected to all of this. How, he would claim, can a Jew be treated the same as a Gentile since they not only had the law collectively but, individually, had the sign of the covenant through circumcision? Circumcision, like possession of the Mosaic law, was a sign that the Jew was in a privileged covenant relationship with God. Circumcision was mandated by God (Genesis 2:25-29) as a sign of the Abrahamic covenant. Its importance to that covenant cannot be overstated. After the return from exile in Babylon and at the time of Paul, circumcision had become so important, it was viewed as a sign of salvation. Douglas Moo commenting on its significance, writes, “Later Judaism claimed that ‘no person who is circumcised will go down to Gehenna [hell]’.”<sup>74</sup> Paul addresses this teaching by stating, “**if you break the [Mosaic] law,**” then “**your circumcision becomes uncircumcision.**” This is a profoundly radical statement. Paul says, if you break the law, you become a non-Jew, outside the covenant promises. Circumcision will not be a shield against the wrath of God; the Jewish lawbreaker is in the same position as the Gentile lawbreaker (1:18; 3:9; compare Matthew 3:9; 23:25-28; John 8:33-41). Both are

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<sup>73</sup> Moo, *Epistle to the Romans*, 166.

<sup>74</sup> Moo, *Epistle to the Romans*, 167.

in desperate need of the gospel – the righteousness from God as a free gift of grace and received by faith.

*vv. 26-27*

The disobedience of the Jew in v. 25 (and v. 27) is now contrasted with the obedience of the Gentile Christian in v. 26 (and v. 27). Instead of simply being circumcised, he is the one who **“keeps the requirements of the law”** (NASB), who is now considered a child of God and under God’s covenant blessings. Within the gospel of Christ, circumcision is no longer of any value (1 Corinthians 7:19; Galatians 5:6). The word translated **“keeps”** implies devotion as well as obedience. The words **“practice”** (v. 25 NASB), **“keeps”** (v. 26) and **“fulfills”** (v. 27 KJV) all indicate devotion. This genuine obedience comes from the right motives in honouring and glorifying Christ (1:21; 2:7). Once again, as he did in 2:6-10, Paul is referring to Gentile Christians. These are the ones who, through the Holy Spirit, are able to keep **“the righteous requirements of the law”** because they **“walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit”** (8:4).<sup>75</sup> Here, faith and good works come together. Those who are justified by the grace of God, through faith in Christ, receive the indwelling Spirit and so are able to please God if they walk by the Spirit (8:4; Galatians 5:4). As Paul has said in his letter to the Galatians, **“Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit”** (Galatians 5:25).

In verse 27, Paul reverses the standard view of the Jew who believed he would stand in judgment over the Gentile. Paul radically states, it is the one who does the law – whether Gentile or Jew – who will stand in condemnation over anyone who breaks the law. And again, this echoes Jesus’s own words in his condemnation (Matthew 12:41-42).

*vv. 28-29*

Physical circumcision was a sign of covenant devotion to God. It was a symbol that identified a people set apart. Circumcision, as an outward symbol, was to reflect this inward devotion. Sadly, the external seldom reflected the internal (Deuteronomy 10:16). So, in verse 28, Paul states circumcision on its own has no value

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<sup>75</sup> And again, others interpret these verses to mean a hypothetical case. However, nothing indicates that this obedience is hypothetical.

concerning salvation (Galatians 5:6). What matters is the “**matter of the heart, by the Spirit.**” In the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 10:6; 30:6; Jeremiah 4:4), there was an expectation that God would come by his Spirit and circumcise his people's hearts so they could keep the law. Paul's reference to the law, circumcision of the heart, and the Holy Spirit indicates that this promise is now a reality.

Again, as he states in his letter to the Galatians church, what matters is “faith working through love.” To be a faithful Christian, a person must be one spiritually through union with Christ (8:9). Without this inner change, no amount of outward activity has any value. And those who are in union with Christ are able and will genuinely want God's approval of their behaviour (John 5:44; 12:43).

### **3. God's righteousness upheld (3:1-8)**

Paul has been particularly hard on the self-righteous Jew who believed he had a saving relationship with God because he was born into a Jewish family and was circumcised on the eighth day. The question then is why God bothered at all with Abraham and Moses. Since this does not save them, what value is there in Judaism?

At first glance, these verses do not seem too difficult to understand. However, when we look closer, there are some issues we must address. No doubt, given what Paul has just said about Jews, he has had this argument many times in the synagogues. I will paraphrase the diatribe as follows:

- v. 1 (Jewish objection)* Given all Paul has said about the law and circumcision, is there still any advantage to being Jews?
- v. 2 (Paul's response)* Yes, of course, because God entrusted Israel with all his commandments, actions and promises of future salvation.
- v. 3 (Jewish objection)* But what about most Jews who have been unfaithful to God's instructions? Does this also mean God has given up on them?
- v. 4 (Paul's response)* No, that will never happen. God remains faithful even though Israel has been as sinful as the Gentiles. (Quoting Psalm 51:4 when David acknowledged God's righteous judgment on him for his sin with Bathsheba.) So,

God's faithfulness is not just blessings but also includes his righteous judgments.

The Jewish opponent's argument shifts to a broader question: How is God just in judging people when their sin increases his glory?

*v. 5 (Jewish objection)* But Paul, if the Jews' unrighteousness resulted in God's righteousness in the coming of Christ and the cross, how can God now condemn them for bringing about righteousness he had always intended?

*v. 6 (Paul's response)* No, if that were true, God could not judge anyone. But Scripture states he will (Genesis 18:25).

*v. 7-8a (Jewish objection)* [The objector now doubles down on his argument.] Again, if God is glorified in his just (righteous) judgment by our sinning, then why are we condemned? Instead, we should sin even more so that God will be glorified even more!

*v. 8b (Paul's response)* Paul now raises his own question. It is an accusation Paul has heard many times against the Gospel. If God does not condemn the Jews when they sin because their sin increases God's glory, then sin is justified if it brings about a greater good. This is the logical conclusion of the objector's argument. Paul answers his own question by stating that God's condemnation of sin is always just.

So, in verses 1 to 4, God's judgment against unfaithful Jews does not mean they have no advantage over Gentiles. Their great advantage is that despite their unfaithfulness, they are the recipients of the very words of God. This includes the Old Testament Scriptures, but it also includes Jesus as the living Word of God (John 1:1; Hebrews 1:2; 1 John 1:1). God has continued to remain faithful to Israel despite their unfaithfulness. But God's faithfulness, as Psalm 51:4 states, also includes his promised judgment on unfaithful Israel. God promised blessings and judgment, and he is true to his word. The problem for the Jewish objector was that he viewed God's faithfulness purely in terms of blessings and salvation. Paul points out, God's faithfulness must



also include the promised curses for disobedience (Deuteronomy 28).<sup>76</sup>

The argument shifts in verse 5 into an outrageous accusation of God's justice. The Jews, Paul addressed in Chapter 2, assumed they were immune from God's judgment because they were within God's (Mosaic) covenant. But this criticism of God, Paul rejects simply because it is incompatible with the biblical doctrine of a just God. The knowledge of God given to them is a two-edged sword; it can bestow blessings and curses (Deuteronomy 28). Therefore, a Jew should know better than to raise this blasphemous objection in the first place.

The argument in verse 8 might have been an accusation against Paul's gospel of grace. A Jew believed he was born a Jew by God's grace, but he had to obey the Mosaic law to remain in that grace. The teaching that getting in and staying in God's grace was all a gift from God was not something with which they would agree; neither for themselves and certainly not for Gentiles. However, we can change the argument into a positive by saying: The more I understand my sinfulness, the more I understand God's grace. And so we can praise and thank him with greater devotion. The following table clarifies the position of the pious Jews before and after the gospel.

	Understanding of salvation before the Gospel		Salvation after the Gospel	A 'Different Gospel'
	Jews	Gentiles	Jews Gentiles	All people
getting in	birth	become a Jew	by grace	by grace
staying in	obedience to Law		by grace	good works

The third column shows that since the gospel, we have often modified the pure gospel to include 'good works' in order to remain in a covenant relationship with God. This was an issue already for Paul. In his letter to the Galatians, he writes, "I am

<sup>76</sup> Moo, *Epistles to the Romans*, 180.

astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – not that there is another one” (Galatians 1:6-7a). In Paul’s day, it was forcing Gentiles to be circumcised to keep the Sabbath and the kosher food laws. But Paul is clear in the gospel: we are saved by grace, and we remain saved by grace. It is all a work of God. Even after the church mainly became Gentile this tendency to add pieces to grace has plagued the church. In our day, we also add many things depending on our culture. It is the primary reason Martin Luther and the other reformers rejected the Catholic teaching of their day. But even today, within the Protestant church, there has been this tendency.

Of course, this does not mean, as Paul points out repeatedly, we can behave sinfully. It is because we are saved by grace that we love and are devoted to him and want to live a life pleasing to him. We must never confuse sanctification with justification. Instead, sanctification – growing in spiritual maturity – *results* from our justification and being filled with the Holy Spirit (2:29).

### **No one, Gentile or Jew, is righteous before God (3:9-20)**

Paul now summarizes all he has taught from 1:18 until 3:8 by reiterating three main points.

1. First, in 3:9, all people, whether Jew or Gentile, “**are under sin.**” And are, therefore, under God’s just condemnation of sin; that is, God’s wrath and need of salvation.
2. Next, in verses 3:10 through 18, Paul uses a string of Old Testament verses highlighting the universal aspect of sin in all of its varieties.
3. And third, in verses 19 and 20, Paul states the obvious result of such universal sin: we all stand condemned, and what is more, we are unable to justify ourselves before God through any work or effort of our own, no matter how hard we try to obey the law.

We are under the just judgment of God, and there is nothing we can do about it. This then prepares us to move to God’s solution to the sin problem beginning in verse 21.

## v. 9

Paul denies that Jews are better off than Gentiles concerning salvation in no uncertain terms. This does not contradict what he said in verses 1 and 2. There he recognizes the advantages of the Jew having been uniquely part of God's *plan* of salvation throughout history. But here, in verse 9, Paul refers to salvation; here, the Jew has no advantage. Both Gentiles and Jews have been given revelation from God, albeit in different forms. But both have equally been unable to meet the requirements of God's stipulations. There is only one conclusion from this universal failure: all "**are under the power of sin,**" and so all are under God's judgment. With the emphasis on "**under,**" we are imprisoned by sin; there is no escape. Without this understanding, the gospel loses its power. But when we contemplate our entirely hopeless situation, the grace and beauty of Christ and his saving work on the cross take on infinite significance.

## vv. 10-18

Paul now switches from writing like a Greek—using a diatribe style—to a Jewish rabbi using what they called a "string of pearls" argument. He quotes six different Old Testament texts<sup>77</sup> to illustrate all people are under the power of sin. Although it seems there is no structure to these verses at first glance, this is not the case. Paul begins by stating, "**There is no one righteous, not even one**" (NIV), and he ends the string by stating, "**there is no fear of God before their eyes.**" This is saying the same thing in different words. Note, both begin with "**there is no ...**". Then, in verses 11 and 12, this theme of "**no one**" is repeated several times. Paul is hammering home the truth that all people are sinful. In verses 13 and 14, Paul highlights how sin manifests itself in human speech. And in verses 15 to 17, Paul highlights how sin manifests itself in human violence.

It is worth noting Paul is not proving that all are unrighteous by quoting the Old Testament as if somehow his argument is still in doubt. Instead, he illustrates and describes what he has already proved from the Old Testament. He shows that all humanity is under sin, which was already known hundreds of years earlier.

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<sup>77</sup> Psalms 14:1-3; 53:1-3; 5:9; 140:3; 10:7; Isaiah 59:7-8; Psalm 36:1.

Additionally, and equally important, Paul states humanity can never obtain the righteousness necessary to stand in the presence of a holy God. Christians are not like followers of other religions such as Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, or Jains.<sup>78</sup> A Christian does not rely on his own resources and efforts to obtain righteousness. Christian faith assumes the firm foundation of complete despair in human efforts. Humans do not have it within themselves to find God or even to begin or want to look for God. After eating the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve were not searching for God; they were hiding from him. And like our first parents, all humanity does the same. This foundational truth of Holy Scripture opposes any optimism about humanity's quest for God. As Patrick Reardon so eloquently states, "Those optimists who entertain the notion that human beings are searching for God are simply neglecting the evidence. C. S. Lewis remarked that speaking of man's quest for God is something on the order of speaking of the mouse's quest for the cat. Indeed, in the strict sense, the true God cannot even be searched for; He can be sought only in the measure that He reveals Himself in holy grace. When sinful human beings are left to their own devices, whatever searching for God is undertaken will invariably involve idolatry—the setting up of false gods in human resemblance."<sup>79</sup>

Even though we cannot find God on our own, we all have a God-given need to worship. Without the guidance of the Holy Spirit, such worship will result in false worship and, ultimately, in a false religion, many of which exist.

*vv. 19-20*

Paul brings his whole argument to a conclusion. He begins by saying, "**whatever the law says**"—here referring to the Old Testament string of pearls—it is saying to those "**under the law,**" referring to Jews. The reference to the "**law**" is "what binds the reason, the conscience, the heart, and the life, whether it be revealed in our nature, or the Ten Commandments, or in the law of Moses, or the Scripture"<sup>80</sup> (2:15; John 10:34). Jews, as Paul has previously made clear, are under the condemnation of the Mosaic

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<sup>78</sup> See Reardon's commentary on Psalm 53, 103-104

<sup>79</sup> Reardon, 104.

<sup>80</sup> Hodge, 75.

law because they were unable to obey it. Paul then states the purpose of the law (“so that”). But its purpose is somewhat surprising. The law was given “so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God.” The phrase “every mouth may be stopped” means no one will have a defence on the day of judgment. The law reveals that all humans are sinners. This includes Gentiles and not just Jews.

This is a profound statement. This is the universal aspect of sin; everyone is included. Even though we cannot escape the power of sin, we are still held accountable for it. That everyone is under God’s judgment, and condemnation, both Jew and Gentile, is a significant part of Paul’s gospel (Galatians 2:16; 3:11; cf. Psalm 143:2). Paul has been viewing sinful humanity outside of God’s promise in the gospel. This is the point he has been addressing from 1:18 through 3:20: without the gospel, there is no hope for anyone.

Paul summarizes his argument by stating we remain under God’s judgment because “works of the law” cannot justify us “in his sight.” But what does Paul mean when he uses the expression “works of the law”? The meaning has been a serious concern of commentators and interpreters. Paul uses this phrase eight times in his letters.<sup>81</sup> Historically, many interpreters view it to mean obedience to the law of Moses to “stay in” the covenant relationship with God. So “Law” refers to the entire Mosaic law, including circumcision, food laws, Sabbath-keeping, and other commandments. The word “works” refers to doing what the “law demands.” Other interpreters have expanded the reference to “law” to mean moral law; in other words, good works in general. But, Paul’s point would not change in this case since he clarifies that no work merits righteousness before God. The problem was not the obedience to God’s law but using that obedience. The Jews believed that adherence to the law resulted

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<sup>81</sup> In verses 10 and 11 he quotes Psalms 14:1-3; in verse 13a, he quotes Psalms 5:9; in verse 13b he quotes Psalms 140:3; in verse 14 he quotes Psalm 10:7; in verses 15 through 17, he quotes Isaiah 59:7 and 8 (although Proverbs 1:16 is also in view here); and finally, in verse 18, he quotes the first part of Psalm 36:1. Although most of these quotes refer to Israel, the equality can be applied to Gentiles.

in maintaining a covenant righteous before God. For Gentiles doing good works was sufficient to be found acceptable to God.

This broader understanding of **“works of the law”** is legalism, work that justifies the sinner since work implies wages or obligation for payment. Paul is adamant that this is not possible. The reason **“works of the law”** cannot justify is that no one can do them perfectly because of their fallen human state (5:12-21). The **“law”** itself can only teach us what sin is (3:20).

Most pious Jews would react negatively to this assessment. They believed it was entirely possible, by one’s own efforts and free will, to have a **“righteousness that is based on the law”** (10:5). This would have included obedience to commands and sacrifices when they unintentionally violated a command. And although there is a *kind* of righteousness (Luke 1:6; Philippians 3:6)<sup>82</sup> for those who were careful to do the law, it was never adequately done to obtain righteousness sufficient for salvation; that is, **“righteousness based on faith”** (10:6). The sacrifices could never truly atone for their sin (Hebrews 10:1-18). They were a righteousness with respect to the law but not without sin. And that was what was needed to be in the right relationship with God.

Paul then concludes by highlighting what the law *does* accomplish. It gives us **“knowledge of sin.”** That is, **“The law simply shows us how sinful we are”** (NLT). The word for **“knowledge”** emphasizes moral and divine concerns (BDAG). So, the first function of the law is to reveal to us we are sinners. At first, this seems like a negative aspect, but in fact, it is to our ultimate advantage! Because of the law, we understand the depth of our depravity and our need for a Saviour. It is profoundly easy for us to deceive ourselves into thinking we are good in the sight of God. But as Jesus himself states to the lukewarm Laodicea church, you do not realize **“you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked”** (Revelation 3:17).

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<sup>82</sup> God even speaks in such positive words about king David who we know violated the law in many way (1 Kings 9:4).

### Summary of 1:8 to 3:20

Paul has presented us with two major teachings: first, all people are sinners and cannot stand righteous before God; second, God is just in his condemnation against sinners.

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### Special Topic: Perfect Obedience to the Law

In our discussion, we understand that in order to be perfectly righteous before God we must obey the law perfectly. We also understand from Paul that this is not possible. However, the question is: is perfect obedience to the law essential to be righteous before God? Does Scripture teach this?

Throughout the history of the Christian church, the answer to this question has always been “yes.” The question and its answer go to the heart of our understanding of salvation. Perfect obedience was not just what Paul taught but was demanded from the time of Adam and Eve. Israel also required perfect obedience in its adherence to the Mosaic Law. A violation of the law required atonement through the sacrificial system. The New Testament makes this even clearer. James writes, “For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it” (James 2:10). And Paul writes, quoting Deuteronomy (27:26; cf. 28:58), “For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law and do them’” (Galatians 3:10) and again, “I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law” (5:3).

When Paul uses the phrase “**works of the law**,” he means doing what the Mosaic law commands. And since no one can “**keep the whole law**” perfectly, Paul says, “a person is not justified by works of the law” (Galatians 2:15) and so remains under the law’s curse. However, “**law**” can also have a more general meaning, referring to anything God has required or demanded of people (e.g. Adam and Eve or the people during the time of Noah). Paul later stated, “**all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God**” (3:23). John, in his letter, agrees with this when he says, “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8). In general, “**works of the**

**law**” means any attempt to obtain a right standing before God through our good efforts and intentions. And since our efforts are never good enough, by “works of the law no one will be justified” (Galatians 2:16).

When quoting the Old Testament, Paul is not explaining why Israel as a nation went into exile. Instead, he is speaking about the individual's sin (see again Deuteronomy 27:15-26). And although the Mosaic law had sacrifices to atone for sin, Paul would disagree that the Mosaic sacrifices were still valid (3:25-26; 8:3; Galatians 3:13) now that Christ has paid the full price. As the writer of Hebrews says, “but as it is, he [Jesus] has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself” (Hebrews 9:26) and again, “For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near” (10:1).

Jesus also agrees with this teaching when he states in his Sermon on the Mount, “be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). The immediate context of this verse refers to the perfect love of the Father we are to emulate. But because of our sinful condition, this is not possible. It is only in our union with Christ who becomes our perfection that we are seen to be perfect (2 Corinthians 5:21).

## Questions for Reflection

### Study it

1. [2:1] Paul states that the “man” is without excuse. But that suggests the “man” thinks he has one. What kind of “excuse” do you think he might give to God?
2. [2:1-16] List the reasons why God will judge. Who is being judged?
3. [2:1-5] In these verses, who is Paul addressing? Could he be addressing self-righteous Christians as well?
4. [2:6-10] Paul seems to suggest, in these verses, that salvation can come from works. However, from everything else Paul



says, this would be a contradiction. How do you understand this passage? Whom do you think Paul is talking about?

5. [2:1-11] Although there are specific things we can learn in each verse, what is the overall purpose of Paul in including this text? Why is this purpose important to the Roman church?
6. [2:16-29] What things did Jews rely on for their salvation? What is the difference (if any) between “getting in” and “staying in” God’s grace?
7. [2:17-20] List the privileges of the Jews. How many did you find? Is it surprising that Jews were racial and religiously proud of their heritage? How could this passage be applied to Christians (substitute the word ‘Christian’ for ‘Jew’ and ‘gospel’ for the law)?
8. [2:25-29] Jews understood that circumcision was not just a seal of the covenant but a seal of God’s approval of them. Was God really concerned about an outward physical sign (see Deuteronomy 10:16; 1 Samuel 16:7; Jeremiah 4:4; Psalm 51:15-17)?
9. [3:1-8] What four objections does the ‘Jew’ make against Paul’s teaching? Do you think Paul’s answer is sufficient in each case?
10. [3:9-20] Identify Paul’s three main points in this passage.
11. [3:10-19] Do you see the world fitting Paul’s severe condemnation of fallen humanity? Is this how you see the world? How does v. 18 summarize what he is saying?
12. [3:11] What does “works of the law” mean for Jews? What does it mean for Christians?

### **Live it**

1. Paul chastises the self-righteous Jew for thinking he has an “in” with God. Do you think we, as Christians, do the same? Do we have a “us” versus “them” mentality?
2. How do you know what is and is not sinful? How do you decide about things not explicitly mentioned in the moral law (Ten Commandments)? Is it easier to state that things are sin

in which you have little or no interest but harder for something you really want to like?

3. What do you think creates the most danger for the Christian church today: legalism or cheap grace?
4. What does it mean for you to “seek for God” (3:11)? What does it mean for you to “fear God” (3:18)?
5. Paul states that God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of the bad behaviour of the Jews. Does this apply to Christians today? Can you identify ways that we, too, benefit from the sins of others?
6. Do you believe the grace of God saved you but that you have to be a good Christian to *maintain* your salvation?
7. Do you recognize more of your own sinfulness as you mature in your faith? If you do, does this result in being more amazed by God’s grace, or does it result in despair?
8. It has been said that sin and grace cause a Christian to be the most content of all people and, at the same time, the least content. To what does this ‘contentment’ refer? Would you agree or disagree with that statement?

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## Lesson 4: Saving Righteousness of God (3:21-4:25)

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At this point in reading the letter, we should be in despair. Paul has made it abundantly clear we are sinners, separated from God (see particularly 3:10-11). However, this is not the worst because there is nothing we can do about it. We will have to wait until 5:12-21 before Paul explains why we cannot do anything about it. At this point, Paul tells us that no good work is sufficient to pay for our sins and make us so that we can stand in righteousness before God. Jesus himself said we “must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). And many times, in the Old Testament and the New we are told to “be holy for I [God] am holy” (1 Peter 1:6; also, Ephesians 1:4).

Now then, in 3:21, Paul writes the most significant adversative conjunction in Scripture, “**but now**” – and everything changes. In those five verses, 3:21-26, Paul gives us possibly the most important theological passages in all of Scripture.<sup>83</sup> Paul describes how God has solved the problem of sin so we can be perfectly justified before him. These verses should cause us to be amazed at the *miracle of righteousness* God gave us as a gift.

Paul follows this by highlighting the implications of this miracle in 3:27-31. And in the following chapter 4, Paul uses Abraham as the key biblical test case. God’s dealing with Abraham is proof of the truthfulness of the gospel of grace which finds its fulfillment in Christ.

### The Saving Righteousness of God (3:21-31)

God’s promises to Israel have not been fulfilled because Israel failed to keep the Mosaic law. Jew and Gentile “**have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.**” Instead, God has fulfilled the

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<sup>83</sup> Martin Luther, in his commentary of Romans, called this passage, “the chief point, and the very central place of the Epistle, and of the whole Bible” because of its focus on justification by faith. John Piper calls this paragraph the most important paragraph in the Bible (Piper, PDI Celebration East Conference, May 31<sup>st</sup>, 1999). D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones commenting on the opening words of the passage says, “there are no more wonderful words in the whole of Scripture than just these two words ‘But now’” (Lloyd-Jones, *Exposition of Chapter 3:20-4:25*, 25).

promises through his Son. Salvation is now available through all who put their faith in Jesus. This salvation reveals *both* God's judging ethical righteousness – his wrath– and the saving redemptive righteousness – his grace. The effect of this righteousness of God is then given in 3:27-31.

### **Righteousness of God through Christ's redemption (3:21-26)**

*v. 21*

Possibly even more important than the opening conjunction, “**but**” is the following word, “**now**.” There was a “then” before Christ and a “now” after Christ. The advent of the Son of God coming to earth as one of us changed everything. There is no event in all of creation—including creation of the universe itself—having more importance and significance than the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. “**But now**” is not just the next step in salvation history but what divides salvation into two; between the old covenant of the law and the new covenant of grace.<sup>84</sup> And what comes after the words “**But now**” is the most glorious centre of the entire Gospel. God's wrath has been revealed from heaven against all sin, whether Jews or Gentiles (1:18-3:20), *but now* God's saving righteousness is revealed through Jesus Christ; not by obedience to the law but by faith. The promises made to Israel are fulfilled in the atoning sacrificial death of Jesus on the cross. The gifts of both God's righteousness and redemption are given to Jew and Gentile – there is no distinction (3:22).

Throughout his writing, Paul uses the phrase, “**but now**” to mean this transition from the old dispensation of sin's dominance to the new dispensation of salvation. In this letter, he uses it again in 6:22 and 7:6, as well as other letters (1 Corinthians 15:20; Ephesians 2:13; Colossians 1:22).<sup>85</sup>

The dominant phrase, however, is the “**righteousness of God**.” It is used four times in the passage; its verb “**justify**” is

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<sup>84</sup> Although ‘the covenant of grace’ really extends from the time of Adam and Eve until Christ's return, there is a unique fulfillment of the covenant of grace as the new covenant with the incarnation of the Son of God.

<sup>85</sup> This profound break is not just in God's plan of salvation history for the universal church but applies equally to the personal history of each believer (Moo, *Epistle to the Romans*, 221).

used twice, and the adjective “**just**” once. Here in verse 21, the righteousness of God means the same as it did in 1:17. That is, the atoning work of Christ in taking upon himself the punishment for our sins and imputing to us his righteousness so we can be declared just before him. This is done so that the justice of God prevails in redeeming sinners. God’s mercy is always greater than his justice (Exodus 34:6-7). As well, the way Paul uses the phrase, however, is different. In 1:17, the righteousness of God is revealed through the *proclamation* of the gospel, while here in 3:21, it is the justifying *activity* or *method* of God in redeeming his people.

Paul now states how the righteousness of God relates to the Old Testament. First, it is “**manifested apart from the law.**” The reference to “**law**” is the Mosaic law. However, it is unlikely, although true, that Paul has in mind that the righteousness of God is now received without doing the law. Instead, it focuses on the new dispensation begun through Christ’s death and resurrection to deliver and redeem his people “**apart from the law.**” The Mosaic law has nothing to do with being righteous before God (Galatians 2:16). The Mosaic law was a temporary *administration* that is now “*obsolete*” (Hebrews 8:13). It was a covenant between God and Israel for their benefit in ordering their lives but also to reveal their sin until the time of Christ (4:13-15; 5:20; Galatians 3:15-4:7). Therefore, the emphasis is on the discontinuity between the old era and the new. There is an aspect of the gospel—that both Jews and Gentiles are justified through faith—which could not be predicted based on the Jewish Old Testament Scriptures (16:25-26; 2 Corinthians 3:14; Ephesians 3:4-6).<sup>86</sup> Paul has clearly stated in 2:12-29, because of the power of sin, Jews have been unable to keep or do the law perfectly. Still, we must keep in mind verse 31. It is not that the law can be forgotten but has been fulfilled.

There is also continuity, for Paul immediately states, “**although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it**”; that is, to the saving righteousness of God. Again, this echoes Jesus’s words when he spoke with Cleopas and his partner to explain, “beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to

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<sup>86</sup> Thielman, 217.

them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself" (Luke 24:27). This would include Genesis 3:15 with the promised seed of the woman who will crush the head of the serpent. Certainly, Abraham understood this since Jesus himself said:

Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad." So the Jews said to him, "You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?" Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am." (John 8:56-58)

And there are many other prophecies in the Psalms (2, 22, and others), in Daniel (Daniel 9), in Isaiah (Isaiah 7, 9, 11), and Jeremiah (Jeremiah 23:6). This is so important because any explanation of salvation, not showing its fulfillment in the Old Testament's foreshadowing in types and prophecies, is defective. Unfortunately, this is the case today.<sup>87</sup> The Old Testament pointed forward to the "**but now.**" Only "**now**" has the "**righteousness of God**" "**been manifested**"; that is, made fully evident or revealed (made public) and continues to be made clear.

v. 22a

Paul again uses the phrase "**righteousness of God,**" but this time the emphasis is on the second half of the Great Exchange: that "**through faith in Christ**"<sup>88</sup> all those who believe receive the righteousness of God – that is, Christ's righteousness. All those whose belief is a saving faith now stand justified (righteous) in (union with) Christ Jesus before God. Moreover, "**faith**" is the *means* or *instrument* (not because of faith; i.e., faith is not the righteousness) by which we receive Christ's righteousness. As well, this faith is not simply a belief in doctrines or the Bible, but trust "**in Christ.**" Christ is the object of our faith. A person may believe all kinds of true things about salvation, but unless their faith is in Christ, receiving him as Lord and Saviour who loves us

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<sup>87</sup> Lloyd-Jones, Exposition of Chapters 3:20-4:25, 37.

<sup>88</sup> It should be noted, many recent interpreters translate this phrase as "the faithfulness of Christ" (see NET Bible). Syntactically, this is valid. And there are good arguments of either interpretation. However, in these notes we take the traditional interpretation because of Paul's overall emphasis of contrasting "works of the law" with "faith" of the believer.

and gave himself for us (Galatians 2:20; John 8:24; 1:12; 3:15-16), he does not have the faith Paul is speaking about (3:25; 9:33; Galatians 2:16, 20; 3:24).<sup>89</sup> Only faith *in* Christ is saving faith.

This righteousness is so much more than just forgiveness of our sins. We are given the free gift of Christ's righteousness through faith in him. Because of his Son, the Father can adopt us as his sons (8:23).

*vv. 22b-23*

This righteousness is available equally "**for all**," both Jew and Gentile, since in the new age there is "**no distinction**." Both Jew and Gentile need this righteousness in Paul's summary of all of 1:18 to 3:20: "**for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God**." It is clear from this statement that humans, all of us, are in a hopeless position. Because we are all sinners – from the time of Adam until now – we are all under the wrath of God. To say "**all have sinned**" is the same as saying "all are human." Paul has spent a great deal of time bringing us to this understanding (1:18-3:20). Our greatest need is not better health or more wealth. Therefore, the only reason to 'come to Christ' is to be justified in his presence. We must begin with the conviction of our own sin. This is the work of the law. The more we see the holiness of God, the more we recognize our own sinfulness.

The phrase "**glory of God**" means God's revealed holiness – his infinite worth – in the image of Jesus Christ as the Son of Man and Son of God. Humans were first created in the "image of God" and were to reflect his glory (Genesis 1:26-27). To "**fall short**" then means that humanity, from Adam and Eve's fall, has failed to glorify him. As faithful followers of Jesus, we are to conform to the "**image of his Son**" (8:29-30; Philippians 3:21). But note the present tense of the verb. We "**fall short**." This means even as faithful followers we continue to fall short. It is not until the Last Day that we are fully glorified to live in his presence forever (again 8:29-30; Philippians 3:21). The cross must always be before us – now and for all eternity. Although our justification occurs the moment we put our hope and trust in Christ, our salvation continues from the past (Ephesians 2:8-9) to the present (1 Corinthians 1:18) and is the hope of our future (Romans 5:9).

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<sup>89</sup> Hodge, 84.

But there is more to this amazing statement than simply falling short. If we look at other texts referring to the glory of God, we see that as Christians we are to behold and rejoice in God's glory.<sup>90</sup>

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and **we rejoice in hope of the glory of God.** (5:1-2)

And again:

And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also **glorified.** (8:30)

And in Paul's second letter to the Corinth church he wrote:

And we all, with unveiled face, **beholding the glory of the Lord,** are being transformed into the same image from **one degree of glory to another.** For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. (2 Corinthians 3:18)

For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the **knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.** (2 Corinthians 4:6; see also 4:17)

And Jesus himself said in words that are most astonishing:

The **glory** that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one. (John 17:22)

Therefore, there is a sense in which we are already glorified in our union with Christ and in which we will be fully glorified. Today we are to behold the glory of God and rejoice in it, for we will someday be like him as the apostle John writes, "When he appears we shall be like him because we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2). On that glorious day when we will be like him by being in perfect union with him, we will not fall short of his glory in any way, for we will be "**glorified**" (8:30; John 17:22).

*vv. 24-25a*

Verse 23 summarizes Paul's teaching from 1:18 through 3:20 that both Jew and Gentile are under God's judgment. Verse 24 then relates to verses 21 and 22, that God has provided the solution for

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<sup>90</sup> Llyod-Jone, Exposition of Chapter 3:20-4:25, 51-52.



the problem of sin. If verses 21 and 22 describe the divine side of God's righteousness, then verse 24 highlights the human side of our justification before him. It is important to note, the verb "justified" does not mean being made righteous or even being *treated* as if we are righteous. Instead, it means we are *declared* righteous. We have been *acquitted* – in a legal sense – by God from all charges against us because of our sin. And this verdict of acquittal is received the moment we put our hope and trust in Jesus. It is not something we have to wait for at the Day of Judgment.

Moreover, this justification (righteousness) is given to us **"by his grace as a gift."** This means that our acquittal is totally unmerited and that it was done without any requirement of God other than faith in his Son. We have no ground at all to be justified since we are guilty, and God is not compelled – beyond his own will – to justify us. This is why Paul calls it **"a gift."** Because a gift demanded, obligated, or owed to someone is no gift at all but a payment for work already done. Although God created us, he was never obligated to justify us. We have never done anything which has put God in the position of owing us anything (11:35). God would have been entirely just and right to destroy the entire human race and start over again if he was so willed. But instead, by his own free will, he loved us and provided the only way possible to redeem us so we could live in his presence. Therefore, his justification – that is, the righteousness of Christ – is a free gift given by God and received through the instrument of faith by us.

But still, how is this justification possible? Can God simply declare us acquitted without any punishment? He cannot because he is a righteous (just) God. It is **"through redemption"** our justification is made possible. The word **"redemption"** means a price was paid to redeem something. During Paul's time, redemption often meant paying the price to redeem, or better to ransom, a prisoner of war, slave or a prisoner. In this context, it is the payment for sin, which included the death of his Son – **"that is in Christ Jesus."** If we need to answer the question: To whom was the payment made, it is not necessary to say God paid the payment to himself, as some commentators have suggested. And it certainly was not paid to Satan as was often

taught in the early church. In the Old Testament, for example, we are told God redeemed Israel out of Egypt. Yet, God did not pay a redemption price to Pharaoh. How then should we understand redemption? The word “**redemption**” is what Christ did for us on the cross. He paid the price, which is death, for us by taking our punishment on himself. As well, God’s work of redemption is not only his Son’s death on the cross, although this is central to its meaning. But “**redemption**” also includes his incarnation, resurrection, and ascension to the right hand of God the Father. What a wonderful word to meditate on!

In verse 25a, we see that it was God the Father who “**put forward**” or better “**displayed publicly**” (NASB) his Son, Jesus Christ, “**as a propitiation by his blood.**” Here “**his blood**” means the death of Christ on the cross. Our redemption, then, was given by the will and by the initiative of God the Father. Although the Son and the Father are distinct Persons, they are still One. And so, we should never think the Father forced his Son to die to appease his wrath. Neither should we think of the Son as independent of the Father as human sons are of their fathers. The Son went to the cross willingly. Both the *love of God* and the *wrath of God* are miraculously brought together on the *cross* to display the *glory of the righteousness (justice) of God*.

The word “**propitiation**” is significant as well. This word is often used in the Old Testament<sup>91</sup> to mean the mercy seat on the ark of the covenant on which God appears as a cloud (Leviticus 16:2). And this is the same way it is used in Hebrews 9:5. Once a year on the Day of Atonement, the high priest sprinkles blood on the mercy seat as atonement for Israel. What the Mosaic covenant hid behind the veil in the Holy of Holies is now publicly displayed in Christ’s once for all sacrifice of atonement. Jesus Christ himself has become both the mercy seat and the atoning blood for our redemption.

Many people have found the teaching that God the Father would demand the death of his Son as an atoning sacrifice to appease his wrath unacceptable. They, therefore, have attempted to interpret this verse differently but with little success. When

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<sup>91</sup> In the Greek Old Testament, which Paul used, “propitiation” is used twenty-one times to refer to the mercy seat.

Paul uses this word to describe the death of Christ after describing the universal wrath of God from 1:18 through 3:20, it is not possible to come to a different conclusion. Recall, God's wrath is not an impulsive burst of vindictive anger but "an inevitable and necessary reaction of absolute holiness to sin."<sup>92</sup> So this atoning sacrifice which is the *ground* or *foundation* by which we receive justification, must "**be received by faith.**" Faith in Christ is faith in the redeeming value of Christ's shed blood.

*vv. 25b-26*

In the second half of verse 25, Paul gives the *purpose* by which God the Father put forward his Son as a redeeming sacrifice; it was "**to show God's righteousness.**" The word "show" means to present convincingly. The reference to "**God's righteousness**" refers to God's holy character and, therefore, the necessity of an atoning sacrifice to satisfy his justice. This is because, before Christ, God restrained himself from punishing Israel's sin to the full measure it deserved. His "**divine forbearance**" was when he "**passed over former sins.**" But this patient endurance of past sins called into question his justice. For God to be holy, sins committed before the cross had to be atoned (Acts 14:16; 17:30). However, this does not mean that sins were overlooked or that there was no punishment. It also does *not* mean that Old Testament believers did not receive complete forgiveness of their sins (Psalm 51:1-3; Isaiah 43:25). Those who had faith like Abraham also had the certainty of their forgiveness just like we do. Paul uses the words "**passed over**" because their sin had "not been adequately punished in Christ, and the absolute righteousness of Christ had not been revealed on the cross."<sup>93</sup>

Paul repeats what he has just said about God showing his righteousness, but now he adds that it is "**at the present time.**" This refers to the "**but now**" (v. 21) that introduced this important paragraph. And he demonstrates his righteousness by being "**just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.**" The meaning here is, God maintains his just and righteous character even when he acts by putting forward his Son as an atoning sacrifice. Although today, many people think God was not just

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<sup>92</sup> Moo, *Epistle to the Romans*, 235.

<sup>93</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 267-268.

in sending his Son to die for us, Paul is making it very clear he is. And that this demonstrates his righteousness in providing God's demands of justice.<sup>94</sup> Those who do not experience this *heavy weight* of the glory of the cross either diminish the sacrifice of Jesus or the sinfulness of their sin, or both.

### **The righteousness of God is received through faith alone and not by works of the law (3:27-31)**

In the final verses of chapter 3, Paul presents the *implications* of the righteousness of God revealed in Jesus's death. He makes several points concerning Israel and its law: first, Israel should not boast about its special status with God; second, God is not only the God of Israel, but according to Israel's own Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4), he is the one God of the whole world. The God whom the Gentiles now worship is the same God Israel worships. And third, even though the righteousness of God is obtained by faith, this does not invalidate the Mosaic law; instead, it provides its foundation.<sup>95</sup> However, Paul's emphasis is on faith first introduced in 1:17 and then in 3:22 – that is, we receive **“the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ.”** Faith is now the primary theme of verses 27 to 31, and indeed all of chapter 4.

*vv. 27-28 First result of justification: we cannot boast about anything* Paul states, there is no **“boasting”** before God. Boasting means self-congratulation. This seems strange to us. But Paul states, we have no grounds before God to claim we have a right to stand justified before him. So **“law of works”** is more general than just obedience to the Mosaic laws. It refers to any attempt to obtain justification before God through our own efforts. In other words, it is legalism. Good deeds (e.g., giving to the poor, attending church regularly) can never put us in right standing before God. Of course, a Jew might say, this is fine for Gentile sinners, but I have the Mosaic law, and I keep it. A Jew could boast, he is in a covenant relationship with God while the Gentile is not. But Paul's position is, we are all sinners and in debt to God, and no effort of our own is sufficient (v. 23). From a Jewish point of view,

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<sup>94</sup> Moo, *Epistle to the Romans*, 242.

<sup>95</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 176.

Paul could claim for himself that concerning “righteousness under the law,” he was blameless but now he views all that as “rubbish” (Philippians 3:6-7). The Jew has no special claim before God simply because of the law. The contrast here is between faith and works, between believing and doing.<sup>96</sup> So neither Jew nor Gentile has anything to boast about. If we could boast, then heaven would be full of people singing their own self-righteousness praises rather than singing to the glory and praise of God (Revelation 5:9-14).

But why does Paul then use the phrase “**law of faith**”? Paul is not saying there is another law like the Mosaic law. Rather, this kind of play-on-words highlights the difference between attempting to obtain justification through personal effort and justification received by faith. So, the “**law of faith**” refers to the rule or principle of faith. It, therefore, refers to the gospel, which may only be received by faith.

This contrast between our own efforts to obtain justification and that of faith is repeated in verse 28. As Moo writes, “A serious erosion of the full significance of Paul’s gospel occurs if we soften this antithesis; no works, whatever their nature or their motivation, can play any part in making a sinner right with God.”<sup>97</sup>

*vv.29-30 Second result of justification: God is God of Jews and Gentiles*  
The contrast continues in these verses. If justification could be obtained through the Mosaic law, then Gentiles would have to become Jews first. But Paul rejects this by asking whether God is “**not the God of Gentiles also**”? And immediately answers his question in the affirmative. The reason is that “**God is one.**” This is one of the oldest and most basic beliefs of Jews - the *Shema*. A faithful Jew would repeat this prayer every morning and evening.

“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might (Deuteronomy 6:4-5)

At the centre of the meaning of “**one**” there is only one God in all the universe. This is the foundation of monotheistic teaching of

<sup>96</sup> Moo, Epistle to the Romans, 247-48.

<sup>97</sup> Moo, 251.

the Old Testament. There are not many gods; there are no greater or lesser gods; there is only one God for all humankind. And he is the God of all. He is not just the God of Israel, with the Gentiles having another god. Zechariah, the prophet, makes this clear. On Christ's return, only one name will be worshipped:

And the LORD will be king over all the earth. On that day the LORD will be one and his name one. (Zechariah 14:9)

Paul echoes this teaching. Christ Jesus is God over both Jews and Gentiles (Philippians 2:9-11).

Of course, Jews believed that God created the entire world, including Gentiles. But, God was only the God of Israel in a relational sense because of God's covenants of Abraham and Moses. But Paul consistently taught that the first five books of Moses (the Torah) could no longer form a wall or barrier between Jews and Gentiles. The people of God are no longer defined by ethnic birth and by obedience to the Mosaic law. Now the people of God were those who were united in Christ. And all people, Jews and Gentiles, have equal access to God in the same way, by God's saving grace alone, through faith in his Son alone.

*v. 31 Third result of justification: The Mosaic law is fulfilled*

This verse again highlights the tension between Jewish and Gentile Christians. If what Paul has just said is the Gospel truth, then what about the Mosaic law? This would have been the most important question for Jewish Christians brought up to obey the law. Paul's answer to this question is, the law is still valid even though it does not have any significance in justification, that is, in salvation. In fact—and this is important (see **Special Topic: Salvation in the Old Testament**)—the law was never intended as a means of justification. Obedience to it was always the result of gratitude and love towards God, who had saved the Israelites by his grace from the Egyptians and by his grace had brought them into the Promised Land. Rightly understood, the Law confirms Paul's teaching on faith.

But the questions remain: what role does Mosaic law have now after Christ for both Jews and Gentiles? In order to make it more understandable, many interpreters say Paul's reference to the "**law**" means *all* the Old Testament Scriptures. However, this is unlikely given the context. It seems best to continue

understanding the “**law**” as the commands in the Mosaic law. And given the emphasis on faith in this section, the phrase “**we uphold the law,**” refers to the law being fulfilled in Christ. So the law is still with us. It is still the basis of judgment. And there is no possibility of standing before God without meeting its righteous demands. But, looking forward in Romans, Paul states “**the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit**” (8:4). And again, Paul says, “**For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes**” (10:4). Christ has fulfilled all the requirements of the law (Matthew 5:17). And so, we, who are in a relationship with Christ through faith, also fulfill the demands of the law in our union with him. So rather than “**overthrowing**” (abolishing) the law, we completely fulfill its demands in our union with Christ. For there is “**now no condemnation for those who are in [union with] Christ Jesus**” (8:1). As well, Paul, like James, constantly emphasizes that faith includes obedience to the “**law of faith.**” This means the moral requirements of the Law are still with us, and as believers, we can fulfill the “**righteous requirement of the law**” when we walk according to the Spirit (8:4).

Even though justification is central to our faith, we should not reduce salvation to justification alone. Salvation is multifaceted. Our Lord’s salvation includes regeneration, justification, sanctification and, ultimately, glorification. It includes a change of heart that loves and is devoted in our union with Christ. This salvation is both from guilt as well as the power of sin (see notes in chapters 6 and 7). We thank and praise God for our justification but also for giving us his Holy Spirit through whom we can walk in a faithful new life in Christ. Such a life always results in obedience of faith that produces good works (6:6-7:18; 8:30; 1 Corinthians 1:30-31; Philippians 2:8-10; 1 John 5:3-4).

### **Abraham is the Father of Jews and Gentiles (4:1-25)**

Paul has given three ways his interpretation of salvation differs from the Jewish interpretation. First, he stated, no one is righteous by “**works of the law**” (3:20); then, even more surprisingly, he said, Gentiles would be justified through faith

without circumcision, i.e., they do not have to come under the law (3:30); and third, salvation is by faith alone (3:28). These would have been shocking statements for the Jews. So Paul also needed to back this with their own Scriptures (Old Testament).

To do this, Paul uses Abraham as the foundation of what it means to be justified by faith alone. However, Paul does not simply portray Abraham as a good example. Sometimes our present-day emphasis on the New Testament reduces Old Testament stories to just such interesting examples. But, for the Jewish Christians, this would be a problem. Paul needed to show how God was working in *continuity* with all they knew from their Scriptures. The gospel of Christ was not separate from the Old Testament but a *fulfillment* of it.<sup>98</sup> So, Paul shows us that the gospel of grace by faith was already there in Abraham's life and that Christ and the gospel of Christ was a fulfillment of everything promised to Abraham (cf. John 8:56-58; Galatians 3:8). Therefore, it may help us if we remind ourselves of how God dealt with Abraham and how he responded to God's promises.

1. Genesis 12:1-3: God first calls Abram to leave his father's house and go to the land that God would show him. God also promises Abram he would become a great nation, his name would become great, and he would bless others. In fact, all the families of the earth will be blessed through Abram.
2. Genesis 15:1-21: Then God makes a covenant with Abram, promising he will have a son who will inherit the promises God made to Abram. And through this son, a great nation would be formed. Abram believed God's promises, and therefore, God "counted it to him as righteousness" (Genesis 15:6).
3. Genesis 17:1-14: God reaffirms his covenant promises to Abram, changing his name to Abraham – father of many nations. The sign of this covenant is circumcision.

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<sup>98</sup> Some have used the metaphor of a house. If God is the foundation, his work in the old covenant can be considered the framing of the house, while his work in the new covenant is the completion of the interior (Schreiner, *Paul*, 20).



Through God's covenant promises to Abraham, Paul understands that righteousness comes through faith. Being right with God always requires faith and trust. This was true right from the beginning. In 4:1-2, Paul says Abraham has no basis for boasting, and so neither do Christians (3:27). Moreover, because Abraham was justified by faith and not works which would make God obligated to Abram (4:3-8), Paul concludes this is true for everyone (3:28). From this, it follows that God unites both uncircumcised (Gentiles) and circumcised (Jews) through one faith (3:29-30; 4:9-17).

### **Abraham is justified by his faith and not by works (4:1-8)**

*vv. 1-3*

Paul has consistently emphasized the continuity between the gospel of the Old Testament and the New. As in his earlier letter to the Galatians, Paul goes back to the first Israelite, Abraham, to show that the gospel of grace received by faith is the same from the beginning. This was important teaching for the Gentile Christians to know their salvation has a long history that includes all of the Old Testament. But it was doubly important for the Jews who venerated Abraham to place him at the highest human level. And even more importantly, Jews believed Abraham's righteousness was obtained through works; it was Abraham's obedience in sacrificing his son Isaac that made him righteous (Genesis 22) – the greatest of Abraham's many works:

“Was not Abraham found faithful when tested, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness?” (1 Maccabees 2:52, NRSV)

In this quote, Abraham's faithfulness in offering Isaac as a sacrifice resulted in being counted as righteous. The Jews considered this faithfulness to God's command as meritorious work.

However, Paul goes back even earlier and refers to Genesis 15:5-6. In that passage, God grants (credits, counts) Abraham righteousness immediately after he believes in the promise made to him. This was before the sacrifice of Isaac. So, Paul points out to the Jews, it was not because of Abraham's obedience that he was “**counted**” righteous, but it was an unmerited gift of God received through his faith. The word “**counted**” (sometimes translated “**credited**” or “**reckoned**”) means to declare in a legal

transactional sense. This chapter uses the word eleven times, best illustrated in 2 Corinthians 5:21. Indeed, Abraham's obedience was proof of that faith (Genesis 22:8). James in the New Testament seems to make a similar point (James 2:20-21). Therefore, in contrast to what the rabbinic Jews taught, Abraham had no grounds for boasting that his work earned him righteousness (v. 2). Although many Jews might have accepted that they or their contemporaries had nothing to boast about, they certainly thought Abraham did.

*vv. 4-8*

Having shown that Abraham's righteousness was not by his obedience but by being counted righteous through faith, Paul makes a general and foundational distinction between obedience and faith. If righteousness is obtained through obedience, it is earned, and God owes man. **"The one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due."** So, if obedience to God's commands is considered work, God would be obligated. But God can never be obligated to humans (11:35). He is only ever bound to himself. This is an entirely different teaching from **"the one who does not work but believes {verb} in him who justifies {verb} the ungodly, his faith {noun} is counted as righteousness {noun}."** Paul could not have drawn a sharper distinction. Faith, simply accepting God's gracious gift, does not put God under any obligation. We should also note, it was not **"faith"** itself or the act of faith that was **"counted as righteousness,"** but faith was the *instrument* by which God imputed (counted, credited) righteousness to Abraham.

We should not miss the word **"ungodly."** God does not justify the righteous but the ungodly! While we are sinners in open rebellion against God, he shows his love for us by sending his Son to die for us (5:8). As Jesus himself said:

"And when Jesus heard it, he said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.'" (Mark 2:17)

But how can God grant such a great gift simply through Abraham's and our faith? It is because God is gracious, merciful, faithful and loving. However, the underserved gift of righteousness does not prove God's mercy; rather, because God

is merciful, he offers the gift of righteousness. That God is gracious and merciful is simply assumed by Paul; it does not require proof.<sup>99</sup>

To further convince the Jewish Christians, Paul uses their standard procedure of quoting a verse both from the Torah and from the Writings using the word “count” (or “credit”) in both quotes linking the two passages (Genesis 15:6 and Psalm 32:2).<sup>100</sup> With two beatitudes, David, in his psalm, confirms it is the gracious gift of the Lord. David implies that God’s offer of forgiveness can never be an obligation but is always a gift.

### **Special Topic: Salvation in the Old Testament**

We know, of course, how people are saved after Christ came. We are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ (John 1:12) and Jesus is the only way to the Father (John 14:6). But what about before Jesus? A common understanding is that salvation for the Jews was by keeping the Mosaic law, including its sacrifices. But we know from Paul’s letters that this is not true. In Galatians, he writes, “Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law” (Galatians 3:11). Then Paul quotes the Old Testament prophet Habakkuk saying, “The righteous shall live by faith” (Habakkuk 2:4). So even before Jesus, the person considered righteous before God is the one who puts their faith in God. And as we have already seen in chapter 4, it was through Abraham’s faith in God’s promises that he was counted as righteous. Those who were faithful after Abraham looked forward to a time when their Redeemer would come and save them from their sins. Job makes this clear when he states, “I know that my Redeemer lives” (Job 19:25-26).

Of course, there were many Israelites who were unfaithful. In fact, there was only a remnant of Israelites who remained faithful to God. These were the true spiritual Israel. The great chapter of faith in Hebrews lists many of these faithful saints, all of whom were “commended through their faith” (Hebrews 11:39). All the promises of redemption were only given to them.

<sup>99</sup> Moo, *Encountering the Book of Romans*, 75.

<sup>100</sup> The Greek Old Testament that Paul is using to quote the Psalms contains the same word in both passages (4:3-6 and 4:8).

So, there has always been only one way to God through faith in his promises. And this genuine faith resulted in loving him with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength.

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**Abraham is not justified by circumcision, by the law, or by sight (4:9-22)**

Paul had already made the point that God credited righteousness to Abraham because of his faith before he had acted in obedience. But what about circumcision, the law, or even seeing before believing? Did this have anything to do with Abraham being credited righteousness? Paul says, ‘no’ – it is only by Abraham’s faith that the promise of God was realized.

*Faith and not circumcision (vv. 9-12)*

Circumcision did come soon after the promises of God. And God did require circumcision from every male descendent (Genesis 17:1-14). Circumcision was a “sign” or a “seal” of God’s covenant with Abraham. Still, it was *before* his circumcision that Abraham received righteousness through his faith. According to Jewish tradition, the time between God’s promise (Genesis 15:6) and circumcision (Genesis 17:23-27) was twenty-nine years.<sup>101</sup>

But as time went by, particularly after the return from exile in Babylon, about 300 years before the time of Christ, the rite of circumcision became more and more important. The ten northern tribes had already been lost in the Assyrian deportations. All that remained was the tribe of Judah which had been exiled on mass to Babylon. The Jews, in order to maintain their unique identity as the people of God, concentrated on the visible signs that separating them from their pagan neighbours. These primary identity markers were circumcision, the special food laws, and keeping the Sabbath. These markers became a significant issue when the early church – which was primarily Jewish Christian – began including Gentiles (see all of Galatians and Acts 15). No doubt, this was also a significant issue in the church in Rome. So, based on Abraham, Paul argues that circumcision—or keeping the Mosaic law concerning food and the Sabbath—had nothing to do with receiving Christ’s righteousness

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<sup>101</sup> Mounce, 125.

and so was not a requirement for the people of God that now included the Gentiles.

*v. 9*

As is common in a diatribe, Paul again answers a Jew who is objecting to his argument. The objector might say: Even if I agree that Abraham received **“this blessing”** of righteousness from God because of his faith, he still had to be circumcised. For God himself said, **“Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant”** (Genesis 17:14). How then can this blessing of righteousness be credited to an uncircumcised Gentile?

*v. 10*

Paul answers this objection by posing his own question, pointing out the historical reality. Abraham was not circumcised until many years after (Genesis 17) he had been credited righteous (Genesis 15:6). Circumcision, therefore, could not be the basis for receiving righteousness.

*vv. 11-12*

Paul then states two truths based on the historical fact that Abraham was credited righteousness because of his faith years before he was given the sign of circumcision.

First, the **“purpose”** for this delay was to point out that Abraham was **“the father of all who believe”** independent of circumcision. As Paul points out, the Jews thought he was the father of circumcision, but Abraham was the father of faith. This is a profoundly fundamental interpretation. The reason is that Abraham is no longer viewed just as the father of the ethnic Israelites but as the father of all the true people of God in every nation and every age who put their trust in God. The people of God can no longer be equated to Jews alone. Race does not define the people of God. And even more, God's promises of salvation to the Israelites are now identified with Abraham's true spiritual descendants. The people of God are now the people of faith and are counted righteous.

Second, equally surprising for a Jew, Paul states that Abraham is only the father of those Jews who have accepted Jesus as their Lord and Saviour – **“who walk in the footsteps of the faith.”** These are the Christian Jews who, like Abraham, are

credited with righteousness not because they were “**merely circumcised**” but through the same kind of faith in God as Abraham had “**before he was circumcised.**”

*The promise of God came by faith and not the law (vv. 13-22)*

v. 13

The “**promise**” of God is the primary theme of this passage from verses 13 to 22. The word promise is used four times as a noun and once as a verb. This promise was made “**to Abraham and his offspring**” that they would become “**heir of the world.**” This promise is not realized “**through the law**” but through “**righteousness of faith.**”

First, Paul says the “**promise**” made to “**Abraham and his offspring**” is being “**heir of the world.**” There is no direct reference to this “**promise**” in Genesis. Still, it is a summary of the four aspects of God’s promise to Abraham: Abraham would have many descendants, comparing their number to the dust of the earth, the stars in the sky, or the sand of the seashore (Genesis 13:6; 15:5; 22:17) and a father of many nations (Genesis 17:4-6, 16-20); he would possess the promised land (Genesis 12:7; 13:15; 15:7; 17:8); and, he would be a blessing to all the peoples of the world (Genesis 12:3; 18:18; 22:18). Later the prophet Isaiah would state that the promise of land would include the whole world (Isaiah 2:2-4; 49:6; 55:3-5; cf. Acts 13:47) and, ultimately, the world to come (Hebrews 11:10-16; Revelation 21-22).

So, this universal statement is significant in light of God’s promise to Abraham. It was through the man Abraham that God called all people to himself. Abraham and his descendants were to show the whole world who God was, what he required and what he was like. However, in this task, Israel failed. Through Christ Jesus—the perfect Israelite—all these aspects of God’s promises were realized. Those who put their hope and trust in Christ are in union with Christ and in that union inherit with Christ “the kingdom of God” (1 Corinthians 6:9; Galatians 3:29; 4:4-7), and in this sense, the whole world. So, “**offspring**” refers first to Israel, but ultimately to Christ, and through Christ all those who are in union with him. And “**heir of the world**” summarizes the universal result of the coming of the Messiah,

who is not just the Saviour of ethnic Israel but all those in the world who put their hope and trust in him.

Paul then states this “**promise**” did not come through the “**law**” but through “**the righteousness of faith.**” The “**law**” refers to God’s commands in general and not specifically to the Mosaic law since the Mosaic law had not yet been given at the time of Abraham.

The phrase “**righteousness of faith**” means the right standing before God, which we have when we put our faith and trust in Christ Jesus. In other words, the righteousness of Christ is received by faith in union with him. Abraham was the first to receive this righteousness through faith in God and his promises. So Paul explicitly contrasts the “**faith**” and the “**law.**” Interestingly, the opposite of “**faith**” is not disbelief as one might expect, but the “**law.**” This is the point Paul is making consistently. Righteousness is not obtained through obedience to the law but through faith in God and his promises.

*vv. 14-15*

Paul explains why the promise cannot be obtained through “**the law.**” If God’s promise is only for those who obey the law, no one will receive the promise because no one obeys the law entirely. In that case, God’s promise would be pointless, and the faith of the faithful would be of no value. The only condition of God’s promise is faith. Faith and works of the law concerning salvation are fundamentally opposed because faith depends on the gift of grace, and works rely on us keeping the law perfectly.

In verse 15a, Paul again points out that “**the law**” only reveals knowledge of sin (3:20), and our attempts to keep it fail. As a consequence, the law only “**brings wrath.**” The second half of verse 15 explains that transgressing the law results in wrath.

Paul reserves the word “**sin**” for the more general condition that justifies God’s judgment. And he uses the word “**transgression**” to mean breaking a specific, definite command. A transgression is a sin, but some sins are not transgressions. So in verse 15b, Paul is *not* saying that if there was no general law of God (outside the Mosaic law), there is no sin. Certainly, outside of the Mosaic law, sin still exists since all people are sinners who reject God and do not worship him. Those that sin without the Mosaic law is not aware that they are rebelling against it. But their

knowledge of natural revelation makes them liable for punishment. And so all people are under God's condemnation and wrath (1:18-20). However, when there are specific written laws, as in the law of Moses, those who transgress these particular laws are under even greater wrath. So, rather than helping the situation, the law of Moses, in this sense, made matters worse.<sup>102</sup>

*vv. 16-17*

Paul switches from explaining the negative statement of verse 13a – that the inheritance “**did not come through the law**” – to the positive statement of 13b, the inheritance comes “**through the righteousness of faith.**”

The “[*the promised inheritance*] **depends on faith**” and “**on grace.**” Paul’s teaching always has a very close connection between faith and grace. Faith and works were *contrasted* in verses 4, 5 and 13; in verse 16, faith and grace are *complemented*. The promise could not depend on works since no one can keep the law perfectly. Therefore, the promise must depend “**on faith in order to rest on grace.**” So, faith itself is a gift of grace. This promised inheritance extends to “**all his [Abraham’s] offspring.**” And here, Paul also includes Gentiles who have faith, along with Jews who also have faith, as Abraham’s (spiritual) offspring. For Paul writes, “**also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham who is father of us all.**” All Christians, therefore, view Abraham as their spiritual forefather. Therefore, Paul interprets God’s promise to Abraham, “**I have made you the father of many nations**” (Genesis 17:5) to include Jews and Gentiles from all over the world.

What is astonishing about this verse is, God’s justification of Abraham, and so us as well, is compared to God’s work in creating the world from nothing (“**calls into existence the things that do not exist**”) and who created life out of earth (“**who gives life to the dead**”). In creation, God spoke, and it was. In the same way, God now speaks, “**Let there be righteousness,**” and there is! Where there was “**void and darkness**” – nothing but sin, guilt and

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<sup>102</sup> Moo, *Epistle To The Romans*, 277.



unrighteousness – there is now Christ’s righteousness imputed to all who put their hope and trust in him.<sup>103</sup>

*vv. 18-22 Faith and not sight*

Paul’s focus in this section is still on God’s promise to Abraham, but the emphasis is on Abraham’s response despite the obvious physical obstacles.

*v. 18*

Paul states that Abraham “**in hope believed against hope.**” This means Abraham kept hoping, even though there was no logical reason or even common sense to hope. It is worth noting that when Scripture uses the word “**hope,**” it does not mean simply wishful thinking. For example, we might say, “I hope it does not rain tomorrow on our picnic.” In this case, the word ‘hope’ is simply a wish. In Scripture, hope in God’s promises is a joyful assured expectation. Unlike predicting the weather, it is guaranteed to happen, so it looks forward to God fulfilling his promise. In Abraham’s case, he did not hope in man’s strength but in the sovereignty of God. And because Abraham’s hope was based on the faithful sovereign character of God, it was not a baseless irrational wish.

This hope was realized when Abraham became the “**father of many nations**” (Genesis 15:5). “This suggests that, in Paul’s mind, the ‘many nations’ of which Abraham is the father are equivalent to the spiritual “seed” made up of believing Jews and Gentiles.”<sup>104</sup> That is, the “**many nations**” promised to Abraham are the innumerable descendants, including not only ethnic Israel, but also, all the converts who have come to Christ from the “**many nations**” through faith like Abraham.<sup>105</sup>

*vv. 19-22*

In these verses, Paul details how and why Abraham hoped against hope. When he considered his own body and his wife’s body, he did not “**weaken in faith.**” At the time of the promise,

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<sup>103</sup> Horton, 621.

<sup>104</sup> Moo, *Epistle to the Romans*, 283.

<sup>105</sup> Osborne, 127.

Abraham was past the time of procreation since he was about a hundred years old (Hebrews 11:12).<sup>106</sup>

Paul uses the word “**dead**” to refer to Abraham’s inability to procreate and “**barren**” to refer to Sarah’s womb. However, this is not the usual term for barrenness. The reason is that Paul highlights faith in God, “**who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist**” (v. 17). As John Calvin writes in his commentary:<sup>107</sup>

Let us also remember, that the condition of us all is the same with that of Abraham. All things around us are in opposition to the promises of God: He promises immortality; we are surrounded with mortality and corruption: He declares that he counts us just; we are covered with sins: He testifies that he is propitious and kind to us; outward judgments threaten his wrath. What then is to be done? We must with closed eyes pass by ourselves and all things connected with us, that nothing may hinder or prevent us from believing God is true.

Instead of weakening in his faith in God, the opposite happened: he “**grew strong in his faith.**” His faith increased even though he faced the physical limitations of his and Sarah’s body. He was able to overcome the obvious conclusion by putting his hope in the character of God. Abraham was “**fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.**” In other words, Abraham saw, with spiritual eyes, the unseen reality clearer and truer than the ‘seen’ physical reality.

But how and why was he able to have this strength of faith? The answer is in the following phrase: because “**he gave glory to God.**” That is, by his faith he honoured God and gave thanks to him, doing the opposite of the idolaters (1:21). God was glorified when Abraham trusted in his promises. We can even say that faith is what glorifies God<sup>108</sup> (see Hebrews 11). Rather than

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<sup>106</sup> Some commentators point out that there is an inconsistency because in Genesis 25:1-2, Abraham has six more sons with Keturah. Their solution is that only Sarah’s barrenness could have been the problem. But the text here and in Hebrews does not permit such an interpretation. The best solution, which remains faithful to the text, is that God’s healing of Abraham’s body continued with him even after Isaac was born.

<sup>107</sup> Calvin, 180.

<sup>108</sup> Lloyd-Jones, Exposition of Chapters 3:20-4:25, 221,

focusing on his and Sarah's weakness, Abraham focused on God's power, sovereignty and trustworthiness.

But what does "he gave glory" mean? It means he considered, meditated, and trusted in the glorious holiness of God; that is, in all the infinite attributes of God. That is how we honour and glorify God by taking the truth of who God is and making it the complete and total basis of our lives. There is nothing more perfect, beautiful and glorious than God himself. Practically, Abraham glorified God by believing and acting on God's promise. And like Abraham, we glorify God when we trust in his promises. The indispensable quality, the very essence of faith, is glorifying God.

That glory is expressed in the earthly wonder of the incarnation of God's own Son (Isaiah 61:8). As Paul had previously written to the church in Corinth:

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. (2 Corinthians 3:18)

And again, Paul points out the reason for evangelism:

For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God. (2 Corinthians 4:15)

This was true for Abraham and all people of God throughout history. The greatest people of faith are those men and women who have glorified God. And it is not unusual that such giants of faith are also most afflicted in trials and temptations. Such things that drive others to despair, drive people of faith to glorify God. So faith gives God glory by trusting in who he is at whatever cost that is to us.

