

Exploring the Word of God: The Letters of Paul

By Michael Morrison

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NOT ASHAMED OF THE GOSPEL

ROMANS 1:1-17

In the year A.D. 57, Paul was on his third missionary journey, getting ready to go back to Jerusalem with an offering from the churches in Greece. Although he knew he had enemies in Jerusalem, he was already thinking about his fourth missionary trip.

Paul wanted to go to Spain, and the best travel route would take him through Rome. This could work out well, Paul thought. There are already Christians in Rome, and they might be willing to support my trip to Spain, just as the Antioch church supported my earlier missionary journeys and the Macedonian churches supported me while I was in southern Greece.

So Paul decided to write to the Roman Christians to let them know that he planned to come to Rome and then go to Spain — and that he would appreciate some support. However, Paul had a problem: the Roman Christians might have heard some erroneous rumors about what Paul preached. To prevent misunderstanding, Paul explains what the gospel is, so they will know what they are being asked to support.

But that is only the first half of Romans. In the second half, Paul deals with some problems that existed in the Roman churches — especially the tension between Jewish Christians and gentile Christians. Paul uses part of his letter to discuss Jew-Gentile relationships in God's plan, and Christian conduct and love for others. He tries to give these Christians some doctrinal foundation for unity.

We do not know whether Paul made it to Spain, but his letter was a tremendous success in other ways. It has been valued throughout church history as the most doctrinally complete letter that Paul wrote. It is the letter that sparked the Reformation. It influenced Martin Luther and John

Wesley and countless others. It provides the benchmark for all studies of Paul's theology, and because of that, it is a cornerstone for understanding the doctrines of the early church.

Introduction to the gospel

Paul begins, as Greek letters normally did, by identifying himself: "Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God..." (verse 1, New Revised Standard Version used in chapters 1-4). Paul identifies himself as a slave who has been commanded to spend all his time on the gospel. He is sent by the master with the message of God.

Greek letters normally began by naming the sender, and then the recipients. But Paul is so focused on the gospel that, before he names the readers, he goes into a five-verse digression about the gospel. In effect, he puts his message at the top, before he even gets to the Dear so-and-so line. This makes it clear that his letter is about the gospel:

"Which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures" (verse 2). Paul begins by linking the gospel to the Old Testament promises (as he also does in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4). This provides a point of stability for gentile readers, and some reassurance for Jewish readers.

God's message is "concerning his Son." It is about the Son of God; the promises found in the Old Testament are fulfilled in Jesus Christ, "who was descended from David according to the flesh" (Romans 1:3). The gospel is again connected with the Old Testament past; Paul's words will appeal to his Jewish readers and remind the Gentile readers of their Jewish roots.

The Son is a descendant of King David. However, by saying "according to the flesh," Paul implies that something more than flesh is also involved. This person at the center of the gospel is not merely a human; he is also the Son of God in a way that other people are not.

Verse 4: "and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord." Through the Holy Spirit, Jesus was powerfully demonstrated to be God's Son by his resurrection from the dead. Jesus, although a human descendant of David, was shown to be more than human by his resurrection into glory.

But the gospel does not stop with Jesus. It also includes us: "through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name" (verse 5). Paul will say more about grace and obedience later in his letter. But he says here that "we" have not only received grace, but also apostleship. Paul is referring to

his commission to take the gospel to the non-Jewish peoples, and by “we” he means the small number of people who were working with him in this special mission, such as Timothy. They have received the grace of spreading the gospel.

He connects the gospel to the readers in verse 6: “including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.” The gospel says that believers belong to Christ, and that is good news.

After this introductory description of the gospel, Paul gets back to the normal letter format by stating the recipients of the letter: “To all God’s beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (verse 7).

Paul does not greet “the church of God that is at Rome.” He does not speak of it as a unity. (Chapter 16 suggests that there were several house churches.) Nor does he write to any particular church leaders. Instead, perhaps because he is not sure how this letter will be delivered, he addresses it directly to the believers.

A prayer of thanks

Greek letters often included a prayer of thanksgiving to one of the gods, and Paul adapts this custom, thanking the true God: “First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed throughout the world” (verse 8). This tells us that Paul prayed through Christ, and it also tells us that “all the world” doesn’t always mean the entire earth. In this case, it means the eastern Roman Empire. It was a figure of speech, not a geographical fact.

Paul gave God the credit for these people’s faith. He didn’t thank the people for believing — he thanked God, because God is the one who enables people to believe. Of our own, we would turn away. Whatever faith we have, we need to thank God as the one who gives us that faith.

In verse 9, Paul calls God as his witness, to stress that he is telling the truth: “For God, whom I serve with my spirit by announcing the gospel of his Son, is my witness that without ceasing I remember you always in my prayers.” People today might say, “God knows that I pray for you all the time.”

Paul adds that he serves God with his whole heart in preaching the gospel of his Son. He is keeping the gospel in the discussion, keeping his role as a servant in the context. These are his credentials; this is what his life is about. Paul’s authority does not rest on himself, but on his role as a servant of God. He is doing only what God wants, and the people therefore need to listen to what he says.

Paul's plan to visit Rome

In verse 10 he adds something else: “asking that by God’s will I may somehow at last succeed in coming to you.” Paul is telling them that he hopes to visit them. This helps create a relationship between the author and the recipients.

“I am longing to see you,” he says in verse 11, “so that I may share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you.” He wanted to help them — but he quickly adds, “or rather so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith, both yours and mine” (verse 12). Paul would be encouraged by them — at least, he hopes he would be!

If I were there in person, he seems to be saying, we would both benefit. But since this is only a letter, the communication can go only one way, and this letter is Paul’s attempt to give them a spiritual gift to strengthen them.

Paul’s plan is not a spur-of-the-moment idea. “I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as I have among the rest of the Gentiles” (verse 13).

Paul has often thought of going to Rome. Even when Paul lived in Jerusalem, he would have met people from Rome and would have heard stories about it. And Paul has already gone as far as Greece — why not go farther, to the capital of the Empire, where many Jews had already gone? But so far, circumstances prevented Paul from doing it.

Why did Paul want to come? He wanted a harvest — he wanted more people to accept the gospel of Christ. Although many Jews lived in Rome, Paul focused on the Gentiles. They were his primary mission field, even if he went to the synagogues first. In the synagogues, Paul could find Gentiles who were prepared to receive the gospel.

An obligation to preach

“I am a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish—hence my eagerness to proclaim the gospel to you also who are in Rome” (verses 14-15). Paul wanted to preach to everyone, and that’s why he wanted to preach in Rome, as well.

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel,” he says in verse 16. He has already used the word *gospel* twice and given a couple of descriptions of it. He has stressed that this is his calling in life, his duty before God. He is not ashamed of the gospel — and he doesn’t want the Romans to be ashamed of it, either. He describes it again in verse 16: “it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.” The gospel is the way that God saves people.

Technically, we are saved by Christ, by what he has done for us. But the

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gospel is the means by which we *learn* of that salvation and the way in which we receive it. The gospel is the power of salvation because it tells us about salvation. God uses the gospel to bring salvation to everyone who accepts the message, to everyone who trusts in Christ (since Christ is the center of the message, accepting the gospel means accepting Christ as well). Paul is not ashamed of the gospel because it is the message of eternal life. It is nothing to be ashamed of — it is something to be shared with everyone, both Jews and Gentiles.

Why is it a message of salvation? “For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, “The one who is righteous will live by faith” (verse 17, quoting Habakkuk 2:4). The gospel reveals the righteousness of God, and it reveals that righteousness means more than strict justice — the gospel says that mercy is more important than justice. As Paul will explain, justice generally says that sin must be punished, but the gospel reveals that true righteousness involves mercy and grace. The fact that God’s righteousness must be *revealed* indicates that it is not the way that many people had assumed.

Is Paul saying that God’s righteousness is through faith? No, he is not talking about the way that God is righteous—he is talking about how his righteousness is *revealed*. We learn about it through faith, by believing the gospel. It is revealed through faith for faith, or literally, “from faith to faith.” Perhaps the best explanation of this phrase is that the Greek word for faith (*pistis*) can also mean “faithfulness.” When we come to believe in God’s righteousness, we respond to him by being faithful to him. We move from faith to faithfulness. Paul is not trying to explain it at this point; he is using a phrase that will make people want to continue reading to see how he will explain it.

Questions

- What does it mean to “belong” to Jesus Christ? (verse 6) In this relationship, what are my obligations, and what are his?
- How often do I thank God for the faith that others have? (verse 8)
- Am I willing to call God as my witness that I am telling the truth? (verse 9)
- When I visit a church, do I look for mutual encouragement? (verse 12)
- Do I have an obligation to share the gospel with other people? (verse 14)
- Am I ashamed of the gospel? (verse 16)

DOES GOD WANT TO PUNISH SINNERS? ROMANS 1:18-32

Paul introduces his letter to the Romans as a letter about the gospel, and he describes the gospel as “the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith.” In the gospel, he says, God’s righteousness is revealed. The good news is that God, in his righteousness, is giving us salvation.

After stating his thesis, Paul explains the gospel in more detail, starting with our need for the gospel. Why do we need this message of salvation? Left on our own, we would be trying to live and form societies in wrong-headed ways. Paul explains that we were not just going in a different direction — we were enemies of God. And we would naturally expect God to be angry at us. We need a message of good news so that we come to love God rather than be afraid of him.

The wrath of God

Paul explains the problem starting in verse 18: “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth.” God is angry at sin — and we should expect him to be. History books and newspapers report all sorts of crimes and atrocities that we should all be angry about. When one of our children hurts another, we should be angry. And many people believe that God is going to punish all the people who do evil.

However, there is something odd about this. It is like a prison warden who is so angry at the prisoners that he sends his son into the prison to tell them how to escape, and he gives them the key to his own home so they will have a place to live. This is not what we normally expect from “wrath.” The gospel reveals that our concepts of God’s wrath are wrong.

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Paul is turning religious assumptions upside down — he may begin with a concept like “wrath,” but he does not leave it there. The gospel reveals how Christ has turned things around. We cannot take verse 18 as Paul’s final statement on the matter, because it is not. It is merely the starting point in his explanation of the gospel. We have to see these verses as part of Paul’s *strategy* of explaining the gospel. He is starting with ideas that his readers probably agree with, but he explains that the gospel calls those assumptions into question.

People assume that God is angry at sinners because they sin even when they ought to know better. (In Paul’s day, it was generally people from a Jewish background who made this assumption; today it is generally Christian conservatives.) But as Paul will soon explain, this would mean that God is angry at absolutely everybody. Instead, the gospel reveals a God who loves people even when they are his enemies, a God who sets the ungodly right, a God who rescues people from their addictions. He wants us to *escape* the punishment.

Verse 19 describes some of the common assumptions about why God would be angry at sinners: “For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them.” How did he make it plain? Verse 20: “Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse.”

Modern science tells us that the universe had a beginning. There was nothing, and there was suddenly something — a big bang, creating and filling the universe. This colossal explosion had a cause, a cause that existed before time did, a cause that was not part of the world the big bang created. Many people conclude that the cause was God. However, this gives only a rudimentary understanding of what God is. People might deduce that God is eternal and supernatural, but it says nothing about morality, and nothing about salvation. The gospel reveals something different: a God who came to his people in a form they did not expect. God’s most important characteristics are revealed not by creation, but by Christ.

God could make himself plain if he wanted to. He could be a pillar of fire, or he could write messages in the sky. He could make his existence unavoidable, but he chooses not to. He allows people to ignore him and reject him. We are not forced to quiver in front of an overwhelming power, so that our love can be freely given.

A bad trade

But many people reject God: “for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened” (verse 21). This was the common Jewish explanation of idolatry, as we can see from other Jewish literature of this time period. Although people had an opportunity to know about God, they ignored him and did not show any appreciation to him. As a result, their thinking became futile — it did not produce any fruit. If we try to make sense out of life without God in the picture, we will never get the right answer.

“Claiming to be wise, they became fools; and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles” (verses 22-23). Most cultures claim to be wise, but if they think it is smart to reject truth and build on falsehood, then they are foolish. They are giving up something wonderful and ending up with snakes and fools to worship. Their gods are imitations, and can never be anything more than imitations.

Letting them do what they want

So what did God do? “Therefore God *gave them up* in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves” (verse 24). In the usual Jewish critique of paganism, God lets people suffer from the results of their erroneous ideas. They miss out on the wisdom and guidance of God. Jews commonly criticized the Gentile world about their sexual practices, and Paul uses that example as well. This is one way they “degrade” their bodies.

Paul repeats these thoughts in verses 25-26: “because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. For this reason God *gave them up* to degrading passions.” The people traded away truth and lived as if God did not exist. God was so “angry” that he let them do what they want.

Paul says: “Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error” (verses 26-27). Paul is not saying that God is going to punish them for their awful behavior. No, his emphasis is different. Paul is saying that God is *already* punishing them by letting them do these sexual sins. Paul is *shifting the meaning* of wrath and punishment.

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The sins that people commit are results of their self-chosen alienation from God. When we cut ourselves off from God, the things we want are often bad for us, and if God lets us do what we want, we end up doing things that are bad for us. Sexual sins are one example; Paul could have just as easily used greed as a different example, or dishonesty, or violence. Different problems appeal to different people, and if we just do what we want, we end up hurting ourselves as well as others.

Verse 28 puts it like this: “Since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God *gave them up* to a debased mind and to things that should not be done.”

Many examples

Paul gives many more examples in verses 29-31: “They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.”

People do not want to live in a world of greed and envy, murder and deceit. They don’t want a world of depravity, arrogance and slander, but without God, that is where they end up.

Paul is echoing part of the standard Jewish view of the world, and he is building rapport with his Jewish readers. But he is setting them up, we might say — after presenting this judgmental worldview, he is going to show that it condemns them just as much as it does the Gentiles. If God is obligated to punish all sinners, then he will have to punish absolutely everyone. But as Paul will soon explain, this way of looking at the world is not right. The gospel has a different view of sin and judgment — it reveals the righteous *mercy* of God.

Verse 32: “They know God’s decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die—yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practice them.” Maybe it seems harsh to say that a gossip deserves to die, and that envious people deserve to die. But it is true: no one can say that the universe owes them eternal life. If they turn away from the Author and the Giver of life, then it is natural that they would cut themselves off from life.

However, there is something odd about this verse. Paul is saying that the people deserve to die. Paul seems to be agreeing with this judgment; he seems to be condemning people to death for their sins. But in the very next verse (chapter 2, verse 1), Paul immediately starts criticizing people who

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pass judgment and condemn others! Is he criticizing himself? No, he is criticizing the worldview described in verse 32. The gospel reveals a God who gives salvation, and a God who is righteous in doing so. God's righteous decree *according to the gospel* is **life**, not death.

The gospel is the power of salvation, and the revelation of God's righteousness is the solution not only for the sins of paganism, but also the sin of being judgmental. God has acted to rescue people, to save them, to restore them to righteousness. As Paul will explain in later chapters, he has done it in Jesus Christ.

Questions

- In what way does creation inform me about God? (verse 20)
- Is it true that everyone has evidence of God? Why doesn't God make himself more obvious?
- Are foolish desires a sin or a punishment? (verse 24)
- Which of the sins am I most likely to commit? (verses 30-31)
- Is God's anger part of the gospel, or the setting in which the good news is revealed?

EVERYONE NEEDS THE GOSPEL

ROMANS 2

As part of Paul's presentation of the gospel, he explains why it is needed. Paul begins with a typical Jewish criticism of Gentiles, which says that people ought to know God but are willingly ignorant and therefore deserve to die. But there is something wrong with this view, Paul says.

All are guilty

In Romans 2:1 Paul says, "Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things."

Does Paul mean that if you accuse someone of murder, you have committed murder? No; we need to see the context. In Romans 1:29-31, Paul had mentioned a variety of sins: "They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless."

In Romans 2:1, Paul is saying that whenever people pass judgment on someone else, when they say that those who do such things deserve to die, they are guilty of *the same kind of thing* — a sin. We are all guilty of something, so we should not judge other people. (Paul will say more about that in chapter 14.) If we condemn someone, we are saying that sinners deserve to be punished (1:32). But since *we* have sinned, we also deserve to suffer the unpleasant consequences.

Paul writes: "You say, 'We know that God's judgment on those who do such things is in accordance with truth'" (2:2). The Greek text does not

have the words “you say.” Most translations present the verse as a statement of Paul; the NRSV says that this was part of the argument that others made. However, even if his opponents said this, Paul would probably agree with it, because God’s judgment is always in accordance with truth. The problem is that different people have different ideas about what that judgment is.

Verse 3 gives Paul’s response: “Do you imagine, whoever you are, that when you judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself, you will escape the judgment of God?” Everyone sins, so no one should be pointing fingers.

“Or do you despise the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not realize that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?” (2:4). If we judge others, we are showing contempt for God’s mercy — not only his mercy toward them, but also his mercy and patience toward us. God’s patience toward sinners should make us have a change of mind and be patient toward sinners, too.

Condemned by our works

In verse 5, Paul is still talking to the person who passes judgment on others: “But by your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath, when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed.” You might like to talk about the day of judgment, but if you persist in judging others, it will be worse for *you* on the day of judgment.

In the traditional view of judgment, God “will repay according to each one’s deeds: to those who by patiently doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life” (verses 6-7). If we take this out of context, it suggests that people can be saved on the basis of good works. But as Paul will soon argue, no one is good enough to earn eternal life through their works. This verse is part of the view that Paul is *critiquing* — he is not endorsing it. He is showing that this view of God’s judgment leads only to universal condemnation and despair. It is not good news.

“While for those who are self-seeking and who obey not the truth but wickedness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be anguish and distress for everyone who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek” (verses 8-9). This is where Paul wants to go — applying this Jewish worldview to the Jews. If God is in the business of applying righteous punishment on all sinners, he will do it for the Jews as well as the Gentiles, because “God shows no partiality” (verse 11).

God will give “glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good,

the Jew first and also the Greek” (verse 10). Paul will soon say that all have sinned; no one deserves glory, honor and eternal life.

In these verses Paul is describing *a judgment of rewards that will never happen*, because no one will ever qualify in this way. This is not a “straw man” that doesn’t exist, or a hypothetical situation that Paul made up just for the sake of argument — it was a view being taught by some people in the first century. Paul is showing that this religious belief is wrong; the gospel reveals that God envisions a much different outcome for humanity.

Equal treatment under the law

“All who have sinned apart from the law [Paul is referring to Gentiles here] will also perish apart from the law, and all who have sinned under the law [Jews] will be judged by the law” (verse 12). No matter who you are, if you sin, you will be condemned. This would be terrible news, if it weren’t for the gospel. The gospel is news we desperately need, and news that is very good — but it is especially good when we see how bad the alternative is.

Verse 13: “For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God’s sight, but the doers of the law who will be justified.” Paul is not saying that people can actually be declared righteous by their obedience — he says that no one can be declared righteous in this way (3:20). Is he inconsistent, as some scholars claim? No, not when we realize that these words are not his own view, but the view he is arguing against. He is showing that this way does not work. The gospel *reveals* something; the word “reveals” indicates that it was different from the previous Jewish view.

How can God condemn Gentiles for breaking his law when they don’t know what it is? The traditional view said they had a chance, but they blew it (1:19). It said that if they would have heeded their conscience, they would have done what was right: “When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them” (2:14-15).

As most people will admit, Gentiles keep *some* things required by the law. They teach that murder and theft are wrong. Gentiles have a conscience, and it sometimes says they did well — but sometimes it says that they did not. Even by their own standards, they fall short. That is how they can “sin apart from the law” (2:12). Even by their own standards, they fall short.

Paul tells us when this will happen in verse 16: “on the day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all.” Paul agrees with his opponents that there will be a day of judgment — but he introduces a big difference — this judgment will take place through Jesus Christ (cf. Acts 17:31).¹

This changes everything. Paul will explain what a difference it makes a little later. But he has not yet finished showing the futility of the opposing view.

Advantages of the Jews

In verse 17, Paul begins to address some arguments that Jews might have:

“But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast of your relation to God and know his will and determine what is best because you are instructed in the law, and if you are sure that you are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth...” (verses 17-20).

If you have these advantages, Paul is saying, “you, then, that teach others, will you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? You that forbid adultery, do you commit adultery? You that abhor idols, do you rob temples?” (verses 21-22). An individual reader might object: “I don’t steal and commit adultery.” But Paul is speaking of Jews *as a group*, and everyone knew that some Jews broke their own laws, even stealing from their own temple (Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.81-84).

Verse 23: “You that boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law?” If you have ever broken a law, you have dishonored God, and you are in the same category as thieves and adulterers — “sinner.” You know what you should do, and yet you fall short.

Paul uses Scripture to illustrate his point: “For, as it is written, ‘The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you’” (verse 24). Ezekiel 36:22 says that the Jews had caused God’s name to be blasphemed. Jews are not immune to sin, and are not immune to judgment. The “judgment according to works” view has nothing good to say to them.

The true people of God

In verse 25, Paul comments on an advantage Jews thought they had: “Circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law; but if you break the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision.” As Paul will soon

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argue, everyone has broken the law — and circumcision doesn't rescue anyone from the judgment.

“So, if those who are uncircumcised keep the requirements of the law, will not their uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? Then those who are physically uncircumcised [the Gentiles] but keep the law will condemn you that have the written code and circumcision [Jews] but break the law” (verses 26-27). Some Jews taught that Gentiles could be saved if they obeyed the laws *that applied to Gentiles*, without being circumcised. So in such a case, the Gentile would be better off in the judgment than the Jew — a reversal of the picture that Jews usually drew.

“A person is not a Jew [that is, not one of God's people] who is one outwardly, nor is true circumcision something external and physical. Rather, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart—it is spiritual and not literal. Such a person receives praise not from others but from God” (verses 28-29). Just as Deuteronomy 30:6 said, circumcision should be in the heart, not just in the flesh. Just because someone is circumcised on the outside does not mean that he is truly part of the people of God who will be accepted on the day of judgment.

Paul is rattling the underpinnings of the traditional view — but he is not yet done. He is pulling his punches as part of his rhetorical strategy. He is saving his most powerful arguments for the next chapter — at this point he wants people to keep reading even if they sympathize with the opposing view. His opponents would have to agree in principle with what he says so far, though they might be uncomfortable with it. Paul wants them to keep reading, and we need to do that, too, if we want to see what the gospel reveals in contrast to the traditional view.

God is perfectly fair. Some Gentiles do what is right, and some Jews do what is wrong. But if both peoples are judged by what they do, then what advantage is there in being Jewish? That is precisely the question that Paul raises in the next chapter.

Questions

- What is my attitude toward sinners? Do I tend to condemn?
(verse 1)
- How well do I appreciate God's mercy toward me? (verse 4)
- Does my conscience ever defend me? (verse 15)
- How is judgment part of the gospel? (verse 16)

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- If sin dishonors God (verse 23), what should my attitude be toward sin?
- What does it mean to have a Spirit-circumcised heart? (verse 29)

Endnote

¹ Paul has shifted the basis of the judgment from works to thoughts. Although we all sin in our thoughts (even more often than in our works), Paul has shifted the focus away from exterior things, subtly preparing for his focus on faith. The thoughts by which we will be judged are actually our thoughts about Jesus Christ.

FROM GUILT TO GRACE: ROMANS 3

In Romans 2, Paul explains that both Jews and Gentiles need the gospel — everyone needs salvation, or rescue from judgment. Although some Jews claimed to have an advantage in salvation, Paul explains that Jews are not immune to sin and judgment. Everyone is saved in the same way. So how do people become right with God? Paul explains it in chapter 3 — but first he has to answer some objections.

Any advantage for Jews?

Paul had preached in many cities, and he knew how people responded to his message. Jewish people often responded by saying: “We are God’s chosen people. We must have some sort of advantage in the judgment, but you are saying that our own law condemns us.” Paul asks the question that they do: “What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision?” (3:1). What’s the point of being a Jew?

Paul answers in verse 2: “Much in every way! First of all, they have been entrusted with the very words of God.” The Jews have the Scriptures. That is an advantage, but there is a downside to it — those who sin under the law will be judged by the law (2:12). The law reveals requirements that the people do not meet.

So what’s the advantage? Paul will say more about that in chapter 9. But here in chapter 3 his goal is not to explain how special the Jews are, but to explain that they, just like everybody else, need to be saved through Jesus Christ. He’s not going to elaborate on their privileges until he has explained their need for salvation — they haven’t kept the law that they boast about.

So Paul asks: “What if some [Jews] were unfaithful? Will their unfaithfulness nullify God’s faithfulness?” (3:3). Will the fact that some

Jews sinned cause God to back out of his promises?

“Not at all! Let God be true, and every human being a liar” (verse 4). God is always true to his word, and even though we are unfaithful, he is not. He won’t let our actions turn him into a liar. He created humans for a reason, and even if we all fall short of what he wants, his plan will succeed. God chose the Jews as his people, and they fell short, but God has a way to solve the problem — and the good news is that the rescue plan applies not only to Jews, but to everyone who falls short. God is more than faithful.

Paul then quotes a scripture about God being true: “As it is written: ‘So that you may be proved right when you speak and prevail when you judge’” (verse 4). This is quoted from Psalm 51:4, where David says that if God punishes him, it is because God is right. When God judges us guilty, it is because we are guilty. His covenant with Israel said that there would be unpleasant consequences for failure, and indeed, there had been many such times in Israel’s checkered history. God had done what he said he would.

Reason to sin?

Paul deals with another objection in verse 5: “But if our unrighteousness brings out God’s righteousness more clearly, what shall we say? That God is unjust in bringing his wrath on us? (I am using a human argument.)” Here is the argument: If we sin, we give God an opportunity to show that he is right. We are doing God a favor, so he shouldn’t punish us. It’s a silly argument, but Paul deals with it. Is God unjust? “Certainly not!” he says in verse 6. “If that were so, how could God judge the world?” God said he would judge the world, and he is right in doing so.

Paul paraphrases the argument a little in verse 7: “Someone might argue, ‘If my falsehood enhances God’s truthfulness and so increases his glory, why am I still condemned as a sinner?’” If my sin shows how good God is, why should he punish me? In verse 8 Paul gives another version of the argument: “Why not say — as some slanderously claim that we say — ‘Let us do evil that good may result’”? Paul stops dealing with the argument and repeats his conclusion by saying, “Their condemnation is just!” These arguments are wrong. When God judges us as sinners, he is right. The gospel does not give any permission to sin.

All have sinned

In verse 9 Paul returns to his discussion: “What shall we conclude then? Do we have any advantage?” Are we Jews better off than others? “Not at all! For we have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under the power of sin.” Jews have no advantage here, because we are all

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sinners — we are all under an evil spiritual force called sin. God does not play favorites, and he does not give salvation advantages to anyone.

In a rapid-fire conclusion, Paul quotes in verses 10 to 18 a series of scriptures to support his point that everyone is a sinner. These verses mention various body parts: mind, mouth, throat, tongue, lips, feet and eyes. The picture is that people are thoroughly evil:

- There is no one righteous, not even one [Ecclesiastes 7:20];
- There is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God.
- All have turned away, they have together become worthless;
- There is no one who does good, not even one [Psalms 14:1-3; 53:1-3].
- Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit [Psalm 5:9].
- The poison of vipers is on their lips [Psalm 140:3].
- Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness [Psalm 10:7].
- Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery mark their ways, and
- The way of peace they do not know [Isaiah 57:8-9].
- There is no fear of God before their eyes [Psalm 36:1].

Those scriptures are true about Gentiles, some Jews might say, but not about us. So Paul answers them in verse 19: “Whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law.” These Scriptures (the law in a larger sense) apply to people who are under the law — the Jews. They are sinners. Gentiles are, too, but Paul doesn’t have to prove that — his audience already believed that.

Why do the scriptures apply to the Jews? “So that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God.” Humanity will stand before the judgment seat of God, and the result is described in verse 20: “Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by the works of the law.” By the standard of the law, we all fall short.

What does the law do instead? Paul says: “Rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin.” The law sets a standard of righteousness, but because we sin, the law can never tell us that we are righteous. It tells us that we are sinners. According to the law, we are guilty.

A righteousness from God

Paul introduces the good news in verse 21 with the important words “But now.” He’s making a contrast: We can’t be declared righteous by the law, but there is good news—there is a way that we *can* be declared righteous: “But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify.” Here Paul gets back to what he announced in Romans 1:17, that the gospel reveals God’s righteousness.

Since we are sinners, we cannot be declared righteous by observing the law. It must be through some other means. God will declare us righteous in a way other than through the law. And although the law does not make us righteous, it does give evidence about another means of righteousness: “This righteousness is *given* through faith in Jesus Christ¹ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile” (3:22). This righteousness is a gift! We do not deserve it, but God *gives* us the status of being counted as righteous. He gives this to all who believe in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Because Jesus was faithful, we can be given the status of being righteous.