Trusting in the promises means trusting in the Giver of the promise. The degree to which we trust someone is the degree to which we know that person's character. So the degree we trust in God is the degree we know God's character. Our faith grows when our knowledge of God's character grows (1 Corinthians 4:4-6). This is not more knowledge *about* God, i.e., more facts about him. True knowledge of God is personal and experienced; in other words, relational. How then does our knowledge of God

grow; through reading and meditating on Scripture as prayer (Psalms 143:8). We can summarize this as follows:

1. Faith grows by glorifying God.
2. Glorifying God grows by trusting him more and acting in obedience to that trust.
3. Our trust in God grows as we know him better.
4. Our knowledge of God grows through the Spirit as we read Scripture prayerfully, meditating on his character.

Most of us know what prayer is: acknowledging God's sovereignty, confessing our sins, thanking him for his loving care and faithfulness and making petitions for others and ourselves. In other words, we are speaking to God. But what if we think of prayer as conversation? How then is God speaking to us? God's primary, foundational and inspired way of speaking to us is through his inspired Word – the Scriptures. So when we read the Bible we should be reading it as if God is speaking directly to us. It is, therefore, a good practice to always ask God to illuminate his word to us before we begin to read. John Piper has a prayer which he suggests we pray before reading Scripture. It is based on the mnemonic IOUSL.<sup>109</sup>

1. *Incline* my heart to your word (Psalms 119:36; Prov 22:17)
2. *Open* my eyes so I might see wondrous things in your word (Psalms 119:18; Exodus 33:18; Matthew 13:13; 1 Peter 1:8-9)
3. *Unite* my heart to fear your name (Psalm 86:11)
4. *Satisfy* my soul with your goodness (Jeremiah 31:14; Psalms 17:15; 63:3-6)
5. *Lead* me in your way (Psalms 5:8; 23:3; 31:3; 43:3; 61:2; 119:35; 139:24; 143:10)

This is a wonderful way to begin each reading of Scripture. In Psalm 63:6, David also speaks of meditation. "I remember you upon my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night."

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<sup>109</sup> John Piper, *Reading The Bible Supernaturally, Seeing and Savouring the Glory of God in Scripture*, Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Publishing, (2017), pp. 251-274.

J. I. Packer gives a very good definition for Christian meditation<sup>110</sup>: (See also Genesis 24:63; Joshua 1:8; Psalms 1:2; 38:12; 63:6; 77:3, 6, 12; 119:15, 23, 27, 48, 78, 148; 143:5)

Meditation is the activity of calling to mind, and thinking over, and dwelling on, and applying to oneself, the various things that one knows about the works and ways and purposes and promises of God. It is an activity of holy thought, consciously performed in the presence of God, under the eye of God, by the help of God, as a means of communion with God”

Note again the phrase “**grew strong.**” This did not happen overnight for Abraham and it does not happen instantly for us. It is a process by which our faith grows and is strengthened. This is the human side of faith. God grants us saving faith as a gift but we also have a responsibility to *grow* that faith with the *help* of the Spirit through meditation on him from Scripture. Jesus states that if our faith is as small as a mustard seed, it is sufficient (Matthew 17:20). And to the pagan woman in Tyre, he states, “O woman, great is your faith!” (Matthew 15:28). It does not take much faith, but the object of our faith must always be God. And the secret to growing our faith is to glorify God.

### **The faith of Abraham and the faith of the believer (4:23-25)**

Paul brings the entire chapter to a conclusion by explicitly applying Abraham’s experience with God to all people who believe in Jesus. In just three verses, Paul sums up the entire gospel and the doctrine of justification by faith. What was “**counted to him [Abraham]**” (Genesis 15:6) is also “**counted to us.**” The principle applies to all people. The plan of salvation for the Gentiles was from the very beginning. Abraham had to believe that God could not only create life from the dead womb of Sarah but also raise his dead son, Isaac after he sacrificed him. Because of this faith and trust in God’s sovereignty and goodness, Abraham was justified. Similarly, we too must believe that God “**raised from the dead Jesus our Lord.**” Abraham was the first to have the doctrine of justification applied to him. And like

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<sup>110</sup> J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, Downer Grove, Illinois: IVP Books, (1973), p. 23.

Abraham, we put our trust in the character of God. He alone is faithful and able to accomplish all that he has promised. As Peter writes,

Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls. (1 Peter 1:8-9)

What exactly is this faith? Paul also answers this question. It is, first of all, faith in God (“**who believe in him**”), who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God who is perfectly holy, faithful, just and who raises his Son from death. So, second, faith is in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The bodily resurrection of Jesus is foundational to our faith. Jesus’ resurrection is not a resuscitation as it was for Lazarus but a resurrection of the One who passed through death into eternal life. Jesus is the “firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Corinthians 15:20).

And third, our faith is in God the Father, who delivered up his Son “**for our trespasses;**” he atoned for our sins on the cross. Finally, we have faith that Jesus was “**raised for our justification.**” But what does this last phrase mean? In 5:9, Paul says we are justified by his blood. This is the usual way we think of our justification. But here, Paul says we are justified by his resurrection. The answer is not hard to see. Jesus’ death could not have atoned for our sins without the resurrection. The two cannot be separated. His resurrection proclaims the vindication of Jesus. If he had not been raised, then Jesus would not have borne the guilt of every sin, and nothing he said prior to his death could be believed. Christ’s resurrection proclaims that God is fully satisfied with the redeeming work of his Son. And so now Christ reigns as our King and High Priest. As the writer to the Hebrews says, “After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high” (Hebrews 1:3).

## Questions for Reflection

### Study it

1. [3:21] What is the significance of “but now”? What does the phrase “righteousness of God” mean in this verse? Why does Paul add, “although the Law and the Prophets testify to it”?
2. [3:22] What is emphasized in the phrase “righteousness of God” in this verse?
3. [3:23] What does it mean that everyone “falls short of the glory of God”?
4. [3:25-26] What does the word “propitiation” mean? In what sense did God “pass over former sins”? And how does “the present time” “show his righteousness”?
5. [3:27] What does the phrase “law of faith” mean?
6. [3:27-31] Identify the three things resulting from justification.
7. [4:1-3] What “works” does Paul refer to in v. 2. How is Paul’s view of Abraham and the Jewish view of Abraham different concerning righteousness? What were Abraham’s “works” and their relationship to his faith?
8. [4:4-5] How does Paul distinguish between obedience (“work”) and faith? In what sense is faith itself not work? What state is the person in when they are justified?
9. [4:6-8] Why does Paul refer both to Abraham and David? What is the difference between a gift and an obligation?
10. [4:9-12] What “blessing” is referred to in v. 9? How much time elapsed between the promise to Abraham and when he was circumcised? How is this significant for accepting uncircumcised Gentiles? To whom is Abraham a father in these verses, and why is he?
11. [4:13] What is the “promise”? In what sense is this fulfilled through Christ?
12. [4:14-15] Why can’t the promise be given through the law? What is the difference between “sin” and “transgression”?
13. [4:16-17] What depends on faith, and why does it?

14. [4:18] What does the phrase “hope he believed against hope” mean? How does Paul understand the phrase “father of many nations”?
15. [4:19-22] In what sense did Abraham not weaken in his faith? How does Paul use the term “dead”? How did Abraham glorify God?
16. [4:23-25] What does Paul’s teaching concerning Abraham’s life and David’s understanding have to do with the Roman Christians? What does the phrase “raised for our justification” mean?
17. [4:1-22] List the ways Abraham is both the foundation and an example of our faith.

### **Live it**

1. Do you view or understand sin as falling short of the glory of God? How should sin be understood by that phrase?
2. What was the reason you chose Christ to be your Lord and Saviour? Is your choosing Christ ground for boasting? Why or why not?
3. Do you think obedience to God’s commands is important for your salvation? In what sense are they, and in what sense are they not?
4. When you stand before the final judgment seat of God, on what basis will you make your defence?
5. Do you think of Abraham as your spiritual father?
6. How do you view the Old Testament? Is it a series of unrelated exciting stories, or do you see it as a continuum of God working out his salvation through history?
7. How are we like Abraham concerning our inability?
8. From this passage, how can you honour and glorify God?
9. According to v. 20, what is the ‘secret’ of strong faith?
10. Do you think of your sins being the reason for Christ’s death? Do you think of Christ’s resurrection as the purpose of your justification?



## PART II: THE GOSPEL OF HOPE

### OUR ETERNAL SECURITY IN CHRIST JESUS (5:1-8:39)

The New Testament message can be summarized by Paul's famous passage on love in 1 Corinthians 13. He ends this instruction on the way of love by stating:

So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love. (1 Corinthians 13:13)

The whole New Testament message is about faith, hope and love.<sup>111</sup> We can use these three to create a broad outline of Romans:

Chapter 1-4: **Faith** – We receive the righteousness of God through faith alone and not by any good work we do.

Chapter 5-8: **Hope** – Despite all the trials and temptations of life, we hope in seeing the glory of Christ.

Chapter 12-16: **Love** – Our Christian life is a life lived in love.

So, in this part of the letter, from chapters 5 through 8, Paul focuses on the hope of our eternal security in Christ Jesus. Christian hope is never just a wish but a joyful assured expectation – looking forward to what is sure to happen – because it is always focused on the person of Christ (Hebrews 6:19). These chapters form a chiastic (ring) structure:

A We rejoice in hope and are confident *in the Spirit* of our future glory (5:1-11)

B In our *union in Christ*, we have his righteousness (5:12-21)

C *Sin*: In our *union in Christ*, we are no longer under the bondage of sin and death but are confident in the free gift of eternal life (6:1-23)

C' *Law*: In our *union in Christ*, we are confident that we are free from law (7:1-25)

B' In *union in Christ* we have the Spirit of life (8:1-11)

A' We are confident *in the Spirit* of our future glory (8:18-39)

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<sup>111</sup> Moo, *Encountering the Book of Romans*, 84.

The two ends of the chiasm are the theme of this section: we rejoice now in hope despite our trials, confident in the Spirit and in our adoption as sons. As Paul says:

Hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. (5:5)

And then at the end of this section on hope:

For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. (8:24-25).

Between these two endpoints, Paul next tells us *why* we have this hope. It is because Christ, the second Adam, has conquered sin and death. Now the Spirit is working in our lives so that we overcome sin and death. In the middle, Paul deals with two problems that undermine our hope: sin and the law. So this whole section, chapters 5 through 8, is about the hope of our eternal salvation that we have in union with Christ.

## **Lesson 5: Rejoicing in the Hope of Glory (5:1-21)**

### **Rejoicing in peace and hope through Christ (5:1-11)**

When Paul first taught about the need for justification (1:18-3:20), he began by stating that the godless and wicked people are all under the wrath of God (1:18). He went on to explain that these Gentiles included those who had not heard the word of God (1:19-32). But then he also turned to the self-righteous Gentile and the orthodox Jews who thought they already had salvation because of the covenants and the Mosaic law. But Paul makes it clear, such “works of the law save no one.” Moreover, he stated that there was no difference between Gentiles and Jews – all had sinned and had not measured up to the glorious standard of God (3:21).

Then, starting in 3:22, Paul instructs us that God has found a solution for this problem of sin. It is the way of justification by faith in his Son. It is not a way of boasting about our good works, no matter how helpful and good they are. But boasting is only in the atoning sacrifice of the Son of God, who has freely justified us

by his grace. In chapter 4, Paul provides the foundation of salvation by grace through faith by showing that salvation by faith goes back to Abraham. And that David also agreed with this teaching (4:6-8). Now in this section (5:1-11), Paul describes those blessings for whom God credits righteousness by faith apart from works (4:6).

Paul names seven blessings resulting from our justification. All these blessings begin with, and are based on, his opening and repeated statement, **“Therefore since we have been justified”** (vv. 1, 9). This justification is a free gift of grace made available through the cross and received through faith. And this is why Paul so often opens his letters with the statement: **“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ”** (1:7b). Here is the outline of the passage 5:1-11 (It is worth noting this section is in the first-person plural.):

I. *Foundation: “Therefore, since we have been justified by faith”* (v. 1a)

Blessings:

1. We rejoice in our *peace* with God through Jesus Christ (v. 1b)
2. We rejoice in the grace of God to enter his presence (v. 2a)
3. We rejoice in the hope of the glory of God (v. 2b)
4. We rejoice knowing God loves us through his Spirit (vv. 3-5)
5. We rejoice because he proved his love by his Son’s death (vv. 6-8)

II. *Foundation: “Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood”* (v. 9a)

Blessings:

6. We rejoice in our *salvation* in Christ (vv. 9b-10)
7. We rejoice in *God* (v. 11)

## 1. We rejoice in peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ

*v. 1b*

Because we have been “**justified**” we now have “**peace with God.**” Within human society, peace is often defined as the absence of conflict and war. In Scripture, it is certainly that, but it is much more. God’s “**peace**” includes the reconciliation of our relationship with him.

This is the first blessing of our being justified through faith. To be justified means we have been declared righteous because of the righteousness from Christ. Although this is a judicial declaration, justification implies much more. Justification always *involves* reconciliation of our relationship with God – our peace with God. Justification and reconciliation always go together. Reconciliation occurs when we are justified and our sins forgiven. Reconciliation means we have been adopted as sons of God (8:15-16), which also means we are fellow heirs with Christ (8:17). And because we have been adopted as sons, Christ now calls us his brothers (8:29). Peace with God implies all these undeserved gifts. This is astonishingly good news!

And this is only possible “**through our Lord Jesus Christ**”; that is, because of what Christ Jesus has done; who “**was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification**” (4:25). This is the great blessing of the messianic age given to us by the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ.

Note as well, this peace is already available to those who put their hope and trust in Jesus Christ. Of course, there is a future fulfillment of this peace when we will be perfectly united with Christ in his glory. Then the peace we only experience in part now, because of sin, will be perfect in every way.

## 2. We rejoice in the grace of God to enter his presence

*v. 2a*

It is by the Prince of Peace, we “**obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand.**” Usually, “**grace**” refers to God’s unmerited, undeserved, and unconditional gift or favour to us. But here, “**grace**” emphasizes “our privileged position of acceptance by him.”<sup>112</sup> “**This grace,**” therefore, refers to

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<sup>112</sup> Stott, 140.

“**justification**” in the previous verse. Two verbs relate to “**this grace**”: “**obtained access**” and “**stand**.” The literal meaning of the verb “**obtained access**” means the right or opportunity to come into the presence of a person with higher authority. So here the imagery is of being brought into the holy of holies to the very mercy seat of God. As is written in Hebrews:

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. (Hebrews 10:18-22)

And as Paul states, we have this access “**by faith**.” Only by faith in the person and work of Christ can we enter with boldness into the very presence of the perfect, sovereign and holy God.

Second, we “**stand**” in this grace. That is, we are confident in his presence. We do not need to shrink back, nor are we those who wonder if God’s acceptance of us varies with our ability not to sin and to do enough good work. Since we are his adopted sons, we live forever, confidently, in his presence. We do not fall in and out of his love. As Paul states elsewhere:

“For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (8:38-39).

### **3. We rejoice in our hope of the glory of God**

*v. 2b*

Recall, again, that Christian “**hope**” is not just a wish. Rather, it is a belief in something that is guaranteed to occur. It is guaranteed because it is based on the promises of God who is both able and faithful to accomplish what he has said. So, our hope is a joyful expectation that his promises will be fulfilled. The word “**rejoice**” literally means “**boast**” (2:17), but here it “denotes exultant rejoicing, jubilation.”<sup>113</sup> Specifically, Paul says

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<sup>113</sup> Cranfield, Vol. 1, 259.

we are jubilant in this hope in **“the glory of God.”** The glory of God is the visible display of his perfect beauty, revealing his infinite worth. This glory is already partially revealed in his creation.

The heavens declare the glory of God,  
and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. (Psalm 19:1)

And it certainly has been already displayed in the incarnate Son of God. As the apostle John proclaimed:

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14)

All of this glory has already been seen in the person of Jesus and is now being seen through faith (1 Peter 1:8). There will come a day when we will no longer see as in a mirror dimly but face to face (1 Corinthians 13:12). On that glorious day, Jesus will be revealed in great power and glory (Mark 13:25; Titus 2:13). It will be a day when every knee will bow before him and confess that he is indeed Lord of lords (Philippians 2:9-10). It will also be a day when we will be changed into his glory. For:

Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. (1 John 3:2)

And best yet, we will be with him:

When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. (Colossians 3:4)

Even though we have now fallen short of his glory, on that great day, we will not only see his glory; we will be transformed into it:

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. (2 Corinthians 3:18)

But it will not only be us who are transformed; it will also be all of creation. For although creation is now under **“bondage to corruption”** it too will be **“set free”** and **“obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God”** (8:21). All of this is amazing good news! And it is all because **“we have been justified by**

**faith**" (v. 1). This result of justification is past, present and future.<sup>114</sup> Past because we now have peace with God; present, because we now stand in the most privileged position before God himself; and future, because we rejoice, exult and boast in the hope of seeing God's glory. All this already sounds perfect. But "**not only this,**" for now, Paul surprises us with the fourth aspect of justification.

#### **4. We rejoice because we know God loves us by his Spirit**

*vv. 3-5*

Paul states, because of justification, we will also experience suffering. But it is our response to suffering that is so surprising. Paul says we will "**rejoice**" in it. Again, the word "**rejoice**" used throughout this passage can also mean "**exult**" (NASB) or even "**boast**" (NIV). Although Paul speaks of suffering, his emphasis is on rejoicing because we know that God our Father loves us. The meaning is to express trust in God to do what he has promised. We know this because he has "**poured into our hearts**" this love "**through the Holy Spirit.**" Because of this assurance of the Father's love, we have hope in the glory of God.

We have this hope even though we suffer because of our faith in Christ. For Paul is not speaking here about ordinary human suffering all people experience. Instead, he is talking about the suffering we experience because we are adopted sons of God (8:15-16). And, because we are adopted sons and Christ is our brother (8:29), we also share in his suffering and the suffering of his church.<sup>115</sup> It is only then that we are also "**gloried with him**" (8:17). However, before it leads to glory on that last day, it leads to spiritual maturity today because it produces steadfast

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<sup>114</sup> Stott, 140-141.

<sup>115</sup> It may be the case that some individual believers never personally experience much suffering for Christ. This may be because of where they were born and lived out their lives. The society in which they lived was not in opposition to the gospel. But Paul is not just talking about individuals, he is talking to the church. We, as the universal church of Christ, "**rejoice**" and "**suffer**" as one body. This is why Paul uses plural language when referring to rejoicing and suffering. When any part of the world-wide church suffers, we all suffer. And it is certainly the case that there is always oppression against the church in some part of the world. We, therefore rejoice and suffer personally with our brothers and sisters throughout the world wherever they are.

endurance in the face of opposition. And this endurance helps in maturing our Christian character. All this is done in the present, so we have hope in the future. And we will never be shamed or disappointed by this hope because it is based on the person of Christ Jesus. We will never be let down because God will never let us down. His love is secure because he is both able and faithful to bring us into glory. His loving kindness endures forever. For we are sure of this, God who justified us will perfect us, carrying us through to the great day of Christ Jesus (Philippians 1:6).

We rejoice because we are assured that God indeed loves us. But how do we know this? Paul gives us two reasons: first, the love of God had been **“poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit,”** and second, God has proven that he loves us by sending his own Son to die on the cross for us (vv. 6-8). Without the assurance that God the Father loves us, it is impossible to rejoice in our hope. Because our hope is tarnished, we wonder if God loves us since we often do not live up to our understanding of the Christian life. So, joy and hope are strongly connected. Yet we can be assured of the Father’s love because the Father has given us the Holy Spirit. It is the work of the Spirit to assure us of the Father’s love. But is this some exceptional charismatic experience? It is undoubtedly the case that many believers have experienced such extraordinary manifestations of the Spirit over the years. However, this is not what Paul is referring to here. He is stating all persons that have been justified have **“obtained access by faith”** to the love of God. Paul now points us to the cross to give us tangible, certain proof of this love. The work of the Spirit convinces us of the truth of the cross.

Before we move to the fifth result of our justification, it is worth reflecting more on God’s love for us. Christians will agree we are saved by grace alone through faith alone. Our justification is entirely a work of God and has nothing to do with our work or efforts. So, we *“get in”* to his love by grace. We know this because, in the following assertion, Paul tells us that **“while we were still sinners Christ died for us”** (v. 8). John is even more specific when he says, *“We love because he loved us first”* (1 John 4:19). But we often think we can only *“stay in”* his love by our good works and efforts. So, we believe God will love us more when



we do good things (pray, read our Bible, go to church, help the poor, and witness to co-workers). And, of course, we often think God loves us less when we do bad things or neglect to do good things. In other words, we believe our good or bad actions somehow affect our salvation. This thinking results from confusion between justification and sanctification. But the gospel does not describe God's love this way. His Fatherly love is unconditional – he does not love us more if we do good or less if we do bad. Our actions have nothing to do with God's love.

The reason is that his love is based solely on his own will and not on us. Of course, we can please or displease our Father. But this does not change the degree to which he loves us. He has adopted us as his sons, so he loves us as his sons (John 17:26). A good father – and only God is good (Mark 10:18) – does not love his son less or more, depending on behaviour. And God is a perfect Father whose love for us is unconditional. So we “*get in*” his love by his grace and “*stay in*” his love by his grace.

Still, it is easy for us to think we must complete our Christian life by works, even though we began it by grace. Paul dealt with this problem when he wrote his letter to the Galatians church. There he reprimands them on this very problem when he says:

O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? (Galatians 3:1-3)

Good works after our conversion do not keep us in God's love; his love is always an undeserved gift of grace from now to eternity. It is because God loves us that our greatest desire is to please him by doing good works God has prepared for us (Ephesians 2:10).

## **5. We rejoice because he proved his love by his Son's death**

*vv. 6-8*

Paul now explains to us the proof of God's love. He states in verse 8, “**God shows his own love for us**”(v. 8). The word “**shows**” is a weak translation. Other translations use the word “**demonstrate**” but this does not bring out the whole meaning.

The emphasis is “to provide evidence of a personal characteristic or claim through action” (BDAG). In other words, amazingly, it means that God is proving to us his love for us. And the action he does as a demonstration of this proof is **“while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”**

To fully grasp this meaning, we must remember that at the heart of love is action which is the complete giving of one’s self. The intensity and purity of the love are revealed by the degree of self-sacrifice and the unworthiness of the recipient of the love. Although this is only partially true for human love, it is perfectly true for God’s love. Measuring love by this standard, God’s love is immeasurable. For he sent his own Son to become one of us. And not only that but also to die on the cross with our sin imputed to him. We know this gift of self-sacrificial love came at an unfathomable cost.

As well, this gift was given to us while we were **“ungodly”** (v. 6) and **“still sinners”** (v. 8). We were **“weak”** or better, **“helpless”** or **“powerless”** (v. 6) to reconcile ourselves to God. This means we have no ability or strength in ourselves to do it. We did not expect or even ask for this gift. But even more unworthily, **“we were enemies”** (v. 10) of Christ. This means we were in rebellion against him (8:7). We resented his authority, so we suppressed his truth in our ungodliness and unrighteousness; that is, we did not believe his gospel to be true (1:18). And that resulted in God’s wrath.

How then can God’s wrath and love be reconciled? It can certainly not be because we turned from our hostilities, repented and turned to him.<sup>116</sup> It can only mean God first reconciled himself to us **“at the right time”** through the self-sacrificing gift of his Son. God the Father put forward his Son as an atoning sacrifice to reconcile himself to us (3:25). And now – only *after* God’s act of love – can we receive this reconciliation by faith in his Son.

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<sup>116</sup> Stott, 145.

## 6. We rejoice in our salvation through Christ

*vv. 9-10*

Up to this point, Paul has told us what God has done for us. We have received the righteousness of Christ; we have been justified and now stand righteous before God. Paul has also taught us how we respond to this good news. We can keep God's moral laws by the indwelling Spirit. And so we rejoice in what he has done, but we also rejoice with all our brothers and sisters in Christ in suffering for him. We see, therefore, that salvation is both *past* – what God has done for us – and *present* – what God is doing for us. And now, in these two verses (vv. 9-10), Paul tells us salvation also has a *future*. Although we have already been justified, we have not yet been delivered from our sinful condition and given new glorified bodies. Paul then explains this future salvation in both negative and positive terms.

Although we have been justified in a legal sense and have the indwelling Spirit to help us mature in our Christian life, we still sin. And so, there is coming a day of God's wrath when his righteous judgment will be revealed (2:5). And for those who have rejected Christ's offer of his righteousness, there will be "**wrath and fury**" (2:8). But because "**we have now been justified by his [Christ] blood**" we are already saved from that future day of judgment. As Jesus himself said:

Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life. (John 5:24)

Paul repeats this wonderful promise later in his letter:

There is, therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (8:1)

Paul also explains – using a Jewish *a fortiori* (how much more) argument – our future salvation in a positive way. If God was able to restore our relationship with him through the sacrifice of his Son, and he did while we were still his enemies, then surely, he can save us "**by his [Son's] life.**" Jesus died for our sins, and "**we have now been justified by his blood.**" But he was also raised to life and is the first fruit of all who have died (1 Corinthians 15:20-23). We see then that the saving work of Christ was not only the cross but also his resurrection and ascension.

The already resurrected life of Christ is a promise of our future resurrected life, a resurrected life in which we will live in the holy presence of God forever.

However, the reference to “**saved by his life**” is not just to Christ’s resurrected life but to his perfect obedience during his earthly life. Although necessary, it is not sufficient for our sins to be forgiven; we must also be counted righteous. Christ’s perfect obedience during his life on earth – his righteousness – is counted to us as if we perfectly obeyed the law. A believer’s righteousness is “not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith” (Philippians 3:9). So, salvation consists of both forgiveness of sins coming from Christ’s death on the cross, *and* righteousness coming from Christ’s life. This is, as Martin Luther said, the Great Exchange: our sins are counted (imputed) to Christ and his righteousness is counted (imputed) to us (2 Corinthians 5:21). Both forgiveness and righteousness are received through the instrument of faith.<sup>117</sup> Our salvation depends on both. On that basis, we can stand in Christ’s righteousness before the judgment seat of God. It is in this reconciliation that we rejoice. This great teaching gives the most honour and glory to our Lord Jesus Christ. As John Piper has written:<sup>118</sup>

Alongside the pastoral preciousness of the doctrine of the imputed righteousness of Christ is the great truth that this doctrine bestows on Jesus Christ the fullest honor that he deserves. Not only should he be honored as the one who died to pardon us, and not only should he be honored as the one who sovereignly works faith and obedience in us, but he should also be honoured as the one provided a perfect righteousness for us as the ground of our full acceptance and endorsement by God.

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<sup>117</sup> We are not saved because of our faith; that is, our faith is not a work which obligates God to save us.

<sup>118</sup> Piper, Counted Righteous in Christ, 125.

## 7. We rejoice in God

v. 11

Now Paul says even **“more than that, we rejoice in God.”** This phrase, coming right after verses 9-10, means we do not just rejoice in *our* salvation but, even more, we rejoice *in* God. It is worth noting that the phrase **“rejoice in God”** is identical in the original Greek to **“boast in God”** in 2:17. In the latter case, the Jews boasted they had a special covenant with God that excluded the Gentiles. So the focus on the bragging was on them. They could point to themselves as being special. However, in this verse (v.11) the focus is very much on God. Actually, neither Jew nor Gentile has anything to boast about since both were **“enemies”** and both needed to be **“reconciled to God by the death of his Son”** by being **“justified by his [the Son’s] blood.”** And so, as Christians, we should not behave like the self-righteous Jews of 2:17. Although he chose us, we have nothing to boast about in ourselves. We were not called to be followers of Christ because we were better than others. Neither should we boast that we accepted his call. In fact, we were sinners and enemies of God when he called us. Our boasting, therefore, must always be in God alone and not in our status.

That God tells us through Paul to **“rejoice,” “exalt,”** or **“boast”** in him is certainly appropriate. For this is what we were created to do. But Paul also reminds us we can only do that **“through our Lord Jesus Christ through whom we have now received reconciliation.”** Now that we have been reconciled, we can fulfill the destiny for which we were created. We were created in his image to reflect his glory (Genesis 1:27), and rejoicing in his perfection glorifies him. So, we rejoice in the surprising privilege of being saved from God’s wrath not because there is anything uniquely special about us but because God is uniquely special. Christian joy is seeing the perfect love and beauty of God. He alone is our complete satisfaction and delight.

### **The hope of eternal life in union with Christ Jesus (5:12-21)**

This passage gives us a clear scriptural understanding of who we are as human beings in Adam and Christ. The universal scope of what Paul is saying in these verses is astonishing. He includes all people who lived, are now living and will ever live. He breaks

down all distinctions between Jews and Gentiles. Every person is included.

Moreover, every person's eternal destiny is determined by whether they belong to Adam or Christ. Either we belong to Adam and are under the sentence of death because of his disobedience, or we belong to Christ and have the gift of eternal life because of his perfect obedience. These acts of disobedience and obedience have power. The power of Adam's disobedience is death; the power of Christ's obedience is life. But these powers are not equal. Christ's power completely overcomes the effects of Adam's disobedience. So instead of the reign of death, we are given the gift of righteousness that reigns in life eternal (v. 17). This contrast between Christ's power of life and Adam's power of death is the dominant theme of this passage.

Paul begins this passage with "**Therefore**" (literally, '*because of this*'), meaning what he is about to say depends on what he has already said. So the "**therefore**" refers back to 1:18 and on to 3:20, where Paul began to teach about our estrangement from God and our rebellion against him. Then in the second half of chapter 3, he explains God's solution to the problem of sin. And in the immediately preceding passage, 5:1-11, Paul tells us we have peace with God because we are justified by faith. But, what Paul has not told us is *why* this was the only possible way we could be redeemed from the power of sin. Why could we not simply be reconciled to God by our own good efforts? Most people think this way, and man-made religions are based on this assumption. We believe that God will accept us if we do more good things than bad things – and our culture, society, or religion determine these things. Paul, in this passage, tells us that God does not work that way. And he explains the only way we can be justified is through faith in Christ. Paul will explain that the 'bad news' he told us from 1:18 to 3:20 is much worse than we thought. But this also means the 'good news' of the gospel of Christ shines even brighter. Working backwards, it is only by seeing the unimaginable sacrifice of the Son of God that we can also fully comprehend the terribleness of our condition. If the crucifixion (death) of the Son of God was necessary to save us, how terrible must our sin be?

## **Sin, death, the consequence of Adam - the reason for the 'bad news' (vv. 12-14)**

*v. 12*

There has hardly been another verse that has resulted in more discussion and debate than verse 12. When Paul begins the comparison of Adam and Christ, he does so by saying “**therefore, just as**”; that is, he is summing up all he has said to this point with particular emphasis on 5:1-11. But, he does not continue the “**just as.**” There is no immediate “so also.” Instead, Paul continues with Adam and his sin<sup>119</sup> and does not complete the comparison until verses 18 and 19. Paul feels it is necessary to provide a fuller explanation (vv. 13-14) of what he states in verse 12. He also wants to highlight the great difference between Adam and Christ (vv. 15-17).

Paul has already told us about our own sins which we have committed, but now he wants us to think about sin differently. He wants us to understand our sinfulness in relation to Adam. He wants us to see Adam as our federal head and representative.<sup>120</sup> And when Adam sinned and rebelled against God, his condemnation became our condemnation. Adam's guilt and condemnation became the condemnation of every person who ever lived. For Jews, in Paul's day, this would not be difficult to understand because of their understanding of corporate and covenantal solidarity by which Adam, the federal

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<sup>119</sup> It is not that Paul is unaware Eve also sinned (2 Corinthians 11:3; 1 Timothy 2:13), but he understood Adam had primary responsibility (Thielman, 282-285).

<sup>120</sup> Federalism understands Adam's relationship to humanity in a similar way a national leader (king, president, prime minister) of a country may enter into agreements with other nations. When they do so, those agreements are binding upon all the country's citizens, even though they may not have supported the agreement or even been aware of it. Because Adam is the federal head of all humanity, his sin becomes our sin and his guilt, our guilt. As we will see later in this passage, Christ is the federal head of all who believe in him. Christ's righteousness becomes our righteousness.

It should be noted not all evangelical churches subscribe to federalism. Others see Adam's sin as only corrupting human nature resulting in all people sinning as individuals. So, the actual sin of Adam is not imputed to everyone, only the consequences of Adam's sin. In these notes, we take the federalist position which is the Reformed theological position.

head, represented all people.<sup>121</sup> However, when we first hear this, it seems entirely unfair to us. We understand we are condemned for our sins but not for Adam's. This, however, is what Paul is teaching in this passage. Christ's redemptive salvation works the same way. It is not because of our own righteousness but because we are now united with Christ, and no longer with Adam, that we are given (imputed) Christ's righteousness. The condemnation of Adam is replaced with the justification of Christ. Adam is the negative representative, and Christ is the positive. But Paul does not get to Christ until verse 18. Instead, he wants first to give us scriptural proof that what he is saying is Biblical.

Throughout this passage, Paul makes sure we know that **“sin came into the world”** through Adam.<sup>122</sup> And that the judgment and condemnation for sin is death (**“death through sin”**), and finally, this **“death spread”** to everyone. Death is the universal result of sin, both spiritual and physical death, and ultimately eternal death. Paul clearly states that sin in this world finds its origin in Adam.<sup>123</sup> Moreover, sin was the cause of death (1 Corinthians 15:56). Death, both spiritual and physical, is the punishment for sin.<sup>124</sup> **“Death is universal because sin is universal.”**<sup>125</sup> Why did this happen? Paul concludes, **“because all sinned.”** This last phrase means all people sinned when Adam sinned.<sup>126</sup> That is, as a result of Adam introducing sin and death into the world, all people sinned. When Adam sinned as

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<sup>121</sup> Osborne, 147.

<sup>122</sup> The word **“man”** and **“Adam”** are the same.

<sup>123</sup> Similarly, Christ, the Last Adam, is the cause of righteousness in the world (Hodge, 138).

<sup>124</sup> There is a contrast in this passage between death in Adam and life in Christ (vv. 15, 17, 21).

<sup>125</sup> Hodge, 141.

<sup>126</sup> This phrase has had many interpretations. The two most common are: death came to all people because all people sin as a result of inheriting a sinful corrupt nature from Adam which will inevitably result in individual sin; and second, death came to all people because Adam is our federal covenantal head. This last interpretation is the most common within many Reformed commentators and is the position we take here. However, many commentators might differ in their interpretation, they mostly agree, it was the transgression of Adam and not the individual sins of people which is the bases for death, both spiritually and physically.



our covenantal federal head, his sin became our sin; Adam's sin was imputed (counted, credited) to all of us. In the same way, when Paul says, "in Adam all died" (1 Corinthians 15:21-22) it does not mean we are all dead in Adam, but that Adam's punishment of death is ours as well, so Adam's sin is also ours as well.

This sin refers to Adam's disobedience. God's command to Adam was not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If Adam violated this command, he would die. The assumption is, also, he would continue to live if he did not violate the command. In Genesis, we read:

And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die" (Genesis 2:16-17).

However, we know from what followed Adam did eat from the forbidden tree (Genesis 3:1-7). And so, God fulfilled his judgment against him. Yet, we also know Adam did not die physically on the same day he ate from the tree. On that day, God expelled Adam from the Garden. This was the Garden where Adam had a unique and special relationship with God. This unique and special relationship was broken. We understand this to mean, Adam died a *spiritual* death that day because he was banished from God's intimate presence (Genesis 3:8, 12, 24). The phrase "you shall surely die" literally means "dying you shall die." This means that spiritual death occurred immediately.

This spiritual death also led to Adam's physical death in due time. Adam's sin resulted in losing his potential immortality, including his spiritual (separation from God's presence) and bodily death.<sup>127</sup> This was God's judgment and condemnation for disobeying a direct command. As the federal and covenantal head of all humanity, Adam passed on both spiritual and physical death to all who came after him. The implication is, we are born spiritually dead and will eventually die physically. However, this does not mean all people will experience *eternal* death, eternal separation from God. Those who put their hope

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<sup>127</sup> The final enemy God will defeat is death (1 Corinthians 15:26).

and trust in Christ experience eternal life even though they will die physically because of Adam's sin.

This is what Paul is teaching in this passage. So, Adam's sin and condemnation also result in our spiritual and physical death. All humanity is affected in this way by the imputation of Adam's sin. This is what the phrase "**sin came into the world through one man**" means. Five times, Paul highlights this point.

(v. 15) "**many died through one man's trespass**"

(v. 16) "**result of that one man's sin ... judgment ... brought condemnation**"

(v. 17a) "**because of one man's trespass death reigned through that one man**"

(v. 18a) "**one trespass led to condemnation for all men**"

(v. 19a) "**by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners**"

Physical death is evident to us since it happens to each one. Spiritual death is different. Although we are physically alive, we are also spiritually stillborn (Ephesians 2:1; Colossians 2:13). Because of Adam's sin, we are born spiritually dead and so have no ability of our own to become spiritually alive again in Christ. All people who grow into maturity sin because all people are born spiritually dead. And so, the result is, no one is able to live a sinless life. We are unable not to sin (3:23; Genesis 8:21; Psalms 51:5; 58:3; 1 Kings 8:46; Jeremiah 17:9; Ephesians 2:3). Although we were first born physically, we must now be born for a second time spiritually – born again (John 3:5-7; 1 Peter 1:3; 1 Corinthians 15:22) – into a new spiritual life to have a relationship with God. This new birth is entirely the work of the Holy Spirit when we come to a saving faith in the Son of God, Christ Jesus our Lord. Paul contrasts our state in sin and our state in rebirth in 6:11 when he says we are "**dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.**"

*vv. 13-14*

Paul interrupts his thought in verses 13 and 14 to prove sin and death have indeed been passed on to all people because of Adam's transgression. This is evident because he begins these verses with "**for.**" Paul's argument may be outlined as follows:<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Hodge, 149-150.

1. Based on Genesis 2:17, death is the punishment for the transgression of God's command.
2. People died between the time of Adam and Moses (v. 14a).
3. The law of Moses was given after this time (v. 13b).
4. So, death during the time between Adam and Moses could not have been a violation of the law of Moses. "Law" refers to the Mosaic law. (v. 13).
5. Death could not have been a result of violating the natural law of conscience since even infants who had not broken any law or sinned died. So, death was not the result of transgressing the Mosaic law, nor breaking natural law.
6. Therefore, it follows death between Adam and Moses was because of the sin of Adam. Adam, as humanity's head, passed on death to everyone.

What seems evident in Paul's teaching is that all people are born not in the state of Adam *before* his transgression – in an innocent state – but in the state of Adam *after* his disobedience. Until we are "born again (from above)" spiritually, we have no possibility of a relationship with God (John 3:3, 7; 1 Peter 1:3, 23). Those born again experience eternal life even though they will die physically because of Adam's sin and God's condemnation of him. Although we die physically, because we are alive spiritually, we will one day also be alive physically in the new heaven and earth. Because of Christ's bodily resurrection, we can look forward to the day when we will be physically resurrected. As Paul states elsewhere:

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man [Adam] came death, by a man [Christ] has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. (1 Corinthians 15:20-22)

*v. 13*

The phrase **“sin was in the world”**<sup>129</sup> means all people are sinners. The phrase **“before the law was given”** means all people were sinners before the Mosaic law and were treated as sinners. The phrase, **“but sin is not counted where there is no law,”** means their sin is not taken into account in the same way as a sin against a specific law of God. However, since people are born under the condemnation of spiritual and physical death, there must be such a law which was broken and for that sin to be counted.<sup>130</sup> The next verse explains what sin this was.

*v. 14*

The phrase **“yet death reigned from Adam to Moses”** means everyone was subject to this punishment of death before the law of Moses was given. And the phrase **“even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam”** means people died who had not sinned as Adam sinned; that is, disobeyed a particular command from God. Therefore, the ultimate cause of their spiritual and physical death was Adam's disobedience (sin). As Hodge writes, “if verse 12 teaches that men are subject to death on account of the sin of Adam, ... and verses 13-14 are designed to prove the assertion of verse 12, then it follows that the apostle should show that death comes on those who have no personal or actual sins to answer for.” And this is what is implied by the last phrase.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> The Bible does not say much about the origins of sin. Sin was in the angelic realm before Adam's sin (Genesis 3; Revelation 12:17-19). But how that occurred is not explained (Job 4:18; Matthew 25:41).

<sup>130</sup> Other interpreters (Calvin, Luther) understand this phrase to mean, when there is no law, people do not see themselves as sinners. That is, they need to have a law to know what sin is (7:8). Although this is true, it is unlikely this is the intent here.

<sup>131</sup> This interpretation does not mean people who lived outside the law of Moses were not punished for their own sins. They even knew in their hearts, as part of their nature, they deserved death for their sins (1:32). However, their sins were not counted (imputed) as Adam's transgression. As Hodge writes, “No one feels that there is any inconsistency in asserting that men and women today, although responsible to God for their personal transgressions, are nevertheless born in a state of spiritual death as punishment for the sin of our great ancestor” (Hodge, 153).

Paul ends verse 14 by stating, Adam is “a type of the one who was to come.” In the following verses, he clarifies what he means by this. Adam is the federal head of the age of death, while Christ is the head of the age of life. Although both are ‘heads,’ the correspondence between Adam and Christ is an antithesis highlighting their dissimilarities.<sup>132</sup> The fact that even infants die, who have committed no sin of their own, is evidence that all people are imputed with the guilt and punishment of Adam’s sin.

**Adam’s trespass brought death *but* Christ’s free gift brings life (vv. 15-17)**

In verses 15 to 17, Paul contrasts in three different ways the work of one man, Adam, to the work of one man, Jesus Christ. Adam’s trespass resulted in death for all people, “*but*” Christ’s free gift resulted in life for all people. Paul wants us to meditate on these verses’ great dissimilarity between Adam and Christ. Although Paul contrasts the two, there is a danger that we misinterpret him in thinking only that Christ is a better Adam. Paul wants to show in these contrasts, Christ is *infinitely* different from Adam. Christ is not just different in degree but in kind.

*Contrast 1—Adam’s self-assertion versus Christ’s self-sacrifice (v. 15)*

The difference between the two acts could not be more apparent. Adam rebelled directly against the simplest of God’s direct commands, “of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for the day you eat you will surely die” (Genesis 2:16). This “*trespass*” was so great, we call it the fall of mankind. In contrast to Adam’s self-assertion is Christ’s “*free gift*” of grace—the gift of Christ’s forgiveness and righteousness—resulting from his obedient self-sacrificial death on the cross. The “*free gift*” which leads to eternal life is through Christ (v. 21). This does not mean everyone is saved. Instead, the free gift of grace is offered to everyone, and all who receive it will be saved. The effect of Adam’s disobedience was that “*many died.*” Given the context of the passage, the “*many*” means “*all*” (v. 18). Death means both physical and spiritual death.

We should also note, Paul’s purpose is not to show, Christ’s blessings are greater than Adam’s curse. Rather his purpose is to

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<sup>132</sup> Stott, 154-156.

illustrate the central doctrine of the whole letter, which is, we are justified based on the righteousness of Christ. So, "**much more**" does not mean a higher degree of effectiveness but an absolute certainty.<sup>133</sup>

*Contrast 2—Adam's result versus Christ's immediate result (v. 16)*

The *effect* of the trespass of Adam and the free gift of Christ is the same; both affect everyone. But the *result* is different: Adam's "**one trespass**" brought immediate "**judgment**" and "**condemnation,**" while Christ's free gift "**following many trespasses**" brought immediate "**grace**" and "**justification.**" Adam's sin produced an indescribable amount of pain, suffering, and death. Christ's self-sacrifice stopped this advance of evil. Christ not only stopped it, but he also restored what Adam had lost.

But Jesus is not just a better Adam. Jesus' grace began where Adam's failure ended – with the sins and the sinners of all the world. The scope of the gift of God cannot even be compared to Adam's sin. This is why Paul states, "**And the free gift is not like ...**" It is reasonable to us that Adam's direct disobedience should result in God's predetermined judgment of death. What seems beyond our comprehension is that every sin already committed and will be committed in the future can be forgiven by the "**free gift**" of "**justification**" for those who come to him in faith. God's grace is sufficient for all the world (John 3:16).<sup>134</sup> This degree of grace revealed in God's love is beyond all our understanding.

*Contrast 3—Adam's result versus Christ's ultimate result (v. 17)*

The ultimate result of Adam's trespass is that "**death reigned**" from Adam to Moses and from Moses until Christ's self-sacrificial death on the cross. Again, the trespass of Adam is contrasted with the free gift of righteousness. And once again, the contrast could not be starker. As John Stott writes:

What Christ has done for us is not just to exchange death's kingdom for the much more gentle kingdom of life, while leaving us in the position of subjects. Instead, he delivers us

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<sup>133</sup> Hodge, 158-159.

<sup>134</sup> The *sufficiency* of God's grace makes universal evangelism possible. God's offer of reconciliation is given to everyone. Yet, his grace is only *effective* for the elect.

from the rule of death so radically as to enable us to change places with it and rule over it, or reign in life. We become kings, sharing the kingship of Christ, with even death under our feet now, and one day to be destroyed.<sup>135</sup>

The ultimate result of the “**free gift of righteousness**” is the “**reign of life**” for all who “**receive the abundance of grace**” through which righteousness is offered.

And again, the phrase “**much more**” emphasizes the certainty of this life for those who “**receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness.**” Moreover, in this case, it is not only the certainty but also the quality that is highlighted.

### **Special Topic: Sin, Transgression and Iniquity**

Scripture uses three different words for rebellion against God: sin, transgression and iniquity. It can be helpful to understand the particular meaning of each of these words to give us a deeper understanding of our human nature and our relationship to God.

#### *Sin*

The word for sin is *khata* in Hebrew and *hamartia* in Greek. It is the most frequently used word for rebellion against God and is first used in Genesis 4:7. It is a general word that means “to miss the goal.” It refers to someone shooting an arrow and missing the target. If that is its everyday meaning, what does it mean when used in Scripture? Every human being is made in the “image of God” (Genesis 1:26-27). Therefore, our purpose in life is to glorify God and please him (honour, worship, praise). That is, to reflect who God is. Since we are created in his image, we ought to live in a way that ‘images’ him. And when we sin, we miss this goal for which we were created. God made us for his glory and honour; anything contrary to that brings him dishonour. This is what Paul means when he says, all people “**fall short of the glory of God**” (3:23). Whenever our actions, thoughts, or motives

<sup>135</sup> Stott, 156.

tarnish the image of God, we fall short of being what we were made for: being in the image of God.<sup>136</sup>

When we only focus on sin as disobedience to God's commands, we tend to think that obedience—simply not breaking the rules—is not sinning. But, God wants more from his children. He wants us to grow in holiness. We are to be holy as he is holy (Leviticus 19:11; Matthew 5:48; 1 Peter 1:15-16). We do this as we mature in our faith, knowledge, and love of Jesus. This is called progressive sanctification, the process of becoming holy. When we do this, we become more and more the “image of God” he originally intended us to be. As Paul writes in another place, “And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of God, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is Spirit” (2 Corinthians 3:18). In the same letter, Paul goes on to say, “Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God” (7:1).

So, sin is more than just doing bad things. Paul personifies this sin as a “power” within us; we do what we do not want and don't do what we want to. If this defines sin, then *how* do we fall short (miss the mark) of the glory of God? We sin through our actions of rebellion through **transgression** and **iniquity**. However, to fully understand sin, we must first keep God's love in mind. John tells us, “God is love” (1 John 4:8,16). God wants us to love him and others as ourselves (Mark 12:29-31). When we fail to love God and others, we sin. If we are permitted to put it this way, sin has more to do with breaking God's heart than breaking his laws. And what breaks God's heart most is rejecting his love, a love that resulted in sending his only Son to die in our place even while we were in rebellion against him (5:8).

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<sup>136</sup> It is important, in this discussion, to remember, Jesus is the truly perfect human who was without sin and so is the perfect image of God (Colossians 1:15; 2 Corinthians 4:4). He did not fail or fall short in glorifying His Father perfectly (John 13:31; 14:13; 17:1,4; 21:19; 1 Peter 4:11). And so, when we are in union with Christ, God the Father sees us as holy as his Son is holy.



### *Transgression*

The word for transgression is *pasha* in Hebrew and *paraptoma* in Greek. Transgression means to betray a loyalty or relationship through a willful rebellion. There are many relationships in the Bible (e.g. treaties between two nations). One does not *pasha* against someone but *with* someone. That is, trust is broken or a relationship of trust violated. So, Peter trespassed when he denied Jesus (Mark 14:66-72). Paul uses the word to mean that Adam broke trust with God when he wanted to discern good and evil on his own terms. When we violate a direct command from God, we break trust with him. Transgression, therefore, means intentionally, rather than unintentionally, disobeying God's direct command. Jesus tells us that the two greatest commandments are to love God and our neighbour as ourselves (Matthew 22:36-40). Any violation of these commands is a transgression.

### *Iniquity*

The word for iniquity is *avon* in Hebrew, and *anomia* or *adikia* in Greek. It is often translated as wickedness or lawlessness. It means to make crooked what was straight. It usually refers to a premeditated choice because there is no fear of God. It often refers to those who have abandoned God entirely. However, it does not just refer to behaviour but also its consequences. To punish such behaviour is to visit *avon* upon him. Cain said, "My *avon* (punishment) is greater than I can bear." In the wilderness, Israel tested God by demanding meat, so God gave them "winged birds like the sand of the sea" (Psalm 78:27) and "they ate and were filled, for he gave them what they craved" (v. 29). Yet, "before they had satisfied their craving, while the food was still in their mouths, the anger of God rose against them" (vv. 30-31). When the Israelites refused to believe Caleb and Joshua that God would fight for them and, instead, refused to enter the promised land, God gave them what they desired, so they remained in the wilderness (Exodus 14:2, 28-29, 34). Or when Jeremiah said, the nations Babylon destroyed would also destroy Babylon (Jeremiah 25:12-14).

The consequence of (the sin of) iniquity is (the punishment of) iniquity. This is the primary way the Bible talks about God's response to *avon*. Letting people experience the result or

consequences of their *avon*. This is what is meant by “to bear” or “to carry your iniquity.” Surprisingly, this is the dignity God gives to people. God gives people what they want, which becomes their punishment (Numbers 11:4-6, 31-35).

Similarly, when Israel worshiped idols rather than God, they became like idols, becoming an image of an idol rather than an image of God. This is why John, quoting Isaiah (Isaiah 6:10), writes, “He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, lest they see with their eyes, and understand with their heart, and turn and I would heal them” (John 12:40). The curse of worshiping an idol is to become like an idol, spiritually blind, without a heart for God, and without any understanding of God. But the Bible also talks about God carrying the *avon* for the people (Psalm 32:5; Isaiah 53:6; Titus 2:14).

However, it should be noted, God forgives sin, transgression, and even iniquity when there is true repentance (Exodus 34:6). He is a merciful God, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness (Psalm 86:15). Our response to his forgiveness must be worshipful reverence (fear) (Psalm 130:4).

### **Christ’s marvellous, infinite, matchless grace is greater than all our sins (vv. 18-21)**

Paul begins this final section with the opening words in Greek “**Consequently therefore.**” Translations usually do not include both adverbs, but we can see his emphasis in the original language. Paul began comparing our fall of Adam and our restoration in Christ in verse 12. He interrupted this comparison in verses 13 and 14 to prove, all people are condemned to death as a result of the sin of Adam. Paul then had to show how Christ was much more than Adam. He did this in verses 15 and 17. Paul has shown we are condemned by one man, Adam, and justified by one Man, Christ Jesus.

Paul now returns to verse 12 and adds three more summary comparisons between Adam and Christ. The structure of the verses changes to “*just as ... so also.*” Just as one man’s disobedience and trespass brought the curse of death, so also one man’s righteousness and obedience bring the blessing of eternal life. The similarity and dissimilarity between Adam and Christ

are highlighted in the single act of disobedience and the single act of obedience, affecting each one of us. In each case, we have done nothing. Although we had done nothing, we were born spiritually dead because of Adam's trespass and, also, though we have done nothing, we are born again, are spiritually alive and declared righteous in Christ. Therefore, the reference to "**one man**" is the federal headship of Adam and Christ.

*Comparison 1—One trespass compared to one act of righteousness*

*v. 18*

Just as one trespass of Adam's has led to the condemnation (i.e., death) of "**all**" humanity, so also the one act of Christ's righteousness leads to justification and life for "**all**" humanity. The "**one trespass**" refers to Adam's disobedience in eating from the Tree of Knowledge. The "**one act of righteousness**" refers to Christ's entire earthly life of obedience, including his perfect life, death and resurrection. Paul highlights how the one act of each federal head affects all mankind. One led to condemnation; the other led to justification and life.

The use of the word "**all**" does not imply universal salvation (2 Thessalonians 1:9). All those who are in union with Adam – which is all of humanity – are condemned, while all who are in union with Christ are justified by his righteousness, i.e. a righteousness that is freely offered to all humankind. For God "desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:4; see also Ezekiel 18:23; 32).

*Comparison 2 – One disobedience compared to one act of obedience*

*v. 19*

Paul draws a parallel statement from verse 18, but this time he highlights the nature of the acts. Adam's disobedience *made* us sinners; Christ's obedience *makes* us righteous in him. The verb "**made**" means all humanity was regarded in a legal sense (counted, imputed) as sinful in union with Adam. Similarly, the obedience of Christ is the basis on which those who are in union with him are regarded in a legal sense (counted, imputed) as righteous. In Adam, we are declared guilty, and in Christ, we are declared righteous.

*v. 20 What about Moses?*

Paul has been contrasting and comparing Adam with Christ. But his Jewish readers might well be wondering about Moses. They may be thinking, when the law of Moses came, the reign of death introduced by Adam ended. Paul emphatically rejects any such idea. Rather than ending the reign of death, the law revealed knowledge and conviction of sin. This would have been shocking to the Jews to hear, the **“law came to increase the trespass.”** They thought the law brought righteousness. He had already stated, **“through the law comes knowledge of sin”** (3:20). And in fact, the law turns sin into a transgression (4:15; Galatians 3:19), and even more surprisingly, Paul later states, **“apart from the law sin lies dead”** (7:8). These are all very negative statements about the law intended to correct the Jewish understanding of the law’s purpose. Later, Paul will also have many positive things to say about the law (7:12).

In the last part of verse 20, Paul states that God’s grace matches and **“abounded all the more”** when **“sin increased.”** It may be that Paul thinks sin increased to its absolute climax in the rejection and death of the Son of God on the cross. But instead of sin defeating God, God’s grace on the cross abounded even over that ultimate sin.

*Comparison 3 – Sin reigns in death compared to grace reigning in eternal life*

*v. 21*

Paul’s final comparison between Adam and Christ focuses on life and death. The comparison is between the reign of sin and the reign of grace. The verse begins with **“so that”** indicating this is God’s divine plan. In the domain of darkness introduced by Adam, we were captives unable to escape from the control of sin. The phrase **“sin reigned in death”** means that spiritual and physical death resulted from sin. But when grace came in the form of Christ’s self-sacrificial death on the cross, he introduced the kingdom of grace. And this kingdom leads to **“eternal life.”** This indeed is a marvelous, matchless, infinite grace sufficient to forgive all sins. It is a grace incomprehensible. And we who have accepted this grace will have an eternity to glory in its wonder and love.

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### **Special Topic: Questions that arise from this passage**

As mentioned at the beginning of this passage, there are many questions and interpretations concerning the extent and significance of Adam's transgression and Christ's obedience. We will deal with three of them here.

*How was Jesus born without Adam's condemnation?*

The teaching on original or inherited sin raises the question of how Jesus was born without the guilt or corruption of human nature as a result of Adam's transgression. We first need to understand that Scripture teaches that Jesus was sinless.

You know that he appeared in order to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. (1 John 3:5)

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5:21)

He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. (1 Peter 2:22)

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. (Hebrews 4:15)

But then, in 5:12 we read, "**just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned.**" How then was Jesus not affected by Adam's transgression?

The most common answer to this question has been to point out, the virgin birth of Jesus protected him against the imputation of Adam's guilt. Certainly, the angel Gabriel's prophecy makes it clear, Jesus will be born sinless:

The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God (Luke 1:35).

Since inherited sin is associated with Adam and since Jesus was born of Mary, the argument is made that Jesus did not descend from Adam, breaking the transmission of moral corruption and legal guilt.

However, Scripture nowhere asserts that the transmission of sin comes physically through the father alone. Although the consequence of Adam's sin is imputed to everyone born of natural descent, nothing states that inherited sin comes through natural birth. Inherited sin, as a *divine* imputation for each person, is better understood when God creates new life in the womb. In this case, Jesus can be the human son of Mary without God imputing to him the sin of Adam. There is a great mystery in the virgin birth, and we should not quickly try to reduce it to our rational understanding. As well, since Jesus was born sinless and without the taint of Adam's transgression, this does not make him less human. In fact, it makes him, in a sense, more human since he was born in the way Adam was created before the Fall; sinless.

*How does inherited sin affect infants and the unborn?*

One of the most challenging questions concerns the salvation of the unborn and children who die in infancy. This question can result in great anguish and doubt for Christian parents who take Scripture seriously. There are, of course, quick answers to this question. Some will say all infants go to heaven because the alternative is unimaginable. Others will say only 'elect' infants will go to heaven while the 'non-elect' infants do not. Neither of these answers is acceptable. Here is why.

The universalist answer is not unbiblical. First, inherited sin is explicitly taught. We are born spiritually dead. Second, the only provision for salvation is through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus. And only those who confess him as Lord and Saviour are justified. And the answer found in Scripture must consider that infants are born with a sinful nature. So, the church, from its beginning, has struggled to come to a satisfying answer. One of the first solutions was that only baptized infants went to heaven. But there is no scriptural support for this position either. Other early church teachers stated that infants would have an opportunity to come to Christ after death. But again, this was merely speculation.

Others who base their understanding on election have more of a biblical foundation. The Bible does teach God chooses persons before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:3-14). Then, the question is: which infants are elect and which are not?

And does the Bible support the position *all* infants who die in infancy are elect? I believe this latter position is what the Bible teaches. Here is why.

To begin with, we affirm that the Bible teaches that all children inherit Adam's sin from conception. We also acknowledge that God is sovereign over salvation and that we are saved only by his undeserved gift of grace. The basis then for my position, *all* infants are elect, is the following:

1. All people face the final judgment seat of Christ (Revelation 20:11-15) and are judged, *not* based on Adam's transgression, but on their *own* sins committed during their lifetime (2:5-6; 14:10; Matthew 25:31-32; 2 Corinthians 5:10). And the sin by which people will be condemned is their rejection of Jesus Christ. As John wrote, "whoever does not believe is condemned already because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God" (John 3:18-21). Infants are not able to commit this sin.
2. As mentioned earlier, inherited sin results in spiritual and physical death. This means we cannot respond to God without the work of the Holy Spirit. It does not teach, we are eternally punished in hell for Adam's sin; that is eternal death (Genesis 2:17; 3:23-24; 5:5).
3. We do not believe infants have committed any sin of their own. When God judged the Israelites to die in the wilderness during their forty years of wandering, he declared concerning their children, "And as for your *little ones*, who you said would become a prey, and your children, whom today have *no knowledge of good or evil*, they shall go in there. And to them, I will give it, and they shall possess it" (Deuteronomy 1:39). These children would not be judged because of their father's sins.
4. Jesus himself instructed his disciples when he said, "Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God." (Mark 10:14). These passages speak directly to infant salvation. Infants have no knowledge of good or evil and have not committed any sins of their own. They,

therefore, all die secure in the grace of God.<sup>137</sup> So we believe our gracious Lord and Saviour receives all children who die, including those who die in the womb or are aborted.

Other theologians, such as Charles Hodge, also believe infants who die go to heaven, but he approaches the question differently. Hodge takes a broad view of 5:18-19. There it states, **“by the offence of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life. For as by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous”** (KJV). In interpreting these verses, Hodge states, “we have no right to put any limit on these general terms, except what the Bible itself places upon them. The Scriptures nowhere exclude any class of infants, baptized or unbaptized, born in Christian or heathen lands, of believing or unbelieving parents, from the benefits of the redemption of Christ.”<sup>138</sup> Hodge goes on to say that only those whom Scripture expressly reveals as not inheriting the kingdom of God are lost. He argues this is consistent with Matthew 7:14 because that passage refers to adults and not to infants with no such knowledge.

*Does this passage teach universal salvation?*

Paul’s comparison of Adam and Christ has resulted in some commentators concluding that Paul teaches universal salvation for all people. They base this understanding on verse 18, where Paul says that just as Adam’s **“trespass led to condemnation for all men”** so also Christ’s **“one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men.”** The emphasis on **“all”** is taken as inclusive of all people in the world. And again, in verse 19, Paul reiterates, this time using the term **“many.”** Most commentators understand the reference to **“many”** in verse 19 to refer to the **“all”** of verse 18.

However, it is clear from other passages in Romans, it is only through faith anyone is justified (1:16f; 3:21ff; 4:1ff). Since it is

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<sup>137</sup> It is worth noting that this is the position of many major Protestant theologians including John Newton, B.B. Warfield, and Charles Spurgeon.

<sup>138</sup> Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 29-30.



evident that not all people have faith, it is also apparent that not all will be justified. How, then, can we understand these verses? As we have already stated, we have all inherited the condemnation of Adam's transgression. The result of this condemnation is physical and spiritual death. And so, we are unable to respond to God without the regeneration of the Holy Spirit, making us spiritually alive. Christ's one act of righteousness accomplishes this on our behalf. That one act results in sufficient grace for the sins of all people.

Although it is *sufficient*, grace is not *effective* unless we receive the life in Christ through the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, as John Stott points out, we have good reason to be confident that a very large number will be saved.<sup>139</sup> Stott gives three reasons for this. First, Paul uses kingdom language in comparing and contrasting the "**reign**" of death to the reign of life and the reign of grace to the reign of sin (v. 21). Second, Paul also uses superlative language to describe grace. Words such as "**abounded**" (vv. 15, 21), "**abundance**" (v. 17). Third, in making these comparisons Paul consistently states, the reign of grace is "**much more**" (vv. 15, 17) and "**not like**" (v. 16) the reign of death.

Stott concludes from this, the work of Christ will be far more effective than the work of Adam. Quoting John Calvin, he writes, "the grace of Christ 'belongs to a greater number than the condemnation contracted by the first man'. For 'if the fall of Adam had the effect of producing the ruin of many, the grace of God is much more efficacious in benefiting many, since it is granted that Christ is much more powerful to save than Adam was to destroy. In Revelation, we are told there will be "a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages" (Revelation 7:9). When we look at history, this does not seem possible. We are not told how God will achieve this. But with God, all things are possible.

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<sup>139</sup> Stott, 159-162.

## Questions for Reflection

### Study it

1. [5:1a] What is the basis of the blessings Paul describes in this chapter?
2. [5:1b] What is the biblical definition of “peace”? Where did peace come from, and how do we receive it?
3. [5:2a] What does “grace” refer to in this context?
4. [5:2b] What is the biblical definition of “hope”? Why is biblical hope different from ordinary human hope? What is “the glory of God”?
5. [5:3-5] Why would Paul call “suffering” a blessing?
6. [5:6-8] What is the person's spiritual condition for whom Christ died? Is this surprising?
7. [5:9-10] How is salvation past, present and future?
8. [5:11] In what should we boast and rejoice? Why?
9. [5:12-13] Why is there death in this world? How is Adam's sin our sin? How is 'original sin' defined? How does Adam's sin affect all people?
10. [5:15-17] How are Adam and Christ contrasted?
11. [5:18-19, 21] How are Adam and Christ compared?
12. [5:20] Why does Paul refer to Moses in this verse?

### Live it

1. Do you experience any of the seven blessings mentioned in 5:1-11? Which do you experience more and which less? Why do you think this is?
2. Have you experienced suffering for Christ? How would you describe this experience as a blessing?
3. How do you know God loves you? Do you agree with the notes that you can do nothing to increase or decrease God's love for you? How do you experience God's love in your life?
4. Did you think of yourself as an enemy of God before you were reconciled to him?

5. What is the significance of the three kinds of death mentioned? Does this give you more joy in being “born again”?
6. How do you respond to being told that you inherited Adam’s sin and guilt at your birth? What questions does this raise for you? How do you resolve them?

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## Lesson 6: Freedom from Sin (6:1-23)

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In chapter 5, Paul taught that we have peace with God through Christ because we have been justified – counted righteous in our union with Christ – through faith in him. As a result, we can stand before him knowing that we stand in a loving relationship because of the work of the cross and the experience of the Holy Spirit. And so we rejoice in the hope of the eternal life we will receive. Although we were born spiritually dead, Christ has made us alive (“born again”) through the regenerating work of the Spirit. The emphasis in chapter 5 is on the sovereignty of God’s grace to us and, therefore, the assurance we have in our salvation. He alone can save us from our hopeless condition. This is why we can **“rejoice in the hope of the glory of God”** (5:2).

We know what we were before our justification and what we will be in glory, but what about now? How are we to live as Christians now between the time of our conversion—our spiritual birth—and the future time of our physical death or Christ’s return? Do we go on living as we have always done? Do we have any blessings in our future life now? Or do we treat our conversion as an insurance policy guaranteed by God himself? Paul has repeatedly dealt with these questions while preaching the gospel throughout his missionary journeys. And so, he also anticipates, the people in the church in Rome would ask these same questions. Two significant issues have repeatedly arisen due to Paul preaching the gospel. Both problems have to do with the law.

First, Paul consistently taught that by obedience to the law, —“**works of the law**”—no one can be righteous before God. Rather, righteousness is a gift from God given to those who put their hope in Christ. Some believers concluded from this, it did not matter what one does since God is love and full of grace, and he will always forgive us. In other words, the more we sin, the more God’s grace is revealed, so it is better to sin more. Such people are called *antinominalists* (against the law), and many are with us even in our churches today. Paul deals with this misrepresentation of the gospel in chapter 6.

The second issue concerned the purpose of the Mosaic law. It is clear from Scripture that God gave the law and that it represents his holiness. Therefore, some people cannot give up on the idea; they must contribute to their own righteousness through obedience to the law. And again, from the history of the Christian church, we know this has been a continuing problem. These people are *legalists*, and Paul will address their issue in chapter 7. Both problems result from Paul's teaching on justification by grace alone through faith alone. So Paul's concern in chapters 6 and 7 is not independent instruction on sanctification; instead, they result directly from the implication of the doctrine of justification.