This pathway to righteousness gives no advantage to the Jew — all are counted righteous in the same way. There is no difference, Paul says, “for all have sinned” — both Jews and Gentiles have sinned — “and [everyone] falls short of the glory of God.” When our works are judged by the law, we all fall short, and no one deserves the salvation that God has designed for us. But our weakness will not stop God’s plan!

“All are justified [declared righteous] freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus” (verse 24). Because of what Jesus did, we can be made right, and it is done as a gift, by God’s grace. We are not made sinless and perfect, but in the courtroom of God, we are declared righteous instead of guilty, we are accounted as acceptable to God and as faithful to the covenant. Whether we feel forgiven or not, we *are* forgiven because Christ paid our debt in full.

What permits God to change the verdict? Paul uses a variety of metaphors or word-pictures to explain this. Jesus has paid a price to rescue us from slavery. He has bought us back; that is what “redemption” means. That is one way to look at it, in financial terms. Courtroom terms have also been used, and in the next verse Paul uses words from Jewish worship:

“God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood — to be received by faith.” God himself provided the payment, the sacrifice that sets aside our sin. For “sacrifice of atonement,” Paul uses the Greek word *hilasterion*, the word used for the mercy seat on

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top of the ark of the covenant, a place where Israel's sins were atoned every year on the Day of Atonement.²

Because of his love and mercy, God provided Jesus as the means by which we can be set "at one" with him. That atonement is received by us through faith; we believe that Jesus' death did something that allows us to be saved. Paul is talking about three aspects of salvation: The cause of our salvation is what Jesus did; the means by which it is offered to us is grace; and the way we receive it is faith.

God provided Jesus as an atonement, verse 25 says, "to demonstrate his righteousness" — to show that he is faithful to his promises — "because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished." Normally, a judge who let criminals go free would be called unjust (Exodus 23:7; Deuteronomy 25:1). Is God doing that? No, this verse says that God is not unjust when he justifies the wicked because he has provided Jesus as a means of atonement.

He is within his legal rights, to use a human analogy, in letting people escape because their sins have already been compensated for in the death of Jesus Christ. Even for people who lived before Christ, the payment was as good as done. In one sense, that applies to everyone, to the whole world: sins are paid for even before people become aware of it and believe it. But only those who believe it can be freed from the fear of punishment.

Romans 3:26 says that God "did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus." In the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, God demonstrates that he is just even when he declares sinners to be just. He has "earned the right" to count us as righteous.

All are equal

"Where, then, is boasting?" Paul asks in verse 27. Can the Jew boast about advantages over Gentiles? When it comes to salvation, there's nothing to boast about. We can't even boast about faith. Faith does not make us better than other people — we are only receiving what God gives. We can't take credit for that, or brag about it.

Boasting "is excluded. Because of what law? The law that requires works? No, because of the law that requires faith" (verse 27). If people were saved by keeping the law, then they could brag about how well they did. But when salvation is by grace and faith, no one can boast. Paul is making two points that reinforce each other: That no one can boast, and that righteousness is by grace rather than by the law or by works. It takes faith

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because we don't have the physical evidence to prove that we are righteous—all we have is the promise of God in Jesus Christ.

In verse 28, he says it again: “For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law.” Being counted right with God on the day of judgment can never be on the basis of the law. The law can't do anything except point out where we fall short. If we are going to be accepted by God, it will not be on the basis of the law, but because of the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

“Is God the God of Jews only?” Paul asks. “Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too, since there is only one God” (verses 29-30). God is not the exclusive possession of the Jews. According to the gospel, God “will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith.” He makes Jews righteous in the same way that he makes Gentiles righteous, and that is through faith, not through the law.

“Do we...nullify the law by this faith?” Of course not, Paul says in verse 31. “Rather, we uphold the law.” The gospel does not contradict the law, but it puts law in its proper place. The law was never designed as a means of salvation. But the salvation it hinted at is now available to all through Jesus Christ. Paul does not yet say how we “uphold the law.” For that, we will have to continue reading in his letter.

Questions

- Did the Jews, by having the Scriptures, have an advantage in salvation? (verse 2)
- Does our sin give God an opportunity to be more gracious? (verse 7)
- Are people really worthless, no one good for anything? (verses 10-12)
- If the law can't declare us righteous, what is it good for? (verse 20)
- In verses 22, 24, 26 and 28, Paul tells us how we are justified or declared righteous. What does he stress by repetition?
- How does Jesus' sacrifice demonstrate God's justice? (verse 25)
- How does Paul want us to respond to this chapter?

Endnotes

¹ The NRSV footnote on verse 22 says the Greek words can also mean “through the faith of Jesus Christ.” It is theologically correct that we are

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saved through the faithfulness of Jesus, through his obedience (see Romans 5:19). The only reason that we can have faith in him is because he was completely faithful. But in order for us to experience the results of his faithfulness, we also need faith in him, in what he did. We do not need to resolve the question about the best translation of Romans 3:22 at this point. It is possible that Paul's original readers were not completely sure of what Paul meant with this phrase. Paul may have given them a phrase that required them to continue reading to get the whole picture.

² The cover of the ark was the location of atonement, but it was not a place of sacrifice. It may therefore be better to translate *hilasterion* as "place of atonement," as done in the NRSV footnote. Some translations use the word "propitiation," a word Greeks used to describe someone appeasing the anger of the gods. But this would mean that God supplied something to appease his own anger, which implies that he didn't really *want* to be angry, but had to perform a ritual so he could get his original wish. This puts God into a convoluted position; it is simpler to say that God provided a means of atonement, because his original wish was atonement, being in fellowship with the humans he had created.

THE EXAMPLE OF ABRAHAM: ROMANS 4

In the last section of Romans 3, Paul declares that the gospel of salvation announces a righteousness from God, a righteousness that is given “through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe” (3:22). Believers are justified or saved by faith, not by observing the law (3:28).

But some people object: Paul, are you saying that the law is wrong? Paul answers: “By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law” (3:31). Paul began this section by saying the Law and the Prophets testify to this gift of righteousness (3:21). He began the entire letter by saying that his gospel had been promised in the Scriptures (1:2).

The law was designed to lead people to the gospel, and the gospel does not nullify the law in the same way that the Messiah does not nullify the prophecies that predicted his coming. Rather, he fulfills them. Similarly, the gospel fulfills the law, brings it to completion, and accomplishes what the law could only point at.

Abraham’s faith

Paul illustrates this with an example from the Old Testament. The patriarch Abraham is a great example of what Paul is saying — that salvation is given on the basis of faith, not through the law. In Romans 4, Paul elaborates on the meaning of both justification and faith. He asks in verse 1, “What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh?”

He sharpens the focus of the question by saying, “For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God” (verse 2). If Abraham was considered righteous because of his works, he would have something he could brag about, even though it would not put

him anywhere near to God.

Paul has already said that boasting is excluded (3:27). He is contrasting two approaches to righteousness — one based on what people do and can take credit for, as opposed to one that depends on faith, which they cannot brag about but merely accept with thanks. What kind of righteousness did Abraham have?

Paul finds an answer in the Law: “For what does the scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness’” (4:3, quoting from Genesis 15:6). Abraham’s belief was counted as righteousness. The patriarch, representing the entire nation (and even the world), was declared to be righteous not on the basis of what he did, but on the basis of believing God’s promise.

Justifying the wicked

Paul then begins to reason what this means. He builds the contrast between works and faith: “Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due” (verse 4). Abraham was given his status — if he had earned it through good works, then God would not have to credit his *faith* as righteousness. Some Jews thought that Abraham was perfect in his behavior, and God was obligated to count him righteous, but Paul is saying that, according to the Scriptures, Abraham had to be counted righteous on the basis of faith.

Paul then says, “But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness” (verse 5). Paul is increasing the contrast — he is not talking about someone who has both works and faith, but someone who believes but does not have good works. Of course, works normally follow faith. But at this point in the story, Abraham had only faith, and no works. He trusted God, and his faith was credited as righteousness.

Paul increases the contrast again by saying that God justifies the wicked. He is using a strong word, one not normally associated with Abraham. But Jews had only two categories of people: the righteous and the wicked. And if God had to intervene in order for Abraham to be counted as righteous, then that meant that he was not righteous beforehand, and he had been in the category of the wicked.

God does not need to rescue the righteous. He saves the wicked; there is no point in saving people who aren’t in any danger. Abraham was a sinner, but because of his faith, he is now counted as righteous.

Evidence from the Psalms

Paul will return to the example of Abraham in a few verses. But at this point he gives more evidence from the Old Testament that God can count the wicked as righteous. Paul uses Psalm 32, written by David, another highly respected patriarch of the Jewish people: “So also David speaks of the blessedness of those to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works: ‘Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the one against whom the Lord will not reckon sin’” (4:6-8).

David talks about someone who had sins, who would have to be counted wicked if judged by works, but who had all their sins forgiven. David didn’t mention faith here, but he is talking about a person to whom God credits righteousness apart from works. There is a way to be right with God that doesn’t depend on behavior. The sins are not counted against us.

For Jews only?

Paul then returns to the example of Abraham, asking, “Is this blessedness, then, pronounced only on the circumcised, or also on the uncircumcised?” (verse 9). Is the blessing of forgiveness available only to Jews, or also to Gentiles? Can Gentiles be counted among the righteous? “We say,” he reminds them, “‘Faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness.’ How then was it reckoned to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised” (verses 9-10).

Abraham was circumcised in Genesis 17. So in Genesis 15 (which is 14 years earlier), when his faith was counted as righteousness, he was not circumcised. Not only was Abraham credited with being righteous apart from works in general, he was counted as righteous apart from Jewish works in particular.

Therefore, a person doesn’t have to become Jewish in order to be saved. They don’t have to become circumcised, or keep the laws that distinguished Jews from Gentiles, because Abraham was a Gentile when he was counted as righteous. Abraham shows that God doesn’t mind calling sinners righteous, and he doesn’t require circumcision, or the laws of Moses.

Abraham “received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised” (verse 11). Abraham became circumcised 14 years later, but that doesn’t prove that we also need to become circumcised after we come to faith. Circumcision was simply a sign of the righteousness that he already had. That didn’t add

anything to his righteousness and didn't change his category.

Paul concludes, "The purpose was to make him the ancestor of all who believe without being circumcised and who thus have righteousness reckoned to them." Abraham is the father of all the Gentiles who believe. He set the precedent for an uncircumcised person being counted as righteous.

"And likewise [he is] the ancestor of the circumcised who are not only circumcised but who also follow the example of the faith that our ancestor Abraham had before he was circumcised" (verse 12). As Paul has already argued, a person is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly (2:28). To truly belong to the people of God, a person must be changed in the heart, not necessarily in the flesh. If Jewish people want to be counted among the people of God, they need faith — the same kind of faith that Abraham had before he was circumcised.

The basis of salvation is faith, not flesh. Gentiles don't need to copy Jews in order to be saved. Instead, Jews need to copy a Gentile — that is, Abraham, before he was circumcised. We all need to copy the Gentile named Abraham.

Faith, not law

Paul now brings the word *law* back into the discussion: "For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith" (verse 13). The law of Moses wasn't even around in the days of Abraham. Paul is saying that the promise wasn't given by law at all.

God didn't say, If you do this or that, I will bless you. No, he simply said he would bless him. It was an unconditional promise: "Abraham, you are going to have descendants enough to fill the earth, and the whole world is going to be blessed through you." Abraham believed that promise, and that is why he was counted as righteous. It was not on the basis of a law.

Because, Paul reasons, "If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null" (verse 14). It's either faith or law — it cannot be both. If we are saved by our works, then we are looking to our works, not trusting in God. If Abraham had earned this blessing by keeping a law, then there would be no point in mentioning his faith.

But even more seriously, Paul says that if salvation is by law, then the promise would be "void. For the law brings wrath" (verses 14-15). The promise would do us no good because we all fall short of what the law requires. We are sinners, and all the law can do for us is bring wrath and

punishment. It cannot deliver the promises, because by its criteria, we fall short.

If salvation is by the law, then we have no hope. The good news, however, is that “where there is no law, neither is there violation” (verse 15). If salvation is not on the basis of the law, then we cannot disqualify ourselves through our transgressions. Since the law is not part of the method by which we are saved, our sins are not part of the picture, either. They don’t take away what God has given to us by a promise (see 8:1).

By faith

“For this reason,” Paul says in Romans 4:16, “it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham” (verse 16). The promise given to Abraham was for uncountable descendants, and we can share in Abraham’s promise by being one of his descendants, through a spiritual union with Jesus, who descended from Abraham.

The promise of salvation comes to us by faith, by grace, not by works, and it is consequently guaranteed. We don’t have to be afraid that we will lose our salvation through some sin that we have trouble getting rid of. Grace doesn’t keep count of works, either good or bad. In this way, the promise goes not only to the Jews, but to all people. We just have to trust Jesus.

Abraham is “the father of all of us,” Paul concludes, and he follows it up with a confirming quote from the Torah: “As it is written: ‘I have made you the father of many nations’” (verse 17, quoting Genesis 17:5 and using the common word for Gentiles). Abraham is the father not just of the Jewish nation, but of many other nations. Gentiles are also his descendants, and they do not have to become Jewish in order to be counted.

Paul writes about “the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist” (verse 17). Why does Paul bring this up? Perhaps he is thinking of the spiritually dead — Gentiles and unbelieving Jews. God can rescue them, and he can take people who were alienated, and make them his people. He can take people who are wicked and call them righteous. He does not want them to remain wicked, but that is where they start.

Abraham’s faith

Paul concludes with a summary of the story of Abraham. His audience knew the story well, but Paul emphasizes certain points to reinforce what

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he has been saying:

“Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become ‘the father of many nations,’ according to what was said, ‘So numerous shall your descendants be.’ [Genesis 15:5]. He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised” (verses 18-21).

In his own flesh, Abraham didn’t have any reason to hope, but he had faith in what God had promised, and his faith was a witness to how great God is. Abraham knew that the promise was physically impossible, but he trusted in God’s power and faithfulness rather than in his own abilities.

In our salvation, too, we have no hope according to the flesh, no hope according to our works, but we can trust in the promise of God, given to Abraham and extended through Jesus Christ to all who believe in him. We should not be discouraged by our human inability to be righteous, but we should trust in the promise of God to count us righteous on the basis of faith. Paul reminds us that because Abraham trusted in God, “Therefore his faith ‘was reckoned to him as righteousness’” (Genesis 15:5). We don’t even believe as well as we ought to, but Jesus takes care of that for us, too. He is our judge, and that changes everything.

As his final point, Paul reasons that “the words ‘it was reckoned to him,’ were written not for his sake alone, but for ours also” (verses 23-24). Those words were not written for Abraham at all, for they were written long after he died. They were written for us, so that we will also have faith. We are the ones to whom righteousness will be reckoned: “to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead” (verse 24).

No matter whether we are Gentile or Jewish, we will be counted as righteous, as God’s people, if we trust in God. What he did for Jesus, he will do for us: raise us from the dead. He has done it before, and he will do it again.

Paul concludes the chapter with a brief restatement of his gospel message: Jesus Christ “was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification” (verse 25). The deed has been done; the promise has been given. He died for our sins, and he now lives to ensure that we are accepted by God. We need to accept his gift — the gift of righteousness — given to those who believe in Jesus Christ. If God can

raise the dead, he can save anyone!

Questions

- If God saves the wicked (verse 5), does that allow me to be wicked? Why would I want to be wicked?
- What is the seal or evidence of my righteousness? (verse 11)
- Does the law have any role in my salvation? (verse 14)
- If salvation is guaranteed (verse 16), can I refuse it or lose it?
- Am I discouraged by my own weaknesses? (verse 19)
- What gives me evidence that God will save me? (verse 24)

PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE OF SALVATION: ROMANS 5

In the first four chapters of Romans, Paul announced that the gospel is a message about the righteousness of God being given to people because of Jesus Christ. First, Paul described the problem: Everyone deserves to die because we all fall short of what God wants.

Then Paul described the solution: The gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. It is a gift, not a result of us keeping laws. In chapter 4, Paul proved this with the example of Abraham, who was declared righteous by God on the basis of faith before the laws were given. Salvation is by grace and faith, not by law or works.

Faith, hope and love

In chapter 5, Paul explains a little more — and in the process, he says a few things that have caused questions for centuries. We will discuss these and notice the main point that Paul makes. He says in verse 1, “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith” — that’s the main point of chapters 3 and 4 — “we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (NIV used in chapters 5-16). The problem between us and God has been fixed.

Before, we were sinners, enemies of God, and unless something was done, we deserved to be punished. But since we were powerless to do anything about it, God took the initiative — he sent his Son to bring us peace. In legal terms, we have been declared righteous, and in relationship terms, we are given peace instead of hostility.

It is through Jesus, Paul says in verse 2, that “we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of

the glory of God.” We enter grace, or forgiveness, by faith in what Christ did. When Paul says that we *stand* in grace, he implies that we can remain in this state. Because of God’s grace, based on what Christ did in the past, we rejoice in the hope that this gives us for the future—confidence that we will share in the glory of God. This hope is not just a wishful thought—it is guaranteed by what God has done for us.

This has practical results in our lives: “Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope” (verses 3-4). We rejoice not only in hoping for future glory, but we rejoice now, even when things are not going well for us.

We may not rejoice *because* of our sufferings, but we can rejoice *in* them. Trials and difficulties help us grow in determination to endure, and in our character, our consistency in doing the right thing even in difficult circumstances. If we stay on the right path, we can be confident that we will get to the goal. Our source of confidence is not in ourselves, but in what Jesus is doing in us.

Paul says more about hope in verse 5: “Hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.” We do not hope in vain, because even in this life we have benefits in Christ, such as the love that God puts into us. Our ability to love is increased because God begins to put his own characteristics into our hearts, and that includes love.

By doing this, God lets us know that he loves us, and he helps us love others, through the Holy Spirit living in us. God gives us something of himself, so we are changed to be more like he is. Through faith, God gives us hope and love. He is changing our outlook on life and the way we live.

Saved by his love

Paul then tells us what he means about God’s love: “At just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly” (verse 6). Who are the “ungodly”? We are! No matter how ungodly we have been, Christ is able to save us. He didn’t wait until we repented; he did not wait until we deserved it. No — he died for us while we were powerless. He helped us when we were helpless.

“Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die” (verse 7). It’s not likely that we can die for someone else, though some people do risk their lives to save others. This rare situation provides a contrast to Christ: “But God

demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (verse 8). He had to do it while we were sinners, because sin is what we had to be rescued from. So God took the initiative, sending Christ to die for us, and this demonstrates God’s love. He is good to us even when we are rebels; he gives generously even when we deserve nothing.

The action of Christ demonstrates the love of God, because Christ is God. They have the same love because they are one. When we have trials, we can look to Jesus as evidence that God loves us. His willingness to die for us should reassure us that God wants to help us, even at great cost to himself.

Paul draws a conclusion in verse 9: “Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God’s wrath through him!” Because of what Jesus did in the past, we are now forgiven, and on the day of judgment we will not be condemned—we will be counted among the righteous.

Paul explains his reasoning in verse 10: “For if, while we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!” If God did this much for us when we were enemies, we can be sure that he will accept us now that Jesus has reconciled us, and he now lives for us.

Not only is this so, but we also boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation (verse 11). We rejoice in the hope of the glory of God and we rejoice in our sufferings, but we especially rejoice in being reconciled to God, because he is better than all his blessings put together. We will spend eternity with a good relationship with God.

Christ and Adam

In the next section of this chapter, Paul makes a contrast between Adam and Christ. His question is, How can one person bring salvation to the whole world? Paul shows that in God’s way of doing things, one person can indeed have that much effect on others. “Therefore,” he begins in verse 12, and he follows it with a comparison — “just as such and such...” — but he does not finish the thought until verse 18. He first has to tell us how he reached his conclusion.

So verse 12 introduces to us what he wants to say: “Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned....” He’s going to say that just as sin entered the world through one person, salvation also entered the

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world through one person, and just as Adam brought death to all who followed him, Christ brought life to all who follow him.

Death is a consequence of sin (Genesis 2:17). Paul may be thinking of physical death, or of spiritual death. Either way, Christ brings life after death, life that reverses the results of sin.

This section of Romans 5 has been important in Christian theology because it teaches that all people are counted as sinful because Adam sinned. This is the doctrine of original sin. These verses say that Adam’s sin affected all humanity (for a summary, see Table 1). But Paul’s main point is the contrast between Adam and Christ (Table 2). In verse 12, Paul says that everyone sinned — that’s in the past tense. We all sinned when Adam sinned, because his sin counted for all his descendants. Because of what he did, we all sin and die. And since what Adam did affected everyone, it should be no surprise that what Christ (our Creator) did could also affect everyone.

In verse 13 Paul explains how he reached his conclusion: “Sin was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not charged against anyone’s account where there is no law. Nevertheless, sin reigned from the time of Adam to the time of Moses, even over those who did not sin by breaking a command, as did Adam, who is a pattern of the one to come” (verses 13-14).

People before Moses sinned, breaking unwritten laws. But Paul is connecting their sin with Adam. The people were counted as sinners not only because of

| |
|---|
| Table 1 |
| Adam and all humanity |
| sin entered the world through Adam (v. 12) |
| in this way death came to all people (v. 12) |
| the many died by the trespass of Adam (v. 15) |
| judgment on one sin brought condemnation (to all) (v. 16) |
| by the trespass of Adam, death reigned over all people through Adam (v. 17) |
| the result of one trespass was condemnation for all people (v. 18) |
| through Adam’s sin all people were made sinners (v. 19) |
| Summary: Because of Adam, all people are condemned as sinners and sentenced to die, because in Adam all people sinned. |

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their own sins, but also because of what Adam did. Adam was a pattern of a future man — Jesus. There is more contrast than similarity, as Table 2 shows.

“But the gift [of God] is not like the trespass. For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God’s grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many!” (verse 15). The grace of Christ is a total reversal of the sin of Adam. Everyone died because of Adam’s transgression, but because of Christ, everyone can live. Everyone was judged guilty because of Adam’s sin; everyone can be judged righteous through faith in Christ.

| verse | Table 2 | |
|-------|---|--|
| 12 | Adam brought sin and death to all humanity | |
| 15 | his sin caused the death of all his descendants | because of Christ, grace overflows to all |
| 16 | judgment on Adam’s sin condemned everyone | grace brought acquittal to all, even after many sins |
| 17 | death reigned over all because of Adam’s sin | with grace, people reign in life through Christ |
| 18 | his sin condemned all people to death | one act of obedience brings life to all people |
| 19 | one sin made many sinners | Christ’s obedience will make many righteous |

“Nor can the gift of God be compared with the result of one man’s sin: The judgment followed one sin and brought condemnation, but the gift followed many trespasses and brought justification” (verse 16). The contrast is partly in the numbers: one sin produced condemnation for all people, but even after a tidal wave of sins, one man brought justification for the same

people. Judgment said we deserved death, but grace said we were acceptable to God.

By being joined with Christ, we can be counted as righteous. Adam causes our condemnation, but the same principle (one person representing others) says that Jesus brings us salvation — not by our own works, but because of what Jesus did.

Paul gives another illustration in verse 17: “For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God’s abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.”

Because of the sin of Adam, death reigned over all humanity. It is even more certain, Paul says, that everyone can be saved through Christ, because he brings superabundant grace. Adam’s sin put us into bondage, being ruled by sin and death. Christ’s grace reverses that, moving us from being a slave to being a ruler: We reign in life through Jesus Christ. By being united with Christ, we have been brought from the kingdom of death into the kingdom of life. Instead of being dominated by the results of Adam’s sin, we are dominated by the results of Christ’s righteousness.

In verse 18, Paul finishes the thought he started in verse 12: “Consequently, just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people, so also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all people.” Just as Adam brought guilt and death to everyone, Christ brought justification and life for everyone. The extent of God’s grace is even more astonishing than the extent of the condemnation.

Verse 19 is similar: “For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.” Through the sin of Adam, everyone was made a sinner. In a similar way, but with opposite results, all who trust in Christ are made righteous — given the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

Just as we receive guilt from Adam, so also our guilt is given to Jesus, and his death counts for ours. We were represented by Jesus on the cross, just as we were represented by Adam when he sinned. The bad news is more than reversed in Jesus Christ: he has brought justification for everyone who believes. With Jesus, we are given more than Adam ever had.

The reign of grace

Paul has dealt with the time between Adam and Moses. Now he makes a brief comment about the law of Moses: “The law was brought in so that the trespass might increase” (verse 20). This is a surprising purpose of the law.

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It could not reduce sin or forgive sin — it could only increase sin. The more rules there are, the more transgressions there will be. The law showed us that humanity is sinful — fatally flawed — and in need of a Savior.

“But where sin increased, grace increased all the more...” The grace of God is more than enough to take care of the increase in sin. “Just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (verse 21). Christ is the solution to the problem of sin and death. Before Christ, everyone was in Adam, under the domination of sin and death. Now, grace overpowers sin, bringing the gift of righteousness, and with it, the gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Questions

- Is it realistic to have glory in my sufferings? (verse 3)
- How has God’s love changed my heart? (verse 5)
- Was there a time in my life when I was an ungodly sinner, an enemy of God? (verses 6-10)
- Do I believe that everyone is counted guilty because Adam sinned? (verses 12-19)
- Do I believe that I can be counted righteous because of Christ? (verse 19)

ENSLAVED TO RIGHTEOUSNESS

ROMANS 6

In Romans 5, Paul says that Christ saved us even while we were sinners. We are saved by grace, not by keeping the law. He ends that chapter by saying, “Where sin increased, grace increased all the more” (Romans 5:20). God’s grace is always larger than our sin.

In chapter 6, Paul deals with a possible objection: “What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?” (Romans 6:1). If grace is so easy, should we bother to change our ways? Whenever the gospel is clearly presented, this question comes up. If all our sins are so easily forgiven, why worry about sin? Should we continue to sin?

“By no means!” Paul exclaims. We should avoid sin, even though our salvation does not depend on our success in quitting sin. Obedience has a different purpose. If faith in Christ led to automatic victory over all sin, then the question would not come up. But sin continues to be a reality we must deal with in our lives — a reality we must resist.

Death of the sinful self

In verse 2, Paul says: “We died to sin. How can we live in it any longer?” If we want to escape death, then we should also want to escape the cause of death — sin. But more importantly, when we believe in Christ, we become new people. In the language of Romans 5, we are no longer people of Adam, but now we are people of Christ Jesus. We are to live in him, to live in that mode rather than the way that Adam did it.

Paul explains this in verse 3: “Don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?” We are baptized not just into the name of Christ — we are baptized into him and united

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with him. When we are identified with Adam, we get the death that Adam brought. When we are identified with Christ, we get the righteousness and life that he brought. When he died, we died, and when he was buried we were buried, and when he rose we also rose. We were with him, because he represented all of us.

We don't tend to think of many people being "in" one person, but this is the way Paul is describing our salvation. All humanity was "in Adam" (1 Corinthians 15:22); now we are in Christ. And because we are united with Christ, his death counts as ours.

Paul draws this conclusion in verse 4: "We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death..." Baptism pictures not only a sharing in Jesus' death, but also a sharing in his burial. But why is that significant for the question about sin?

Paul explains the purpose in the last part of verse 4: "...in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life." In the same way that we died with Christ, we also rise with Christ into a new life, and this implies that we should live in a different way than we used to.

Although baptism symbolizes this burial and new life, Paul's point does not depend on symbolism — it depends on our union with Jesus Christ. Not only does baptism unite us with Jesus in his death and burial, it also unites us with his resurrection and his life. The old self is dead, and yet we live — we have a new life, and that means a new approach to life.

Paul explains more in verse 5: "For if we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection." Our union with Christ brings not only justification, the benefit of sharing in his death — it also brings the benefit of eternal life, of sharing in his resurrection. This affects the way we live. We are to live in a way that reflects our future life with Christ.

Paul seems to be saying something like this: Why would anyone want to be joined to sin on the one hand, and joined to Christ on the other? Why would anyone want to live forever with righteousness, if they want to live in sin right now?

"For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with" (verse 6). Our old self was a descendant of Adam, a body under the power of sin, and that died on the cross. Our former identification with Adam is dead; we are no longer his, but we belong to Christ.

Here's why we were killed: "...that we should no longer be slaves to sin

— because anyone who has died has been freed from sin” (verses 6-7). In the death of Christ, pictured in our baptism, our former selves were given the penalty of sin — death. Since the penalty has been paid, sin has no authority over us.