Chapter 6 begins a more extensive section that includes chapters 7 and 8 concerning our ongoing life in Christ. In each chapter, he starts with our release from the law by our inclusion into the saving death and resurrection of Christ (6:1-14; 7:1-6; 8:1-11); and only then to the result of our inclusion in our present life (6:15-23; 7:7-25; 8:12-39). Each chapter ends with the grace and love of God we now experience in our union in Christ (6:23; 7:25; 8:39).

### **Union with Christ in death, resurrection and life (6:1-14)**

Paul has just said the Mosaic law, rather than bringing righteousness, was given **"to increase the trespass"** and **"where sin increased grace abounded all the more"** (5:20). These two statements, which are foundational to the gospel, would have raised two questions from Paul's readers. First, if the law does not bring righteousness, but as sin increases, grace increases even more, shouldn't we sin even more **"that grace may abound"** even more (v. 1)? And second, since the law no longer applies, why not live as sinful a life as we please **"because we are not under the law but under grace"** (v. 15)? Paul emphatically answers **"no"** to both these questions and then explains why. We can place both these positions under **"cheap grace."**

*vv. 1-2*

When Paul begins this section with **"what shall we say then?"** he asks how God's gracious acceptance of sinners, without any work on their part but through faith in Christ, determines how we should now live. Paul just finished describing God's plan and

assurance of salvation; despite the rebellion of all people beginning with Adam, God had sent his Son through whom we receive justification and life. He states that Israel was also in rebellion even though it had the law. And the law, rather than bringing righteousness, increased transgression. This culminated in the ultimate rebellion of crucifying God's own Son on the cross. But grace abounded even more (5:20-21), and the cross resulted in God's justice and love to be sufficient for all the sins of the world.

However, because of Paul's emphasis on grace and our inability to contribute to our own righteousness, some people hearing this gospel misunderstood what Paul was saying; they either thought they could live as before they became Christians, while others accused Paul of promoting sin.<sup>140</sup> They reasoned that if grace abounds all the more, then Paul was teaching, the greater their sin, the greater God's grace.

Paul again uses the diatribe style by asking their question, "**Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?**" Not surprisingly, he responds with great emotion to this reasoning with an emphatic, "**by no means!**" And then immediately provides the key reason: because we have "**died to sin.**" And because we have died to sin, we can no longer "**live in [sin]**" (v. 2). This is the Christian's new relationship to sin after being born spiritually.

But what exactly does it mean that we have died to sin, particularly when it is still possible to sin? Paul contrasts our death to sin and life in Christ to answer this question using the imagery of baptism and our union with Christ. He ends by stating in verse 14, "**sin will have no dominance over you.**" So, "**died to sin**" does not mean we are dead, but it means, sin no longer reigns over the Christian; that is, sin has lost its power over the believer. Throughout this passage, Paul uses words like "**dominion**" and "**reign**" to show we have been rescued from the dominion and reign of darkness and sin and been transferred into the kingdom of light and grace. "**Died to sin**" is in the past and refers specifically to Christ's death and our relationship to his death (cf. vv. 3-4). The punishment for sin is death and I deserved

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<sup>140</sup> It is worth noting that this was also the argument against Martin Luther and other reformers.

to die. Christ, my Substitute, died for me. And so in union with Christ, I died with Christ (see verse 6). "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who lives but Christ who lives in me. The life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loves me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20).

Paul is not saying, Christians do not sin but that we must not "**continue**" or "**remain**" (NET) in sin. This phrase pertains to Christians who live in sin and refuse to change their sinful habits. Although we sin individually because of our union with Christ, the reign of grace gives us the power not to sin continually; that is, continue to live in it. Deliverance from sin is not just forgiveness of sins and its penalty but also its power to overcome sin. So, Paul urges us to be what we are, citizens of heaven and not of this world. Paul now describes all this in more detail in verses 3 through 13 and then sums it all up again in one profound declaration in verse 14.

### **United with Christ in his death and resurrection (vv. 3-11)**

The question raised in verse 2 remains: how or in what way have we died to sin? In these verses, verses 3 through 11, Paul gives us the answer; it is through our union with Christ. Our union with Christ brings us freedom from the dominance of sin's power and frees us to live for God (v. 10). Union with Christ is Paul's fundamental way of describing a Christian. He does not call anyone a Christian but uses the phrase "*in Christ*" or, in this passage, even more directly "**united with him**." It is unusual that he uses baptism to describe our union. In the preceding passage (5:12-21), he has just explained how we were *in Adam* but now are *in Christ*. We were *named* in Adam; that is, the name of Adam defines who we were and to whom we belonged. When Christ came, he gave us a new name (Matthew 28:19). We are no longer *in Adam* but *in Christ*. So, baptism is a public *naming* ceremony, or better, a *re-naming* ceremony, where we set aside the name of Adam and take the name of Christ. There are other naming ceremonies in human society, such as marriage or citizen ceremonies when one becomes a citizen of a new country. Most importantly, parents name their newborn children, making them part of their family by name. There are also many name changes in Scripture (Genesis 17:5, 15; 32:28; 2 Samuel 12:24-25; Mark 3:16;

Acts 13:9). Each has spiritual significance. This is also true for Christians. Jesus said to baptize “into the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit.” We take on the “name” of the Trinity in our baptism, thereby joining God’s family.<sup>141</sup>

*vv. 3-4*

Paul begins with “**Do you not know,**” referring to what he just said in verses 1 and 2. Anyone who does not know that a Christian no longer lives under the dominion of sin does not understand the meaning of “**died to sin.**” So he now explains further the basis or reason why we who have “**died to sin**” should no longer “**live in it.**” There are two things that God alone has done that we can count on. First, our union with Christ means that we have “**died**” *with* Christ; second, it also means that we are now “**alive**” *in* Christ. Our old self (*in* Adam) has been crucified with him, and we now live (who we are in Christ) because Christ lives to glorify God (v. 10).

Paul begins by reminding his readers of the significance of being “**baptized into Christ Jesus.**” To fully understand what baptism means for the Christian, we must first recognize that it points to Jesus Christ and our union in him. Therefore, it is primarily a sign of what Christ has done for us. We tend to focus on what baptism says to others about ourselves and our faith in Christ. And so, we often relate baptism to our initial decision for Christ. When we focus on ourselves, we lose the blessing baptism is meant to be. Instead, Paul instructs us to focus on what baptism says about Christ and what he has done for us.<sup>142</sup>

The first thing Paul tells us is our baptism is in union with Christ and we have been “**buried with him.**” Baptism symbolizes that we have been “**crucified with him**” (v. 6). His death becomes our death (Galatians 2:20). Baptism is the appointed means of professing faith in him by publicly swearing allegiance to him in his death and resurrection. Christ’s death on the cross becomes our death in our union with him. And, if we have died with Christ, we are also “**raised from the dead**” so “**we too might walk in newness of life.**” We share in Christ’s death so we might

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<sup>141</sup> This is the reason, in some Christian traditions, the person baptized is given a new name by which they are now called.

<sup>142</sup> Ferguson, 87.



share in his life. The main point Paul makes then is, we are freed from the reign of sin because of our union with Christ in his death and resurrection. Since death releases one from all obligation and control, our death, in union with Christ, has freed us from sin's power. How can someone who swore allegiance to Christ continue to live in sin? It simply is not possible. Although Christ's death was for our justification, our justification *is the foundation* of our sanctification; that is, we may "**walk in newness of life.**"

Significantly, Paul uses baptism to describe our union with Christ. Baptism in these two verses implies water baptism rather than baptism in the Spirit. Paul usually uses "**to baptize**" to mean water baptism (1 Corinthians 1:13-17; 12:13; 15:29; Galatians 3:27). As well, the command of Jesus (Matthew 28:19), the importance of baptism to the early church, and particularly the reference to "**through baptism**" (v. 4 NASB, NIV, NET) makes any other type of baptism unlikely.<sup>143</sup> However, we need to remember that for Paul, water baptism and baptism in the Spirit go together since both occur at conversion.<sup>144</sup> Paul himself, experienced water baptism immediately at his conversion (Acts 9:18). However, even more importantly, Paul's emphasis and concern in this passage is not baptism but union with Christ.

Interpreters have several explanations of this close relationship of baptism to union with Christ. Some view baptism as the only way we are joined to Christ. However, given Paul's emphasis on faith as the *instrument* by which we receive justification, it is not possible that he now adds baptism as a kind of work. Others view baptism as a *symbol* or *picture* of what occurred at the moment of conversion. In this case, going under the water symbolizes death to our old life and being raised out of the water symbolizes being raised to new life. This is a profound image of our total identification with Christ in his atoning work for our sins on the cross and his resurrection which gives life. But is that all it is?

Douglas Moo points out, "Paul, however, does not say that we experience a death or burial, or resurrection 'like' Christ's;

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<sup>143</sup> Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit*, 140.

<sup>144</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 307.

rather, Paul claims that we died ‘with’ Christ (vv. 5, 6, 8), that we were ‘buried with him’ (v. 4), and that we will be raised with him (vv. 5, 8).<sup>145</sup> Paul does not say baptism is a symbol or picture. He does say, “**we were buried with him through baptism into death.**” Baptism actually does something. So, baptism cannot be simply a symbolic picture or illustration of the profound richness of our union with Christ.

But, if this is so, how do we avoid baptism from becoming the means by which we are saved? The answer lies in the understanding of conversion as being a set of events including grace, new birth, faith, repentance, the gift (baptism) of the Holy Spirit and water baptism. All these are part of our salvation. So, water baptism is not an isolated event but part of a larger complex of events bringing us into union with Christ.<sup>146</sup> The importance of baptism is that it points directly to a profound spiritual reality. This spiritual reality is the transformation that takes place at conversion when we die to sin and live for God. As James Dunn points out, “It is as real an event in our spiritual history and experience as our share in the future consummation will be.”<sup>147</sup> Just as we were born physically in union with Adam, we are now born spiritually in union with Christ. We now have a new name to whom we belong as an adopted child of God.

Paul also states, Christ was raised from the dead “**by the glory of the Father.**” God’s glory is his infinite worth and holiness revealed in this world. Therefore, Christ’s death and his resurrection demonstrated God’s holiness, mercy, faithfulness, compassion, power, and love.

Paul does not compare Christ’s resurrection with our bodily resurrection, symbolized by being raised from the water at baptism. As we will see in verse 5, our bodily resurrection occurs as a future event. Here in verse 4, Christ’s resurrection is paralleled with our being able to “**walk in newness of life.**” This

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<sup>145</sup> Moo, *Encounter*, 96.

<sup>146</sup> Some interpreters have attempted to define a strict chronological order to all the events of salvation but it may be best to understand them as a collective whole. Of course, baptism does come in time after regeneration and justification (born again), and so can be viewed as evidence of our adoption.

<sup>147</sup> Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit*, 143.

new spiritual life is only through our union with him; because Christ lives in us, we can live like him. As part of our salvation, baptism is so significant that it affects every aspect of who we are. In the next verse (v. 5), Paul explains how this happens.

*v. 5 The meaning and result of our union with Christ*

Paul now makes explicit the *meaning* of our union with Christ. He reiterates if we are “**united with him,**” we are also united with him in his death. “**United**” is key. Believers are united or in union or simply *in* him (8:1; John 15:4; Ephesians 1:3-4; Philippians 1:1; Colossians 1:2). Here, our union with Christ looks forward to a time when we “**shall certainly**” also be resurrected bodily as he was. Note as well, the significance of our death and future resurrection is not identical to Christ but is “**like his.**” Only Christ died as a sinless sacrifice for us, and only Christ’s resurrection defeated and destroyed death.

Although Paul normally sees our resurrection as occurring when Christ returns (Philippians 3:21; Colossians 3:4), he also understands that we already experience that future glory in our life on earth. As he writes to the church in Colossae:

having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. (Colossians 2:12)

And as he said in verse 4, “**we too might walk in the newness of life.**” This is the *result* of our union with Christ. “**Newness of life**” also means we are “**no longer enslaved to sin**” (v. 6). We have freedom from sin in our union with Christ, so we are not to “**continue in sin**” (v. 1). Every aspect of our lives is affected.

The key that holds all this together is our union with Christ. It is a tremendously important part of Paul’s teaching throughout his letters. He uses the phrase, “**in Christ,**” at least seventy times. This is how we must think of ourselves in our relationship with Christ. Everything we have, we have because of this union. As Paul wrote to the church in Corinth:

And because of him you are **in Christ Jesus**, who became to us *wisdom* from God, *righteousness* and *sanctification* and *redemption*, so that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.” (1 Corinthians 1:30-31)

So, in our union with Christ, we receive “*wisdom*” removing our blindness and ignorance of God and giving us true knowledge of God; we receive “*righteousness*,” replacing our guilt and condemnation with peace with God; we receive “*sanctification*,” that triumphs over our corruption and sin so we can walk in newness of life; and we receive “*redemption*” that transfers us from the realm of darkness and death into God’s realm of light and life. We accomplish none of this on our own but only in our union with Christ, who has given us all these things by his grace. On that great and final day, when we stand in reverent fear of God before his throne, he will pronounce us justified *in* Christ and there will be no condemnation because we are *in* Christ. And so we will live for all eternity *in* Christ, honouring, glorifying and worshipping him in all wisdom and without any sin. What a day to look forward to!

*vv. 6-7 The purpose of our union with Christ: Crucifixion*

In these verses, Paul highlights the *purpose* of our union with Christ. In doing so, he points back to our union with Adam (See 5:12-21). The reference to “*old self*,” or better “*old man*” (KJV), is our union with Adam which has now been “**crucified with him [Christ].**”

Our union with Christ means his crucifixion became our crucifixion – once and for all– and his resurrection became our new life. Though we were spiritually dead *in* Adam, we are now born again into new spiritual life *in* Christ. We were born children of wrath, but now we are re-born (born again) as children of life. This is a complete and whole transformation. It is not partial. We are not still partially united with Adam and partially with Christ. This is what Paul had also written to the Galatian church:

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Galatians 2:20)

Such a radical change must reveal itself in a new way of living.

Paul gives two purposes for our dying with Christ. First, it is so “**the body of sin be brought to nothing.**” The phrase, “**body of sin**,” refers to our sinful state (7:18; Colossians 2:11; 3:5). The

purpose of our crucifixion with Christ is not only that we are forgiven but that the power of sin is brought to nothing (5:21). And second, we are no longer “enslaved by sin.” That is, we no longer live in bondage to sin (6:1-2; 8:4; Galatians 5:16-25; Ephesians 4:22-24; Colossians 3:5-10; John 8:34; Hebrews 2:14-16).

Paul’s radical description of the crucifixion of the old man does not entirely agree with our experience as Christians. Without doubt, we still sin. In Paul’s letter to the church in Ephesus, he writes, we are “to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires” (Ephesians 4:22; cf. Colossians 3:9-10). Here the description is not so radical. How are we to understand this? Some interpreters say our crucifixion takes a long time to complete, and so it describes our entire earthly life as a Christian – each day we need to crucify the old man. But Paul uses the past tense when he says, “**our old self was crucified.**” It is also important to remember we cannot crucify ourselves, and so we cannot crucify our “old man.” And thankfully, we are not asked to do so. The “old man” has *already* been crucified with Christ on the cross. What was crucified was all of us that existed before being born again. We do not need to get rid of him, nor could we if we tried. Christ has already put our union with Adam to death on our behalf. Therefore, we are called to live who we already are in union with Christ. We are not to continue in sin (v. 1) – to live as if we are still in Adam – but to live as we really are in Christ.

It is essential, therefore, to distinguish between “old man” which is dead and gone and “body of sin” which is our sinful human condition that is still subject to sin (8:23). Our ability to sin (“flesh”) remains in our members (vv. 12-14). This is why we still so easily sin. Satan does not have power over us but he still can continue to deceive us (John 8:44; Revelation 12:9; 20:3, 8, 10).<sup>148</sup> But, this does not change the fact, we are entirely a new creation. This is the *already* and *not-yet* of our present salvation. Our “old man” has already been crucified with Christ, but not yet has our “body of sin” – sinful state – been destroyed. And our hope – our joyful assured expectation – is that one day we will also

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<sup>148</sup> Osborne, 168.

be rid of our present sinful human “flesh” and be resurrected into a glorious sinless body (See the **Special Topic: Do Christians have two natures?** in **Lesson 7**).

Paul, in verse 7, gives the reason why a believer cannot continue in sin. It is because the believer “**has died**” (crucified) “**with him [Christ]**” (see v. 10; Galatians 2:20). Such a person is “**set free [justified] from [the bondage of] sin.**” It is because the believer is justified, declared (credited, counted, imputed) righteous in Christ. Therefore, he is able to live a holy life and is now able not to sin. This is the foundation of the whole teaching on holiness (sanctification). Although justification is separate from (progressive) sanctification, it is the basis of and foundation for why a Christian is able to live a holy life.<sup>149</sup> However, justification is not the cause of sanctification; rather, through his Spirit, we grow in spiritual maturity. This is because we are united with Christ by faith.

Other religions state that we must be holy to be justified before God. The gospel states the opposite; God accepts the ungodly and justifies them, so they become holy. This is the most astonishing gracious act of our loving God. So, a justified believer cannot and must not live in sin because he is dead to sin. The phrase “**set free [justified] from sin**” means the believer is freed from the guilt and penalty of sin and the power or reign of sin.

Moreover, to be justified means we are counted as righteous. This double grace is received through union with Christ by faith in Christ, apart from works. As a result, we are able to live a life pleasing to God. So, our sanctification or holiness is guaranteed by the death of Christ (Galatians 2:19-20; 6:14; Colossians 2; 3:3; 1 Peter 4:1). Death to the “**old man**” is not something we do but what we are granted in our union with Christ (vv. 7, 10).

*vv. 8-10 The **purpose** of our union with Christ: **Resurrection***

In the previous verses, vv. 6-7, the relationship between Christ’s death and the death of our old self is described. Now, Paul describes our relationship to Christ’s resurrection. In Christ’s death, our old self was crucified; we now live with him in Christ’s

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<sup>149</sup> Piper, 78.

resurrection. Deliverance from the penalty and power of sin was the negative side of the cross; to live in Christ is the positive side. Verse 8 states, **“Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.”** Paul uses the future tense again when talking about our life with him. And again, he certainly may be referring to our resurrected bodies. But here, it is more likely he refers to our new spiritual born-again life on earth (14:23; John 5:24). In this case, the future is a logical sequence. We divide our earthly life into two halves: the life of our old self which died in Christ at conversion and our life in Christ that lives for God’s glory. The difference is so significant that it can only be viewed as the death of one life and the beginning of new life. As Paul writes to the Corinthians, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Corinthians 5:17). Of course, it is also possible that Paul means both a temporal and logical future.

Paul goes on in verse 9 to distinguish between the raising of the dead in the gospels and Christ’s resurrection. Lazarus was raised from the dead only to die physically again (John 11:38-44). However, Jesus went *through* death, conquering it, and was raised with an incorruptible body. Christ **“will never die again”** and neither will we who are in union with him. The phrase **“death no longer has dominion over him”** does not imply that death did have dominion over Christ at some point. Jesus voluntarily laid down his life for our sakes, and so was the master of death, even on the cross. Jesus, as the Son of God, was never subject to the power of death. Yet before his resurrection, Jesus’ body was like ours. This is explained further in the next verse.

Verse 10 contrasts the difference between Jesus’ **“death”** in his earthly body and his **“life”** in his eternal resurrected body (1 Peter 3:18). The difference is profound. His death was a single once for all event, but his life is present and eternal; his death was for sin, but his life seeks God’s glory (**“the life he lives he lives to God”**) (Hebrews 7:27). In this context, the meaning of **“[Christ] died to sin,”** is that Christ died to the power of sin, which is death. Of course, Christ died for our justification, but he also died to break the power of sin, which is death. Jesus’ resurrected body is now eternal and is not subject to death. And

we too, who are in union with Christ, have died with Christ to the power of sin and are now able to live for God.

*v. 11 The consequence of our union with Christ*

This verse summarizes the *consequence* of our union with Christ. If we have indeed been united with Christ in his death and resurrection, we have also died to sin and been given new life. We, therefore, **“must consider”**<sup>150</sup> ourselves **“dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.”** This ‘considering’ is not just an idea, concept, or doctrine. The Greek word translated as **“consider”** is the same one Paul used when he said Abraham was **“counted righteous.”**<sup>151</sup>

We do not just pretend our old self has died. For, in fact, our old self has died –crucified with Christ–and Christ has paid for all the sin we have committed. The basis for **“consider”** or **“counted”** is what God has first done for us. Paul tells us we must remember this as a fact and not just pretend it is true. This remembering means living and acting what is true. The fact that we still sin does not change this reality. We are to remember who we are. And to remember not only the day of our conversion but also our baptism when we were given a concrete reality of that new life of union with him. Living and maturing in Christ is to remember, recall, meditate, and ponder who we are in union with Christ.

In summary, these verses (vv. 1-11), Paul has explained the *meaning* of our union with Christ. We have been crucified with Christ (v. 6), we have died with him (v. 8), we have been buried with him (v. 4), and we have been made alive with him (v. 8). And so, since death has no longer dominion over him, it also has

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<sup>150</sup> It is worth noting, this is the first time in the letter Paul is commanding the Roman Christians. After this point in the letter, he gives many exhortations (vv. 12, 13, etc.). His emphasis moves from doctrine to living the Christian life. However, what is important to remember is, doctrine always must come first. It is foundational. And the primary doctrine that Paul is concerned about is that we are justified in our union with Christ. This is the basis on which we can stand before the judgment seat of God. It is what God had first done for us. Without first getting this doctrine of union with Christ clear in our hearts and minds with all its implications, our Christian life will not have the proper direction.

<sup>151</sup> Paul used the same Greek word fourteen times already (eleven in chapter 4).



no dominion over us (vv. 9-10). This has a direct consequence on how we now must live (v. 11). Paul now explains further the *application* of our union with Christ in the following few verses.

### **Transferred from the dominion of Adam to the dominion of Christ (6:12-14)**

*vv. 12-13 The application of our union with Christ*

If verse 11 summarizes the consequence of our union with Christ, verses 12-14 summarize the *application* of that union. Paul gives us two negative commands and two positive commands. And again, Paul then reminds us who we are in Christ. So the reality of what God has done for us in Christ changes how we should live. This is our response to what God has sovereignly done for us.

The first command (v. 12) is **“let not sin therefore reign in your moral bodies.”** The reference to **“reign”** refers to the way a king rules or dominates his subjects. Now sin is no longer our ruler; its power over us has been destroyed. We are no longer *in* Adam but *in* Christ and so are now able, through the Spirit, not to practice sin. Although we still sin on occasion, it should never be our master. Paul is quite specific about what he means. The second negative command (v. 13a) is, we are not to use our **“mortal body”** as **“instruments for unrighteousness.”** This means our moral life but also our behaviour (James 3:1-12). Positively (v. 13b), we are to present ourselves **“to God as those who have been brought from death to life”** and our **“members to God as instruments of righteousness.”** This itself is an amazing responsibility. Our members, our hands, feet, eyes, ears, and minds, are instruments of God for righteousness.

*v. 14 Remember! You are “in Christ”*

Paul ends this passage with another reminder of who we are in Christ. Sin is no longer our master and ruler. This is not an exhortation or command from Paul but a statement of fact. Simply put, sin no longer has **“dominion over you”** neither are we **“under law.”**<sup>152</sup> That old dispensation is gone. We are now

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<sup>152</sup> Not all commentators understand “law” to refer the Mosaic law. Some understand it to refer to the general will of God. However, given Paul’s interaction with Jews and Gentiles, it is more likely to refer to the Mosaic law.

under the dispensation of grace in which Christ is the ruler (5:2, 21; John 1:17). Although the law made good and holy demands on us to love God and our neighbour as ourselves, it did not change our hearts. The result is, we continue to break God's law by not honouring and glorifying him as we ought. The law did not help us overcome sin. In fact, it increased sin (5:20). The result was, before grace came, we were under the reign of sin. However, now that grace has come, although we may sin, we are not under the power of the law causing sin to increase. Instead, we are under grace. This is what Paul meant when he wrote, "**you are not under the law but under grace.**"<sup>153</sup> As well, through the justifying work of Christ and the sanctifying work of the Spirit, grace has given us the ability not to sin. Therefore, in our union with Christ, we are able to honour him, glory him, and delight in him.

Do this and live the Law demands,  
But gave me neither feet nor hands.  
A better way God's grace doth bring,  
It bids me fly and gives me wings.

### **Summary of 6:1-14**

We can now summarize Paul's teaching in this passage as follows:

1. Although Christ was sinless, he took upon himself our sin and "**died to sin**" on the cross. This was a "**once for all**" event. But he not only died, he also rose again, and "**lives to God**" (v. 10)
2. We are in union with Christ, "**united with him**" (v. 5) and so his actions of dying and rising are applicable for us as well. Just as Adam's act of transgression was applied to us, now in our union with Christ, his act of righteousness is applied to us.

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<sup>153</sup> Syntactically, it is possible to understand the statement, the believer is "**not under the law**" to mean, the law has no authority any longer. However, given all Paul states concerning God's law in 3:31; 7:12, 14a; 8:4; 13:8-10, it is difficult to comprehend that Paul would undermine the authority of the law. It is much more likely, Paul is speaking about the condemnation of the law on law-breakers since he contrasts the law with grace. See also 8:1.

3. Therefore, in our union with Christ, we have also “**died to sin**” so we do not “**continue in sin.**” And in our union with Christ, we too, have been raised to new spiritual life so “**we too might walk in newness of life.**”

### **Freedom from slavery to sin, enslaved to God (6:15-23)**

Paul has just dealt with the first reason not to be enslaved in sin (“**are we to continue in sin that grace may abound**” v. 1). He now turns to the second reason why some people thought Paul was teaching, they could continue to sin.

Their reason is that because we are no longer under the law of Moses and have been given Christ’s perfect righteousness, it does not matter much what we do.<sup>154</sup> The grace of God is so great, infinite, and wonderful, he will always forgive us. The extreme position is that we demand his grace; we cheapen his grace by taking it for granted. There is a story about Heinrich Heine, a famous nineteenth-century German poet who did not believe in Jesus as Lord or Saviour. He was asked at his deathbed if he was concerned about meeting God if the gospel was true. He was not concerned for if it was the case then: “Of course, God will forgive me; that’s his job.” Often, we do not make such a rash statement, but it is close to our sentiment. The result is, we do not take our sin, even as Christians, very seriously. This is the issue Paul now addresses.

*v. 15 freedom from sin does not mean freedom to sin*

Paul begins this second question of how we should live as followers of Christ much the same way he began the first question. In both cases, he asks: how shall we now live given we are justified by the grace of God through faith and not by anything we do (“**What shall we say then?**” and “**What then?**”). He addresses the issue directly, which some Christians have asked or assumed: “**Are we to sin because we are not under the law but under grace?**” Again, as in this first question, his answer

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<sup>154</sup> Although this sounds somewhat strange to us, it is much the same as what occurs in society and sadly in some churches. Today many things that God states are sin, are no longer considered to be sin. Or, we diminish the severity of sin to the point that we ignore its relevance. There is little difference between these contemporary attitudes to the gospel than those that Paul dealt with.

is, **“By no means!”** As in the first question, he now provides reasons (vv. 16-23) why continuing in sin is not an option for Christians, even though we are no longer under the law.

*v. 16 obedience to sin leads to death or obedience to righteousness*

Paul again reminds them about what they already know. He asks, **“do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves you are slaves of the one whom you obey?”** The first readers in Rome would certainly have known this. So Paul uses their everyday experience in the slave market to illustrate their new relationship with God. It might seem a bit puzzling for anyone to **“present”** or **“offer”** (NIV) themselves as slaves. It appears this type of slavery is voluntary. The original Greek word means to put oneself in the power of another. A slave has no will of his own but must obey the will of his master. We usually think of slavery in Roman times as the result of war or being purchased in the Roman slave markets. However, people voluntarily offered themselves as slaves if they were too poor to feed, house and clothe themselves. Paul’s point is that the master would accept their offer if this happened. And once accepted, all freedom would be lost. One could not take back their offer. Paul is using this familiar harsh reality to illustrate *spiritual* slavery. We have two choices: we either voluntarily surrender our lives to obedience to **“sin which leads to death,”** or we surrender our lives to **“obedience which leads to righteousness.”** Jesus himself stated:

“Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin.” (John 8:34)

And again, in Matthew’s gospel, Jesus commenting on slavery says:

“No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. (Matthew 6:24)

Then when Paul says the alternative is **“the one whom you obey ... obedience”** what does he mean? We would have expected Paul to say, that the alternative to obeying sin is obeying God. And we would have expected the alternative of **“death”** to be ‘life’ rather than **“righteousness.”** As Stott points out, the “idea of ‘obedient to obedience’ is a dramatic way of emphasizing

obedience is the very essence of slavery and ‘righteousness,’ in the sense justification is almost a synonym of life (cf. 5:18).<sup>155</sup> In this context, “**death**” means spiritual and eternal death. Therefore, Paul illustrates that self-surrender results in slavery and slavery demands complete obedience. Our loyalty is either to sin or God – we cannot have two masters. Once we have chosen our master, we have lost our freedom to choose another (part-time) master. Loyalty is either to “**sin**,” which leads to “**death**,” or “**obedience**” which leads to “**righteousness**,” which is the basis of eternal life. Once again, this is the all-or-nothing nature of conversion. We are never partially converted.

One might ask: Are we not just trading one slavery for another? How does that help? The reason is, we were created to be the image of God. Therefore, the more we are in God's will, the more human we become. And the more human we become, the more freedom we have. We are only truly free when we are in God's will because that is what we were created for. Jesus himself said, “So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:36).

Finally, when Paul states obedience “**leads to righteousness**,” he does not mean we become righteous by our good works. Here righteousness means holiness. In other words, obedience leads to our sanctification (see the last phrase of verse 19); that is, maturing by conforming to the image of God (2 Corinthians 3:18).

*vv. 17-18 freedom from sin, and slaves to righteousness*

Paul now continues the illustration of slavery to show God has transferred us from the realm of slavery to sin and death to the realm of slavery to righteousness and life. We cannot be in both realms at the same time. This transfer is our conversion from obedience to sin to obedience to righteousness. Paul describes this transfer in four steps. But he begins with “**thanks be to God**.” This can only mean God accomplishes the transfer from one realm to another on our behalf. Being spiritually dead, we cannot transfer ourselves from one realm to another. This is entirely a work of God. And so, our response (as was Paul's) is

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<sup>155</sup> Stott, 183.

to continually thank God for rescuing and freeing us from the realm of sin and death. The four aspects of conversion are:

1. **“you who were once slaves of sin”** This is the condition of every person born into this world (5:12ff). We are born spiritually dead in Adam, making it impossible not to sin. We are born into the realm of sin and death and cannot escape through our own ability.
2. **“have become obedient from the heart”** This is conversion itself. It may not be the normal way we describe conversion, but Paul addresses how one should live as a Christian. His answer is to live in obedience **“to the standard of teaching to which you were committed.”** Again, this seems unusual. We would have expected to be obedient to Christ or to live a life for which Jesus is our primary example. Instead, Paul speaks of **“teaching,”** which can only mean his teaching and the teaching of the apostles, which was first received through the unique inspiration of God. This would include the gospel and ethical teaching on how to live the gospel. The word translated as **“committed”** or **“delivered”** (KJV) – in fact, the entire expression – is extraordinary. It means God, in his grace and mercy, is the subject of the teaching. The acceptance of the gospel was given over to us by God to instruct us in it and to live it. There is a sense that faith itself is a gift of God.<sup>156</sup>
3. **“having been set free from sin”** This phrase means we have been rescued from the realm of sin and death. Once, we were helplessly in its dominion and power. But now we are set free. This does not mean we never sin, but it does mean sin no longer reigns in us (**“Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body”** 6:12).
4. **“have become slaves of righteousness”** We have not only been rescued and freed from the realm of sin and death, but we have been transferred into the realm of righteousness and life. Sin has lost its power, and we are now able not to sin. This transfer is not simply an idea or illustration, or a

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<sup>156</sup> Hodge, 191.

metaphor. It is an actual event. This transfer has also given us new life. We are born once more but spiritually into a life of praise and glory to God. No wonder Paul begins these verses with the doxology, **“thanks be to God!”**

*vv. 19-22 Two kinds of slavery*

*v. 19*

Surprisingly, Paul begins this verse with a kind of apology for speaking about the divine mystery of conversion using such a human illustration as slavery (**“I am speaking in human terms”**). Slavery is a good metaphor for our condition while in the realm of sin and death, but it does not seem like an entirely appropriate metaphor for our new life in the realm of righteousness and life. His explanation for using the slavery metaphor for both realms is due to their (and our) **“natural limitations.”** The word **“limitation”** can also be viewed as **“weakness”** (NASB, NET), meaning that the Roman church (and us) are not entirely aware of their (our) new condition in union with Christ. And as a result, they are susceptible to temptation. Because of this weakness, Paul does not abandon the slavery metaphor but contrasts the *result* of each form of slavery. If they are **“slaves to sin and lawlessness,”** the result is **“more lawlessness.”** But if they are **“slaves of righteousness,”** the result is **“sanctification.”** Either way, as slaves we must obey. One obedience leads to more and more deterioration not just in morals but, more importantly, in a hardening of the heart and greater rebellion against the things of God. The other obedience leads to less and less sin, but more importantly, in a softening of the heart towards God; to become more Christlike in our love for and our praise and honour of God.

The phrase **“leading to sanctification”** means sanctification is both a free gift from God and a command to obey. The New Testament uses the term **“sanctification”** in two ways. It can refer to what we receive when we are born again. This is called *positional* sanctification. It is a gift of God given at salvation along with justification through faith in Christ (Acts 26:18; 1 Corinthians 1:2; 6:11; Ephesians 5:26–27; 1 Thessalonians 5:23; 2 Thessalonians 2:13; Hebrews 10:10; 13:12; 1 Peter 1:2). As well, there is *progressive* sanctification which is also the work of God through the Holy Spirit together with the will and desire of the

believer. Progressive sanctification is how the believer's life is transformed into the image of Christ (2 Corinthians 7:1; 1 Thessalonians 4:3, 7; Hebrews 12:10, 14).<sup>157</sup> It is because of our *positional* sanctification in Christ that we can "**walk in newness of life**" (v. 4), which is our *progressive* sanctification. This later meaning (progressive sanctification) is implied here.

*vv. 20-22 The fruit (result) of two kinds of obedience*

In these verses, Paul again contrasts what they "**were**" to what they are "**now**." They "**were slaves of sin,**" but the product of such sin was "**things of which you are now ashamed.**" And in the end, these "**things is death.**" In contrast, Paul says, "**but now**" (see 3:21). There, he contrasted the time before the coming of Christ and the cross to the time of justification that came because of the cross. This was the great divide in salvation history: Before Christ (BC) and after Christ (AD). Paul now applies this same metaphor to individual salvation. Before, we were "**slaves to sin,**" "**but now,**" "**you have become slaves to God.**"

It is worth looking at some of Paul's phrases in these verses more carefully. What did he mean when he says, those who live in the realm of sin are "**free in regard to righteousness**"? This almost seems like a positive statement. Paul also adds to his illustration of slavery by introducing an additional metaphor of "**fruit**" or the result of the two kinds of slavery in each realm. To produce fruit means to have a benefit or profit. We will look at each of these in turn.

First, "**free in regard to righteousness**" means free from the control of righteousness.<sup>158</sup> Each realm has its own demands of slavery. Those who are in the realm of sin, are free from the demands of the realm of righteousness since their master is not righteousness but sin. The "**fruit**" of obedience in the realm of sin leads to death (v. 21). So when Paul asks, "**what fruit [benefit or profit] were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed?**" (v. 21) The answer is "**none**" for the product is "**death.**"

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<sup>157</sup> Utley, Volume 5, Romans 6:19.

<sup>158</sup> Mounce, 158.



Second, Paul said in verse 18, we are “**slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification.**” So, the fruit of obedience to righteousness is sanctification. And, the “**end**” of “**sanctification**” is “**eternal life.**” The expression “**the end**” implies a journey reaching its goal. Sanctification is, then, maturing and progressing in our relationship with Christ, growing in holiness, and setting the believer apart from the unbeliever.<sup>159</sup>

*v. 23 The wages of sin compared to the free gift of God*

Paul brings both arguments for continuing in sin to a conclusion. Throughout the passage, he describes two slave masters: sin and righteousness. Those in Adam are slaves in the realm of sin; while those *in* Christ are slaves in the realm of righteousness. But now, in conclusion, Paul does not hold back. The “**wages of sin is death**” meaning a slave to sin receives what is deserved; sin deserves death. Wages are earned (changing the metaphor slightly). The punishment of death is the reasonable and just payment for sin (James 1:15). A labourer deserves the wages he earned, so God would be unjust not to provide them. Those who expect forgiveness without atonement believe one of two things: either they do not think their sin deserves death, or they expect God to be unjust. The “**death**” Paul mentions in this verse is not just physical death but eternal (second) death (Revelation 21:8).

But someone might ask, “why does sin deserve death?” The answer is because of the holiness of God. God demands holiness – perfect heartfelt obedience to his law – from his creatures. He must punish sin, which is rebellion against being in his image, with death. God would not be righteous if he did not. This was Martin Luther’s great struggle leading to the Protestant Reformation. How could he, as a sinful human being, ever become sufficiently righteous to satisfy a righteous God? He found his answer in the heart of the gospel: we can only be righteous by receiving (clothing ourselves) with the righteousness of Christ through union with him. This righteousness was made available to us only through death, not our death, but the death of the Son of Man and Son of God. We participate in his death when we are united with him (v. 5). This

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<sup>159</sup> Thielman, 325.

gift of Christ's righteousness, permitting us to live eternally in the presence of God, is the wondrous **"free gift of God."**

The contrast to payment is the **"free gift of God."** The contrast could not be starker. Wages are for services rendered; a free gift is an undeserved grace (gift) resulting in **"eternal life."** And this free gift, which is the righteousness of Christ, is given to all who put their hope, trust and obedience in **"Christ Jesus our Lord."** The reference to **"Lord"** is important. Christ Jesus is not just our Saviour; he is also our Lord. And this means he is our Master and King. We owe all our devotion, loyalty, and faithful obedience to him. Although salvation begins with judicial justification and receiving Christ's righteousness, it does not end there. If we truly have been born again into a new life in union with Christ, and if we truly have been transferred from the realm of sin and death to the realm of righteousness and life, then we have a new Lord whom we are to obey as **"slaves to God."**

## Questions for Reflection

### Study it

1. [v. 1] What arguments were some Christians making that it was not just okay but beneficial to sin? What does the phrase "continue in sin" mean?
2. [v. 2] What is the reason Paul gives for a Christian not to continue living in sin? Is this a surprise to you? What would you have expected Paul's reason would be? What does "died to sin" mean?
3. [vv. 3-4] What does "baptized into his [Christ's] death" mean? What was the purpose of our being baptized into Christ Jesus? Does Paul describe baptism as a symbolic event, a means of grace or something else?
4. [v. 5] What is the significance and meaning of being "united with him [Christ]"? Why is this such an important doctrine for Paul? What is the result of this union?
5. [vv. 6-7] What does Paul mean by "old self" or "old man"? What does the phrase "body of sin" mean? What is the significance of the "old man" having already been crucified?

Do you agree or disagree with the understanding given in the notes?

6. [vv. 8-10] How do you understand the statement, because “we have died with Christ,” “we will also live with him”?
7. [vv. 6-10] What are the purposes of our union with Christ?
8. [v. 11] What is the consequence of our union with Christ?
9. [vv. 12-14] What is the application of our union with Christ?
10. [v. 14] How do you understand the statement, “you are not under the law”?
11. [v. 15] Why was Paul criticized for teaching that we are no longer under the law?
12. [vv. 17-18] How does Paul use the metaphor of slavery to prove we are still obligated not to sin even though we are not under the law?
13. [vv. 19, 22] What does “sanctification” mean?
14. [vv. 18, 20] What does Paul mean when he says slaves of righteousness are free, but then he also says slaves of sin are free?
15. [vv. 21-23] What is the “fruit” of the realm of righteousness, and how does one produce it? What is the “wages” of sin, and how does one earn it? What is the “end” of each of these ‘products’?

### **Live it**

1. What does “died to sin” mean to you personally? What reason would you give if someone was to ask you for the reason Christians should not sin?
2. Is baptism merely symbolic, or is it a spiritual event? If you were baptized, what was your experience? What was the significance of baptism to you? Was it anything similar to what Paul mentions in vv. 3-4?
3. What does “walk in newness of life” mean to you? Is this something you have experienced?

4. How do you view the Christian life? Is it one of constantly fighting to “crucify” your old self? Do verses 6 and 7 shed any light on your struggle with sin? Do they encourage you?
5. What does “freedom” in Christ mean to you?
6. What is the secret of holy living (being sanctified) (hint: v. 13, 19, 22)?
7. We are mostly taught that God is our Father and Christ is our friend or brother. But in this passage, we are also taught that we are “slaves of God.” What do you think or feel about that statement? How might it affect your prayers?

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## Lesson 7: Freedom from the Law (7:1-25)

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Misunderstandings of the meaning and role of the law resulted (2 Peter 3:15-16) because of Paul's emphasis on grace (5:20-21). In chapter 6, Paul addressed two such misunderstandings by some who thought Paul was teaching God's grace was so great there was no need to live a life that honoured and glorified God. It did not matter what one did; God's grace would increase to cover any sin (6:1-14), or God's grace replaced faithful obedience (6:15-23). Such views are still present in today's church. But there is also an opposite view which we might call legalism. And this view may even be more prevalent, particularly in the evangelical church. The legalist position is the Law<sup>160</sup> is so important that breaking it means a Christian can lose their salvation. Paul now refutes this position, and he does so with essentially the same argument. We have in union with Christ not only "died to sin" (6:2), but we have also "died to the law" (7:4).

Although Paul rejects any connection between the law and justification, he also denies any idea the law is evil. Instead, he makes several positive statements about the law, calling it "**holy, righteous and good**" (7:12). The problem is not the law itself but sin resulting from our sinful human nature. However, although believers may sin and thereby break the law, believers are no longer under the *power* of sin nor the *condemnation* of the law.

In the first section, 7:1-6, Paul explains what he meant when he said, in 6:14, "**you are not under the law but under grace.**" Paul continues in the next section, 7:7-25, to describe the implications of not being under the condemnation of the law yet continuing to live with a sinful condition. He first describes the relationship between sin and the law in 7:7-14 and then gives a personalized account of the great struggle to do what is right

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<sup>160</sup> Today, within our churches, the "law" is not so much the Mosaic law but a set of cultural obligations that have risen to the status of law. These obligations vary from culture to culture. For some, it may be drinking wine, for others it may be how one votes politically. There are, of course, moral standards which all Christians must live by. However, often cultural obligations are outside Biblical ethical commands but often take on an importance and status even greater than Biblical instruction.

when sin encourages evil. This culminates in an agonizing cry of near despair (v. 24) but finds its answer in the saving righteousness of Jesus Christ (v. 25).

### **Our union in Christ's death frees us from the Law (7:1-6)**

In this section, Paul describes how Christians are free from the condemnation of the law despite, on occasion, breaking the law. All world religions say, 'do this (i.e., do our law) and God will accept you,' but only the gospel says 'you are already accepted, so do good.' By being in union with Christ, a believer has died in Christ's death (v. 4). Therefore, the requirements of the law to make us holy before God no longer apply since we have "**died to the law**" because Christ died to the law and sin, and so to be joined with Christ means a new life.

But, that is only half the story; a believer is also made alive in Christ (6:8) in order to "**serve in the new way of the Spirit.**" Paul has already taught it is impossible to be *justified* before God through obedience to the law (specifically 3:22-23, but also all of chapters 1 through 6). Now, he shows us it is also impossible to be *sanctified* (made holy) by obedience to the law. In fact, attempting to achieve holiness through the law impedes sanctification. So, dying to the law means we are free from the condemnation of the law and the law's inability to produce obedience.

However, dying to the law does not mean we are free from moral commands. Because of our union with Christ, our heart desires to honour, love and glorify his name. We are, therefore, horrified by anything which would undermine this desire and to see Christ's name tarnished. We are obedient to God's moral commands because of our love for Christ, not our duty to the law.

#### *v. 1 Principle: Death severs all ties and obligations*

Once again, Paul asks his readers, "**do you not know.**" This is the third time he has asked this question (6:3, 16), and in each instance, he assumes the answer from his readers to be: 'Yes, we think we do but remind us again about the implications.' And this is precisely what he does. The first time he asked this question, he wanted them to know the meaning of their baptism. And in the second question, he wanted them to think through the implications of slavery to sin and God. Now in the third

question, he wants them to understand the application of the law. Specifically, he wants them to know the implications of his statement in 6:14, **“You are not under law but under grace.”** The significance of this statement is Paul’s main point in this chapter.

He begins by addressing them affectionately as **“brothers.”** In this context, **“brothers”** means both men and women. This is only the second time in the letter he has used that term (1:13). But from now on, he will use it at least fifteen more times. After teaching the doctrine of justification through grace alone by faith alone, he is now speaking more personally about applying his doctrinal instruction.

After asking, **“do you not know,”** he adds they must know, in a kind of parenthesis, because he is addressing those **“who know the law.”** But who exactly are these people, and to which law is he referring? Most interpreters believe the **“law”** is the Mosaic law. In this case, he is referring to the Jews in the church. However, the Gentile Christians would also have known much of the Mosaic law since, at least in the early church, many of the Gentile **“God-fearers”** were the first to become Christians. These Gentiles would have been taught the law in the Jewish synagogues. However, it is more likely Paul refers to the general principle, **“the law is binding on a person only as long as he lives.”** Those who knew the Mosaic law would undoubtedly have agreed with this. But this is, of course, true generally. The law is for those alive, not those who have died. Paul will make this the basis for his argument that the Mosaic law is no longer **“binding”** over Christians.

*vv. 2-3 Illusion: Death opens the door to our new relationship with Christ*

Paul now explains the legal requirements of the law by using marriage as an example. Death ends the contract or covenant of marriage not only for the one who died but also for the spouse who lives. In Paul’s context, the **“law of marriage”** (or literally ‘the law of the man’) applies to the wife. As long as her husband is alive, she is bound by law to him, but when her husband dies, she is freed from this law. The word **“released”** from her husband means she is no longer obligated to him. To state it even more strongly, she is no longer a wife to him legally.

The conclusion to be drawn from this is, if she violates her marriage vows **"while her husband is alive, " she commits adultery.** However, when her husband dies, she is **"free from that law"**—obligations to the first marriage—and is permitted to marry another man. The difference between these two states is death; that is, the death of her first husband. Of course, all this was clear to Paul's readers, but he uses this illustration to emphasize that death is the only way the legal requirements of marriage are terminated.

Interestingly, when Paul uses the word **"lives with"** or **"marries,"** he uses a different word normally used for marriage. The word he uses is literally **"joined to."** Continuing this illustration, we are joined to (united with) Christ in his death and life.

*vv. 4-6 Application: Because we are now joined to Christ, we bear fruit*  
*v. 4*

Paul immediately points out, a Christian's relationship to the law is the same (**"likewise"**) as his illustration of the wife's relationship with her husband. Before Christ came, Jews were 'married' to the law because they were obligated to it. But as in the marriage law, death terminated their relationship to the law, so they were set free to 'marry' another. But who **"died,"** and how did this death occur? Surprisingly, Paul changes the illustration from the husband dying to the wife dying. Still, the principle is the same. It is not the law that died; it continues; instead, Christians have **"died to the law."** But how did we fail?

Paul used the same argument in chapter 6 when he said we **"died to sin"** (6:2). In that case, Paul says, in our union with Christ, **"we were buried therefore with him by baptism into death"** (6:4). Now, in chapter 7, he says, we **"died to the law through the body of Christ."** The **"body of Christ"** refers to Jesus' physical body that died on the cross. And so, in our union with Christ, we also share in his death. Christ's death is ours vicariously. As Paul stated much earlier in his ministry to the churches in Galatia:

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. (Galatians 2:20)



So “**died to the law**” and “**died to sin**” (6:2) are the same, in the sense that in both cases, it is our union with Christ and his death that has freed us from the authority and condemnation of the law, as well as the power of sin. And as in the marriage illustration, we can now “**belong to another**”; that is, we are now joined (i.e., the same word Paul uses for joined in verse 3) to Jesus Christ in whom we died but now also “**who has been raised from the dead.**” We are united with a living and life-giving Saviour.

The *result* (“**in order that**”) – not the purpose – of our union with Christ in his death and resurrection is to “**bear fruit to God.**” But what does Paul mean by “**fruit**”? Some commentators continue Paul’s marriage metaphor and conclude that this fruit is children, resulting in the church’s growth. However, this seems highly unlikely. It is best to think of “**fruit**” as the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22), which is “the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God” (Philippians 1:11; see also Titus 3:8, 14). This is Paul’s emphasis in verse 6 when he says, “**we serve in the new way of the Spirit.**” Jesus also taught this in his illustration of the vine and branches. Unless we abide in Christ and he in us—another way of saying union in Christ—we can produce no godly fruit.

“Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me.” (John 15:4; see also John 15: 8 and 16).

*vv. 5-6*

Paul now contrasts our old life in the flesh with our new life in the Spirit (This contrast continues until 8:14). When we were “**living in the flesh,**” we produced “**fruit for death,**” *but now* we “**bear fruit for God**” (v. 4). When Paul uses the term “**flesh**” in this verse, he means our moral corruption and our desire for legalism, contributing to our own righteousness in some way. This radical transformation results from being transferred from the dominion of sin and death into the dominion of life. This transfer is made possible through our union with Christ. Through this union, we died with Christ using the symbolism of baptism. Paul wrote to the Galatians, “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Galatians 3:27). But we have died with Christ and have also been resurrected with him (v. 4b) to live for his glory and honour. Paul also mentions,

"while we were living in the flesh our sinful passions [are] aroused by the law." By the phrase, "living in the flesh" Paul means under the law.

That the law actually aroused our sinful passions must have been a shocking statement for the Jews. But this is exactly what it does. When a law restricts us, we do not desire to keep it, so, we either deny that the law exists or reinterpret the law to permit our passions full expression. This is what Adam and Eve did when God restricted their access to the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2:16).

The "old way" is the "written code" resulting in death. This "old way" attempts to obtain righteousness through obedience to the Law. But, the "new way" is the way of "the Spirit." Believers are no longer under the old covenant, which says "do this and live," but under the new covenant in which they receive righteousness, not because of what they have done, but because of what was done for them.

Paul uses a unique word for "new," which he again uses in 7:6. It is only used in these two places in the New Testament. Its fuller meaning is, not just new in the sense of time but, new in the sense of a different extraordinary nature and implying something superior. It refers to something wonderful and surprising. For Christians, our life in union with Christ is extraordinarily superior and wonderfully unexpected to our old way in Adam.

*Similarities between Chapters 6 and 7*

It is worth noting the parallels between Paul's teaching in chapter 6 and his teaching in chapter 7. This is not surprising since Paul addresses two parallel errors resulting from his teaching. John Stott points out the following similarities:<sup>161</sup>

6:2	died to sin	7:4	died to the law
6:3	died by union with Christ	7:4	died through the body of Christ
6:7,18	freed from sin	7:6	released from the law

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<sup>161</sup> Stott, 194.

6:4-5	shared in Christ's resurrection	7:4	belong to the resurrected Christ
6:4-5	live in newness of life	7:6	service in newness of the Spirit
6:22	bear fruit leading to holiness	7:4	bear fruit for God

So, only through our union with Christ are we freed from the power of sin and the condemnation of the law. Moreover, through Christ's resurrection, we can live a "**new way of the Spirit**" and not in the "**old way of the written code**" (v. 6).

### **Summary of 7:1-6**

Paul has made an enormous shift in understanding godliness (sanctification). It is only in our union with Christ, we are able to obtain holiness. There are at least three things we learn from this passage:

1. Our union with Christ has freed us from the imprisonment of the law. We are no longer under the condemnation, authority or demands of the law.
2. Our union with Christ results in a relationship of mutual love. We are no longer 'married' to the law but 'married' to Christ who loves us and has given his body on the cross for us in order to release us from the law.
3. Our union with Christ produces holy fruit that honours and pleases God. We no longer produce fruit for death which resulted from the law, but we now produce fruit for God as we serve Christ in a new way of the Spirit.

### **The purpose of the Law and its inability to accomplish its purpose (7:7-25)**

So, if a Christian has died to the law (7:4, 6), can the law be ignored or abandoned? And if not, what is the purpose and value of the law? Paul will first demonstrate the law instructs us in what is right and good. But, shockingly, despite our new nature, sin uses the law to increase sin. So again, the law, together with our fallen nature, undermines any hope of salvation. Only Jesus

Christ can set us free from the power of sin and the condemnation of the law.

We should never forget that the Mosaic law was given as a gift of grace for those who put their hope and trust in God. It was a gift of God to enable the Israelites to live in a way acceptable to God. However, rather than accepting it as a gift, they turned it into a work by which they thought they could become righteous (See discussion on 9:30-32).

### **Purpose and value of God's good Law (7:7-13)**

In his letter, Paul has been quite negative about the law up to this point. This is because people, particularly Jewish Christians, still viewed the law as a means for justification ("do this and live" cf. Leviticus 18:5; Galatians 3:12). Paul is as clear as he is can be. There are no grounds for obedience to the law to warrant justification. We are "**not under law but under grace**" (6:14). He clarifies that believers do not keep their salvation by obedience to the law. Instead, it is because of our union with Christ that "**we are released from the law [...] so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code**" (7:6). However, with all these negative statements, one might easily conclude, the law is itself sin. Paul has repeatedly heard this accusation against his preaching and now addresses it directly.

At first, it does not seem Paul gives a direct answer for why the law is "**holy, righteous and good**" (v. 12). But when we look back at what he already said about the law and what he now says in these verses, we see the law is holy and good because it reveals God's holiness and righteousness. The purpose of the law is to reveal our fallen condition and our need for God's righteousness. Paul concludes the problem is not the law but sin's relationship to the law.

Beginning again with the question, "**What then shall we say?**", he responds by using the question-answer (diatribe) method of instruction by asking: Is the law sin? ("**that the law is sin?**") (v. 7). And as in his previous questions, he gives an unequivocal response, "**by no means!**" He then follows it with several reasons why the law can't be sin. He does so by using his personal life which corresponds to Adam and Israel's history. Using a specific example of the law, he shows that the law against

coveting increases the desire to covet rather than reduce it. In a strange twist, sin can manipulate a good law for evil purposes. As given to fallen humans, the law had no power of its own to accomplish its requirements.

It is essential to recognize in what sense Paul is using the pronoun “I” in this passage (vv. 7-12). Although there are several alternatives, it seems best to understand the “I” to refer to a Christian who is under conviction of breaking the law. Every believer growing in holiness experiences a profound conviction of sin. Paul provides three reasons why the law itself is not sin.

1. (v. 7) *The Law is not sin but reveals our sin of rebellion:* Paul stated earlier, **“through the law comes knowledge of sin”** (3:20). And so, we can recognize and understand what sin is because of the law. In verse 7, Paul gives a specific example of coveting, which confirms this point. He writes, **“I would not have known what it [sin] is to covet if the law had not said, ‘You shall not covet.’**” So, the law is no more sin, than saying, ‘do not murder’ is ‘murder.’ However, it is interesting that Paul chooses **“covet”** as his example. Covetousness is an internal heart desire and includes all desires resulting in actions dishonouring God. In a real sense, then, covetousness is idolatry (Colossians 3:5). Adam and Eve desired (coveted) the forbidden fruit to be like God (Genesis 3:4-6). By eating the fruit, they placed their desire above obedience to God. One might readily obey the prohibition of murder, but coveting is part of our sinful state (Matthew 6:19-24; Mark 7:21). The word **“sin,”** therefore, refers to our corrupt nature. So the law is good because it reveals our sinful state and our need for righteousness.
2. (v. 8) *The Law exposes sin by revealing its power:* But now Paul states, the sin through the law (commandment) **“produced in me all kinds of covetousness.”** He had already said, **“our sinful passions [were] aroused by the law”** (v. 5). Of course, it is not the law itself but our sinful condition within us. Our human nature is so perverse, we naturally rebel against authority that prohibits what we desire most. It is easy to keep rules and regulations telling us not to do something we have little interest in doing. Not surprisingly,

these are often the rules we highlight most. However, we often resist any suggestion restricting what we love to do. The simple act of restricting produces in us a desire to do it. Augustine gave an example in his *Confessions* when he described stealing fruit from an orchard. He was not hungry or needed the fruit. So, he asked himself, "Was it possible to take pleasure in what was illicit for no reason other than that it was not allowed?" Paul adds, "**without the law, sin was dead**" (KJV). This means that without law, there is nothing to rebel against. Paul is describing the psychological effect of the law on his sinful condition.

3. (*vv. 9-11*) *The Law, because of our sin, condemns us:* In these three verses, Paul describes the power of sin to use the law, resulting in our condemnation. Sin is able to take what Paul will describe as "**holy and righteous and good**" and use it as an instrument of evil. The commandment "**that promised life**"<sup>162</sup> was manipulated through the power of sin to produce "**death**." The law is not at fault, but it is also powerless against sin. This "**death**" is the condemnation of the law. Although sin is described as an external power, what Paul has in mind is the self-destructive power of our own sinful passions ("**flesh**" v. 5). But what did Paul mean by the phrase "**sin ... deceived me**"? Paul, as an orthodox Pharisee, expected to receive life through obedience to the law, but instead, he found only misery and death. He wanted to be holy by keeping the law but saw only corruption. So, sin used the law to deceive Paul. Hodge points out, "this is the experience of every believer in the ordinary progress of his inner life. He first turns to the law, to his own righteousness and strength, but he soon finds that all the law can do is aggravate his guilt and misery."<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> This does not mean the law ("commandment") promised salvation. But it did promise life for those who were obedient to it (Leviticus 18:5; Ezekiel 20:11). So, life would have been given to anyone who could perfectly obey it.

<sup>163</sup> Hodge, 206.

*vv. 12-13*

So, Paul has made it clear the law is not sin, rather, sin manipulates the law for its own evil end. This, then, is the relationship between sin and the law. Sin weakens the promise of the law to give life, changing it from promise to condemnation. The law itself reflects the holiness, righteousness and goodness of God.

Paul describes this condition in verse 13 but then adds that the law reveals and exposes the sinfulness of sin “**beyond measure.**” What he means by this is that sin is so exceedingly wicked; it can use God’s holy, righteous and good law to accomplish its evil, producing evil out of good.<sup>164</sup> In this sense, sin produces the opposite of what God produces. Only God is able to produce good from evil; Christ’s crucifixion is the greatest of these.

### **Special Topic: Do Christians have two natures?**

Modern commentators and preachers often refer to the struggle between the flesh and the Spirit in us as two natures in the believer. The problem is not that there is conflict within the believer; everyday experiences prove this. The problem is, when referring to it this way, we assume we have two different human natures. It is as if we are schizophrenics with a sinful and spiritual nature, each fighting for dominance. For many Christians, this ends up being a pessimistic struggle. Certainly, in chapters 7 and 8, Paul describes two competing struggles in dire terms. Still, this view is entirely at odds when we study all Paul’s teachings on the Christian life. The overall theme of chapters 7 and 8 describes this inner conflict: it is a conflict *from* which Christ delivers Christians, not what he leads Christians *into*. This is highlighted by how Paul concludes chapter 7, “**Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!**” (7:24b-25). And this is how he describes Christians in chapter 8, “**You, however, are not in the flesh but the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you**” (8:9). Paul understands the life of a Christian to be transformed

<sup>164</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 371.

by the power and presence of the Spirit. He is confident that when the “**Spirit of God dwells in you,**” then “**the Spirit is life**” (8:9-10).

Humans, both believers and non-believers, have only one human nature. Our nature is who we are as humans; that which makes us human. This is true of all living things; each is created with its unique nature, which it receives at birth. We see this in Genesis 1, where God created all creatures “according to their kind.” After the Fall, we did not become less human because something of our human nature was removed. Additionally, when we become believers, we do not become more human because something was added to our human nature. To avoid confusion, it may be better to refer to sinful and spiritual nature as our condition or state. How then does this relate to our sinful state and our born again (regenerated) state? As Jesus said to Nicodemus, “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (John 3:6).

#### *Our “natural” State*

Often when Paul or Jesus uses the word “**flesh**” or “**sinful flesh**” (the latter only occurring in Romans 8:3), it refers to the sinful state of humans. This means all humans are born with the guilt of sin “in Adam.” When he was first created, Adam was not in this sinful state. As such, he was *able not to sin*. After Adam’s sin, all humanity inherits the guilt of Adam’s sin, so our ‘natural condition’ is that we are born with a desire to sin. The result is that we are now *not able not to sin*; as Jesus and Paul say, we are born “**slaves to sin**” (John 8:34; Romans 6:20). And this is what is often called our sinful human nature. However, it is not our nature that is sinful; we—as individuals—are sinful and need redemption. Paul calls this the “natural person” (1 Corinthians 2:14), and Jesus calls this “born of the flesh” (John 3:6). Twice in Romans 8:7-8, Paul says we are born “**not able**” as well as 1 Corinthians 2:14. This is the natural state of human beings when born. We are not able not to sin because our natural state is now in rebellion and insubordinate to God’s will. This is our natural inclination and preferred choice. We choose according to our nature, which is sinful.



*Our "regenerated" State*

When we become believers in Christ, our natural sinful state is transformed by God into a regenerated state where we are *able not to sin* (Romans 6:14). Our natural state has been changed from rebellion to worship. As a result, rebellion is no longer our preferred choice; worship is. And so, we now are able (free) to choose to please God—indeed, this is now the believer’s deepest desire. Scripture describes this transformation in various terms:

1. *God's creation of light in our hearts:* "God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." (2 Corinthians 4:6)
2. *God's causing us to be born again:* "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." (1 Peter 1:3)
3. *God's raising us from the dead:* "God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ." (Ephesians 2:4-5)
4. *God's gift of repentance:* "God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will." (2 Timothy 2:25-26)
5. *God's gift of faith:* "It has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake." (Philippians 1:29)

From these verses, we see God’s work in the life of a believer transforms our nature from its physically-born state to our born-again spiritual state. Only our loving, caring, and faithful Lord can do this in us. So, we can continue to use the term "sinful nature" or possibly better, "corrupt nature," but not in the sense of two natures.

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### **Life under the Law and Sin (7:14-25)**

Once again, Paul deals with the Mosaic law and its relationship to the power of sin. To understand what Paul is saying, we must keep in mind that his *purpose* in writing this passage is to *show the inability of the law to transform anyone because of the power of sin existing in our sinful condition*. This is certainly true for anyone who is not a believer, but it is also true for a believer. As such, the passage presents a pessimistic view of our sinful state. Our inability to keep the law perfectly continues whether one is a Christian or not. This is why the following passages (chapter 8) are so important. They describe the hope we have as believers in our life in the Spirit despite our continuing sinful state.

*Paul's first lament: God's law is spiritual and good, but I am sinful (vv. 14-17)*

*v.14*

Paul has made it very clear it is not the law that causes death but sin using the law for its evil end. The law condemns sin to death, but sin encourages us to break the law so death results. So, sin resulting from our sinful passions is the ultimate *cause* of death. The “**for**” at the beginning of verse 15 implies that Paul is still dealing with the question raised in verse 7. Because Paul is preaching justification by faith apart from works of the law, some people understood he was saying the law is evil. The law, in fact, is “**spiritual**.” This means the law comes from God and reveals God’s holiness.

We break the law not because the law is unspiritual but because we are under the influence of sin. Paul uses the phrase “**I am of the flesh**” to describe human beings “**sold under sin**.” The word “**flesh**” does not mean our body but our whole fallen and corrupt nature (1 Corinthians 3:3). So what Paul is saying in verse 14 is, he is unspiritual because of his continued tendency to sin, while the law, given by God, is “**spiritual**.” The phrase, “**sold under sin**” means he is under the power of sin. This seems to imply Paul is still a slave to sin. But we know from 6:22, Paul – and all believers – are redeemed and set free from the slavery of

sin. What could Paul mean, then? Hodges gives a clear understanding of these two kinds of slavery. He writes<sup>165</sup>:

But there is another kind of slavery. A man may be subject to a power which, of himself, he cannot effectually resist, against which he may and does struggle, and from which he earnestly desires to be free, but which, notwithstanding all his efforts, still asserts its authority. This is precisely the bondage of sin of which every believer is conscious. [...] This is the kind of slavery the apostle is speaking about here, as is clear from the following verses as well as from the whole context and from Scripture.

The only deliverance from this slavery is through Jesus Christ our Lord (vv. 24-25). Although we sin, sin must not reign in our mortal bodies (6:12) since it does not have dominion over us (6:14). Instead, we can now reign through Jesus Christ (5:21).

*v. 15*

Verse 15 provides the basis for this assessment. One is not unaware or ignorant of one's actions. Instead, we cannot "**understand**" why we behave the way we do. We want to do what is right but often do the opposite. We do the things we do not want to do. This simply means "one cannot fully comprehend the depth of sin in oneself."<sup>166</sup> Verse 15 describes what it means to be "**sold under sin.**"

*v. 16*

However, it is equally important to recognize the struggle within the person's heart—referred to by "I." This person knows what is right and "**agrees with the law that it is good**" (v. 16). The struggle comes from an inability to keep the law. This is not a person who embraces sin but one who, to some degree, knows what sin is and does not want to do it.

*v. 17*

Paul then makes a startling conclusion in verse 17. He states, "**it [sinning] is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.**" It seems Paul is now not taking responsibility for his sin and is blaming sin itself. However, from verse 14, we know that

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<sup>165</sup> Hodge, 208-209.

<sup>166</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 373.

Paul does accept responsibility. The solution to this difficulty is understanding, when Paul uses “I” in this verse, he refers to the crucified old self (6:6; see Galatians 2:20 again). Yet, Paul knows he still sins. However, there is a significant difference between *reigning* sin and *surviving* sin in the life of a Christian. So, because of our corrupt and sinful condition, even as Christians, we cannot keep the law perfectly. Therefore, Paul is saying we are impotent against our corrupt nature and must look for a solution outside of ourselves. There is a genuine feeling of helplessness because of our hearts. No matter how hard we try, we continue to sin.