Paul is introducing new metaphors: slavery and freedom. Sin is not just something we do — it is a power that works against us, a power that enslaves us, a power we must be freed from. When we die with Christ, we are liberated from this evil slavemaster. We do not go on serving it, but we live a new way of life. We do not do it perfectly, but this is what the Christian life is for.

Alive to God

Paul now starts to emphasize life. “If we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him” (verse 8). We will live with him in the resurrection, but the question in this chapter is about life right now. So what is Paul’s point?

“For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. The death he died, he died to sin once for all” (verses 9-10). Jesus was not brought back to mortal life, as Lazarus was. Rather, Jesus was raised to immortal, imperishable life. Death had mastery over him for a short time, just as sin once had mastery over us. But Jesus has been freed from that power, and as we are united with Christ, we are freed from those powers, too.

Paul mentions the example of Jesus in the last part of verse 10: “but the life he lives, he lives to God.” So we are to model our lives after Christ: “In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus” (verse 11). This is the choice set before us. We can serve sin, or we can serve God.

When sin offers us something tempting, we are to answer: No, that’s the old way, and I am supposed to die to that. That is not the kind of life that I want. If we believe we will live with Christ in the future, we should also believe that he has overcome the power of sin and death, and he liberates us from these powers in this life. We still sin, but it does not have the final authority in our lives. It cannot force us to sin. We are no longer slaves of sin.

This is not automatic, or Paul wouldn’t have to tell us to do it. We must remind ourselves of who we are: children of the Savior, not children of the sinner. Just as Christ died to sin, we are to resist sin day by day, and this is the new life we are to live.

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But the Christian life is not simply a matter of refusing sin, of playing dead. We are supposed to be alive — alive to God, because we are in Christ Jesus. Our desire to live for him should be very much alive!

“Therefore,” Paul writes in verse 12, “do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires.” Christians should not continue in sin. We do sin, but we can be confident that God does not count our sins against us. Our salvation is not in jeopardy, but we are still commanded to obey God and to quit sinning.

There is a battle going on for our bodies. The old slavemaster, sin, has been defeated by Christ, but sin continues to attack us nevertheless. It tries to rule us, but we are not supposed to let it. Sin will take over as much as we allow, so we must resist it — not let it rule in our mortal bodies. Paul says: Don’t give up. Fight against it. (If you really like sin, you are not going to enjoy eternal life with Jesus. You will experience it as eternal frustration instead.)

“Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness” (verse 13). There’s a battle going on for control of your body. Will you let sin have its way, or will you let God have his way? You have been brought from death to life, so let God win, Paul says.

How do we do that? By giving him our bodies as tools or weapons he can use for righteousness. We shouldn’t let sin use our body parts as tools to make us more wicked. Instead, we need to let God use our bodies as weapons of righteousness, as people who work for his kingdom.

“For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace” (verse 14). If we were under the authority of the law, then we would be condemned as sinners, and sin would have the final say in our lives. We would die. But we are not under the law, and not under its penalty. Death has been conquered, the power of sin has been broken, and the captives of sin have been set free!

Since we are under grace, sin is not our master. Going back to sin makes no more sense than running back to our old slavemaster, or for a prisoner who has been pardoned running back to his old jail cell. In grace and in salvation, sin is what we are getting away *from*.

If it weren’t for grace, we would be condemned whether we tried to do right or not. If there were no grace, we might as well continue in sin, because our efforts wouldn’t make any difference. So grace gives us the

freedom to escape from sin and to live for righteousness. It makes no sense to seek salvation at the same time as seeking sin.

Slaves of righteousness

“What then?” Paul asks in verse 15. “Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!” Paul is dealing with the same question, this time from a different angle. God does not want us to sin. We are supposed to obey God.

Paul then develops the analogy of slavery a bit further to make his point: “Don’t you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey — whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness?” (verse 16).

If you choose sin, you are enslaving yourself to a master who will beat you, make your life miserable, and work you to death. What’s our choice? We are not completely independent — we are slaves of one power or the other. We have no choice about that, but we do have a choice about who will be our master. We can choose sin, or we can choose God. Why not choose to be a slave of obedience, a slave of doing right? The rewards are much better, not only in the next life but in this one, too.

The Romans had already made the right choice: “But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness” (verses 17-18). Obedience is a normal result of faith (1:5).

Why was Paul using the analogy of slavery? “I put this in human terms because you are weak in your natural selves. Just as you used to offer the parts of your body in slavery to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer them in slavery to righteousness leading to holiness” (6:19).

The Romans were weak — all Christians are, in their natural selves. The Romans were slaves of righteousness, and yet they needed to be exhorted to continue. We fight against sin as long as we live in our mortal bodies. It is an enemy that should be resisted. If we don’t resist, it gets worse and worse — ever-increasing wickedness.

We want to be enslaved to doing good. That is because we are already saved, not because we are trying to earn our salvation. We do good works because they are good, because our Savior wants us to do good. When we do that, it gets better and better — righteousness leading to holiness.

“When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of

righteousness” (verse 20). Each slavery has a form of freedom. When we sin, it might look like we are free from outside control, but we are really in slavery. “What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death!” (verse 21). Sin produces death, and we do not want to serve that kind of master. What looked like liberty, actually brought bondage.

“But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life” (verse 22). Now, we are no longer under sin’s authority. We are freed from one power, but we are also under obligation: We are slaves to God. However, his benefits are infinitely better: holiness and eternal life.

The word *slavery* is an analogy — it is not a complete description of our relationship to God. Far more often, Scripture describes our relationship as one of dearly loved children, or as inheritors of great wealth. The word *slavery* is useful only insofar as it emphasizes our responsibility to obey.

In what sense is eternal life the “result” of obeying God? Paul would vigorously deny that our obedience causes our salvation — he clearly says that salvation is a gift, based on faith rather than works, on grace rather than payment. Here, Paul is simply making a contrast: obedience leads to holiness instead of shame, and to eternal life instead of death.

Why should we deny sin and obey God? “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (verse 23). If we serve sin, we get wages — something we deserve: shame and death. But if we serve God, we get eternal life as a gift, something we didn’t deserve. Choose life, Paul says. Let righteousness rule! Be alive in Christ, not dead in your sins.

Questions

- Does the abundance of grace encourage sin? Does it give me any motivation to fight sin? (verse 1)
- In what way is my life different now than before Christ? (verse 4)
- Do I feel freed from sin? Do I have habits that enslave me? (verse 14)
- In what way did Jesus die to sin? (verse 10). How can I count myself dead? (verse 11)
- In what way am I “under” grace? (verse 14)
- What sins enslave people today? Are there “respectable” sins?
- Do I feel enslaved to righteousness? (verse 18)

THE THREE-WAY STRUGGLE: LAW, SIN, AND ME — ROMANS 7

In his letter to the Romans, Paul has explained that we are saved by grace, not by observing the law, because Christ died for us. This does not give us permission to sin — rather, we should serve God by being slaves of righteousness. Paul clarifies the relationship between law and sin in chapter 7. He begins by giving us an analogy from marriage, and he speaks to the Jewish believers, because they are the ones who are most concerned about the law.

An illustration from marriage

“Do you not know, brothers and sisters — for I am speaking to those who know the law — that the law has authority over someone only as long as that person lives?” (7:1). Paul has already argued in chapter 6 that believers died with Christ, and we have therefore died to sin. In chapter 7, he will argue that, in our union with Jesus Christ, we also died to the law. When we die to sin, we also die to the law. The law can no longer prosecute us, because in the eyes of the law, we are dead.

However, Christians have been given *new* life with Christ, so where does that put us? Paul’s second point is that we are under a new authority. In verse 2, Paul uses the analogy of marriage, in which death affects the legal status of the living: “For example, by law a married woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive, but if her husband dies, she is released from the law that binds her to him.” The law of marriage has force only as long as *both* partners are alive. As soon as one dies, the marriage restrictions are gone.

By analogy, Jews were once bound to *the law*. But since they died with

Christ, they are released from the law, and as a result, a *new* union can be formed. That's what Paul is interested in — the new union: “So then, if [a woman] has sexual relations with another man while her husband is still alive, she is called an adulteress. But if her husband dies, she is released from that law and is not an adulteress if she marries another man” (verse 3). Because a death has occurred, a new relationship can be formed.

A new authority in our lives

Paul applies his analogy to the law in verse 4: “So, my brothers 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.”

Paul's point is that Jesus' death breaks a person's bond with the law, and a new bond is permitted. The Jewish believers died to the law through the death of Christ, and their allegiance is now to Christ rather than the law. We are released from the law and united to Christ.

Jesus was born under the law, but in his death and resurrection, he escaped its obligations. The *risen* Christ does not have to keep the Sabbath or the other laws of Moses, and when we are in Christ, we don't have to keep them, either.

We *are* supposed to avoid sin, but sin is no longer defined by the laws of Moses. Rather, it is defined by the character of Christ. We are to conform to him, and since he is not bound by the law of Moses, neither are we. We belong to the one “who was raised from the dead.” Why? To “bear fruit for God.” We are to serve him.

Paul contrasts the before and after again in verse 5: “When we were in the realm of the flesh [some translations say “sinful nature” — the Greek word is *sarx*], the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in us, so that we bore fruit for death.” Before Christ, everyone was dominated by our sinful nature, and so our sinful desires brought us death instead of bearing fruit for God. But with Christ, our life is no longer controlled by the flesh.

Paul says that our sinful passions were “aroused by the law.” As he said in Romans 5:20, the law had the ironic result of *increasing* our desire to sin. Before Paul develops that thought more, he makes this conclusion in verse 6: “But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been 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.”

The law was once binding, but we have been *released* from it. Instead of

serving God according to the law, we serve in a *new* way, defined by the Holy Spirit. Paul explains that in chapter 8; the rest of chapter 7 is a discussion of law and sin.

The law and sin

“What shall we say, then? Is the law sinful?” (verse 7). If the law causes our desire for sin to increase, is the law bad? “Certainly not! Nevertheless, I would not have known what sin *was* had it not been for the law.” The law reveals what sin is (Romans 3:20) — and that is a dangerous bit of knowledge.

Paul illustrates the problem with the tenth commandment: “For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, ‘Do not covet.’ But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of coveting” (verses 7-8). Paul, like everyone else, had covetous desires, and the law told him that his desires, although normal, were sinful. Paul could keep the external rules of Judaism, but he couldn’t prevent himself from coveting, and he learned from the law that this was sin.

But the relationship between law and sin is worse than simply giving information. Paul is saying that the law, by defining sin, told his sinful nature how to *sin more*. Our sinful nature wants to violate laws. If you give it a rule, it wants to break it, to assert its independence. So the law, by prohibiting certain things, made people do those things even more, because of our perverse nature.

Is Paul talking about himself, or is he giving a general principle, writing in the first person as a literary method? Some people are troubled by the idea that Paul struggled with sin. They would like to put all that struggle in Paul’s past. But Paul does not describe his past as troubled (Philippians 3:6).

In chapter 6 Paul says that we died to sin, but we still have to fight it. In chapter 7 he says that we died to the law, but we are to serve Christ in the way of the Spirit. He does not want to make it sound effortless or automatic. The struggle that began before we came to faith¹ continues even *after* we come to faith — at least that’s the experience of most Christians.

“Apart from the law, sin was dead. Once I was alive apart from the law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died” (verses 8-9). When was Paul alive “apart from the law”? When he was a baby, too young to understand. But when he learned the law, the sinful nature inside of him found a way to express itself — by rebelling. Sin sprang to life, and Paul sinned, and he was condemned. Some commentators say that Paul is

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speaking here of Adam, who was alive before the law, but failed after a commandment was given.

Paul said, “I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death” (verse 10; see also Romans 4:15). Paul is apparently speaking from a human perspective here, for in Galatians 3:21 he says that the law could not bring life, so presumably God did not *intend* for it to bring life. Instead, it brought death. The law showed people what would happen if they went this way, or if they went that way. It gave guidance, but did not force people go either one way or the other.

The Jews assumed that the law would give people life, but it actually gives death. Why? Because sin took over. That’s what Paul says in verse 11: “For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death.” Since sin breaks rules, and the law offered rules, it allowed sin to exercise itself. The law allowed sin to trick me, and I got death when I was trying to get life. When people try to be righteous by keeping the law, they are relying on themselves instead of relying on God, and that is a sin.

The law is not the problem — it’s just that it is so easily hijacked by our sinful desires. The law didn’t cause us to take a wrong turn — it just told us which direction was wrong — and the perversity inside us made us take the wrong turn. Sin deceived us and put us on the pathway to death. The law isn’t the culprit — it was an unwitting accomplice. So Paul concludes in verse 12 that “the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good.” The law is holy, but it can’t make *us* holy.

Were the laws of animal sacrifices good? Yes, because God gave them — but that doesn’t mean they are required today. We can’t use this verse to support any specific laws, because Paul isn’t being specific here. He is just saying that God’s law, no matter how you define it, is not the cause of the problem.

So Paul asks, “Did that which is good, then, become death to me?” (verse 13). Did the law cause my death? Certainly not, he says. Criminals can’t blame the *law* for their crimes. Rather, the law just tells us whether we have done wrong, and the consequences of doing wrong.

“Nevertheless,” Paul says, “in order that sin might be recognized *as* sin, it used what is good [the law] to bring about my death, so that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful.” The law is good, but sin hijacks it and uses the law to bring us death. God allowed this so we could see how terrible sin is.

The struggle inside us

Paul describes a conflict: “The law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin” (verse 14). Could this be the *Christian* Paul, who said he died to sin and is no longer its slave? Could Paul describe himself as unspiritual, a slave of sin?² Let us keep reading to see.

In verse 15 he describes the struggle: “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do, I do not do, but what I hate I do.” He wants to do good, but he ends up doing bad. He has a mind that wants to do good, but a body that does bad. Why? Because, as we will soon see, there is another power at work within him.

“And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good” (verse 16). “If I sin even though I don’t want to sin, I am implying that the law is good” (my paraphrase). The fact that he doesn’t like his own behavior is evidence that he likes the law.

“As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me” (verse 17). Paul explains the problem by metaphorically splitting the person in two! There is “the real me,” and there is “sin living in me.” All the blame goes to sin; the “real me” is not guilty.

Paul is not trying to get pagans off the hook; he is not saying that people “in Adam” love God’s law and *they* are not sinning, but rather it is sin in them that should be blamed. No. By distinguishing the “real me” from the “sin living in me,” he seems to be saying that the “real me” is the person in Christ. This is why he can say that there is no condemnation for people in Christ (8:1). Whatever bad they do is blamed on the sin within them, not on the new person they are in Christ.

Being freed from sin and obeying righteousness is not automatic — it involves a struggle. Galatians 5:17 describes it: “The flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are *in conflict* with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want.” There is the old person, in the sphere of sin, and there is the new person in Christ. The new person is enslaved to Christ, but the sinful nature is still enslaved to sin, and they are both vying for our attention.

But didn’t Paul say that the old person is dead? Yes, he did. He is using metaphors to try to explain things, and we cannot expect the comparisons to extend further than what Paul intends. For *legal* authority, the old person is dead. The law, sin and death no longer have authority over us. But in terms of Christian life, the sinful nature still has its desires, and we should resist it. The struggle is real.

“Good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature” (Romans

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7:18). Paul qualifies his statement by saying that he's talking about the flesh, the sinful nature, not his new nature in Christ. All the *good* in Paul's life comes from Christ living in him, rather than originating in Paul. The good comes from the new nature, the bad comes from the old, and the Christian life involves fighting against the old.

"I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do — this I keep on doing" (verses 18-19). Paul is a saint, but he's not sinless. He wants to do good, but he sometimes sins. The sin within him is hijacking him, making him do things he wouldn't otherwise do.

"Now if I do what I do not want to do [that is, when I sin], it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it" (verse 20). Paul blames sin, not himself. What he said in verse 14, that he was a slave to sin, is only the way it *appeared* to be. The reality, he says, is that all my sins are blamed on this hostile power within me. It is not me, but my old sinful nature that is still enslaved to sin.

Paul summarizes it in verses 21-23: "So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law [or principle] at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me." As a Christian, he wants to do right, but it's a struggle.

His mind wars against his body, which has been hijacked by sin. Although he wants to do good, the evil within him sometimes causes him to do things that he hates. So he *groans*, as he says in Romans 8:23, waiting for the redemption of his body, the resurrection and the *ultimate* victory over his sinful nature.

"What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?" (verse 24). How will I escape the sinful nature that fights within me? Paul knows where his deliverance will come from: "Thanks be to God, who delivers me [present tense] through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (verse 25a). Paul is in the *process* of being delivered. It's a lifelong struggle, but the victory is sure, thanks to God! How does it happen? That's what Paul covers in chapter 8 — life in the Spirit, extending into eternity. That's where the battle is won.

Paul concludes this chapter with a summary: "So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in my sinful nature a slave to the law of sin" (verse 25b). Even after he talks about the deliverance being given to him by Christ, Paul uses the metaphor of a split personality: there is the real

me, and there is sin living in me. There is a struggle between mind and body. He is enslaved to the law of Christ, but he sometimes falls short. He's got a new mind, but an old body, and he looks forward to all things being made new!

Questions

- In Paul's analogy, is it possible to be obligated to the law and united to Christ at the same time? (verse 3)
- The commandment against coveting helped Paul see that he was sinful (verses 7-8). Have I had a similar experience to help me realize that I am sinful?
- If the commandment brings me death instead of life, how can it be good? (verses 10, 12)
- Have I struggled with sin in the way that Paul describes in verses 15-20?
- If I blame my sins on a hostile power within me (verse 20), do I reduce the importance of fighting against it?
- Is God delivering me from the slavery of sin and death? (verse 24).

Endnotes

¹ Some people do not experience much of an internal struggle before they come to faith. Perhaps like Paul, they felt that they were successfully doing all that they ought to do. Others served sin and did not struggle against it. The struggle can become more intense after we come to faith and perceive how far short we are of the life we want with Christ.

² There are several explanations of this passage: that Paul is describing his own life before Christ, or his life after Christ, or he is using "I" as a literary convention to describe people in general. In some ways, these views amount to the same thing. If Paul is describing himself, he shares his own experience because he thinks it is representative of others. And if it describes people in general, then it applies to Paul as well. As a Pharisee, Paul would not have described himself as a slave of sin, but his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus showed him that that's exactly what he was. Once he realized that God's righteousness was much deeper than the law, he would have also realized how much sin had infected him.

SHARING IN THE LIFE OF CHRIST

ROMANS 8:1-17

Paul's letter to the Romans can be divided into three major parts: a presentation of the gospel (chapters 1-8), the place of Israel in God's plan (chapters 9-11) and exhortations for Christian living (chapters 12-15). Chapter 8 comes near the end of Paul's explanation of the gospel. It is the climax, and the truths that Paul discusses are astonishing.

No condemnation!

The chapter begins with an astonishing statement: "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death" (verses 1-2).

Because of what Christ has done, believers are not counted guilty and will not be punished on the day of judgment. We sin, but there is no condemnation. If we didn't sin, the question of condemnation wouldn't even come up. Paul knows that we sin, so he is saying, there is no eternal punishment for Christians even though they sin.

Hard to believe? Yes, because we know that sin deserves to be punished. Paul agrees, but the gospel announces that Christ has taken our sins, and the consequences, on himself. Because he paid the penalty in full, we do not need to pay it again. Christ has already experienced the penalty of our sins, so there is no further condemnation waiting for us. If we have faith in him, if our lives are in him, we do not need to be afraid. Sin has physical penalties in this life, but for those who are in Christ, it has no ultimate penalty for us.

Why? Because Jesus has set us free from the law of sin and death, set us

free from the only law that could possibly condemn us. The law that says, “Those who sin shall die,” no longer applies to us, because it has been taken care of — completely. We died with Christ, and it is no longer we who sin, but the sinful nature inside of us that does it (7:17). It will die, and we who are in Christ will live eternally.

God does not want us to sin, but even if we sin, we will not be condemned because of what Jesus has done for us. The law could not give us eternal life, but God could, and he did it through the death of Christ. “For what the law was powerless to do [that is, to give life] because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in the flesh” (Romans 8:3).

Jesus did not come to condemn sinners — he came to condemn sin. He came to punish sin, to take away its power to control us and kill us. He came to give us life, and to do it in such a way that “the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us” (verse 4). In his life and in his death, Jesus satisfied all the requirements of the law. It cannot demand anything more.

Life in the Spirit

Paul then tells us that Christians “do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit” (verse 4). We do not set our minds on what the flesh wants, “but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires” (verse 5). We are not perfect, but as we are led by the Spirit, we think and do the things of God.

Before we came to believe, our minds were headed for death. The unconverted mind “is hostile to God. It does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so.” It is rebellious and disobedient. Paul concludes, “Those who are in the realm of the flesh cannot please God” (verses 6-8).

But now, we “are not in the realm of the flesh but are in the realm of the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, they do not belong to Christ” (verse 9). The Holy Spirit lives in and guides everyone who belongs to Christ, and “the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace” (verse 6). If we don’t even *want* to live right, we do not belong to Christ (in the sense that Paul is using it here).

Our old bodies are dead because of sin, and they received their wages on the cross (6:2-6). In Christ, though, we have new life — “But if Christ is in you, then even though your body is subject to death because of sin, the Spirit gives life because of righteousness” (8:10). Because Christ is

righteous, and we are in him, the Spirit gives us life.

“And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead [i.e., the Father] will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit, who lives in you” (verse 11). God will also raise us, if his Spirit is living in us. Our bodies will be raised like his — immortal, incorruptible and glorious. The Holy Spirit plays an essential role in our salvation.

Our obligation

“Therefore, brothers and sisters, we have an obligation,” Paul says (verse 12). It is not to live according to the flesh, for if we do that, we will die (verse 13). Paul does not directly say what our obligation is, but his contrast implies that we are obliged to live according to the Spirit of God. There is no ultimate penalty for failure, Paul says in verse 1, but the obligation still remains: “if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live” (verse 13). We are called to serve the Spirit, not the flesh. We are commanded to serve God, not self. We are commanded to resist sin.

The old person is condemned; the new person is not. Therefore, we want to spend as much of life as we can in the new. Whatever we do according to the sinful flesh will die, but whatever we do in obedience to God will be of eternal value. The more we reject sin and the more we obey God, the more we are really alive. “For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God” (verse 14). If we are in Christ, we are guided by the Spirit into a life that pleases God. Our obedience is led by the Spirit; we cannot take credit for it. Paul says that the life he has now is Christ in him (Galatians 2:20); Paul cannot take credit for the work that Christ does in him (Romans 15:18).

The Spirit does not enslave us or frighten us with threats of condemnation, but gives us a secure membership in God’s family: “The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, ‘Abba, Father.’ The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children” (verses 15-16).

Since the Spirit lives in us, we can confidently call God our Father — and this has important implications. “If we are children, then we are heirs — heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ...” (verse 17). This means an assurance of salvation and an assurance of glory — but it also means that we suffer, as Jesus did. “...if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that

we may also share in his glory.”

When our lives are placed in Christ, then we share in his life, both the good and the bad. We share in his sufferings, in his death, in his righteousness and in his resurrection. As God’s children, we are co-heirs with Christ, sharing in who he is and what he has done. We are united with him — forever in glory!

Questions

- If there is no condemnation for believers (verse 1), should we ever have feelings of guilt? Why?
- In what way does the Spirit “control” our minds? (verse 6)
- How do we get the ability to put our misdeeds to death? (verse 13)
- When we call God “Father,” do we feel fear, or privilege? (verse 16).

THE CERTAINTY OF GOD'S LOVE

ROMANS 8:18-39

Throughout the book of Romans, Paul has argued that God counts us as righteous because of what Christ has done. Even though we sometimes sin, those sins are counted against the old self that was crucified with Christ; our sins do not count against who we are in Christ. We have an obligation to fight sin — not in order to be saved, but because we are already children of God. In the last part of chapter 8, Paul turns his attention to our glorious future.

All creation is waiting for us

The Christian life is not easy. Fighting sin is not easy. Enduring persecution is not easy. Coping with day-to-day life in a fallen world, with corruptible bodies, has its difficulties. Nevertheless, Paul says, “our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us” (verse 18). Just as there was for Jesus, there is joy set before us — a future so wonderful that our current trials will seem minor.

But we are not the only ones who will benefit. Paul says that there is a cosmic significance to God's plan being worked out in us: “For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed” (verse 19).

The creation not only wants to see us in glory — the creation itself will also be blessed with change when God's plan is brought to completion, as Paul says in the next verses: “For the creation was subjected to frustration...in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of

God” (verses 20-21).

The creation is now in decay, but that is not the way it is supposed to be. But at the resurrection, when we are given the glory that rightly belongs to God’s children, the universe will somehow be freed from its bondage. The entire universe has been redeemed by the work of Jesus Christ (Colossians 1:19-20).

Waiting patiently

Even though the price has already been paid, we do not yet see everything the way God wants it. “The whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time” (Romans 8:22). The creation is burdened, as if in pain, as it forms the womb in which we are being birthed. Not only that, “but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies” (verse 23). Even though we have been given the Holy Spirit as an advance payment of salvation, we also struggle, for our salvation is not yet complete. We struggle with sin, we struggle with physical limitations, pain and sorrow — even while we rejoice in what Christ has done for us.

Salvation means that our bodies will be made new, no longer subject to decay (1 Corinthians 15:53), and transformed into glory. The physical world is not junk that must be tossed aside — God made it good, and he will make it good again. We do not know how bodies are resurrected, nor the properties of the transformed matter, but we can trust the Creator to complete his work.

We do not yet see a perfect creation, neither in space nor on earth nor in our own bodies, but we are confident that it will be transformed. As Paul says: “For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently” (Romans 8:24-25).

We wait, with both patience and eagerness, for the resurrection of our bodies, when our adoption will be completed. We live in the situation of “already but not yet”: already redeemed, but not yet completely redeemed. We are already freed from condemnation, but not yet completely freed from sin. We are already in the kingdom, but it is not yet in its fullness. We live with aspects of the age to come, even as we struggle with aspects of the old age.

“In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through

wordless groans” (verse 26). God knows our limitations and frustrations. He knows that our flesh is weak even when our spirit is willing, so his Spirit intercedes for us, even for needs that cannot be put into words.

God’s Spirit does not remove our weakness, but helps us in our weakness. He bridges the gap between old and new, between what we see and what he has declared us to be. For example, we sin even though we want to do righteousness (7:14-25). We see sin in our lives, but God declares us righteous, because God sees the end result even while the process has just begun.

Despite the discrepancy between what we see and what we want, we can be confident that the Holy Spirit does what we cannot. He will see us through. “He who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God’s people in accordance with the will of God” (8:27). God is on our side, helping us, so we can be confident!

Called according to his purpose

Even despite our trials, our weakness and our sins, “we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (verse 28). God does not cause all things, but he allows them and works with them for his purpose. He has a plan for us, and we can be confident that he will complete his work in us (Philippians 1:6).

God planned in advance that we should become like his Son, Jesus Christ. So he called us through the gospel, justified us through faith in his Son, and united us with him in his glory: “For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified” (Romans 8:29-30).

The meaning of *foreknowledge* and *predestination* is vigorously debated, and this verse does not resolve the debate, for Paul is not focusing on these words here (nor does he elsewhere). Paul is not commenting, for example, on whether God allows people to refuse the glory he has planned for them. Paul’s purpose here, as he nears the climax of his presentation of the gospel, is to assure readers that they do not need to worry about their salvation. If they want it, they’ll get it. And for rhetorical effect, Paul speaks even of being *glorified* in the past tense. It is as good as done. Even though we have struggles in this life, we can count on glory in the next life.

More than conquerors

What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all — how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? (verses 31-32). If God went so far as to give us his Son even when we were sinners, we can be sure that he will give us everything else that we need to make it. We can be sure that he is not going to get angry at us and take away his offer.

“Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies” (verse 33). On the day of judgment, no one can accuse us, for God has declared us not guilty. No one can condemn us, for Christ our Savior is interceding for us: “Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died — more than that, who was raised to life — is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us” (verse 34). We have not just a sacrifice for our sins, but also a living Savior who continues to help us in our journey toward glory.

Paul’s rhetorical skill shines in the stirring climax of the chapter: “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: ‘For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered’” (verses 35-37, quoting Psalm 44:22). Can our troubles separate us from God? If we are killed for the faith, have we lost the battle?

Absolutely not, Paul says: “No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.” Even in pain and suffering, we are not losers — we are better than conquerors, because we share in the victory of Jesus Christ. Our prize — our inheritance — is the eternal glory of God! The prize is infinitely greater than the cost.

“For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (verses 38-39). Nothing can separate us from the plan that God has for us. Absolutely nothing can separate us from his love. We can be confident in the salvation he has given us.