*Paul’s second lament: Indwelling sin makes it impossible to keep God’s good law perfectly (vv. 18-20)*

These verses continue the assessment Paul gave in verses 14 to 17. The “for” at the beginning of verse 18 provides the basis for the conclusion of verse 17. So, the basis for being impotent against sin is, “**nothing good dwells in me.**” The “**nothing good,**” therefore, refers (“that is”) to indwelling sin “**in my flesh.**” In no uncertain terms (vv. 18b-19), Paul highlights one’s inability to keep God’s law perfectly.

Paul’s conclusion from this inability is similar to the one he drew in verse 17. Indwelling sin, in our sinful and corrupt nature, is responsible for the evil I do. And again, it would be wrong to conclude, Paul is stating that we are not responsible for the consequences of breaking the law because of our inability to keep the law.<sup>167</sup> As a reminder, keep in mind, Paul’s *purpose* in writing this passage is to show the inability of the law to transform anyone because of our corrupt nature.

This teaching on indwelling sin does not mean sin only refers to our actions; the things we do violate the law. Instead, sin is a state of mind revealing itself through sinful actions. This is often how Scripture describes sin. It is fundamentally a matter of the heart. We have some degree of control over our will and actions but not our hearts. We always do what our heart desires most. This, then, is the bondage of sin. Paul is pointing out this battle between our sinful state and our new spiritual (born again) state

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<sup>167</sup> To claim one is not responsible is similar to the claim of a thief before a judge whose defence is simply that he cannot help himself from stealing; that the urge to steal is too great in him. No judge would dismiss the charges against the thief based on such a defense.

is real, and Christians must fight this fight throughout their lives. Still, although Christians sin (1 John 1:8), sin must not **“reign,”** making us **“obey its passions”** (6:12).

*Paul’s third lament:* *Although I delight in God’s law, I am unable to keep it (vv. 21-25)*

In these verses, Paul uses the term **“law”** many times and in different ways. So, it is essential to recognize what he means in each case. Although there are other valid options, **“law”** refers to the Mosaic law in all these verses.

v. 21

Paul concludes his argument; although Paul (“I”) desires to keep the law of God, he is unable to do so. He begins with the phrase, **“I find it to be a law that when I want to do right.”** Paul’s reference to the Mosaic law when he speaks about wanting **“to do right”** is clear enough, but what about **“I find it to be a law”**? At first glance, this does not seem to be the Mosaic law. However, if we understand the phrase to mean what was found, then the **“law”** is the Mosaic law. To paraphrase: **“I find I am not able to obey the good law, namely the Mosaic law, because of evil.”** The second half of verse 21 again reveals he is not able to obey the law because **“evil lies close at hand.”** Verse 21 is, therefore, a summary of verses 14 to 20.

vv. 22-23

These two verses restate the summary in verse 21. Verse 22 explains more about what Paul meant by the first half of verse 21. Here he refers to the **“law of God”** as a law he delights in. The phrase **“inner being”** refers to the spiritual nature of a Christian (2 Corinthians 4:16; Ephesians 3:16).

And verse 23 explains Paul’s meaning in the second half of verse 21 (**“evil lies close at hand”**). He mentions **“law”** three times in verse 23, each time referring (in my view) to the Mosaic law. Again, at first, the phrase **“another law”** or **“law of sin”** would not suggest this. However, Paul has closely associated sin and the Mosaic law. The power of sin uses the Mosaic law to produce sin. The two phrases, then, (**“another law”** and **“law of sin”**) refer to sin’s power to use the Mosaic law as its own instrument of death.

The phrase “**in my members**” refers to the physical body in which sin has power. So, the “**other law**” therefore “**wages war against the law of my mind.**” The “**law of my mind**” refers to the Mosaic law which he delights in (v. 22) and which he agrees is “**good**” (v. 16); that is, it is the “**law of God**” which he serves “**with my mind**” (v. 25). And “**mind**” refers to spiritual nature (Philippians 2:5).

*vv. 24-25a*

Paul concludes this despairing condition with an agonizing cry: “**Wretched man that I am!**” This wretched condition is because the law is unable to transform anyone because of indwelling sin within our corrupted nature. In fact, things are even worse. Indwelling sin uses the law as its instrument of death. Given this hopeless condition, Paul asks, “**who will deliver me from this body of death?**” His answer is immediate and delivered with an equally emotional outburst of thanksgiving: “**thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!**”

*v. 25b*

We might expect Paul to continue his doxology of praise and gratitude to God for his deliverance. Instead, we are confronted with more tension. Paul’s conclusion of the entire passage (vv. 14-25) is, “**I myself serve the law of God with my mind,**” but then “**with my flesh I serve the law of sin.**” So, Paul’s “**mind**” loves and delights in God’s law, and he longs to obey it. However, Paul’s “**flesh**” resists God’s law and is held captive by the “**law of sin.**” Again, this last phrase means sin has manipulated God’s good law, so that, “**through the commandment,**” sin is exposed “**beyond measure**” (v. 13). Once again, we see the good law of God when it comes against our corrupt nature, is weakened and unable to transform us into the persons we long to be. Our sinful self overwhelms God’s commandment and uses it for its own evil end.

### **Special Topic: The identity of the “I” in 7:14-25**

The question remaining, which we have avoided, is the spiritual condition of the “**I**” in this passage (vv. 14-25). Certainly, it refers in some manner to Paul, but is it *before* or *after* his conversion?

These two main options have been the source of discussion throughout the church's history. It is one of the most difficult interpretive issues in the letter. If Paul is describing his life under the law, then the "I" is *before* his conversion on the road to Damascus. However, if it is *after* his conversion, then he is describing the ongoing struggle with sin as a Christian. Either of these positions has been held by prominent evangelical leaders of the church throughout its history. We, therefore, do not view it as a matter of absolute doctrinal significance in which position is taken. However, after examining both arguments, we understand Paul speaking of himself *after* his conversion.

Before we look at the arguments for each of these positions, we need to remember that the passage is not about what happens before or after conversion. Instead, *it is about the good and holy law's inability to transform anyone* because of the indwelling sin existing before *and* after our conversion.

The arguments for support of the view that Paul is speaking of his experience *after* conversion are:

1. The verbs referring to "I" (Paul) in 7:14-15 are twenty-six in the present tense. In passage 7:7-13, the nine verbs are in the past tense. This is intentional.
2. Verse 25 gives thanks for God's salvation but follows the doxology with the continuing struggle of the Christian life. When Paul says in verse 25, "**I myself serve the law of God,**" he is speaking of his life as a believer. And when he adds, "**I serve the law of sin**" he continues to struggle with sin as a believer.
3. There are dual aspects present in these verses. The "I" agrees that the law is good; it desires to do what is right and delights in God's law. On the other hand, the "I" is of the flesh, so sin dwells within. The flesh does not have the ability to do the law. These conflicting aspects is the experience of the Christian.
4. The regenerated nature that desires to do good and "**delight**" in God's law does not characterize a non-believer.
5. It would seem, the nature that is "**sold under sin,**" is an insurmountable objection to the Christian view. But in 6:12-

23, Paul warns against sin becoming our master. Paul's teaching always has an 'already but not-yet' reality. Believers have already been freed from the dominion of sin, but there still exists a bondage to sin.

6. The present ("I am") and future ("who will") tense highlights this 'already but not-yet' aspect of salvation in verse 24.
7. Although Paul is speaking about himself, it is easy for Christians to identify with his description of the Christian life. We are all too aware of our failures and sins and our inability to live without sin. We can agree without reservation with the apostle John's depiction: "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful, forgiving us and cleansing us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us" (1 John 1:8-10).

From these points, the overwhelming consensus is that this passage depicts Paul *after* conversion. However, there are also arguments for a pre-conversion view. One is reminded of the Proverb, "The one who states his case first seems right, until the other comes and examines him" (Proverbs 18:17). Here are the arguments that Paul is speaking about his life *before* conversion.

1. In 7:6, Paul states we have been released from the law holding us captive so we can now live in the "**new way of the Spirit.**" But what Paul describes in 7:14-25 is still very much a person that is "**sold under law.**" However, see the discussion on "**sold under the law.**"
2. Although 7:14-25 use present tense verbs, these can be used to describe the reality of life under the law. As such, they describe the *state* of the person enslaved to sin.
3. The argument that there are conflicting aspects in a Christian creates too great a division. The "I" is always a whole and is entirely in bondage to sin.



4. The work of the Holy Spirit is never mentioned in 7:14-25, while the Holy Spirit is mentioned no less than nineteen times in 8:1-17.
5. The argument that it is impossible to delight in God's law without being a believer does not seem consistent with many orthodox Jews who have a great zeal for God (cf. Psalm 19 and 119). Such Jews delight in God's law even though they are unable to keep it perfectly.
6. To say that a believer is "sold to sin" clearly refers to a non-believer (3:9, 19-20). And this is also highlighted by the wretchedness and despair that Paul expresses.

Although the arguments in favour of *before* his conversion are significant, they are not sufficiently pervasive to overturn the more natural conclusion; Paul is speaking about the common condition of a believer. Believers are not free from their sinful passions, so they cannot obey the law on their own. However, when we understand 7:14-25 to depict the life of a Christian, then it is paramount we continue with 8:1-17 in order not to end in despair. Once again, we should remember, Paul's *prime purpose and concern* in the passage is to prove that the law cannot transform human beings because of indwelling sin.

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### **Application of 7:14-25**

We have stated, Paul's reference to "law" in these verses refers to the Mosaic law. He clearly indicates, the Jews were not able to keep it. And, when we assume "I" refers to Paul's experience *after* his conversion, it becomes clear that he was unable to keep the law even then. How, then, do we, as Gentiles, apply this passage to ourselves?

When we recognize that we share the same sinful condition as Israel before and after they received the law, we can recognize that what happened to them also happens to us. When sinful humans try to keep the spiritual holy law of God, the only outcome is failure. Israel had been rescued from bondage in Egypt through ten mighty demonstrations of power over the reigning pharaoh. They had seen and experienced the Red sea part and the destruction of the Egyptian army. They had felt his

hand of comfort and punishment as he brought them into the Promised Land. All God required of them was to obey the law he gave to them through Moses. Yet, from Israel's history, there was an abject failure to keep the law. And so, judgment came via their exile from the land of promise. All this repeated failure reveals that human nature is sinful. Or, as Scripture describes it, we have a sinful heart that is desperately wicked (Jeremiah 17:9). So, God promised Israel a new covenant and a new heart (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

The history of Israel is everyone's history. We all are born with a corrupt, sinful nature, unable to keep God's good laws no matter their form. Because of our sinful condition, we cannot keep God's holy, righteous, and perfect will. Even though we know what is right, we cannot do it perfectly. The law, in any form, cannot make us righteous *because* we still have a sinful human nature. And so, like the Old Testament Israelites, we also need a new heart. It is often the case, though, that Christian churches create a whole set of laws and rules they believe produce holiness. We do need rules. And chapter six is proofs this. But, attempting to keep these rules can never justify us before God. We may keep some but then break others. And some of these 'others,' such as coveting (v. 7), are more difficult to recognize in ourselves. Our holiness, righteousness, and sanctification are all a gift of grace from God. This is now the topic Paul turns to in chapter 8.

## Questions for Reflection

### Study it

1. [v. 1] Why do you think Paul begins to use more affection when referring to the brothers and sisters from this point in the letter?
2. [vv. 2-4] How does Paul's illustration relate to 6:1-11?
3. [v. 4] What are the two purposes for dying to the law?
4. [v. 4] What does "the body of Christ" mean in this verse?
5. [vv. 4-6] What are the two kinds of fruit, and how are they produced?

6. [v. 6] What does the phrase “new way of the Spirit” and “the old way of the written code” mean?
7. [v. 7] What purpose does Paul give for the law? Why does he use “covet” as his example?
8. [vv. 8-11] What is the relationship between sin and the law? In what sense did the law promise life? Why can’t the law do what it promised?
9. [v. 12] Given all Paul said, state why the law is holy, righteous and good.
- 10.v. 13] How does sin show it is “sinful beyond measure”?
- 11.[v. 14] When Paul said, he is “of the flesh, sold under sin,” what does he mean?
12. [v. 15] Why can’t Paul understand his own actions?
13. [vv. 17, 20] In what sense does Paul mean, it is “no longer I who do it”? How can he still be held accountable if it was not “I” who did it?
14. [vv. 21-25] List all the different uses of “law” in these verses. How do you interpret each one? What are the assumptions and implications of your interpretation?
- 15.[14-20] List all the desires identified in these verses. Explain how these desires are possible.
16. [v. 25] Explain the tension Paul describes in this verse. How do you understand it?

### **Live it**

1. Read 6:1-11 and 7:4-6. On what basis are we able to say we are dead to the law? Do you view yourself dead to the law but alive in Christ? What does this mean for you in your Christian life? What does “bear fruit for God” mean to you?
2. Do you think it is possible to be in union with Christ (i.e., a Christian) and not bear fruit for God (cf. John 15:1-8)?
3. How do you understand the relationship between obedience to the law and godliness? What is your motivation for obeying God’s moral commands?

4. Are Christians required to keep all of The Ten Commandments?
5. Do you relate to Paul's statement, "Wretched man that I am!'"? What is stronger in your life, law or sin?
6. How do you apply 7:14-25 to yourself? Is it encouraging or concerning?

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## Lesson 8: Freedom from Death (8:1-39)

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In this chapter, Paul returns to 1:16; the gospel is **“the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Gentile.”** He has also shown us that the law weakened by sinful flesh cannot transform us. And he has stated, there is a **“new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code”** (7:6). Paul now brings out the full meaning of this **“new way of the Spirit.”** For Paul, the Spirit's role is foundational to our relationship with God. So powerful is the work of the Spirit, we can put to death sin (v. 13), we have life through the Spirit, and we are sons of God by the Spirit of adoption. And as sons, we become fellow heirs with Christ. The Spirit also gives us faithful spiritual endurance (vv. 23-25). We need to suffer with Christ during our time on earth while we wait for the glory we will have in Christ. This overwhelming witness of the Spirit assures us that we are in the right relationship with God.

Therefore, not surprisingly, the text of chapter 8 has been a source of great comfort to Christians throughout the church age and rightly so. Its magnificence shines even greater when we keep in mind chapters 1 through 7. However, we should not lose the larger purpose of Paul's teaching in the letter. To this point, Paul has taught, both Jews and Gentiles are under the power and condemnation of sin but are now a single people of God in Christ. Both are redeemed, saved, and justified not by works of the law but by the free gift of grace. Paul continues this theme, explaining, the Spirit of adoption adopts both Jews and Gentiles in the same way. Paul has repeatedly pointed out, the law is powerless – weakened by sin – to transform us into a righteous people. Instead, what the law could not do, Christ has done and is doing through the Holy Spirit. The coming of the Spirit has brought an end to the law; and, therefore, makes it possible to live a transformed life despite the influence of sin. These two themes –there are only one people of God and the grace of God saves them – must be kept in mind as we study this material.

## The Spirit of Life and sonship (8:1-17)

### No condemnation because of Christ Jesus (8:1-4)

*vv. 1-2*

Paul begins this passage with **“therefore now.”** **“Therefore”** follows 7:14-25, where Paul describes the emotional trauma of living with the hopelessness the law would transform us into righteous people. Paul made it clear; sin's power was stronger than the law. This was a wretched condition, but in his cry of despair, he also states the answer is **“through Jesus Christ our Lord.”** Sin uses the law to condemn us to death. But **“now,”** there is **“no condemnation.”** This **“now”** is Paul's way of dividing time (3:20; 5:9; 6:22; 7:6; 11:30). There is the age of the law, and now there is the age of the Spirit.

The phrase **“no condemnation”** refers to the final end-time judgment. Although believers will give an account for themselves on the last day (14:10-12), it will not be a judgment of condemnation. This statement of fact could never have been made in the time of the Old Testament. It is only because of the life-giving blood of Christ that believers can stand before God without condemnation, being united with him and wearing his righteousness.

It is also worth noting, at the end of this chapter, Paul states there is also no separation **“from the love of God”** (8:39). Peace with God is not just the absence of judgment but the presence of the love of our heavenly Father (vv. 14-17). There is no condemnation or separation because we are in union with Christ (**“in Christ Jesus”**). And because we are in Christ Jesus, we have the assurance of Christ's love, grace, forgiveness and righteousness; even resurrection and glory are ours (v. 30). Chapter 8 is all about his commitment to us.

In verse 2, Paul gives the ground or reason why there is now no condemnation for believers. The reason he gives is a significant theme of the chapter: **“For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.”** But, what does he mean by **“the law of the Spirit of life?”** Nowhere else is this phrase used. It must be the case that Paul is taking up the word **“law”** from the previous passage and

contrasting the power of the Spirit with the power of the **“law of sin and death.”**<sup>168</sup>

It is of the greatest importance to understand that we receive these undeserved benefits through our union with Christ. There is no condemnation for us because we are **“in Christ.”** And we have been set free<sup>169</sup> from the tyranny of the law and sin, again, by our union **“in Christ.”** What is so crucial to see is the activity of the Spirit, and our union with Christ is indivisible. Paul never sees these as two separate things. Because we are **“in Christ,”** we can experience the power of the Spirit in our lives.

### v. 3

In this verse, Paul explains the reason in verse 2: there is no condemnation for those in Christ. Christ Jesus has given us freedom from sin, death, and life through the Holy Spirit.

In verse three, he states this was done by God (**“God has done”**). The Trinitarian reference here should not be overlooked. God the Father,<sup>170</sup> was able to do **“what the law weakened by the flesh,”** was unable to do. The phrase **“weakened by the flesh”** refers to our sinful human nature. So again, the problem is not the law but our sinful state. But, **“what”** is it the law could not do and God has done? Indeed, he sets us free from sin and death. But, it is more than that. What God did through his incarnate Son is to reverse what sin did through the law. Sin used the law to condemn us to death. So, Christ not only set us free, **“he condemned sin in the flesh.”** This means God carried out his judgement by sending his Son into the world of sinful human beings to break the power of sin.<sup>171</sup> How was this accomplished?

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<sup>168</sup> Moo, *Epistle of Romans*, 474.

<sup>169</sup> It is interesting to reflect on who the **“you”** (singular) is when Paul says, **“has set you free.”** It may be, he simply means anyone who has put their hope and trust in Christ Jesus. But it is also possible that he is directly addressing the Jewish objector with whom he has had a running discussion throughout the letter. This person has constantly been raising questions Paul has been answering. Paul now addresses this questioner directly, telling him, ‘Christ Jesus has set *you* free from the law of sin and death’ (Fee, 527). This should be a source of great rejoicing for him.

<sup>170</sup> When the word **“God”** is used together with the Jesus, the reference is to God, the Father. There are many examples of this throughout the New Testament

<sup>171</sup> Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 480. Schreiner, *Romans*, 402.

By God “sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh.” The words “sinful flesh” can only mean sinful human nature. There is a question, though, of the meaning of the word “likeness.”<sup>172</sup> The word “likeness” implies the Son of God did not simply resemble humans; he participated fully in human flesh (Hebrews 2:17). The reason Paul adds the word “likeness” is to highlight, even though he assumed a human nature like ours<sup>173</sup>, his human nature “was never the whole of Him—He never ceased to be the eternal Son of God”<sup>174</sup> (Hebrews 2:14-18). So, while Jesus was like us and was also tempted like us in every respect, he never sinned (Hebrews 4:15; 2 Corinthians 5:21). Commenting on this phrase, Robert Mounce writes, “If Christ had not taken on our nature, he could not have been one of us. On the other hand, had he become completely like us (i.e., had he sinned), he could not have become our Savior.”<sup>175</sup> It is also the case Jesus participated in the effects of sinful human nature. Schreiner writes, “he participated in the old age of the flesh, and that his body was not immune to the powers of the old age: sickness and death.”<sup>176</sup> The phrase “and for sin” means he took upon himself the judgment that was due us and is best understood as a sin offering.<sup>177</sup>

Therefore, we can paraphrase the sentence as follows: God sent his own Son as a human being like us into our sinful world to break the power of sin by offering himself as a sacrifice for our sins. Christ became what we are, so we might become what he is.

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<sup>172</sup> There have been many attempts to minimize the impact of the word “likeness” to imply not identical to sinful flesh. Care must be taken here not to interpret “likeness” to mean Jesus only appeared to be fully human. This was an early church heresy called Docetism. It was unequivocally rejected at the First Council of Nicaea in 325 AD.

<sup>173</sup> Although Jesus was born with a human nature like ours, this does not imply he was born with the guilt of Adam’s sin. (cf. **Special Topic: Questions that arise from this passage**).

<sup>174</sup> Cranfield, 382.

<sup>175</sup> Mounce, 175.

<sup>176</sup> Schreiner, 196.

<sup>177</sup> Dunn, *Romans*, 422.



## v. 4

Verse 4 gives the divine purpose of this atoning sacrifice of Christ, a purpose that never fails. The intent is, in union with Christ, the **“righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us.”** It is not **“us”** who fulfills its requirements, but the requirements are fulfilled **“in us.”** This means, Christ has fulfilled the law’s requirement for us. However, what does the **“requirement of the law”** (note the singular) mean, and how are they fulfilled in us. There are two valid interpretations.

The first is, Christ perfectly kept the law and has entirely met its requirements. When we are in union with Christ, we also participate in Christ’s perfect obedience. The emphasis is on justification or our *positional* sanctification before God. The **“fulfillment”** is not for everyone but for **“us”**; that is, only for those who **“walk according to the Spirit.”**

The second view places the focus on our obedience to God’s commands. Because we are in union with Christ and have the power of the indwelling Spirit, we are able **“to walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.”** In this view, it is still the Spirit working in us to enable us, but the emphasis is more on the Christian life than legal justification. Paul emphasizes this in 13:10, **“love is the fulfillment of the law.”** The Spirit enables us to grow in love for God and our neighbour (Jeremiah 31:33; Ezekiel 36:26-27).

Since both interpretations are valid, both should be taken together. If this is the case, it certainly does not imply that Christian behaviour is unimportant. It is still paramount that we do not practice sin (**“walk according to the flesh”**) but **“walk according to the Spirit”** (vv. 12-14). Only those whose lives are controlled by the Holy Spirit also have the moral requirement of the law fulfilled in Christ. Although our nature results in sin, making the law powerless to justify and sanctify, the Spirit enables us to obey. This is *progressive* sanctification. This does not mean perfect obedience to the law. Perfect obedience is only through our union in Christ. Returning to the beginning of verse four, we see that the ultimate purpose of Christ’s atoning sacrifice was not only our legal justification but also our holiness. A holiness which is itself a work of the Holy Spirit.

### Contrasting life in the Spirit and life in the flesh (8:5-13)

#### *The Mind of the Spirit (vv. 5-8)*

Verse 5 begins with “**for**” following from verse 4, meaning those who “**live according to the Spirit**” are given the power of the Spirit to “**walk**” according to the Spirit. But those “**who set their minds on the things of the flesh**” walk (“**live**”) according to the flesh. These verses (vv. 5-13) emphasize the Christian life of obedience made possible by the Spirit. To walk and live according to the Spirit means to surrender to the control of the Spirit. Paul highlights the contrast between living under the control of “**flesh**” and living under the power of the “**Spirit**.” His purpose in repeating this contrast highlights the impossibility of “**pleasing God**” (v. 8) without the Spirit.

#### *Flesh*

But, what does Paul mean when he uses the word “**flesh**” in these verses? He does not simply mean our human bodies. Neither is it just referring to sensual sins. Instead, he is referring to who we are as fallen human beings. Martin Luther, in his preface to his commentary on Romans, writes, “Paul, like Christ in John 3, calls ‘flesh’ everything that is born of the flesh’ viz., the whole man, with body and soul, mind and senses, because everything about him longs for the flesh.”<sup>178</sup> In an earlier letter, Paul writes concerning flesh in this way:

Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. (Galatians 5:19-21)

Jeremiah, years earlier, describes flesh in more general terms:

The heart is deceitful above all things,  
and desperately sick;  
who can understand it? (Jeremiah 17:9)

So “**flesh**” is who we are as sinful human beings. We are born under and in sin’s control. Therefore, to “**set the mind**” on the desires of the flesh is to make them our deepest concern, driving

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<sup>178</sup> Luther, xvii.

our actions, ambition, time and energy. Those who do so are unbelievers who are outside the gospel of grace. Therefore, the consequences of their greatest desires do not only affect their earthly lives – which they do (5:12, 15, 21) – but they also have eternal consequences. When Paul says, “**death**” is the product (“**fruit**” 7:5) of a mindset on the flesh, he includes eternal death, that is, the result of “**condemnation**” (8:1). So, the “**mind**” of a person, expressed by its strongest and greatest desires, reveals whether that person is a Christian or non-Christian. But people are like this, not because they *think* like this but because they *are* like this. Our nature determines how we think; if we are by-nature-in-the-flesh, our minds are set on the “**things of the flesh,**” but if we are by-nature-in-the-Spirit, our minds are set on “**the things of the Spirit.**”

In verses seven and eight, Paul explains why a mindset on the things of the flesh results in death. Such a mind is in open rebellion (“**hostile**”) towards God. There is no neutral position: either we are for God or against him. And so, a person in the flesh “**does not submit to God’s law.**” Here, “**God’s law**” means God’s righteous demands on unbelievers. It is the basis by which everyone who has rejected God will be judged and condemned. Although believers are not “**under the law**” (6:14, 15) and there is “**no condemnation**” for them, unbelievers remain under the judgment of God’s law.

Paul concludes in verse eight, those in the flesh “**cannot please God.**” This means, everyone who is not in union with Christ is under the power of sin and remains in union with Adam. Note the words, “**indeed, it cannot**” and “**cannot please God.**” Those who are in Adam not only sin but are unable to do otherwise. Although they can physically obey God’s laws, they are *morally* unable<sup>179</sup>. This moral inability does not reduce their accountability or liability to God. And again, this does not only

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<sup>179</sup> Although those who have not been born-again by the Spirit are physical and mentally able to believe in Jesus, they cannot because they are morally unable. It is only when God has regenerated us by making us alive in the Spirit, we are able to put our hope and trust in him. There is a sense, however, in which he can come to faith because no one is forcing him not to, yet he does not want to come. Therefore, he is responsible for his own condemnation.

mean sexual sins but an inability to honour and glorify God in their lives by believing in his Son. It is impossible for them to have faith in God's Son. As the writer of Hebrews notes,

And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. (Hebrews 11:6)

So, apart from grace coming through faith (Ephesians 2:8), we all have a moral inability to please God.

### *Spirit*

The good news of the Gospel of grace is, we are no longer forced to live under the control of the flesh. With the coming of the Spirit, we can now have our minds "**set on the Spirit**" rather than setting our minds on the desires of the flesh. In this case, we have a new nature; therefore, our minds are set on "**the things of the Spirit.**" The question comes down to this: Are we in the flesh or in the Spirit? These are the two options, and there is no middle way. In the following verses (vv. 9-17), Paul describes in greater detail what it means to be "**in the Spirit.**"

#### *The Indwelling Spirit (vv. 9-13)*

##### *v. 9*

So far in these verses (vv. 5-8), Paul has generally been speaking about people in one of two states: the flesh or the Spirit. Now, he speaks directly to the Christian members of the Roman church. He confidently states they are "**not in the flesh**" but "**in the Spirit.**" Paul immediately indicates what he means by this. To be "**in the Spirit**" means, the "**Spirit of God dwells in you.**" The word "**dwell**" means to live or to inhabit. Since God is the subject, it implies a *permanent* dwelling (1 Timothy 6:16).

Verse 9 is significant since it contains a profound definition of a true believer. A Christian has the Holy Spirit dwelling in him. The opposite is true; those who do not have the indwelling Spirit do not belong to Christ. Children of Adam have indwelling sin (7:17, 20), but children of God have the indwelling Spirit. Indwelling sin fights against God, but the indwelling Spirit fights against sin. This was the promise of Jesus before returning to the Father.

And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world

cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you. (John 14:16-18)

The gift of the Holy Spirit is given to everyone who repents and believes in Jesus. Although there may be additional blessings of the Spirit in a Christian's life, all Christians have the Holy Spirit living in them. In verse nine, it is also worth noting, Paul equates the "**Spirit of God**" with the "**Spirit of Christ**" – these are one and the same. Paul now gives two consequences of the indwelling Spirit. The first is "**life**" (vv. 10-11), and the second is "**obligation**" (vv. 12-13).

*vv. 10-11 First consequence of the indwelling Spirit: life*

Paul begins with an "**if**" statement, but his intent is not to doubt their sincerity. His focus is on the *result* of the union with Christ ("**Christ is in you**"). Note as well the parallel between the indwelling Spirit and union with Christ. What did Paul mean when he said, "**the body is dead because of sin**"? It cannot mean the body has already died since, in verse 13, he states, "**by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body**," implying an ongoing process. So, it is better to understand the phrase to mean our "**mortal bodies**" (v. 11); that is, we are all destined for physical death "**because of sin**"<sup>180</sup> (6:12; 8:11b). We have mortal bodies due to Adam's sin, which is also our sin (Genesis 3:19). However, in contrast to our dying bodies, we are alive "**because of the righteousness**" of Christ (5:15-18, 21). Because of Christ's righteousness, the Spirit who is life dwells in us, and so is life for us. Our life is not our own but a gift of the Spirit.

Even though the mortal body is destined for death, the ultimate destiny of our body is an eternal glorified body. We do not *just* die physically and go to heaven. Rather our glorious destination is to live eternally with God in a new heaven and earth with resurrected bodies. Although this is sometime in the future, "**we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies**" (v. 23).

In verse 11, there is again a reference to the Trinity: Spirit, Son, and Father ("**he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead**"). Moreover, it is because of what the Father has done, which

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<sup>180</sup> Stott, 226.

guarantees our own bodily resurrection. This new resurrected body will be free of sin and wholly indwelt by the Spirit. We, therefore, **“wait eagerly”** for this time, for then we will be able to honour, worship, and glorify God for whom we were created. The significance of our bodies is often minimized or overlooked in the church today. However, this is not the case in Scripture (1 Corinthians 3:16-17; 6:19-20).

*vv. 12-13 Second consequence of indwelling Spirit: Obligation*

Paul now brings to a close his discussion (**“so then”**) of the believer’s liberation from the flesh through the death of Christ. Life is not the only consequence of the indwelling Spirit of Christ. We are also **“debtors”** or obligated to God. Those who have the Spirit are alive in Christ and have no obligation to **“the flesh.”** Our sinful condition has no absolute claim on us anymore because we have died to the **“old self”** (6:6-7). However, we have an obligation, or more directly, are in debt to the Spirit. This obligation is to live a life pleasing to God. And what pleases God is to **“put to death the deeds of the flesh”** and **“set the mind on the Spirit.”** So, there are positive and negative aspects.

To please God also means to set our minds on the things of God. The letter to the Hebrews states faith in the Son is what pleases God (Hebrews 11:6). God also spoke through the prophet Jeremiah about what pleases him:

Let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the LORD.” (Jeremiah 9:24)

So, *knowing* God pleases him. This is not just ‘head’ knowledge; it must be knowledge of the heart, motivating us to holy action, reflecting the image of God. This is no different than when God gave the Mosaic law to Israel. Over and over again in Deuteronomy God wants Israel to love him with all their heart (Deuteronomy 4:29; 6:5, 6; 8:14; 10:2, 16; 11:13; 13:3; 26:16, 47; 30:6, 10). The great difference is, in the New Covenant, God has given us his Spirit to love him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Once again, in verse 13, Paul presents only two options. Either we **“live according to the flesh”** and **“die,”** or we **“put to death the deeds of the body”** and **“live.”** As John Stott writes,

“there is a kind of life that leads to death and a kind of death that leads to life.”<sup>181</sup> This reflects Christ’s own teaching when speaking to the people as recorded in Mark:

“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it. (Mark 8:34-35)

How is this “**putting to death**” accomplished? First, it is something we do. We are responsible for putting sin to death in our lives. To “**put to death**” means Christians are “to engage in a life-long struggle, through faith in Christ and by the power of the Spirit, against the sinful and corrupt tendencies which continue to work in them till the day they die.”<sup>182</sup> Paul also clarifies, we can only do this “**by the Spirit.**” So again, we have the twin truths of the sovereignty of God and human responsibility. Only by the indwelling power of the Spirit will we have the desire to reject evil and embrace reality. When temptation comes, we are obligated to fight against it, even sacrificing what is near and dear to us. Again, as Jesus taught:

If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell. (Matthew 5:29-30)

Although this seems to kill pleasure, it is the very opposite. To walk according to the flesh is the road to death, but walking according to the Spirit is eternal life.

Conclusion:

So, Paul has answered his Jewish critics who accused him of preaching a gospel of grace which resulted in ignoring and disobeying the law. Paul has stated in these verses the opposite. Those who are not in Christ cannot obey the law, and only those who have the indwelling Spirit receive power to obey. Faithful obedience to the law coming from the heart is now possible through the power of the Spirit (Ezekiel 36:26-28; cf. Joel 2:28-29).

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<sup>181</sup> Stott, 228.

<sup>182</sup> John Owen, *The Mortification of Sin*, xii.

Once when we were in Adam, we were not able not to sin, but now in union with the Spirit of Christ, we are able not to sin.

### **The Spirit of Adoption (8:14-17)**

Paul now moves from contrasting life in the flesh with life in the Spirit to the joys, security, and benefits of our sonship through adoption. The emphasis is on the family. Each of the four verses refers to “**sons**” (vv. 14-15) or “**children**” (vv. 16-17). Moreover, as sons, we are “**fellow heirs with Christ.**” Paul now describes how the Spirit “**bears witness**” that God is our “**Abba, Father**” and we are his adopted sons.

*v. 14*

The “**for**” at the beginning of the verse clarifies what was just stated in verse thirteen. Paul declares, all people “**led by the Spirit of God**” are also “**sons of God.**” Paul has used three other metaphors in referring to our relationship to the Spirit. In verse 4, he said we are to “**walk**” “**according to the Spirit,**” in verse 5, we are to “**live according to the Spirit,**” and in verse 6, we are to “**set our minds on the things of the Spirit.**” Now, he uses a fourth image.

We are to be “**led by the Spirit.**” The term “**led**” can have several meanings in Scripture. It can mean being forced to surrender or compelled by the Spirit; some interpreters see this meaning here. However, “**led**” can also mean “to guide morally or spiritually” and to “encourage” (BDAG). I believe this is the meaning Paul has in mind. It explains what he said in verse thirteen about putting to death our sin. There Paul said that life is only given to those who live by the Spirit. In verse fourteen, he is more specific: life in the Spirit means being led by the Spirit, and being led by the Spirit means we are “**sons of God.**” So, the Spirit’s witness is his leading and guiding us into spiritual maturity. Our assurance that we are “**sons of God**” is the change the Spirit makes in the heart of a believer. Our desire is now to “**please God.**”

When Paul uses the term “**sons,**” he, of course, means women as well.<sup>183</sup> Many people today claim all human beings are

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<sup>183</sup> The reason he uses the term “**sons**” is, in the historical context of Scripture, only sons are able to inherit from their fathers.



children of God. And to some degree, this is true. When Paul spoke at the Areopagus, he quoted one of the Greek poets who stated, we are all “God’s offspring.” However, here in Romans, “**children of God**” refers only to those who are “**led by the Spirit**.” As the apostle, John writes, “all who did receive him, who believe in his name, he gave the right to become children of God” (John 1:12).

*v. 15*

And as “**sons**,” we did not “**receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear**.” In the previous passage (vv. 1-13), Paul contrasted life and death. In the first half of verse fifteen, he contrasts two kinds of human conditions; “**slavery**” and “**adoption**.” Slavery means “**slaves to sin**” (6:12-23). The reference to “**spirit of slavery**” does not refer to any particular ‘spirit’ (i.e., human spirit)<sup>184</sup>; rather Paul uses the word to parallel the phrase “**receiving the Spirit of adoption**.” Slavery to sin results in “**fear**” of God’s final judgment. So, those who are adopted are not under the power of sin. As it has been throughout chapter 8 so far, the primary emphasis is on these two opposing conditions: the controlling power of sin and the controlling power of the Spirit.<sup>185</sup>

When Paul refers to “**adoption**,” did he mean an adoption similar to God adopting Israel (9:4) or to the practice of adoption in Roman society? Both are possible. However, because the term ‘adoption’ is not in the Old Testament<sup>186</sup>, most interpreters think Paul refers to Greco-Roman adoption. In this verse, Paul refers to our adoption as a present condition all believers receive at conversion. Later in the chapter, he will refer to adoption in a future sense (8:23). This highlights Paul’s understanding of our present age to be inaugurated with the first coming of Christ but not yet consummated at his second coming – an ‘already but not-yet’ age.

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<sup>184</sup> See 1 Corinthians 2:12 and 2 Timothy 1:7 where he uses a similar linguistic technique.

<sup>185</sup> This emphasis is even clearer in the parallel passage in Galatians 4:1-7

<sup>186</sup> However, concept of adoption is in the Old Testament. God is the Father of Israel, whom he loves as his child (Isaiah 1:2 ; Hosea 11:1 ). God also tells Pharaoh that, "Israel is my firstborn son" (Exodus 4:22 ).

What was adoption like in Roman times? John Barclay gives us a detailed description.<sup>187</sup> The legal process of adoption was a lengthy impressive procedure. The ceremony for adoption was done before seven witnesses. So, if the adopting father died and one of his biological sons disputed the adoption, the adopted son, together with the witnesses, would guarantee his inheritance. Barclay states that the consequence of the adoption is what is most significant for Paul. These are:

1. The adopted son loses all rights to his old family and gains all rights to this new family. His biological father is no longer his father. He now has only one new father.
2. The adopted son is treated identically to biological sons. This was true even if sons were born later to the adoptive father.
3. All debts that the adopted son might have had in his old life are paid. It is as if he was reborn.

We can see from this description that each aspect has meaning in our spiritual adoption as sons of God. Our old life has no claim on us any longer. All our past debts have been paid. And our co-inheritance in union with Christ is guaranteed as permanently adopted sons by the witness of the Spirit and our spirit (v. 16).

However, it is not only a legal relationship. Because we are adopted sons, we can, by the Spirit, "**cry, Abba! Father.**" This is the cry of the adopted son who calls to God his Father. It is similar to the cry of a child who, when seeing his father coming home from work or a trip, calls out, "Daddy!" or "Papa!" in a confident and delighted acknowledgement of seeing his beloved father, also knowing, his father feels the same way. This is a cry filled with personal and intimate emotion.

*vv. 16-17*

Paul, in verse 16, explains how it is we can cry out with such confidence and happiness. Both our human spirit and God's Holy Spirit together<sup>188</sup> "**bear witness**" to our relationship with the Father. This witness must include a strong emotional aspect as

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<sup>187</sup> Barclay, 125-126.

<sup>188</sup> This dual witness may be a reference to the Old Testament requirement of two witnesses (Deuteronomy 19:15).

does the cry, “**Abba! Father.**” Sometimes, fearing we are overemphasizing subjective sentimentality, we tend to shy away from any emotional response. This would certainly not have been the case for Paul as a Jew, and it has not been the case for Christians throughout history. However, we should not view this as a special experience of the Spirit, only received by some believers. This witness is for all believers.

After confirming our adoption, Paul describes the benefit of sonship. Because we are now God’s adopted “**children,**” we are “**heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ.**” Elsewhere, Paul proclaimed, we had inherited the promise of Abraham (Galatians 3:14, 29). In this letter, he described that promise as inheriting the whole world (4:13). But now he says something even more astonishing. Believers—Jews and Gentiles—are not only heirs of the world but heirs of God himself.<sup>189</sup> The ultimate benefit of the fulfillment of the covenant to Abraham is having God be our God (Genesis 17:7; Revelation 21:3). Paul helps us understand what this means when he adds, “**and fellow heirs with Christ.**” We can cry to God as our loving Father with confidence and joy because we are in union with Christ. This is what Christ has gained for us because of his birth, death, resurrection, and ascension to the Father’s right hand. The Son and the Father are One, and we, who are in Christ, are also one with the Father. Not as the only begotten Son of God, but as adopted sons in Christ Jesus.

Paul, in verses 14 through 16, has given us three reasons to be assured of our union in Christ: first, we are “**led by the Spirit**” (v. 14) meaning our conduct honours God; second, we have received “**the Spirit of adoption**” meaning we are now in a special family relationship with God; and third, “**the Spirit himself bears witness to our spirit**” meaning we experience God’s fatherly love. Surprisingly, now Paul adds a fourth reason. It is only “**provided we suffer with him.**” If we do, we will also be “**glorified with him.**” We would not expect suffering to be a ‘proof’ we are God’s children. In fact, we would likely think the opposite. When we experience a special blessing of God we feel more like his child. We think of suffering more as a problem

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<sup>189</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 427.

when we think of the sovereignty and love of God. Douglas Moo commenting on this verse writes, "Participation in Christ's glory can come only through participation in his suffering."<sup>190</sup> This condition is *not* a condition for salvation, but the *result* of salvation; that is, further 'proof' we are in union with Christ. So once again, we are given a greater understanding of our union with Christ. We now know that in union with him we receive his righteousness, but now we are told that we also "**suffer**" in union with him and in order that we are "**glorified**" in union with him.

*Benefits of Adoption (v. 17a)*

Adopted children are heirs of the parents who adopted them. This is something the Rome citizens in the church would have known very well because of the adoptions that occurred within the imperial family.<sup>191</sup> If we are "**children of God,**" we are "**heirs.**" Heirs of what? We are heirs to all the promises to Abraham, who is heir of the world (4:13-16; Galatians 3:14-29). Paul now says something even more amazing: we are "**heirs of God.**" This is not only the promises of God but God himself (Genesis 17:7-8; Revelation 21:7). Paul goes on to say we are also "**fellow heirs with Christ.**" In Colossians, Paul tells us, "all things were created by him and for him" (Colossians 1:16). The Father makes the Son the inheritor of all created things (Hebrews 1:2; Psalm 2:8). This includes the present creation and the new heavens and earth. And we, as adopted children, are included. As Michael Reeves writes, "It is a physical expression of the marvelous truth that the Father shares his love of the Son with us: the meek shall inherit the earth!"<sup>192</sup>

*Suffering with him (v. 17b)*

Paul now states we are "**fellow heirs with Christ provided we suffer with him.**" We often hear messages and teaching on suffering, yet we do not often hear teaching on sharing in Christ's suffering. Paul, however, refers to suffering for Christ repeatedly

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<sup>190</sup> Moo, *Epistle to the Romans*, 506.

<sup>191</sup> Thielman, 392.

<sup>192</sup> Reeves, 50.

in his letters. For instance, in his letter to the Galatian church, Paul writes:<sup>193</sup>

Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. (Philippians 3:8-11)

Paul boldly states, he wants to share Christ's suffering and even become like him in Christ's death. So, what does Paul mean by sharing in the suffering of Christ? Some interpreters believe this suffering includes all suffering believers experience, particularly the spiritual struggle against sin. These interpreters understand that even though our struggle is faint in comparison, it reflects Christ's struggle in Gethsemane. They base this on the letter to the Hebrews where the writer states, "because he himself [Christ] has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted" (Hebrews 2:18; see also Hebrews 5:7). It is because of Christ's suffering in temptation that he understands and can help us (Hebrews 4:15).

Although this is true, in verse 17, it seems Paul is referring to the suffering Christ experienced on the cross when he took upon himself the sins of the world. Christ's suffering on the cross concerned the redemption of sinners to gather together a people for his kingdom. In this sense, it relates to the Christian mission. It is because of Christ's completed work that he instructs his disciples:

"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:19-20)

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<sup>193</sup> See also Galatians 6:17; 2 Corinthians 1:5; 4:7-8; Colossians 1:24; Philippians 1:29; 1 Thessalonians 1:6; 3:2-3.

Paul's missionary work always resulted in suffering for Christ (Acts 13:50; 14:19; 2 Corinthians 11:25; 2 Timothy 3:10-11). Missions, therefore, is the Christian extension of Christ's work on the cross. To be in mission for Christ also means our willingness to sacrifice all for him. When we are in union with him, we are in union with his work to redeem a people for himself. Paul understands that the suffering he experienced as a result of his missionary work is because of his union with Christ, both Christ's death and Christ's life. So, union with Christ includes both the life and death of Christ. For Paul, this was experienced daily. As Paul himself will later say in this letter, "**present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship**" (12:1). Many believers have suffered and even faced death for their faith throughout church history. This is still the case in many parts of the world.

However, as well, we will see in the following passage (vv. 18-25) "**suffering at this present time**" (v. 18) does not only include the direct trials of persecution because of confessing Christ. It also consists of all types of human suffering and how a believer *responds* to such trials. There are in the world around us many non-Christian responses to suffering. One of the most common is anger against God, blaming him for allowing specific suffering. But Jesus never promised an easy life here on earth, only future glory.

Although this letter contains much doctrine, Paul is also a pastor. And so, his concern is not only to teach but to encourage and comfort the church in Rome in their suffering.

*Glorified with him (v. 17c)*

The outcome or result ("**in order that**") of suffering with Christ is we will also be "**glorified with him.**" Paul has already spoken about the beginning of salvation when we first receive Christ's righteousness and the Holy Spirit. He has also taught in the present earthly life of a Christian how we are to "**put to death**" sin and be "**led by the Spirit.**" He has told us that this includes "**life ... through the Spirit who dwells in you.**" And he has also told us life in Christ means to "**suffer with him.**" But now, Paul tells us what will happen to the believer at the end of our physical life—we will be "**glorified with him.**" This is the

ultimate goal of our salvation. So everything we have, everything we are, and everything we will have is “in Christ.”

When Paul uses the word “**glorified**,” what does he mean? Lloyd-Jones, commenting on this word, writes, “Glorification means full and entire deliverance from sin and evil in all their effects and in every respect – body, soul, and spirit. The whole man will be completely and entirely delivered from every harmful effect of sin; every tarnishing, polluting effect of sin. Not only so, but we shall also become like the Lord Jesus Christ”.<sup>194</sup> This is the doctrine of glorification. It is the positive side of our salvation. On that great day, we will be transformed, not just like Adam was before he sinned but even better:

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. (2 Corinthians 3:18)

John the apostle also says this in his first letter:

Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2)

So, we shall be transformed into his image. And so, when we are glorified, it will be impossible for us to sin, not because of who we are, but because of who he is. The fall will not be repeated, for all evil will be destroyed (Revelation 20:10, 13-14). What Christ offers in his salvation is not just escape from hell (as wonderful as that is) but also glorification; that is, to be completely and entirely restored in our union with Christ Jesus. As Paul said elsewhere:

[Christ] will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself. (Philippians 3:21)

This is the glorious future of all who are adopted sons of God.

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<sup>194</sup> Lloyd-Jones, Romans, Final Perseverance of the Saints, 3.

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### Special Topic: God as Father

The most astonishing teaching about God in this letter is not God being the Creator or Ruler of the universe, but being our Father.<sup>195,196,197</sup> Paul opened this letter to the Romans by calling God the Father, *our* Father (1:7). We are able to call and relate to God as our Father because he has adopted us as his children (8:15; Galatians 4:6-7). However, before God was our Father, he was the Father of Jesus Christ, the Son of God (15:6). God did not become Father at the birth of Jesus. It is helpful to think about what God was doing before creating the world and universe to understand this better. At first, we might say, we have no idea. However, Jesus tells us precisely in John 17:24: "Father," Jesus says, "you loved me before the foundation of the world." Before God created the world and everything in it God was loving and delighting in his Son and the Son loves the Father (John 14:31).

Throughout Scripture, God and Father are used interchangeably. In Exodus, Israel is called "my firstborn son" (Exodus 4:22; see also Isaiah 1:2; Jeremiah 31:9; Hosea 11:1). God carries Israel "as a father carries his son" (Deuteronomy 1:31 NIV). David says in the Psalms, "As a father shows compassion on his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him" (Psalm 103:13). There are many more such examples in the Old Testament. The same is true in the New Testament. Jesus often refers to God as "Father." He tells his disciples to pray, "Our Father" (Matthew 6:9). Both Paul and Peter refer to God as Father. And the writer of the letter to the Hebrews states, "God is treating

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<sup>195</sup> This is why those who understand "God" only through nature most often end with a wrong understanding of who God is. Nature teaches them, a god exists (1:17-20), but their sinful condition distorts this knowledge as Paul describes in the very next verses (1:21-23). The only way to understand God as Father is through special revelation given by the Spirit.

<sup>196</sup> Reeves, 23-32.

<sup>197</sup> God as Father is unique, compared with other religions. For example, some people believe, the God Christians and Muslims worship is the same God. However, this cannot possibly be so. Christians worship God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit while Islam states, "He is Allah, the One. Allah the eternal. He begets not, nor was He begotten. And there is none comparable to Him" (Surah 112).



you as sons. For what Son is there whom his father does not discipline?" (Hebrews 12:7). So common is the reference to Father that when the word "God" is used by itself in the New Testament, we can often substitute the word "Father."

God uniquely loves his only Son. We are given the privilege to know this by the baptism of Jesus. "As soon a Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment, heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, 'this is my Son, whom I love; with him, I am well pleased'" (Matthew 3:16-17 NIV). And so, he pours forth his love through his Spirit (Romans 5:5; Titus 3:4-7; Acts 2:17-18), not only to his Son but also to us. In Romans 5:5, Paul tells us that God (the Father) pours his love into our hearts "by the Holy Spirit." What a privilege we have, in union with Jesus, to share the Father's love with his Son through the Holy Spirit (5:5; 15:30). It is this profound understanding that God is first and foremost a kind and loving Father to whom we respond not just in obedience or even gratitude but in deepest love. To know God as Father is to love him, for a Father gives life to his Son and us, his adopted children. That is who he is, his most profound identity. Love is not just another attribute of God or something he has. As John states again, "God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him" (1 John 4:16).

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### **The Spirit of Hope (8:18-30)**

In the passage 8:1-17, Paul described how Christ Jesus freed us from the law of sin and death. Because of our freedom from the law, we are no longer under condemnation when we come before God's throne (vv. 1-2). Paul has also stated through the Holy Spirit, we have life and peace (vv. 6, 11). He reminds us all believers receive the Spirit of Christ (v. 9). And those who have the Spirit are also led by the Spirit (v. 14). We eagerly await our adoption as sons of God (v. 23). These are all glorious promises and blessings for those who suffer with Christ. And here lies the tension: as Paul indicated in chapter 7, although we have '*already*' all these things as current blessings, we still live in the '*not-yet*' era. During this not-yet time, we live in the hope of these

promises, a hope guaranteed by the Spirit (2 Corinthians 1:22; 5:5; Ephesians 1:13-14). As Jesus told his disciples just before he returned to his Father:

But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid. (John 14:26-27)

It is through the “Helper” that we have hope in our future glory with Christ, while now, in this present time, we “**groan inwardly**” (v. 23). Although we have already been adopted (v. 15), we “**wait eagerly**” (v. 23) for the consummation of our adoption. The phrase “**wait eagerly**” perfectly defines a believer’s hope. Any promise given by one person to another implies a hope that the promise will be kept. The certainty of the hope is based on the ability and integrity of the person making the promise. Christian hope is a guaranteed, assured certainty because our sovereign God gives it. God has not only given us a contract but a surety<sup>198</sup> the promise would be kept. This surety is the Holy Spirit (v. 9).

[God] who has also put his seal on us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee. (2 Corinthians 1:22)

He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee. (2 Corinthians 5:5)

In him, you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory. (Ephesians 1:13-14)

Our hope, guaranteed by the Spirit, is a joyful, eager – can hardly wait – expectation of the fulfilment of his promises. And it is through reading, studying, meditating, and most importantly,

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<sup>198</sup> The term “surety” or “earnest” means in human transaction a down payment or pledge in advance to guarantee the whole future payment. In this passage, Paul uses the term “firstfruits” (v. 23) rather than “guarantee”.

praying the Scriptures that the Spirit increases our hope in Christ (15:4). The passage may be outlined as follows:

*Outline*

- Main hope: Our present suffering is nothing compared to our future glory. (v. 18)
- Reason 1: Creation's hope for freedom from bondage to corruption (vv. 19-21)
- Reason 2: Believer's hope for adoption, the redemption of our bodies (vv. 22-25)
- Reason 3: The Holy Spirit helps us in this hope of future glory (vv. 26-27)
- Reason 4: Hope for glory is based on the sovereignty of God (vv. 28-30)

**Main hope (8:18)**

*v. 18*

Paul, following from verse 17 (“for”), compares the suffering he experienced in the “**present time**,” to the future time when “**the glory**” is “**revealed**.” This current paragraph (vv. 18-25) explains what Paul meant by the relationship between suffering and glory mentioned in verse 17b. Paul sees Christ's return in all its immense, eternal glory. And his own glorification in Christ's glory. Paul suffered for Christ more than most and eventually was martyred for his faith. Still, he viewed all earthly suffering as light compared to what he saw as his guaranteed glorious future.<sup>199</sup> In his letter to the Corinthian church, Paul writes how he has been imprisoned, beaten, received lashes, stoned and more (2 Corinthians 11:23-28). But he also says, in the same letter:

So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the unseen things are eternal. (2 Corinthians 4:16-18)

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<sup>199</sup> In another letter, Paul states, this light affliction is used by God to “prepare for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison” (2 Corinthians 4:17).

Despite the terrible suffering in this world, Paul (and other New Testament writers such as Peter, John, James, and the writer to the Hebrews) wants us to keep our ‘eye on the prize.’ So, these “**sufferings**” do not only relate to sufferings with Christ as a result of persecution. There is also a sense in which they include all human suffering, such as sickness, loss of a loved one, financial ruin, or facing death. Since Jesus came “**in the likeness of sinful flesh**” (v. 3)<sup>200</sup>, he experienced many sufferings common to human experience. All such suffering results from sin entering the world because of Adam. Even though believers suffer similarly as unbelievers, the response to suffering differentiates Christians. This difference should be visible to everyone. This is a significant theme of this passage. Because Christians have the hope of glory, which far exceeds any suffering, they do not grieve their loss as those without hope (1 Thessalonians 4:13; Ephesians 2:12; 1:18).

Although our present time is full of pain and sorrow, all suffering will be left behind (Revelation 21:4) when Christ’s glory is revealed (Philippians 2:9-11). Then, we in union with him will also “**be glorified with him**” (v. 17). This glory is not just something we will see but something “**revealed in us**” (NIV)<sup>201,202</sup>. We will not just be watching from the outside, but the glory is something *in us*; we will be glorified (v. 30). This will be when all disease and death disappear, along with all personality disorders and mental illness, making life very difficult for people today. God will turn our sinful, broken, damaged lives and bodies and make them as glorious as Jesus’ risen body (Philippians 3:21). Sadly, it is often the case, as Christians, we do not meditate on our future glory with Christ. For Paul, it gave him the strength to endure great hardship. And, it is vital for us as well, as C.S. Lewis once said, to keep one foot on earth and one foot in heaven; that is, to continually remind ourselves that our eternal home is with Christ. This is what the apostle John meant when he wrote:

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<sup>200</sup> Moo, *Epistle of the Romans*, 511.

<sup>201</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 434; Fee, 570.

<sup>202</sup> The Greek word means ‘in’ or ‘for’ and has a more special meaning that just “to” (see NIV translation).

Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. (1 John 3:2)

However, the question remains: what does Paul exactly mean by "glory"? Although it includes, as already mentioned, a glorified body like Christ's glorified body, there is more to being glorified. We notice from verses 17, 18, and 30 that we are glorified *with* him, this glory will be revealed *in* us, and it is *God* who glorifies us. We see from this, our glorification is based on the glory of Christ. Because we will be in perfect union with Christ, Christ's glory becomes our glory. Christ's glory is his holiness made visible. In short, it is his beauty. "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit" (2 Corinthians 3:18). When God the Father looks upon us, he will see the beauty of his Son. This is why today, we can "rejoice in our hope of the glory of God" (5:2). When God glorifies his children, he gives us the privilege of not only beholding his infinite beauty but partaking in it. "When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory" (Colossians 3:4). To fully partake in Christ's holiness is the believer's greatest privilege.

Paul now reminds believers, specifically, what we hope for; what is to be "revealed": it is a new creation (earth) and a new physical life on the new earth.

### **The hope of new creation (vv. 19-21)**

*v. 19*

Paul first mentions the hope of a new creation. As he did with sin, Paul personifies creation, saying, it "waits with eager longing for the revealing for the sons of God." The phrase "eager longing," means to look while standing on your tiptoes, or to strain the neck to see better.<sup>203</sup> Surprisingly, creation itself has this same longing as Christians have (v. 23), which is the consummation of "adoption as sons" (v. 23).

What is the meaning of "creation"? Throughout church history, interpreters have referred to it as believers, or non-

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<sup>203</sup> Moo, *Epistle of Romans*, 513.

believers or even angels. But none of these fit the context. I agree with most interpreters that here **“creation”** refers to God’s physical creation excluding humans, that is, the universe and specifically our earth (Isaiah 24:4; Jeremiah 4:28; 12:4).

But why does creation eagerly await the revelation of believers? Paul tells us in verses 20 to 22.

*vv. 20-21 The groaning and hope of creation*

Creation eagerly awaits its consummation of adoption because it has been **“subjected to futility”** by God. This is likely a reference to God’s curse on the earth because of Adam’s sin (Genesis 3:17-19). **“Futility”** is the result of the curse; that is, it is not able to fulfil its original God-created purpose<sup>204</sup> (Isaiah 11:6-9; 25:6-8; 35:1-10; 49:8-13). Creation itself was not at fault, so Paul adds **“not willingly”** to clarify this. Now, in this present time, creation’s **“hope”** is that it will be **“set free”** from this **“subjection,”** resulting in **“its bondage to corruption.”** This last phrase describes the meaning of **“futility”**: decay and death, which is part of our world. It also includes earthquakes, hurricanes, famines and other natural disasters. This is creation’s current reality, but its hope is to be **“set free”** and again **“obtain freedom.”** This hope will only be experienced when God’s children are glorified. So, creation’s hope depends on the fulfilment of Christians’ hope. It is worth noting that the reference to **“freedom”** strongly suggests that this earth will be transformed into a new heavens and earth (Revelation 21:1-7).

**The hope of believers (vv. 22-25)**

*v. 22*

The reference **“groan together in the pains of childbirth”** most likely refers to the time of distress—often referred to as the ‘messianic woes’—Jesus predicted would come before the day of the Lord (Mark 13:8-14; John 16:20b-22; 1 John 2:18). The word **“together”** means creation is groaning together with believers. Although distress will increase as the day of the Lord approaches, such distress has always been present throughout human history (Mark 13:7-8).

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<sup>204</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 436.

v. 23 *The groaning and hope of believers*

What are “**the firstfruits of the Spirit**” believers have and why do they “**groan inwardly**”? Both phrases point to Paul’s already but not-yet understanding of the present time. The “**firstfruits**” is the guarantee of the Spirit. In this sense, it refers to the Holy Spirit himself as the guarantee (2 Corinthians 1:22; 5:5; Ephesians 1:14)<sup>205</sup>; that is, the “**firstfruits**” which is “**the Spirit**.” It is also likely, Paul had in mind the “**feast of the firstfruits**” which took place during the week of the Pentecost (Exodus 23:16; Numbers 28:26). The feast of firstfruits marked the beginning of the harvest and was a thanksgiving festival for the promise of the actual harvest to come. As such, it was very much a celebration of hope for the coming harvest and an acknowledgment that the whole harvest depended on God. In the New Testament, it marked the coming of the Spirit (Acts 2:1-4).

This guarantee has already been given to us and is the basis of our waiting eagerly for our “**adoption as sons**.” Still, it is because we have the indwelling Spirit, we have the surety of this hope, and it is because we hope that we “**groan inwardly**.” The “**groan**” is not of abject despair but the pain of childbirth anticipating new life.

Paul is now using adoption in the future when he just used it in the present (v. 15). This fits Paul’s understanding of the present time. Those who are “**in Christ**” are already adopted, but they also “**wait eagerly**” and patiently for the consummation of their adoption.<sup>206</sup> It is also very important to see that the consummation of our adoption is directly connected to our bodily resurrection. Although our bodies now share in creation’s “**futility**,” our bodies will be transformed to be like Jesus’ resurrected body (Philippians 3:21). For this is what the phrase “**the redemption of our bodies**” means (1 Corinthians 15:42-44, 53-54). This all points forward to that great day of the Lord. But

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<sup>205</sup> Note also the close connection between the resurrected Christ and the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 15:20, 23) in reference to “**firstfruit**.”

<sup>206</sup> Elsewhere Paul also uses this already-but-not-yet understanding for our righteousness in Christ. In 5:1, he states, “**since we have been justified by faith**” but in Galatians 5:5, he wrote “**we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness**.” The consummation of our righteousness is our glorification (8:30) when we will live with Christ in perfect obedience; reflecting his glory as Adam was created to do.

the fact remains, believers also suffer with the rest of creation. The Spirit does not always rescue believers in this present age from the consequences of a sinful world. This includes the evil actions of humans and sin's effect on creation (2 Corinthians 5:2-4; Mark 13:5-8). But the believer's response is one of hope in the Spirit to "be on guard" and to "keep awake" (Mark 13:133).

*vv. 24-25 The patience of hope in believers*

Our salvation ("were saved") has brought us this hope for our future. Paul provides in these verses the Christian definition of "hope." Clearly, it is what we are experiencing now in the present time. We do not now "see" the final consummation of all things, but we hope for it. Again, Paul emphasizes the not-yet aspect of this present age. Hope is built on our faith in the trustworthiness of God. We believe in God's lovingkindness (steadfast love), his mercy and compassion, and his sovereignty; that is, his absolute ability to accomplish all he says. Therefore, because of our faith in God, we have hope in his promises. With faith, there is hope, a faith that pleases God, and without faith there is no hope (Hebrews 11:6).

This hope is characterized by eagerness, confidence, and "patience." It is a joyful waiting that must be endured with patience. Patient endurance, in the face of all suffering, results from Christian hope. And the emphasis is on patience and not just endurance. Patience means that we are satisfied and at peace and that God is entirely in control of whatever situation we find ourselves in. We know in our hearts that God will work everything out for his glory (v. 28), our greatest desire. For believers, this is only possible through our union with Christ. Peter sums up this teaching perfectly (1 Peter 1:3-9).

*Conclusion of vv. 18-25*

We should not forget that Paul began this section with the suffering of faithful believers. It would be foolish for Christians to think, this glory that will be revealed in them is now, that is, everything will be perfect in their lives. Some preachers preach such a gospel of prosperity. But Paul does not. He preaches a gospel which includes suffering in this world and that God is preparing his children to glory through and by means of this suffering. But there is no comparison between the suffering of



this world and the glory of the world to come. Paul wants the Roman Christians to know that the amazing future awaiting them greatly exceeds any present trouble. Because of this knowledge, they can wait eagerly and patiently for its fulfillment. In this passage, he specifically mentioned their hope for their future adoption. It is, therefore, a passage of encouragement and assurance. Now, (vv. 26-30), he mentions the other aspects of their assurance in hope: the prayer of the Spirit and God's sovereignty.

### **The Hope in the intercessory prayer of the Spirit (vv. 26-27)**

Paul begins verse twenty-six with "likewise," connecting it with the preceding verses. The connection is that the hope of believers in this present age is helped by the interceding prayer of the Holy Spirit. The word "helps" does not mean simply encouraging us in our prayer but the Holy Spirit ("intercedes") himself prays for us.<sup>207</sup> We need help because, so often, we experience "weakness" in our prayer-life<sup>208</sup>. Still, the question remains: what specific weakness is Paul referring to, and how does the Spirit intercede? Paul refers to "what" specifically we are to pray about; that is, the content of our prayers<sup>209</sup>. We have trouble knowing what is appropriate to pray for, "as we ought"<sup>210</sup>. In this present age, while we wait eagerly and patiently for God's glory and our glory in him to be revealed, we need the help of the Spirit in praying "according to the will of God" (v. 27). Therefore, weakness in prayer results from an unclear understanding of the will of God for a particular situation. We lack wisdom in our prayers. We are fallen human beings and cannot comprehend God's ultimate will. All Christian prayer, therefore, is qualified, as Jesus' own prayer in the garden of Gethsemane, with "not as I will but as you will" (Matthew 26:39). This is why we close our prayers with "in the name of Jesus." This does not mean we do not strive to understand God's will for our lives, but we also must recognize our weakness in doing so.

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<sup>207</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 442.

<sup>208</sup> Although "weakness" could refer to general bodily weakness, Paul's emphasis in this verse is weakness in our prayer.

<sup>209</sup> Fee, 579.

<sup>210</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 443.

Because of this weakness, the Spirit “**intercedes**” (both v. 26 and v. 27). Although we do not always know God’s will, the Spirit does (v. 27a) and so prays on our behalf. Surprisingly, Paul tells us, the Spirit does this “**with groaning too deep for words.**” Interpreters have wondered what is meant by this phrase. Some believe this “**groaning**” refers to the believer praying in tongues.<sup>211</sup> They base this understanding on Paul’s other teaching about praying in the Spirit (1 Corinthians 14:2, 14-15; Ephesians 6:18). As well, in this context, creation groans (v. 22) and believers groan (v. 23). Also, Paul has just described this intermingling of our spirit with the Holy Spirit (vv. 15-16). Although this is possible, others have pointed out that these verses apply to *all* believers, while speaking in tongues seems to be a gift given to only *some* Christians (1 Corinthians 12:30). If the Spirit’s groaning does not mean speaking in tongues, to what might it refer? I believe the groaning is the believer’s groaning in his deep longing to do God’s will, although at times is confused, perplexed and even discouraged (2 Corinthians 4:8).<sup>212</sup> But God assures the believer that their prayer is never wrong. God takes our prayers and shapes them into his will when we cry out for God in a difficult situation to heal an illness or remove a financial or physical threat. We know God always hears his child’s cries.

God the Father “**searches hearts**” – that is, our hearts – and who knows “**the mind of the Spirit.**” The role of the Spirit in prayer is the same as the role of Christ as our great High Priest.

Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them. (Hebrews 7:25)

The Spirit of Christ, like Jesus, is interceding for us according to God’s will. He takes our prayers as our great High Priest and sanctifies them, making them holy and pure and then presents them to the Father. And since we know God’s purpose and will for us will be accomplished, we know these “intercessions” on our behalf, will always be accomplished (see v. 28). Lois Berkhof,

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<sup>211</sup> Fee, 580-585.

<sup>212</sup> The Psalms also contain many laments describing the groaning of the faithful (Psalm 6, 38, 102 but also others).

one of the leading theologians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, commenting on Hebrews 7:25:

It is a consoling thought that Christ is praying for us, even when we are negligent in our prayer life; that He is presenting to the Father those spiritual needs which were not present to our minds and which we often neglect to include in our prayers; and that He prays for our protection against the dangers of which we are not even conscious, and against the enemies which threaten us, though we do not notice it. He is praying that our faith may not cease, and that we may come out victoriously in the end.

What a glorious truth to know that right now – in our weakness in prayer – the Spirit of Christ is speaking to the Father on our behalf; to contemplate such a wonderful fact, we can only respond in deepest humble gratitude.

### **Hope of glory based on the sovereign love of God (vv. 28-30)**

The goal of the prayer of the Spirit of Christ for us is to grow in the image of the Son of God. And we can be confident the Spirit's prayers will be answered. This is our hope for future glory when we will be like him.

*v.28*

Paul begins by saying, "**we know.**" This knowledge is not a faint wish or a guess. We know it with absolute certainty, like Paul, because the Spirit gives us understanding. It is spiritual knowledge given only to "**those who love God.**" These two things are equal; to be "in Christ" means to love as Christ loves. This is not a condition but a simple statement of fact.

We know God causes "**all things [to] work together for good.**" The reference to "**all things**" implies there is nothing outside God's control and will. However, the emphasis of the phrase must also be the suffering and troubles Paul referred to in verses 17 and 18. This means that even tribulations are worked out in God's will for the "**good.**" This is sometimes difficult for us to comprehend. But when we reflect on the cross and the good resulting from it, we can understand it for our own lives. The implication is that suffering will occur, but the suffering of his children will be turned into something beautiful. Suffering itself is not good, but God turns it into good. This may well be the

greatest miracle of all. The term “**good**” refers to what God has done. And so, it is a perfect good based entirely on his sovereign will.

Paul ends the verse by giving additional detail concerning the believer who loves God. In fact, he provides the foundation of the cause of this love of God. He states, they are also “**called according to his purpose.**” The *cause* is God himself. And the *purpose* of God is to call people to love him. God’s calling and purpose are the reason believers will be “**conformed to the image of his Son**” (v. 29). The calling is not just an invitation to be accepted or rejected. Rather, it is a summons which must be obeyed. The following two verses make this understanding of calling and purpose even more evident (vv. 29-30).

*vv. 29-30*

Once again, these verses begin with “**for**” which means they contain the reason “**all things work together for good**” in verse 28. God’s work will occur because he is sovereign and is able to do what he wills. Paul now underlines this thought. He makes sure his readers understand God can and will accomplish all of his purposes. Paul does this by creating a “golden chain” defining specifically what “**good**” meant in the previous verse.

In the first link in the chain, God (and God is the subject of all the verbs in these two verses) “**predestined**” those who he “**foreknew.**” There are two ways this phrase can be understood. Each result in a substantially different understanding of salvation. One way is to state that God only predestines those he already knows will choose him out of their own free will. God knew before creation who would and who would not freely choose him. So, God does not foreordain the choice but, in a sense, observes the choice. Based on this knowledge, God predestines those who choose him. In this understanding, the Holy Spirit convicts each person and makes a choice possible by overcoming their depravity.<sup>213</sup> This is an attractive interpretation since it removes the difficulty of what appears to be God’s arbitrary choice rather than man’s choice.

However, when God is the subject of “**foreknew,**” it refers to his covenantal love and personal knowledge of Israel and his

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<sup>213</sup> Osborne, 250.

prophets (Exodus 33:17; Jeremiah 1:5). Similarly, Paul also uses the term when referring to Israel in 11:2 **“God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew”** (see also 1 Peter 1:2, 20; Acts 2:23; Ephesians 1:4). God does not simply know *about* us (i.e., what we will do), but he knows and loves his children personally. **“Foreknew”** describes God’s special knowledge of a person (Genesis 18:19; Jeremiah 1:5; Amos 3:2) rather than prior knowledge of how a person will respond to God’s call in the future. As well, only some individuals have been **“foreknown.”**<sup>214</sup> The term **“foreknew,”** therefore, refers to God’s preordained plan and **“predestined”** *outcome* of that plan.<sup>215</sup> In both terms the prefix **“fore”** and **“pre”** refers to what took place before the world was created.

Amazingly, every Christian is known and loved by God before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4-10). This understanding of predestination should give hope and comfort to believers. All who come to Christ will be accepted, and all who are accepted are eternally secure. Of course, this also raises the difficult question of why God would call some but not others. We can be assured that God is perfectly just, loving, and sovereign in all his ways. And so, we can with confidence, leave this all in his hands. As Paul says later, **“Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!”** (11:33). Keep in mind, Paul’s main point is not to argue about predestination, but to strengthen the hope of believers who are struggling in their earthly life by encouraging and comforting them.

The purpose of God’s foreknowledge and accomplishment in his children is so we **“will be conformed to the image of his Son.”** This is the primary meaning of the word **“good”** of the previous verse. It is not earthly wealth or comfort in this present age, but conformity to Jesus Christ. God uses all things, including suffering, to bring about this transformation. There is no higher purpose than this. As such, it should be the goal of every believer. This transformation which begins in this present age (2 Corinthians 3:18; Colossians 3:10), will finally be accomplished

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<sup>214</sup> Moo, *Epistle of Romans*, 533.

<sup>215</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 452=453.

on the great day of our resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:49; Philippians 3:21). The purpose (“**in order that**”) of this final transformation is for God’s Son to be “**the firstborn among many brothers.**” In the Old Testament, Israel was God’s firstborn (Exodus 4:22), but now Jesus Christ is God’s firstborn (Colossians 1:15, 18). And, we who “**love God,**” who are “**called according to his purpose,**” are Christ’s “**brothers.**”

Paul now continues the “golden chain” by stating, God “**called**” those whom “**he predestined.**” Based on our understanding, “**predestined**” implies the outcome of God’s “**foreknowledge,**” God’s call is the *means* by which he creates a people for himself. God calls his people through the preaching of the gospel and the work of the Spirit (10:14). The call is effective, for all who are “**called**” by God are also “**justified**”; that is, we are given the righteousness of God. Paul completes the chain in stating those who are justified will also be “**glorified.**”<sup>216</sup>; that is, we become like him. This is the ultimate goal of salvation (John 6:37-40; 10:27-29). This sequence from foreknowledge to glorification is the golden chain of the order of salvation.

### Conclusion

Paul begins and ends this passage with the hope of glory (v. 18 and v. 30; see also v. 21). It is a hope based ultimately on God, whose promises are secure. Christian hope in this already but not-yet age includes enduring suffering (v. 18), waiting eagerly (v. 23), expecting things not yet seen (v. 24), persevering (v. 25), being led by the Spirit who intercedes (v. 27), and relying on God’s faithfulness (vv. 28-30).

### Victory: Because God is for us we are more than conquerors (8:31-39)

We can outline this passage as follows: Paul begins with a rhetorical question (v. 31a) which he answers emphatically in verses 37 to 39. Between the question and the answer, Paul states five truths about God by using questions containing the answer

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<sup>216</sup> Although the verb “**glorified**” is in the past tense, this does not imply that glorification occurs during this present age. Rather, it is certain God will finish what he began (Schreiner, *Romans*, 454). Stating a future event in the past tense is called a divine or prophetic perfect.

within them. The first of these questions begins, “**if God is for us**” (v. 31a). This is not so much a question but a statement of fact. It is Paul’s main topic for this passage. The *result* of God being for us is, we are “**more than conquerors**” (v. 37). The rest of the passage explains what it means for God to be for us.

*Outline:*

v. 31a Reflection on all of 5:1 to 8:30

v. 31b **Main truth:** *God is for us*

v. 32 **Basis** for main truth: The *justice* and *love* of God

vv. 33-34 **Judicial:** Christ died for us and  
now intercedes for us

vv. 35-36 **Love:** God’s love ensures that  
no earthly suffering will separate us

v. 37 **Result** of main truth:  
We are more than conquerors

vv. 37-38 **Conviction** of main truth:  
Union in Christ ensures our victory

Although the primary emphasis is on God’s love, his love and justice are evident in this passage. We mustn't view these as two independent attributes of God. There is no love without justice or justice without love.

### **Foundation of our assurance (vv. 31-32)**

*v. 31 God is for us*

Paul begins this passage with the same question he used three times earlier (6:1, 15; 7:7). Given all he has already said from 5:1 to 8:30, what more is there to say? So, he asks the question: “**What then shall we say to these things?**” Surprisingly, he answers the question by asking more questions. However, each question describes who God is and what he has done in his love for us. In fact, the summary answer to this first question is given in the next question, “**if God is for us.**” This phrase summarizes what “**these things**” means. That God is for us is the foundation of our hope. Like 5:1-11, these verses express confidence in the believer's hope. Despite suffering, a believer does not lose heart because of the indwelling Spirit who testifies, leads, and prays for the believer.

When Paul asks, “**who can be against us,**” he does not mean believers do not have any enemies. Clearly, they do, and Paul had many himself. What he means by this statement is no enemy will

be victorious in their opposition. This is an amazing statement of confidence. Many times, believers have wondered if their ministry and lives would be successful. They may even doubt. However, Paul is unequivocal. No one can stand against them. This does not mean success is judged by human standards but by God's standards. The cross would have appeared as an absolute failure from a human perspective, but instead, it was just the opposite. The basis for Paul's confidence is that "**God is for us.**" He now explains how God is for us.

*v. 32 Proof that God is for us: God's justice and God's love*

How do we know for certain God is for us? Because God "**did not spare his own Son**" but "**gave him up**" to be condemned to death for our sins<sup>217</sup>. The triune God's sacrifice for us proves his justice and his love. This sacrifice is so great that it is beyond our imagination and complete understanding. Paul could have had the story of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac in mind<sup>218</sup>. Abraham was willing to sacrifice his own son, and Isaac was willing to be sacrificed. Following this story, many Bible students have also noted the relationship of these phrases ("**did not spare**" and "**gave him up**") to Isaiah 53:6-11, where Scripture makes it clear it was the will of the Father to "crush him" and to make "his soul an offering for guilt" (Isaiah 53:10). The cross demonstrates both the love and the justice of the Father. Earlier, Paul described the need for the cross to satisfy God's justice. For God to pass over sin and not condemn sin would have made him unrighteous. Instead,

God put forward [his Son] as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness because he had passed over former sins in his divine forbearance. It was to show his righteousness at the present time so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. (3:25-26)

Amazingly, God sacrificed his own Son while we were still rebelling against him. This demonstrated the justice of God and the love of God. As Paul said:

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<sup>217</sup> The reference to "**all**" means both Jew and Gentile.

<sup>218</sup> Christopher Wright, 113.



God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners,  
Christ died for us. (5:8)

So, if God the Father willed this, we know he is for us and he **“will give us all things.”** This is an argument from the greater to the lesser. It follows from the unimaginable great sacrifice of the cross that he will also give everything needed for his children. The phrase **“all things,”** does not *just* mean our rewards in heaven, but everything required to live a life pleasing to God in the present time. The greatest of these earthly gifts is the Holy Spirit. Indeed, as Jesus said to his disciples at the end of his ministry on earth:

And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you. “I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. (John 14:16-18)

Christ has not left us orphans but has given us the indwelling Spirit of adoption (v. 15). This union with Christ is our guarantee of a future with him. For elsewhere, Paul says:

And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. (Philippians 1:6)

In the remaining portion of the passage, Paul gives two explanations for this truth. **“God is for us”** because we have received the righteousness of his Son, demonstrating God’s justice (vv. 33-34). However, there is more. **“God is for us”** because he loves us. Moreover, because he loves us, nothing can cause him not to love us (vv. 35-39). Again, we must not separate these two attributes of God as two opposing ideas. The cross is both the justice and love of God. This is why the cross is the glory of God.

### **“God is for us” by giving us his righteousness (vv. 33-34)**

v. 33

Paul states, through a question, on the day of judgment no one can accuse a believer and make the charge stick. Paul uses the term **“elect”** to refer to all who have been called, justified and glorified (v. 30). The emphasis is on justification which is the imputation of Christ’s righteousness on those he calls. This is what the statement **“God who justifies”** means. There is no

condemnation of the elect, and they can face the day of judgment with confidence even though they are sinners.

v. 34

Verse 34 restates in greater detail what Paul said in the previous verse. Because the elect have received the righteousness of Christ, no one can “condemn” them on the day of judgment. Although Christians sin during this present age, no sins will condemn them. Although many may come forward to condemn, no accusation or charge will be accepted. So, believers may now look forward to the day of judgment with confidence, knowing they would be found innocent of all charges in Christ Jesus.

The reason believers can have this confidence is given in the second half of verse 34, “**Christ Jesus is the one who died**” for the guilt and punishment for our sins. This is a summary of what Paul has already stated in 3:21-26. God has put forward his Son as a “**propitiation by his blood**” for our sin. All our sins must be condemned and punished. God would not have been a just God if he had simply ignored our sin. However, God is just, and his “**wrath**” (1:18) against sin has been satisfied by the saving death of his Son. He did not just die but “**was raised**” to life, indicating the punishment for our sins is complete (4:25).

And even more, he ascended into heaven and now sits “**at the right hand of God**” (Hebrews 1:3). Paul uses the imagery of the authority of God’s right hand, where Christ now sits, as the guarantee that no power in all the world can separate us from the love of God<sup>219</sup>. But there is still more; Christ now, as our great High Priest, is “**interceding for us.**” This intercession includes but is not limited to his atoning death (See notes on v. 26).

**“God is for us” by giving us his love (vv. 35-39)**

I am so glad that our Father in Heav’n  
Tells of His love in the Book He has giv’n;  
Wonderful things in the Bible I see,  
This is the dearest, that Jesus loves me.

(Philip P. Bliss, 1870)

Paul now switches from speaking about the *judicial* aspects of God being for us to the *relational*. He states, as a question, nothing

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<sup>219</sup> Christopher Wright, 269.

can **"separate us from the love of Christ?"** The question implies that some things might separate us from Christ's love for us. Paul lists seven things these might be: **"tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword."** He even quotes the Psalms (v. 36) to underscore the troubles Christians have in their lives. But then, in verse 37, he concludes, **"No,"** none of these will separate us from God's love.

He then gives the reason he can be so sure of this: God's love is based on God's covenant faithfulness to us and not on our loveliness. It is based on **"him who loved us"** and not the other way around. Here, Paul refers to Jesus simply as the one **"who loved us."** And so, we love him only because he first loved us (1 John 4:10, 19). Because of God's everlasting guaranteed perfect love, we can be **"more than conquerors"** of all these afflictions which could easily undo our love for him. So, instead of causing believers to despair, these afflictions are how our faith grows in maturity (5:3-5). We would surely fail if we relied on our own will, strength, and effort to overcome such afflictions. But it is God, whose love never fails, carrying us through to the day of the Lord (Philippians 1:6).

Many interpreters have seen, in these troubles, a reference to the messianic woes. However, they should not be restricted to these alone. Paul's emphasis is that many things would cause us to lose hope, but we can overcome any distress or despair they bring because of God's unfailing love.

Although the list of seven troubles in verse 35 is comprehensive, some Christians might worry that other things might cause God not to love them. So, Paul lists another ten things ending with **"nor anything else in all creation."** These two lists leave nothing out.<sup>220</sup> The intent, again, is to assure the believer, although they may suffer greatly, or are under attack by spiritual powers, or **"anything else"** including the sins of the believer

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<sup>220</sup> Except for **"powers,"** Paul uses couplets in this list. **"Death"** means physical death, while **"life"** means the anxieties, sufferings and cares of life. **"Angels"** likely means good angels, while **"rulers"** means earthly authorities and so together, they imply all earthly and spiritual powers. But then **"powers"** are on its own and may refer to supernatural events that could undermine a believer's faith. **"Height"** and **"depth"** likely refer to the universe as in heaven and earth (Moo, Romans, 545).

himself, can separate him from God's love. With confidence, we can be assured that once God has called us as his child, nothing can be done to cause God to stop loving us. Most clearly, Paul is teaching the eternal security of believers (5:1; 8:30; 11:28; John 1:12-13; Jude 24; 2 Corinthians 5:17). Once God has adopted you, he will never disown you.

The final phrase in this passage ends in a similar way it began. This love is the "**love of Christ**" (v. 35) and the "**love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord**" (v. 39).<sup>221</sup>: Only in our union with Christ will we experience this love.<sup>222</sup> Astonishingly, the Father loves us as he loves his Son. Jesus himself tells us this twice in his high priestly prayer (John 17:23, 26).

### A Quote and a Poem

Karl Barth, an important theologian of the twentieth century. He had written millions of words over his lifetime describing the doctrine of God. Once, when he was in the USA in 1962, he was asked how he would summarize a life's worth of thought and writing. He simply replied, "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so." Not much more can be added to that simple children's song. As someone else said: the gospel is shallow enough for the smallest child to wade in, but deep enough for the most skilled theologian. Paul has been encouraging his Roman friends by expressing the goodness of God in his love for them, so they could be "**more than conquerors.**" The poem by William Rees (1802-1883) captures this well:

Here is love, vast as the ocean,	On the mount of crucifixion,
Lovingkindness as the flood,	Fountains opened deep and wide;
When the Prince of Life, our ransom,	Through the floodgates of God's mercy
Shed for us His precious blood.	Flowed a vast and gracious tide.

Who His love will not remember?	Grace and love, like mighty rivers,
Who can cease to sing His praise?	Poured incessant from above,
He can never be forgotten,	And Heaven's peace and perfect justice
Throughout Heaven's eternal days.	Kissed a guilty world in lov

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<sup>221</sup> Paul uses two phrases for the love of God: "**love of Christ**" and "**love of God in Christ Jesus**". These refer to Father's love in sending his Son and the Son's love in obedience to the Father; they, therefore, include both the Father's and the Son's love for us.

<sup>222</sup> Moo, Epistle of the Romans, 546.

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## Special Topic: Union with Christ

Scriptures teaching on our union with Christ affects every aspect of our relationship with God. It is so broad and deep; it is concerned with eternity past, before creation, to eternity future after Christ's return. It includes every aspect of our present relationship with God on this earth. Union with Christ refers to all the benefits of our salvation in Christ.

There are two ways Scripture speaks of our union with Christ. Sometimes, it states, *we are in Christ* (2 Corinthians 5:17; 1 Corinthians 15:22; 2 Corinthians 12:2; Galatians 3:28; Ephesians 1:4, 2:10; Philippians 3:8-9; 1 Thessalonians 4:16; John 15:4, 5, 7 1 John 4:13). For example, in Philippians 3:8b-9a, Paul writes, "For his sake, I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, so that I may gain Christ and be found in him." At other times, Scripture speaks of our union as *Christ in us* (Galatians 2:20; Colossians 1:27; 2 Corinthians 13:5; Ephesians 3:17). In this letter to the Romans, Paul writes, "Christ is in you" (8:10). He states a Christian is one in which "his Spirit dwells in you" (8:11). In John's gospel and letters these two concepts are combined. In John 15:4, Jesus himself states, "Remain in me, and I will remain in you." And John writes in his first letter, "We know that we live in him and he in us because he has given us of his Spirit" (1 John 4:13). So, union with Christ means both that we are in him and he in us.

The blessing of our union with Christ is so important, Scripture has given us several different pictures for our understanding. These are:

1. *Clothed with Christ*: We are clothed with Christ at our conversion, "So in Christ Jesus, you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ" (Galatians 3:26-27 NIV). And, now during our present life, we are to be clothed with Christ, "Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of

the flesh" (13:14). And again, in Paul's letter to the Colossians, "therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience" (Colossians 3:12 NIV). And although we are already clothed, there is a future sense of when we will be fully clothed. "For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life" (2 Corinthians 5:4 NIV).

2. *Vine and branches*: In John's gospel, Jesus uses the picture of a vine and branches. "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me, you can do nothing" (John 15:5 NIV).
3. *Marriage*: Paul, in this letter, uses a metaphor of marriage to describe our union with Christ. In this picture, we have died to sin, so we can now be united with Christ. "So, my brother and sisters, you also died to the law through the body of Christ, that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit for God" (7:4 NIV).
4. *Love*: One of the most astonishing and beautiful verses in Scripture comes from Jesus' prayer for us. Jesus prays that the perfect love the Father and Son share, might also be in us. "I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them" (John 17:26 NIV).

Our union with Christ began in eternity past, before creation. In Ephesians, Paul writes, "he chose us in him before the foundation of the world" (Ephesians 1:3-4). This means God the Father decided, in eternity past, there would be a people of God who belonged to his Son. To achieve this, Christ came to redeem a people for himself (Matthew 1:21). Then, again, in John's gospel, Jesus states, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (John 10:11). The Father, in his infinite loving-kindness, determined, his only Son

would redeem a people (“sheep”) for himself (John 3:16). So, from the beginning of time to the end of time, we are only saved in Christ.

We can identify several aspects of this salvation as follows:<sup>223</sup>

1. We are first united with Christ in *new birth* (Ephesians 2:4-5, 10).
2. We live out our union with Christ *through faith* (Galatians 2:20; Ephesians 3:16-17).
3. We are *justified* in our union with Christ (1 Corinthians 1:30; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Philippians 3:8-9).
4. We are *sanctified* through union with Christ (John 15:4-5; Ephesians 4:15; 2 Corinthians 5:17).
5. We *persevere* in faith in our union with Christ (John 10:27-28; Romans 8:38-39).
6. We *died* in our union with Christ (6:3-5; 7:4; 14:8; 1 Thessalonians 4:16; Revelation 14:13).
7. We are *raised to life* in our union with Christ (6:5; 7:4; Colossians 3:1).
8. We *shall be glorified* in our union with Christ (8:30; John 17:22; Colossians 3:4; 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17).

Anthony Hoekema summarizes our union in Christ as follows: “union with Christ has its source in our election in Christ before the creation of the world and its goal in our glorification with Christ throughout eternity. Union with Christ was planned for eternity, and is destined to continue eternally. This union, therefore, is what makes our life as Christians significant, happy, and victorious. We are pilgrims and strangers on this earth, but Christ lives in us forever.”

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<sup>223</sup> Anthony Hoekema, “*Saved by Grace*”.

### **Fifty blessings from Chapter 8**

There is much suffering in this world, causing us to be discouraged, resulting in lost joy and confidence. We must fully abide in our union in Christ to battle these discouragements. As we have already seen in Romans, being in Christ results in our justification (forgiveness of sins and being declared righteous in Christ), new life, adoption as a son, help in maturing in Christ (sanctification), and hope in our ultimate glorification in Christ. Romans 8 lists at least 50 blessings we have in our union with Christ. Each one is worth praying over and meditating on.

1. We are no longer under any condemnation - the wrath of God (v. 1).
2. The Holy Spirit has set us free in Christ Jesus from sin and death (v. 2).
3. Christ did for us what we could not do by offering himself for us on the cross (v. 3).
4. We can fulfill the law by our walk according to the Spirit (v. 4).
5. We are now able to set our minds on the things of the Spirit (v. 5).
6. And so rather than death, we have life and peace (v. 6).
7. Also, we are no longer hostile toward God (v. 7).
8. We can please God (v. 8).
9. Because the Spirit dwells in us, we belong to him (v. 9).
10. We have life in the Spirit because of the righteousness of Christ given to us (v. 10).
11. The Father, who raised his Son, will give us physical resurrection life (v. 11).
12. We have no obligation to our old sinful condition but to Christ (v. 12).



13. We are able not to sin by the sanctifying work of the Spirit who gives life (v. 13)
14. We are led (walk v. 4; live v. 5; minds v. 6) by the Spirit into God's will (v. 14).
15. We are adopted sons of God (v. 14).
16. We no longer live in fear (v. 15).
17. We are adopted sons, even able to call God our Father "Abba!" (v. 15).
18. The Spirit of adoption encourages us as children of God (v. 16).
19. Because we are children, we are heirs of God and share in Christ's glory (v. 17)!
20. Worldly suffering is bad, but nothing compared to the glory kept for us (v. 18).
21. Creation itself waits for our redemption first, for its curse to be removed (v. 19)
22. When we are glorified, there will be a new creation free of natural disasters (v. 20)
23. The new creation will join God's children in glory, free of death and decay (v. 21)
24. For that Day, we eagerly wait for our resurrected bodies (vv. 22-23)
25. Patient eager waiting is our hope which is guaranteed by the promises of God (v. 24)
26. Although we often do not know how to pray in God's will, the Spirit himself prays for us to do his will (vv. 26-27).
27. God makes all things work for his good purpose for us who love him (v. 28).
28. God's purpose is to restore us into the perfect image of His Son (v. 29).

29. He knew about us before creation and has, in the present time, called us to glorify his name and one day, we will share in his glory (v. 30).
30. The all-powerful sovereign God is for you, so no opposition can be successful (v. 31).
31. God, our Father, gave his only Son to die on our behalf while we were sinners (v. 32).
32. Now that we are adopted sons, he will withhold no good thing (v. 32).
33. No charge against us will work because we have already been justified by the ultimate Judge (v. 33).
34. Jesus died, was raised, and even now intercedes for us (v. 34).
35. We cannot and never will be separated from Christ's love(v. 35).
36. No earthly troubles will separate us from Christ's love (v. 35).
37. No earthly hardship will separate us from Christ's love (v. 35).
38. No earthly persecution will separate us from Christ's love(v. 35).
39. Even if we are hungry and destitute, we will not be separated from his love (v. 35).
40. Physical danger or threats of violence will not separate us (v. 35).
41. Because Christ has conquered, we conquer in union with him who loves us (v. 37).
42. Physical death or life will not separate us from his love (v. 38).
43. Neither good angels nor evil angels will separate us from his love (v. 38).
44. Things present will not separate us from his love (v. 38).

45. Things to come will not separate us from his love (v. 38).
46. Even the powers of hell will not separate us (v. 38).
47. No power in the sky above will separate us (v. 39).
48. No power in the earth below will separate us (v. 39).
49. Nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God.
50. Nothing can separate us from God because we are in union with Christ Jesus, our Lord (v. 39).

Ultimately, the greatest gift of the gospel is God Himself (5:11). So, all these benefits are received in Him, in Christ Jesus – in union with Him.

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### **The Romans Road to Salvation**

The Romans Road to Salvation is a simple way of explaining the gospel by using Romans as a guide. It first explains why we need salvation (the gospel is good news because it is the answer to bad news), how God provides this salvation, how we can receive it, and what the results are for us. As we study Romans, we will highlight the specific verses used. However, it may be helpful to review this “Road.” There are five waypoints on the Road.

1. *We are all sinners:* The Road of salvation begins with verse 3:23, “**for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.**” We have not only been born into the sin of Adam (5:12), we also have sinned ourselves. No one has not sinned; every Jew has, every Gentile has. If someone asks, “in what way have I sinned?” The answer is given in 1:18-3:18.
2. *The punishment for sin is death:* The second waypoint teaches about the consequences of our sin. In 6:23, Paul writes, “**For the wages of sin is death.**” The punishment for sin is death, not just physical death but eternal spiritual death.

3. *God's answer to the sin problem: "But now"* (3:21), the righteousness of God – both his judicial/ethical and saving righteousness – has been revealed. In 5:8, Paul writes, **"God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."** Jesus died for us, taking upon himself the punishment of death we deserved. In 3:25, Paul tells us, **"God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith"** (NIV). Jesus offers this gift of grace if we believe in his Son as 6:23b states, **"the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."**
4. *How we receive this Salvation:* The fourth stop on the Road is given in 10:9, **"if we confess with our mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved"** (See also 10:13). All we need to do is accept this gift of salvation by putting our hope and trust in Jesus, that he paid the penalty for our sins and rescued us from death, giving us eternal life. Deliverance from this death is available to anyone who trusts in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour.
5. *What are the results of this Salvation:* If we trust Jesus and follow him, we have peace with God. Paul tells us in 5:1, **"Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."** And 8:1 teaches, **"there is, therefore, no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."** The broken relationship with God has now been restored. And this precious salvation that came at such a high price is guaranteed, for Paul tells us **"neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height or depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord"** (8:38-39).

Verses 1:16 and 17 are a summary of all five points. There is, of course, more to salvation than these five steps. Paul speaks much in this letter about the Christian life and how we are to live in our union with Christ.

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## Questions for Reflection

### Study it

1. [8:1] How does Paul divide the ages? What is the clue for understanding this division? How will Christians be judged on the day of judgment?
1. [8:2] On what ground is there “no condemnation”? Paul uses the phrase “in Christ” in verses 1 and 2. What does this mean to you?
2. [8:2] What is the meaning of the phrase, “the law of the Spirit of life”?
3. [8:3-4] What did God, the Father, do? What did his Son do? What does the phrase “and for sin” mean? What does the phrase “condemned sin in the flesh” mean?
4. [8:4] What is the purpose (“in order that”) of Christ’s atoning sacrifice? How do you understand the phrase “the righteous requirements of the law”?
5. [8:5-8] What does “flesh” mean in these verses? How does Paul explain it is possible to live a Christian life of obedience? What do “walk” (v. 4), “live” (v. 5), and “led” (v. 14) mean?
6. [8:9-10] How does Paul define who a Christian is in verse 9? How are being “in the Spirit” and “in Christ” (union with Christ) the same?
7. [8:11] Who raised Jesus from the dead? Who will raise your body from death? How does this verse describe the Trinity?
8. [8:12] What does Paul mean by the phrase “we are debtors” (v. 12)? How is “put to death the deeds of the body” accomplished?
9. [8:14-17] What is the primary emphasis in these verses describing our relationship to God? What benefits do we receive from this relationship? What does it mean to be “heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ”?
10. [8:17b-18] What does Paul mean by sharing in Christ’s suffering? What does Paul mean by “glorified”? What

suffering did Paul experience that he considered not worth comparing? (See 2 Corinthians 11:23-28).

11. [8:19-21] In what sense does “creation wait”? And what is the ultimate occasion for which it waits? When will “the sons of God” will be revealed? What will happen then to creation?
12. [8:22-25] What does “the whole creation has been groaning” mean? Does this creation include people?
13. [8:27] Identify the Trinity in verse 27.
14. [8:28-30] What are the “all things” in verse 28? Does this include ‘bad’ things happening as well as good?
15. [8:29] What does “conformed to the image of his Son” mean?
16. [8:29-30] Identify seven things God does for Christians.
17. [8:28-39] How many reasons does Paul give for the Christian to rejoice despite the trials and tribulations of this world?

### **Live it**

1. Do you view the activity of the Spirit as central to your Christian life? In what way?
2. What does “set the mind on the Spirit” mean in your life?
3. Do you think of yourself as an adopted son of God? How would you describe your relationship with God?
4. Define Christian hope in your own words.
5. How encouraging is it that the Spirit is praying intercessory prayers for you?
6. How often do you think about your glorification? Do you view your present suffering as light in comparison? How much do you look forward to that day? That is, do you “wait eagerly”?

## PART III: THE DEFENSE OF THE GOSPEL

### *THE QUESTION OF ISRAEL (9:1-11:36)*

In the letter so far, Paul has described the human condition in general. We all – both Gentile and Jew – are under the sin and guilt of Adam; we all – both Gentile and Jew – have sinned ourselves. As a result, all have fallen short of the image of God for which we were created (3:22b-23), so we all are under God’s condemnation. Paul has also presented God’s solution to the sin problem. We are all justified by God’s grace through our faith in his Son (3:24). Jesus has taken our sin and guilt upon himself and paid the price we deserve on the cross. As well he has also given us his righteousness so we can stand without condemnation before God (8:1). This Great Exchange is true, in the same way, for both Jew and Gentile. Now “**in Christ,**” we are a new creation able to glorify him (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Paul presented this good news of the Gospel as consistent and continuous with the teaching in the Old Testament. As Jesus himself said, “was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory? And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke 24:26-27). However, it does not take much reading in the Old Testament to see many promises of a future restoration of Israel. Therefore, there can be no good news if there is no continuity with what God has been doing with and through Israel. God has made many promises to both Gentiles and Jews in the New Testament, but he has also made many promises to Israel in the Old Testament. If his promises to Israel are abandoned, how can he be trusted for his promises in the New Testament to Gentiles? And, as important, since salvation is the same for Gentiles and Jews, how are the promises to Israel fulfilled in Christ, Israel’s Messiah?

This question would not be so critical if the Jews of Paul’s day had fully embraced the gospel. However, they had not. Instead, they mainly had rejected their Messiah and his gospel. Paul’s evangelism resulted in the majority of the early church being Gentile. So the question of all the Old Testament promises

to ethnic Israel – why they had rejected their Messiah and how this relates to the predominately Gentile early Christian church – had to be addressed. The heart of this issue is: Can God be trusted? Therefore, chapters 9 through 11 are not just a side question concerning a future political and military restoration of the nation of Israel. Instead, these three chapters address the fundamental issue supporting all that Paul has said in his letter to this point concerning the salvation of Israel and the Gentiles as a single people of God. As such, the unity between Gentile and Jewish Christians is an ongoing concern for Paul (see particularly 11:13-25). The faithfulness, trustworthiness, and righteousness of God were at stake for both the Gentiles and Jews.

As we will see, Paul answers the question of God's faithfulness through his divine sovereign choice of mercy and compassion. God's mercy concerns the salvation of individual Israelites and not just Israel as a nation. Salvation from the final judgment of God is not based on ethnic origin.

That Paul is addressing the salvation of Israel seems clear from 9:1-3. Paul's "**great sorrow and unceasing anguish**" is not that Israel was unable to obtain political power. Instead, Paul's anguish is that too few of his fellow Jews had accepted Christ as their Lord and Saviour and were still under eternal condemnation. Paul makes this clear when he says, he could be "**accursed and cut off from Christ**" (9:3) if it would result in their salvation. He reiterates this when he says, his "**heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved**" (10:1).

Returning to the primary concern of chapters 9 through 11, Paul addresses two questions: first, has God broken his promises to Israel, and second, if not, how are they fulfilled? The way God works this out brings honour and glory to his name (11:33-36). We can outline these chapters as follows:

9:1-5 Paul's lament over Israel

9:6-10:3 God chooses a faithful remnant despite Israel's rejection

10:4-21 Israel's responsibility to accept Christ as their Messiah

11:1-32 God will save all Israel despite Israel's rejection

11:33-36 Paul's praise of God



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## Lesson 9: The Sovereign Grace of God (9:1-10:3)

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After the emotional and spiritual joy of chapter 8, it is a shock to read of Paul's sorrow and grief. Paul's despair is for his own people, Israel, because when their Messiah finally came, they rejected him. Their rejection was because he did not fit their understanding of God's promises to Israel. Despite this, Paul is adamant that God is faithful (v. 6a). The summary title or thesis for chapters 9 through 11 can be taken from verse 6a, "**it is not as though the word of God has failed.**" From 9:6b to 9:29, Paul explains why God's promises to Israel have not failed despite Israel's rejection. In verses 6b to 13, Paul states *why* they have not failed and *how* they have not failed. Paul clarifies that the promises never applied to all descendants of Abraham, that is, to all ethnic Israel (v. 6; chapter 4; Galatians 3:29). He then states the promises only applied to those whom God specifically chose in his mercy (vv. 7-14).

Paul anticipates an objection to this argument (vv. 14-18). If God chooses some descendants but not others, cannot God be accused of being unjust? Paul rejects such a conclusion and again points to the absolute sovereignty of God. The fulfillment of the promises depends on God's mercy. God is righteous and just in showing mercy on whomever he wishes (v. 15). Since all people are sinners, and under God's condemnation, he is merciful and compassionate when he is merciful to some. God's choice does not depend on human effort or will (v. 16).

Once again, Paul anticipates an objection. If it is the case that no human effort can change God's purposes, then how can God blame human beings (v. 19). Paul answers this objection by again pointing to the absolute sovereignty of God over all things. If such questions reflect a rebellion against God's justice and mercy, then Paul states we do not have the right to ask such questions (v. 20). That God's wrath is shown to some highlights the glory of the mercy he shows to others (vv. 22-23) because all people deserve his wrath.<sup>224</sup>

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<sup>224</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, Second Edition, 466.

Paul returns to the central theme in this section's final verses (vv. 24-29). God, in his mercy, has called a remnant from the Jews and many from the Gentiles. This relates to what Paul had already said in chapter 4. Faithful Israel consists of those who put their hope and trust in Christ – both Jews and Gentiles (see also Ephesians 4:1-16; Galatians 3:7-29). What underlines this whole argument is the presupposition of the absolute sovereignty of God to do what he wills, and his will alone—not a human sense of justice or logic—determines what is right and just. This understanding of God's absolute sovereignty challenges the human heart to its core. It is not surprising that this chapter has challenged many Christians, not in understanding but in accepting God's relationship to us and us to him. The section is outlined as follows:

- 9:1-5 Paul's *lament* over Israel's rejection  
 9:6a *Thesis* statement: God's word has not failed Israel  
 9:6b-7a *Reason*: Not all descendants of national Israel belong to true Israel  
 9:7b-13 *Proof*: God, not birth, determines who is true Israel  
 9:14 *Objection 1*: In that case, God is unjust  
 9:15-18 *Response*: No, it is God's choice on whom he has mercy  
 9:19 *Objection 2*: How, then, can I be held responsible?  
 9:20-23 *Response*: No, if our question is rebellion against God  
 9:24-32 *Result*: God's calling has resulted in a new people of God, true Israel, including both Jews and Gentiles who are faithful to Christ  
 10:1-3 Paul's *lament* and prayer is for Israel to would turn to Christ and be saved

### **Paul's lament over Israel's rejection (9:1-5)**

As we have already pointed out, Paul has been preaching the gospel for many years and has heard every argument against it. An argument he had heard, no doubt, many times went something like this: "Paul, you claim Jesus is Israel's Messiah and the fulfilment of Hebrew Scripture, but most Jews do not believe

this. Surely, they know better, for they know their Bible very well. You are just a renegade preacher making up a new religion!" Paul now addresses this issue by agreeing with the first part of this attack. First, in verses 1 through 3, Paul makes it clear he is in great distress over ethnic Israel's unbelief. This was not an academic issue for Paul. These Jews were people he cared deeply for. Many were his friends and some, no doubt, were his relatives. But they rejected what he had to say when he spoke to them about the Jesus he loved.

In verses 4 and 5, he lists Israel's privileges and promises given by God, which makes their rejection so surprising. However, Paul's anguish over his fellow Jews' rejection of Christ is not only personal sorrow. Rather, it highlights the fundamental question concerning God's faithfulness and ability to keep his promises to Israel.

We should always keep in mind throughout this passage that although Paul teaches the absolute sovereignty of God in salvation, he worked very hard as a missionary for the conversion of his people, the Jews. As we see in the book of Acts, he first goes to the synagogues to present the gospel. It was always to the Jew first.

*vv. 1-3*

Paul describes his lament in three doublets. In the first, he is emphasizing his own trustworthiness by saying, "**I am speaking the truth**" and "**I am not lying,**" which is a phrase he often uses when dealing with opponents (2 Corinthians 11:31; Galatians 1:20; 1 Timothy 2:7). It may well be that the Jews were accusing Paul of abandoning his Jewish heritage, possibly even becoming anti-Semitic.<sup>225</sup> So Paul gives the strongest affirmation to the truth he is about to state by adding the phrase "**in Christ**" and "**the witness in the Holy Spirit,**" meaning he is speaking in the Spirit's and Christ's agreement. In the second doublet, he is testifying, he has "**great sorrow and unceasing anguish**" in his heart. But, why exactly is he so sorrowful? It is most likely "Paul expresses such grief because the honor and faithfulness of God are inextricably intertwined with the fate of Israel."<sup>226</sup> Paul

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<sup>225</sup> Osborne, 272.

<sup>226</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 469.

seems to reflect the deepest emotion of the Old Testament prophets such as Moses, who also reminded God his honour was threatened (Exodus 32-33). In the third doublet, Paul, reflecting on Israel's rejection of their Messiah, goes so far as stating he would be "**accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers.**" Again, this is similar to Moses' willingness to be blotted "out of your book that you have written" (Exodus 32:33). Of course, in Moses' case, as well as Paul's, the request was not granted because Israel's salvation depended solely on the covenant promises of God.

When Paul says "**my brothers,**" he is explicitly referring to his non-believing Jewish brothers and sisters, not Gentile Christians; that is, to ethnic Israel. Paul clarifies this by adding the phrase, "**my kinsmen according to the flesh.**" What troubled Paul was the salvation of his non-believing Jewish brothers and sisters (10:1). As we will see in chapter 11, what gives Paul hope is, finally, God "**will banish ungodliness from Jacob**" and so "**all Israel will be saved.**" There seems little reason to think Paul was concerned about restoring Israel as a political or military force, dominating the nations, as so many of his fellow kinsmen desired. Paul's concern was, first and foremost, for their salvation.

v. 4

Paul now explains why it is so uniquely crucial for Israel to believe in Jesus. What is agonizing for Paul is that Israel was God's elect people of all nations. It is worth noting he does not use the term "Jew" (3:1) but refers to the covenant name "**Israelites.**" Paul then lists six more of God's blessings; each one highlighting salvation. First, "**adoption**" refers to God making Israel his son (Exodus 4:22). This reference to adoption is different from what Paul had stated for Christians (8:15). Here, it refers to the rights and privileges of the nation as a whole and highlights the continuing relationship between God and Israel.<sup>227</sup> In parallel with adoption is "**the giving of the law,**" which occurred at the time of the exodus when God first called Israel his son (Exodus 4:22). Paul's references to "**glory**" and "**worship**" is an allusion to the Shekinah glory that entered the

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<sup>227</sup> Moo, *Romans*, 583.

tabernacle (Exodus 29:42-43) and temple (2 Chronicles 5:13-14). In the New Testament, this glory and worship are found only in Christ (Colossians 2:9). Finally, the terms “**covenants**” and “**promises**” refers to the covenant promises to Abraham (4:13-14, 20; 9:8-9; 15:8). But given that “**covenants**” is plural it likely refers to all the Old Testament covenants including the new covenant (Jeremiah 31:31).

We can conclude from these blessings that God uniquely loved Israel in the past, and they can expect to receive saving blessings in the future. When writing the letter to the Romans, these future blessings had yet to be realized. As we will see, a small remnant of Jews did believe, including Paul himself (11:1). This remnant, however, did not exhaust the promises made to Israel since the vast majority of Israelites had rejected Jesus as the fulfilment of these prophecies.

v. 5

In this verse, Paul adds two more blessings. When Paul mentions, “**to them belong the patriarchs,**” he refers to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. These patriarchs was given the unconditional covenant promises of blessings to Israel and all other nations (Genesis 12:1-3). Perhaps the best commentary on this phrase is in 11:28, “**as regards election, they [Israelites] are beloved for the sake of their forefathers.**” Because God freely chose the patriarchs to love, “**all Israel**” (11:26) will someday receive salvation.

The last statement of verse 5 highlights the reason for Paul’s agony. Jesus Christ, the Messiah of Israel, came from the line of beloved patriarchs. When Paul uses the phrase “**from whom according to the flesh,**” he indicates Jesus descended from Israel in terms of lineage and ethnicity. However, to show Jesus is not limited to Israel, Paul states, “**who is God over all.**”<sup>228</sup> The two natures of Christ, both human and divine, are emphasized (cf. 1:3-4). Although there is a question about where to put the punctuation, there is little doubt Paul is referring to Jesus as God (see 1:1-4).

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<sup>228</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 476.

## **God's sovereign glory displayed in His mercy and justice (9:6-29)**

In this passage, Paul describes the reasons God's word has not failed and cannot fail. The reason is, the promises are based on God's free sovereign choice and not on any effort or requirement of man. Since the promises are based solely on God, they are guaranteed to be fulfilled. Paul then addresses two significant objections to this reason. Both objections are based on a faulty view of who God is and his relationship with humankind. They are still objections occurring today based on our understanding of God.

Paul is primarily addressing Jews and Jewish Christians in this passage. Jews believed God had chosen them at birth as a special nation and for salvation.<sup>229</sup> If the Old Testament taught that belonging to ethnic Israel implied salvation, then the gospel Paul preached would be false. Paul had taught that only those who believed in Jesus Christ could be saved (10:5-13). Therefore, Paul has to demonstrate that the true people of God have always been based on God's mercy alone.<sup>230</sup> This is why Paul emphasizes election in this passage, making it clear that salvation is not a matter of birth but determined by God's call on the individual; only those whom God calls are the "**children of promise.**"

### **God's word has not failed (9:6-13)**

Paul's argument that God's word has not failed is based on God's sovereignty choice of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as the patriarchs of Israel. These men were not chosen by their human will or determination but entirely by God's free choice. Although not explicit, this divine choosing continued even

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<sup>229</sup> Douglas Moo writes, "Mainstream Jewish teaching held that all Jews were elected to salvation by virtue of their inclusion in that people with whom God had entered into a covenant relationship. Only by apostatizing did the Jew forfeit that salvation" (Moo, *Romans*, footnote, 589). Therefore, in opposition to Jewish teaching, Paul was teaching what Jesus himself taught (Matthew 8:11-12; John 8:34-58) as well as John the Baptist (Matthew 3:9-10). Paul's teaching against guaranteed salvation was radical teaching for the Jews. It is not surprising, then, Jews would have thought Paul's teaching meant that God had abandoned Israel.

<sup>230</sup> Moo, *Romans*, 589.

within ethnic Israel so a true faithful remnant always existed within unfaithful national Israel.

v. 6

Paul begins this verse by stating the overall theme for all of chapters 9 through 12. **“It is not as though the word of God has failed.”** If God has promised, then it will surely come to pass. As Isaiah states (see also Matthew 24:25; 1 Peter 1:25):

The grass withers, the flower fades,  
but the word of our God will stand forever. (Isaiah 40:8)

It may be Paul had intentionally used the phrase **“word of God”** since he later quotes Isaiah again (Isaiah 59:20-21, 27:9), **“The Deliverer will come from Zion, he will banish ungodliness from Jacob”; “and this will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins”** (11:26-27). The **“word of God,”** therefore, means salvation for Israel.

However, Paul wants to clarify that God’s promise to Israel does not mean every Israelite will be saved. The reason is, **“not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel.”** In this statement, Paul distinguishes between two Israels: an ethnic Israel as a nation is the first **“Israel,”** and the faithful remnant within Israel is the second **“Israel.”**<sup>231</sup> Unlike orthodox Jewish teaching, Paul states, God’s word applies only to the faithful remnant within Israel (11:5). Of course, Paul does not deny ethnic Israel is, in some way, God’s people (9:4-5; 11:1-2, 28). However, he does deny that the election of Israel as a nation implies salvation for every individual Israelite. The election of

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<sup>231</sup> Some commentators interpret the second **“Israel”** as true spiritual Israel; that is, the New Testament Church, including both Jews and Gentiles. Paul does state that the true family of Abraham includes Gentiles (4:9-25). Later, in this chapter, he will include Gentiles into Israel by quoting Hosea’s prophecy (9:24-26). And in 11:17-24, Gentiles are grafted into the olive tree of Israel. However, the context of this statement does not support such an understanding. It is best to view both references to **“Israel”** to refer to ethnic Israel. And so, to understand that the second **“Israel”** refers to the remnant of Israelites *before Christ* who were faithful to the Lord, as well as those Jews who believed in Jesus as their Messiah. Finally, it will include **“all Israel”** (see notes on 11:25-29). Throughout chapters 9 to 11, **“Israel”** always refers to one of these two and not the Church.

the nation of Israel was for a different purpose.<sup>232</sup> Paul has already insisted salvation was never based on ethnic birth (2:28-29; 4:1-16).

Paul now demonstrates from the Old Testament story of the patriarchs that there is a true faithful Israel within ethnic Israel. He gives two explanations proving God alone determines which descendants of Abraham would receive his blessing. That is, it is God's sovereign choice to choose the remnant. This may be surprising to us. We might have expected Paul to say, the reason not all Israel is Israel is because they pursued righteousness through works rather than by faith. And, at the end of the chapter (9:32), he says precisely that. But here, in verses 7 through 13, he does not. Instead, he goes directly to the sovereignty of God in the salvation of a remnant within Israel. A saved remnant exists within ethnic Israel because of God's choice.

*First Explanation: Children of the flesh are not all children of the promise (vv. 7-9)*

Although Abraham is not mentioned explicitly as an example, he is included, since Abraham was chosen from all the pagan worshippers to be the elect father of Israel.

*vv. 7-8*

Verses 7 and 8 underline that not all physical Israel is faithful Israel; that is, not all Abraham's children are children of God. When Paul quotes Genesis 21:12, "**through Isaac shall your offspring be named**" the word he uses for "named" can also be translated "**called.**" In these verses, calling is what God promises and what he promises he brings into being (8:28-29; 9:24-26).<sup>233,234</sup> The context of Genesis 21:12 is God's rejection of

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<sup>232</sup> The primary reason God chose Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was to establish a chosen people from which would ultimately come Jesus Christ, the son of David and the Son of God (Genesis 12:1-3). Another reason was that they would teach other nations about God. Israel was to be a missionary nation to the whole world, a purpose they never fulfilled until the time of King Jesus.

<sup>233</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 484.

<sup>234</sup> In Jesus' parable he states that "many are called but few are chosen" (Matthew 22:14). However, in this context, "called" means invited. Simply hearing the gospel and understanding its meaning is not sufficient; one must also respond in faith to the gospel.



Ishmael even though he was Abraham's son. Instead, God reaffirms it is Abraham's "**offspring**" Isaac, and not Ishmael, through whom the message would go out to the nations.

But to be a child of Abraham physically did not mean one was also a child spiritually; that is, salvation was not a birth-right.<sup>235</sup> Paul interprets the story of Ishmael and Isaac to mean that the true people of God are not just those who are physical descendants from Abraham. Paul contrasts "**children of the flesh**" with "**children of God**" and "**children of the promise.**" As Paul states, "**this means**" that "**the children of the flesh**", that is, direct physical descendants from Abraham, are not necessarily "**children of God**" but only those who are "**children of the promise.**" The phrase "**children of the promise**" applied to those Israelites who were saved. Therefore, God's promises remain true; "**the word of God**" has not failed. God had not rejected Israel, for he is saving a remnant throughout time to be included in the people of God, "**God's elect**" (8:33). That not all Israelites are "**children of the promise**" was evident to Paul since most Jews rejected Jesus as their Messiah.

It is worth noting that the "**children of the promise**" are "**counted**" by God to be His offspring. The word "**counted**" refers to chapter 4, where Abraham was "**counted**" righteous through his faith in God's promise. And so, in Paul's day, those who have not placed their faith in Christ are not counted as God's offspring. That is, it is not physical birth that counts for salvation.<sup>236</sup>

v. 9

This verse is proof of the statement in verses 7 and 8. The promise is that "**Sarah shall have a son.**" The guarantee of this promise is God who is sovereign in all things. Isaac was the particular child of that promise to Sarah (Genesis 17:15-16; 18:10, 14). Paul's emphasis is on God's supernatural work in creating a covenant people rather than the natural work of humans. Here, as in Galatians, Isaac is a *type* for believers, while Ishmael,

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<sup>235</sup> Moo, *Romans*, 596.

<sup>236</sup> The best commentary on verse 8 is Paul's own words to this letter to the Galatians (Galatians 4:22-30).

although not explicitly mentioned, is a *type* of unbelievers<sup>237</sup> (Galatians 4:21-31). Although God cared for both Isaac and Ishmael (Genesis 16:7-14; 21:15-21), Paul understands God's work in their lives in terms of salvation; that is, he understands the story typologically.<sup>238</sup> God's children are, therefore, children of the promise and not children of physical descent.

*Second Explanation: God's sovereign choice between children of Isaac (vv. 10-13)*

*vv. 10-12*

Some opponents to Paul might have argued that Ishmael's mother was Egyptian and so should not be included as part of God's electing choice. To counter this, Paul continues with the story stating, "**not only so but also Rebekah**".

In Rebekah's case,<sup>239</sup> both Jacob and Esau had the same father and mother. They were, in fact, twins, so no one could point to parentage from the outside. God's free and sovereign choice on whom to continue the covenant promises he made to Abraham was exclusive to Jacob. Moreover, God made his choice before their birth. Paul could have simply stated that Jacob was his choice. Still, Paul wanted to make it absolutely clear to his readers that the promise to bless Jacob was not based on any good work that Jacob did or, for that matter, evil decisions Esau would eventually make. The choice of Jacob was based entirely on God's free will and not upon the future actions of Jacob or Esau.<sup>240</sup> Paul states the reason that the choice was God's, "**in order that God's purpose of election might continue.**" That is, God's electing choice is the reason that Jacob was chosen.

The choice of Jacob had nothing to do with anything Jacob did. To clarify further, Paul writes, "**not because of works but**

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<sup>237</sup> Although Ishmael received temporary blessings (Genesis 17:20; 21:13,18), he was excluded from the covenant to Abraham. See Schreiner, *Romans*, 486.

<sup>238</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 485.

<sup>239</sup> Recall, also, that Rebekah was barren. The birth of Jacob and Esau were the result of God's intervention because of Isaac's prayer (Genesis 25:21).

<sup>240</sup> There has always been a desire to rationalize the choice of Jacob instead of Esau. However, there is no bases in the text to interpret God's choice on his knowledge of their future actions.

because of him [God] who calls.” The contrast is between “works” and “him who calls.”<sup>241</sup> Paul underscored this by emphasizing God’s election before they were born (v. 11a). The connection between God’s effective call is, therefore, the same as his free choice. We have already seen this in 8:30, “those whom he predestined he called, and those whom he called he also justified.” Finally, Paul once again underscores God’s choice in verse 12 when he reminds his readers what God himself said, “the older will serve the younger” (Genesis 25:23). Paul’s emphasis, again, is that God grants his covenant blessing based on his divine grace and not on human works and actions; as N. T. Wright succinctly writes, “what counts is grace, not race.”<sup>242</sup>

v. 13

Paul begins his quote of Malachi 1:2-3, “**Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.**” At any level, this is a shocking statement. And so, there have been many attempts to soften it. One way is to explain the contrast between “love” and “hate” is based on the Hebrew thought of “to love” and “to love less.” This argument may have merit, but it does not reduce the problem since God’s love, or lack of love is directed to Jacob and Esau before they were born.<sup>243</sup> A more promising explanation is to understand God’s choice not in terms of salvation but for a unique role in salvation history. The word “hate” then refers to God rejecting Esau as the means by which he will establish his covenant. The contrasting words “love” and “hate” mean the choice of Jacob also implied the rejection of Esau. God alone has absolute freedom of choice to work salvation through Jacob and not through Esau, even though humanly speaking Esau was the firstborn. Our human conventions do not bind God. The choice of Jacob was an undeserving gift of grace. So Paul began his argument that “God’s word” has not failed by showing that his word applies to the “children of promise;” children who are

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<sup>241</sup> Earlier, Paul had contrasted works and faith (4:2-8) but here he is contrasting works and God’s election.

<sup>242</sup> N. T. Wright, *Climax of the Covenant*, 238.

<sup>243</sup> Besides, the context in Malachi shows that God “hated” is active tearing down anything Edom builds.

determined by God's free electing choice.<sup>244</sup> What is surprising in Paul's argument is most of ethnic Israel is identified with Esau and not Isaac because they rejected Jesus.

However, as can be imagined, Paul anticipates two objections he has heard many times to his teaching on election. And so, he immediately addresses them. The first objection is: That this appears to make God unjust. The second objection is: Why am I blamed for my sinful actions if God chooses everything? Paul responds to the first objection with Scripture and commentary and the second with a series of rhetorical questions. Neither of these responses is what we would expect.

### *Summary*

Paul's explanation that God's word has not failed and so God is trustworthy is based on distinguishing between ethnic Israel and true believing Israel. True Israel is itself based on God's freedom of choice. At the beginning of Israel, God chose Abraham from a pagan nation and then chose Isaac and Jacob based entirely on God's sovereign call (election) and not their deeds. However, this pattern of divine election continued even within ethnic national Israel, resulting in a true faithful Israel within the nation of Israel. This election is for salvation.

Paul also contrasts "works" with "calling" rather than "faith," as he did earlier. In doing so, he rejects salvation by birth in the same way he rejected salvation by works. This election language is both corporate and individual. That is, the people of God are chosen by choosing individuals. God never promised to save all ethnic Israel, so the rejection of their Messiah by the majority of Jews does not undermine God's word.

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<sup>244</sup> Although Paul is speaking about the salvation of Isaac, and Jacob and not Ishmael and Esau, many commentators believe Paul is speaking of groups. That is, he is speaking about the saved remnant within ethnic Israel. Although true, for God to choose a remnant from Israel also means that he chooses individuals to make the remnant. Individual election is, therefore, still implied. Also, in chapter 10, believing in Jesus refers to individuals not to groups. Therefore, chapters 9 through 11 is concerned with both corporate election and individual election within the corporate entity. (See Schreiner, *Romans*, 486-87).

### God's sovereign choice raises questions of Justice (9:14-21)

Again, we must remember that this is not an abstract theological argument for Paul. He is deeply involved in his love for his people, wanting to present the whole gospel to them. But his commitment to the truth of God's word does not permit him to shrink from difficult teaching.

### Is God unjust? (9:14-18)

#### *v. 14 An accusation and the answer*

Paul has established that God's promises are guaranteed because their assurance depends solely on God's sovereign choice and not human will. This implies God determines those who receive the promises before birth (cf. Ephesians 1:4). However, this calls into question God's justice. Is God unjust to his covenant with Abraham by only electing a remnant for salvation within ethnic Israel?

Paul returns to the question-and-answer (diatribe) method of teaching. He asks the question on behalf of the objector: "**Is there injustice on God's part?**" (See also 3:5 where Paul raised a similar question earlier in the letter.) This objection has been raised ever since and remains a major point of disagreement today. It is likely you have heard the expression or said it yourself: "That is just not fair!"<sup>245</sup> To this question, Paul, not surprisingly, responds, "**By no means!**" God's electing love is fair!

#### *v. 15 The first defense: God is merciful since all deserve condemnation*

However, surprisingly, Paul emphatically defends God's justice by emphasizing God's mercy and compassion. This is not the expected answer. But then this is because the question raised is based on a misunderstanding. The question assumes that God saves sinners on the basis of justice. However, this is not the case. If God dealt with sinners based on justice, everyone would be condemned. Instead, God deals with sinners with mercy and compassion. Paul quotes God's own response to Moses. "**I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.**" So, God's election

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<sup>245</sup> The fact that this objection is raised leaves little doubt that Paul is talking about election.

and preservation of even a remnant of Israel is based on his mercy and compassion, not on Israel's goodness.<sup>246</sup>

*v. 16 Conclusion to the first defense: Salvation depends solely on God's mercy*

This response highlights once again, salvation “**depends not on human will or exertion, but<sup>247</sup> on God who has mercy.**” Paul has made this point repeatedly in the previous eight chapters. In this case, Moses was interceding for Israel. However, Moses wanted to be sure God was with them, so he asked to be shown God's glory (Exodus 33:18-19). God responded in mercy and revealed his character to him (Exodus 33:19b). Once again, we are reminded that God's election aims to create a people of God who will bring him glory and glorify his name. We need to be reminded that if we insist on God being fair from our perspective, then all humans would be condemned, for we have all sinned and fallen short of his glory. We all deserve eternal death. Yet, because of God's mercy, love, and compassion, he found a way to meet the just requirements of our sin and bring us into a saving relationship with him. The cost of God's mercy is beyond all our understanding, for it costs not only the death of his Son but also the imputing of all our sin and condemnation upon him. The suffering described in Isaiah 53 should have been our suffering. Instead, the Father's own Son suffered for us (“He was crushed for our iniquities” Isaiah 53:5). This is mercy so broad and vast, no words can embrace it. This is why, although the question is raised about justice, Paul does not talk about justice. Instead, he talks about mercy. This is the only adequate answer to the just requirement of our condemnation.

*v. 17 The second defence: God is just in his condemnation of Pharaoh*  
But what about Pharaoh? Towards him, God displayed his justice and judgment, a judgment each of us deserves. This is why Paul now mentions the salvation of Israel from the slavery of Pharaoh in Egypt. Pharaoh believed he was a god. This is important because Pharaoh and the Egyptians believed he was both divine and sinless during his lifetime. At his death, he became the god Osiris, presiding over judgment. God's defeat

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<sup>246</sup> Toews, 247.

<sup>247</sup> The “**but**” is a strong contrast in the original Greek.

and humiliation of Pharaoh foreshadowed Christ's defeat of evil and Satan.

When Moses demanded that Pharaoh let God's people go, he refused. Once again, Paul quotes God in the Exodus account (Exodus 9:16). God provides **"the very purpose"** Pharaoh was **"raised"** or permitted to stand. It was God who made Pharaoh king of Egypt and kept him in power despite his sinfulness. This was to show God's power and the glory of his name (Exodus 15:14; Joshua 2:10; 9:9; 1 Samuel 4:7-9). So, the same power that freed Israel is the same power that judged Pharaoh. God's glory in saving Israel was revealed in his justice (judgment over evil) and his mercy (rescue of his people).

This is the answer concerning God's righteousness; it is the revelation of his mercy and compassion to Israel and his judgment against Pharaoh. God's glory is revealed in his judgments (righteousness) and salvation (grace and mercy). This revelation is given so God's **"name might be proclaimed in all the earth."** "God's righteousness, then, is vindicated in his freedom primarily in showing mercy and inflicting judgment."<sup>248</sup>

Much has been written concerning whether God hardened Pharaoh's heart first or whether God hardened his heart in response to Pharaoh first hardening his own heart. We need to remember, Pharaoh commanded the Israelite midwives to murder newborn Hebrew boys. And when that failed, he ordered these babies to be thrown into the river to drown (Exodus 1:1-22). Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, had a serpent on his crown identifying with the "seed" of the serpent in the Garden (Genesis 3:15), his father, the Devil. And so, as Jesus said, he was a murderer from the beginning (John 8:44). It is also essential to keep in mind why God is sending the plagues. It is to make Pharaoh and all of Egypt know his awesome power and that there is no one else like God (Exodus 9:14-16; 7:4-5).<sup>249</sup> In other words, God intends to be known so that he will be

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<sup>248</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 499.

<sup>249</sup> Also, God delivers Israel from slavery in Egypt so they will know he is the LORD God (Exodus 6:7).

glorified in the salvation of Israel through the judgment of Pharaoh.<sup>250</sup>

In the Exodus story (Exodus 4 through 14), the term “**harden**” is used fourteen times. Many of these references state that Pharaoh hardened his own heart, and in others, God hardened his heart. However, God first speaks of this hardening when he says to Moses, “I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go” (Exodus 4:21; also 7:3). The term itself means to become insensitive to God and his word. So God hardening Pharaoh’s heart is the same as iniquity, which Paul spoke about in chapter 1 when God “**gave them up**” to the sin the unrighteous and ungodly had already chosen (1:24, 26, 28).

God does not cause spiritual insensitivity but hardens the hearts of those who have hardened their own hearts against God, those who “**set the mind on the flesh**” (8:6). The result for those who hardened their own hearts is that God turns them over to a “**debased mind**” (1:28). Such people, including Pharaoh, no longer have the desire or ability to repent. This is the meaning of iniquity; it is guilt worthy of its own punishment. However, hardening does not imply that the heart can never be revived. Amazingly, God’s compassion and mercy can turn a hardened heart to love him. As Micah, speaking the very words of God concerning the remnant of Israel, prophesies, “Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not retain his anger forever because he delights in steadfast love” (Micah 7:18). This love of God is fully manifest in the incarnation, life, death, resurrection and reigning of his only Son, who “loves me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20).

However, Pharaoh was an unrepentant sinner who failed to acknowledge the LORD God, even making himself a god and violently persecuting and enslaving Israel. All this occurred long before Moses came to demand the release of the Israelites. Pharaoh was therefore accountable for his actions. Pharaoh is judged for not repenting of this evil and not accepting the sovereignty of God. God hardened (strengthened) Pharaoh’s evil heart to ensure his name would be “**proclaimed in all the earth**”

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<sup>250</sup> Hamilton, 91.



in freeing Israel and judging Pharaoh. So, God's mercy to Israel and even the just punishment of Pharaoh are used to glorify and honour God's name.

*v. 18 Conclusion to the second defence: Salvation depends solely on God's mercy*

Paul concludes his argument for the justice and righteousness of God by restating God's words concerning mercy. In this verse, he generalizes "mercy" and "hardening" to "whomever he [God] wills." Paul is unapologetic about God's absolute freedom in showing mercy to some and judgment to others. And it is clear Paul is relating God's mercy to the salvation of individuals since Paul often uses the word "mercy" to refer to personal salvation (11:30-32; 15:9; Ephesians 2:4; 1 Timothy 1:13, 16; 2 Timothy 1:16, 18; Titus 3:5). Paul often uses the term "harden" to refer to the rejection of the gospel (2:5; 11:7,25; 2 Corinthians 3:14; Ephesians 4:18).

*Summary*

Is Paul's response satisfying to the question of God's justice? For many, it is not. Some commentators even find Paul's argument so abhorrent that they either condemn Paul for being illogical or, worse, they attribute verses 14-19 to Paul's opponent, whom Paul is merely quoting. However, these 'solutions' are entirely inadequate. It is difficult for us to accept that all people are born into a state of condemnation and undeserving compassion. Deep within us, we believe in our own goodness and that although we all sin, we all do good and deserve mercy. And does not God's love for the world put him under an obligation of love to save the world?

These verses force us to evaluate whom we understand God to be, who we are, and our relationship with him. Our question should not be: why does God punish the innocent, but why does a righteous God not punish *all* sinners? Our answer, like Paul's, should be: because of God's mercy and compassion. God's election aims to display his glory in judgment to those (all of us) who deserve it and show underserved mercy to his elect.

### **Why should I be blamed? (9:19-21)**

The way that Paul defended God's justice in verses 14 through 18 results in an even more significant problem (note the "then"

at the beginning of the verse). If God has mercy only on those he chooses, then it seems my choices do not matter. Paul, once again, anticipates this objection. If God is solely responsible for softening hearts and hardening hearts for salvation, how can anyone be blamed for what they do? No one can resist God's will to harden or soften a heart. It is agreed that no one can take pride in their faith when God softens their heart, but similarly, no one should be blamed if God hardens their heart. At stake, again, is the justice of God. Paul presents this objection as two questions; he responds with three counter-questions.