Questions

- How do you envision the glory that will be revealed in us? (verse 18) What will we be like?
- How much groaning do we do, and how much does the Spirit

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intercede for us? (verses 23, 26).

- Would Paul agree that God works for the good even in cases of child sex abuse, terrorism and genocide? (verse 28).
- God loves everyone, but does everyone love him? He will always love us (verse 39), but will we always love him?

PAUL'S ANGUISH FOR HIS PEOPLE

ROMANS 9

Romans chapters 9-11 pose a question: Are these chapters a digression, or a main point? Paul has stopped describing the gospel, and begun to talk about the role of the Jewish people in God's plan.

One theme that Paul continues from earlier chapters is that God does not show partiality. Salvation is not just for the Jews — it is for Gentiles, too. But has God given up on the Jews? No way!

Answering objections

When Paul wrote this epistle, he was in Corinth, hoping to travel to Rome on his way to Spain (15:23-24). But first, he planned to take a gift from the Greek churches to Jerusalem (verses 25-29), and he knew that many Jews viewed Paul and his gospel with hostility.

So when Paul wrote to the Romans, he had one eye on the Gentiles, and another on the Jews in Jerusalem. Paul is not only rehearsing his message to Gentiles; he is also rehearsing what he will say in Jerusalem.

He's answering an objection: If the gospel is promised in the Jewish Scriptures, then why are so few Jews accepting the message? Paul claimed that the gospel was rooted in the Old Testament, but why should anyone believe the gospel if the people who knew those Scriptures best, the Jews, didn't accept the message? The Jewish rejection of the gospel was undermining Paul's message.

Had God given up on the Jewish people and turned to the Gentiles instead? And if he did that, can we be sure that he won't abandon the

Gentiles, too? Why were most Jews rejecting the free gift that Paul was offering?

Advantages of the Jews

Paul begins chapter 9 with a strong assertion: “I speak the truth in Christ — I am not lying, my conscience confirms it through the Holy Spirit — I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart.”

Chapter 8 ended with rejoicing and confidence in God’s love, and then all of a sudden Paul says he is full of anguish. He hasn’t even said why — he delays that for rhetorical effect until verse 3. He just said that nothing will be able to cut us off from the love of Christ, and yet he says, “For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ...” He is making a huge contrast, wishing for something he has just said is impossible.

What has filled him with anguish? It is “for the sake of my people, those of my own race, the people of Israel” (verses 3-4). Just as Moses offered to give himself up for Israel (Ex. 32:32), Paul also says that he is willing to be cut off from salvation, if such were possible, so his people could be saved.

Why does he begin with a three-fold assertion that he is telling the truth? Probably because some people thought that Paul had abandoned his people.

Paul has deep concern for his people, and he is convinced that without Christ, they are headed for destruction, despite all their advantages. He lists some advantages: “Theirs is the adoption to sonship; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises” (verse 4).

Gentiles had many of these advantages, too — they can be adopted through Christ, offered the divine glory, a new covenant and wonderful promises. But Paul is referring to special events in Israel’s history: when God adopted the nation at the exodus, when God’s glory filled the tabernacle, the covenants given to Abraham, Moses, Levi and David, the sacrificial rituals and the promises given through the prophets.

Those things were a head start in salvation, one would think, but they hadn’t helped much. The Jews were so proud of these good things that they were overlooking the best thing — Christ. If salvation is in Christ, then it’s not in the law and the temple worship, and many Jews were not willing to admit the relative unimportance of something that had always been an important part of their culture and religion.

Paul lists two more Jewish advantages in verse 5: “Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of the Messiah, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen.” This verse is one of the few in which Jesus is called God. The grammar is sometimes debated, but it seems most likely that the Messiah is being called God and given a praise doxology appropriate to God. But Paul’s main point here is that Jesus is a Jew, the fulfillment of the promises given to the patriarchs.

So if Israel has all this, what’s the problem? Paul doesn’t directly say! But he implies that since the Jews have rejected Jesus, they are missing out on salvation, which gives the appearance that God’s promises to them have been broken.

God’s freedom to choose

Paul begins to address the problem in verse 6: “It is not as though God’s word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel.” The root problem is whether God’s word is true, whether he is faithful to his promises. Paul then points out that we can’t expect all Jews to be inheritors of the promise.

In verse 7 Paul gives evidence: “Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham’s children.” Some of Abraham’s descendants are not counted as his children; they are disinherited. Paul quotes Genesis 21:12 as evidence: “It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.” Ishmael was Abraham’s son, but he was not counted as a descendent for the purpose of the promise — the promise was given to the children of Isaac.

“In other words, it is not the children by physical descent who are God’s children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham’s offspring. This was how the promise was stated: At the appointed time I will return, and Sarah will have a son” (verses 8-9, quoting Gen. 18:14). Only Isaac was a child of promise. But God’s selectivity did not stop there — not even all the children of Isaac were counted among the chosen people.

Verses 10-13: “Not only that, but Rebekah’s children were conceived at the same time by our father Isaac. Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad — in order that God’s purpose in election might stand: not by works but by him who calls — she was told, ‘The older will serve the younger’ [Gen. 25:23]. Just as it is written [Mal. 1:2-3]: ‘Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.’”

The word *hated* doesn’t imply hate as we know it — the construction is a

Hebrew figure of speech to emphasize the love for the other. God blessed Esau, but he did not choose him for the covenant he gave Israel. Instead, the promise was carried through the line of Jacob.

All this supports the point Paul made in verse 6: not all the Israelites are God's people. God can choose the people he works with, and when, and for what purpose. He had a special purpose for Israel, and he did not choose everyone for that role.

But Paul has not yet solved the problem he began with — if God is not giving salvation to all of Jacob's descendants, what good is it to be a descendent of Jacob? It looks like God is not keeping his promises.

God's freedom to give mercy

In verse 14, Paul approaches the question from a different angle: "What then shall we say? Is God unjust?" God chooses some people and not others, and this doesn't look fair — especially if you think that God made a promise to save all the Jews.

But Paul answers in verse 14: "Not at all! For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion" (Ex. 33:19). It's a matter of mercy, not justice. The surprise is not that some people are left out — the miracle is that some people are saved. God can give mercy to whomever he wants, without being unfair to the others (Matt. 20:15).

Paul concludes, "It does not, therefore, depend on human desire or effort, but on God's mercy" (verse 16). Salvation is by grace, not by what we want or do.

God's freedom to harden hearts

It is easy to show that mercy is fair, but Paul also has to include the opposite, because it seems that Israel is being hardened. He begins with the example of Pharaoh: "For Scripture says to Pharaoh: 'I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth'" (verse 17; Ex. 9:16). God tells Pharaoh: "I put you in a position of power so I could show the world that I have far more power. You will be an object lesson of what happens to people who resist my purpose."

"Therefore," Paul summarizes in verse 18, "God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden." Both

of these can be fair. We have to accept what God does, and not judge him by our own understanding.

However, Paul knows that his case is more difficult, so he says in verse 19: “One of you will say to me: ‘Then why does God still blame us? For who is able to resist his will?’” The objection is that it’s not fair for God to punish people for disobedience when he made them disobey. Paul does not say whether the accusation is true — he just pulls rank. “Who are you, a human being, to talk back to God?” He quotes Isaiah 29:16: “Shall what is formed say to the one who formed it, ‘Why did you make me like this?’”

Paul asks questions that emphasize the gulf between God and humans: “Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for special purposes and some for common use?” Here Paul refers to Jeremiah 18, where God says that he can change his plans for Israel depending on how *they* respond to him.

Then Paul asks another “what if” question: “What if God, although choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath — prepared for destruction?” (verse 22). The marvel is not that God rejects his people — it is that he is so patient with those who reject him.

God’s freedom to call his people

In verses 23-24, Paul asks another “what if” or hypothetical question: “What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory — even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles?” What if God’s patience is designed to help us appreciate his mercy? If God is patient with those who oppose him, how much more is he patient with those who turn to him?

Paul has dismissed the question about fairness and is now moving to statements about God’s calling. He starts by showing from the Old Testament that God is saving not only Jews, but also Gentiles.

“As he says in Hosea: ‘I will call them “my people” who are not my people; and I will call her “my loved one” who is not my loved one.’ In the very place where it was said to them, ‘You are not my people,’ there they will be called ‘children of the living God’” (Romans 9:25-26, quoting Hos. 2:23 and 1:10). Hosea is talking about the restoration of Israelites who had fallen away, but Paul is adapting the verse to say that God is calling Gentiles, who had never been part of God’s people.

God can reject Israelites who persistently reject him. He has no further obligation to them — they are in the same category as Gentiles. So, if he can make these rejected Israelites his people again, then he can make anyone his people. He can choose people he previously ignored, just as he did with Abraham and Israel. What God did with the Jews, he can also do with everyone else.

Paul moves into a slightly different idea when he quotes Isaiah 10:22: “Though the number of the Israelites be like the sand by the sea, only the remnant will be saved. For the Lord will carry out his sentence on earth with speed and finality” (verses 27-28). The word *remnant* is important.

“It is just as Isaiah said previously [in Isa. 1:9],” Paul says in verse 29: “Unless the Lord Almighty had left us descendants, we would have become like Sodom, we would have been like Gomorrah.” The surprise is not that many Jews reject the message, but that some accept it. If we were left to ourselves, we would be desolate. But because God has been merciful, a remnant of people are responding. God’s word has not failed — Isaiah’s prophecy has come true. A remnant is being saved.

Israel missing the goal

“What then shall we say?” Paul asks in verses 30-31. “That the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith; but the people of Israel, who pursued the law as the way of righteousness, have not attained their goal.” The Jews were trying hard to be righteous, but they failed, and the Gentiles, who were ignoring it, were given righteousness by God.

Why did Israel not attain their goal? Because they were trying to be righteous through the law. They focused on the law that made them distinctive and failed to see that it was leading them to Christ. They had a good goal, but they were pursuing it in the wrong way. “They pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works” (verse 32). The Jews focused on their advantages, but those things are ineffective in salvation. What we need is faith in Christ.

“They stumbled over the ‘stumbling stone’” — Christ (verse 32). “As it is written: ‘See, I lay in Zion a stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall, and the one who believes in him will never be put to shame’” (verse 33, quoting Isa. 28:16). The word of God predicted that most of the Jews would stumble against Christ, and that has come true.

But the person who believes in Christ will be saved. A remnant will be saved.

In this chapter, Paul stated the problem—explaining that only a few of the Jews accept Jesus as the Christ. This should not be surprising, for it was predicted in Scripture. But that is not the end of the story, as we will see in the next two chapters.

Things to think about

- Have I ever wondered why Jews don't accept Jesus?
- How concerned am I for the salvation of my people? (verse 3)
- What advantages do I have in salvation? (verse 4)
- Is it fair for God to save some people and let others continue walking toward disaster? (verse 14)
- Is God fair, or are we even allowed to ask the question? (verse 20).
- If God saves a few Jews, does that solve the problem, or do I still have questions? (verse 27).

ISRAEL'S OPPORTUNITY FOR SALVATION ROMANS 10

In Romans 9 to 11, Paul deals with Israel's role in God's plan. Does the new covenant mean that God no longer has a special interest in the Jewish people? Since salvation is by faith, is there a role left for Israel? In chapter 10, Paul develops but does not answer the question.

Israel's failure

Paul begins by expressing his hope that the Jews would accept the gospel: "Brothers and sisters, my heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved" (Romans 10:1). Paul wants his own people to be saved.

Humanly speaking, we would expect the Jews to do quite well: "For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God..." (verse 2). But the problem is that "their zeal is not based on knowledge." What knowledge did they lack? "They did not know the righteousness of God." They knew that God is righteous, but they did not know how he would count humans as righteous. They therefore "sought to establish their own."

This verse contrasts a righteousness based on the law, and a divine righteousness that comes through faith (9:30-31; 10:5-6). The Jews aimed at righteousness through their covenant with God, a relationship the Gentiles did not have. The Jews, focusing on the law, could not see a different means of righteousness, and could not see God working with other people.

As a result of looking to their works, "they did not submit to God's righteousness" (10:3). God's righteousness must come by grace, not works,

and as long as people look to what they do, they fail to accept the gift of righteousness the gospel reveals.

So Paul concludes: “Christ is the culmination of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes” (verse 4). Some translations say the “end” of the law; others say the “goal” of the law. If Christ is the end of the law, the law has come to an end. If Christ is the goal of the law, then the law points to Christ.

Both *goal* and *end* can be supported by other verses, but which emphasis did Paul intend here? Perhaps he meant both meanings. In a race, for example, the goal is also the end. When we reach the goal or purpose of some endeavor, the project is finished. The NIV uses a different word: *culmination* or climax. Christ is the supreme expression of what the law was. Now that we have him, we do not need the preliminary, for he is the means of our righteousness.

Paul’s conclusion is clear: Righteousness cannot be obtained through the law. Rather, it must be 1) given through Christ, 2) received by faith rather than works and 3) available to Gentiles as well as Jews. When it comes to salvation, Jews do not have special privileges. The law, which was unique to Israel, is not the means of salvation.

In verses 5 to 10, Paul will elaborate on faith, and in verses 11 to 13, he will emphasize that it is available to everyone.

Contrast between law and gospel

Throughout this section, Paul looks to the Old Testament for support. Here, he quotes Leviticus 18:5: “Moses writes this about the righteousness that is by the law: ‘The person who does these things will live by them’” (verse 5). The old covenant included faith, but it emphasized obedience. Since no one could do everything the law required, it could never be a means of righteousness. The new covenant, however, is based on faith, so it succeeds where the old covenant could not.

“But the righteousness that is by faith says: ‘Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’ (that is, to bring Christ down) or ‘Who will descend into the deep?’ (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead)’” (verses 6-7, quoting parts of Deut. 30:4, 12-13). Moses told the Israelites that God did not choose them because they were righteous, so they should have known that God could reveal himself to sinners, including Gentiles. Moses told the Israelites that the commandments are revealed rather than hidden. God’s word for them was readily available. Paul applied this

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principle to Christ and the gospel—the word of God in the gospel is easy to obtain.

“But what does it say?” Paul asks in v. 8, and then he quotes Deut. 30:14: “The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart.” Deuteronomy goes on to say “so you may obey it,” but Paul does not quote that, for he is applying the principle to the gospel, not the law. He says instead, “...that is, the message concerning faith that we proclaim.” The message about righteousness through faith is not hard to get.

Paul shows how accessible true righteousness is: “If you declare with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (verse 9). Paul is not giving a new formula for salvation that requires spoken words — he is showing how the words *mouth* and *heart* apply to the gospel. It is Christ (not the law) that should be in the heart and mind.

“For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved” (verse 10). Here, Paul puts faith and confession as parallel ideas, not distinctly different, and he puts justification and salvation as roughly equivalent terms. The law required obedience, but the gospel requires acceptance.

Everyone is invited

“As Scripture says,” Paul notes in v. 11, “Anyone who believes in him will never be put to shame.” This is quoted from Isa. 28:16, which says that God will lay a cornerstone in Zion for a sure foundation, and people who have faith in this cornerstone will not be found short on the day of judgment. Paul quoted the entire verse in 9:33; here he just repeats the part about believing in Christ as the key to salvation.

Paul then repeats a favorite theme: “For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile — the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved’” (verses 12-13, quoting Joel 2:32). Salvation comes by calling on the Lord, looking to him for salvation. In Joel, the Lord was Yahweh, but Paul uses the verse for Christ, showing that he accepted Jesus Christ as God.

Salvation comes by accepting Jesus Christ as Lord. The problem is that Paul’s own people are rejecting the message. He highlights this in verse 14: “How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in?” They have to call on the Lord to be saved, but if people think he is a crucified criminal instead of the Messiah, they won’t call on him.

“How can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can anyone preach unless they are sent?” (verses 14-15). This is a general sequence of preaching and salvation. But the problem can’t be solved simply by sending more preachers — preachers have already been sent, and most of the Jews still haven’t believed. So where in the sequence is the problem for the Jews?

Israel hears but does not believe

In verse 15 Paul shows that messengers were sent: “As it is written: ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!’” This is quoted from the Greek version of Isaiah 52:7, which uses the common New Testament verb for preaching the gospel. In Isaiah’s day, the good news was the prophecy of the people being restored to their land.

Paul says in verse 16: “But not all the Israelites accepted the good news. For Isaiah [53:1] says, ‘Lord, who has believed our message?’” People didn’t accept the message back then, either — it is an old problem. Isaiah says that the message has to be believed—it’s a matter of faith, one of Paul’s favorite topics. So he says in verse 17: “Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ.” Here, Paul seems to be completing the evangelistic sequence of verse 15. People need to hear the message before they can believe it — but simply hearing the message does not always lead to faith.

In verse 18, Paul asks: “Did they not hear? Of course they did: ‘Their voice has gone out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.’” This is quoted from Psalm 19:4, which says the heavens declare the glory of God. So if the whole world has heard the message, the Jews have also heard.

“Again,” Paul asks in verse 19, “Did Israel not understand? First, Moses says [in Deut. 32:21], ‘I will make you envious by those who are not a nation; I will make you angry by a nation that has no understanding.’” Yes, Israel understood, but they failed, and God told them in advance that he would work with other peoples. And this key verse revealed to Paul what God was doing in Paul’s ministry: He wanted the salvation of Gentiles to make Israel envious, so the Jews would then accept the gospel.

“And Isaiah boldly says, ‘I was found by those who did not seek me; I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me’” (verse 20, quoting Isaiah 65:1). Isaiah is talking about wayward Israelites, but Paul applies it here to

Gentiles. If God can reveal himself to disinherited Jews, then he can do it to anyone. So God turned away from the zealous, and blessed people who didn't even know to ask.

Paul concludes the chapter by saying, "But concerning Israel he says, 'All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and obstinate people'" (verse 21, quoting Isa. 65:2). God did not want the Jewish people to go astray, but they would not listen. Israel had an opportunity for salvation, but most were refusing it.

But does that mean that God has given up on them? Certainly not, Paul says. But that is in chapter 11, and we'll see his conclusion in the next article in this series.

Things to think about

- Was I ever zealous for God and his law, but mistaken? (verse 2)
Has that experience dampened my zeal? Should it?
- Is the gospel message in my mouth as well as my heart? (verse 8)
- Who was sent for me to hear the good news? (verse 15)
- Am I envious of a blessing given to someone else? (verse 19)
Does that envy have good fruit, or bad?

“ALL ISRAEL WILL BE SAVED”

ROMANS 11

In Romans 9 and 10, Paul describes a theological problem: Most Jews are rejecting the gospel. Not only are they missing out on salvation, it makes other people wonder whether God is faithful to his promises. In chapter 11, Paul affirms that God has a surprising plan for the people of Israel.

The remnant of Israel

At the end of chapter 10, Paul described Israel as a people who heard the message but refused to accept it even though God pleaded with them. So Paul asks, “Did God reject his people?” (11:1). And he answers: “By no means! I am an Israelite myself, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin.” Paul is living proof that God has not abandoned his people.

“God did not reject his people, whom he foreknew” (verse 2). Foreknow here does not refer to advance knowledge, as if God knew more facts about the Jews. Rather, it refers to a relationship that God had with the Jews. His covenant with them is no longer valid as a source of laws, but the promises God made to them will still be kept. God has not given up on the Jews.

“Don’t you know what Scripture says in the passage about Elijah — how he appealed to God against Israel: ‘Lord, they have killed your prophets and torn down your altars; I am the only one left, and they are trying to kill me?’” (verses 2-3, quoting from 1 Kings 19:10, 14). Elijah thought that everyone else had gone astray.

“What was God’s answer to him?” Paul asks in verse 4. “I have reserved for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal.” [1 Kings

19:18] “So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace” (verses 4-5). The situation wasn’t as bad as Elijah thought it was. In Paul’s day, too, thousands of Jews believe in Christ. There is a remnant, a small percentage, of Jews who are following what God is doing.

They are chosen by grace, not by their zeal for the law. “And if by grace, then it cannot be based on works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace” (verse 6).

Some were hardened

“What then?” Paul asks in verse 7. “What the people of Israel sought so earnestly they did not obtain.” The Jews sincerely wanted to be righteous, but their works did not achieve what they wanted.

“The elect among them did” obtain righteousness, Paul says, “but the others were hardened, as it is written: ‘God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that could not see and ears that could not hear, to this very day’” (verses 7-8, adapting Deut. 29:4 and Isa. 29:9-10). The minority accepted the gospel; the others did not because God gave them over to their own inclinations.

However, Paul said in chapter 10 that they heard and understood, and that God pleaded with them, but they refused. And Paul will soon say that he works hard so that some of them might be saved (verse 14). God has not decided that these people will be lost. But they rejected Christ, and God let them have their own way. But the blindness will eventually be removed.

In verses 9-10, Paul quotes a stronger passage in Psalm 69:22-23: “And David says: ‘May their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a retribution for them. May their eyes be darkened so they cannot see, and their backs be bent forever.’”

In this psalm, David asks God to punish his enemies — even to blot them out of the book of life! But Paul is not asking that, for the Jews have not stumbled beyond recovery, and Paul works hard so that some might be saved. Paul is not quoting the psalm for eternal punishment, but only for its comment about eyes that cannot see.

Arousing the Jews to envy

In verse 1, Paul asked a question as a springboard for his discussion, and in verse 11 he does it again: “Again I ask: Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all! Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious.”

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The Jews who reject Christ are not hopelessly lost — they can still be saved. But in the meantime, salvation is being offered to Gentiles. Paul is alluding here to Deuteronomy 32:21: “I will make you envious by those who are not a nation; I will make you angry by a nation that has no understanding.” Contrary to what most Jews thought, God would bless the Gentiles so much that the Jews would be envious.

In verse 12, Paul reasons from a less-than-ideal situation to a better one: “But if their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their full inclusion bring!” If Jewish failure has brought blessings to others, won’t Jewish success bring even more? Paul is implying that there will come a day of success, when most Jews will accept Christ.

Paul believes the majority will be saved — first a remnant of Jews, then a good number of Gentiles, then the majority of Jews, and finally another blessing for the Gentiles — the salvation of the great majority.

“I am talking to you Gentiles,” he says in verse 13. “Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I take pride in my ministry in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them.” Even though Paul was writing to Gentiles, he was addressing a Jewish question. He seems to be rehearsing what he will say on his trip to Jerusalem.

In verse 15, Paul again uses an argument from the lesser to the greater: “For if their rejection brought reconciliation to the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?” If the failure of the Jews brought salvation to everyone else, won’t it be even better when the Jews finally accept the gospel? They might be spiritually dead now, but God can raise the dead.

New branches attached to the tree

In verse 16, Paul switches to a different style of argument, using analogies. First, he uses an example from Israel’s system of worship: “If the part of the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy...” No one could eat from the harvest until the firstfruits had been offered (Lev. 23:14). After they were offered to God, the entire harvest was sanctified.

In context, the firstfruits are the remnant of Israel, the small percentage of Jews who accept Jesus. They are given to God, and this means that the whole Jewish nation is set apart for God.

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Then Paul uses another analogy: “If the root is holy, so are the branches.” The root is probably the patriarchs, and if they are holy, their descendants are, too, and God won’t give up on them.

Then Paul moves into the analogy of tree-branch-grafting: “If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root...”

Paul isn’t giving horticultural advice — he is tailoring his analogy to suit his purposes. The root is the promise of salvation given to Abraham, a promise now given nourishment by Jesus Christ. Many of the Jews are cut off from Christ, and Gentiles are being attached to the tree. The Jews are not superior — but neither are the Gentiles.

But Paul warns those Gentiles in verse 18: “Do not consider yourself to be superior to those other branches.” That was apparently a temptation for Gentile Christians in Rome. “If you” think this way, Paul says, “consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you.” Remember that your salvation depends on a promise given to the ancestor of the Jews, Abraham, and to the Messiah of the Jews, Jesus. You didn’t earn the right to be grafted in; it was only a matter of God’s grace.

“You will say then, ‘Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in’” (verse 19). Paul then responds: Even if that’s true, I can still show that you shouldn’t think of yourself as superior to the unbelieving Jews. “Granted,” he says in verse 20. “But they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but tremble. For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either” (verses 20-21). You can be broken off just the same as they were.

Paul considers it possible for someone to reject the faith. If salvation were predestined, then people would have no need to tremble, and Paul would not imply that God could break them off. Paul wants people to be confident, but not to assume that everything is guaranteed no matter what they do.

Paul combines God’s grace and judgment in verse 22: “Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off.” If we fall away from grace and go into self-reliance, then we will be cut off from the tree of salvation.

The salvation of Israel

“And if [the Jews] do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again” (verse 23). If Jews accept the Messiah, they will be re-attached to the Abrahamic tree — everything can change, according to whether people accept or reject Christ.

Paul then reasons as to how easy it will be for the Jews to be grafted back in: “After all, if you [Gentiles] were cut out of an olive tree that is wild by nature, and contrary to nature were grafted into a cultivated olive tree...” — if that difficult thing has been done — “how much more readily will these [Jews], the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree!” (verse 24). God can easily put the Jews back in.

Paul then says: “I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers and sisters, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in, and in this way all Israel will be saved” (verses 25-26).

Paul calls it a mystery, something previously hidden but now revealed — and it is revealed so Gentiles do not think themselves superior to Jews. Israel has been hardened in part — that is, most Jews do not currently believe. But this restriction is temporary — it lasts only until the full number of Gentiles come into faith.

Paul has already argued that the Jews have not stumbled beyond recovery, and Jewish branches can be grafted back in if they believe, so when he says they are hardened until the full number of Gentiles comes in, he implies a temporary hardening. And the following verses say that the Jewish people are still loved, that their calling cannot be revoked, and that God will have mercy on them. Paul believes that most of the Jews will be saved, because Deuteronomy 32 predicts a time when they will accept Jesus as their Savior.

Paul supports his point by blending ideas found in Isaiah 59:20-21; 27:9; and Jer. 31:33-34: “As it is written: ‘The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob. And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins’” (verses 26-27). Isaiah says “the Redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who repent of their sins,” and Jeremiah promises a new covenant in which God will not remember their sins any more.

Paul knows that the Redeemer has come to Zion — Jesus has come, and Paul is confident that Jesus will accomplish the work he came to do.

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Even when the nation was a mess, God promised a day of salvation for them, and he promised a new covenant for them. The fact that Gentiles are entering the new covenant does not change the fact that it was promised to the Jews. The promise is not broken — rather, it is expanded to include the Gentiles.

When will this happen? Paul does not say. The Jews can turn to Christ at any time.

Paul gives us his summary and conclusion in verse 28: “As far as the gospel is concerned, they are enemies for your sake; but as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs.” The Jews are enemies of the gospel right now, but God still loves them, and they are still part of the chosen people. Why? “For God’s gifts and his call are irrevocable” (verse 29). God will keep his promises.

In verses 30-31 Paul summarizes it: “Just as you who were at one time disobedient to God have now received mercy as a result of their disobedience, so they too have now become disobedient in order that they too may now receive mercy as a result of God’s mercy to you.” Mercy is now given to Gentiles; it will also be given to Jews, for salvation is by grace.

Paul’s concluding rationale is in verse 32: “For God has bound everyone over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all.” Everyone has sinned and deserves wrath on the day of judgment, but in Christ all can be made alive. The grace of God “offers salvation to all people” (Titus 2:11) — to all races and nations.

Doxology

What more can Paul say? There is no evidence that this will happen — there is only the promise of God, but he is more faithful than evidence is. So Paul launches into a section of praise. It is a call to theological and intellectual humility — and it is also a reminder that theology, if done correctly, should always lead us to praise and worship. Whenever we catch a glimpse of what God has done or is doing, we should respond with awe and thanksgiving.

Paul started this chapter by talking about human failure, but he ends by praising the God who can be counted on to succeed:

“Oh, the depth of the riches of the
wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable his judgments,

and his paths beyond tracing out!

‘Who has known the mind of the Lord?

Or who has been his counselor?’ [Isaiah 40:13]

‘Who has ever given to God,

that God should repay them?’ [Job 41:11]

For from him and through him and for him are all things.

To him be the glory forever! Amen” (verses 33-36).

Praise God, who in his grace saves both Jews and Gentiles! He is faithful to his people, and his purpose will stand.

Things to think about

- Are there people today who claim to be part of God’s people, and yet seem to ignore him? Would Paul hold out hope for them?
- Do people reject the gospel by their own choice (10:21) or because God has blinded them (11:8)?
- Can envy really cause people to turn to Christ (verse 13)?
- Have I ever felt superior to unbelievers (verse 18)?
- Does Paul want me to be confident (8:38-39) or to tremble (11:20)?
- When I think about what God has done in my life, do I respond with praise (verses 33-36)? What would my poem say?

ATTITUDES THAT PLEASE GOD ROMANS 12

In his letter to the Romans, Paul has presented the gospel — from our need for divine rescue to the glorious future that Jesus Christ offers us. In chapter 12, Paul explains that the gospel has implications for the way we should treat one another. He begins with attitudes and principles rather than specific actions.

Living sacrifices

Paul begins with the word *therefore*, indicating that he is drawing a conclusion. “Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God — this is your true and proper worship” (12:1). Since God is giving us mercy, we should submit ourselves to him.

Our bodies are to be given to God in worship — not to be killed, but as a living and continuous response to God. We are set apart for him, to serve him — and as we do his will, he is pleased.

A literal translation of the last clause says, “this is your reasonable service.” Sensible people respond to God’s mercy by serving him.

What does this involve? Paul explains: “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (verse 2). Our standard of behavior is no longer the society around us. We do not just continue doing what we have always done. Rather, we are to change, and this change begins in the mind. It takes conscious effort — thinking about how God’s way is different from the world around us. “Then you will be

able to test and approve what God's will is — his good, pleasing and perfect will.”

After we stop looking to the world, we will see what God wants, and we will find that his way is better. His instructions are not arbitrary rules just to test our loyalty — they are to help us avoid causing pain for ourselves and for others.

Serving with our gifts

Paul first describes how the Roman Christians are to work together as a worship community: “For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you” (verse 3). By grace, God authorized Paul to give commands, and this first command is a call to humility. Take a realistic look, Paul says. Whatever faith you have, has come from God. We have value only because God chooses to give us value; no one has any reason to boast.

For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others (verses 4-5). Not only do various members have different functions, they also belong to each other. We have duties to each other, according to the way God has blessed us.

“We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement” (verses 6-8). God has given us different abilities, so some people serve through words, and some through their hands. Those who prophesy should stick to the faith, not their own opinions, to strengthen, encourage, comfort and edify the church (1 Cor. 14:3-4). Each person should do what he or she does best.

For the next three gifts, Paul adds an adverb to emphasize the way we should serve: “If it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully” (verse 8). Paul summarizes by saying, “Love must be sincere” (verse 9). All service should be sincere — gifts should be motivated by generosity; mercy should be given joyfully.

Paul does not give these commands as requirements for salvation.

Rather, these are what we should do after being saved, after God has shown us his mercy.

Harmony in the body of Christ

In verse 9 Paul begins to list some qualities that should characterize Christian love. He begins with a general principle: “Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.” Love is not a vague feeling, but it discerns the difference between good and bad.

He is focusing on attitudes within the Christian community: “Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves” (verse 10). Most people struggle to get more honor, but as we imitate our Savior, we should try to excel in humility and give more honor. Our status is secure in Christ, so we do not need to fight for it.

“Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord” (verse 11). Or as Paul says in Galatians 6:10, Do not grow weary in doing good. It’s not always easy or fun; we have to remember that we are serving God.

“Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer” (verse 12). When life is difficult, don’t give up hope — be patient and keep on praying, looking to God for a way to deal with the problems.

“Share with God’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality” (verse 13). Our possessions, like other gifts, should be used to serve others. Even if we don’t own a home, we can be hospitable. At church, for example, we can be hospitable by welcoming others, being easy to approach and willing to help.

“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse” (verse 14). Most people want revenge, but that is a destructive approach. If we respond to people in the way that Christ has treated us, then we will respond with good rather than evil.

“Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another” (verses 15-16). If other Christians are blessed, rejoice with them, rather than being jealous. If they are suffering, empathize with them rather than looking down on them.

“Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited” (verse 16). Some Christians are in a high position; others are low — that has not changed. But those external matters are not the basis of a person’s real value. If people are less fortunate than you, don’t think less of them for it. Count them as an equal.

Responding to enemies

In verse 17, Paul returns to the way that we should respond to persecution or injustice: “Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone.” In other words, do not harbor grudges, and be sensitive to social values.

“If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone” (verse 18). We should do our best to avoid offense. Sometimes that means accepting restrictions on what we can do (1 Cor. 9:20). At other times, it is necessary to stand up for the truth of the gospel (Gal. 2:11).

“Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord” (verse 19, quoting Deut. 32:35). Let God take care of whatever punishment is needed — that will stop the cycle of violence.

Instead of vengeance, Paul assigns us a different job: “On the contrary,” Paul says, “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head” (verse 20, quoting Prov. 25:21-22). Various suggestions have been made about why it might be good to put burning coals on someone’s head, but the expression is probably figurative, meaning simply that if we treat our enemies well, they may blush with shame.

Paul concludes the discussion by saying, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (verse 21). That is the way of Christ. Evil cannot be beaten by more evil — it can be conquered only by good.

Things to think about

- What steps can I take so that my mind is being conformed to God’s will? (verses 1-2)
- Am I using my abilities to serve others? (verses 6-9)
- In what ways can I give honor to others? (verse 10)
- What social values do I need to pay more attention to? (verse 17)

CHRISTIANS AND THE GOVERNMENT

ROMANS 13

In Romans 12, Paul wrote that we should be living sacrifices, transformed in our minds so that we please God and do his will. Paul described the attitudes that should characterize believers: humility, service, love and peace. In chapter 13, Paul gets specific about how a Christian should respond to civil authorities.

Submission to civil government

Paul writes, “Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established” (13:1). Rulers have sometimes used this verse to tell their citizens to obey, but many citizens have rightly wondered if this is what Paul meant, because rulers sometimes tell people to sin. Paul himself once had authority that he used to persecute the church, so how can he say that all authority comes from God?

Remember the context — Paul has just written several verses about how we should respond to evil, and he concludes, “Overcome evil with good” (12:21). Although government authority is established by God, and is good in itself, it is sometimes used in an evil way. Christians should not fight against the government, repaying evil for evil, but are to respond with good behavior.

Paul is giving a general principle, not writing about specific rulers. We do not subject ourselves to specific people, or pay taxes to specific people — rather, we submit to the office, and when a new person is in office, we submit to the new person, not the old one. Once a person is out of office,

we do not owe that person any allegiance or payments. The “authorities” that Paul writes about are *roles*, not specific people.

“Submit” does not always mean “obey,” but it usually does, and Christians should be willing to obey civil authority. If the government commands a sin, then we have to disobey (Acts 5:29) — but that does not mean that we can fight against the government on other issues. We do not conform to the world (12:2), but neither do we try to overthrow it.

When Paul wrote this, he was planning to visit Jerusalem, where there were many political tensions. Jewish Zealots were taking up weapons to fight against Rome. There were also political difficulties in Rome: Jews had been involved in so many disturbances that Claudius had forced them to leave (Acts 18:2). After Claudius died, many Jews returned, but the tensions were still there.

Paul knows that his advice will not be accepted automatically, so he supports it with theological principles: “The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted” (verses 1-2).

If Caesar demands to be called “Lord and God” (as Domitian did a few decades after Paul wrote), Christians should refuse, even at risk of their lives. But there is a big difference between refusing to obey one law, and a rebellion that claims that Caesar should not rule. It is not wrong to resist specific injustices, but it is wrong to work against government itself. Those who rebel against a God-ordained authority “will bring judgment on themselves.” Civil government is temporary, but it has been established by God (Dan. 4:17; John 19:11). It is not our place to try to overthrow the government.

Paul is writing about a dictatorial government, not a democracy. In a democracy, all citizens are given a small amount of authority each time they vote, and it is not a sin for people to use that authority. They are not rebelling against the government even if they are voting for a new person to fill the office. Quite the contrary: they are supporting the government by participating in it.

Nero, servant of God

Then Paul explains how rebels might be punished: “For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong” (verse 3). Empires are built on the blood of thousands of innocent victims. Jesus himself was killed by the Roman government. But when civil rulers are

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performing their God-ordained role, they are a threat to evildoers, not to those who obey the laws.

Paul is giving a general principle, not addressing all the confusing situations that sin creates. He does not say what we should do in a civil war, or when the rulers are so corrupt that they terrorize good people and support criminals.

Paul asks, “Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended” (verse 3). If you are a law-abiding citizen, you should have no reason to fear the government. (However, governments sometimes go awry and persecute Christians. Revelation 13, using imagery from Daniel, depicts civil government as a terrifying “beast.”)

Paul then makes the astonishing statement: “For the one in authority is God’s servant for your good” (verse 4). When Paul wrote Romans, Nero was the emperor. In his early years, he was a good ruler. But he turned evil, and tradition says that Paul was executed under his reign. But Paul calls him the minister of God! The fact that rulers often sin, even serving Satan at times, does not change the fact that God designed those roles to be used for good.

“But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God’s servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer” (verse 4). Civil rulers serve God by bearing the sword, Paul says. They have authority from God to execute rebels. Genesis 9:6 authorizes capital punishment for murder. God authorized even imperfect governments to administer the death penalty to punish and deter crime.

God has the authority to punish evil (12:19), and he delegates that authority to civil rulers. Personal vengeance is wrong, but civil rulers have the God-assigned responsibility to punish evil. When we report crime to the police, we are seeking the justice that God has designed. Since God wants civil justice, it is permissible for a Christian to serve on the police force, or as a judge, or on a jury, doing what God has declared good, punishing crime not for our own vengeance, but acting on behalf of the civil government that God has authorized.

Paul concludes, “Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience” (verse 5). We should obey civil laws not only because the civil

government might punish us if we don't, but also because God wants us to be law-abiding people (cf. 1 Peter 2:12-14).

Taxes, too

Paul then moves from general principles to the more specific matter of taxes: “This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God’s servants, who give their full time to governing” (verse 6). Since civil rulers have a legitimate, God-ordained function, it is right for us to pay taxes to support this service. Rulers are never perfect, but they are still worthy of their wages, and God does not want us to rebel against that role.

Nero changed the tax system in A.D. 58 because of a widespread outcry against the greed of the tax collectors. Paul wrote shortly before that, when the resentment was growing. But a tax revolt would be bad for the Christian community. Paul did not want the believers to be associated with rebellion — especially when Christ himself had been executed for anti-government activity in Judea! Such a reputation would make it difficult for Paul to spread the gospel.

Just as Paul began this section with a comment about what “everyone” should do, he concludes with a command for everyone: “Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor” (verse 7). Taxes are a debt that should be paid, he implies. We should also pay customs duties, commissions, royalty fees and other obligations spelled out by law. We also have intangible obligations: to respect and honor government officials (Acts 23:5; 1 Peter 2:17) — not for their private lives, but for their God-ordained role of restraining evil.

Since we should respond to evil with good, blessing even those who persecute us (12:14-21), in most situations we should cooperate with civil authorities, since they have a God-ordained function in society. The basic Christian ethic is not to fight for our own benefit, but to do good to others.

Paul’s own experience with the government is an example of a balanced approach. When he was on trial for his life in Judea, he was respectful, but he did not passively submit to whatever the rulers wanted. Rather, he used his rights as a Roman citizen to prevent a flogging (Acts 22:25) and to prevent being sent back to Jerusalem (25:11).

The government gave citizens the right of appeal because they knew that their officials sometimes made wrong decisions, and when Paul used his rights, he was not submissive to the specific person in front of him, but

he was submissive to the governmental system. In the same way, Christians today can use their rights as citizens to request changes in government policy, including changes in personnel. Voting is not a sign of disrespect, but is an opportunity to use some of the civil authority that God has authorized.

The law of love

After saying that we should pay whatever we owe, Paul shifts the subject back to love through a play on words: “Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another...” (13:8; 12:9-10). Love is the most basic Christian ethic. We will always need to love one another; it is an eternal obligation.

Why? Because “whoever loves others has fulfilled the law.” The way this is written, the logic could imply that “the law” is the primary goal, and love is a stepping-stone toward that goal. But more accurately, love is the goal, and the law provides guidance about how we are to love. Paul then gives some examples of harmful behaviors we should avoid:

“The commandments, ‘Do not commit adultery,’ ‘Do not murder,’ ‘Do not steal,’ ‘Do not covet,’ and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’” (13:9; cf. Matt. 22:36). These commandments are not a complete guide to love — they specify a few things to avoid. Written commandments can never be a complete guide to love. Human situations are too diverse for rules to be written about all possibilities. However, the law guides us — it is impossible to love our neighbor while violating these commandments.

Paul is dealing with laws about how we interact with other people — he is not saying how we should show love to God. Most of the old covenant laws about worship are obsolete.

“Love does no harm to a neighbor,” Paul says — but love must go further than simply avoiding harm — it should actively seek to do *good* to the neighbor. Paul is summarizing the function of the commandments he quoted. He concludes, “Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law” (verse 10). If we love others, we have fulfilled the purpose of the law — and have gone further than what it requires. If we love our neighbor, we should pay our taxes. Even if the government is evil, we should respond to evil by doing good, not by taking matters into our own hands.

Clothed in Christ

“Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy” (verse 13). The Roman Christians were probably not involved in debauchery, but judging from chapter 14, they probably *were* involved in dissension and jealousy. By grouping these vices together, Paul is implying that competitive attitudes within the congregation are just as inappropriate as debauchery. The church is to be a community of brothers and sisters, not a place where one person vies against another.

Paul then gives the alternative: “Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh” (verse 14). Drunkenness and immorality come from the sinful nature; so do jealousy and dissension. Neither are appropriate for people who give their allegiance to Jesus Christ. When we clothe ourselves with him, imitating him, cooperation and mutual esteem will replace selfishness.

Things to think about

- Pontius Pilate ordered the death of an innocent man. Would Paul have given Pilate as much respect as he gave Festus and Felix? When might Paul refuse to obey?
- A government has the right to execute criminals. However, does it have a right to use lethal force to pursue criminals who are being protected by another nation?
- What might Paul say about the American War of Independence, which began as a protest against taxation?
- How does the law of love (verse 10) apply to our relationship with God? What does it command, and what does it prohibit?
- When we are saved by grace, why is important that we “behave decently”? (verse 13)

DEALING WITH DISAGREEMENTS ROMANS 14

Paul's letter to the Romans is his most systematic presentation of the gospel. He explains human sinfulness and the forgiveness that we have in Christ (chapters 1-8). Starting in chapter 12, he moves into the practical results of the gospel.

In chapter 14, he addresses at length a specific problem in the first-century Roman churches — namely, that people had disagreements about different customs and religious convictions. Even though Paul had never been to Rome, he had heard about the controversies.

Disputable matters

“Accept the one whose faith is weak,” Paul begins, “without passing judgment in disputable matters” (14:1). Here, we learn several important things:

- Some Christians are weak in the faith and, as verse 2 explains, they are overly restrictive.
- Weak-faith Christians should be accepted, not ridiculed. People grow in faith through love and acceptance, not through ostracism.
- Christians who think they are strong are sometimes tempted to look down on others.
- Some matters are disputable. The beliefs and practices that some Christians think are important are unimportant to others.

Paul then addresses the dispute in Rome: “One person's faith allows

him to eat anything, but another person, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables” (verse 2). Why did some people avoid meat? Perhaps they were influenced by ascetic philosophies, but more likely, the concerns came from Judaism. The terms “unclean” and “clean” (verses 14, 20) were important in Judaism, and as we have seen, the letter to the Romans repeatedly addresses Jews and Gentiles as the most significant divisions in the church.

Some (but not all) Jews avoided meat because they could not be sure that the animals had been properly killed (see Dan. 1:8). Some Gentiles may have been just as cautious.

Accepting sin?

Let’s see how Paul dealt with this situation: “The one who eats everything must not look down on the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not condemn the one who does, for God has accepted them” (verse 3). The strong-faith Christian should not belittle the weak Christian, and the weak one should not condemn the more permissive Christian.

What shocking advice! Imagine that you believe it is wrong to eat meat. Paul is not only calling you “weak,” he is also telling you not to condemn people you believe are sinning! Why? Because God accepts people on the basis of faith, not on works.

Paul did not mean that we should accept idolaters, fornicators, thieves and drunkards (1 Cor. 5:11). The New Testament clearly tells us to avoid certain behaviors. But it doesn’t address every situation and every behavior, and because of that, there will be differences of opinion within Christianity.

For example, if we are convinced that wine is bad, we should avoid wine. But we should not call all wine-drinkers sinners, nor should we separate from them. Wine is a disputable matter, and so are days and foods. These are matters for tolerance, not division and criticism.

Paul asks: “Who are you to judge someone else’s servants? To their own master servants stand or fall” (verse 4). The Lord has called us to serve, not judge. If he has been so merciful as to include us, we must let him be merciful to them, too. He will manage his own servants. “They will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand.”

Be fully convinced

Paul then addresses another difference of opinion in the Roman churches: “One person considers one day more sacred than another;

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another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind” (verse 5).

In a church composed of Jews and Gentiles, what days would be considered better than others? For some, it would mean weekly Sabbaths and annual festivals; for others, it might mean superstitions about other days. Paul describes it in such a way as to cover both situations. People should act from conviction, not from fear of what others might think.

Astonishing! Paul is asking fully convinced Sabbath-keepers to be tolerant of people who ignore the Sabbath. They thought that Sabbath-breakers were unbelievers, but Paul says that they should be accepted. The Sabbath-keepers thought the Sabbath was essential, but Paul is saying that it is not.

And on the other side, Paul tells those who are strong in faith to respect the weak. They do not have to adopt their restrictions or let them dictate church policy, but they should accept them.

“Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord. Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God; and whoever abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God” (verse 6). Sabbath-keepers are responding to God as best they know how. So are the others. Meat-eaters and vegetarians are both trying to obey God. When we are trying to please God, we must be gracious toward one another’s doctrinal errors.

Judged by Christ

Our lives belong to Christ: “For none of us lives for ourselves alone, none of us dies for ourselves alone. If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord” (verses 7-8). On the day of judgment, after we die, we will belong to Christ — but we also belong to him now, while we live. A promise of salvation on the day of judgment does not mean that we can live selfishly in this age.

“Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living” (verse 9). He is our Master both now and in our future.

“You, then, why do you judge your brother or sister? Or why do you treat them with contempt? For we will all stand before God’s judgment seat” (verse 10). God will be the judge; we are not to usurp his role. We should not say, “They are too liberal to be real Christians”; nor should we

say, “They are too legalistic to be real Christians.” We should let God decide that (see Matt. 7:1). We should not even look down on another believer.

Paul then quotes Isa. 45:23 to show that God will judge every person: “‘As surely as I live,’ says the Lord, ‘every knee will bow before me; every tongue will acknowledge God’” (verse 11). And Paul concludes, “So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God” (verse 12). Since God will judge each person, Paul exhorts, “Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another” (verse 13).

Avoid offense

Paul now speaks to the strong, to those who eat everything, and encourages them to be careful about their freedom. “Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister” (verse 13). We are to be considerate of their beliefs.

Paul makes his own position clear: “I am convinced, being fully persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean in itself” (verse 14). The Torah declared many things to be unclean, but Paul is convinced that in the Christian era, those ritual categories are obsolete. They no longer matter to God — but some people do not yet have that understanding.

“But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for that person it is unclean.” If people think it wrong to eat pork, they should not eat pork, and others should not pressure them into doing it, because for them, it is wrong.

“If your brother or sister is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy someone for whom Christ died. Therefore do not let what you know is good to be spoken of as evil” (verses 15-16). A Christian must balance two needs: 1) Do not let someone else’s conscience dictate what you do and 2) Do not let your behavior cause them to sin.

Christ calls us to be considerate of others, without letting their conscience dictate how we live. We cannot become so afraid of offending others that we conform to every sensitivity everyone has. Just because one person in our church thinks it is a sin to drink wine, does not mean that everyone else has to abstain.

Paul is talking about an offense so serious that the person would be spiritually destroyed — someone who might think, “If Christianity allows that, then I don’t want Christianity.”

“For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and receives human approval” (verses 17-18). That is, be willing to abstain, because the kingdom does not require you to exercise all your liberties. Righteousness does not require eating, nor does it require abstaining, because it comes through faith in Christ.

Good behavior does not earn us a place in God’s kingdom, for we all fall short, but it is a good reflection of what God’s reign produces — and his kingdom does not have rules about what we eat and drink.

A plea for peace

“Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification” (verse 19). We are to teach one another what is true, and try to live peaceably with one another despite our differences. With peace and mutual acceptance, people will learn the truth about foods and days.

Paul then warns the strong, who have the right doctrine but the wrong attitude: “Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a person to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother or sister to fall” (verses 20-21). If you are too aggressive, you will drive the weak people away from Christ, and consequently “destroy the work of God” that is being done in their lives. Paul is not dealing with minor personal preferences, but major questions of faith and apostasy.

“So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God” (verse 22). Paul did not keep his own position a secret (verse 20) — but he did not badger the weak to eat and drink what he did. He did not pressure people to violate their own consciences.

Paul is clearly on the side of liberty, but he also sounds a warning: “Blessed is the one who does not condemn himself by what he approves” (verse 22). In other words, make sure that your freedom in Christ does not hurt others. Yes, you may eat pork, but if you pressure a weak person to eat pork and cause that person to fall away from Christ, you have sinned.

“But whoever has doubts is condemned if they eat...” This reveals what the problem was. It was not that vegetarians were annoyed when others ate meat — rather, vegetarians were being pressured to eat meat themselves, even when they believed it was wrong. In their minds, they thought they

were disobeying Christ, and the pressure was destroying their allegiance to him.

In such a case, “their eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin” (verse 23). The problem was not in the food, but in their perception. The conscience should be obeyed — but it should also be educated.

On some matters, Christians may have different beliefs, but they should not push those beliefs onto others. People should not be tricked, shamed or coerced into behavioral change — they should be taught. It all comes back to faith. We are saved by faith, not by observing or avoiding certain days and foods.

Paul will continue this subject in the next chapter.

Things to think about

- How can we know which matters are “disputable” and which are not? (verse 1)
- Some people don’t ever seem to be “fully convinced” about what they do (verse 5). What would Paul say to them?
- Peter withdrew from the Gentiles because he did not want to offend some Jewish believers, but Paul rebuked him for it (Gal. 2:11-14). How were those circumstances different from the Roman situation?
- Christians who flaunt their freedoms can scandalize believers who are more cautious. Can cautious Christians also turn people away from Christ?

CONFLICT AT ROME: ROMANS 14

By Russell Duke

How often have you heard someone in the church say, “I just want to go somewhere I can be comfortable”? Some Christians are uncomfortable with new approaches to music, food or worship days. Some feel pressured to adopt new practices before they have resolved the issues.

Unfortunately, some stay at home rather than face the stress. Change often brings discomfort, so how are these feelings best resolved? These feelings are not unique to today — Paul addressed similar situations in the church in Rome.

By the time Paul wrote Romans, about 50,000 Jews lived in Rome, a city of about one million people. They were brought to Rome as slaves, and they achieved the right to meet in synagogues on Saturday and to worship their God. This is in contrast to religious Romans who worshiped their gods daily in their homes.

Idols adorned corners throughout the city so travelers could worship. Romans worked seven days, using the eighth and sometimes a ninth for markets and festivals. So, conflict existed between Roman culture and Jewish belief.

Enter Christians

Christians originally met in synagogues with Jews, but growing animosity from Jews led Christians to worship separately in houses. After all, the Sanhedrin, the governing body for the Jews in Judea, had sanctioned the

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crucifixion of Jesus, imprisoned Peter and John, martyred Stephen and James, persecuted Christians in Judea, and attacked Paul.

So Paul addressed the house churches of Rome (16:5) about conflict on a new level—Jew vs. Christian.

About A.D. 49, a dispute arose among Jews and Christians about Chrestus, probably referring to Christ, whom the Christians accepted as Savior. Fearing that Jews were insurrectionists, Emperor Claudius banished all Jews, including Jewish Christians, from Rome. Gentile Christians were allowed to remain.

The death of Claudius in A.D. 54 ended the banishment of Jews from Rome. It appears that Paul's friends, Aquila and Priscilla, returned to Rome, as did other Jewish Christians (16:3). Not all gentile Christians welcomed back Jewish Christians, so Paul wrote them to accept Jewish Christians and to understand that God would yet graft in many Israelites into the body of Christ (9:11-24).

In A.D. 57 many members of the church in Rome were gentile Christians who had come from pagan roots in polytheism without any particular day of worship. Probably some gentile proselytes of the Jews had become Christians and would have been observing some, but not all, of the Jewish requirements.

Jewish Christians who kept Old Testament traditions formed a third group. A fourth group, probably the smallest, were Jewish Christians who had abandoned their traditions as unnecessary and unwanted.

The message God sent to that church has much to teach us about the work of the Spirit in our church today.

Painful conflict threatened the work of God (14:20). Opinions differed on what should determine holiness in the Christian calling. Did eating certain meats make a person unholy? Was a certain day to be kept holy?

Although Paul does not give details, he sets forth principles to counter the problems and leads us to better understand the difficulties confronting each group. Paul builds the theme in Romans on God's reply to Habakkuk: "The just shall live by faith." His solution to disagreement in the church shows us how to live in faith (Romans 13:8 to 15:13).

Consider these principles:

Love your neighbor as yourself (13:8-10). Love fulfills the purpose of the law and sums up the intent of the commandments. Christians should

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resolve to do no harm to their neighbors and, even more difficult, to love others regardless of circumstances.

Live daily in the light of Jesus (13:11-14). Awaken from lethargy and live in the light of our Lord Jesus Christ, not in the actions of darkness: no drunken parties, no sexual immorality and no dissension. Thus, Paul struck at three enemies of love: apathy, lust and hatred. Christians must clothe themselves with Jesus Christ, not with carnality.

Accept differences in eating (14:1-4). Some felt free to eat any meat served. Others felt that God did not accept those who did not adhere to dietary restrictions of the Old Testament.

Concerns about meat probably ran the gamut from unclean meats of Leviticus 11, to meat offered to idols, to improperly bled animals, to blemished sacrifices. Romans had no qualms about eating various meats. They sacrificed pigs, goats and dogs to their gods in the temples. Some “conservative” members would refuse to eat with “liberals.”

Two problems resulted: those who ate indiscriminately often ridiculed anyone who restricted what could be eaten. Those who held to dietary restrictions often judged the liberalness of others.

Paul warned them not to be contemptuous or condemning (14:3, 10). Why? Both parties serve God, even though they may be uncomfortable with traditions maintained by others.

Accept differences in worship (14:5-8). Some members believed that one day was holy, while others believed that all days were alike, that no day was inherently holy.

Paul returns to dietary concerns. Those eating freely did so to God, and those limiting their diet did so to God, thankful for what they had to eat.

The point? Holiness in God lies in commonality of worship and prayer, not in traditions. Paul probably repeats the concerns about eating because Christians had common meals on the day of worship, and conflict would destroy the work God was doing in them.

While Paul supported the position that no day was any longer inherently sacred, he did not require anyone to act against Christian conscience.

Live and die in Jesus (14:9-13). Jesus lives today. Since he is the judge, and he accepts those who live and die in him, we should not judge others in their chosen religious traditions. Days and foods do not matter, but Jesus does.

Do not block Jesus (14:13-18). Individuals with a greater sense of

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freedom must not place a stumbling block in the path of those who feel greater restrictions.

Paul supported this position by writing that “nothing is unclean [*keoinos*] in itself” (verse 14), for the new law in Christ changed what is holy. In fact, “the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but of righteousness and peace and joy” (verse 17), for all who serve Jesus Christ are accepted by God (verse 18). Strong Christians must be peacemakers.

Paul taught that although Christians are no longer required to keep Old Testament regulations, members could choose to maintain those traditions.

However, just because the doctrine of the church was set forth does not mean everyone at that time was comfortable with it, especially those who had spent entire lifetimes within Judaism. So Paul admonished everyone to be tolerant of one another and to live by personal conscience in the walk with Jesus.

Live in the kingdom in faith (14:19-23). Seek peace, so that no one destroys the work of God (verse 20). Christians, as the body of Christ, should build, not destroy. Maintain a strong commitment to Jesus and his work of the kingdom now.

Again Paul states the principle of the new covenant: “All food is clean” (*katharizo*) (verse 20). However, the strong should not purposefully eat or drink anything that would be offensive to others in their company. Nor should those with greater restrictions judge others if they encounter them eating freely. Live in the faith you possess with God.

Imitate the sacrifice of Jesus Christ (15:1-6). Jesus did not become a human sacrifice for us because it was the comfortable thing to do. He came to serve, to save and to be sacrificed.

Christians accept a life of service and sacrifice, even when it is not comfortable to do so. Freedom in Jesus means leaving comfort zones to bear with those who do not share the same approach to liberty.

To bridge distinctions of worship, Paul focused on building unity through following Jesus Christ (verse 5). In unity Christians glorify God and Jesus (verse 6).

Accept others as Christ accepts you (15:7-13). God is praised when his people place responsibility to love others above their rights of personal freedom. Christ is Lord and servant of both Jew and gentile. Each needs to appreciate the culture of the other.

How comfortable are you with freedoms that exist in Christian grace?