*v. 19 The objection stated in two parts*

Paul states the first part of the objection, "**Why does he still find fault?**" And then, second, "**who can resist his will?**" The objector complains, "Paul, you have just told me that God determines everything, then God himself must be held responsible for my actions, and not me." It is clear from this question that the objector interprets Paul's previous statements as we often do.

*v. 20a Paul's response to the first question: Human wisdom versus divine wisdom*

The first part of the objection is: "**Why does he still find fault?**" How can God condemn anyone if no one can resist his will? The objector certainly knows that God is holding him responsible for his actions. Paul's response is, "**who are you, O man, to answer back to God?**" God is not on trial; we are. Humans cannot put God in the dock. So Paul does not answer the objector's question directly because at the heart of the question is a fundamental misunderstanding of people's relationship to God as well as an inability to recognize one's own sinfulness and God's holiness. Paul is not trying to avoid a sincere question, but he is also not interested in arguing with someone who wants to pick a quarrel with God. The objector's argument is not with Paul but with the Bible, which teaches God's sovereignty. And if it is with the Bible, then ultimately, the objector's argument is with God, who inspired the words of Scripture.

Paul is not trying to avoid an embarrassing question or stifle the discussion. He is, however, reminding us of two crucial points. First, we are finite creatures with limited understanding. Humans are frail, weak and finite; God is sovereign and infinite in all things. Paul is amazed the objector thinks he knows better

than God. So, we should not be quick to assume we understand an infinitely holy God. We cannot fully comprehend him (11:33-36; 1 Corinthians 13:12). God is reduced to speaking in human terms to communicate with us. This is why Paul concludes this entire section with, **“Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! ”** (11:33).

Second, Paul says, we have no right to call God’s mercy into question. The Father, who in his infinite mercy sacrificed his own Son, is not subject to our human judgment. We might question our own mercy towards others, but we have no right to question the heart of God. Have we loved to the point of laying down our lives for others? God has. Once again, his mercy is not on trial nor his justice.

*vv. 20b-21 Paul’s response to the second question: The divine-human relationship*

The second part of the objection is: if God is sovereign, **“who can resist his will?”** Paul responds to the objector by stating the relationship between humans and God. Paul’s illustration of the potter’s right to make what he wants out of his clay highlights the discrepancy between humans and God.<sup>251</sup> The illustration of God as the potter is used many times in the Old Testament (Psalm 2:9; Isaiah 29:16; 41:25; 45:9; Jeremiah 18:1-6). Through strength, design, and purpose, the potter is able to create a vessel highlighting his skill and ability. The purpose of the vessel is to display the glory of the potter. In the same way, humans’ purpose is to display God’s glory; that is, we are created in “the image of God” (Genesis 1:26-27) to reflect his holiness.

This is the point of the metaphor and, like all metaphors, should not be taken in every respect. Paul is illustrating the disparity between God and us by pointing out humans’ limited ability to understand God’s infinite wisdom.<sup>252</sup> To judge God’s action implies humans are more just, righteous and even wiser than God. This comparison is similar to how God responds to Job’s unhappiness with how God manages the world. In the

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<sup>251</sup> Although Paul states his argument as questions, we should understand these as rhetorical questions; that is, as statements of fact.

<sup>252</sup> Stott, 271.

story of Job, God does not explain why and how he does things. Instead, God tells Job, “who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?” (Job 38:2). Again, “And the LORD said to Job: ‘Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty? He who argues with God, let him answer it.’” (Job 40:1-2) And again, “Will you even put me in the wrong? Will you condemn me that you may be in the right?” (Job 40:8). God points out to Job his lack of wisdom and discernment compared to God's infinite wisdom.

However, we must also point out, Paul is not saying we are pieces of inanimate clay. He only points out in his illustration the ludicrousness of a piece of pottery, an ordinary vase, for example, to argue with the potter who made it. Paul is not saying God is treating us this way. The point of the metaphor is to acknowledge God's right to judge sinful human beings, and his judgments are always just. (11:33-38).

### *Summary*

The great struggle is the conflict between God's sovereignty over our salvation and our human responsibility and accountability. This was the struggle for the objector and many of us today. On the one hand, Scripture teaches, we all deserve condemnation but God chooses (elects) some for salvation by his mercy and grace. On the other hand, Scripture also teaches us that we are responsible for responding to God's offer of salvation. We can only be held accountable if we have that responsibility. These seem to be two incompatible positions. Our human tendency is to believe one or the other, but not both simultaneously. Yet Scripture teaches both without compromise. In fact, starting in 9:32 and including all of chapter 10, Paul speaks directly about human responsibility. Many worthwhile efforts have been made to resolve this tension without diminishing one or the other.<sup>253</sup> J.I. Packer, in his

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<sup>253</sup> Possibly, the best attempt at understanding this tension is Jonathan Edwards' thesis on “*Freedom of the Will*.” Even today, many theologians view this book as one of the greatest contributions to the evangelical faith. Based on the phrase “**it is not him that willeth**” (9.16), Edwards demonstrates that Scripture teaches salvation is entirely a work of God and not a choice of man. In so doing, he also proves man remains accountable to God for his rejection of Christ.

chapter on “*Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility*,” states that this is an antinomy. He defines antinomy as “cogent reasons for believing each of them; each rest on clear and solid evidence; but it is a mystery to you how they can be squared with each other. You see that each must be true on its own, but you do not see how they can both be true together.” He states that we should accept these positions equally and not downgrade one over the other. But we should refuse to regard this tension as a real inconsistency. They only appear to us as a contradiction because of our limited human understanding. Since both God’s sovereignty and our responsibility are taught in Scripture, we must proclaim both equally. We can do so because we believe God is, faithful, loving, and merciful. We know this because his sacrifice on the cross proves his justice and mercy.

### **God’s purpose is to reveal the glory of His mercy in the face of evil (9:22-29)**

*The purpose of election is to make his glory known (9:22-24)*

*vv. 22-23*

Paul begins verse 22 with “**But**” or “**now**”<sup>254</sup>. This suggests Paul is introducing a new thought. What Paul is asking his readers is a way of understanding God’s purpose in dealing with “**vessels of wrath**” and “**vessels of mercy.**” In order to understand God’s purpose, we need to understand what Paul means by the words and phrases he uses.

First, Paul states that God “**desires**” to “**show his wrath.**” The word “**desires**” means will or act (cf. NASB, and KJV). So we understand Paul saying that God *caused* his wrath to be made known rather than simply wishing to show his wrath but not actually doing so. And the phrase “**show his wrath**” and “**his power**” most likely refers to the revelation of God’s end-time power in judging evil, which is rebellion of the creature against the Creator.<sup>255</sup> Recipients of God’s wrath, the “**vessels of wrath**” deserve immediate judgment, but God had restrained this judgment with patience. Why has he? It is to “**make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy.**” Indeed, this was the

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<sup>254</sup> The “**but**” is often not included in many translations.

<sup>255</sup> Toews, 250.

case when God intervened with Pharaoh to free Israel from bondage (Exodus 14:4, 17-18). Pharaoh is a good example. God did not destroy him immediately as he could have. Instead, he was patient so that his name was magnified, and the greatness of his salvation in freeing Israel and his wrath in destroying the first-born and Pharaoh's army. Paul is not stating that God has the desire to create sinful humans in order to destroy them. Instead, God's sovereignty is highlighted as moral, just, and righteous.<sup>256</sup>

Similarly, God delays his immediate judgment against those who continually resist his gracious offer of forgiveness. On the last day, his wrath and their destruction will display his glorious justice. God does make vessels (human beings) who rebel against him. And despite his patience towards them, they reject his mercy. However, God does not make anyone "**prepared for destruction.**" Their destruction is the result of their own iniquity. Such human beings (and nations) he will later destroy (punish) to display most fully both his power and his wrath.

Another example of this is given by the prophet Habakkuk. At that time God said, "I am raising up the Chaldeans [Babylonians], that bitter and hasty nation" (Habakkuk 1:6). Both God's saving mercy and his justice display the glory of his righteousness.

We often forget God's punishment of wickedness also displays his glory. The greatest of these acts was the crucifixion. Jesus knew when he chose Judas to be his disciple that Judas would betray him. Yet, through the three years of teaching and healing, Judas was part of his inner circle. Shockingly, Jesus even washes Judas' feet before the Passover. Jesus held out the possibility even then for Judas to repent. Earlier in the letter, Paul had asked, "**do you presume on his riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?**" (2:4). Despite this, he knew Judas would not repent. He also knew that the Jewish leaders would demand his death and he knew the Romans would agree and carry out his crucifixion. Yet, the cross

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<sup>256</sup> Hodge, 319.

is the greatest display of God's mercy and compassion as a result of unimaginable evil.

In a more contemporary setting, we could ask what if God permitted a totalitarian atheistic government to take over a country. The leaders of this government would shut down all the churches, put their pastors in prison and burn the Bibles. They could even pass laws prohibiting speaking about God. In fact, this did happen when Mao's Red Army took over China. Thousands of Christians were martyred, and many the churches were destroyed. Christians and churches had to go underground even to this day. But today, the Christian church in China is growing steadily. China is expected to have more Christians than the USA by 2030. Did God have the right to raise up Mao's army? Did he have the right to allow Hitler, Stalin and Mussolini to rise in power causing the deaths of millions? Yes, God does have this right. He is the God of all history. This is the point Paul is making.

*v. 24*

So to this point in Paul's argument, the "**vessels of wrath**" are Esau (Edom) and Pharaoh (Egypt) and the "**vessels of mercy**" are Jacob (ethnic Israel) and, implicitly, Moses. But now, in verse 24, Paul makes a startling change in his argument. The "**vessels of mercy**" are redefined as "**us**"; that is, Christians. Christians who God "**called not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles.**" These new elect people of God are "**called,**" which has been Paul's emphasis on God's sovereignty in salvation. And they are composed of Jews first but also Gentiles, which has been a significant emphasis of Paul throughout the letter (1:16; 2:9, 10; 3:9, 29; 4:12, 16).

Paul not only redefines the "**vessels of mercy**" but implicitly also "**vessels of wrath**" who are now those who have rejected Jesus as their Saviour, both unbelieving Jews and Gentiles. This radical change in definition does not exclude Jews. God is now merciful calling a people from both the Jew and the Gentile. God calls both to be his elect in the same way. We can now reflect again on Paul's astonishing earlier statements that "**not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel**" but only those who are "**children of the promise.**" These are the elect of God, true

spiritual Israel, whom God has called to place their hope and trust in his Son, Jesus Christ.

However, such a radical change in definition requires Scriptural proof. This has been Paul's method throughout his argument in Chapter 9. This time Paul turns to the prophets to demonstrate that his understanding was prophesied from the beginning.

*Biblical proof Gentiles and Jews are included in God's elect (9:25-29)*  
Many commentators have recognized the ring structure (chiasm) in these verses from vv. 24-29:

- A. God calls the Jews (v. 24a)
- B. God calls the Gentiles (v. 24b)
- B' Biblical proof God calls the Gentiles (vv. 25-26)
- A' Biblical proof God calls the Jews (vv. 27-29)

*v. 25-26 Biblical support God calls the Gentiles*

Paul finds support for the inclusion of Gentiles in Hosea, the prophet. He reapplies Hosea 2:23 in verse 25 and then Hosea 1:10b in verse 26. In verse 25, Paul changes the prophecy from "I will say" to "**I will call**" to highlight his emphasis on God's sovereign choice. Paul points out that the Gentiles were at one time "**not my people,**" but now God calls them "**my people.**" And again, in verse 25, quoting Hosea 1:10a, he says, where God called them "**not my people,**" they "**will be called 'sons of the living God.'**" God had instructed Hosea to give his children symbolic names: one son, Lo-Ammi, means "**not my people,**" and the daughter, Lo-Ruhamah, means "**not beloved.**"<sup>257</sup> As Toews points out, "Gentiles, who were not the people of God, are now the people of God, not because of their ethnic or moral claims, but because of the call of God."<sup>258</sup> In fact, they are sons of the "**living God**" – a phrase which contrasts the God of Israel with the dead pagan gods of the Gentiles (Joshua 3:10; 1 Samuel 17:26, 36; Jeremiah 10:10; and many others).

In applying these prophecies to the Gentiles, Paul is reinterpreting the original application of Hosea. Hosea predicted God would again be merciful to the ten northern tribes of Israel who had become apostates under Jeroboam. Paul

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<sup>257</sup> It also means "no mercy."

<sup>258</sup> Toews, 251.



is justified in doing so because he is reinterpreting Hosea's prophecy in light of God's final revelation in Christ.<sup>259</sup> The coming of the Son of God as the Messiah of Israel is the key to understanding the Old Testament.

This method of interpreting Old Testament prophecies to Christ and the church is called typology. Osborne describes it as follows: "Paul is using typology here, in which an Old Testament principle is applied and reenacted in a New Testament situation. He sees the promise to the northern kingdom of Israel as fulfilled in the new Israel that includes the Gentiles. The two major typological exegesis we see in the New Testament are applying passages to Christ and the church. Paul applies the Hosea passage to both here but especially the church. Salvation for the Gentiles is the proper next stage of salvation history and also a fulfillment of Hosea's prophecy. Those who for generations were the enemies of God's people will now be "my people" and "my loved one." "<sup>260</sup>

*vv. 27-29 Biblical support that God call a remnant of Jews*

Paul now turns his attention to the faithful Jews who have accepted Christ as their Messiah. Paul first combines quotes from Hosea 1:10 and Isaiah 10:22-23 in verses 27 and 28 and then quotes Isaiah 1:9 in verse 29. Isaiah describes a remnant ("**not left us offspring**") of Israel that is saved. Because even a remnant was saved, God is merciful and just in dealing with Israel.

This concludes Paul's argument in chapter 9 that God's word has not failed (9:6). In summary, God never intended to save Israel apart from the Gentiles. And second, Gentiles and Jews are included in God's elect in the same way based on God's call. God is just towards ethnic Israel because their unbelief deserved judgement; that he saved a remnant is an act of mercy.

Still, Paul's lament remains. Although there have been a small number of Jews, a remnant of which Paul includes himself (11:1), most Jews had rejected their Messiah. As we will see in chapter 11, Paul looks forward to a time when this will be

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<sup>259</sup> Moo, *Romans*, 633.

<sup>260</sup> Osborne, 295.

reversed, and the majority of Israelites will repent and believe in the gospel (11:26; Mark 1:15).

### Summary of 9:1 to 9:29

Paul began his lament with the irony of Israel's spiritual privilege and rejection of God's plan of salvation for them. The question, then, was how can Israel's unbelief be explained? Is it because God's word to them failed, or is there another reason?

1. It is not because God is *unfaithful* since his promises were to a true faithful Israel (Abraham and the remnant of faith like his) within ethnic Israel (9:6-13).
2. It is not because God is *unjust* in his choices since his mercy and his hardening are compatible with his justice (9:14-18)
3. It is not because God is *unfair* since he acts according to his own righteous character and prophecy (9:19-29).

Therefore, it is important to remember throughout all chapter 9, Paul's primary point is to demonstrate God's word has not failed even though the majority of Jews had not accepted Christ as their Messiah.

### Questions for Reflection

#### Study it

1. [9:1] How does Paul prove his sincerity? (cf. 10:1; 11:1) How does this relate to any misunderstanding some Jews and Gentiles might have of Paul?
2. [9:2-3] Chapter 8 is full of hope and joy. What then is the reason for Paul's great sorrow and unceasing anguish?
3. [9:3] What is the reason Paul is so concerned for the Jews? That is, what is the meaning of "accursed" (cf. Galatians 1:8-9; Joshua 6:17)?
4. [9:4-5] What is the heritage of the Israelites (cf. Exodus 4:22; 19:16-21:1; 40:34-38)?
5. [9:5] What is Jesus' relationship to Israel and humans in general?
6. [9:6-8] Who are the true descendants of Abraham (4:18-24; cf. Galatians 3:29)? Who are the "children of the promise"?

7. [9:9-13] What principle is Paul teaching by referring to Jacob and Esau?
8. [9:] How does God maintain both his justice and mercy in dealing with people?
9. [9:14,19] Why do people have no grounds for complaint against God's judgments?
10. [9:15] What is the basis given for salvation?
11. [9:25-26] How does Paul use Hosea's prophecy to the Gentiles?

**Live it**

1. Do you experience the hope and joy of your salvation but also the sorrow and anguish of loved ones who have (so far) rejected Christ? Do you relate to Paul saying he wished to be "accursed" if that would cause their salvation?
2. How is God's hate different from people's hate? How does this help you in relating to the evil within your world?
3. For whose purpose does God exist? How does this affect your understanding of who God is? How might this affect your prayer life?
4. How significant is it that you cannot make God merciful to you by your actions?
5. What reaction did you have to reading about God's sovereignty?
6. What is the relationship between God's sovereignty and your responsibility to him?

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## **Lesson 10: Salvation through Faith alone (9:30-10:21)**

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Paul focuses all of chapters 9 through 11 on the problem of Jewish rejection of their Messiah and its relationship to the faithfulness of God in his promises to Israel. As we saw in chapter 9, Paul answered this question by emphasizing the sovereignty of God in choosing a faithful remnant within unfaithful ethnic Israel. **“It is not as though God’s word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel”** (9:6). This answer led to two objections to God’s sovereign choice in electing a remnant.

But now Paul changes direction. He switches from God’s sovereignty in salvation to Israel’s responsibility. Israel’s rejection of Jesus is the negative side corresponding to the positive side of God saving an elect remnant. But why would Israel, for that matter anyone, reject Jesus and the gospel? In these verses, he answers why Israel rejected their Messiah and failed to obtain righteousness.

Paul does not just focus on Israel’s inability to obtain righteousness, but how righteousness—and thereby salvation—is actually obtained. It is only by confessing Jesus as our risen Lord (10:9-10). Confessing means faith—that is, belief from the heart (10:10)—in the words of Christ (10:17)

### **Israel’s failed attempt to obtain righteousness (9:30-10:4)**

#### **Israel did not obtain righteousness because they sought it in the wrong way (9:30-33)**

*vv. 30-31 They pursued the law to obtain righteousness*

Paul concludes the previous section, 9:6-29, asking, **“what shall we say then?”**<sup>261</sup> Paul answers by summarizing the contrast between the believing Gentile and the unbelieving Jew. Despite all the spiritual blessings and benefits God has given Israel, only a small number of them had put their hope and trust in his Son. The situation is more surprising since the **“Gentiles”** did **“not pursue righteousness.”** They were not interested in God’s

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<sup>261</sup> This is the sixth time Paul uses that phrase in the letter. Three times it begins with a false assertion (6:1-2; 7:7; 9:14) and three times introduces a possible conclusion (4:1; 8:31; 9:30).

salvation and were not seeking a right relationship with him. They were idolaters, lovers of money and pleasure (2 Timothy 3:1ff). This is a very unexpected result. We would have expected Israel to embrace their Messiah and the Gentiles to reject him. But just the opposite happened.

Nevertheless, the Gentiles **“attained righteousness.”** The word for **“attained”** emphasizes that when they heard of God’s righteousness, they accepted it, grasping it **“by faith.”** This is the reason the Gentile believers received salvation. It was by putting their faith in Christ Jesus. On the other hand, Israel **“pursued a law of righteousness,”** wanting to obtain righteousness through their obedience to the Mosaic law.<sup>262</sup> Their pursuit of keeping the law was well known. Their entire focus was on obedience to the law. But they **“did not succeed in reaching that law.”** Although they tried to obtain righteousness by keeping the law, they never succeeded. Israel, who had all the benefits of God’s gifts, did not receive the righteousness they longed for. In the following two verses, Paul explains why this happened.

*v. 32a Answer: They pursued works of the law to obtain righteousness*  
This shocking contrast between the Gentiles and Israel raised a second question. **“Why”** would such a thing happen; that is, why did the Jews not reach the righteousness they sought? Paul gives two answers to this question.<sup>263</sup> Paul’s first answer is, the Jews tried to meet the requirements of the law **“based on works”** and not **“by faith.”** So, the problem was not the law itself (7:12) but trying to obtain righteousness through keeping the law.

How could they have it so wrong? Because they tried to obtain righteousness by keeping the law through their own efforts rather than by faith and trust in God; that is, by loving God with all their heart, soul and strength (Deuteronomy 6:4-5).

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<sup>262</sup> Cranfield, 508.

<sup>263</sup> It is worth noting that Paul does not say that Israel’s rejection was because of God’s electing choice. Instead, he says it is because of their own wrong choices. So, this chapter highlights both God’s sovereign election (9:6-29) and human responsibility (9:30-10:3). Paul is not contradicting himself. As John Stott writes, **“‘antinomy’ is the right word to use, not ‘contradiction’”** (Stott, 278).

By this method of works, righteousness is an impossible goal to reach. This is a very sobering answer. Paul is saying, one can seek fellowship with God the wrong way. There is only one way to have fellowship with God: though union with Christ. The fundamental problem with seeking righteousness by obedience to God's law is *underestimating one's own sin*. And by so doing, they thought they were good enough to stand before God. Paul will come back to expand on this answer in 10:3-4.

*vv. 32b-33 And so they stumbled over Christ*

So, no amount of obedience can make one righteous. The penalty of sin is death and good works cannot overcome this. The second problem with seeking righteousness by one's own efforts is, it *underestimates the cost of salvation*. The penalty of sin, which is the cost of salvation, required the death of Christ. Because of these two underestimations, Israel "**stumbled over the stumbling stone.**" The "**stumbling stone**" is an Old Testament reference to Israel's Messiah. When their Messiah came, Israel did not recognize him, assuming they could be righteous on their own. These reasons are the same for most people today who reject Christ but still believe they are good enough to go to heaven when they die; they do not see the depth of their own sin nor the penalty of death it deserves.

Paul also explains Israel's failure by an illustration from Isaiah. He combines two verses (Isaiah 27:16 and 8:14) to show, the Jews could not accept a crucified Messiah. Paul had stated in an earlier letter, the cross was a stumbling block and an offense to them (1 Corinthians 1:23; Galatians 5:11; see also 1 Peter 2:8). Quoting Isaiah, Paul states, Jesus was a "**stone of stumbling and a rock of offence.**" This is exactly what Simeon prophesies when the infant Jesus is brought to the temple. There Simeon told Mary, "Behold this Child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed" (Luke 2:34). Jesus also uses a similar metaphor when referring to the Jewish leaders; he states, "Have you not read this Scripture: The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this is the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes?" (Mark 12:10-11).

## Israel's ignorance of how to obtain the righteousness of God (10:1-4)

*vv. 1-3*

In these verses Paul restates his concern, similarly to the beginning of this section (9:1-3), that his **“heart’s desire and prayer”** was for his fellow Israelites to be **“saved.”** He knows that his **“brothers”** rejection of their Messiah and his gospel will result in their eternal condemnation on the day of judgment. His prayer is that they will come to a saving knowledge of their Messiah before it is too late.

Paul recognizes his fellow Jewish brothers and sisters have a great **“zeal for God.”** He knows this because he had the same zeal (Galatians 1:14). Although this zeal was for God, it was a misdirected zeal. The reason, Paul states, is because it was **“not according to knowledge.”** Of course, they had a great deal of knowledge of God’s law. They knew their Scriptures very well. However, their great mistake was, they did not accept God’s way of making people right with himself. They did not accept the meaning and necessity of the cross. God’s way of righteousness was to place their sin and punishment on his Son and to place his Son’s righteousness on them. This Great Exchange of sin for righteousness could only be received through faith. But they refused to accept God’s way. They could not fathom God would come in human form and die on a Roman cross for them (1 Corinthians 1:23). And so, they clung to their old way of getting right with God through keeping the law.

*v. 10:1 Paul’s sorrow over their mistake*

Paul is so overwhelmed again by his people’s rejection of Jesus; he cries out in a lament. It is Paul’s **“heart’s desire”** as we saw so powerfully in 9:2-3. Because of God’s sovereignty, Paul’s **“prayer to God for them”** is that all Israel **“may be saved.”** It is important to note even though Paul has stated it is God’s sovereign choice to establish a faithful remnant within unfaithful Israel, he still prays for the salvation of all Israel. Paul is not a fatalist; he knows God has put it in his heart to pray for their salvation. This, then, is important for us today to continue to pray for our unsaved family, friends, co-workers and

neighbours. Although tension exists between God's sovereign choosing and our prayers for salvation, both are consistently taught in Scripture.

*vv. 10:2-3 They had zeal without knowledge*

Paul reiterates Israel's failure to obtain righteousness. Their failure was not just in keeping the law but that they did "**not submit to God's righteousness**"; that is, they did not accept their own sinfulness nor the imputed righteousness of Christ. Their religious piety for God was not in question. But this fervour or "**zeal for God**" was without "**knowledge**" for they were "**ignorant of the righteousness of God.**" That is, they could not understand the spiritual truth of the gospel. The great contrast is the "**righteousness of God**" and "**their own righteousness.**" As a result, they were not able to "**submit to God's righteousness.**"

#### **Christ is the end of the law (10:4)**

*v. 4*

Verse 4 is the summary statement for all Paul has already said in chapters 1 through 8. It is one of the most significant of Paul's theological statements concerning the gospel and its relationship to both Jews and Gentiles. In the rest of chapter 10, Paul *will bring out* the implication of this statement. The verse is as follows:

For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.

The meaning of the phrase, "**Christ is the end of the law**" has resulted in a great deal of debate. First, the word "**law**" refers to the Mosaic law. The Greek word often translated as "**end**" can mean "**goal**," and so "**Christ is the goal to which the law points; and when the goal is reached, the law also comes to an end.**"<sup>264</sup> The emphasis, however, is that Christ is the fulfilment of all the law demands (Matthew 5:17). Once Christ came, the requirements of the law were fulfilled, resulting in the culmination of the law (Ephesians 2:15; Colossians 2:14). Of course, this does not mean there is no law for Christians. Now Christians are under the "**law of Christ**" (1 Corinthians 9:21;

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<sup>264</sup> Schreiner, *40 Questions*, 69.



Galatians 6:2). The Mosaic law is also “profitable” and so should be studied and understood by the faithful Christians (2 Timothy 3:16).<sup>265</sup>

Paul continues his thought by saying that the law is ended “for righteousness to everyone who believes.” Christ has fulfilled the law so that justification (righteousness) may be attained through faith in Christ. The law itself was never given as a method for justification since it was not possible to meet its demands. However, Paul states this is just what the unbelieving Jews were trying to do; they sought to establish their justification before God through obedience to the law.

### **Israel’s flawed understanding of obtaining righteousness (10:5-13)**

#### **Misunderstanding righteousness based on faith (10:5-8)**

Paul now quotes Moses twice, contrasting two methods for justification; one by works of the law (v. 5) and the other by faith (vv. 6-7). Paul points out that these two contrasting methods already existed in the Old Testament. As well, Paul includes a running commentary on how Moses’ statements apply to the gospel. This distinction in how justification is obtained enables Gentiles to be included in the elect people of God.<sup>266</sup>

#### *v. 5 Righteousness by works*

In verse 5, Paul’s quotation is from Leviticus 18:5. But before he begins the quote, he states, Moses is writing “**about the righteousness that is based on the law.**” This refers to the attempt by Israel to obtain their own righteousness through obedience to the law (9:31-32; 10:3). Surprisingly, it is not part of Moses’ Leviticus quote. Rather, it is Paul’s understanding of what the law meant to Jews in Paul’s day. For Paul, the word “**righteousness**” means justification before God; those who are justified are no longer under condemnation (8:1). However, when we read the original quote and context in Leviticus, Moses does not seem to be speaking about justification that leads to salvation; that is, eternal life. Instead, Moses warns the Israelites not to engage in pagan worship as the Egyptians did when they

<sup>265</sup> Moo, *Romans*, 660.

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid*, 662.

were still in bondage. When they entered the land of Canaan, they were not to practice the detestable worship of the Canaanites. Instead, they were supposed to obey the law that the LORD God had given them on Mount Sinai. The text is as follows:

You shall therefore keep my statutes and my rules; if a person does them, he shall live by them: I am the Lord. (Leviticus 18:5)

God was instructing them how to live in their promised land in order that he would bless and prosper them. He did not mean an Israelite would receive eternal life (salvation) by doing the law. Paul, however, clearly has eternal life in view and not just earthly life in the land of Canaan. So, has Paul misunderstood what God was saying through Moses? Not at all. He is simply describing how Jews understand righteousness. By the time Paul was writing to the Roman church, orthodox Jewish tradition had, indeed, understood Leviticus 18:5 to mean promised eternal life by keeping the law.<sup>267</sup> This was also the issue Paul had been addressing in 10:2-3. It is also how Paul interprets this Leviticus quote in his other letter to the Galatians (Galatians 3:12). Paul's point then is, if one is trying to obtain righteousness by keeping the law, it must be done perfectly; this is, of course, an impossible task.

But why had the Jews of Paul's day interpreted Leviticus like this? They understood Judah had been sent into exile in Babylon because they had not kept the law. They also believed Assyria had destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel for the same reason. So, when they returned from exile (see Ezra and Nehemiah) they believed they needed to keep the law in order to be right with God. The Pharisee movement continued to develop from this way of thinking to the time of Paul. Israel was certainly required to obey the law, as the quote from Leviticus makes plain. And the law was not difficult to understand, as the following quote (vv. 6-8) states. However, it was never meant as a means to obtain righteousness. Righteousness was always a gift of grace from God to those Israelites whose hearts were faithful to him.

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<sup>267</sup> Schreiner, *40 Questions*, 62.

*vv. 6-8 Righteousness by faith*

Paul quotes Moses again in these verses, this time from Deuteronomy. Paul begins with contrasting a righteousness from the law with “**righteousness based on faith.**” However, once again, Paul’s quote does not match exactly what Moses said.

Moses spoke about the law to be obeyed, while Paul interpreted Moses as speaking about Christ. However, Paul is not saying, Moses predicts the gospel by speaking about the law. The connection Paul is making is, both the Mosaic law and the gospel of Christ are easy to understand and are readily available to everyone.<sup>268</sup> Moses had stated, his teaching was “not too hard for you, nor is it out of your reach” (Deuteronomy 30:11 NASB). Moses then uses dramatic imagery of going to the highest of heaven or going beyond the sea. Moses said that his teaching on the law did not require anyone to make such drastic trips to obtain or understand the law. Instead, Moses says that “the word is very near you” and it is so close that it is “in your mouth and in your heart” (Deuteronomy 30:14). So, Moses’s purpose was not to let the Israelites evade accountability for breaking the law by claiming they did not know or understand it.

Paul is saying the same thing about the gospel. This is Paul’s running commentary. The gospel, like the law, is not remote or difficult to understand. There is no need to “**ascend into heaven**” (v. 6) or to “**descend into the abyss**” (v. 7) because the gospel is as near as “**your mouth**” and “**your heart**” (v. 8). As John Stott writes, “The whole emphasis is on the close, ready, easy accessibility of Christ and his gospel.”<sup>269</sup> In the same way God was “**near**” to the Israelites in giving them the law, so now God is “**near**” to Jews and Gentiles in giving them his Son, Jesus Christ.

**How to receive righteousness by faith (10:9-10)***v. 9*

Paul now summarizes the gospel by continuing to use Moses’s imagery of mouth and heart. He states that the “**word is near you**” (v. 8) “**because if you confess with your mouth that Jesus**

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<sup>268</sup> Stott, 284.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid, 284.

is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” This is one of the earliest Christian confessions. It emphasizes both inward belief and trust: that is, the “heart,” which is a life lived “according to the Spirit” (8:5). Saving faith also includes an outward confession: that is, the “mouth.” Both these things are an essential part of a saving faith in Christ.

*v. 10*

In typical Hebrew parallelism, Paul repeats what he said in verse 9. The parallel between “justification” and “saved” is important. There is no real difference between these two words in meaning. To be justified is to be credited (counted, imputed) with the righteousness of Christ, and so we are saved from condemnation on the day of judgment (8:1).

### **The universality of righteousness by faith (10:11-13)**

*v. 11*

This verse begins with the word “for” meaning it builds on what was previously said and moving the thought forward. Paul again quotes Isaiah and states, the gospel is for “everyone” equally (Isaiah 28:16). He highlights this in the next verse by saying, “there is no distinction.” And just in case we are still unsure, he repeats for a third time, quoting the prophet Joel, that salvation is for “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord” (Joel 2:32).

Paul has already quoted Isaiah 28:16 in chapter 9, verse 33. He states, “everyone who believes in him [Jesus] will not be put to shame.” In Isaiah, the object of belief was God, but here it is Jesus. Also, the word for “believes” is not mere intellectual assent, simply agreeing the gospel is true. The meaning is to entrust oneself entirely to Jesus. It is a living trust informing all aspects of life. Although trust is necessary, it is not sufficient. It must be a trust resulting from a loving relationship with Jesus. The foundation of trust is love. Paul himself makes this clear in his famous chapter on love (1 Corinthians 13). This is the full definition of Christian faith. Yes, it includes belief and trust but these are grounded in a loving relationship with Jesus.

Because this loving trust is in Jesus, who is the Son of God, it is not a misplaced trust; we will not be “put to shame” by our

trust in him. Following on from the great chapter of God's sovereignty (chapter 9), we know God is able and willing to accomplish all he has promised. The phrase, "**put to shame**," is an interesting one for Paul to use. It could mean that the believer's hope will be vindicated on the day of judgment. However, the emphasis is on the believer relationship with Jesus.

*v. 12*

There is "**no distinction between Jew and Greek**" because the relationship with the Lord is the same for both. This is the positive side of 3:22, where Paul also says, "**there is no distinction for all have sinned.**" Until the time of Christ, God had dealt differently with Israel than with other nations. But now, since the gospel was proclaimed, God has dealt the same way with all people. He is the "**Lord of all**" people. However, only those who "**call on him**" will receive "**his riches.**" Paul explains the meaning of "**call on him**" in the next verse. The meaning of "**his riches**" most likely means the righteousness of God credited (counted, imputed) to those who place their trust in him. It can also mean rich in mercy and blessings.

*v. 13*

For the third time, Paul includes all people when he states, "**everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.**" This statement is a quote from Joel 2:32. To "**call on the name of the Lord**" means to worship him. It is, therefore, similar to the meaning of "**believe**" or "**trust**" (vs. 9, 10). The phrase is often used in both the Old and New Testament to mean thanksgiving, praise and worship, and a life of obedience and trust (Genesis 4:26; Isaiah 64:1, 7; Psalms 116:14-15; 79:5-6; Acts 2:21; 1 Corinthians 1:2; 2 Timothy 2:22). The phrase "**name of the Lord**" implies a dependent intimacy only available to those who are in union with Christ.

As well, verse 13 highlights human responsibility in our relationship with God. The word "**everyone**" not only implies independence from ethnic origin, social status, or gender (Galatians 3:28) but also, no one is ever refused who desires to be "**saved.**" In chapter 9, Paul spoke of God's sovereignty in salvation; here he speaks of human responsibility. Although

this seems to be a contradiction for us, they are not for God. Scripture consistently maintains both teachings without apology or explanation to resolve the antinomy. It is important to accept both equally without devaluing the other.

In many ways, verse 13 is a restatement of verse 11. The phrase “**calls on the name of the Lord**” is similar to “**everyone who believes.**” And “**saved**” is similar to “**not put to shame.**”

### **These misunderstandings resulted in Israel’s Disobedience (10:14-21)**

Why does someone reject or accept God’s salvation? Paul’s answer to that question in chapter 9 was God’s sovereignty, that is, God’s free choice. But then he asks the same question again in 9:30-33: how could it be Israel would have stumbled “**over the stone stumbling,**” Jesus Christ? Now in 10:14-21, Paul, again, asked the same question: why does someone reject the gospel?

He begins by asking diagnostic questions. Paul is asking: Is the reason they do not believe because no one told them about the gospel? Or is it because they have not heard the gospel? Or is it because they did not believe the gospel when it was told to them? He then responds none of these are why people reject the gospel. Then, in the last verse (v. 21), he answers: The heart of the problem is the problem of the heart.

### **How God accomplishes Salvation (Righteousness) by faith (10:14-17)**

*vv. 14-15*

Paul now explains the citation from Joel, “**everyone who calls on the name of the Lord**” (“**call on him**” v. 14), with four rhetorical questions. He does this by tracing the sequence, in reverse order, in which a believer comes to saving faith. Again, “**call**” means to worship and trust the Lord. Paul begins with someone who worships Christ. However, it is necessary to “**believe**” in the Lord before this can be done. And to “**believe**” in the Lord means a saving faith in the Lord. To have a saving faith in the Lord, a person must have “**heard**” about Christ and the gospel. But it is not simply hearing facts about Jesus; it is hearing them through “**someone preaching**”; that is, the gospel’s message is believed when heard through a messenger

of the gospel (2 Corinthians 5:20; 13:3).<sup>270</sup> And finally, these messengers must be “sent” by God.

Paul quotes Isaiah to show the importance of preachers whom God sends to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ. In its original context, the quote celebrates the good news that the Jews had been released from exile in Babylon. Paul reapplies this to the gospel's good news that believers are now released from the power of sin and death.

When we reorder the sequence, Paul's argument for evangelism is clear: God sends preachers, preachers present the message of the gospel, people hear the message through God's messages, some people believe the gospel, those who do call on the name of the Lord, and those who call are saved. The order is stated in negative terms and highlights the importance of evangelism in the way God calls people to himself.

*v. 16*

Paul now applies the evangelistic efforts of verses 14 and 15 to Israel. He concludes, “**they have not all obeyed the gospel.**” The “**they**” within the context of this section is the nation of Israel. If God has determined how the gospel is proclaimed among his people, then why have not all accepted it? Paul quotes Isaiah, who foresaw their unbelief: “**Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?**” Isaiah predicted the rejection of the coming Messiah of Israel in the fourth Servant Song (Isaiah 52:13-53:12).

The apostle John in his gospel also quotes the same verse when he states, despite all the signs Jesus did, the majority of Jews still did not believe in him. John then observes, their rejection of Jesus was so “the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled” (John 12:38).

*v. 17*

Still, they should have believed since it was not difficult to understand (vv. 6-7), and so they are responsible for their unbelief. The reason is given in verse 17, where Paul summarizes the order of evangelism: “**faith comes from**

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<sup>270</sup> Stott, 286.

hearing and hearing through the word of Christ." "Faith" is a gift of God to all who hear the gospel preached.

The phrase "**word of Christ**" means both the gospel message and the person of Christ. Still, why did they not believe? Given that they had all the benefits and blessings of God's unique covenants and were expecting their Messiah, why did they reject him when he did come? Paul now dismisses two explanations for why this could have happened and then gives his own reason.

### **Israel has heard, known and rejected God's message of salvation (10:18-21)**

*vv. 18-20 Not the reasons why the Jews rejected Jesus*

The first reason Paul rejects – it is Paul asking the question "**But I say**" and not an opponent – is the Jews did not hear about the gospel. He makes it clear, "**indeed they have.**" For evidence they heard, he quotes Psalm 19:4.

"Their voice has gone out to all the earth,  
and their words to the ends of the world." (Romans 10:18b)

The difficulty is, Psalm 19:4 does not deal with the proclamation of the gospel "**to all the earth.**" Instead, it talks about creation and how the created world proclaims the glory of God. It is, of course, entirely unreasonable to think that Paul did not know this. He has applied the reference to creation to the church and the gospel. We could even say this is a typical rabbinical lesser-to-greater argument, although not explicitly given: if the revelation of creation proclaims God's glory, how much more does the revelation of his gospel?<sup>271</sup> The meaning of "**to all the earth**" refers to every location where the Jewish community existed.

Someone might argue, although they heard, they did not understand the gospel. It is possible to hear without understanding, as Jesus himself stated in the parable of the sower (Matthew 13:19). But Paul also rejects a lack of understanding because they did not accept their own Messiah. This time Paul quotes Moses to prove this position (Deuteronomy 32:21).

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<sup>271</sup> Stott, 288.



“I will make you jealous of those who are not a nation; with a foolish nation I will make you angry.” (10:19b, quoting Deuteronomy 32:21)

Moses contrasts faithless Israel with the Gentiles whom God is using for his purposes in moving forward his plan of salvation. Surprisingly, it is the Gentile no-nation that is a “**foolish nation**” without understanding and not Israel. The implication, although not explicitly stated, is that Israel, with all its blessings (9:4-5), is a nation who should have understood the significance and meaning of the gospel. However, rather than accepting the gospel, they became jealous and angry at its proclamation to the no-nation of Gentiles (Acts 13:44-45 and many others). Paul now quotes Isaiah, who also agrees with Moses that Israel understood.

“I have been found by those who did not seek me; I have shown myself to those who did not ask for me.” (10:20; quoting Isaiah 65:1)

Paul interprets Isaiah by also using a lesser-to-greater argument: if the spiritually ignorant Gentiles understood the gospel, then Israel, with all its spiritual blessings, should have had no difficulty in understanding. Paul’s emphasis is not on the Gentiles’ acceptance but on Israel’s rejection. So, Paul, having quoted both Moses (law) and Isaiah (prophet), has made it clear the Jews are without excuse for rejecting Jesus Christ.

*v. 21 The reason why the Jews rejected Jesus*

Earlier (10:3), Paul said they were “**ignorant of the righteousness of God.**” But this was a willful ignorance because they had failed to trust in God for their righteousness. Because of their self-righteousness, they unsuccessfully pursued a God-righteousness (9:31). They should have known from their Scriptures not to attempt to establish their own righteousness by law-keeping (Deuteronomy 9:4-5; Isaiah 28:16). They, therefore, understood the gospel sufficiently to be held responsible for rejecting it. The self-righteous Pharisees rejected it, while unrighteous tax collectors and sinners accepted it (Mark 2:16; Luke 15:1-2).

So here, in verse 21, Paul contrasts the believing Gentiles with the unbelieving Jews. However, Paul’s quote of Isaiah 65:2

also has a note of hopefulness. When God says, “**all day long, I have held out my hands,**” there is an implication God has not rejected his people. He has held out his hands even though they are “**disobedient and obstinate**” in their attitude to the gospel. God continues to be faithful to the promises to his people, although they have been unfaithful to him. God holds out his arms even now. This hope anticipates Paul’s prophecy that “**all Israel will be saved**” (11:26).<sup>272</sup>

### **Summary of Chapters 9 and 10**

What shall we say then about the faithfulness of God concerning his word (9:6)? Chapters 9 and 10 have given two complementary answers:

1. *God’s sovereignty* (9:6-29): God’s word has not failed because God’s promises never included all of Abraham’s biological descendants. In his free will, God chose those he desired to bless.
2. *Human responsibility* (9:30-10:21): God’s word had not failed because it was Israel’s responsibility to accept God’s way of righteousness when they heard and understood the gospel. This they were unable to do.

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<sup>272</sup> Ibid, 505.

## Questions for Reflection

### Study it

1. [10:1] Compare v. 1 with 9:1-3. What is Paul's primary concern for his kinsmen? For what does Paul pray?
2. [10:2-3] Paul states Jews have a "zeal" for God not based on knowledge. What was the problem with zeal?
3. [10:4-10] What are the two ways of seeking acceptance with God contrasted here? How do they oppose each other? Was there one way in the Old Testament and the other in the New?
4. [10:11-13] What does Paul say about the universality of obtaining a righteousness before God?
5. [10:14-15] What does Paul say about evangelism? What steps does he outline?
6. [10:16-21] Why did the Jews not believe in the gospel and their own Messiah?
7. How would you answer the question whether God's word has failed Israel?

### Live it

1. Although chapter 9 teaches about the sovereign free will of God in establishing a faithful people, in 10:1 Paul says his "prayer to God for Israelites is that they may be saved." How does the sovereignty of God and prayer for salvation work together?
2. Can you identify a kind of zeal in Christian churches that is also not based on knowledge?
3. What reason would you give if someone asked you why you believe you have eternal life and will not be condemned?
4. What is our responsibility when we hear the gospel?
5. What have you learned about evangelism from this passage?

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## Lesson 11: God's faithfulness (11:1-36)

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Chapter 11 now brings to a climax the question concerning God's faithfulness to Israel (9:6). In the previous two chapters, Paul answered this question in two ways: first, by describing God's sovereign free will in choosing whom to bless and, second, by describing Israel's unfaithfulness, thereby making them accountable for their rejection of God.

In this chapter, Paul gives two more answers showing God's faithfulness to Israel: First, by preserving a faithful remnant within Israel, not only in the past (Old Testament) but in the present (time of Paul until now); secondly, by prophesying God will bring, at a future time, "all Israel" to salvation. Paul then ends this entire section (chapters 9 through 11) with a doxology of praise and worship. The outline of the chapter is as follows:

1. God continues to be faithful to national Israel despite its unfaithfulness (11:1a & 2a)
  2. God's past and present faithfulness to Israel in keeping a remnant (11:1-10)
  3. God will continue to be faithful to national Israel in the future (11:11-32)
    - a. The importance of Israel's salvation for the Gentiles (vv. 11-24)
    - b. The mystery of Israel's salvation (vv. 25-32)
  4. Doxology: In praise of the sovereignty of God (11:33-36)
- So, God's righteousness is vindicated by his plan of salvation for both the Jews and Gentiles.

### **God's continued faithfulness to Israel (11:1a & 2a)**

Paul had charged Israel for "stumbling over the stumbling stone" (9:32) and "being ignorant of the righteousness of God," trying to establish "their own righteousness" and "not submitting to God's righteousness" (10:3). Paul goes on to say, Israel has "not all obeyed the gospel" (10:16) even though they knew (10:18) and understood the gospel (10:19). Paul concludes this indictment by quoting Isaiah, who states, Israel is "a

**disobedient and contrary people”** (10:21). It is not unexpected, therefore, for Paul to ask, **“then, has God rejected his people?”** Possibly surprising, then, Paul answers with a resounding, **“By no means!”**.

He repeats this assurance in the next verse, **“God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew.”** In both affirmations, **“his people”** refers to ethnic Israel. However, Paul qualifies **“his people”** by adding **“whom he foreknew.”**<sup>273</sup> Does this mean, there are God’s people, Israelites, whom he did not foreknow? Many commentators view this as a restricting clause referring to a remnant within Israel. Others think Paul is referring to all of national Israel as a whole as he did in 9:1-5 (see also Amos 3:2).<sup>274</sup> This affirmation reflects both Psalm 94:14 and 1 Samuel 12:22. However, Paul now elaborates on this answer by referring to a faithful remnant rather than the nation as a whole (vv. 1b-10). So **“foreknew”** refers to a remnant chosen for salvation. Although Paul’s focus is on a remnant, Schreiner points out, **“the preservation of the remnant functions more explicitly in an anticipatory way: the preservation of the remnant signifies that God isn’t finished with his people and thus will fulfill his saving purposes and save Israel in the end.”**<sup>275</sup> The remnant acts as an implicit lesser-to-greater argument for God’s faithfulness to Israel (11:25-32).

### **God’s past and present faithfulness to a remnant within Israel (11:1b-10)**

*vv. 1b-5 God preserves a faithful remnant*

In these verses, Paul provides four proofs God would never forsake his people.<sup>276</sup> First, Paul gives a personal reason why God has not rejected Israel. He states, **“I myself am an Israelite.”** As a Jew, Paul is proof God has not rejected his people. He makes this emphatic by emphasizing he is a **“descendant of**

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<sup>273</sup> When the word **“foreknew”** is attributed to God it does not just mean knowing what will happen in the future. It also means foreordained; that is, what God knows in advance will always happen because he has the sovereign power to make it happen.

<sup>274</sup> Moo, *Romans*, 692-693.

<sup>275</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 566.

<sup>276</sup> Stott, 292-293.

**Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin.”** Like the remnant in the Old Testament, God has maintained a remnant to this present day. Paul is an individual member of this remnant.

The second reason is theological. God does not reject **“his people whom he foreknew.”** As mentioned, these are the faithful Israelites who placed their hope and trust in God. God speaking through Jeremiah, states: **“Thus says the Lord: If you can break my covenant with the day and my covenant with the night, so that day and night will not come at their appointed time, then also my covenant with David my servant may be broken so that he shall not have a son to reign on his throne, and my covenant with the Levitical priests my ministers”** (Jeremiah 33:20-21). This covenant promise was ultimately fulfilled in Christ.

The third reason is biblical. Paul appeals to the story of Elijah when after his victory at Mount Carmel, he was overcome with fear. Elijah thought he was the only faithful Israelite left, but God tells him, **“I have kept seven thousand men”** (v. 4; 1 Kings 19:18) faithful to himself.

Paul then gives a fourth reason. As in the time of Elijah, **“so too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by God.”** And, as we have already seen, Isaiah also predicted, that **“a remnant of them will be saved”** (9:27). This current **“remnant”** are Jews who had accepted Jesus as their Messiah and the gospel as the way of salvation. Luke tells us, **“three thousand souls”** came to faith on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:41), and later on, **“five thousand”** more came to faith (Acts 4:4). Also, James tells us, there were **“many thousands”** who were believing Jews (Acts 21:20). Those whom God **“foreknew”** have also been **“chosen.”**

v. 6

Paul’s reference to **“no longer”** in verse 6 should not be understood as temporal; that is, at one time God chose on **“the basis of works,”** but now he chooses on the basis of **“grace.”** Instead, it should be viewed as logical.<sup>277</sup> God never chose the remnant based on good works. In Elijah’s time, God did not keep the **“seven thousand men”** because they had **“not bowed**

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<sup>277</sup> Thielman, 517.

the knee to Baal” rather, it was God who kept them from bowing. Paul is pointing out that there is no kind of work (works of the law or otherwise) resulting in God’s electing grace.

In verses 5 through 7, Paul’s emphasis is entirely on the grace of God in choosing a remnant for himself. Although Paul is speaking of the remnant in Israel, this teaching applies to all believers. It is not an esoteric theological question but a profoundly practical one. Works, including our ability to choose and worship Christ, cannot be mixed with grace. The reason is, if we include our choice of God with God’s choice of us, we rob God of his glory; that is, it diminishes the perfect work of the cross. Our ability to love God is only because he first loved us (1 John 4:10). It is also practical because if we base our salvation on our ability to have faith in Christ, then we can never be sure we have sufficient faith. Our faith is often so weak. It also leaves open the question of losing one’s faith and, then, losing salvation. But, if we base our salvation entirely on God’s sovereign, loving faithfulness, we have complete assurance he alone will carry us through to the final day (Philippians 1:6).

*vv. 7-8*

Given that God has preserved a remnant, Paul asks, “**what then?**” Why are there now so few Jewish believers? He concludes, Israel, as a whole, had “**failed to obtain what it was seeking.**” What Israel had been seeking was justification before God. But it had done so on their own terms and not by submitting to God’s way (10:3, 16, 18, 21). However, like Elijah and the seven thousand and Paul and the many thousands, “**the elect obtained it.**” So, the reference to “**the elect**” here does not refer to Israel as a whole but the faithful remnant of Israel within Israel. This was the “**remnant chosen by grace**” (v. 5). The remaining Israelites, “**the rest,**” like Pharaoh, had their hearts “**hardened.**”

Paul has shown from Scripture that God preserved a few faithful people, but now he proves from Scripture that the rest were apostate. In verse 8, he combines Isaiah 29:10 with Deuteronomy 29:4. In the first line, Isaiah says, God has given Israel a “**spirit of stupor,**” meaning they have had no spiritual sensitivity to God’s word. Israel was so committed to sinning, that when they heard Jesus and the gospel, they could not

receive him. Instead, his message drove them further away from him.

The second and third lines in the biblical quote refer to Moses telling the Israelites the same thing. In the Old Mosaic covenant, the gracious enabling power to obey God by the Holy Spirit was not fully given to them. Only a few whom God called received it. But now Christ has come and inaugurated the new covenant, and God's promise that he already gave during the old covenant has come true. These promises were given to Jeremiah, "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts" (Jeremiah 31:33). And to Ezekiel, "I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes" (Ezekiel 36:27). Because of Christ, both Jews and Gentiles can now "**walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit**" (8:4).

However, Paul states that this condition of spiritual insensitivity continues to exist even "**down to this very day.**" This day was the time of Paul, but it will continue until "**the fullness of the Gentiles has come in**" (11:25). This certainly does not mean every Jew is like this. Paul himself is a counter-example. There continue to be those Jews who accepted and believed in Jesus, so there continues to be the necessity to evangelize (10:14-16).

Paul has portrayed the remnant in these verses as God's faithfulness to Israel. However, this does not exhaust his faithfulness, as we will see in 11:26-29. Instead, the very fact there is a remnant, proves God has not rejected his people. The "**hardening**" (v.7) Paul referred to is, therefore, not a permanent hardening (11:25).

*vv. 9-10*

Paul quotes Psalms to prove his point that "**the rest**" (v. 7) are under the judgment of God.

And David says,

"Let their table become a snare and a trap,  
a stumbling block and a retribution for them;  
let their eyes be darkened so that they cannot see,  
and bend their backs forever." (11:9-10; cited from Psalm  
69:22-23)



These verses are a messianic reference Jesus applies to himself (John 15:25). The speaker is a righteous man who has experienced great injustice. And so he prays, God's just judgment will be given to his persecutors. In the original context, David is speaking of himself being persecuted. But here, because Jesus has appropriated the psalm to himself, Paul can reverse the application. As Douglas Moo writes, "What David prayed would happen to his persecutors, Paul suggests, God has brought upon the Jews who have resisted the gospel."<sup>278</sup> The application is general, so there is no need to identify the meaning of the details of the quotes (e.g., "table," etc).

### **God's future faithfulness to Israel: "All Israel will be Saved" (11:11-32)**

Paul's major issue he is dealing with in chapters 9 through 11 is that most Jews have rejected Jesus as their Messiah. This was true during the life of Jesus, and it continued to be true in Paul's day. And sadly, it has continued to be true to our day. Likely some Gentiles in the Roman church concluded that God had rejected Israel because of their stubbornness to accept his Son. However, Paul answered the opposite by giving two reasons (vv. 1-5). First, as a devoted Jew, he believed in Jesus as the Messiah. And second, not only Paul but also many other Jews had come to faith in Christ. However, Paul is not finished answering this question. Now, beginning in verse 11, he gives another reason.

#### **The importance of Israel's salvation (11:11-24)**

*v. 11a*

Because the situation looks dire for most Israelites, Paul asks: "**Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery?**" (NIV). Not surprisingly, Paul again responds with, "**By no means!**" In the previous passage (10:1-10), Paul has demonstrated that national Israel's apostasy did not include the entire nation. In this passage (11:11-32), Paul says that national Israel's "**fall**" is also not permanent. There will come a day when "**all Israel**" will be saved (11:26).

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<sup>278</sup> Moo, Romans, 700.

*God's plan of salvation for the Gentiles and Jews (vv. 11-16)*

This passage explains the mystery of God's plan for the salvation of the Gentiles. It has come to them through the rejection of the gospel by the Jews. This has resulted in Paul and others presenting the gospel outside the synagogues. What is important to remember is Paul's reference to the Jews is as a community and not as individuals. The same is true for the Gentiles. Later in this chapter, when Paul speaks about the restoration of Israel, he is also speaking about Israel as a community or nation, not as individuals.

*vv. 11-12 God's plan in general*

Paul outlines God's plan of salvation for the Gentiles and Jews in three sequential steps. First, Israel's failure of the way of the righteousness of God as provided in the gospel has resulted in the gospel coming to and being accepted by the Gentiles (v. 11b). This step has already begun, and we are in the midst of it. Second, the salvation of the Gentiles will eventually make Israel jealous (v. 11c). Israel will be fully included in God's elect in the third and final step. This last step will result in an even greater benefit to the Gentile world than their rejection (v. 2).

*v. 11b Rejection of the gospel by Israel meant the gospel went out to the Gentiles*

It was and is a historical fact that most Jews have rejected the gospel. So, when Paul says: "**through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles,**" he gives a theological interpretation of this reality. Four times in the book of Acts, Luke records that when Paul first entered a city, he would first go to the synagogue. Only after the Jews rejected his preaching of the gospel does he go to the Gentiles. For example, on their first missionary journey:

And Paul and Barnabas spoke boldly, saying, "It was necessary that the word of God be spoken first to you. Since you thrust it aside and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles. (Acts 13:46)

The same happened during Paul's second and third missionary journeys (Acts 14:1-2; 18:5-6). Even years later, it happened again when Paul finally reached Rome as a prisoner (Acts 28:25-28). These could have all been viewed solely as historical events.

Paul, a Jew, would naturally go to a synagogue first, and when it did not work, he went to people who would accept the gospel. However, Paul views this outcome as the planned purpose of God. God used the Jew's stubborn rejection of Jesus, their Messiah, as the way to reach the Gentiles.

This was not a secondary plan but God's plan from the beginning. And it is often how God works in the world. He uses the sin, transgressions and iniquity of people to bring about blessings to others. The greatest example of this is Christ's death on the cross. An act of unimaginable evil produced salvation for the whole world. There are many examples of this throughout Christian history. The gospel has spread throughout the world because of the great sacrifice and even martyrdom of Christians. As Tertullian, an early church leader, stated, "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." This is important for contemporary believers as well. We often see God's gracious work through hard times and the most difficult circumstances.

*v. 11c Gentiles' new relationship with God will make Israel jealous*  
 But Paul does not leave it there. He goes on to say, accepting the gospel by the Gentiles will result in the Jews becoming "jealous." This also is God's plan. Luke, the historian mentions, several times, this reaction by the Jews (Acts 5:17; 13:45; 17:5). In these instances, however, the jealousy resulted from Paul's success in converting Jews to Christ. This type of jealousy was envy resulting from pride and covetousness, which is a sin (1 Corinthians 13:4-5). But Paul also talks about a different kind of jealousy, a "godly jealousy" (2 Corinthians 11:2). This kind of jealousy is a zeal for Christ and his gospel. Elijah had this kind of jealousy for God (1 Kings 19:10). The word Paul uses here in verse 11 is slightly different and refers to injustice in the sense of a husband or wife being jealous of their spouse's faithfulness. Paul borrows from God's declaration in 10:19 (Quoting Deuteronomy 32:21). Paul's desire is for the Jews to see Gentiles receiving the righteousness they themselves desired, by trusting in their Messiah. And so, the Gentiles will receive all the blessings and inheritance the Jews were also seeking. As a result, jealousy will cause Jews to have a godly desire for Christ.

It is often the case, Gentiles accept the first part of Paul's statement but ignored the second. Yes, salvation has come to

the Gentiles because of the rejection of the gospel by the Jews. But this happened to make the Jews jealous? This is a surprising statement. The conversion of the Gentiles is the means God will use to evangelize the Jews. The Gentile acceptance of the Jewish Messiah will result in a great benefit to the Jewish people.

*v. 12 A future revival in Israel will result in an even greater blessing for the Gentiles*

Paul then adds a further third and final surprising step. He states, blessings—Paul uses the phrase “**riches for the world**”—will result from Israel coming to Christ. That is, the meaning of “**fullness**” is the restoration of Israel to Christ and his gospel. Furthermore, when this occurs, these blessings will also be even greater than the blessing the Gentiles have already obtained through the rejection of the gospel by the Jews. It is difficult to imagine a greater blessing than the gospel itself – righteousness with God and eternal life – but this is Paul’s prophetic description (see v. 15).

So, we can summarize God’s surprising plan of salvation for the world as follows: Israel’s rejection of the gospel results in the blessing of the gospel being preached to the Gentiles. We often think nothing could be greater. But in the future, the Gentile acceptance of the gospel will result in blessing to Israel because Israel will accept the Christ Jesus as their Lord and Saviour. And ultimately, Israel’s acceptance will result in a greater blessing to the Gentiles than when the gospel first came to them. This is hard to fathom! This should create a love and desire in all Gentile Christians to long for the conversion of Israel. Sadly, it has often been just the opposite in Church history. If only we had read these verses carefully, much pain and suffering the Christian church has inflicted on Jews could have been avoided.

*vv. 13-16 Paul’s involvement in God’s plan*

*v. 13*

Paul now relates this sequence of events to his ministry. Paul makes it clear that he is emphatically pro-Israel. Not in the sense of wanting a political or military nation but in wanting them to have all the blessings of the gospel.

He begins by speaking to the believing Gentiles. Paul affirms Jesus appointed him as an apostle to the Gentiles (Acts

9:15; Romans 1:5; 15:16). He says, “**I magnify my ministry**” to the Gentiles. What he means by this statement is that he takes this ministry very seriously. He is so determined in his Gentile ministry that he hopes “**somehow to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them.**” Again, this seems to be a surprising reason.

*v. 14*

The motivation of jealousy to become a Christ-follower does not seem very noble initially. But as already mentioned, jealousy may be understood as a desire for what is good and a hatred for anything that may damage the good. Paul wants the unbelieving Jews to emulate the believing Gentiles. Paul, therefore, hopes the Jews will see the great value and benefit of the gospel and desire it more than anything else. Also, we should not view negatively Paul wanting to “**save some.**” Paul knows salvation comes from God and when the “**fullness of the Gentiles has come in,**” “**Israel will be saved**” (11:24-25). Paul views his contribution as only a part of God’s plan of salvation.

Another reason Paul’s statement is surprising is that the reason to evangelizing the Gentiles is to evangelize to the Jews (“**in order to**”). However, this statement implies the very close relationship between Jews and Gentiles. We have already seen that the gospel went out to the Gentiles because of its rejection by the Jews. The coming to faith of one group is strongly tied to the coming to faith of the other. As the fullness of the Gentiles’ salvation is reached, Israel itself will be saved. Paul is working hard for this to happen.

*v. 15*

Paul now explicitly restates the benefits the Gentiles will experience when the Jews come to faith. But first, he states the benefits they have already received from the “**rejection**” of the gospel by the Jews. This may mean Israel’s rejection of the gospel or God’s rejection of unfaithful Israel. The latter is most likely.

In any case, this rejection results in “**reconciliation of the world.**” The best commentary of this phrase is Paul himself in Ephesians 2:11-22. The “**world**” are those Gentiles who were “separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of

Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God." And "**reconciliation**" means, Christ "came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those near. For through him, we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God." Therefore, reconciliation of the world is the conversion of a great number of non-Jews throughout the world to Christ and his gospel. This reconciliation's glorious, happy and blessed result is "**life from the dead.**" This phrase has been interpreted as new spiritual life (2 Corinthians 3:6; 5:17; Galatians 6:15) when we were dead in our trespasses and sin (Ephesians 2:5; Colossians 2:13). Others have said it means bodily resurrection after physical death. Given the context, it seems much more likely it is the former. However, as Douglas Moo states, "the context suggests that this state of "life from the dead" refers to an unprecedented experience of blessing that is inaugurated by the coming of Christ at the end of history."<sup>279</sup>

*v. 16*

Paul, in this verse, uses two metaphors to illustrate his concern for the future conversion of Israel. However, the exact meaning has had different interpretations. It seems best to view "**firstfruits**" and "**root**" as the patriarchs of Israel: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.<sup>280</sup> When first fruits were offered, they were regarded as consecrating the whole harvest (Leviticus 2:1-14). So, God's choice of the patriarchs meant that the whole nation of Israel – the "**whole lump**" and "**branches**" – became set apart from the world for God (v. 28). Paul explains this in more detail in verse 28: "**as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers.**" In this context, "**election**" means the descendants of Jacob. The word "**holy,**" means devoted to God. Israel is a people consecrated to God. It does not mean being set apart for salvation but for them to continue being a special people in God's eyes. Because of this special relationship, there is hope for their spiritual renewal (vv. 23-24).<sup>281</sup>

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<sup>279</sup> Moo, *Romans*, 713.

<sup>280</sup> Hodge, 329.

<sup>281</sup> Moo, *Romans*, 718.

*Gentile Christians are warned against being arrogant (vv. 17-22)*

*vv. 17-18 The Olive Tree Illustration*

Paul now begins with an illustration of an olive tree. When Paul mentions an olive tree, his readers would have known he is speaking about Israel. Old Testament symbolism referred to Israel as a thriving olive tree (Jeremiah 11:16; Psalm 52:8; Hosea 14:6). The primary motivation of this instruction was to warn and admonish the Gentile Christians in their attitude towards their fellow Jews. To understand this illustration, we need to remember to whom Paul is referring. In the Old Testament, Israel is the olive tree, and God is the gardener. The spiritual “**nourishing root**” refers to the patriarchs of Israel, including all the promises made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Paul now reapplies this illustration to the New Testament people of God.

He begins by saying, “**some of the branches were broken off.**”<sup>282</sup> This is Paul’s great anguish. The Jews have not come into the blessings of the gospel because of God’s hardening (vv. 7-10) as a consequence of their unbelief (v. 20). However, other branches, which Paul calls “**wild olive shoots,**” are “**grafted in among others.**” These wild shoots are Gentile Christians who do not have a natural relationship with the patriarchs and God’s promises to them.<sup>283</sup> It is only by God’s kindness (v. 22) that Gentiles can be included and “**share in the nourishing root of the olive tree.**”

It seems clear from Paul’s description that the “**branches**” broken off, which Paul later calls “**natural branches**” (v. 21), refer to Jews. “**Wild branches,**” then, refer to Gentiles. The “**nourishing root of the olive tree**” is the blessings and promises to Abraham. As Thielman comments: “Contrary to expectations and solely as a matter of God’s grace, God had brought them into the sphere of Israel and enabled them to derive rich spiritual benefits from Israel’s heritage (9:4-5; 15:27; cf. Ephesians 2:11-13, 19; 3:6).”<sup>284</sup> The illustration is surprising because Paul knows wild olive branches were not grafted into an old cultivated olive

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<sup>282</sup> Verse 17 contains the condition (“**if**” part) and verse 18 the “**then**” part. This “**if**” statement is assumed to be true just like the other five “**if**” statements in verses 12 to 16.

<sup>283</sup> *Ibid.*, 719.

<sup>284</sup> Thielman, 541.

tree (cf. v. 24). It was, actually, the other way around. Paul's illustration is against the natural order of things. He does so in order to remind everyone of the surprising thing God has done by including ("**grafting**") believing Gentiles into Israel.