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From greater variety in song services, to variation in personal expression, from worship on different days, to freedom in eating, we should be thankful for the wider opportunity to praise God as we live in his love.

Differences on these issues should not overwhelm our focus on Jesus and his kingdom. True comfort lies in a close relationship with Jesus and tolerance for one another. “The just shall live by faith.”

JEWS AND GENTILES TOGETHER

ROMANS 15

In Romans 15, Paul completes his discussion of how Christians who are strong in the faith should help those whose faith is weak. He reminds his readers that God is calling the Gentiles to salvation, and that they are the focus of Paul's ministry. Paul shares his plan to visit Jerusalem with an offering from the Gentiles to give to the Jewish believers.

The strong should help the weak

In chapter 14, Paul explained that Christians who were strong in the faith believed that everything was clean and could be eaten. Those who were weak in faith were cautious about their diet and observed certain days as special. This difference of opinion was a serious problem for the Roman churches, so Paul took a considerable portion of his letter to address it. The cautious Christians should not condemn the more permissive ones, and those who feel free should not cause the weak to sin by pressuring them to do things that their conscience did not yet allow.

“We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves” (15:1). The people who are confident of their salvation in Christ need to be tolerant of the doctrinal mistakes that others have. Their faith is already weak; we should not challenge them more than they can bear. Paul taught that all foods are clean, but he sometimes restrained his freedom (1 Cor. 8:13; 9:20).

Paul then gives the general principle: “Each of us should please our neighbors for their good, to build them up” (verse 2). He uses Jesus Christ

as the model we should follow: “For even Christ did not please himself...” Paul supports his point by quoting Psalm 69:9, a messianic psalm: “As it is written: “The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me”” (verse 3). Christ was willing to accept persecution, so the strong should be willing to accept a little inconvenience.

Some people might wonder why Paul is using the Old Testament. He has already used it dozens of times, but now he explains: “For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope” (verse 4). Paul isolates two lessons we can draw from the Old Testament: endurance and encouragement. We need to endure difficulties, and God is faithful to us.

Gentiles praising God

Paul includes a brief prayer: “May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (verses 5-6). That is, may God give you the attitude of service that leads to worship together.

Paul concludes: “Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God” (verse 7). Just as Jesus gave up his privileges to serve us, we should be willing to give up some of ours, so people will praise God. Reconciliation with God should lead us toward reconciliation with other people.

“For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God’s truth...” (15:8). Paul mentions this because of the situation in Rome: He is asking the strong (primarily Gentiles) to restrain their freedom when with the weak (primarily Jews). He now begins to defend his ministry to the Gentiles.

Why did Christ serve the Jews? Paul explains: “So that the promises made to the patriarchs might be confirmed and, moreover, that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy” (verses 8-9). It is only through Christ that people may be forgiven and thereby receive the patriarchal blessings. But Christ’s purpose extends beyond the physical descendants of Abraham — he also wants Gentiles to bring glory to God.

Paul now presents a series of Old Testament prophecies about Gentiles

joining the Jews in worshipping God. He begins with Psalm 18:49: “Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles; I will sing hymns to your name.” Then he moves to the Gentile response to the good news: “Rejoice, you Gentiles, with his people” (Romans 15:10; Deut. 32:43).

Then the Gentiles join in the praise: “Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and sing praises to him, all you peoples” (verse 11; Ps. 117:1). Paul concludes with a quote from Isaiah 11:10, showing that this praise comes through the nations accepting the Messiah, the descendant of David and Jesse: “The Root of Jesse will spring up, one who will arise to rule over the nations; in him the Gentiles will hope” (verse 12).

Then Paul gives another short prayer, a benediction good for believers everywhere: “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (verse 13). Through faith in Christ, we have tremendous hope.

Paul’s ministry to the Gentiles

With tact, Paul explains why he wrote to the Roman church: “I myself am convinced, my brothers and sisters, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with knowledge and competent to instruct one another. Yet I have written you quite boldly on some points to remind you of them again, because of the grace God gave me to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles” (verses 14-16). Since Christ appointed Paul to serve the Gentiles, he felt that he could remind them that basic Christian principles would help them deal with the doctrinal differences they had.

“He gave me the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit” (verse 16). Paul uses special terms here to call his mission a work of worship. He is zealous in this mission: “Therefore I glory in Christ Jesus in my service to God. I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me in leading the Gentiles to obey God by what I have said and done” (Romans 15:17-18). Paul is giving the credit to God, not himself.

The results of Paul’s ministry can be seen in the fact that Gentiles are obeying God. This does not mean circumcision, food laws or Sabbaths — the Gentiles are considered obedient without keeping such laws.

How has Christ achieved this result through Paul? “By the power of

signs and wonders, through the power of the Spirit of God” (verse 19). Although Acts describes several miracles done through Paul, Paul rarely mentions them. His readers needed to follow him not by doing miracles, but in humility and enduring difficulties.

“So from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum [modern Albania] , I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ” (verse 19). Paul did not preach in every city, but everywhere he preached, he proclaimed all the gospel. He preached in a few cities, and after he left, his converts could then take the gospel to surrounding towns.

“It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else’s foundation” (verse 20). At some point in his life Paul decided that his mission was to go to new areas. He saw his work as a fulfillment of Isa. 52:15: “As it is written: ‘Those who were not told about him will see, and those who have not heard will understand.’ This is why I have often been hindered from coming to you” (verses 21-22). This verse does not apply to every missionary, but it described what Paul was doing.

Although Paul had wanted to visit Rome earlier, there was a greater need for the gospel in Asia Minor and Greece. Now, Paul sets his sights farther west — Spain — and that will give him an opportunity to visit Rome. But he had a more important mission to take care of first.

Paul’s travel plans

Greek letters often mentioned the writer’s travel plans, and this letter does as well. Paul begins with an almost humorous exaggeration: “But now that there is no more place for me to work in these regions, and since I have been longing for many years to visit you, I plan to do so when I go to Spain. I hope to see you while passing through and to have you assist me on my journey there, after I have enjoyed your company for a while” (verses 23-24).

Paul would never live long enough to take the gospel to all the empire, so he wanted to make a decisive leap westward. He not only invited himself to Rome, he also invited them to support his mission — perhaps even provide some assistants.

But other plans were more immediate — the churches in Greece were sending an offering to the believers in Judea. Paul had urged them to do it,

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for he felt it was very important to send this token of unity from the Gentiles to the Jews. “Now, however, I am on my way to Jerusalem in the service of the Lord’s people there. For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. They were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews’ spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings” (verses 25-27).

The Greek Christians had a debt to pay. But what could the Roman Christians do? It was too late for them to join in the offering being sent to Jerusalem. Paul is hinting that the Gentile Christians in Rome should help the Jewish Christians in Rome. Paul wants peace between Jews and Gentiles, whether it is in Rome or in Jerusalem.

“So after I have completed this task and have made sure that they have received this contribution, I will go to Spain and visit you on the way. I know that when I come to you, I will come in the full measure of the blessing of Christ” (verses 28-29). Paul viewed this offering as a symbol of the spiritual fruit produced by the gospel among the Gentiles.

The message he wanted to send to the Jerusalem church was this: “See how many Gentiles are now praising God because of the mission you began. They are thankful that your Messiah is also their Messiah, and as the Scriptures predicted (Isa. 60:5; 66:20), they are sending gifts to Jerusalem as a firstfruits offering to sanctify the rest of the harvest among the Gentiles.”

Paul was confident that after he had delivered this offering, that Christ would bless his mission to Rome and Spain. He asks them to help him in his difficult mission by praying for him: “I urge you, brothers and sisters, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me. Pray that I may be kept safe from the unbelievers in Judea and that the contribution I take to Jerusalem may be favorably received by the believers there...” (verses 30-31).

As Acts 21 confirms, the most dangerous part of the trip was not the voyage, but the disobedient Jews (an ironic contrast to the obedient Gentiles). Paul did not assume that the believers would be glad to see him, either — he wanted prayer that they might accept the offering he was bringing. Some did not want to accept the fact that Gentiles were now in the family of faith.

And after the offering, Paul wanted them to pray “so that I may come to

you with joy, by God's will, and in your company be refreshed. The God of peace be with you all. Amen" (verses 32-33). Paul concludes with a benediction of peace — what the Roman churches needed most. He says "amen," but he is not yet done. In our next issue, we will discuss the greetings and exhortations of chapter 16.

Things to think about

- What scruples do weak-faith Christians have today, and in what way should we bear with them? (verse 1)
- How do the Old Testament scriptures encourage us? (verse 4)
- In v. 7, Paul uses Christ as a model we should follow. Are there aspects of Jesus that we should not follow?
- Do we "overflow" with hope when we trust in Christ? (verse 13)
- How well do we teach one another? (verse 14)
- If evangelism is a priestly duty (verse 16), does it apply to all Christians?
- Should we assist missionaries who are on their way to another region? (verse 24)
- Are we obligated to share material blessings with the Jews, or should we share with some other parent group? (verse 27)
- Do we pray for missionaries in dangerous areas? (verse 31)

GREETINGS, FRIENDS

ROMANS 16

In the last chapter of Romans, Paul greets a large number of people and gives a few closing exhortations. These greetings reveal a lot about the early church.

Paul's emissary

In verse 1, Paul writes, "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchrea." Although some older translations say that Phoebe is a "servant," this is unlikely because all believers are servants, and v. 2 indicates that she was a person of some importance. The phrase "of the church" also suggests an official role.

Unfortunately, we do not know what deacons did in the church in Cenchrea (near Corinth). A comparison of Paul's letters shows that the "organizational chart" could vary quite a bit from one church to another; the description of deacons in 1 Tim. 3 may not tell us much about what a deacon did in Corinth or Cenchrea.

Phoebe is apparently the person who carried Paul's letter to Rome. As the letter-carrier, she probably also read the letter out loud, answered questions about it and the author, and conveyed some verbal news and greetings.

Paul then asks the Roman church to serve her needs: "I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of God's people and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been the benefactor of many people, including me" (verse 2).

The word "benefactor" is just one of many suggested English

translations of the Greek word *prostasis*. Literally, it means a person placed in front. In the Greek Old Testament, it was used for officials; in ordinary Greek it was used for patrons — wealthy people who assisted others. Phoebe had helped Paul, and although she probably would not need *financial* help, Paul asks the Roman Christians to help her in other ways.

Notable women and men

Paul then greets a number of people in Rome — some of them Jewish, most of them Gentiles, often with names commonly used for slaves and freedmen. For a city he has never been to, he knows a surprising number of people who have moved to Rome. He probably begins with his closest friends:

“Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my co-workers in Christ Jesus. They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them” (verses 3-4). Acts 18 tells us that Priscilla and Aquila were originally from Rome. Paul met them in Corinth and worked in their tentmaking business. They became part of Paul’s ministry team, went to Ephesus with him, and were instrumental in teaching Apollos about Christianity.

Paul does not call ordinary Christians “co-workers” — this term indicates a person who works “in Christ Jesus” — that is, full-time work in the gospel. He used the term for himself, Timothy, Titus, Epaphroditus, Philemon, Mark, Luke, and a few others. Priscilla and Aquila had played an important role in the evangelization of the Gentiles; now they were back in Rome, leading a house church, as Paul notes: “Greet also the church that meets at their house” (verse 5).

Paul then greets “my dear friend Epenetus, who was the first convert to Christ in the province of Asia” (verse 5). We do not know anything else about Epenetus. Nor do we know anything about “Mary, who worked very hard for you” (verse 6). We do not know what kind of work she did, or how Paul learned about it.

He then sends his greetings to another couple: “Greet Andronicus and Junia, my fellow Jews who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was” (verse 7). Junia is a woman’s name, but in some translations she is given a man’s name: Junias, suggested as a possible short form of the name Junianus. But no one has ever found this form used, and Junia is used hundreds of times for a woman, so Junia is probably correct.

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Andronicus and Junia were a Jewish couple who believed in Christ before Paul did — and that was very early; perhaps they were part of the Pentecost crowd. They were in prison with Paul, probably because they were preaching the gospel along with him. In what way were they “outstanding among the apostles”? It is possible that Paul meant that the apostles thought highly of them, but Paul does not refer to the opinion of the apostles anywhere else in his writings. It is more likely that Paul is commending them for their own work.

However, since Andronicus and Junia have not left any further trace in church history, they probably were not apostles in the same sense that Paul and the Twelve were. Since the word *apostle* can also refer to an official messenger (see 2 Cor. 8:23), it is possible that Andronicus and Junia served in that way.

“Greet Ampliatus, my dear friend in the Lord. Greet Urbanus, our co-worker in Christ, and my dear friend Stachys. Greet Apelles, whose fidelity to Christ has stood the test [apparently in some severe trial]. Greet those who belong to the household of Aristobulus” (verses 8-10).

Paul does not greet Aristobulus, but only those in his household (which would include slaves and servants as well as family members). This Aristobulus may have been the grandson of Herod and friend of Claudius Caesar; such a person would have had a very large household, many of them Jewish. Paul knew that his household formed the core of another house church.

“Greet Herodion, my fellow Jew. Greet those in the household of Narcissus who are in the Lord. Greet Tryphena and Tryphosa, those women who work hard in the Lord” (verses 11-12). The phrase “in the Lord” suggests that these women were involved in evangelistic work of some sort. Narcissus may refer to another wealthy friend of Claudius who would have had a large “household,” some of whom had become believers.

“Greet my dear friend Persis, another woman who has worked very hard in the Lord. Greet Rufus [possibly the son of Simon of Cyrene (Mark 15:21)], chosen in the Lord, and his mother, who has been a mother to me, too. Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas and the other brothers and sisters with them. Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas and all the believers with them” (verses 12-15). Here, Paul may be referring to two other house churches, and people he does not

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necessarily know, but he knows enough about the churches in Rome to know the names of the most prominent members.

The early church apparently had an effective (although probably informal) system of communication. As people moved from city to city, churches stayed in touch and were aware of the doctrines taught in other churches. That helped maintain the unity of the faith.

“Greet one another with a holy kiss,” Paul concludes. “All the churches of Christ [in Paul’s region, that is] send greetings” (verse 16). Greet one another as dear friends, he says — and Christians kissed one another for centuries, and still do in some cultures.

But the purpose of Paul’s command would be thwarted if we insisted on taking him literally in American culture today. Instead of being a sign of welcome, a congregational kiss would not be welcomed by most today. Paul’s instructions in this case are limited by culture — by his culture and ours. There is no requirement for us today to greet one another with a kiss.

Plea for peace

Paul then turns to one last, presumably important, exhortation: “I urge you, brothers and sisters, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them” (verse 17). Paul had experience with divisive people who taught rules that the gospel did not have. The solution is simple: Don’t listen to them. If they say, You have to keep our rules to be saved, then they are contrary to the gospel of Christ.

“For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites [it could be an appetite for money, fame, or just a sense of personal importance]. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people” (verse 18). They make a good argument, but they are dead wrong. They are not yet causing a problem in Rome, but Paul knows that it won’t be long before they try to influence the Roman churches. And since the Roman churches already have different practices (about meat and days, for example), they are vulnerable to divisive teachings.

“Everyone has heard about your obedience [that is, you are already obeying enough rules],so I rejoice because of you; but I want you to be wise about what is good, and innocent about what is evil. [That is why Paul urges them to be alert.] The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet”

(verses 19-20). God is a God of peace, not division, and when we focus on the good, on grace, the adversary will be powerless (cf. Gen. 3:15).

“The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you” (cf. Romans 1:7).

Paul’s companions send greetings

Paul closes, as many ancient letter-writers did, with greetings from the people with him: “Timothy, my co-worker, sends his greetings to you, as do Lucius, Jason and Sosipater, my fellow Jews” (verse 21). Why did Paul mention that these men were Jewish? Perhaps he was trying to remind the Jewish readers that many Jews supported Paul in his mission to the Gentiles, and they supported his message of grace. Luke may refer to the same men in Acts 13:1; 17:5; 20:4.

“I, Tertius, who wrote down this letter, greet you in the Lord” (verse 22). Since it was difficult to write on papyrus, most letters were written by professional secretaries. Here, the secretary sends his own greetings, noting that he is also a believer.

“Gaius, whose hospitality I and the whole church here enjoy, sends you his greetings” (verse 23). Paul is staying at the home of Gaius, and the church meets at his house (cf. 1 Cor. 1:14). “Erastus, who is the city’s director of public works, and our brother Quartus send you their greetings.” Here Paul makes special mention of a government official — the Roman Christians might be encouraged to know that an official has accepted the gospel. They are likely to know Quartus, too, but we do not.

Paul closes with a benediction

“Now to him who is able to establish you in accordance with my gospel, the message I proclaim about Jesus Christ, in keeping with the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all the Gentiles might come to the obedience that comes from faith — to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen” (verses 25-27).

This benediction reviews some of Paul’s main points:

- The gospel is rooted in the Old Testament, but is now much more clearly revealed and is being preached (see Romans 1:2).
- The gospel involves Gentiles in faith and obedience (Romans 1:5).

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- The gospel is about Jesus Christ (Romans 1:3).
- God can and will establish you (that is, give you eternal life) through this gospel (Romans 1:11, 16).
- God will get the glory, through Jesus Christ.

To that, we can join Paul in saying “amen.”

Things to think about

- If I were writing to a church in another city, which men and women would I name?
- Does a handshake convey the warmth of affection that Paul wanted in verse 16?
- How can I know whether a new teaching is divisive, or merely different? (verse 17) What should the message center on?
- How well does the gospel give glory to God in my life? (verses 25-27)

THE WISDOM OF WEAKNESS

1 CORINTHIANS 1

The church in Corinth was beset by problems — divided into rich and poor, sophisticated and simple, the talented and the average. Some members claimed to have special knowledge that Paul did not have. They began to look down on his simple message about a man who was killed by the Romans. They wrote him a letter asking for more information on several topics, and Paul learned even more about the church in Corinth from people who had been there.

Greetings

Paul's reply is now known as 1 Corinthians. He begins, as ancient letters normally did, by saying who he was and naming the people he was writing to: "Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes, To the church of God that is in Corinth" (verses 1-2, New Revised Standard Version in this chapter).

He then reminds them of who they are: "To those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours" (verse 2). They are called to be holy, but they are also called to be part of a larger group. That will be important later in the letter.

Greek letters usually began with *chara*, greetings, but Paul modifies this to *charis* (grace) and peace (the typical Jewish greeting): "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

Greek orators would often begin a speech by praising the audience, but Paul modifies this to praise God for what he is doing in the readers: "I give

thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind—just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you” (verses 3-6).

The Corinthian Christians prided themselves on their speaking and their knowledge. Paul acknowledges these as blessings from God, and as evidence in support of the gospel of Christ. He will address the misuse of these gifts later in the letter.

Since God has been generous to them, he writes: “You are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ” (verses 7-8). Paul here subtly reminds them to stick firmly to their original faith, rather than accepting odd new doctrines. Don’t forget that salvation depends on Christ!

A divided congregation

He begins with a plea for unity: “I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose” (verse 10). Perfect agreement is pointless if it means that everyone believes the same heresy. So in this letter Paul will try to set them on the right track.

Paul had heard that the congregation was divided into different groups, some claiming to follow one leader, and some another (verses 11-12). But Paul didn’t want even his own name to be an excuse for division: “Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name” (verses 13-15).

But then Paul stops to correct himself: “(I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else)” (verse 16). Paul could have edited his original mistake out, but he left it in as an illustration of how unimportant it was to keep track of who did the actual baptism.

“For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power” (verse 17). Paul baptized people — and he assumed that all the readers had been baptized — but the gospel was his priority. The message centered on Christ, not on a ritual. Paul wanted to persuade people

with the facts, not with the flowery oratory that some Greek philosophers used to attract a following.

God's power and wisdom

The message about a crucified Messiah might seem preposterous to some people, but God uses that message to bring salvation to those who believe. “For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (verse 18). Paul then quotes Isa. 29:14: “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.” God works in unexpected ways — some people might say that the gospel of grace is a message of weakness, but Paul says it is a message of power (Rom. 1:16).

“Where is the one who is wise?” Paul asks. Most are not in the church. Where is the teacher of the law? Most are not accepting the message of salvation. Where are the philosophers? Not here. “Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?” (1 Cor. 1:20).

Humans value education, but God's message does not depend on human approval. People cannot know God through their own intelligence, and they cannot save themselves by any amount of philosophy or study. Instead, God decided to save people who believed the gospel (verse 21).

“Jews demand signs [miracles] and Greeks desire wisdom [philosophy], but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (verses 22-24). The message is too simple for some people, but God uses it to save his people.

The crucified Christ may look weak and foolish, but this is the power and wisdom of God. “God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength” (verse 25). This is the basis of unity in the church: accepting the gospel of Christ crucified — people being saved by the shameful death of Christ.

The wisdom of God

Remember that you were ordinary people when you heard the gospel, Paul says. You were not the movers and shakers of Corinth. “But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God” (verses 27-29).

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If people could save themselves through their own intelligence, then the kingdom of God would be filled with people who were proud of their own accomplishments. If people could get in through their own abilities, they would think that they were just as good as God.

So God decided to call the nobodies of this world, those who were willing to admit their need, those who were willing to accept the gift of salvation. And this plan will eventually shame the wise and humiliate the proud, who will then be able to realize that their own strength, no matter how good it was, was not good enough.

Because of God's plan, Paul writes, "He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord'" (verses 30-31, quoting from Jer. 9:24). Jesus is our righteousness — it is in him, and only in him, that we can be righteous and holy. Only when we are in Christ, united with him by faith, can we be redeemed. We cannot boast about anything we did — our only boast is in what Christ does for us. He gets the credit and the praise.

Things to think about

- In what way has God enriched you? (verse 5).
- How can people be perfectly united in mind and thought? (verse 10)
- Is v. 14 an inspired mistake?
- Can the wise and wealthy accept the unexpected wisdom of God? (verse 20)
- If Christ is our righteousness, do we need any of our own? (verse 30)

A COMMAND PAUL DID NOT OBEY

1 CORINTHIANS 9

In his first letter to the Corinthian church, Paul deals with a number of questions the Corinthian Christians had. Some of them felt free to eat meat in pagan temples; others thought that would be sinful.

Paul explains that Christian liberty must be voluntarily limited, and in this case the “free” Christians should stay out of pagan temples so they would not hurt the faith of weak Christians. He illustrates his conclusion by saying that he would not eat meat at all, if eating would cause someone to fall into sin (8:13).

What? Doesn’t Paul have the right to do what he wants? Why should his freedom be limited by other people’s immaturity?

Paul explains that love requires self-sacrifice, and he gives an example from his own ministry. In this example, the Corinthian church is “weak,” and Paul is giving up his rights to avoid offending them. Though he is free, he chooses to be a slave for the sake of the gospel.

The rights of an apostle

“Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not the result of my work in the Lord? Even though I may not be an apostle to others, surely I am to you! For you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord” (9:1-2).

Apparently some people in the Corinthian church did not respect Paul, did not accept him as a genuine apostle and were refusing to give him any support. Paul replies that he has full apostolic credentials, but even by a lesser definition, they should accept him as an apostle because he is the one

who brought the gospel to them. And because of that, he has certain rights.

“This is my defense to those who sit in judgment on me. Don’t we have the right to food and drink? Don’t we have the right to take a believing wife along with us, as do the other apostles and the Lord’s brothers and Cephas? Or is it only I and Barnabas who lack the right to not work for a living?” (9:3-6).

Other apostles are being given support — enough to support their wives, too. The Corinthians apparently agree that those apostles have a right to financial support, but they deny it for Paul. (The other apostles were conveniently far away, barely aware of the Corinthians and unlikely to ask them for support.)

This is not fair, says Paul. Barnabas and I are doing the same kind of work, and we should be able to have the same kind of support. Paul gives some examples from secular society: “Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat its grapes? Who tends a flock and does not drink of the milk?” (9:7).

“Do I say this merely on human authority? Doesn't the Law say the same thing? For it is written in the Law of Moses: ‘Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain’” (9:8, quoting from Deut. 25:4).

This law is not simply about animals, Paul says. It is a principle that applies to people, too. “Is it about oxen that God is concerned? Surely he says this for us, doesn’t he? Yes, this was written for us, because whoever plows and threshes should be able to do so in the hope of sharing in the harvest” (9:9-10). Yes, people should be paid for the work they do.

The Lord’s command

Paul then applies the principle to his own situation: “If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you? If others have this right of support from you, shouldn’t we have it all the more?” (9:11-12) In other words: If I have given you the gospel, you should be willing to support me as I preach the gospel. If I have given you something of eternal value, surely you should be willing to give me things of temporary value.

We have this right, Paul says, “but we did not use this right. On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ” (9:12). Paul is willing to set aside his rights — the gospel is more important to him than his own privileges. Paul’s example is relevant for many modern situations, and his comments challenge those who receive money as well as

those who should give. All sides are called to self-sacrifice for the sake of the gospel.

This is common sense, Paul seems to say. The principle is true for oxen, soldiers, farmers and shepherds. If the work is worth doing, it is worth supporting, and this is true in religion, too: “Don’t you know that those who serve in the temple get their food from the temple, and that those who serve at the altar share in what is offered on the altar?” (9:13).

To clinch the argument, Paul quotes Jesus: “In the same way, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel” (9:14, perhaps alluding to Luke 10:7). But then Paul again notes, “I have not used any of these rights” (9:15).

Paul clearly calls this a command of the Lord, and just as clearly says he does not obey the command. He makes his living by making tents — he understands the Lord’s command more as a command for giving than for receiving. The focus is on the responsibility of believers to support the work of the gospel.

The priority for Paul is not money, but the gospel. He willingly sets aside his right to financial support so that people will not think his message is just a speech designed to get money. Some Greek orators made their living by traveling and entertaining audiences with speeches. Others formed schools and charged students for lectures. Paul does not want anyone to think his message is motivated by selfish concerns.

But Paul’s willingness to support himself does not change the Lord’s command. Ministers of the gospel have a right to financial support, and believers have an obligation to provide support. But Paul is not asking for his own support. “I am not writing this in the hope that you will do such things for me, for I would rather die than allow anyone to deprive me of this boast” (9:15).

Even in this letter, Paul is not asking the Corinthians to support him. His request may have been for the collection he was coordinating for the believers in Jerusalem (16:1-4). He wants to make it clear that he does not preach for his own benefit. Rather, he preaches because the Lord commanded him to preach. The gospel is his priority: “When I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, since I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! If I preach voluntarily, I have a reward; if not voluntarily, I am simply discharging the trust committed to me” (9:16-17). Paul feels compelled, not quite sure whether he is a volunteer or a slave. As

he does his duty, he also feels rewarded.

“What then is my reward? Just this: that in preaching the gospel I may offer it free of charge, and so not make full use of my rights as a preacher of the gospel” (9:18). Paul felt good in being able to preach without asking for money. That approach may be good when preaching to unbelievers, but eventually the time comes, as it has here for Paul, when believers must be taught about the Lord’s command. Those who accept the gospel of grace must become gracious.

A slave of everyone

Paul again uses himself as an illustration of how believers should respond to the gospel with self-sacrifice: “Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible” (9:19). His goal is the gospel, not himself. He sets aside his rights, gives up his freedom, to do the work Jesus has given him.

“To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law” (9:20). Jesus, as a Jew, was born “under the law” (Gal. 4:4). Jews were under the law, and Paul obeyed the law when he was with Jews. Why? To win the Jews, to help them accept the gospel.

But Paul also notes that he is not under the law. Rather, he is free to live like a gentile (Gal. 2:14), to live as though he does not have the law, as we see in verse 21: “To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law), so as to win those not having the law.”

Paul’s priority is to win people, to make the gospel attractive. He is obligated by the law of Christ to set aside his personal preferences so that he can serve others. He uses his freedom in Christ to be a slave, to adapt his behavior to the situation. His main goal is not to uphold tradition or to fight tradition, nor to side with one ethnic group or another, but to preach Christ.

“To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings” (9:22-23).

Paul does not want to disqualify himself (9:27) by living a self-centered life. He goes out of his way to serve others, to serve the gospel. His example is consistent with his message: the message that God loved the

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world so much that he sent Jesus to die for us. Although we were enemies, Jesus gave up his rights and gave up his life as a ransom for us.

The example Jesus set includes a command for all of us: Those who receive spiritual blessings must be willing to share material things.

DIVERSITY AND UNITY IN SPIRITUAL GIFTS: 1 CORINTHIANS 12

The church members in Corinth asked Paul a number of questions, and Paul responded in the letter we know as 1 Corinthians. One of the topics he addresses is “spiritual gifts.” Paul’s explanation begins in chapter 12; we’ll begin in verse 3.

Same source, but different results (verses 3-7)

Paul comments on how God works in different ways in different people: “There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work.”

Paul uses “gifts,” “service,” and “working” as roughly equivalent (just as Spirit, Lord and God are equivalent). The three terms are not distinct categories, but they highlight different aspects of the same phenomena: 1) that the abilities are given, not something we can take credit for ourselves, 2) they are given for service, to help other people, and 3) they work; they produce results in our lives. The main point is that God works in different ways in different people.

Paul summarizes the purpose: “Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.” Spiritual gifts are not for a person’s private benefit—they are to help the church as a whole.

Various gifts (verses 8-11)

Paul lists some of the gifts: “To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, to another a message of knowledge by means of the

same Spirit.” Generally speaking, knowledge refers to awareness of facts; wisdom refers to the ability to apply facts to the right situation. The Corinthian believers seem to be interested in knowledge and wisdom, and that may be why Paul begins with these two gifts.

He lists more: “to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits.” All believers have faith, but some have stronger faith than others. Presumably someone who has a gift of miraculous healing also has stronger faith than most people. These gifts overlap; Paul is giving examples, not creating totally distinct categories. He will have more to say about prophecy in chapter 14.

Paul ends with the gift that was causing the most problems in Corinth, and its solution; “to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues.” No matter what the “tongues” were, no one in Corinth understood them, except people who had the special gift of interpretation.

The main point for Paul here is that “all these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines.” Not everyone is given the same abilities; the Spirit purposely distributes different skills to different people.

Why?

As verse 7 says, it is for the common good. When we have different gifts, when no one has all the abilities, then we need to work together, and that in itself is good for us.

One body with many parts (verses 12-16)

Paul compares the church to a human body: “Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ”—that is, with the body of Christ, the church. Paul is still stressing diversity within one body. The Corinthians needed to know about that diversity, because some of them said that everyone should have one gift in particular—tongues—and they looked down on people who did not have that gift.

Paul explains the body analogy: “For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.” The Spirit places people of all ethnic and social groups together. We have a common origin and a common purpose, but (Paul reminds us again) we are not identical: “Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many.”

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Paul insists that all the parts are needed: “Now if the foot should say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,’ it would not for that reason stop being part of the body.” Similarly, if a person who did not speak in tongues should say, “Because I do not speak in tongues, I do not belong here,” Paul would respond: “That does not disqualify you—you are still part of the body.”

Similarly, “And if the ear should say, ‘Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,’ it would not for that reason stop being part of the body.” If someone thinks that they don’t belong because they lack the gift of miracles, then Paul says: “You are part of the body anyway; that is no reason to drop out.”

Variety is necessary (verses 17-20)

Paul develops the analogy further: “If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be?” He is saying, in effect, “If everyone in the church had the gift of tongues, who would be doing the prophecy? If everyone had the gift of miracles, who would have the wisdom?”

Paul stresses diversity: “But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body.” We cannot turn a gift into a requirement for acceptance, because God has distributed different roles to different people. There are many parts to play within the body of Christ.

All parts are needed (verses 21-27)

Earlier, Paul encouraged the people who felt left out. Now he addresses those who look down on others: “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I don’t need you!’ And the head cannot say to the feet, ‘I don’t need you!’” People who speak in tongues should not think that they have everything they need.

One person might say, “I don’t need prophecy, because I have tongues. I don’t need discernment, because the only gift that counts is the one that I have.” But Paul says, “We need every part, and every person.” God puts his people into a body, into a community of people in which we need to work together to help each other.

“On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor.” Is this true in the church today? Do we give special honor to people who are weak, who are not in the limelight?

“And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment.” Do we take special efforts for church members who are less glamorous in the eyes of the world? Paul wants us to make sure we include everyone, and to make everyone feel an important part of the body—because everyone *is* important.

“But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other.” God wants his children to love one another, no matter which gifts they have or lack. We should not separate into the haves and the have-nots; we are all in this together, and we are to help one another and learn from one another.

What does “equal concern” look like? Paul will say more about that in the next chapter. Here he gives one example: “If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.” Our sorrows and our successes are shared; we support those who suffer, and congratulate those who have blessings. Someday the tide will turn, so everything will work best if we stick together, each doing the part God has given us to do.

Paul summarizes it: “Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.” Everyone belongs, and all the parts need to work together.

The Greeks had a word for it: χάρισμα

In English, a person who has “charisma” has a personality that seems to attract followers. But for Paul, everyone has been given a *charisma*, because for him the word meant a gift, something given by the grace (*charis*) of God. When God delivered Paul from danger, it was a *charisma* (2 Cor. 1:11). His ability to be celibate was another *charisma* from God (1 Cor. 7:7).

But *charismata* (the plural form of *charisma*) are best known as the special abilities God’s Spirit distributes to his people (Rom. 12:6; 1 Cor. 12:4; 1 Pet. 4:10). Churches that emphasize these gifts are often called *charismatic* churches.

But actually, all Christians can be called charismatic, because we all believe that “the gift [*charisma*] of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 6:23). Salvation is the greatest gift, given to all.

EXEGETICAL NOTES ON 1 CORINTHIANS 12

Features of the literary structure

Paul writes, I don't want you to be ignorant about the spiritual things (verse 1). This is similar to 7:1, so Paul may be addressing the topic of spiritual things at the request of the Corinthians. Fee notes that "this is a nearly universal conviction" (570n), but notes that Paul's corrective comments imply that the Corinthians were not simply asking for information. I suspect that they did not admit any ignorance about this topic, so 12:1b may indicate that Paul is initiating the topic (cf. 11:18). His comments in chapter 14 suggest that he would have addressed the topic of spiritual gifts whether the Corinthians had asked or not.

Verse 2 refers to voiceless idols, and v. 3 to speaking. Chapter 14 makes it clear that the spiritual gifts of greatest interest to the Corinthians and to Paul involved speaking.

Verse 3 contains Trinitarian words, but not in formula. Verses 4-6 mention Spirit, Lord, and God, but "God" here does not seem to be the Father, as distinct from Spirit and Lord. Rather, "God" encompasses both. No matter what kind of gift, no matter who has it, God, by means of either the Spirit or the Lord, is the one working in the person.

The parallels of verses 4-6 at first suggest that *charismata*, *diakonia* and *energēmata* are three types of *pneumatika* (=manifestations of the Spirit). Martin seems to follow this view, saying that Paul sets the *pneumatika* "within a larger framework of God's *charismata*, a broader term referring to all manifestations of God's favor" (1016). However, Paul seems to vary his terms without necessarily implying distinct categories (Barrett 285, Fee 585-

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6n12). Paul seems to use *charismata* and *pneumatika* interchangeably (cf. v.31a and 14:1; cf. Fee 576).

The list of gifts does not seem to be in any well-defined order. (Other lists are in different orders — cf. vs. 28-30 and Rom. 12:6-8.) In 1 Cor. 12:8-10, Paul begins with two gifts of words, perhaps due to the interest in gifts of speaking, or perhaps due to the Corinthians' interest in wisdom and knowledge. Faith, healing and miracles may form a group. He ends with two gifts of tongues, putting the gift causing the most problems last (Fee 591, 619). But the gifts of prophecy and discerning spirits don't seem to be in any particular order or logical connection. None of the lists is exhaustive. "Paul's concern here is to offer a *considerable* list so that they will stop being singular in their own emphasis [i.e., expecting all Christians to speak in tongues]" (Fee 585).

Paul does not *prove* that the diverse gifts are all inspired by the same Spirit. He simply repeats this truth in various ways. His analogy shows that it is possible, but doesn't prove that this is the only possible explanation for diverse gifts.

Did Paul emphasize diversity, or unity? Fee argues for diversity, but I think Paul was keeping both in balance. As Fee points out, there doesn't seem to be factions due to *charismata*, but there were factions over leadership (1:10-12) and social status (11:17-34). Paul is encouraging them to have greater diversity in *charismata* and less diversity in factions; thus he has to keep balancing unity and diversity. The principle of love and mutual benefit achieves both of Paul's interests.

Paul argues that the diversity originates from a common source, and he develops that thought into the fact that God's gifts are *distributed* (vs.11, 28). This seems to be important, because from the concept of distribution comes several important corollaries: 1) Gifts are given for a good purpose. 2) God designs the distribution of gifts. 3) Not every member has every gift. 4) All gifts are important. 5) Gifts are for the benefit of the community.

Verse 31a is interpreted as an imperative in the RSV and NIV; the indicative has the same form. The Corinthians seem to have been eagerly desiring a particular spiritual gift; why would Paul command them to continue? The answer is in v.31b: Paul is going to clarify for them what the best spiritual way is, laying the foundation for chapter 14, in which he encourages them to seek a spiritual gift that is more helpful.

Outline

1. Introduction to the topic of spiritual gifts. vv. 1-3
2. One Spirit inspires a variety of divine gifts — vv. 4-11
3. Analogy of the human body to show how diversities work together
4. God distributes his gifts — vv.28-31

Cultural and contextual background

This chapter has numerous interesting words. Some are not found elsewhere in the New Testament, because few passages discuss the topic of spiritual gifts. Interest is increased, and opinions multiply, because of current controversies about charismata.

Verses 4-6: varieties (*diarseis*) may imply distribution, rather than simple variety. The related verb in v. 11 clearly means distribution (Earle 234-5, Barrett 283). Although *diarseis* might have been ambiguous on first occurrence (Fee 586n13), Paul's later use of the verb would make the meaning more clear on subsequent readings of the letter.

Verse 9: Faith “is the only charisma listed in 1 Cor. 12 that is also listed as a ‘fruit of the spirit’ in Gal. 5:22.... Here, however, *pistis* seems to mean an unusual degree of faith” (Spittler 603). “*Faith* cannot be that faith by which alone the Christian life is begun and maintained, for this could not be spoken of as a gift enjoyed by some Christians but not others” (Barrett 285).

Verse 10: Discernment of spirits “refers to the ability to evaluate ¹ either the spirits themselves [cf. 1 Jn 4:1] or ² spirit-inspired utterances [cf. 14:29]” (Spittler 603-4). “It was necessary (and it required another gift) to know whether the inspired speaker...was actuated by the Spirit of God, or by some demonic agency” (Barrett 286; he should have added as a third option that the person could be speaking of his own spirit).

Verse 10: Tongues. Fee lists the following as certain: It is an unintelligible Spirit-inspired utterance, directed to God and under the control of the speaker. “What is less certain is whether Paul also understood the phenomenon to be an actual language” (Fee 598). Fee gives evidence against glossolalia being a human language, but he also says the question is irrelevant.

Verse 11: “as he wills.” The Greek verb *bouletai* implies “the deliberate exercise of volition” (Earle 235, citing Abbott-Smith).

The message and application

When discussing spiritual gifts, the best starting point is the realization that we cannot naïvely accept all impressive gifts as having divine origin. Non-Christian religions have some dramatic phenomena, but such phenomena are not evidence of value or authenticity. Rather, value is seen in relationship to Jesus Christ our Lord. If phenomena (including supernatural, seemingly miraculous powers) work against Jesus, they are not inspired by God. That is a reliable criterion. If miracles are used in association with a false gospel or a misleading message, we must not be misled by the display but rather judge the truthfulness of the message. If the phenomena are used to promote the Lordship of Jesus Christ, they are good, and the message of Lordship is inspired.

Next, we should realize that spiritual gifts come in great variety. Even though there is only one Lord and only one Spirit, God works in every Christian, using every variety of spiritual gift. We must not expect uniformity or be misled by the diversity. Spiritual gifts are distributed with purpose and thought, according to the divine will, therefore for our good, and we are likewise to use them to serve one another.¹

God inspires a large variety of abilities. We cannot expect any person to have them all, or any of them to be experienced by all Christians, because God purposely distributes them. By dividing the skills, God encourages members to work with and help one another. The human body is an apt illustration, since it contains many types of organs. This analogy helps us see how foolish it would be to conclude that we must have one particular ability or else we don't belong. Because if the entire body were only one type of tissue, it couldn't function. Rather, the organs are interdependent, by divine design.

Just as we shouldn't lament our *lack* of a particular ability, we shouldn't disown or exclude those who have a different ability. That's because we are often unable to correctly judge the usefulness of various abilities. Our internal organs may be weak in some respects, but they are nevertheless essential. The point is that we can't judge value the way God does, so we must tolerate and try to understand differences within the church. God is the author of the variety, even though he isn't a creator of confusion. Rather, he wants the variety to have harmony and unity, not discord and schism. Members of the church need to care about one another, without haughtiness or envy. The haves and the have-nots must remember that they

are part of the same body.

God has distributed within the church gifts of leadership, miracles and service. None of these gifts are universal — God distributes them as he wishes. We should seek not for the gifts of our own choosing, not for the gifts we perceive to have honor,² but we should seek to allow God to give us greater gifts, which operate within the parameters of love and humility rather than schism.

Endnotes

1 “One of the great tragedies of history is that many people have thought that salvation comes by being a ‘member’ of some church” (Earle 235). Membership isn’t enough; we must become involved with one another.

2 It is not for Christians to dictate to the Spirit what gifts they (or others) should have, though they should strive for the greater (and perhaps less spontaneous) gifts (verse 31). The Spirit chooses what gift shall be given to each Christian, so that none has occasion for boasting, or for a sense of inferiority” (Barrett 286).

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THE MOST EXCELLENT WAY 1 CORINTHIANS 13

The church in first-century Corinth was plagued with social divisions and rivalries. Paul explained to them that God gives different people different abilities—not so that some people can exalt themselves over others, but so that everyone will work together for the common good (1 Cor. 12:7). No one is self-sufficient, and no one is unnecessary.

Near the end of chapter 12, he again explains that God appoints different roles in the church. He asks, Is everyone in the church an apostle? Of course not, he implies. It's silly to expect everyone to have the same role (verses 28-30).

Nevertheless, some gifts are better than others, and Paul encourages the Corinthians to “eagerly desire the greater gifts” (verse 31). But even if they get better gifts, how are they to use them? He explains: “And now I will show you the most excellent way.”

This superior pathway, he says in chapter 13, is the way of love. Love is not a gift that some people have and others don't—it is the way in which *all* gifts should be used. This is what the Corinthians needed most. Indeed, without love, all the other gifts were pointless.

Without love, we are nothing (verses 1-3)

Paul begins with the spiritual gift that the Corinthians valued the most: “If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.” No matter how special the words are, if they aren't helping anyone, they are just noise.

“If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all

knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.” Eloquent preaching, deep wisdom and strong faith are all wasted if they are not being used to help others.

“If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.” Even great sacrifices, if done for selfish purposes, fail to do anything for us. Selfish actions, no matter how good they appear on the outside, do not improve our standing in the eyes of God.

A description of love (verses 4-8)

Real love is not proven through spectacular performances. Rather, it is demonstrated in much smaller things we do in everyday life: “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.”

This is a description of God himself, and this is the life that the Father, Son, and Spirit enjoy with one another. This is the life God wants us to enjoy forever—and the life he wants us to have now, as well.

Love “does not dishonor others,” Paul says. “It is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.” God encourages us to participate in this life now: freed of selfishness, fits of anger and grudges.

The reason that God wants us to live this way is because this is the way God already is. He does not keep a record of wrongs—he has already forgiven us for everything we’ve done. He does not tell us to do something he has not already done himself.

“Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.” Unfortunately, *we* often fail. Paul is describing a way that we, of ourselves, cannot achieve. But Christ in us has already achieved it, and God wants us to participate with Christ in his perfect life by trusting him and letting him live in us.

Love is eternal (verses 9-13)

Paul makes a quick comparison between love, which is eternal, and the spiritual gifts favored by the Corinthians: “But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears.”

After the return of Christ and everything is made right, love will still be an essential part of life. But in that perfect age, there will be no need for

prophecies or tongues. When we all have knowledge, there is no need for a “gift of knowledge.” Those things will pass away; they are temporary.

Paul then compares this to stages in human development that we are already familiar with: “When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me.” Prophecy, tongues, and other gifts are designed for the immature, for those who live in this age; they (unlike love) are not part of mature life in the kingdom of God.

“For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.” Our life, even the best spiritual life, is on a far lower level than what we will later enjoy. We know only a fraction of what that future life will be like, but God knows exactly what we are now, and what we need to be; we can trust him to work it out for our good.

In the end, three virtues will still be needed: “And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.” This is what we all need most, because it describes the life of God himself, the life he wants us to participate in now and forever.

The Greeks had a word for it: *agapē*

Ancient Greek had several words for love: *erōs* for erotic love, *philos* for love between equals, *storgē* for the love of parents and children, and *agapē*. Although the verb form of *agapē* was common, often as a synonym for other types of love, the noun was rare.

This changed when Jews in Alexandria translated the Old Testament from Hebrew into Greek. They preferred the word *agapē*, and by using it to describe God’s love for his people, they gave it a more distinctive meaning. It was associated with the goodwill and generosity of a person in power toward one without power. It was a love that was freely given, without expecting things in return except for gratitude and loyalty.

When the New Testament was written, *agapē* was again chosen to describe the kind of love that God has for his people, and the kind of love that he wants his people to have toward one another: a love that is freely given, whether or not the other person is able to give any favors in return. Because it never keeps track of failures, it is a love that never ceases to be given.

THE GIFT OF PROPHECY

1 CORINTHIANS 14:1-12

The early Christians in Corinth were fascinated with spiritual gifts. After telling them to “desire the greater gifts” (12:31), Paul described to them “the most excellent way”—love (13:1-13). Paul then weighed the relative merits of two spiritual gifts—one the Corinthians had over-valued, and one that they did not value enough. This problem warranted considerable space in Paul’s letter.

Prophecy better than tongues (14:1-5)

“Follow the way of love, he writes, “and eagerly desire gifts of the Spirit, especially prophecy.” What is this gift of prophecy? We will see more when Paul describes its benefits. The point is that the Corinthians should value it more highly.

Tongues is a valid gift. So why should anyone want a different gift? Paul explains: “Anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to people but to God. Indeed, no one understands them; they utter mysteries by the Spirit. But the one who prophesies speaks to people for their strengthening, encouraging and comfort.”

When people speak in tongues, they cannot be understood. What good does that do? Paul answers: “Anyone who speaks in a tongue edifies themselves.” There is a private benefit.

“But the one who prophesies edifies the church.” This is the contrast Paul is making: prophecy helps other people, but tongues do not. If believers love others and want to help others, they should value prophecy over tongues.

Prophecy strengthens, encourages and comforts people. It builds them up in the faith and teaches them. Many scholars conclude that it is what we now call preaching.

Tongues are good, but prophesying is much better. “I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but I would *rather* have you prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues...so that the church may be edified.” The entire worship service should focus on edification: “Everything must be done so that the church may be built up” (14:26).

A clear message (verses 6-12)

“If I come to you and speak in tongues, what good will I be to you, unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or word of instruction?” Tongues would not be understood, but prophecy is given in language that people understand.

“In the case of lifeless things that make sounds, such as the pipe or harp, how will anyone know what tune is being played unless there is a distinction in the notes? Again, if the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle? So it is with you. Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone know what you are saying?”

If no one understands the words, they might as well all be the same syllable: “da-da-da-da-da.” It might inspire the speaker, but it doesn’t do anything for anyone else. Paul wants them to speak words that can be understood.

“There are all sorts of languages in the world, yet none of them is without meaning. If then I do not grasp the meaning of what someone is saying, I am a foreigner to the speaker, and the speaker is a foreigner to me. So it is with you.”

The much-vaunted gift of tongues wasn’t doing the Corinthian church any good. It had become a point of rivalry, pride and division. It was not helping the people join together as the family of God, the body of Christ, the temple of the Holy Spirit.

It’s good to desire spiritual gifts, Paul concludes, but for the good of the church, believers need to focus on a different gift: “Since you are eager for gifts of the Spirit, try to excel in those that build up the church.” Seek to be a person who helps others understand the words of God.

The Greeks had a word for it: *prophēteuo*

The word *prophēteuo* is a combination of the prefix *pro-*, meaning “before” and the root *pbe-*, referring to speech. *Prophēteuo* means to speak publicly, or to speak of something before it happens. Moses was a prophet (Deut. 34:10), and although he made some predictions, his greater role was to tell people about their current responsibilities.

The later Israelite prophets spoke about the future not as mere predictions, but as words of judgment about the behavior of the people in their own day. When Jonah warned Nineveh of impending destruction, the people repented, and the city survived (Jonah 3:10). As a prediction, the prophecy failed, but as a warning about the present, it achieved its purpose.

When soldiers asked Jesus to prophesy about who hit him (Luke 22:64), they were not asking for a prediction, but for evidence that showed he had supernatural knowledge. When Paul wrote about prophecy in Corinth, he referred to speech that was divinely inspired to instruct and strengthen others.

Spiros Zodhiates defines a prophet: “not primarily one who foretells things to come, but who (having been taught of God) speaks out of His will” (*The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*, page 1244).

ARE YOU OUT OF YOUR MIND? 1 CORINTHIANS 14:13-25

The believers in Corinth liked to speak in tongues, but Paul encouraged them to focus instead on gifts that build up the church. He explains why the gift of prophesying is better than tongues for use in church meetings.

Does anyone understand? (verses 13-17)

Believers meet together in order to build one another up (verse 26). But tongues are of private value; they do not help others. So Paul exhorts, “the one who speaks in a tongue should pray that they may interpret what they say.” If they speak in tongues, they should desire that their words be explained.

“For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful.” People who speak in tongues edify themselves (verse 4), but their minds are not producing any other fruit, or any other results.

Paul asks, “So what shall I do?” What is the practical action in this situation? It is to pray *and* to be fruitful: “I will pray with my spirit, but I will *also* pray with my understanding.” Tongues edify the speaker in a non-cognitive way, but they do not help others understand.

“I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my understanding.” Will he alternate between tongues one minute and interpretation the next? Perhaps. But he can pray with his spirit or sing with his spirit *and* with understanding all at the same time, with normal words.

“Otherwise when you are praising God in the Spirit [in tongues], how can someone else, who is now put in the position of an inquirer, say ‘Amen’ to your thanksgiving, since they do not know what you are saying?” If other

people don't know what the words mean, they cannot indicate agreement. They are like outsiders, excluded from the praise.

"You are giving thanks well enough, but no one else is edified." Tongues are good for private use, but not for public praise and prayer.

Do people respond with belief? (verses 18-25)

Paul knows both sides of the issue: "I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you." Even though Paul spoke tongues privately, he says, "in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue." Church meetings are a place for instruction, not for using a gift that does not edify others.

He chides them, "Brothers and sisters, stop thinking like children. In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults." When they use a spiritual gift for self-exaltation, they are being childish.

Tongues do not help other believers, but could they help unbelievers? To address that point, Paul quotes Isaiah 28:11-12: "With other tongues and through the lips of foreigners I will speak to this people, but even then they will not listen to me, says the Lord."

Isaiah was talking about the Jews being conquered by enemy nations, and in that circumstance God used other languages to speak to the people, who were essentially unbelievers. But they did not respond to Babylonian words any better than they did to Hebrew words. Paul concludes: "Tongues, then, are a sign, not for believers but for unbelievers..."

"Prophecy, however, is not for unbelievers but for believers." When God inspires people to prophesy, he speaks to people who will respond. It is the same in the church, Paul implies. Prophecy, or inspired words of instruction, is the appropriate gift for speaking to believers.

"If the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and inquirers or unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind?" The visitors would hear many sounds, but would also see that no one understood anyone else. It would seem pointless, and it could repel them.

"But if an unbeliever or an inquirer comes in while everyone is prophesying, they are convicted of sin and are brought under judgment by all, as the secrets of their hearts are laid bare." Prophecy helps people understand what sin is, and helps them admit they fall short and need a Savior.

So it leads to conversion and belief: "They will fall down and worship

God, exclaiming, ‘God is really among you!’” Prophecy is the appropriate gift to help unbelievers, too.

The Greeks had a word for it: οικοδομή

Oikodomē comes from Greek words for “house” and “build.” It may be used in its literal sense, for constructing a house, or repairing a building. But it is often used in a figurative way, as a metaphor for helping people. Paul uses it in 1 Cor. 14:26: “Everything must be done so that the church may be built up.” He is not talking about constructing a building—he is referring to helping other people.

But what does it mean to “build” another person? *The Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains* gives this paraphrase: “to increase the potential of someone or something, with focus upon the process involved – ‘to strengthen, to make more able, to build up.’” In 2 Cor. 13:10, Paul refers to his God-given authority “for building you up, not for tearing you down.”

ONE AT A TIME, PLEASE

1 CORINTHIANS 14:26-39

What did first-century believers do in their worship meetings? The Bible gives us only a few glimpses into the details. Paul gives a description in 1 Corinthians 14:26: “When you come together, each of you has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation.” Every believer had a part to play, each according to the way that God had gifted them.

Speaking in turn

However, it seems that all the believers in Corinth wanted to use their gifts at the same time, and their meetings had become chaotic. One person was singing, another speaking in tongues, a third trying to deliver a message—but no one was listening to anyone else. Everyone was empowered to speak, and that was good. But when everyone spoke at once, the gifts were not producing the desired results.

So Paul gives them a basic principle: “Everything must be done so that the church may be built up.” Spiritual gifts are given for the common good (1 Cor. 12:7), and they should strengthen the church. People should be taught, and a sense of community should grow.

Based on this foundational principle, Paul gives instructions: “If anyone speaks in a tongue, two—or at the most three—should speak, one at a time, and someone must interpret. If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and to God” (verses 27-28).

When God inspires people to speak, he does not cause everyone to speak at once. Rather, he expects them to restrain themselves so that their

gift is used at a time when it can be effective. It may mean waiting for someone else to finish, or until an interpreter is present.

Tongues are not appropriate in church, he says, unless someone is there to interpret the words. And do not expect everyone to speak in tongues—no more than three should speak at each meeting. If more people feel inspired to speak in tongues, then they can wait until the next week.

Not a God of disorder

Paul gives similar guidelines for the gift of prophecy: “Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said. And if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop. For you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged” (verses 29-31).

How do people “weigh carefully” what is said? The Greek word means to discern, to make a decision. People are to decide whether these are words of God, or not. Was this done by each person silently, or did it involve discussion? We do not know.

The first speaker must be willing to cut the message short if someone else is inspired to give an additional message. The meeting is not an oratory contest or an endurance contest, but a time for instruction and encouragement, a time to serve others rather than to seek attention for one’s self.

Paul gives another basic principle when he writes, “The spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets” (verse 32). He has already implied that tongues-speakers should control their own gift; each person should use wisdom when using their gifts. Being “inspired” does not mean that everyone blurts out whatever they want, whenever they want. God gives gifts, but he also wants us to think about how and when we use those gifts.

“For God is not a God of disorder but of peace—as in all the congregations of the Lord’s people” (verse 33). Paul’s other congregations were orderly, and he wanted Corinth to be orderly as well. He did not tell people to stop using their gifts, but his guidelines would make their gifts more effective.

Women should (not) be silent

Paul also calls for orderly worship among a third group—women—and these are among the most controversial words Paul ever wrote: “Women

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should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church” (verses 34-35).

I cannot discuss all the details of the controversy here, but briefly, we may note that Paul already implied in chapter 11 that women were allowed to prophesy, presumably in public meetings. When he writes that women are to be *silent*, he did not mean a total and permanent prohibition, just as he did not mean a total prohibition when he used the same Greek word for tongues-speakers and prophets.

The problem in the Corinthian church meetings was not a problem of *who* was speaking, but of *when*. When everyone spoke at once, it was chaotic. Part of the problem was that women were talking. So Paul tells them to stop talking in church. He did not mean that they could not sing along with everyone else, or that they could not interpret tongues for someone else, or that they could not prophesy. Rather, just like everyone else, they were to cease all out-of-turn talking. (For more details, see our more detailed study of this passage, posted at <http://www.gci.org/church/ministry/women9>.)

Paul seems to express some frustration with the Corinthians when he asks, “Or did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached?” (verse 36). The Corinthians claimed to be inspired, and acted as if they did not need any guidance from Paul or anyone else. They were using “inspiration” as an excuse for their own excesses.

Paul wants them to see the bigger picture, that they are not the only believers on the planet, and they do not have a perfect pipeline to God. Just as God can inspire the Corinthians, so he can also inspire Paul—but that does not mean that the Corinthians were responding to the Spirit just as accurately as Paul was. Paul had a special conversion, a special commission, and many more years of experience with the Spirit.

“If anyone thinks they are a prophet or otherwise gifted by the Spirit, let them acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord’s command. But if anyone ignores this, they will themselves be ignored” (verses 37-38). Paul is invoking his God-given authority over his churches.

Paul concludes the chapter: “Be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way” (verses 39-40). We might summarize it this way:

- Be eager to speak words that instruct, encourage, and build

people up.

- Tongues are not wrong in themselves, but they can (like most other gifts) be used wrongly.
- Meetings should be orderly, so they can strengthen the church.