In verse 18, Paul provides the "then" part of the "if" condition beginning in verse 17. Speaking now directly to the Gentile Christians, Paul warns them not to become "**arrogant**" towards the Jewish "**branches**." Paul does not state whether these "**branches**" are believing Jews or unbelieving Jews, i.e., branches who have been broken off. It is, therefore, assumed he is referring to both. The Gentiles should not be arrogant because they do not "**support the root**"; instead, "**the root supports you**." The root, as before, refers to the patriarchs of Israel and the promises of God given to them. So, the root is not all Israel but the patriarchs who "continue to be the source of spiritual nourishment that believers require."<sup>285</sup> Salvation does not depend on biological descent but faith like Abraham's. Only those "**who share the faith of Abraham**" (4:16) can consider Abraham their father, who is "**the father of all who believe**" (4:11).

We conclude from these verses that the Christian church is one with Israel. There are only one new covenant people of God that includes both believing Jews and Gentiles. There is only one olive tree. There is not one olive tree for Israel and another for the Christian church.

We can summarize Gentile Christians' attitude to present-day Israel as follows: First, we need to remember that the root of the Christian church is Israel; that is, Abraham and the promises to him. We must not erase Jewishness from Christianity. Christianity is inherently Jewish, and Paul warns Gentile Christians to understand Israel is the foundation of God's promised blessings. Second, we should remember our grafting is unnatural. Only by God's grace are pagan, idolatrous, polytheistic Gentiles included in his people. It is only because of our union with Christ that the wild olive branches of Gentile Christians are included in the olive tree. God has, against all natural expectations, included us in his fellowship. And third,

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<sup>285</sup> Moo, *Romans*, 722.



this should make us humble. It is only by God's all-surpassing grace that we are included. And so, we should not look at the broken branches with arrogance. Instead, we should be like Paul, whose "**heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved.**"

*vv. 19-21*

Once again, someone seems to object to this line of teaching. The objection can be stated as follows: "We agree that God in the Old Testament used Israel, but today they have rejected him. And you state that they are broken off. We share a common root, but why should I be concerned for present-day unbelieving Israel?" So Paul now continues the allegory to reset and correct the arrogance of the Gentile Christians towards the Jews in general. The Jews had boasted of their special status and elitism towards the Gentiles and missed out on the righteousness of Christ that comes through faith. Paul is warning the Gentiles of the same thing. There is nothing special about the Gentiles who have faith; that is, faith is not an accomplishment in which to boast. Like all of salvation, faith is a gift from God (Ephesians 2:8-9). So Paul urges the Gentile Christians not to fall into the same error as unbelieving Israel. Instead, we are to "**stand fast through faith**" and not be proud, "**but fear**" because if we don't, we will also find ourselves broken off.

Paul now explains what he means by "**fear.**" This is a severe warning to not trust in anything but the unmerited grace of God for our salvation. The Gentiles should learn from the Jews that failure to continue in faith would result in the same judgment of God. If God judged the "**natural branches,**" he will most certainly judge the "**wild branches.**" This also warns and rebukes the Gentile Christians not to be arrogant towards Jews.

*v. 22*

In verse 22, Paul describes the "**severity of God**" against those "**who have fallen.**" The severity of God's ultimate judgment and condemnation is directed at those who have fallen away from saving faith. These are Gentiles who, like the Jews, have presumed God's goodness (2:4-5). So they, like the Jews, will also be "**cut off.**" The "**if**" (KJV) statement (translated "**provided**" in ESV and NIV) in verse 22 (and in verse 23) is not

assumed to be true but only potentially true in the future. In New Testament teaching, salvation always depends on a continuing faith. Anyone who has renounced their faith has given up any hope of salvation (Matthew 10:22; Luke 9:62; Galatians 6:9; Colossians 1:23; 2 Timothy 4:7; Hebrews 3:6, 14; 6:4-6).

The question then is, can a genuine Christian lose their faith? From this teaching, it certainly appears to be the case. However, it is not necessarily so. The difficulty is in the olive tree allegory. It is important not to extract more theological teaching from an illustration than was intended. When Paul states natural branches are cut off, he refers to Jews who have never believed. In reality, they never were part of the tree, but Paul states the allegory as if they were. So, in the same way, there are members of the Roman Christian church who might appear genuine but reject their faith in the end. Such members may not have been part of the tree in the first place. As we have mentioned several times, it is essential not to lose sight of the fact Paul uses this illustration to warn and rebuke Gentile Christians not to become elitist and arrogant towards Jews.

*All Israel, believing in Jesus by faith alone, are included in God's kingdom (vv. 23-24)*

Paul continues the olive tree illustration by stating that in his sovereignty, God can certainly graft back in the “**natural branches**” if they repent of their unbelief and place their hope and trust in Christ and his gospel. Just as Paul emphasized the sins of the Jews to admonish them in their boasting over the Gentiles (2:17ff), so now he admonishes the Gentiles in their boasting.

Paul, however, is not stating the Jews are in some way “**by nature**” better suited for salvation than the Gentiles. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile so far as their relationship with God is concerned. Neither is Paul stating Jews have a greater claim on God and so have an advantage in salvation. Paul has gone to great lengths in chapters 2 and 3 to deny this. He had concluded that Jews are not better off concerning salvation, but “**both Jews and Greeks are under sin**” (3:9). Paul means that the future redemption of Israel is more likely than the surprising present inclusion of the Gentiles into God's

elect.<sup>286</sup> Although most Jews during Paul's time had rejected Christ, Paul is saying it is easier ("**how much more**") for God to save Israel than it was to save Gentiles. Paul is unequivocal about the power of God to save even those who seem so hardened against the truth. However, it is important to note this will only happen if they "**do not continue in their unbelief.**" So, God's sovereignty and human responsibility to believe are not compromised. Both truths are held simultaneously together.

### **The mystery of salvation for Gentiles and Israel (11:25-32)**

Within the Protestant church, these verses have had two quite different interpretations. At the Reformation, most leaders did not believe Paul was speaking of a future time when there would be a great conversion of Jews. They understood the "**partial hardening**" did not prevent individual Jews from coming to faith. And so, the term "**all Israel**" referred to faithful spiritual Israel, which included Jews and Gentiles until Christ's return. However, since then, as well as in the early church, another interpretation supported a remarkable time of conversion for national Israel's future. Suffice it to say there are many reasons why the latter interpretation is correct, not the least being Paul has been speaking about Jews and Gentiles throughout this passage in a corporate sense. Verse 25 makes clear, his reference to a "**partial hardening has come upon Israel**" refers to ethnic Israel, the Jews. And so, it is unlikely he would not change the meaning of "**Israel**" in the following sentence.<sup>287</sup>

#### *v. 25*

It would appear from this verse some Gentile Christians had a preconceived idea of why most Jews had rejected Jesus. They believed God had rejected the Jews because they had crucified Jesus. And then, when the infant church began, they severely persecuted it. Paul was involved in such persecution and later could attest to being himself persecuted. However, Paul wants to dispel the misunderstanding that the Jews' rejection of Jesus

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<sup>286</sup> Hodge, 333.

<sup>287</sup> However, even today, some evangelical commentators hold to the spiritual Israel interpretation including Jews and Gentiles who have put their faith in Christ.

means God abandoned them. He says he does not want them **“to be wise in your own sight.”** And so, Paul tells the Gentile Christians he does **“not want them to be unaware”** of what God is doing now in bringing about a people of God and what God will do in the future. He does not want them to be **“arrogant”** (v. 18) or **“proud”** (v. 20). Sadly, this is exactly what has often happened throughout the Christian church history.

Paul begins by calling what God is and will do a **“mystery.”** The way this word is used in the New Testament means that spiritual truth is hidden or concealed, which can only be revealed through divine revelation (Ephesians 3:3f). So, when Paul uses this word here, he means this could not be understood from natural reasoning or observation but is the divine plan of God which he has kept hidden (Ephesians 3:9). Therefore, when Paul now describes this mystery, he is doing so as a prophet. Prophecy should not be understood as foretelling the future as history in the same way history describes the events of the past. Instead, it is a promise from God about what he will do in the future; however, the details of how this promise is fulfilled are not in view.

So, what is this mystery Paul is now revealing? When the Gentiles observed the Jews, they could see this **“hardening”** was **“partial.”** There were many Jews who had accepted Christ as their Saviour and Lord; Paul is one of the most prominent as also all the other apostles, as well as James and Jude, who were Jesus’ brothers. This partial hardening has continued until now and will continue until the time the **“fullness of the Gentiles has come in.”** Although there have been many Jews who have become Christians, a great conversion had not taken place and awaits the full number of Gentiles who first must become Christians.

It is not easy to understand what Paul means by **“fullness.”** It does not mean that every Gentile will first become Christian. It likely means Gentiles, as a corporate body, will come to faith in large numbers (Luke 21:24).<sup>288</sup> At some time after the fullness of the Gentiles come to faith, Israel as a corporate body will also

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<sup>288</sup> Some commentators understand **“fullness”** to mean that the gospel will be preached and a church established in every Gentile nation.

come to faith. Again, the corporate reference to the Gentiles or Israel does not mean every person will come to faith.

In this verse, we see Paul describing God's plan for salvation. Jesus came to the Jews as their Messiah, the Jews rejected him, but the Gentiles accepted him, which will result in the Jews accepting him. The wide acceptance of Gentiles to believe the gospels does not mean God no longer has a plan for Israel. Instead, it means that the fullness of the Gentiles will result in a great conversion of the Jews, resulting in an even greater benefit to the Gentiles (v. 12).

*v. 26a*

Paul now states, "**in this way**" which means that after the full conversion of the Gentiles, "**all Israel will be saved.**"<sup>289</sup> The phrase, "**all Israel,**" does not mean the faithful remnant has already come to faith since the time of Christ. It means there will be a great, astonishing future outpouring of the Spirit on Jewish people before Christ's return. As a result of this outpouring of the Spirit, a vast number of Israelites—although not every Israelite—will come to faith in Jesus.

To be clear, however, this does not mean there are two different separate peoples of God. There is only one true Church—the elect people of God—including both believing Jews and Gentiles who put their hope and trust in Christ Jesus. When this future outpouring occurs, "**all Israel**" will put their faith in Christ and so be re-grafted into the one people of God; the Church of which Christ is the head (Colossians 1:18). Therefore, the purpose of salvation for the nation of Israel is not to restore her to her Old Testament theocratic glory. Instead, it is to include her again into the faithful Israel of God.

A significant objection to this understanding of "**in this way**" and "**all Israel**" is that Israel has an ethnic privilege not available to the Gentiles. It seems to contradict Paul's emphasis

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<sup>289</sup> It is possible to understand "**in this way**" in a causal sense rather than temporary. That is, it is the ongoing process of salvation which is the means "**all Israel**" is saved. Commentators who follow this interpretation also consider "Israel" to include all believers, Jews and Gentiles. However, we understand "**in this way**" to be temporal. That is, it refers to a future time when all ethnic Israel will be mysteriously and miraculously saved.

that there is no longer Jew or Gentile in Christ Jesus (3:22; 4:11-12; 8:15-17; Galatians 3:28-29). N.T. Wright's criticism, for instance, is typical. He writes, "this basic view always seems to fit very badly with Romans 9-10, where, following Galatians and Romans 1-9, Paul makes it abundantly clear, there is no covenant membership, and consequently no salvation, for those *who simply rest on their ancestral privilege.*"<sup>290</sup> A future large-scale conversion of ethnic Israel appears to undermine Paul's teaching on the equality of the Gospel without ethnic privilege. How, then, can this objection be addressed?

The answer is in verse 28. Future Israel will be saved because of the "election" promises made to the "forefathers." As has been made clear, the election is always a matter of grace and not one of works or privilege (3:34; 5:17, 20-21; 11:5). It is not because of their privilege God grants grace to Israel but because of God's grace that Israel is privileged. Abraham was granted righteousness and salvation, not because of his merit but because God chose Abraham. And Abraham responded to God's choice with faith. In the same way, future Israel will respond to God's choice in saving faith. Because of God's sovereign choice in offering grace and predestination to whom he wills, future Israel will be saved.

*vv. 26b-27*

To prove this prophecy (divine promise) of Israel's conversion as true, Paul again appeals to the Scriptures. Although he only quotes from Isaiah, Paul has a more general prophecy in mind, expressed in many other passages in the Old Testament (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 14:7; Zechariah 12:10). This prophecy is, God has promised to be Israel's "Deliverer" and, therefore, we can be certain, he will come and save them. The quotation from Isaiah 59:20-21 and 27:9<sup>291</sup> is clear that salvation is much more than a remnant since God, "the Deliverer," will "banish ungodliness from Jacob." Paul's prophetic interpretation then is proven correct. The result of this deliverance will be that God

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<sup>290</sup> N.T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology*, (New York: T&T Clark, 1991), 246.

<sup>291</sup> After this quote, Isaiah 27:9, Isaiah continues in verses 12 to 13 to include the Gentiles together with Israel to worship God together.

will “**take away their sins.**” This is not a new or different way from the past. Paul has made it clear throughout the letter, there is only one way to receive salvation by grace: through faith in Christ (see also Jesus’ own words in John 19:7-8; 11:25-29; 14:6).

Of course, like all prophecies, the details of how these events will unfold are not given. We also know this from the prophet Zechariah:

“And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy, so that, when they look on me, on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn. (Zechariah 12:10).

There is a day when Israel will recognize their Messiah, repent in mourning and weeping, and turn and follow him.

*A glimpse into God’s divine plan of salvation (vv. 28-32)*

*vv. 28-29 How the Gentiles should understand Israel*

Paul sums up how the gospel became available to the Gentiles. As far as the gospel is concerned, “**they [Jews] are enemies for your [Gentiles] sake.**” Paul does not say with whom the Jews are enemies; given the context, it is most likely the gospel and by implication, Jesus Christ. But with regard to the election of Israel, “**they [Jews] are beloved for the sake of their forefathers.**” This reference to election is the election<sup>292</sup> of national Israel; that is, it refers to the covenant promises made to Abraham and his elect descendants. The faithfulness of God is Israel’s only hope (Malachi 3:6 “For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed.”) This highlights in a different way what Paul has already said, “the covenant made with Abraham was inconsistent with the final rejection of the Jews as a people. God foresaw and predicted their temporary defection and rejection from his kingdom, but

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<sup>292</sup> The election of Israel in the Old Testament was to show the Gentile world the glory of God, and to eventually result in the coming of Jesus as the Redeemer of the world. Election in the New Testament, however, refers to the gospel, salvation and eternal life. These are two different meanings of election.

never contemplated their being forever excluded (see verses 15, 25-27)."<sup>293</sup>

However, once again, their salvation will not be based on their Jewishness or their obedience but on God's free and gracious promise made to Abraham. Their salvation will come through faith in their Messiah, Jesus Christ who will deliver them from their sins (v. 27)

*v. 29*

Once God has made a promise, he is faithful to keep it and sovereign to be able to keep it despite Israel being "**a disobedient and contrary people**" (10:21). Having chosen Israel as a people, they will continue to remain his people. The meaning of the word "**irrevocable**" is to show no regret. So, the emphasis in this verse is God has no regret in his "**gifts and the calling**". The "**gifts**" refer to the promises of 9:4-5. The "**calling of God**" is equivalent to "**election**." Once again, when God calls, his calling is sure and effective. In the New Testament, those whom God calls will have eternal life; and in the Old Testament, Israel, whom he called, will forever remain his chosen people. As in the previous verses, Paul is speaking here about the rejection and restoration of Israel as a corporate body rather than the salvation of individuals.

We might ask: on what basis will all Israel be saved? Is it because they are Jews? Definitely not. Is it because they will be obedient? Also, definitely not. What then? It is because of God's free and gracious commitment to his promises which he made to "**the forefathers**" (v. 28). This salvation will be through faith in their Messiah, Jesus Christ when he comes to "**take away their sins**" (v. 27). This is Paul's answer to the question he raised earlier in his letter: "**Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? By by means! Let God be true though every one were a liar**" (3:3-4). God does not take back or even regret his decision to choose and to bless<sup>294</sup>.

*vv. 30-31 God's method and goal of salvation*

These verses are a summary of all of chapter 11. Paul is still speaking to the Gentiles in the church. It is no less startling a

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<sup>293</sup> Hodge, 338.

<sup>294</sup> Thielman, 550.



divine mystery then the first time Paul states it. God is using Israel's disobedience as the way to open the door of the gospel for the Gentiles. And the great number of Gentiles being included in God's people will one day result in God's saving mercy coming to Israel as well. The fourfold reference to God's "mercy" dominates this remarkable plan of salvation. And, of course, mercy only has meaning in the justifiable condemnation of the disobedient.

*v. 32 God's judgement and mercy*

If verses 30 and 31 sum up chapter 11, then verse 32 sums up the whole letter in one short sentence. The phrase "for God has consigned all to disobedience," refers to chapter 1 verse 18, "for the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness." The word "consigned" means to bind, lock up, or imprison. God has revealed in the gospel that all people, Jews and Gentiles, have disobeyed God and are under his condemnation. The charge of rebellion he has against each one is inescapable. But he has done this so "he might have mercy on all" (10:12). The word "all,zz" applies to all Israel and Gentiles in a corporate sense.

**Doxology: In praise of the sovereignty of God (11:33-36)**

Paul ends his question concerning Israel's salvation and God's faithfulness by describing the power and majesty of God's promised plan of salvation. It is a surprising plan, not one Jews would have thought of or even understood from the Old Testament Scriptures. In this sense, it was a divine "mystery" only revealed through divine revelation. It is an expression of wonder to Paul that God has revealed this plan to him.

Moreover, God's plan was not just for Israel but the whole world despite their rebellion against him. In all this, God remained faithful to his justice, yet his unsurpassed mercy and compassion brought salvation for all. This majestic passage is the culmination of the entirety of God's plan of redemption, all Paul has described from the beginning of his letter. God's plan is an overwhelming display of his wisdom, knowledge and power. *It was a plan whose ultimate goal was to bring glory to God himself.* As Gentiles or Jews, it is far beyond our human

knowledge or understanding. This passage has three parts and is outlined as follows:

1. Expression of amazement at three attributes of God: his riches, wisdom and knowledge concerning his plan of redemption (v. 33).
2. Three rhetorical questions contrast God's greatness with human weakness to evoke our praise and trust in him (vv. 34-35).
3. Praise of the sovereignty of God who is the source, provider, and owner of all things (v. 36).

Few passages in all of Scripture describe so powerfully that God is all in all and, in comparison to God, mankind is nothing. Yet it is this all-sovereign God who provided a means of redemption for his people through his mercy, love, and grace.

*v. 33*

Paul begins the passage with **"Oh!"**. This is Paul's loud cry of amazement and astonishment. He is simply overcome, contemplating the **"depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God."** The word **"depth"** modifies the three attributes of God.<sup>295</sup> It means God's riches, wisdom and knowledge are inexhaustible. God's infinite **"riches"** highlights God's glory, that is, the revealing of his infinite worth (9:23 **"the riches of his glory"**). As such, it refers to his sovereign power to accomplish his will in all things. God's infinite **"wisdom"** then refers not only to the creation of the world (Proverbs 3:19) but also to his ability to plan salvation history in a way that all the world can experience his grace and peace (1 Corinthians 1:21; 2:6-7; Ephesians 3:10). God's infinite **"knowledge"** refers to his foreknowledge of who would be included as his people (8:29; 11:2; cf. 9:6-29).<sup>296</sup>

Paul's opening word in the second part of his exclamation also begins with amazement: **"how!"**. (Most translations include the exclamation mark at the end of the sentence.) Paul now compares God's riches, wisdom and knowledge to human

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<sup>295</sup> In other translations **"depth of the riches"** modifies two attributes of God: wisdom and knowledge.

<sup>296</sup> Thielman, 553.

understanding. He does this with two parallel thoughts: “unsearchable” and “inscrutable.” The first word, “unsearchable,” means that God’s “judgments” are beyond the ability of humans to comprehend. Judgment is a judicial term referring to the justice and mercy of God. The second word, “inscrutable,” is similar, but highlights the human inability to see how God accomplishes his plan of salvation; that is, “his ways” are beyond finding out. What Paul is referring to is his “amazement at how God has accomplished his purposes for the salvation of both Jews and gentiles and at the same time has remained faithful to his promises to Israel.”<sup>297</sup> So, Paul is not only praising God for what God has revealed to him concerning salvation but also what God has not revealed to him. The great confidence of the Christian faith is not having all the answers but having God, who has all the answers.

*vv. 34-35*

God’s ways are unsearchable and inscrutable because humans cannot fully comprehend the depth of God’s riches, wisdom and knowledge. Paul now explains why this is so (“for”). He asks three rhetorical questions, which would all be answered with a resounding, “no one!” The questions refer to God’s riches, wisdom and knowledge in reverse order. The first question asks about the “mind of the Lord” and refers to his “knowledge.” The second question asks about being “his counsellor” and refers to God’s “wisdom.” These two questions reference the passage in Isaiah 40:9-17 and specifically verse 13. The third question asks about a human’s ability to repay God. This is a question God asks Job (Job 41:11).

Paul’s intent in giving both Gentiles and Jews this passage is to warn them of any hasty judgments on how God is working out his promises. Too often we want to quickly understand the reasons and causes of the current world events and so come to a hasty judgment that this is the way God is working. Paul’s words here are an admonishment to any such rash judgments.

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<sup>297</sup> Thielman, 553.

v. 36

Paul now answers why no one can give God any advice by being his counsel. Also, no one can repay God for his glorious plan of salvation. This is because (“**for**”) everything is already “**from him**,” that is, all things originate with him. Everything is “**through him**,” everything occurs because of God’s sovereign ability to accomplish his will, and everything is “**to him**,” God is the goal of all things. All of this is the reason: everything originating with him, everything accomplished, and everything belonging to him is for his “**glory**.” All things were created and are sustained and find their purpose in glorifying God. The salvation of Jews and Gentiles is only the penultimate purpose; what is ultimate is the glory of God. God has determined all history, particularly salvation history, is done to bring maximum glory to himself.<sup>298</sup>

Paul ends this passage of praise with a concluding, “**Amen**.” Paul began with worship in 9:5: “**Christ, who is God over all blessed forever. Amen**” and concludes his doxology with a matching “**Amen**” (v. 36)

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<sup>298</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 620.

## Questions for Reflection

### Study it

1. [11:1-10] List four reasons Paul says God has not rejected his people.
2. [11:5-7] Who are the remnant, and on what basis have they been saved? Who are the “elect” in verse 7?
3. [11:11, 16] Based on these verses, why is Paul confident that Israel’s rejection is not final?
4. [11:17-24] What is Paul warning the Gentiles about? How is it similar to the warning he gave the Jews (2:12ff)?
5. [11:11-24] Outline how the Gentiles were given the gospel?
6. [11:25-32] What does the “mystery” in verse 25 mean? What is the ultimate future for Israel? How does Paul use Scripture to support it?
7. [11:26] What does “all Israel” mean? Is Paul speaking about the salvation of individual Israelites or Israel's political and military establishment as a nation?
8. [11:29] On what basis will Israel be saved?
9. [11:33-36] Why does Paul conclude chapters 9 through 11 this way? Why is God’s judgment unsearchable and inscrutable? What does this mean?
10. [11:36] For whom are all things? What does this mean?

### Live it

1. Does this passage support evangelism to the Jews?
2. In what context does “mercy” have meaning in vv. 30-33?
3. On what basis were the remnant saved in the Old Testament? So, does the Old Testament teach salvation based on faith or works of the law (cf. chapter 4)? How does God’s consistency through the old and new Testaments encourage you?
4. Does the “depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God” encourage you?
5. How does your life glorify God (cf. v. 36)?

## PART IV: THE GOSPEL OF LOVE

### *THE CHRISTIAN LIFE (12:1-15:13)*

In this next section of Paul's letter, his focus changes from instruction in the doctrine of justification to exhortation in sanctification. These are not two independent doctrines. Sanctification means becoming more Christ-like—the process of growing and maturing in Christ—which is dependent first on our justification in Christ.

As a result of justification, we are born-again spiritually and **“the Spirit of God dwells in you.”** This close relationship is already evident in chapter 6, where Paul describes our union with Christ's death, and resurrection must lead us to **“walk in newness of life”** and not to let sin **“reign in your mortal body.”**

Then in chapter 8, he again says, those who are justified **“live according to the Spirit”** and **“set their mind on the Spirit.”** The reason we are able not to sin is that the **“Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you”** and **“gives life to our mortal bodies.”** However, it is important to remember, we are not **“saved”** from the **“wrath of God”** by sanctification but by justification; justification is being counted (imputed, credited) with Christ's righteousness through faith in Christ, a faith which itself is a gift of grace from God.

So the power to live a victorious Christian life is granted to us by our union with Christ since we now have his indwelling Spirit. The primary way of a Christian is a life of love. God is love, and to become like Christ is to grow and mature in love. This is only possible by the power of Christ's Spirit within us. As a result, Paul now urges us to demonstrate and live this power in our everyday lives.

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## Lesson 12: The Gospel of a Renewed Mind (12:1-21)

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### Transformation by renewing our minds (12:1-2)

*v. 1*

Paul begins this famous passage with **“therefore,”** which refers to everything he has said in the entire letter. It, therefore, lays the foundation of what he is about to say concerning the Christian life. Paul’s second word is **“appeal,”** but possibly a better word is **“urge”** (NASB, NIV) or **“exhort”** (NET). The word implies not just a request but an authority coming from Paul, who was **“called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God”** (1:1). His appeal is personal and relational in urging his **“brothers”** and sisters in Christ. These opening words are intended to make Paul’s readers pay close attention to what he is about to say.

What he is about to say is based on **“the mercy of God.”** By God’s mercy, he sent his only Son to be the propitiation for our sins and through union with Christ to credit us with his righteousness. Because of God’s mercy, salvation has come to both Jews and Gentiles. Paul can urge his brothers and sisters in Christ **“by”** (or better **“through”**) the mercy of God; that is, Paul exhorts them because of God’s mercy. The obedience to which Paul urges them is their appropriate response to this mercy. However, this is not **“paying God back”** for the mercy he has shown, because it is impossible to repay him (11:35). Just as God’s mercy is complete and sufficient, our response should be total.

So Paul describes this response as a **“living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God.”**<sup>299</sup> This is somewhat surprising language since Christ alone is the final sacrifice, so his followers no longer offer sacrifices. However, Paul is not speaking of a blood sacrifice for the remission of sins but, like Peter, a **“spiritual sacrifice”** (1 Peter 2:5). It is a **“thank offering”** (Leviticus 7:15) honouring God (Psalms 50:23; 107:21-23;

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<sup>299</sup> The words **“living,” “holy”** and **“acceptable (pleasing) to God”** all modify **“sacrifice.”**

Jeremiah 33:11; Hebrews 13:15-16). Still, sacrifice implies completely giving over one's life to God. In other words, death to self. This reflects Christ's words for his genuine disciples to "deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mark 8:34-36). By "**present our bodies,**" he means our entire selves and lives. Salvation is a free gift of grace that, in this sense, costs the disciple everything. The word "**present**" was used five times in chapter 6, where Christians were urged not to present their bodies to unrighteousness but to God. And the word "**sacrifice**" also implies a dedication to God despite any troubles or difficulties. This sacrifice is "**holy**"—set apart and dedicated without reservation to God. Such a sacrifice is "**acceptable**" or "**pleasing**" to God.

John Calvin, in his *Institutes*, wrote concerning this level of dedication, "We are not our own: let not our reason nor our will, therefore, sway our plans and deeds. We are not our own: let us therefore not set it as our goal to seek what is expedient for us according to the flesh. We are not our own: in so far as we can, let us therefore forget ourselves and all that is ours. Conversely, we are God's: let us therefore live for him and die for him. We are God's: let his wisdom and will therefore rule all our actions. We are God's: let all the parts of our life accordingly strive toward him as our only lawful goal."<sup>300</sup>

Paul then states that such a complete dedication to God's service is our "**spiritual worship,**" which means true and proper priestly service (1 Peter 2:5; cf. Philippians 4:8; Hebrews 13:14-16). Although justification is a free gift of mercy, our response to this gift demands all of us; Paul does not preach 'cheap grace.' Paradoxically, a "**living**" sacrifice is the opposite of death, which is normally associated with sacrifice. Instead, presenting ourselves to God means that we "**have been brought from death to life**" (6:13).

v. 2

In this verse, Paul provides more detail about what he meant by "**sacrifice.**" Any zeal or dedication we have for God must be in accordance with his will. He begins with two parallel statements, one negative and one positive. By "**do not be**

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<sup>300</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, Book One, 690.



**conformed to the world**" instead, Paul says we should **"be transformed by the renewal of your mind."** The words **"conformed"** and **"transformed"** are similar but not identical. **"Conformed"** is passive and implies we easily fall into or become more like the world without even being aware of it. The word **"world"** means this present evil age, contrasting the world to come. As Paul, in another letter, wrote: Jesus Christ "gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father" (Galatians:1:4). The word **"transformed,"** on the other hand, is the same word for metamorphosis. Mark uses this word to describe Jesus' transfiguration (Mark 9:2). In the same way, Christians are to be fundamentally transformed in their character and conduct. Like metamorphosis, we are to change from accepting and participating in the present evil age and remade into the image of Christ for the age to come. Paul writes about this transformation in his letter to the church in Corinth.

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed (*metamorphosis*) into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. (2 Corinthians 3:18; compare with 2 Corinthians 4:4)

In this exhortation to the Corinthians, Paul again uses the same word for **"transformed."** And in the letter to Philippi, Paul writes:

But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform (*metamorphosis*) our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself. (Philippians 3:20-21)

Christians have been rescued from a perishing world of darkness into an eternal kingdom of light. We were spiritually dead in a perishing world but have now been made alive in an everlasting kingdom. God had already done this for us; our response (**"be"**) to such a great salvation is to be what we now are.

The means God has provided by which we are to be transformed is through **"the renewal of the mind."** The word

“**mind**” refers to our reasoning and moral consciousness.<sup>301</sup> The mind should be “**set on the things of the Spirit**” (8:5), which results in “**life and peace**” (8:6) and “**joy**” “**abounding in hope**” (15:13). The thought process, world view, and understanding of our meaning and purpose in life are set on God and the age to come; it is entirely different from a mind set on the flesh (8:5) whose purpose and meaning come from this present evil age. The Holy Spirit renews our minds; this is his work (Titus 3:5, the only other place “**renewal**” is used). A transformed and renewed mind is not replacing a do-not-do list with a to-do list; the works of the flesh are not replaced with works of the law but rather the “**fruit of the Spirit**” (Galatians 5:19-22). To have a renewed mind is not just external behaviour but an internal transformation, a spiritual metamorphosis; as Paul says elsewhere: “**be renewed in the spirit of your minds**” (Ephesians 4:23). A Christian mind views the world differently; the *spirit* of our minds are transformed by the Spirit of God (1 Corinthians 2:10; Ephesians 3:16). Our role is to pursue what brings glory to God (11:36). And the foundation of this pursuit is to study his Word with spiritual eyes, searching for what glorifies God—his good, pleasing and perfect will. This too is our “**spiritual worship**” (12:1).

The reason we must have transformed and renewed minds is to be able through “**testing**” to “**discern**” what is “**the will of God.**” The “**will of God**” is a well-known phrase. There are at least two biblical meanings. First, it means God’s *sovereign* will in which all things he wills will come to pass. This is often referred to as his *hidden* or *secret* will (8:27). However, God at times gives us an understanding of his hidden will (Isaiah 53:10; Matthew 26:39; Acts 4:27-28). The second meaning refers to God’s *revealed* will as given in Scripture, the greatest of which is to love God and our neighbours (Matthew 22:36-40). In this verse (v. 2), Paul is referring to God’s *revealed* will (see also Hebrews 5:14; Philippians 1:9-11). Christians are no longer under the Torah but under the “**law of Christ**” (Galatians 6:2; 1 Corinthians 9:21). As Paul says later in this letter, “**love is the fulfillment of the law**” (13:8, 10). This is the law of love Jesus

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<sup>301</sup> Moo, Letter to the Romans, 775.

taught his disciples and John passed on to us: “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another” (John 13:34; cf. 1 John 4:7-12, 19-21). For those whose minds are conformed to this age, this will of God often does not come to pass (Matthew 7:21; 1 John 2:17). It is through “**testing you may discern**” God’s revealed will. Paul is convinced the Christian—with a mind set on the Holy Spirit—is able to perceive and do the law of Christ. Now in his letter (12:3 to 15:21), he will describe in practical terms what this love looks like within a Christian community and within the world.

The word “**test**” means to determine what is genuine from what is false through meditation and prayer on God’s written Word. Through this process, a Spirit-filled Christian can “**discern**” God’s will; that is, to understand, agree with, and put into practice what is pleasing to God. The implication is that a non-transformed person does not and cannot discern God’s will, even though it is written in the Bible. Paul has already told us in 1:28, those who reject God, God will give a “**depraved mind.**” Paul also describes the will of God as “**good, acceptable, and perfect.**” The word “**acceptable**” means what is pleasing to himself.

John E. Toews points out the contrast between a transformed Christian described in these two verses with a non-believer in 1:18-32.<sup>302</sup>

**1:18-32**

the wrath of God  
refuses to glorify God  
dishonours the body  
depraved mind  
rejects the will of God

**12:1-2**

the mercies of God  
thankful sacrifice to God  
offers the body to God  
renewed mind  
discerns the will of God

The contrast between how believers and non-believer understand the world could not be clearer.

**Unity in the body of Christ means a diversity of gifts (12:3-8)**

Paul now describes how a Christian’s transformed mind is capable of discerning and evaluating our identity in Christ, and

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<sup>302</sup> Toews, 300.

the gifts Christ has given in order to build the church. Paul emphasizes two points: first, that Christians should not think too highly of themselves because we all work together in **“one body in Christ.”** But, second, Christians should exercise the work and gifts God has given to build the church.

v. 3

Before Paul begins his exhortation, he reminds **“everyone”** of his readers about the authority God has given him. He states that he is qualified to write because of the **“grace given to me”** (cf. Ephesians 3:2). Paul uses the word **“think”** four times in this verse, clearly tying it to the transformed Christian mind. Christians are intended to *think* as Christians; that is, to have the mind of Christ. The first thing Christians should have is **“sober judgment”** of themselves. This judgment should result in not thinking **“more highly than he ought”** when compared to other Christians. This instruction is similar to Paul’s teaching to the Philippian church:

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 2:3-5)

Paul states that this should be done by each Christian **“according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.”** It is difficult to know precisely what Paul meant by **“measure of faith.”** Many commentators have understood this phrase to mean different Christians are given varying degrees of faith. This may be possible given the diversity Paul mentions in the next verse. However, **“faith”** often does not mean belief *in* the gospel, as if some have more belief in Christ and others less.<sup>303</sup> It is also possible to view the **“measure of faith”** as the accepted standard of the gospel; the gospel is then the measure to which everyone should evaluate themselves. Because everyone uses the same measure, one can assess themselves. However, **“measure of faith”** could have a special meaning; that is, it is a **“faith”** associated with different services necessary for building

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<sup>303</sup> Although this is what some commentators believe. They base their argument on 4:19-20 and 14:1.

up the church. Faith, then, relates to gift and the way we apply the gift (Ephesians 4:7). Without faith, the gifts God has given us cannot be adequately exercised. Given the following verses, the later understanding may be correct (v. 6).

*vv. 4-5*

Another way Christians can assess themselves is by God's gifts to them. The church of God is "**one body in Christ**," but God has given individual members of this body different "**functions**." Although there are individual members, we are "**members one of another**." The emphasis is that we have unity since we are all together in union with Christ. Because of our union "**in Christ**," we are one living body. The loss of any one member affects the whole. The church as a human body is a metaphor Paul uses regularly (1 Corinthians 12:12-27; Ephesians 1:23; 4:4, 12, 16; 5:30; Colossians 1:18, 24; 2:19).

The phrase "**members one of another**" implies the importance of every member of the body, even those considered "less honourable" (1 Corinthians 12:20-27). Likely Paul has in mind not only the local church but all Christians together – the universal church of God.

*vv. 6-8*

Paul describes these various functions as diverse "**gifts**" given by "**grace**." He then lists seven of these gifts, which may be categorized as speaking or service gifts. There are three speaking gifts: prophecy, teaching, and encouragement. And there are four service gifts: service, contributing, leading and acts of mercy.

The first of these, prophecy, likely does not mean the Old Testament prophets or New Testament apostles. It refers to those with the gift of prophecy as described in other letters of Paul (1 Corinthians 12:28-29). Although prophecy can include future promises (Acts 11:27-28; 21:10-11), it also means explaining and applying the gospel (1 Corinthians 14:3). Of course, this also implies there can be false prophets (2 Peter 2:1; 1 John 4:1). Prophecy also needs to be exercised "**in proportion to our faith**." This is similar to "**the measure of faith that God has assigned**" (v. 3; cf. Ephesians 4:7).

The rest of the gifts to the church are more straightforward. The gift of “**service**” can be translated as “**ministry**” or even “**administration**.” All of these are part of the service to the body of Christ. The gift of “**teaching**” is similar to prophecy (Acts 13:1; Ephesians 4:11).

The final gift, “**acts of mercy**,” refers to providing care for those in need, particularly orphans and widows. Interestingly, Paul adds that these acts must be done “**with cheerfulness**,” meaning wholeheartedness and graciousness.

What is significant in all the gifts is that they come from God. These seven gifts are not exhaustive (see 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4). All gifts offered to the church should be evaluated in how they build the church (1 Corinthians 14:12). It is also worth noting, after each gift, Paul adds a qualification. These qualifications should be viewed as exhorting both the church and the gifted member to use their gifts faithfully to bless the whole body of Christ.

### **Love: The life of a Christian (12:9-21)**

Paul’s primary focus in this passage is Christian love. He first describes how Christians should love one another (12:9-16). He then addresses how a Christian should love those outside the faith (12:17-21). Up to this point in the letter, “**love**” was always about God’s love for us. Paul begins the letter by writing, “**To all those in Rome whom God loves**” (1:7). Then, in 5:5 and 5:8, Paul describes God’s love to redeemed sinners: “**God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us**” and “**God showed his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.**” In 8:35, he asks: “**Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?**” And so, in 8:37, he says: “**No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.**” Paul concludes from all this:

For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (8:38-39)

It is most appropriate that Paul begins with God's love for us. For it is only in union with Christ that Christians are able to love others. As the apostle John teaches:

Beloved, let us love one another, for **love is from God**, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because **God is love**. 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. In **this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us** and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. (1 John 4:7-11)

*Loving one another (vv. 9-16)*

At first, it seems Paul is listing exhortations in no particular order. But a closer look reveals he is building and expanding on his imperative to love within the Christian community as well as those who express opposition.<sup>304</sup>

*v. 9a Be genuine*

Christian "**love**" should be sincere and not just words. As John writes, "let us not love in word or talk but in deed and truth" (1 John 3:18). Paul describes in great detail what love should and should not look like in 1 Corinthians 13. This is a practical love that does no harm (13:10) but seeks to help and be useful to others.

*v. 9b Be discerning*

The words "**evil**" and "**good**" likely refer to moral or social good and evil. We are to "**abhor**" (loathe, hate) one and "**hold fast**" to the other. Given the reference to love, we should be revolted by anything which would hurt or damage others and, instead, strive to be beneficial.

*v. 10a Be affectionate*

Paul clarifies what genuine love means by stating there should be "**brotherly affection**." There should be an inherent family kindness, concern, and devotion towards other Christians (1 Thessalonians 4:9; Hebrews 13:1; 1 Peter 1:22).

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<sup>304</sup> Stott, 330.

*v. 10b Be honouring*

This maxim implies we can often view other people as competition to our honour. Instead, Paul says we are to prefer others over ourselves. This is similar to what Paul said to the Philippian church: “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit but in humility count others more significant than yourselves” (Philippians 2:3; Ephesians 5:21).

*v. 11 Be enthusiastic*

Moreover, Paul says, love should be enthusiastic (“**zeal**,” “**fervent**”), which is opposite to laziness (“**slothful**”). This kind of love “**serves the Lord**.” We should exercise the gifts given us by God (vv. 6-8) to serve the body.

There is some question about whether “**spirit**” means human spirit or the “**Holy Spirit**.” Commentators seem equally split. If it refers to the Holy Spirit, then Paul says our zeal should be “**aglow with the Spirit**” (RSV). However, it more likely refers to an enthusiastic, hard-working devotion in service to the Lord in love.

*v. 12 Be hopeful*

In this verse, Paul describes Christian “**hope**,” which is a joyful, patient and consistent expectation of God’s promises. Hope looks forward to a time when all believers experience “**adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved**” (8:24). Paul has already pointed out believers should persevere in hope despite the sinful world in which they live (5:3-5). Believers can do so because the Holy Spirit enables us to pray, and he even prays for us (8:26-27).

*v. 13 Be generous and hospitable*

Believers should be generous in contributing to the needs of those facing difficulties. Of course, we are to be generous to all people in need, but particularly to our brothers and sisters in Christ; i.e., “**saints**” (Galatians 6:10). The word “**contribute**” means to have fellowship (*koinonia*) in the lives of others (Matthew 25:35). “**Hospitality**” is a specific kind of fellowship. Paul says we are to “**seek**” hospitality; meaning we are to be actively looking for ways in which we can share with guests, visitors or even strangers (Hebrews 13:2).



*v. 14 Be a blessing*

This verse anticipates the next section (vv. 17-21). Still, to bless rather than curse requires a transformed mind. This is not a natural human reaction to those who “**persecute you.**” Christian love even extends to those who want to do us harm.

*v. 15 Be caring*

Paul’s directive in this verse is to share in the joys and sorrows of members of our church community. These are specific and practical ways in which we love one another. This is particularly true where the social status varies considerably within the church. In Rome, the socially elite members were to embrace the joy as well as the sorrow of the slaves in the church. And the slaves were to rejoice and participate in the sorrow of the ‘elite.’ Interestingly, Paul mentions rejoicing together with sorrow. It can sometimes be more difficult to rejoice with another’s blessing than to feel sorrow in their grief. Envy and jealousy often hinder us from rejoicing with others.

*v. 16 Be in harmony means to be humble*

This verse emphasizes how we consider or think of others and how we think about ourselves. Three times the same root word “think,” “consider,” or “mind” is used. The maxim: “how we think is how we act” is true. To be “**in the same mind towards one another**” (KJV) means we consider, understand and appreciate one another’s views and opinions. This does not mean we need to agree with their views, but our appreciation and actions towards others are considerate. This, again, reveals our love for one another.

Paul also tells us love means not thinking arrogantly but appreciating those with less economic, social, political, authoritative or educational status. Someone with a low standing may have a closer relationship with Christ than someone who is viewed by the community or society as an elite. One only has to look at the uneducated, and economically disadvantaged apostles in comparison to the religious elite of their day, the Pharisees and the Sadducees.

And for a third time, Paul tells us not to think of ourselves as “**wise**” in our own estimation. Given the repetition, Paul clearly thinks this is an issue for some Christians.

*Loving our enemies (vv. 17-21)*

Paul began this chapter by stating Christians should “**present their bodies as a living sacrifice**” and not be “**conformed to this world but be transformed**” (12:1-2). He gives practical advice when interacting with those who are not fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, including those who are unfriendly or confrontational.

This passage from verses 17 through 21, including verse 14, has four negative imperatives instructing Christians on what not to do when encountering hostility towards them. Paul also follows each of these negatives with positive exhortation.

*v. 14 Do not curse but bless*

Paul’s directive in this verse is for Christians who face personal opposition. It is similar to Jesus’ instruction in Luke 6:27-28, “But I say to you who hear, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.” In the Roman society in which Paul wrote, cursing one’s enemy was all too common.<sup>305</sup>

*vv. 17-18 Do not repay evil for evil but be honourable*

This teaching, again, reflects Jesus’ teaching:

To one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from one who takes away your cloak, do not withhold your tunic either.

But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. (Luke 6:29, 35)

To “**repay evil for evil**” is an overwhelming desire within our fallen human condition. Only those who “**set their mind on the things of the Spirit**” (8:5) can overcome.

But even more than passively avoiding evil, we are to “**do what is honourable**” to those who do us evil. Part of such behaviour is not only to avoid evil but also not to rejoice when evil or misfortune is done to our enemies. This type of honourable response should be recognized by “**all**”; that is, not only Christians but society.

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<sup>305</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 648.

Paul summarizes the spirit of this teaching in verse 18. Christians should delight in peace and be saddened by division. Of course, Paul is practical enough to know that this cannot always be done. But the onus is on the Christian. When a Christian acts in the way of love, he pleases God and then it is even possible for an enemy to be at peace with him (Proverbs 16:7).

*vv. 19-20 Never avenge yourself, but help your enemy*

After encouraging us to live peaceably, Paul now warns us not to avenge wrongs. Surprisingly, he begins the admonishment with the word “**beloved.**” He wants first to remind us that God loves us and sees all the harm done to Christians. And as a loving Father, he will not permit such harm to go unpunished. That evil needs to be judged and punished is fundamental to the justice of God—particularly evil done to his children.

However, as individual Christians, we should never become the judge, jury and punisher ourselves; that is, inflict harm on someone who has harmed us. Instead, we are to leave the right to avenge wrongs to God alone. When Paul says, “**give place for wrath**” (KJV), he means the wrath of God (2:5, 8; 3:5; 5:9; 9:22). This refers primarily to the end-time judgment of God but can also mean judgment now. To “**give place**” (KJV) means to leave the judgment to God. Paul provides biblical support for this by quoting Deuteronomy 32:35 (see all Psalm 94:1; Proverbs 20:22). Paul is applying an Old Testament promise of God to New Testament Christian; to both Jews and Gentiles. This promise is, God will bring greater justice than we ever could. If we trust God for this promise, we are assured, God’s perfect justice will right every wrong. This means punishing the wrongdoer or, if he repents, then Christ has taken the wrongdoer’s punishment on himself.

Therefore, what is suggested here is that our desire for retaliation cannot be overcome without trusting God will hold the evildoer to account. As Schreiner comments, “Believers can leave the fate of their persecutors in God’s hand, knowing he is good and just and he does all things well.”<sup>306</sup> And elsewhere, Paul taught the suffering Thessalonians:

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<sup>306</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 654.

This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering—since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed. (2 Thessalonians 1:5-10)

*v. 20*

Still, Christians must also keep verse 14 in mind. Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, intensified Elisha's instruction to the king of Israel (2 Kings 6:15-23). We are to **"bless"** and to pray for those who persecute us (Matthew 5:43-44). This means we are to desire their salvation. In this age, we are to treat our enemies as our friends, to feed them when they are **"hungry,"** and to give them **"something to drink"** when they are thirsty. This is the practical work of blessing our enemies.

Paul adds an interesting result to such Christian behaviour: **"for by so doing, you will heap burning coals on his head."** This is a quote from Proverbs 25:21-22, which goes on to say that by so doing, "the Lord will reward you." It is quite challenging to know precisely what Paul had in mind. Within the Old Testament, the metaphor of burning coals concerns God's judgment (2 Samuel 22:9, 13; Job 41:20-21; Psalm 140:10). Taken in this way, then, Christians are motivated to do good to their enemy so that God will punish them more severely. However, nothing in this passage would suggest this; neither does Jesus teach his followers to have such motivation. For this reason, most Bible commentators have rejected this interpretation.

Recently, interpreters have understood the phrase as an Egyptian cultural idiom meaning kindness is the best way to turn an enemy into a friend. This certainly is a Christian

response to evil.<sup>307</sup> However, it is doubtful Paul would have quoted an Egyptian saying.

Many other interpreters view “**burning coals on his head**” as a metaphor for shame. A Christian responding with love and compassion will result in one’s enemy recognizing their sinful conduct and being ashamed of what they have done. The exhortation then is motivated by kindness leading to repentance and salvation. The challenge for the Christian experiencing oppression is not to do anything but actively respond in love and mercy to one’s enemies. Although this interpretation takes away the sting of the metaphor, the Old Testament metaphor itself always reflects God’s judgment.

It seems reasonable, therefore, to return to the interpretation that “**burning coals**” means God’s judgment. However, we do not have to conclude, the motivation for being kind to an enemy is for our enemy to incur God’s wrath. Instead, returning to verse 19, believers can only overcome feelings of revenge if they know God will deal justly with their enemies. This knowledge frees the Christian to offer kindness (food and drink) to an enemy because he knows God, as his Father, will ultimately judge the evildoer.

*v. 21 Do not be overcome by evil but overcome with good*

Paul summarizes verses 17 to 20 by commanding Christians “**not to be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good**” (cf. Luke 6:27-31). The evil Paul is talking about is the evil of the oppressor and not the evil in the human heart of the Christian. Paul’s warning is not to become like the oppressor. We are to conquer evil by doing good; this is the meaning of the word “**overcome.**” This is what Jesus himself did. And we are to be imitators of Christ. This can only be done when “**we know that for those who love God all things work together for good**” (8:29). Peter’s instruction also points us to Jesus:

For to this, you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when

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<sup>307</sup> Utley, Volume 5, Romans 12:20.

he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. (1 Peter 2:21-23)

## Questions for Reflection

### Study it

1. [12:1] On what basis does Paul urge and encourage the Roman Christian? What does “present your bodies as a living sacrifice” mean?
2. [12:2] Explain what “conform to the world” and “transformed by the renewal of your mind” mean. What is the difference between “conform” and “transform”? What does “mind” mean? How is a Christian’s mind “renewed”?
3. [12:2] What is the will of God mentioned here?
4. [12:3-8] List and describe each of the gifts. Why does Paul add a qualification? How does this teaching reflect Paul’s teaching about Gentile and Jewish Christians?
5. [12:9-16] What does “love to be genuine” mean?
6. [12:14, 20] How do v. 14 and v. 20 fit together?
7. [12:17-20] What was Paul getting at when he said, kindness to an enemy results in heaping burning coals on his head?
8. [12:21] What does the word “overcome” mean? How does it relate to the chapter?

### Live it

1. How much time and energy do you spend on the renewal of your mind to be transformed into the image of Christ?
2. What do you understand by the “will of God”? How do you discern the will of God?
3. In verses 3 through 8, Paul teaches what Christian humility and unity look like. And in verses 9 through 21, what love means. Assess one’s attitudes and behaviour in comparison to what is taught.
4. How do you view people in your church? Those with many observable gifts and those with few?

5. What gifts do you bring to the church for its benefit? Do you experience these gifts? Are you encouraged by the church to use these gifts?
6. Describe a time when you were harmed or opposed by someone. How did you feel? How did you respond? How does this teaching on loving your enemy challenge you?
7. How is it possible for a Christian not to be overcome by evil? Relate your own experience or the experience of someone you know.

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## Lesson 13: The Gospel of the Law of Love (13:1-14)

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Bible students have long puzzled over what appears to be a sudden shift in Paul's instruction to the Roman church. However, when returning to the overall theme of this section in 12:1-2, we can understand that Paul is providing further clarification about what it means not to be "**conformed to this world**" but to "**discern what is the will of God**" (12:2). Throughout this entire section, Paul gives a coherent set of instructions on how we should relate to God, ourselves, believers, enemies, as well as civil government, the world, and Christ's return.<sup>308</sup>

1. God: Be a living sacrifice (12:1-2)
2. Ourselves: Be humble with believers (12:3-8)
3. Believers: Be loving to fellow believers (12:9-16)
4. Enemies: Be honourable with everyone (12:17-21)
5. Government: Be obedient to the authorities (13:1-7)
6. World: Be obligated only in love (13:8-10)
7. Christ's return: Be watchful for Christ's return (13:11-14)

In this passage, 13:1-14, being "**a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God**" includes instructions on how to behave towards the prevailing government authorities, believers, and even our enemies. This is all the more relevant because Christ's return is imminent (vv. 11-12).

### **A Christian's obligation to earthly governments (13:1-7)**

Few teachings in Scripture have been more misunderstood or misapplied by governments against their citizens. When looking at this passage outside its historical context and the greater biblical context, one can easily see how this might occur. In other parts of Scripture, it is abundantly clear, we must only submit to the governing authorities as long as that submission

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<sup>308</sup> Stott, 348.:



does not result in disobedience to God. Peter's rejection of the Sanhedrin's demand is an excellent example. "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). Other examples include the Israelite midwives in Egypt who feared God more than Pharaoh (Exodus 1:17). Daniel's three friends also would not bow down to Nebuchadnezzar's golden image (Daniel 3). And Daniel himself, refused to obey King Darius (Daniel 6). In each of these instances, they defied the state. So, when we interpret this passage, we assume, unconditional and absolute submission to every and all demands of the state is not biblical. However, no matter which forms of government, it should be obeyed if its laws and demands do not violate biblical teaching. The reason is, human government is God's providential provision for an ordered and just society. The degree to which the state adheres to biblical principles determines the quality of life within the country for its citizens.

Throughout the history of the church, Christians have advocated various types of responses to their government.<sup>309</sup> These include (but are not limited to):

1. The government is fundamentally corrupt, so there should be no participation in its work, military, or elections.
2. Christians can work with the government but view the government's work completely outside the church. The church and the government are in two entirely different spheres of influence. When Christians perform the duties of government, they only do on behalf of the government
3. Other Christians believe they should influence the government to function more biblically. So, they become involved in politics and the military.

*v. 1a command*

Although Paul says "**every person,**" he primarily refers to Christians in the church. All believers are commanded to "**be subject to the governing authorities.**" The verb "**be subject to**"

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<sup>309</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr describes five Christ-culture options in his book "Christ and Culture." See also D. A. Carson, "Christ & Culture Revisited."

means to obey the directives and orders of the **“governing authorities.”** **“Subject”** is a strong word Paul and others use for obedience (Titus 2:9; 2 Corinthians 9:13; Hebrews 13:17). Submission, therefore, means to accept the claims and to order one’s life to a higher authority. The command implies a choice by the Christian to accept the authority of the government and not to resist or oppose it.<sup>310</sup>

There has been some question to what is meant by **“governing authorities.”** Some interpreters think it relates to cosmic forces such as angels. However, Paul never suggests Christians should be subject to such powers (1 Corinthians 15:24-27; Galatians 4:8-11; Colossians 2:15). So, there is little doubt Paul is referring to human state government.

*vv. 1b-2 Theological reasons for the command*

The first reason Paul provides for submitting to the state is, its authority comes from God (**“no authority except from God”**). He clarifies this reason by adding, **“and those that exist have been instituted by God.”** The critical word is **“instituted”** or **“ordained”** (KJV) (literally, ‘put in place’) This reason is taught throughout the Old Testament:

By me, kings reign, and rulers decree what is just; by me princes rule, and nobles, all who govern justly. (Proverbs 8:15-26)

Other examples include Isaiah 41:2-4; 45:1-7; Jeremiah 21:7, 10; 27:5-6 and Daniel 4:7, 25, 32. However, the word **“instituted”** does not necessarily imply God approves of the actions of the state. It only means, the state’s authority is derived from God’s authority. This is why Jesus said to Pilate, “You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above” (John 19:11).

The second reason follows from the first. If God has instituted the governing authorities, then opposing these authorities means resisting what **“God has appointed.”** The consequence of resisting God’s will results in **“judgment”** (**“damnation”** in the KJV is too strong). Within this context, **“judgment”** could refer to penalties for violating secular laws. However, Paul usually uses the word **“judgment”** for God’s

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<sup>310</sup> Toews, 314.

end-time judgment (2:2-3; 3:8; 5:16; 11:3). Later, in verse 5, Paul uses the same language (“**wrath**”) to refer to the wrath of the “**rulers.**” It, therefore, seems reasonable to assume “**judgment**” implies civil punishment (vv. 4-5) derived as an expression of God’s authority. John Murray comments, “We have here in this term “judgment” the twofold aspect from which it is to be viewed. It is punishment dispensed by the governing authorities. But it is also an expression of God’s wrath and it is for this reason that it carries the sanction of God and its propriety is certified.”<sup>311</sup>

*vv. 3-4 Practical reasons for the command*

Paul also provides several practical reasons to submit to the state. The assumption is that the state powers have a positive role in the life of its citizens. This is made explicit when Paul says the government “**is God’s servant for your good.**” In this sense, the state operates as a ministry of God as long as it does God’s will. When it violates God’s will, it no longer has authority. God has delegated the authority to do good and confront evil to the state. However, the definition of “**good**” and “**wrong**” is given by God, who has entrusted the state with this authority.

Paul argues that if our conduct is “**good,**” we will have nothing to “**fear**” from their authority to punish neither do we have to be in “**terror**” of those in authority. Instead, we will have the state’s “**approval.**” However, if we do “**wrong,**” we should fear “**the sword.**” The sword is a symbol of authority and ultimately a symbol of death. The state’s authority, given by God, is to restrain and punish evil. This authority is the state’s and not the individual who suffered the wrong (12:19). Paul also sees the state as “**the servant of God**” to do “**good.**” So the state must act in accordance with biblical principles to promote the welfare of its citizens. A state violating biblical principles does not have this authority.

*v. 5 Two more practical reasons*

Paul begins this verse by restating our need to “**be in subjection**” to the governing authorities. The “**wrath**” mentioned here refers to the punishment of the state. And then

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<sup>311</sup> Murray, Vol. 2, 149.

he adds a final practical reason: we should do so **“for the sake of conscience.”** Christian conscience is informed by the Holy Spirit and refers to our ability to think critically about moral issues (12:2). It also implies action–responsibility and obligation—as a result of such reflection. In relating **“conscience”** to the first five verses, we understand it means Christians are to submit to the government because they recognize God has instituted the state for their good.<sup>312</sup>

*Application of submitting to the state: Christians should pay taxes (vv. 7-8a)*

Paul now gives a practical example of submitting. Submission means Christians should pay both **“taxes”** and **“revenue”** to the government. By so doing, they will **“owe no one anything”** (v. 8a). This could well have been the main reason Paul adds this whole passage on being subject to the state. Christians may have been avoiding paying taxes to Rome. We know there were widespread protests against Nero’s tax system in A.D. 58.

Paul mentions two forms of taxation: **“taxes,”** which were a direct obligation to Rome. This tax was levied on persons and property (Luke 20:22; 23:2); and **“revenue”** or **“custom,”** which were taxes on goods and customs. It was often the case, a great deal of graft and oppression was associated with tax collection.

The Jewish Christians had just been able to return to Rome after their expulsion as part of the *“Chrestus”* riots. Besides this, Jews were uncomfortable with supporting any form of the Roman government. This is why the Jewish leaders asked Jesus if it was right to support Caesar by paying his taxes (Matthew 22:17). Most Jews would have answered negatively. Rome, like any government, did not look kindly on such disobedience. Refusing to pay taxes was one of the accusations brought against Jesus when he was before Pilate (Luke 23:2). Gentiles, too, were very unhappy with the taxation system.

Often it was the poor who were most affected by its corruption. However, Paul would not have wanted the Roman church to become mixed up with anti-government protests over taxation. Not paying taxes meant both Jewish and Gentile Christians were in danger of prosecution, not to mention the

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<sup>312</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 667.

disunity this might have caused within the church. Paul does not want them to be financially obligated to the state. Their only obligation should be to “**love each other**” (v. 8a).

*Reflection on vv. 1-7*

Paul has presented a surprisingly positive view of the state in these verses. Still, often the state demands loyalty, resulting in disobedience to God. Only thirty years after Paul wrote this letter, John the apostle also wrote concerning Rome (Revelation 13). However, John’s assessment is much different. At that time, the persecution of Christians under Emperor Domitian was underway. John does not see Rome as a servant of God but as a servant of Satan. In Revelation, Satan, described as a red dragon, gives authority to Rome.

So, both views of the state are correct. As Paul states earlier, we need a transformed and renewed mind to test and discern what God’s good and perfect will is concerning obligations to the state (12:2). When the state operates within God’s moral justice as given in the Law, it is a servant of God. However, when it operates outside God’s justice, it is an instrument of Satan.<sup>313</sup>

It requires a great deal of spiritual maturity to know when to support and oppose the state. At the time of Paul, the Roman government was no paradigm of good government. Paul himself, will be executed by Rome a few years after writing this letter. Within our context, governments are also operating outside of biblical principles—for example, their support of abortion. Whether a Christian should withhold tax from such a government requires a significant reflection on this text and God’s provision for the government.

### **A Christian’s obligation to love his neighbour (13:8-10)**

*v. 8*

Paul now returns to the individual Christian’s obligation to love. But before he does so, he reminds us we are “**to owe no one**

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<sup>313</sup> Stott, 343.

**anything.**"<sup>314</sup> Our only indebtedness as believers is **"to love each other."** This does not mean we do not have other obligations. In 1:14, Paul speaks of his obligation to preach the gospel to everyone. And in 8:12-13, he instructs us that we are under obligation to the Holy Spirit to live a life pleasing to him. So our obligation is to God, but we also must love others. We can be released from the obligation to the state by paying its taxes and respecting and honouring our rulers, but we can never be free of the obligation to love. The commandment to love is a major theme throughout the Old and New Testament (12:10; John 13:34; 15:12; 1 Corinthians 13; Philippians 2:3-4; 1 Thessalonians 4:9; Hebrews 13:1; 2 Peter 1:7; 1 John 3:11; 4:7, 11-12; Leviticus 19:18; Deuteronomy 6:5; 10:12,19; 11:1,13,22; 13:3; 19:9; 30:6,16,20). Paul says, we fulfill the law by loving one another. However, although a believer has **"fulfilled the law,"** they have not exhausted their obligation to love. That obligation always remains an outstanding debt.

It is surprising, though, that Paul says a Christian had fulfilled the law when in chapter 7, he said we are incapable of fulfilling it on our own. As well Paul also says:

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 in order so that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us. (8:3-4a)

We can fulfill these requirements by walking according to the Spirit, living according to the Spirit and setting our mind on the Holy Spirit (8:4-6). This is possible only if the **"Spirit of God dwells in you"** (8:9). So as John states in his letter, the reason we can love one another is that love is from God (1 John 4:7). John goes on to say, "We love because he [God] first loved us" (1 John 4:19) Our ability to love one another is God's love flowing through us by the power of the Spirit (cf. 15:30).

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<sup>314</sup> This is not a command to avoid financial debt or not to loan someone money. Although this is good advice, within this context Paul is speaking about obligations to the state.

*vv. 9-10*

Paul now describes what this love means. He first lists the second table in the Ten Commandments,<sup>315</sup> and adds, “**and any other commandment.**” He then declares these laws are all “**summed up**” by quoting Leviticus 19:19, “**You shall love your neighbor as yourself.**” Loving ourselves is not an implicit command to self-love. It simply means we are to love with sincere and real love. Paul also explains why love sums up these commands. It is because “**love does no wrong.**”

Of first importance is that neighbour-love does no harm. It is unthinkable for us to harm those whom we love intentionally. Similarly, as we seek our good and avoid personal harm, we also seek our neighbour’s good and avoid doing them any harm. Given what Paul has previously said earlier in the letter about the Mosaic law, this positive view of the law is noteworthy.

So, we find the law and love come together in the great command of God. This is what Jesus himself said to one of the Jewish leaders when asked about the greatest commandment of the Law. Jesus replied:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.” (Matthew 22:37-40)

These two commands are not two independent commands. When Paul only quotes the second commandment, he implicitly includes the first. It is only *because* we love God that we are filled with the Spirit and so are enabled to love our neighbour. Both of these commands are summed up as “the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2). In the context of Leviticus 19:18, the neighbour is a fellow Israelite. But a few verses later, Israel is instructed to love the non-Israeli foreigner (Leviticus 19:34). And if there is any doubt to whom “**neighbour**” refers, Jesus makes it clear in the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37).

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<sup>315</sup> He does omit, “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.” But there is no reason not to include it and many later manuscripts do.

### **A Christian's obligation to Christ (13:11-14)**

Paul now returns to the first two verses of chapter 12. There he spoke of a renewed and transformed mind. In these verses (13:11-14), Paul explains why it is so important for Christians to have a renewed mind because the time is short, and the final day of our salvation is nearer than we think. As a consequence of such spiritual knowledge, Paul includes three more exhortations for believers as they await the culmination of their salvation.

It would appear from these verses, Paul expected Christ to return immediately. We know that did not happen, so was Paul wrong? To answer this question, we have to look at all the New Testament teaching of Christ's return. When we do, we see it says the Lord's day is at hand (Philippians 4:5; Hebrews 10:25, 27; James 5:8; 1 Peter 4:7; Revelation 22:10-12, 20). However, there is no need to interpret this as expecting an imminent return. Paul had to warn and encourage the Thessalonian Christians concerning Christ's return (2 Thessalonians 2:1-12). And in this letter to the Romans, Paul teaches about Israel's conversion, which at that time had not occurred (11:12, 15, 26). Peter also states, one day to God is as a thousand years to us (2 Peter 3:8). Jesus himself says, no one knows the day or hour (Mark 13:32). However, all believers throughout all the generations are to live with the watchful expectation of Christ's return (Mark 13:33-37).

*The reason: Christ's return is close at hand (vs. 11-12a)*

*v. 11a*

Paul begins the passage with "**besides this, you know**" which links what he just said about loving our neighbour (vv. 8-10) with what follows (vv. 11-14). We are to know "**the time, that the hour has come.**" The reference to time and hour is to an event rather than clock-on-the-wall time. This event is, "**salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed.**" This statement refers to the return of Christ (1 Corinthians 7:29; 10:11; James 5:8; 1 Peter 4:7; 2 Peter 3:9-13; 1 John 2:18; Revelation 1:3; 22:10). In the same way that dawn arrives at the end of a long dark night (present age), so the time for Christ's return is dawning. "**The night is far gone; the day is at hand.**" This metaphor of the dawn refers to the time in which all



Christians have lived, now live, and will live until the return of Christ. We live in a time just before Christ returns to restore justice and peace on earth.<sup>316</sup> As Christians, we must anticipate the sun coming up and the Son returning.

*Four exhortations (vv. 11b, 12b-14)*

*v. 11b Stay awake*

The implication of this knowledge of Christ's imminent return is to keep spiritually awake; as Paul says, "**wake from sleep.**" This recalls Jesus' imperative to "be on guard, keep awake" (Mark 13:32-37). The term "**sleep**" is a metaphor for death, but here it means spiritual slowness (Ephesians 5:13-14; 1 Thessalonians 5:6). We are spiritually alert, growing in spiritual maturity.

*v. 12b Cast off darkness; put on light*

Paul now uses a common metaphor of taking off and putting on clothes. Here he urges Christians to "**cast off works of darkness**" and to "**put on the armor of light.**" The "**works of darkness**" are the sins that are part of this present evil age (2 Corinthians 6:14; 1 Thessalonians 5:4-5)<sup>317</sup>. The reference to "**armor of light**" means weapons of righteousness (2 Corinthians 6:7; 10:4; Ephesians 6:11, 13; 1 Thessalonians 5:8). These are God-given resources to fight spiritual battles. The emphasis here is on light and refers to living in the morning, which is Christ (John 8:12; 9:5) and in the love of our brothers and sisters in Christ (1 John 1:17; 2:10).

*v. 13 Walk properly in the daylight*

Holy Christian living does not involve such things as "**orgies,**" "**drunkenness,**" "**sexual immorality,**" "**sensuality,**" "**quarrelling,**" or "**jealousy.**" Although some of these are not done today within the church, others are still evident. Paul describes Christian behaviour in the negative, what not to do. But the positive is implied; that is, a Christian should live soberly,

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<sup>316</sup> Thielman, 615.

<sup>317</sup> Osborn, 421.

*v. 14 Put on our Lord Jesus Christ*

In Paul's letters, he often uses the metaphor of "**putting on**." He speaks of putting on the new man (Ephesians 4:24; Colossians 3:10), of putting on the armour of God (Ephesians 6:11), of putting on the armour of light (v. 12), of putting on the breastplate of righteousness (Ephesians 6:14) and of faith and love (1 Thessalonians 5:8), of putting on compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness and patience (Colossians 3:12). As profound as these all are, nothing matches the metaphor of "**putting on the Lord Jesus Christ**."<sup>318</sup> To put on Christ is to be in union with him: in his death and in his resurrection and, on the last day, in his glorification (6:1-10; 8:30). Ultimately, to put on Christ is to be clothed with his righteousness. There is no more wonderful metaphor. All we are, all we have, and all we will be, we have in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul's second exhortation in this verse encourages the believer to "**make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires**." By "**flesh**," Paul means our sinful condition continues to be with believers until their glorification. Although Paul has just mentioned indulgences in sensual desires (v. 13), there is no reason to restrict this warning to those. In the previous verse, Paul has also mentioned "**quarrelling**" and "**jealousy**."

## Questions for Reflection

### Study it

1. [13:1] What does Paul mean by "governing authorities"? Who are they?
2. [13:1,2] What does it mean then that God "instituted" and "appointed" governing authorities?
3. [13:2] How do you understand "judgment" in this verse?
4. [13:1-7] List all the theological reasons why we should obey the government. List all the practical reasons.
5. [13:4] What does it mean, the government "does not bear the sword in vain"?

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<sup>318</sup> Murray, Vol. 2, 170.

6. [13:4-5] Whose “wrath” is Paul referring to in the verses? Why should a Christian pay taxes?
7. [13:6-7] The notes indicate Paul addresses the issues of Christians paying taxes. Do you agree or disagree?
8. [13:8-10] Looking carefully at the text, what does Paul say about loving our neighbour?
9. [13:10] Why does loving your neighbour fulfill the law?
10. [13:11-14] How does Paul tie together the return of Christ with his exhortation to submit to the government?
11. [13:14] What does “put on the Lord Jesus Christ” mean?

**Live it**

1. Is it encouraging there is no authority which is not under God and everything is under his control?
2. Have you ever experienced an example where the government or any other higher authority used these verses to demand obedience?
3. Have you ever resisted submitting to the authority of the state? What were your reasons? How did the state violate a commandment of God?
4. Do you live in joyful expectation of Christ’s return? Does this knowledge affect how you live today?
5. How do you stay spiritually awake?
6. What do “works of darkness” and “armor of light” mean in your life?

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## Lesson 14: The Gospel of Life in Christ (14:1-15:13)

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In this rather lengthy passage from 14:1 to 15:13, Paul addresses a very practical situation between Roman Gentile and Jewish Christians in their house churches.<sup>319</sup> The Jewish Christians had grown up within Jewish religious culture, requiring a strict kosher diet and careful observance of the Sabbath and other holy days. On the other hand, Gentiles had grown up within a pagan religious culture. They had not observed holy days like the Jews, nor had they been raised with strict dietary requirements.

Now that Jews and Gentiles had become believers, they were living and worshipping together from very different cultural backgrounds. The resulting conflict was not surprising. Paul had to address questions about the significance of food and holy days. Paul's concern was not only to encourage unity between Gentiles and Jews but also what is essential and non-essential to the gospel. This is no less important today than it was in Paul's day. As John Stott comments, "We must not elevate non-essentials, especially issues of custom and ceremony, to the level of the essential and make them tests of orthodoxy and conditions of fellowship."<sup>320</sup>

Christian fellowship was particularly concerning for Paul because of the importance of the love (agape) feasts in the Christian communities. Early on, we hear of Christians meeting together for fellowship and worship. Luke states, Christians were "day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favour with all the people" (Acts 2:46-47a). Certainly, this included the Lord's

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<sup>319</sup> It is worth noting, Paul does not actually identify each group by their ethnic origin. However, terms and phrases such as "**considering one day more sacred than another**" and "**clean**" and "**unclean**" strongly suggest he is referring to Jews and Gentiles. Because Paul did not explicitly identify the "**strong**" and the "**weak**," commentators have proposed other groups. Given the cultural diversity in the Roman churches, and Paul having already addressed Jewish and Gentile unity throughout his letter, it is more likely he is addressing Jewish and Gentile believers.

<sup>320</sup> Stott, 358.

Supper and the fellowship meals (1 Corinthians 11:20-34; Jude 12).<sup>321</sup>

However, those Christians Paul called “**weak in faith**” were not necessarily only Jews but also Gentiles. Paul, for example, was a Jew and belonged to the strong group. This would also be true for other Jews who believed in their freedom in Christ (e.g., Aquila and Prisca). As well, Gentiles might have been part of the weak group. There had been Gentile “God-fearers” who observed many of the ritual requirements of the Jews. Petronius, a Roman poet during the time of Nero, made fun of these Gentiles because they observed the food laws and Sabbath but would not submit to circumcision.<sup>322</sup>

Because of such cultural diversity, Paul taught both groups how to appreciate and welcome one another into their homes. This was no small task, so Paul includes significant teaching on these issues. Paul’s focus was on a specific issue within a particular cultural environment. Similar problems have arisen throughout the church age. It should also be noted, a person’s strength and weakness are not absolute. A strong person can be strong in one area of their faith but weak in another. The same is true for the weak person. A humble self-examination advocated in 12:3-8 is essential. We are not to “**think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think but to think with sober discernment**” (12:3). What Paul is emphasizing is the second great command he mentioned in the previous chapter: “**You shall love your neighbour as yourself**” (13:9).

The emphasis, therefore, is one of community. This is also how Jesus taught us to pray. It begins with “Our Father,” not “My Father.” There is no “I” in the Lord’s Prayer. The story in a major newspaper illustrates the problem of overestimating our spiritual maturity and underemphasizing others based on our biases. They had sent the question “What is the problem with the world?” to the great intellectuals of the day, including G. K. Chesterton. Many responded with long essays describing the

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<sup>321</sup> These meals continued to be part of the church community until the beginning of the 2nd century. However, by A.D. 150 there is no longer any mention of such agape meals. Of course, the Lord’s Supper continued to be an essential aspect of their worship.

<sup>322</sup> Thielman, 629.

many complex problems of the world. Chesterton's reply, however, was a small handwritten note, reading, "I am. Sincerely yours, Chesterton." This is the humble response Jesus taught when he said, "Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye but do not notice the log that is in your own eye" (Matthew 7:4).

The passage can be outlined as follows:

- A. Welcoming those with a weaker faith (14:1-12)
- B. Do not judge each other (14:13-23)
- B' Do encourage each other for the glory of God and Christ Jesus (15:1-6)
- A' Welcome everyone with hope, joy and peace (15:7-13)

### **The strong and weak Christian's life together (14:1-13a)**

*v. 1*

Paul, in his normal forthrightness, simply states the obvious. There are some Christians who are "**weak**" in their faith. The implied audience of this verse is the "**strong**" (15:1). The strong are to "**welcome**" the weak but are to do so without quarrelling "**over opinions.**" The obvious implication is that there was quarrelling between the weak and the strong.

As we have already mentioned, the "**weak in faith**" were Christians who believed they must continue to be faithful to the Old Testament food laws and observe the Sabbath and other festival days. They were weak in faith because they did not fully understand the freedom they had in Christ. Even though they may not have thought such observations were necessary for salvation, they believed such practices were required by God and made them more acceptable to him.

Still, Paul says, to those who fully understand the gospel, they should "**welcome**" the weak into Christian fellowship. The word "**welcome**" (often translated "**accepted**" or "**received**") means to be warm and hospitable despite the differences in understanding the truth. Near the end of this passage, Paul states this in even stronger terms "**welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you**" (15:7).

Paul then states, the strong should not "**quarrel over opinions**" with the weak. This does not mean he thinks justification by faith is an opinion. Instead, he is referring here

to the practice of eating specific foods and observing special days. Paul would have thought it necessary to continue instructing the weak in the gospel to help them grow in faith. But he did not want to get side-tracked in arguing and quarrelling over non-essentials. It was not the actual practice of such things which was important; rather it was the meaning and significance such practices had for the weak. Paul himself practiced such rituals when necessary to further the gospel (Acts 16:3; 18:18; 21:26; 1 Corinthians 9:22).

It may be that the “**weak**” were new Christians who had just come to faith in Christ but had previously been pious Jews who followed the Mosaic laws. Paul’s pastoral concern was that the mature Christians in the church did not immediately impose teaching not foundational to the gospel. Paul is taking a profoundly generous and tolerant position. He knows the weak are incorrect in their understanding. Yet his love and concern for them is such that he would rather tolerate their misunderstanding rather than get into arguments. However, I suspect, Paul would not have been so tolerant of church leaders. There, he would have expected more of a proper understanding of the gospel, particularly because of their influence on their congregations. Paul’s reaction to Peter and Barnabas is certainly a significant example (Galatians 2:11-14).

*v. 2*

In verse 2, Paul describes two different people: those believers who eat whatever is offered during their church fellowship meals and those who only want to be sure what they eat meets strict standards set by the Mosaic law. The tension at these meals is clear. One can easily imagine the judgmental looks each of these groups would give one another at the meal. The person who “**believes he may eat anything**” does so based on his faith. He is confident that he correctly understood the gospel’s teaching about food (Mark 7:18-19; Acts 10:11-15).

Paul then contrasts this person with “**the weak person**” who “**eats only vegetables.**” Jews and God-fearers were not against eating meat. If meat had been offered to idols, they avoided eating such meat at the fellowship meals. In this way, they were following Daniel and his friends (Daniel 1:8-16). However, Paul calls such people “**weak**” meaning they are weak in their

understanding of the freedom the gospel has now brought them. They had not yet fully grasped all the gospel offered them. Still, mature Christians were to welcome them and not place burdens on them and certainly not get into arguments with them.

*vv. 3-4*

Having identified the two groups, Paul now instructs them on how they should treat one another. Paul views such differences as “**quarrelling over opinions**” (v. 1). The person who eats the meat should not “**despise**” the faith of the one who does not, and the one who only eats vegetables should not “**pass judgment**” on the one who eats meat. The word “**despise**” implies religious superiority. On the other hand, vegetarians should not judge the meat-eaters as violating God’s laws, thereby displeasing God. They would have thought of themselves as strong and the meat eaters as weak. The particular concern Paul has is that they were judging the strength and vitality of each other’s faith.

Paul makes this clear in verse four by answering the rhetorical question that only God has the right to judge. Paul mainly addresses the “**weak person**” who is “**passing judgment**” on the one who eats meat. Using master-slave imagery, Paul identifies God as the “**master.**” However, Christians should not despise or condemn one another because God had already accepted (“**welcomed**”) both the strong and the weak. God’s grace and forbearance is emphasized. As Christians, they were to do no less.

The reference to “**stand or falls**” refers to the final judgment of God. On that day, the believer will be “**upheld**” because God is the one who credits him with the righteousness of Christ.

*vv. 5-6*

Paul now identifies another issue of contention between the strong and weak. Some Roman believers “**esteems one day as better than another**” The word “**better**” means the day is more sacred than other days. On the other hand, other believers “**esteemed**” all days the same. Although Paul does not say which day, he most likely refers to the Sabbath. Jews were very careful to observe this day because of God’s commandments in the Scriptures. Now they had accepted Jesus as their Messiah,



they believed they needed to continue this practice. Paul is not so much concerned about whether this is theologically correct, although he most likely would have viewed each day the same (Galatians 4:10; Colossians 2:16). Rather, Paul's concern was whichever position one took, it was taken as a true expression of their love and faith in Christ. They must be "**fully convinced**" their position is based on their desire to honour and thank Christ (v. 6). Most important was their heart's motivation.

Paul makes this position clear in verse 6. Whatever one chooses must be done "**unto the Lord**" (KJV). This means it is done to honour God. And the one who "**gives thanks to God**" honours God. This is why Paul wants the two groups not to despise or judge one another. It is because both groups, equally, honour God in their thankfulness to him. This is why both Jews and Christians give thanks in prayer before a meal. It is given to honour God.

*vv. 7-9*

Paul now expands on the motivation of the heart. It does not matter how much one continues to follow the Mosaic law or not; what does matter is that "the whole existence of the believer, both life and death, is focused on the Lord."<sup>323</sup> What matters most to Paul is that "**we are the Lord's**" (v. 8). Believers who have given their lives as a "**living sacrifice**" to be a "**spiritual service**" (12:1) to the Lord are also ones who have given their death to the Lord (v. 7). Both our life and our death belong to the Lord.

In verse 9, Paul explains why a believer has given both life and death to the Lord; it is because a Christian who is in union with Christ dies and lives in him. As Paul wrote to the Galatians:

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Galatians 2:20)

For we know, if we have died with Christ, we also live with him (6:8). Christ's resurrection from the dead means death no longer

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<sup>323</sup> Thielman, 633.

has power and authority over him (6:9), so too death has no authority over the believer who is in union with Christ.

Although Paul is speaking of life and death, the point he is making is there is nothing at all in a believer's life is not under Christ's authority. This includes what we eat or do not eat. Everything must be done to the glory and honour of God. As Paul has said elsewhere:

So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. (1 Corinthians 10:31)

And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Colossians 3:17)

*v. 10a*

Because every aspect of a believer's life is devoted to Christ, judging and despising a "**brother**" makes no sense. Rather than judging and despising one another, we should encourage and love one another as family. Understanding and accepting a brother or sister who thinks quite differently from us is one of the most difficult things to do. But this is exactly what Paul is teaching.

*vv. 10b-13a*

Paul now returns to the very real problem of unity among those Christians who are expressing their freedom in Christ and those who are not yet able. It would seem from verse 10 that Paul's assessment that they were despising and judging one another did take place. So, his focus is once again on God. Only God has the right to judge a believer's heart (v. 4). Paul reminds both the strong or weak that they will have to give an account of themselves to Christ for how they lived their lives (2 Corinthians 5:10). To prove this point, he quotes Isaiah stating, "**every knee shall bow**" to God alone. And everyone will "**confess**" God; that is, everyone will acknowledge God as God.

This is what Paul means in verse 12 when he says, "**each of us will give an account of himself to God.**" We will not give an account of another person or accuse another. The phrase "**give an account**" means explaining why we behaved the way we did.

The conclusion of all the warnings and exhortations is given in verse 13a: "**therefore let us stop passing judgment on one**

**another.**" In review, Paul has provided four reasons why the strong should welcome the weak and not despise them and why the weak should not judge the strong.<sup>324</sup> First, God has welcomed both the strong and the weak as his children, and so they should welcome one another. Second, only God knows the motivation of the hearts, so they should not judge or despise exterior actions done to honour God. Third, they are all one family and so should encourage rather than despise or judge one another. And finally, there is only one Judge, so it is absurd to think they can take his place.

Recall that the issues Paul addresses are a matter of "**opinions**" (v. 1). It is not a matter fundamental to the gospel. Therefore, it is essential to note that such issues in Christian living must not be forced on another who thinks differently. Obeying the Mosaic law was a matter of opinion. The importance is not obedience but the motivation of the heart, why one Christian obeys it and another does not. This motivation must always be to glorify God. It is possible, then, for one Christian to believe they are glorifying God by obeying the Mosaic law and another Christian to believe he is also glorifying God by not following the law.

### **A Christian should love both weak or strong believers (14:13b-23)**

There are several things we should note while studying this passage.<sup>325</sup>

1. There are things that a group of Christians believes is of utmost spiritual importance, but they are not, in themselves, important to God. What God views as important is the motivation of the heart. Christians should fully accept one another because God has fully accepted both groups, and he alone is the judge of both groups.
2. In this passage (vv. 13b-23), the focus is on Christian love. Just as Jesus has given up his life for all believers, so must Christians lay down their freedom for those whom he died.

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<sup>324</sup> Stott, 364.

<sup>325</sup> Utley, Romans 14:12-23.

3. Things in themselves are not evil. It is people's use of them that is sinful. The issue is whether the use of earthly things comes from faith or not.
4. Strong believers are their brother's keepers and so must give up their freedom to build up and maintain the faith of the weaker brother.
5. However, Paul's focus is entirely on mutual peace, acceptance and love between differing Christian understandings of what God desires. Interestingly, he does not urge the "weak" to progress in their spiritual understanding in order to become "strong."

*vv. 13b-16*

Paul, having warned Christians to leave all judgment to God, now describes how Christians should exercise the freedom they have in Christ. He begins by stating that our freedom should not be a "stumbling block or hindrance" to a brother or sister in Christ. Paul is warning that one's freedom may damage a weaker believer's relationship with Christ. Paul now explains what he means by this in verses 14 and 15.

A believer, feeling his faith is despised, could compromise his belief about what is right and eat meat designated unclean by the Mosaic law. This is what is meant when he says, "**your brother is grieved by what you eat.**" The emotional distress is not because of a self-righteous attitude of the weaker believer but a feeling of pressure to compromise.<sup>326</sup> In fact, such a compromise can amount to sin ("**it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean**").<sup>327</sup> A strong believer may not have done this intentionally but results from expressing their contempt for the beliefs of another. Such a strong believer does not reflect Christ's love who died on the cross for the weak (5:6). To "**despise**" is an act of selfishness and not of self-sacrifice (12:1).

Paul is not saying the strong believer wrongly understood his freedom. In fact, he said he himself is "**persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself**" (v. 14). This is not just

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<sup>326</sup> Moo, Letter to the Romans, 854.

<sup>327</sup> This does not mean, just thinking something is good or evil makes it so. There are things which are good or evil no matter what we think.

an opinion but the result of a revelation. However, he goes on to say, the freedom the strong **“regard as good”** (v. 16) should not be turned into evil. Because the outside world will also observe such behaviour, even non-believers will take notice and be justly critical (v. 16). This is the first of three exhortations (vv. 16, 19, 20) and is followed by a beatitude (v. 22b).

*vv. 17-20a*

Paul now explains why the strong should not use their freedom to harm other believers. It is all about life in the **“kingdom of God”** where Christ is our King over both the strong and weak. It is the kingdom as it exists in this present day within all the kingdoms of the world. It is a kingdom **“of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.”** It is therefore not a kingdom where its citizens—brothers and sisters in Christ—despise and judge each other. What characterizes God’s family is the Spirit’s work in them. Righteousness, peace and joy all come from the Spirit; that is for those who **“set the mind on the Spirit”** (8:6). Paul also says in his letter to the Galatian church, we are to walk, keep in step, be led, and live by the Spirit (Galatians 6:16-26).

Earlier (chapters 1 through 8), he used the term **“righteous”** to mean the righteousness of Christ imputed to the believer in order to be justified before God. Here, Paul’s use of the term refers to growing and maturing in Christ-likeness (cf. 6:16, 18). So, believers are not only imputed, once and for, all Christ’s righteousness; they are also to become righteous. Justification always leads to sanctification. For a believer to set aside his freedom to benefit a brother or sister is to be like Christ. Christ himself set aside what was rightfully his to benefit us (Philippians 2:5-8). In this way, also, the believer **“serves Christ”** and so will be **“acceptable to God”** and **“approved by man.”** The term **“acceptable”** means to please God.

Paul’s conclusion and summary are to **“pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.”** This exhortation is directed towards both the strong and the weak believer. To live in harmony and to encourage one another applies to both. This means the strong do not have to give up their freedom in the gospel. They do not have to be forced to accept the argument of the weaker believer. Neither do the weak need to feel that they

must undermine their understanding of obedience. What is required is, each group humbly refrains from arguments (v. 1). Instead, they are to live in a way which encourages mutual Christian fellowship. In verse 20b, Paul contrasts **“upbuilding”** with **“destroy,”** which means to tear down or dismantle. The **“work of God”** is the work of the Spirit in the life of the weak believer.

*vv. 20b-21*

However, Paul wants to be clear about where he stands regarding food. He states that **“everything is indeed clean.”** This is similar to the statement he made in verse 14. Nothing in God’s good creation is evil in itself. What is in our hearts is evil. As Jesus taught:

“And he said to them, “Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him since it enters not his heart but his stomach and is expelled?” (Thus he declared all foods clean.) What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.” (Mark 7:18-23)

However, even though this is true, it still may be the case that exercising this freedom will **“make another stumble.”** To **“stumble”** means to cause the person to be **“offended or made weak in faith”** (KJV). If this is so, **“it is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything.”** By **“anything”** Paul makes this command as broad as possible.

Verse 21 then summarizes the central teaching of this passage. Paul gives more detail in his letter to the Corinthian church when he writes:

Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol’s temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols? And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ

died. Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble. (1 Corinthians 8:8-13)

*vv. 22-23*

When there is a disagreement between Christians, their opinions should not be grounds for quarrelling but kept between the believer and God. This does not mean Christians should not share their understanding of God's will with one another. But it means that if there is no agreement, these different understandings should not break fellowship.

A strong believer is "**blessed**" because his conscience is clear, and he has no guilt in eating meat and drinking wine. He is blessed because he fully partakes in the freedom the gospel gives him. But the believer who has "doubts" about such things and still participates in them is "**condemned.**" This does not only mean his conscience condemns him but he is also sinning.

Paul, in verse 23, provides the reason why it is a sin. Everything done must "**proceed from faith.**" This means that even though eating meat or drinking wine or anything else is not a sin, if it is done without faith, then doing so is a sin. This means that a believer who has discerned it is not God's will to eat meat or drink wine must abstain. As Christians in this fallen world, we must live authentically in God's light without despising or judging one another.

### **A Christian should encourage the weak for the glory of God (15:1-6)**

Paul now provides the reason why strong and weak Christians must live in peace and mutual respect for one another; it is because such fellowship glorifies God.

*vv. 1-2*

Although Paul identified with the "**strong**" Christian, he places two "**obligations**" on himself and others: they must "**bear**" the "**weakness of those without strength**" (NASB), and they must not live "**to please ourselves.**" The word "**bear**" means to be considerate, but it also means compensating for another's weakness. This is Paul's positive exhortation. He also warns the

strong not to be self-centred, discard the concerns of the weak. Christians who experience their freedom in Christ must not exploit their freedom to the detriment of those who have not fully grasped the grace given to them. Rather than using freedom for personal advantage, Jesus taught his followers to “deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23).

Paul encourages the strong to “**please his neighbour, to build him up.**” This command refers to the second of God’s great commandments, “**You shall love your neighbor as yourself**” (13:9), which Paul earlier stated fulfilled the law (13:10). The phrase “**please his neighbour**” is best understood by the next phrase, “**build him up**” which means to edify. We edify by loving our neighbour (1 Corinthians 8:1; Ephesians 4:16), by limiting our personal freedom (1 Corinthians 10:23-24), and by avoiding idle theological speculation (1 Timothy 1:4). Although Paul is referring to edifying individual neighbours, he also includes building up the whole body in a corporate sense (1 Corinthians 14:12; Ephesians 4:12).<sup>328</sup> In this context, “**neighbor,**” refers to the weak believer.

*vv. 3-4*

Paul now provides the foundation for *why* we should please our neighbours. The reason is “**Christ did not please himself**” during his earthly ministry but was obedient to the will of the Father (Mark 14:36). And so we, as imitators of Christ, are to do the same (1 Peter 2:21; 1 John 3:16; Philippians 2:1-11). If “**even Christ**” (KJV) did not please himself, how much more those who are his followers? Although Christ was by very nature God (Philippians 2:6), he did not use his infinite strength to please himself but took on himself the nature of humanity and “**humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross**” (Philippians 2:8). Christ’s love was so great that “**he died for us**” while “**we were still weak**” (5:8, 6). To underscore this truth, Paul quotes Psalm 69, which describes

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<sup>328</sup> Utley, Volume 5, Romans 15:2.



the unjust suffering of a righteous man. This messianic psalm predicted the sufferings of the perfectly righteous One.<sup>329</sup>

Paul chose verse 9 of that Psalm, "**The reproaches of those who reproach you fell on me.**" The word "**reproach**" means insults or disgrace. One might think Paul would have mentioned the love of Christ for humanity at this point. Instead, he quotes this verse to show Jesus' devotion to his Father. As Schreiner states, "Jesus's passion is the supreme example of one who forsakes his own pleasure to advance God's honour."<sup>330</sup> Christ identified so entirely with his Father that the insults and rejection intended for the Father fell on him. This was most clearly evident on the cross. If he had tried to "**please himself**" he could have avoided all of this (Matthew 26:53). Jesus, the only begotten Son of the Father, only desired to please his Father, even knowing the suffering he would endure.

In quoting this Psalm, Paul expects strong believers to be like Jesus. However, in doing so, they are not enduring the insults of the weaker Christians. Instead, by associating and accepting the weak, they open themselves to insults from their pagan neighbours and family.<sup>331</sup>

*vv. 4-5a*

Because of his quote of the Psalms, Paul reminds his readers that even though the Scriptures were written "**in former days,**" they were also written, "**for our instruction**" in the present. When Paul mentions "**Scriptures,**" he means the Old Testament. Although he only quotes one sentence of a single verse, he states, "**whatever was written**" is written for us. So it is not just individual messianic psalms pointing to Jesus but all of Old Testament Scripture. This was Jesus' own teaching when he instructed his disciples (Luke 24:27; John 5:29; cf. Acts 17:11; 2 Timothy 3:15-16).

Paul also tells us the instruction given in the Old Testament is for our "**encouragement**" and "**endurance,**" which results in "**hope.**" Christian hope is the joyful expectation that all the

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<sup>329</sup> Other portions of Psalm 69 are also frequently quoted and attributed to Jesus (Matthew 27:34, 48; Mark 15:23, 36; Luke 23:36; John 2:17; 15:25; 19:28; Acts 1:20).

<sup>330</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 722.

<sup>331</sup> Beale and Carson, 686.

promises of God will be fulfilled. And in particular, hope focuses on the second coming of Christ. This is why Paul adds, in the next verse, God is **“the God of endurance and encouragement.”** So, in order to be encouraged to endure in our lives, we need to read, study and meditate on God’s word in the Old Testament Scripture. The purpose of such careful study is not academic knowledge but patience, comfort and endurance in our **“hope.”** It must have a practical application in the spiritual life of the believer.

There could be no more forceful statement than what Paul states in verses 4 and 5 of the Old Testament’s importance for the benefit of New Testament Christians. Neglect of the Old Testament is neglect of God’s instruction to us.

*vv. 5b-6 Benediction*

Paul’s prayer for all the Roman Christians is that God, who gives them encouragement and endurance through Scripture, will also **“grant”** them **“to live in such harmony.”** The question then is, what does Paul mean by **“such harmony”**? The word **“harmony”** literally means to be like-minded. However, Paul could not mean that they all had to think the same way about everything. There are questions of opinion in which the strong and weak differ. Although Paul sided with the strong, he did not want the strong to convince the weak if the result was quarrelling.

What Paul means by **“harmony”** is clear from the next phrase, **“in accord with Christ Jesus.”** Paul is not interested in unity between the Jews and Gentiles only for its own sake, but for the sake of Christ and the glory of God. **“Harmony,”** therefore, means to *worship* in harmony.<sup>332</sup> Harmony means to be like-minded in the essential truths of the gospel. We are all sinners who have not yet attained the goal of reflecting God’s glory. And while we were in this state, Christ still loved us and died for us; on the cross, he took upon himself our sin and credited his righteousness to us. And we know all this is true because the bodily resurrection of Christ is proof positive. Certainly, such harmony also benefits the believers.

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<sup>332</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 724.

When speaking of these essentials of the gospel, both the strong and the weak must speak with **“one voice.”** Christians must set aside their denominational differences and proclaim the one true gospel (Ephesians 4:4-6). Then, rather than falling short of God’s glory, we **“glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”** To glorify God is the one great purpose of a Christian and, so, is the reason for unity.<sup>333</sup> All people were created in the image of God; that is, to reflect his glory to others. There is no greater joy than to fulfill the purpose for which we were created. Such joy in unity among believers is a foretaste of the harmony we will have in heaven and the new earth. There will be no church denominations in heaven, but we will all glorify God together with one voice:

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” (Revelation 7:9-10)

### **Christian life is filled with hope, joy and peace (15:7-13)**

This passage summarizes all the themes of the letter. Many commentators view it as the pinnacle of the letter.<sup>334</sup> Indeed, a significant concern for Paul has been the unity of Greek and Jewish Christians. Now he calls on both to accept one another for the glory of God. To live in gospel unity glorifies God, and to glorify God is the opposite of the central sin of not glorifying him (1:21). The inclusive worship of Jews and Gentiles together fulfills the promise given to Abraham, David and the prophets. God’s ultimate purpose for creating the world and the people within it is that he would be honoured and praised by them (Genesis 2:3). Therefore, such harmony among ethnic groups that were so opposed to each other fulfills his purpose. This is

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<sup>333</sup> This does not mean we need to give up what we believe or how we interpret various teachings of Jesus and Paul differently. But we must understand what is essential to the gospel and what is not. For example, although understanding the correct mode and method of baptism is important, it is not essential to the gospel. Such differences should not break fellowship among believers.

<sup>334</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 726.

why Paul is not merely interested in the absence of hostilities among the Jews and Gentiles. What Paul desires is that the purpose of God in glorifying himself will be fulfilled.

v. 7

The main teaching is given in this verse (“**therefore**”). We are to accept (“**welcome**”) one another for the glory of God (v.7a) just as Christ accepted you “**for the glory of God**” (v. 7b). This call to accept one another was first given in 14:1 at the beginning of this section on unity.

The phrase “**for the glory of God**” refers to accepting one another just as Christ has accepted us. The glory of God is a prominent theme throughout the letter. In 1:21, the result, of not glorifying God as God, is a futile mind and foolish heart. And in 3:23, Paul tells us we all have fallen short of glorifying God. Then in 4:20, we first learn it is Abraham’s faith that brings glory to God. In this verse, Christ brings glory to God by accepting us; that is, his work on the cross brought salvation to both the Jews and the Gentiles. So, Paul’s whole argument in this verse is that if Christ has accepted a brother or sister, you must also. We cannot deviate from the gospel of God, which has brought a person into fellowship with Christ. Neither should we believe we can set higher standards than God. Furthermore, by accepting one another, even though we may have different understandings of the gospel’s non-essentials, we bring glory to God.

vv. 8-9a

These two verses explain how Christ brought salvation to the Jews and the Gentiles for the glory of God. Paul says, “**Christ became a servant to the circumcised.**” And Christ did so “**to show God’s truthfulness.**” When Paul refers to Christ being a servant, he does not mean his humanity. Instead, he refers to Christ’s “divine commission to accomplish salvation.”<sup>335</sup> The phrase “**God’s truthfulness**” refers to God’s covenant faithfulness, i.e., the promises of salvation he made to Israel (3:4; 9:5; 11:28-29). This is made clear in the next clause: “**in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs.**” The purpose for

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<sup>335</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 728.

which Christ **“has become”**<sup>336</sup> (NIV, NET) a servant to the Jews was on behalf of (**“show”**) the faithfulness (saving promises) of God to the patriarchs of Israel. The word **“confirm”** underscores the certainty of fulfilling these saving promises to Israel (Acts 3:23-25; Micah 7:20). Jesus himself understood he was called **“only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel”** (Matthew 15:24).

In verse 9a, Paul states, Christ became a servant to the circumcised, which confirmed the promises of salvation to Israel, **“in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.”** So, the purpose in which Christ was a servant to the Jews also includes the Gentiles. As God’s promise to Abraham stated: it is through Israel, all the nations will be blessed (Genesis 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4). The fulfillment of these promises to Abraham must include the whole world and not only Israel (4:13, 9-17). Christ’s coming as a servant to the Jews not only fulfilled the promise to the Jews but also included the fulfillment of the promise to the Gentiles. Gentile believers, therefore, **“glorify God”** for his covenant faithfulness to Israel, which has resulted in the surprising and undeserved saving **“mercy”** to them (11:11-24).

Therefore, Paul implicitly reminds both the strong, mostly Gentile Christians that the weak, mostly Jewish Christians, were the ones to which Christ first came and are supported by a Jewish foundation: **“the root that supports you”** (11:18). And Paul also reminds the weak Jewish Christians that the strong Gentile Christians are full members of God’s people: they are **“the wild olive shoot grafted in”** (11:17).<sup>337</sup>

*vv. 9b-12*

Paul now cites three divisions of Scripture, the Law (Torah), Psalms (Writings) and Prophets, to prove (**“as it is written”**) that the Gentiles and Jews are both beneficiaries of the covenant blessings to Abraham. Gentiles **“glorify God for his mercy”** through confessing, singing, rejoicing, praising and extolling

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<sup>336</sup> The perfect tense is used in the verb **“become”** implying that Christ’s ministry continues even now to the Jews (Moo, *Letter to the Romans*, 894).

<sup>337</sup> Moo, *Letter to the Romans*, 893.

God.<sup>338</sup> So, Gentiles glorify God through worship. However, Gentiles do not worship (“rejoice”) independently of Israel. This is stated clearly in Deuteronomy: **“Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people.”** This is the climax of God’s purpose in creation. God is glorified when Christians worship in unity. In the cultural context of this letter to the Roman church, Paul is speaking about Jews and Gentiles. But it is no less true today than it was then. However, the principle applies to all believers in every denomination.

In the first citation, Paul quotes from the parallel verses of 2 Samuel 22:50 and Psalm 18:49. The context of these verses is David’s deliverance from his enemies and King Saul, who was trying to kill him. In response to his salvation, he praises God among not only his people but also the Gentiles.

The following quote is from the Torah (Deuteronomy 32:43), called the “Song of Moses.” In this song, Moses commands the Gentiles to rejoice with the Jews for the salvation God has granted Israel.

Paul next quotes from the short two verse Psalm 117. Again, the psalmist calls on **“you Gentiles”** and **“all the people”** to praise the Lord. And so again, even in the Old Testament, it is evident, God is God of both Israel and the nations and wants all people to glorify him, for this is why he created them.

Finally, Paul chooses a verse from the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 11:10). Isaiah predicted that the **“root of Jesse”** would come and **“rule the Gentiles”** and **“in him will the Gentiles hope.”** By quoting this verse, it is clear, Paul understood the root of Jesse to refer to Jesus. The prophecy looked forward to a day when Israel would experience a return from exile again. This time they would not return from Egypt but the kingdom of darkness. So, the Son of God, coming as their Messiah, inaugurated this promised return. And when this promise was fulfilled, Jesus would rule over the Gentiles. That the Gentiles were now turning to Christ as their salvation fulfilled the promise that in Christ the Gentiles would place their hope. Although this

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<sup>338</sup> Three different Greek words are used for glorifying God through praise in these Old Testament citations.

promise does not exclude a future time (11:12,26), Paul believed that these promises were now being fulfilled in the present time.

v. 13

In this concluding verse, Paul focuses on the hope for both Jews and Gentiles. Harmony and unity will only occur when both Jews and Gentiles put their faith in the root of Jesse, the Lord Jesus Christ. Hope is not a human wish but a divine promise. God is the “**God of hope**” because he is faithful and able to fulfill all his promises to his people, including Jews and Gentiles. It is only because of this assurance that hope can fill the believer with “**all joy and peace.**” This hope is “**believing,**” with a joyful expectation, in Christ’s second coming. All the promises of God, already begun in his first coming, will be completed. The *source* of this hope is the “**God of hope,**” and the *instrument* by which we receive this hope is faith (“**believing**”) and the *means* by which this hope “**abounds**” in the believer is “**by the power of the Holy Spirit.**”

## Questions for Reflection

### Study it

1. [14:1] Who are the “weak in faith”? Who should “welcome” or “accept” them? In what way should they be accepted?
2. [14:3-4] What argument does Paul give for not judging? Is this surprising?
3. [14:7] What does Paul mean when he says, believers do not live or die to themselves?
4. [14:5-9] What is the main concern in doing or not doing something?
5. [14:10-12] How do you understand Paul’s statement, we will all stand before the judgment seat of God and each one must give an account of himself?
6. [14:14] What does Paul mean by “but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean”?
7. [14:17] What is the “kingdom of God”? What characterizes it? How is this achieved?

8. [14:22] Describe the beatitude in this verse in your own words.
9. [14:23] What does “condemned” mean in this verse?
10. [15:1-7] What is the reason a strong believer should not please himself? What does “please himself” mean? What glorifies God?

**Live it**

1. Who are the weak in faith in your church? Do you identify with the weak or the strong? Why? Is it possible we are weak in some areas of our faith and strong in others?
2. Identify a list of beliefs you think are “weak” today? Would you believe these are fundamental to the faith or simply “opinions”? What does “quarrelling” mean? Does it mean there can be no disagreement?
3. Does it surprise you Paul does not try to convince the “weak” to believe as he does but says we would just accept one another?
4. Why is it so easy to despise or judge someone with whom you have theological disagreements?
5. What is the purpose for which you were born? Are you living up to this purpose?
6. What does “hope” mean in your life? Do you have “all joy and peace” in your faith?



## **PART V: PAUL'S CLOSING REMARKS (15:14-16:1-27)**

In this letter to the Roman church, Paul has already presented the gospel of the righteousness of Christ (chapters 1-8). Next, he addressed the question of the present Jewish rejection of their gospel (chapters 9-11), and urged the church in their spiritual growth through a life of sacrifice and devotion to Christ (12:1-15:13). And then, in the last passage, he concluded with two benedictions (15:5, 13).

It would not be surprising if Paul ended his letter at this point.<sup>339</sup> But instead, Paul returns to the subjects he raised at the beginning of the letter (1:8-13). He also becomes very personal by speaking directly to the Roman Christians (notice the "I-you" dialogue). He wants to explain why it has taken so long to visit them, expecting this will soon change. He also tells them of his future missionary plans and hopes they will help in this work.

However, Paul is also concerned he might have offended some Christians in Rome. At times, he has written very boldly to them and wonders if he might have upset them in any way. Had this authority been undermined because he had not started the church in Rome, nor had he visited, even after many years of ministry? Or, had he somehow judged them to be defective in their faith? To deal with these concerns, Paul now opens himself up personally, first to explain the ministry for which he was responsible, but also to show his care and affection for them; they are not far from his heart and mind, and God willing, he would soon visit them.

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<sup>339</sup> Some ancient manuscripts insert 16:25-27 after 14:23.

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## Lesson 15: Paul's responsibility to the Gentiles (15:14-33)

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### Paul's apostleship to the Gentiles (15:14-22)

*Paul's view of the Roman Christians and his ministry (vv. 14-16)*

*v. 14*

Although Paul had not been to Rome, it is clear from this verse and others, he personally knew many of the leaders of the church ("I myself"). Of course, their reputation had spread throughout the world. And so, Paul thanked "**God through Jesus Christ for all of you**" (1:8) in the opening of his letter. There he had commended them for their "**faith**," and now he praises them for their "**goodness**," "**knowledge**," and ability to "**instruct one another**" (cf. Hebrews 15:11-14; 1 Thessalonians 5:14). Paul, therefore, had not written to them because he thought they were not living a fruitful life for Christ or they could not teach and admonish one another. The following two verses contain the reason Paul wrote to the Roman church.

*v. 15*

Paul's real motive in writing to them was to remind them of "**some points**" they might have forgotten. It certainly is true that spiritual truths can be forgotten (2 Timothy 2:14). Other New Testament writers also understood this concern (2 Peter 1:12; 3:1; Jude 5).

He does acknowledge that this reminder was "**very bold**" or bolder than it might have been. The humility of Paul is evident. Although bold, his instruction, exhortations and warnings were done in affection and concern for a brother in Christ. However, Paul was given the responsibility by Jesus to boldly proclaim the gospel to all, both unbelievers and believers. His humility is an example for all teachers who have felt the need to 'preach to' their church.

*v. 16*

Paul states that he could speak boldly "**because of the grace given me by God to be a minister of Christ Jesus**." This, again, echoes his statements at the beginning of the letter (1:1). Paul not only had the authority to teach the gospel but was uniquely

sent by Jesus to do so (Acts 9:15; 22:21). Paul uses the word “**minister**,” which in this context, refers to the office of a priest (Hebrews 8:2). However, Paul is using the word in a figurative sense. As a New Testament priest, Paul is “**offering**” the Gentiles as a symbolic sacrifice, a sacrifice “**sanctified by the Holy Spirit**” (cf. 12:1; see also Exodus 28:38). This is the meaning of the phrase “**in the priestly service of the gospel of God.**” Paul is offering the Gentile believers themselves to God as an acceptable sacrifice. Normally, a sacrifice was purified with water to prepare for the altar. Here, the Gentile believers are made holy – set apart for service to God – by the power of the Holy Spirit. Such an offering is pleasing to God. Paul is always very careful to attribute salvation to God and not to his preaching or any other method of evangelism. Although preaching the gospel is necessary to communicate the gospel (10:17), salvation itself is entirely a work of God through the power of the Spirit.

The Gentiles had been entirely excluded from the temple in Jerusalem. But now, because they were sanctified, they are able to enter the true tabernacle (Hebrews 9:11; cf. Hebrews 13:11) since they have become a holy and acceptable offering to God. This fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah that diaspora Jews, which Paul certainly was, would “proclaim God’s glory in distant lands and bring people to Jerusalem from all the nations ‘as an offering to the Lord’” (Isaiah 66:20).<sup>340</sup>

It is worth noting, this is the only place in the New Testament that associates the work of a priest with a minister of the gospel. Paul describes this relationship figuratively because ministers are not mediators between the church members and God. As Charles Hodge states, “their only priesthood is the preaching of the Gospel, and their offerings are redeemed and sanctified men.”<sup>341</sup>

*Reflection on past ministry (vv. 17-22)*

Paul now reflects on the ministry God had given him; that is, he was “**called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God**” (1:1). He has fulfilled this ministry only “**in Christ**,” and so has

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<sup>340</sup> Stott, 379.

<sup>341</sup> Hodge, 384.

**“reason to be proud of my work for God.”** However, if anyone thinks Paul is speaking of self-pride, he immediately explains what he means by this boast.

*vv. 18-19*

Paul now (**“for”**) gives the reason why he is **“proud”** of his **“work for God.”** He states that he would not **“dare to speak”** (KJV) of anything except what Christ had accomplished through him. What Christ accomplished was to bring **“the Gentiles to obedience.”** This last phrase means the conversion of the Gentiles. This is similar to the phrase **“obedience of faith”** Paul used at the beginning of his letter (1:5). Conversion of the Gentiles was God’s work, not Paul’s. However, Paul is using **“obedience”** in a broader sense which includes obedience that demonstrates their faith was genuine.

Paul also lists how his ministry was effective among the Gentiles. First, it was **“by word and deed.”** Christ accomplished the salvation of the Gentiles through Paul’s preaching of the gospel, which expressed itself in the moral integrity of Paul’s life. Both **“word”** and **“deed”** must come together as a proclamation of the gospel. **“Deed”** does not necessarily refer to miracles. Instead, it relates to a life reflecting the truth of the **“word.”** In Jesus’ earthly ministry, some of the most powerful ‘messages’ were not his miracles but his interaction with those around him:

Then children were brought to him that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples rebuked the people, but Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 19:13-14).

And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me.” (Mark 9:36-37)

When the church cares for those who cannot care for themselves, it does so **“in deed,”** validating **“the word.”**

Second, God also accomplished **“signs and wonders”** through Paul. These miracles confirmed the truth of the gospel (2 Corinthians 12:12). Luke, the historian, recounts many such

miracles (Acts 2:43; 4:40; 5:12; 6:8; 14:3; 15:12). These unique works of God are intended to demonstrate the “**power**” of God to accomplish salvation and judgement (Exodus 7:3-5).

Paul’s ministry was “**by the power of the Spirit of God.**” It was through the Spirit, all his words, deeds, and miracles were done. Again, Paul wants to ensure the reader knows he was only an instrument of God through which the salvation of the Gentiles was accomplished.

Given all this, Paul can now declare that he has “**fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ**” for which he was commissioned. He is quite specific in stating that his ministry results from “**Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum.**” The gospel of freedom and salvation to the Gentiles, which Paul preached and defended (see Galatians chapters 1 and 2), began in Jerusalem and reached far and wide, including Syria, Turkey, Greece, and Macedonia. Paul must include Jerusalem since his commission by Jesus, although primarily to the Gentiles, was also to the “children of Israel” (Acts 9:15; cf. 9:26ff).

*vv. 20-22*

When Paul says, his ministry is “**fulfilled**” (v. 19) and the gospel has gone out to all these regions, he does not imply, everyone has heard the gospel. He means that his ministry was “**not where Christ was named**” (KJV); that is, where there were already Christians. Paul’s apostolic mission was to plant churches where no one had heard of the gospel and where there were no believers. He does not want to preach in a region where some other evangelist had already planted a church. This is the meaning of the phrase, “**lest I build on someone else’s foundation.**” We can then understand Paul’s claim to have fully preached the gospel to mean he has planted churches in all the major towns. He expected the new believers would continue the work of the gospel in the smaller villages. Paul understands his commission to proclaim Christ, where no one had previously heard of him from Isaiah’s prophecy to the Gentiles (Isaiah 52:15).

*v. 22*

Until now, Paul had not given a reason for not being able to visit Rome. Of course, he had planned many times to come but to

this point was prevented (1:13). Now, he states that it was because of his policy to first preach the gospel to regions having never heard of Christ. Although we cannot be sure how and when the church began in Rome, we know it was not through Paul. And since it was his policy not to **“build on someone else’s foundation,”** he would not go to Rome until there was **“no longer room for work in these regions.”** Paul then reiterates his desire to visit them (1:13) – **“since I have longed for many years to come to you”** – and he is now free to travel to Rome. However, because the church in Rome is already established, he does not expect it to be an extended visit. He plans only to see them **“in passing as I go to Spain.”**

### **Paul’s travel plans (15:23-29)**

#### *vv. 23-24 Plan to visit Rome*

Paul provides three reasons why he can finally visit Rome. First, his work is complete, and there is **“no longer room for work in these regions.”** Although this might seem surprising, Paul means that the foundation had been laid and work could continue with local believers. Second, Paul does want to visit them. This has been a long desire of his. It was not just a superficial wish but a sustained hope, someday he would be able to visit. And third, although he expects to **“enjoy your company for a while,”** he does not just want the visit to be social, but he also wants to be **“helped on my journey”** to Spain. The word **“helped”** encompasses food, money, companions, and other necessities for travel (BDAG).

#### *vv. 25-27 Plan to visit Jerusalem*

However, before going to Rome, he must first travel to Jerusalem. This trip was to **“bring aid to the saints,”** who were the poor Jewish Christian community in Jerusalem. The aid is a collection from the churches in **“Macedonia and Achaia.”** These churches were **“pleased”** to contribute to the welfare of the Jewish Christians. Moreover, they understood they **“owe it to them.”** They were obligated to the Jews in Jerusalem because they had benefited spiritually from them. Therefore, they were required to reciprocate in prayers for them and in **“material blessings.”** This contribution was, in a sense, a debt the Gentiles owed the Jews. Salvation had come through Jesus, Israel’s

Messiah, and because Israel rejected him, the gospel went to the Gentiles (11:11-24). Paul views this financial contribution to the Christian Jews as a symbolic demonstration of this debt.<sup>342</sup>

Paul does not state why the Jewish Christians were so poor. When the church began, it seemed to be doing very well, and everyone was cared for (Acts 2:42-47). Although there was some dissension, that too was dealt with (Acts 6:1-7). Some commentators have speculated on the cause, but no clear answer is given. However, this was a major concern for Paul. He encouraged the churches to make good on their commitments (1 Corinthians 16:1ff; 2 Corinthians chapters 8-9) and was also willing to make the long and dangerous journey to Jerusalem to deliver the contribution.

*vv. 28-29 Plan to visit Spain*

Paul now looks past his task of delivering the financial contribution to Jerusalem to Spain's missionary journey. He had been planning a trip like this for at least two years (2 Corinthians 10:16). We can only speculate how far Paul planned on taking the gospel—to Germany or Britain? Of course, there is no definitive proof Paul made it to Spain. He could have gone there after his release from prison in Rome. The only reference we have is from a pastor in Rome. Clement of Rome, around ad 96, wrote:

“having preached righteousness to the whole world, and having come to the extremity of the West, and having borne witness before rulers, he departed at length out of the world, and went to the holy place, having become the greatest example of patience.” (1 Clement 5:7)

In verse 29, Paul, again, reflects on his planned trip to Rome. He states that after his work in Jerusalem, he will come in “**the fullness of the blessing of Christ.**” This thought is similar to the beginning of the letter when reflecting on his coming to Rome when he stated, “**that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you—that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith**” (1:11-12). Of course, we know that when Paul did get to Rome, he came as a prisoner

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<sup>342</sup> Stott, 387.

(Acts 28:16). So, the “**fullness of the blessings of Christ**” did not mean a life without troubles and difficulties. What it meant was peace and joy in the Spirit. Difficult outward circumstances did not mean much to Paul. As he wrote to the Philippian church:

Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me. (Philippians 4:10-13; see also 2 Corinthians 12:10).

### **Request for prayer for his visit to Jerusalem (15:30-33)**

*vv. 30-32*

At the beginning of the letter, Paul states, “**that without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers**” (1:9-10). So it is only reasonable for them to pray also for him. Paul knew how valuable it was for believers to pray for him and his work. He asks for prayer many times in his letters (2 Corinthians 1.11; Ephesians 6.18-20; Philippians 1:19; 1 Thessalonians 5:25; 2 Thessalonians 3:1; Philemon 22). And so, he also “**appeals**” to them as “**brothers in our Lord Jesus Christ**” and “**by the love of the Spirit**” to “**strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf.**”

The words “**urge**” and “**strive**” are very strong words. The first, “**urge**,” was used in 12:1. The word “**strive**” is used in Jesus’ struggle in Gethsemane. Jesus’ agony in Gethsemane was his concern to do his Father’s will. However, his desire to do God’s will overcame his own human will (Luke 22:42). Paul knew there was a need for fervent prayer for himself and his gospel ministry. Paul does not want the Romans in their prayers to be conformed to how the world thinks about such issues. Instead, he desires that his and their minds be set on the Spirit so they would be able to test and discern God’s good, acceptable and perfect will. And not only to know God’s will but, like Jesus, be able to embrace it for their lives.

Paul gives two reasons for these prayers. First, he “**may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea.**” And second, “**that**



**my service in Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints.**" Paul was undoubtedly justified in being concerned over these issues. We can look ahead and know what happened to Paul when he arrived in Jerusalem (Acts 21:27-28:16). The unbelieving Jews tried to kill him and accused him before the Roman governor, resulting in his imprisonment for two years in Caesarea. It was only in chains that he was finally sent to Rome.

Paul's concern was not only for the unbelieving Jews; he was just as concerned for the Jewish Christians who did not believe Christ's death and resurrection had fulfilled the Mosaic law (Acts 21:17-24). These Christians were still "zealous for the law" and were greatly concerned about Paul's preaching of gospel freedom to the Jews (Acts 21:21). The kindness, compassion and acceptance of Paul are evident in calling these Jewish Christians "**saints.**" He wanted them to accept this financial gift with gratitude and with recognition of the kindness the Gentiles felt towards them.

*vv. 32-33*

Paul also gives a third reason for these prayers. He wants it to be "**God's will**" that he goes to Rome and if it is "**with joy and be refreshed in your company.**" The word "**refreshed**" does not mean relaxing as one would on vacation but refers to Christian fellowship and joy when believers worship together.

He ends this appeal with a prayer for them: "**May the God of peace be with you all. Amen.**" Although Paul understood the difficulties he faced and those of the Roman Christians, he also knew God was the only source and provider of peace. The word "**peace**" means inward confidence that God's will is done. This is why Paul begins this final request with "**by God's will.**" Knowing God's will is done is the assurance of inward peace.

## Questions for Reflection

### Study it

1. [15:14] By what authority does Paul have to write the way he does? Why is he concerned that he might be misunderstood? Should today's pastors speak the same way?

2. [15:16-17] What unique symbolic role does Paul take on in these verses? How does he apply it to those who become believers?
3. [15:18-19] What did Paul mean by “word,” “deed,” “power of signs and wonders,” and “the power of the Holy Spirit”?
4. [15:20-22] Why do you think his calling was only to those who had not heard before?
5. [15:23-24] Why is Paul free to visit Rome? How do you understand his reasoning?
6. [15:25-27] Why was Paul so determined to God to Jerusalem?
7. [15:28-29] Paul was always looking for new opportunities to preach to those who had never heard the gospel. Do you think he made it to Spain?
8. [15:30-32] What do “urge” and “stive” mean concerning prayer? List the things Paul wants the Roman Christians to pray for.

### **Live it**

1. Give an example of where you spoke the truth in love to someone but were misunderstood. Did you explain to the person your concern about being misunderstood the way Paul did?
2. What role do you and the Holy Spirit have in leading someone to Christ?
3. How do you understand the integration of “word” and “deed” in mission today? What importance and purpose are “signs and wonders” today? Give an example of each of these.
4. Do you think we are still indebted to Israel? What is your definition of Israel? Is it Israel's current country and people or some other aspect or part of Israel?
5. What does it mean to “strive” or “struggle” in prayer? How does this relate to God’s will?

6. Paul prayed for the unbelievers, the weak believers and Christian fellowship. How does this compare to your prayers?
7. Do you think God answered Paul's prayers for protection and acceptance in Jerusalem and joy and refreshment in Rome? How does this relate to "God's will"?

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## Lesson 16: Paul's final greetings and Doxology (16:1-27)

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It is easy to skip over the names and greetings in this final passage. However, we can learn many interesting things in taking a little time. One of the most important is Paul's personal relationship with so many people. He knows many details about them. He is concerned their many services to the Lord are acknowledged. Many commentators have wondered in awe at the number of people Paul knew. The diversity of ethnic backgrounds, social standing, and gender is astonishing. Although Paul was not their pastor, his pastoral love and encouragement for them are evident throughout.

### Personal greetings to the friends in Rome (16:1-15)

*vv. 1-2*

It is somewhat surprising the first person Paul mentions is Phoebe, a woman from Cenchreae. Cenchreae was an important port city just eleven kilometres southeast of Corinth.<sup>343</sup> Doubtlessly, Paul knew her from his extended stay in Corinth. His first reference to her is “**our sister**” in the faith. Most commentators believe she was the one who carried Paul's letter to Rome. As a trusted envoy, she would have needed a letter of recommendation. So, Paul commends her to the Christians in Rome. The Greek word for “**commend**” was often used in such letters of recommendation.

Paul also acknowledges Phoebe as a “**servant of the church**.” The Greek word for “**servant**” has a broad meaning, including deacon (15:8) or even government agent (13:4). Paul describes himself as a servant of God (2 Corinthians 6:4). So the question is whether Paul used the word “**servant**” for Phoebe in a religious or common sense. Early in church history, the word came to mean “**deacon**” (Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:8, 12). The way Paul describes her here and the use of the verb introducing her (“**being**”), suggests that she was more than the messenger for the letter. As a deacon in the Cenchreae church, she would

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<sup>343</sup> Recall that Paul wrote this letter from Corinth.

have had many responsibilities and tasks. She had done these very well, or Paul would not have entrusted the letter to her.

Paul provides two purposes for his commendation of Phoebe. First, he expects the church in Rome to **“welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints.”** Paul has already indicated what this would involve (12:10-13). Second, the church should **“help her in whatever she may need”** because **“she has been a patron of many and of myself as well.”** The help Phoebe needed likely involved some particular project or concern of hers in Rome. Phoebe especially deserved assistance as a **“patron”** because of her financial help to others and Paul. **“Patrons”** were usually men of high social status who provided benefits to their clients in return for public honour. Evidently, she was an unusually gifted woman of wealth and social status.

It is also interesting to contrast the role of **“deacon”** with **“patron.”** A deacon was involved in lower service by Greco-Roman standards. A patron, on the other hand, would be a person expecting much public honour. However, Paul does not indicate Phoebe received recognition from her home church. This could well reflect the gospel's transformation on a Greco-Roman honour system ubiquitous in those cultures.<sup>344</sup>

*vv. 3-15*

Paul now sends greetings to twenty-six people, twenty-four of whom he identifies by name. In several instances, he also adds a personal statement of appreciation. The diversity of the persons is quite surprising, but their unity in Christ diminishes these distinctions. The most important aspect of a person is their faith in Christ.<sup>345</sup>

### *Diversity*

We already know the church in Roman included both Gentiles and Jews. It is not surprising then that we would find both Roman and Jewish names on this list. It was also known that the gospel attracted many people of lower social standing. Names like Ampliatus (v. 8), Urbanus (v. 9), Hermes (v. 14),

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<sup>344</sup> Thielman, 712.

<sup>345</sup> Stott, 395-398

Philogous and Julia (v. 15) were common names for slaves.<sup>346</sup> On the other hand, Aristobulus (v. 10) was the grandson of Herod the Great and friend of Emperor Claudius, while Narcissus (v. 11) was a well-known and wealthy freedman. These last two were family names, so it was likely they were not Christians, even though many in their households had become believers.

The most interesting aspect of the people mentioned is their gender. Of the twenty-six persons mentioned, nine were women: Prisca (v. 3), Mary (v. 6), likely Junia<sup>347</sup> (v. 7), Tryphaena and Tryphosa and Persis (v. 12), Rufus' mother (v. 23), Julia and Nereus' sister (v. 15). Obviously, Paul thought very highly of the women who worked in the churches. Prisca is Paul's "**fellow worker.**" Four women are specifically identified as those who "**worked hard.**" However, the particular work they did is not mentioned. Junia, a Jew who was imprisoned with Andronicus and Paul for their faith, is referred to as being "**well known to the apostles.**"<sup>348</sup> So, not only did Paul know her but other apostles as well. We can conclude from this list that Paul held the role of women in the church in the highest regard.

### *Unity*

What is truly astonishing in the list of people is their unity as people of God despite their gender, social status or ethnic background. Paul refers to them as "**in Christ**" (vv. 3, 7, 9, 10) and "**in the Lord**" (vv. 8, 11, 12, 13). Twice he uses "**sister**" and "**brother**" (vv. 1, 14). He refers to them as "**my beloved**" (vv. 5, 8, 9). And as "**fellow workers**" (vv. 3, 9, 12) and fellow sufferers (vv. 4, 7).

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<sup>346</sup> Stott, 395.

<sup>347</sup> The name could also be masculine. The only variation between feminine and masculine names is a different accent. The masculine form of the name is not found in any Roman literature or inscription, while the feminine form is quite common (more than 250 times in Greek and Latin inscriptions).

<sup>348</sup> Some translations have "**Junias, my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners, who are outstanding among the apostles**" (NASB). However, it is more likely that the preposition is "**to**" rather than "**among.**" These three then are not apostles, but are known to the apostles.

*v. 16*

Paul concludes this list with a universal command and encouragement: “**Greet one another with a holy kiss.**” Paul has just greeted them by writing, but if he were with them in person, he would greet them with a “**holy kiss.**” This is his instruction for the believers in all the churches (1 Corinthians 16:20; 2 Corinthians 13:12; 1 Thessalonians 5:26). It was also the instruction of Peter (1 Peter 5:14). The idea seems to be that a greeting should not just be verbal but also include physical contact. The kiss was a common greeting among the Jews and this custom also entered the early Christian church. Interestingly, Paul calls it “**holy.**” It may be, when this practice was introduced to the non-Jews, Paul wanted to avoid any misunderstanding.<sup>349</sup>

Paul also wants to encourage them by stating, “**all the churches of Christ**” know about them and send their greetings to them. It would not be surprising that, when visiting the churches from Jerusalem to Illyricum, the faith of the Roman church was discussed.

### **Final Exhortations (16:17-24)**

*vv. 17-20 Warnings*

Paul is always concerned about the attacks of Satan against the church. It is never far from his mind, and so it is not surprising after his warm greetings, and just before ending the letter, he again warns the church to “**watch out**” for false teachers (2 Corinthians 11:13-15; Galatians 1:6-8; Colossians 2:8, 18; 1 Timothy 4:1-3; 2 Timothy 3:1-8; 4:2-4). His main concern, as always, is those who “**cause divisions**” within the church’s unity by teaching what is “**contrary to the doctrine**” of the gospel. In verse 18, Paul explains why such people should be “**avoided.**” His apprehension is they will “**deceive the hearts of the naive.**” All members of the church must be vigilant in protecting the doctrinally weak. Truth in doctrine is essential for salvation; Satan, since the Garden of Eden, has ever since been attempting to subvert God’s truth.

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<sup>349</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 772.

Although Paul is confident the faith of the Roman church is healthy, he gives one more exhortation: “**be wise in what is good and innocent as to what is evil.**” The word “**good**” refers to both the teaching of the gospel and living the gospel. And the word “**wise**” means recognizing, loving, and following the good. When unsure of doctrine or behaviour, we can ask ourselves: Does it agree with Scripture? Does it glorify the Lord Jesus Christ? Does it promote spiritual maturity?

Paul ends this warning with the guarantee of assurance that the God they serve will triumph over Satan's attacks. Although Satan was entirely defeated on the cross, he remains active in the world.

*vv. 21-24 Greetings*

Paul had sent his greetings to the Christians. Now he includes greetings from eight “**fellow workers.**” Of these, “**Tertius,**” who was the scribe writing Paul's letter, adds his greeting. “**Gaius,**” as mentioned earlier, was likely the host where Paul wrote this letter.

**Doxology (16:25-27)**

*v. 25*

Paul begins the verse with “**now,**” signalling an end to the greetings and the beginning of the doxology. Doxologies express praise, honour, glory and strength to God. Doxologies were always part of Jewish worship in the temple (1 Chronicles 16:28-29; Psalms 29:1-2; 96:7). When the early Jewish Christian church began, they became common there as well (1 Peter 4:11; Hebrews 13:21). Even after the church became more Gentile, they continued to be an important part of worship.

The doxology has four parts: the power of God, the gospel of Christ, evangelism of the world, and praise to the wisdom and glory of God. First, Paul begins with God's power, for only God “**is able to strengthen you.**” The word “**strengthen**” means to establish, set firmly, and support. This recalls Paul's introduction to the Philippians church: “And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:6). Only God can bring about a single people of God from so diverse a



humanity as Jews and Greeks, slaves and free, males and females making them “all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28).

Second, God establishes the believer in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Here Paul describes it as “**my gospel**”; that is, the gospel he preaches (1:8), which is the “**proclamation of Jesus Christ**” (NET). This gospel is a “**mystery that was kept secret for long ages.**” The gospel was “**kept secret**” or “**hidden**” until the time of Christ. Then it was “**disclosed**” or “**revealed**” (Ephesians 3:5). This gospel is the proclamation of Jesus Christ himself (Colossians 2:2) and equally available in the same way to the Gentiles (Colossians 1:27; Ephesians 3:6-13; cf. 6:19). It is also especially good news for believing Jews who look forward to a time when “**all Israel will be saved**” (11:28). And so, it is the gospel of hope that Christ will return to establish the new heaven and earth.

*vv. 26-27*

Third, the gospel was revealed but has also been “**made known**” to the whole world. Before Christ came, God revealed himself only to Israel. With the defeat of Satan through the death and resurrection of Christ, the revelation of the gospel is known “**to all nations.**” Paul lists several ways in which the gospel is made known: “**through the prophetic writings,**” which is a reference to the Old Testament Scriptures understood in light of Christ’s work; the gospel was made known “**according to the command of God**” referring to the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20) as well as Christ’s command to the apostles before his ascension (Acts 1:8); the gospel was made known to “**bring about the obedience of faith**” meaning salvation is only possible through faith in Christ; and, the gospel was made known by “**the only wise God**”; the wisdom of God refers to Christ himself (1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5). Once again Paul makes it clear that faith without obedience is dead (James 2:14-17).

In the final and fourth part of the doxology, Paul states that God is now and forever gloried through Jesus Christ, who is the “**image of the invisible God**” (Colossians 1:15). It was Jesus, the perfect image of God (Hebrews 1:3), who brought glory to the Father through his incarnation, life, death and resurrection (John 17:1). And it is believers, through our union with Christ, who

are also able to honour and glorify God since we, too, are created in his image.

## Questions for Reflection

### Study it

1. [16:1-2] Why did Paul mention Phoebe first? Why was it necessary to commend her? What do we learn about her?
2. [16:3-16] How is diversity in the church described in these verses? How is unity in the church described?
3. [16:3-16] What do you think the role of women was in the churches Paul established?
4. [16:7] Do you think Junia was a man or a woman? What grounds do you base it on? Was she identified as an apostle or only known by apostles?
5. [16:16] What did Paul mean by “holy kiss”?
6. [16:17-18] What warnings does Paul give? What questions can we ask ourselves to identify them?
7. [16:19] What is the meaning of “good” and “evil”?
8. [16:20] If Christ defeated Satan on the cross, what did Paul mean by “will soon crush Satan”? How has the cross changed things?
9. [16:22] What was Tertius’ role in the letter? Where was the letter written?
10. [16:25-27] Identify the four parts of the doxology and list how God has manifested the gospel of Christ. Compare the doxology with the opening of the letter (1:1-5).
11. [16:27] What is the purpose of a doxology?

### Live it

1. Does this passage help you understand women’s role in the church?
2. How does this passage affect your understanding of various ministries in the church? Does it give you insight into men-only ministries or women-only ministries? What about ministries that are associated with a specific ethnic group?

3. Identify the warnings in vv. 17-19. Are these warnings relevant today?
4. How do people greet one another in your church? Is there any physical contact? Do you think this is important? What are the dangers?
5. How, in your own life, would you understand and follow Paul's exhortation to be innocent concerning evil and wise concerning good?
6. Is saving faith possible without obedience? How do you reconcile these two in your own Christian life? How does justification relate to saving faith, and how does sanctification relate to obedience?
7. Do you end your prayers in a doxology?

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