The Greeks had a word for it: τάξις

Taxis comes from *tassō*, which means “to arrange.” *Taxis* usually conveys the idea of a sequence. We get the English word *taxonomy* from this word.

In Luke 1:8, *taxis* is used to say that Zechariah’s division was “on duty.” It was the turn for his group to serve. *Taxis* is used more often in Hebrews, to say that Jesus is a priest in the “order” of Melchizedek.

Paul uses *taxis* in 1 Cor. 14:40 to say that worship meetings should be orderly. The context shows that Paul is concerned with sequence—that people speak one after another, each in their own turn.

WILL WE LIVE AGAIN? 1 CORINTHIANS 15:1-23

Every spring, Easter reminds Christians that Jesus rose from the dead. His resurrection was certainly good news for him, and we rejoice that our Friend lives again. But Easter tells us more than that — it tells us something about our life, too.

A core component of the gospel

Paul wrote his letter to the church at Corinth to address several problems and questions that the members had. In chapter 15, he responds to the idea that no one will be resurrected from the dead.

Paul begins with a teaching the people had already accepted: “I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you” (verses 1-2).

Since Paul is focusing on the resurrection, he catalogs the eyewitness evidence: “He appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born” (verses 5-8).

We have all seen him, Paul is saying, and you can verify that for yourself, because most of those witnesses are still alive. In verses 9-10 he digresses about his calling as an apostle; then he concludes: “This is what we preach, and this is what you believed” (verse 11).

All in vain?

With this foundation, Paul begins to reason: “But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith” (verses 12-14).

The apostles are witnesses of the fact that Jesus was resurrected from the dead. It therefore makes no sense for anyone who believes the gospel to teach that there is no resurrection, because they have already accepted a message that proclaims a resurrection. If the message is defective at its core, it is pointless to preach it, and everyone ought to quit and go home.

And if the message is wrong, the apostles are liars: “We are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead” (verse 15).

But the problem becomes even greater than that. Paul points out another logical consequence: “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins” (verse 17). The gospel message proclaims that Jesus died for our sins — but if the gospel message is wrong about his resurrection, then we have no reason to believe the other part of the message, that his death takes care of our sins. The message of resurrection is logically connected to the message of crucifixion. If one is false, the other is as well.

And if people die without any forgiveness, without any hope of living again, then it was pointless for them to accept the gospel: “Those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied” (verses 18-19).

In this life, we run the risk of being persecuted for Christ. We give up the temporary treasures and pleasures of this world, but if this life is all we get, why should we give anything up? If we gave it all up for a message that wasn't even true, we would be rightly ridiculed.

Jesus the first of many

But the gospel says that in Christ we do have hope for a future life, and it hinges on the resurrection of Jesus. Easter commemorates not only the fact that Jesus came back to life — it becomes a promise to us that we will live again, too. If he did not rise again, we have no hope, either in this life or the next. But he did, and therefore we do have hope.

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Paul reaffirms the good news: “Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” (verse 20). The word firstfruits is highly significant. In ancient Israel, the first grain to be harvested each year was carefully cut and offered in worship to God. Only then could the rest of the grain be eaten (Lev. 23:10-14). When they offered the firstfruits, they were acknowledging that all their grain was a gift of God; the firstfruits offering represented the entire harvest.

When Paul calls Jesus the firstfruits, he is saying that Jesus is a promise of a much greater harvest yet to come. He is the first to be resurrected, but he represents many more who will also be resurrected. Our future depends on his resurrection. Not only do we follow him in his sufferings, we also follow him into his glory (Rom. 8:17).

Paul does not see us as isolated individuals—he sees us as belonging to a group. But which group? Will we be people who follow Adam, or those who follow Jesus?

“Death came through a man,” Paul says, and in the same way, “the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive” (verses 21-22). Adam was the firstfruits of death; Jesus was the firstfruits of resurrection. If we are in Adam, we share in his death. If we are in Christ, we share in his resurrection.

The gospel says that all believers will be made alive in Christ. That is not just a temporary benefit in this life—it is something we will enjoy in eternity. “But each in turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him” (verse 23). Just as surely as Jesus rose from the grave, we will as well, rising to a new and incredibly better life. Rejoice! Christ has risen, and so shall we!

Things to think about

- Everyone who saw the resurrected Christ is now dead. Is their eyewitness testimony still good? (verses 5-8)
- Why would anyone want to preach that there is no resurrection? (verse 12)
- Does the Christian faith have any value for life before death? (verse 19)
- Is it fair for Adam to determine the fate of all his descendants? (verse 22)

THE RESURRECTION BODY

1 CORINTHIANS 15:35-58

Ancient Greek philosophers believed that the world of spirit is perfect, whereas the world of matter is bad. The human soul is good, but it is trapped in the physical world. The body is a like a tomb, and the soul needs to escape.

These beliefs affected the congregation in Corinth. Some church members thought that the body is bad, so they denied all bodily pleasures, even in marriage. Others went to the opposite extreme: since the body will eventually be discarded, it doesn't matter what a person does in the body.

The apostle Paul said there would be a resurrection of the body, but to Greeks steeped in ancient philosophy, this made no sense. Why would God mess up the afterlife by putting people back into their defective bodies?

Paul responds in 1 Corinthians 15. He begins by saying that Jesus was raised from the dead — with a body — and this is not only part of the gospel, it also shows that God will resurrect all who are in Christ.¹

Different kinds of bodies (verses 35-43)

Paul addresses the questions starting in verse 35: “But someone will ask, ‘How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?’” He responds, “How foolish!” It is foolish to reject the idea of a resurrection just because you have questions about how it works.

He uses an example from agriculture to illustrate: “What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. When you sow, you do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed, perhaps of wheat or of something else.” The seed ceases to exist, and something quite different comes up.

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“But God gives it a body as he has determined, and to each kind of seed he gives its own body.” Each kind of seed produces a different kind of plant, and it is difficult to predict the size or shape of the plant just from the shape of the seed.

Paul offers other living things as examples: “Not all flesh is the same: People have one kind of flesh, animals have another, birds another and fish another.” These creatures all have bodies, but they are not the same.

It’s true in astronomy, too: “There are also heavenly bodies and there are earthly bodies; but the splendor of the heavenly bodies is one kind, and the splendor of the earthly bodies is another.” The stars are glorious in one way; geological features in a different way.

“The sun has one kind of splendor, the moon another and the stars another; and star differs from star in splendor.” So with all this variety, he seems to imply, why do you think that the spiritual world cannot have shape or body?

“So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power.” Our bodies are defective, perishable, lacking honor, and weak. But the resurrection will not be an exact restoration — it will be a lot better.

A spiritual body (verses 44-49)

The old body will die, like a seed; a new body will live. “It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.” The old body has life similar to an animal; the new body will be energized by spirit.

“If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body.” Biology and astronomy show that there are different kinds of bodies; there is variety in the spiritual realm, too. “So it is written: ‘The first man Adam became a living being’; the last Adam, a life-giving spirit.”

Genesis 2:7 says that Adam became a living soul. He had a mortal life. But the resurrected Jesus revealed a new kind of life: spiritual, and yet with a body.

“The spiritual did not come first, but the natural, and after that the spiritual.” Adam came first; Jesus came later. “The first man was of the dust of the earth; the second man is of heaven.” Adam started as dust; Jesus started in the spiritual realm and became flesh.

“As was the earthly man, so are those who are of the earth; and as is the heavenly man, so also are those who are of heaven.” All humans followed

the path of Adam. But Jesus brought something better.

So if we are in Christ, we will be resurrected in his mode, not in the Adamic mode. “And just as we have borne the image of the earthly man, so shall we bear the image of the heavenly man.”

Our mortal flesh is the seed of something far more spectacular than we can imagine. We look like Adam now, but in the resurrection, we will look like Christ.

A dramatic change (verses 50-53)

The human body as we know it now is absolutely inadequate for the life we will have. “I declare to you, brothers and sisters, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.”

In eternity, we will not need blood to circulate oxygen to our muscles. Flesh and blood is rooted in the biochemical world, where nothing lasts forever. Life based in chemical reactions cannot be eternal. The kind of flesh that decays cannot inherit the eternal realm.

There must be a radical change, and *change* is exactly what the gospel promises. “Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed — in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.”

At the return of Christ (verse 23), we will all be made alive. We will rise to meet him, and we will be with him forever (1 Thessalonians 4:14-17).

Paul uses one more metaphor: “For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality.” We will not be a soul clothed with a perishable body — we will have a body that never decays. The resurrection body will never die, never grow weary, never wear out.

The great victory (verses 54-58)

“When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: ‘Death has been swallowed up in victory’” (Isaiah 25:8). In the resurrection, death will have been defeated.

Paul mocks his enemy with words similar to Hosea 13:14: “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” Where is your power now? All your work has been undone.

“The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law,” and these

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three worked against us: the flesh led us into sin, and the law condemned us to die. But it has all been reversed in Jesus, who conquered sin in the flesh, and conquered death on behalf of us all.

Our enemies have been defeated, as Paul exclaims: “But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” The resurrection of Jesus is not just good news for him — it is also wonderful news for us, because the reason that he went through his ordeal is to rescue us from our enemies. He gives the victory to *us!*

Paul concludes: “Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.” No good deed will be forgotten. There are eternal consequences for all our work — even actions as small as giving water to a thirsty person.

There is a resurrection, and there is an afterlife — and that gives tremendous meaning to this life as well.

Things to think about

- If I am “changed” as much as a seed changes into a tree, how will anyone recognize me? (verse 37)
- Would I describe my current body as dishonorable? (verse 43)
- What are the advantages of an imperishable body?
- Why does Paul say that the power of sin is the law? (verse 56)

The Greeks had a word for it: ψυχικός

The Greek word *psychē* means “soul”; the word *psychikos* means “pertaining to the soul.” Since animals have souls, *psychikos* (even when referring to humans) may refer to an animal sort of life — the biochemistry and brain function of an animal. Paul uses the word to refer to the type of body we now have (1 Cor. 15:44-46), as opposed to a body animated by spirit.

In 1 Cor. 2:14, Paul says that the *psychikos* person cannot understand spiritual things. A horse may be spirited, but it does not understand spiritual realities. James 3:15 refers to *psychikos* wisdom; it is the sort of wisdom that an animal might have. Jude 19 uses the word to say that *psychikos* people follow their instincts; they do not have the Spirit.

Since the word is often used in opposition to “spiritual,” some scholars translate the word as “unspiritual.”

WHAT PAUL WISHED MEMBERS KNEW ABOUT MINISTERS

By Neil Earle

Second Corinthians is a highly personal piece of writing in which the apostle Paul strips himself bare. Throughout this letter, Paul is on the defensive. As New Testament scholar Ralph Martin explains, Paul is here dealing with severe criticisms of himself and his ministry:

The first part of the letter reflects what must have been one of the most distressing experiences of Paul's life. He had personally been opposed and insulted by an individual or a group in the church at Corinth, which taunted him with insincerity and duplicity.... He was accused of vacillation (1:17), pride and boasting (3:1), lack of success in preaching (4:3), physical weakness (10:10), "rudeness" of speech, deficiency in rhetorical skill (11:6), being an ungifted person (4:7-10), dishonesty (12:16-19), posing as a "fool" (5:13), and lack of apostolic standing (11:5). Above all he is held to be a deceiver (4:8) and a charlatan (10:1), a blatant denial of the power of the Christian message (13:2-9). (*Second Corinthians*, pages lxi-lxii)

Wow! That's some ministerial evaluation!

The God of comfort

Yet perhaps because Paul is passing through the crucible with those pesky Corinthians, this letter also contains some of the richest spiritual teaching Paul ever penned. It is in this letter that we read of the God of all comfort, believers as the fragrance of Christ, the spirit of liberty, a new creation, faith — not sight, ambassadors for Christ, the ministry of

reconciliation, God's indescribable gift, power perfected through weakness.

A powerful two-beat rhythm persists throughout as Paul contrasts vital principles — death/life, distress/consolation, present affliction/future glory, weakness/strength, sow abundantly/reap abundantly. In short, 2 Corinthians is what we could call today, an emotional roller-coaster. Why this emotion-etched epistle? Scholar James Dunn put it succinctly: “[Paul] experiences Christ as the Crucified as well as the Exalted; indeed it is only when he experiences Christ as crucified that it is possible for him to experience Christ as exalted, that it is possible to experience the risen life of Christ” (*Jesus and the Spirit*, 334).

In this epistle, Paul gives the New Testament's best expose of life as a minister, a candid and personal revelation that Paul wanted members to know about.

The perils of Paul

Paul knew this: Millions want Christ's crown, but few want his cross. It grieved Paul that his beloved Corinthians (he planted the church there, after all) couldn't see that some were out for advantage, building themselves up at the expense of Paul's concern for his flock (2 Corinthians 11:18-19).

It is a familiar pattern. Would-be pastors crave power over people to make up for their own shortcomings. The self-anointed (who often get their way, incidentally) want prestige, forgetting the call to duty, to faithfulness unto death. Paul was richly experienced with those who enter ministry to manipulate men and women or as mere hirelings (11:20-21).

But Paul had been through this before. The slings and arrows of criticism, blame placing, negative projection, misunderstanding and willful misinterpretation that are often the minister's lot soon drive the ministerial wannabes away, sometimes, however, only after much damage has been done to the flock.

Formal, full-time service in ministry, Paul knew, is no place to build wounded self-esteem or release frustrated power urges. That's why his words inspire today's pastors. His catalogue of battle scars in 11:23-29 have their modern parallels. G. Lloyd Rediger writes:

Abuse of pastors by congregations and the breakdown of pastors due to inadequate support are now tragic realities. This worst-case scenario, one that is increasing in epidemic proportions, is not a misinterpretation by a few discontented clergy. Rather, it is a

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phenomenon that is verified by both research and experience.... Pastors have become more vulnerable, parishioners more confused and less courageous, denominational offices more political, and our whole society more numb to abuse and conflict. Together these factors create opportunity for abuse of spiritual leaders and even encourage its development. (*Clergy Killers*, 1)

There was a time in America, especially small-town America, that if a person needed a loan from a bank, the financial officers would often check with a pastor or a teacher to “verify a person’s good character.” No more. As Rediger points out, today the expectations for pastors are far higher. “Megapastoring” is the measure of all things:

This is the expectation on the part of both the congregation and the pastor that the pastor must be a charismatic personality who can be up front at all church activities, make them successful, and continually draw new members. The goal, of course, is for the congregation to become a megachurch, with hundreds of enthusiastic members, dozens of thriving programs and an expanding budget that allows for regular additions to building facilities.... The congregation and pastor who do not function like a megachurch are suspected of being in decline. The pastor, of course, is blamed and punished. (23)

These realities help explain why so many pastors find great comfort in 2 Corinthians. From the opening chapter we sense it will be a barnburner. “We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death.” (1:8-9). It is full of candid disclosures: “We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord” (5:8). The last verses contain a heartfelt plea: “Now we pray to God that you will not do anything wrong” (13:7).

Yet the dominant note throughout is one of triumphantly holding fast to a ministerial calling in the face of great pressure and misunderstandings. Paul has confidence that the spiritually mature in Christ have already accepted the correction he doled out in 1 Corinthians and that the church there is, on the whole, on the rebound.

Paul loves these troublesome members as only a pastor could! He values their good opinion. Yet he knows that in this letter he must not be afraid to lay some things on the line. “We are not withholding our affection from

you, but you are withholding yours from us” (2 Corinthians 6:12).

He is not hesitant about being autobiographical in defending his call to ministry. Paul knew that Christ gives ministers authority without expecting them to turn into authoritarians (10:8-11). Yet the pastoral office was given to keep order in the church.

“It must be emphasized that Paul is not moved by self-concern,” writes Philip E. Hughes. “He willingly endures for Christ’s sake any number of affronts and indignities to his own person. But when the genuineness of his apostleship is called into question that is something he dare not endure in silence, for it is no less a challenge to the authority of Christ himself” (*Second Corinthians*, page 477).

Hence Paul’s references to being flogged more severely, imprisoned more frequently and exposed to death more often (11:24). Such personal declarations work both ways. Even today it is hard for ministers and pastors who feel like singing the blues not to feel a little embarrassed in reading about the perils of Paul. They help give perspective to the peculiar ministerial trials of life in the goldfish bowl.

Fools for Christ?

So, what keeps ministers going? What kept Paul going? Really, it is something other-worldly, beautiful and even slightly mystical, this sense of calling that ministers have for ministry. Ask them about it sometime. One pastor I know was told by a particularly difficult and recalcitrant parishioner: “You seem like a fool to me, hopelessly trying to persuade me to do something you know I will never do.”

Yes, what ministers attempt to do often seems, by worldly measurements, foolish. But if it is in a good cause for godly ends then they find comfort in being what Paul called a “fool for Christ” (1 Corinthians 4:10).

What character trait is needed for pastors to keep coming back week after week to people who quite often are not listening to what they have to say? Or to never cease reaching out to those who tune them out and then have the pastor for lunch after the sermon is over?

Can one make sense of this indescribable, relentless sense of mission that keeps pastors riveted to their post? Like the prophet Jeremiah, their emotions do often fail them (Jeremiah 15:18). Pastors do get discouraged, do feel abused and sometimes do lash out in unfortunate anger or resentment against their persecutors and critics.

But most stay the course. Their emotions may fail them, but the faith of Christ never fails them. Notice the wisdom in this note I saw on a pastor's door: "The pulpit calls those anointed to it as the sea calls its sailors; and like the sea, it batters and bruises, and does not rest.... To preach, to really preach, is to die naked a little at a time and know each time you do it that you must do it again."

So, why do pastors stay in there? What keeps them going? Two things are necessary to keep faithful ministers going, growing and abounding from year to year, and parishioners need to know this. These two essentials are a strong sense of initial calling and an unusual love and regard for members in their care. Without these it is easy to go under in the often turbulent ebb and flow of pastoral ministry. Let the ambitious beware.

Paul's sense of calling never left him. That blinding glimpse of Christ on the Damascus road is still a classic text on ministry. Most calls are not so dramatic. They are maybe more of a growing sense of conviction over time when the pastor and those in community with him slowly sense that God has indeed selected this individual for a special work (Acts 13:1-3).

But the call — however manifested — becomes a life raft that bothered and bewildered ministers cling to in years to come. That's when Christ's reminder speaks most forcefully and hopefully: "You did not choose me but I chose you" (John 15:16).

Supernatural love

The unusual love ministers have for members — even for those who hurt them — is sensed throughout 2 Corinthians. Even though Paul needs to reprimand this church, he still wants things to work out between him and them. "We have opened wide our hearts to you ... open wide your hearts also" (6:11-13). He interjects: "I speak as to my children." And in a magnificent short declaration he plunges to the heart of the member-minister relationship: "For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake" (2 Corinthians 4:5).

That just about says it all. Paul is not in it for himself. He wants members to know that the most basic common ground between them is a mutual relationship with the risen Lord. Every true minister of Christ understands that even in corrective matters he must proceed in meekness, for he is often "instructing those that oppose themselves" (2 Timothy 2:25, King James Version). The true pastor does this with a deep Christlike sense that most people — even those who may hate him temporarily — are their

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own worst enemies.

Such attitudes reach the very heights of Christian love and empathy as well as Christian service. But Paul well knew that such depth and maturity of character and outlook are vital parts of any ministry that lasts. The calling is sacrificial, abiding. God takes the minister's life and then gives it to the people after placing within his servants a godly concern for the members (8:16). That's how ministers endure. This is why Paul could say: "Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift" (9:15).

PAUL AND THE NEW COVENANT

2 CORINTHIANS 3

Paul begins this chapter by pointing out that he, the apostle Christ used to begin the Corinthian church, did not need a “letter of recommendation” from anybody: “Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation to you or from you? You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everyone” (verses 1-2).

The people themselves served as authenticating proof that Paul was an apostle of Christ: “You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. Such confidence we have through Christ before God” (verses 3-4).

Paul then explains that God is the real source of his authority: “Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant — not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (verses 5-6).

The new contrasted with the old covenant

Paul has already mentioned “tablets of stone,” and then the “new covenant.” He then builds the contrast between the new and the old. His authenticity as an apostle of Christ is not built upon the old covenant, but upon the new — not on the letters engraved in stone, but in the Spirit of God.

Let’s see how he develops the contrast: “Now if the ministry that

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brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, transitory though it was, will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious?” (verses 7-8).

Let's pause to be sure we know what Paul is talking about. He is talking about something written on stone, at a time when Moses' face shone with glory. He is talking about the Ten Commandments. This is what was written on stone. Paul is calling the Ten Commandments a “ministry that brought death.” Paul was not a minister of the letter (the Ten Commandments), but of the Spirit.

Notice that he does not say, like some people want him to, that he was a minister of “the spirit of the law.” Instead of combining law and spirit, Paul equated the law with the letter, and he made a contrast between the Law and the Spirit of God.

Of course, it was God who gave the Law. Nevertheless, Paul saw a fundamental contrast between the Law and the Spirit, between the old and the new. There is continuity, of course, for both old and new are covenants of the same God. But even though God does not change, and his underlying principles do not change, his covenants do.

Paul explains some differences in the next verses: “If the ministry that brought condemnation is glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness!” (verse 9). The Ten Commandments were a ministry that condemned people. They had some glory, but not nearly as much as the new covenant. The Ten Commandments cannot bring righteousness, but the new covenant does.

“For what was glorious has no glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory” (verse 10). The Ten Commandments have no glory now, Paul is saying, in comparison to the new covenant, which brings life and righteousness.

“And if what was transitory came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts!” What was fading away? Moses' face was fading, but Paul is not talking about Moses' face any more — he is talking about “the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone.” That is what “came with glory” (verse 7). That is what was fading away.

The Ten Commandments, Paul is saying, came with glory, but they were temporary, just as surely as the glory of Moses' face was temporary. The new covenant not only has much greater glory, but it also “lasts.” The Ten

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Commandments, Paul implies, do not last forever. They were designed as a temporary “ministry of condemnation,” designed to lead people to Christ.

Notice the contrasts Paul has made:

| The Ten Commandments | The New Covenant |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| written on tablets of stone (v. 4) | written on the heart |
| the letter that kills (v. 6) | the Spirit that gives life |
| a ministry that brought death (v. 7) | a ministry that brings life |
| engraved in letters on stone (v. 7) | ministry of the Spirit |
| came with glory (v. 7) | even more glorious |
| the ministry that condemns (v. 9) | the ministry that brings righteousness |
| no glory now in comparison (v. 10) | the surpassing glory |
| it came with glory (v. 11) | much greater glory |
| it is now fading away (v. 11) | the ministry that lasts |

Paul says that the Ten Commandments, although good, are temporary and fading. What has faded away concerning the Ten Commandments? Some people try to say that the Ten Commandments, instead of fading, are actually more binding on people today than ever before. They want to expand the Ten instead of letting them fade.

But Paul is saying that there is a fundamental change in the way people relate to God. The old way is a written law that condemns people to death. The new way is the Holy Spirit, which brings forgiveness and life. The Spirit leads us to obey God, but it is a fundamentally different relationship, a different basis of relating to God.

There is some basic continuity between the old covenant and the new. Most of the Ten Commandments are quoted with approval in the New Testament. Those commands reflect aspects of God’s law that were in effect long before Sinai—from the beginning. One is not — the Sabbath command. It was a ceremonial law, instituted for a temporary time period.

Paul’s boldness in Christ

Once Paul understood the change, he was strengthened and encouraged:

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“Therefore, since we have such a hope, we are very bold. We are not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face to prevent the Israelites from seeing the end of what was passing away” (verses 12-13).

Paul did not hide. He was bold in preaching the new way — salvation through the crucified Christ. But despite his boldness, and the clarity of the message, many people did not accept the gospel:

“But their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away. Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts” (verses 14-15).

Many people today, Jewish or not, do not seem to understand. They keep reading the Bible with old covenant eyes. The only solution is Christ. Only in him can the “veil” be removed. “Whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away” (verse 16).

The basis of our relationship with God

What does it mean to “turn to the Lord”? It means to see Jesus as the basis of our relationship with God. It means seeing our identity in him, not in the Law of Moses. Christ becomes central. We obey his law, the law of Christ (1 Cor. 9:21). When we put him first in our identity, he will help us see the covenantal change more clearly.

“The Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (verse 17). We have freedom in Christ — but what kind of freedom? Certainly, we still obey — Paul makes that clear in Romans 6. But in this context of 2 Corinthians, what kind of freedom is he talking about? It is freedom from the ministry that brought death — freedom from the old covenant. There is a lot of continuity, but there is some important change as well.

An unfading glory

Not only do the covenants change from old and temporary to new and permanent, Christians themselves are changing: “We all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit” (verse 18).

Moses had only a fading glory, and his covenant had only a fading glory. It could give only temporary blessings. But we, with the eternal Spirit living within us, are being changed into a permanent glory — a glory that does not need to hide, a glory that looks to the heart instead of the stone tablets.

BETWEEN DEATH AND RESURRECTION

2 CORINTHIANS 5:1-10

Everyone eventually dies. But the gospel says that everyone will be resurrected — brought back to life. When will this happen? The resurrection will occur when Christ returns (John 6:40; 1 Corinthians 15:21-23, 52; 1 Thessalonians 4:14-17). We will be given new and dramatically different bodies—imperishable, glorious, powerful, spiritual, and immortal (1 Corinthians 15:35-51).

But what happens between death and the resurrection? What is happening right now to believers who have died? And what will happen to *us* when we die, and are still awaiting the return of Christ and the renewal and transformation of our bodies?

Far better to be with the Lord

The apostle Paul deals with this question in two of his letters. When he wrote to the church at Philippi, he was in prison, thinking about the possibility of death. I'll paraphrase what he wrote:

“If it’s just for my own convenience, I’d rather die and get it over with. I’d like to escape the problems of this world and be with Christ. But I don’t want to just think about myself. I’ve got work to do, and it is better for *you* if I stick around a little longer.”¹ Paul thought that being with Christ was a lot better than living on earth.

Paul lived for a while longer, but eventually he died. Since Christ has not yet returned and the resurrection has not yet happened, Paul is still not in his final state. He is in what theologians call “the intermediate state” — somewhere between death and resurrection.

Clothed with life

Paul tells us more about it in a letter to Corinth. He is again talking about the difficulties of life in this age. We are persecuted, he says, given over to death for Jesus' sake (2 Corinthians 4:4-11).

He is motivated to continue "because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus" (verse 14). He knew that there would be life after death. "Outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day" (verse 16).

And then Paul describes what will happen to his body: "If the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands" (5:1). Ancient Greeks described the body as a tent, meaning a temporary dwelling. They thought that at death, the soul escaped the tent and existed without any need for a body.²

Paul uses this metaphor, too, but he says that our temporary dwelling will be replaced by a permanent one. The new body will be heavenly, not earthly, and eternal rather than wasting away.

He doesn't tell us exactly what this home will be like, nor exactly when we get it. We might wish he had given those details, but that is not his purpose. He is simply saying that we've got something a lot better waiting for us.

He gives a few more hints in subsequent verses: "Meanwhile [in this life, in this body] we groan, longing to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling, because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked" (verses 2-3). As we struggle with the pains and infirmities of our present mortal bodies, we would really like a better body.

Some people go to fitness centers in search of a better body; others try special diets. Some go to plastic surgeons. But no matter how good the fitness center and how diligently we diet, we are going to die. That's not such a bad deal, Paul says, because we'll get something a lot better.

At home with the Lord

"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" (verse 4).

Ancient Greeks expected to be a disembodied soul. Paul did not — that would be like being naked, he says. Our home and clothes might be a bit shabby right now, but the solution to the problem is not to go naked and

homeless, but to get a better home and better clothes.

The body we have now is wasting away. It has aches and pains, wrinkles, memory lapses and tooth decay. It is temporary, mortal. So we want something better: to be clothed with *life*, to have life as a permanent possession, as a permanent home.

We were created for eternal life, heavenly life, not the aches and pains of mortal life. “The one who has fashioned us for this very purpose is God, who has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come” (verse 5). God has plans for us, and he will make sure they work out.

“Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord.... We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord” (verses 6, 8).

Paul is contrasting life before and after death: We are now in the mortal body, but not with Christ.³ After death, we will be with Christ, but not in the old body. That’s what he prefers.

What difference does it make?

But there are a few pieces missing in this jigsaw puzzle, and so we need to make some guesses. Paul talks about a heavenly dwelling — apparently a body we will be given after we die. But in other passages, he says that our bodies will be resurrected when Christ returns. He does not tell us how these two ideas fit together.

Do we get a new body when we die, and a third one when Christ returns? Or are we disembodied for a while, despite Paul’s desire to avoid it? Or is the concept of time irrelevant in the intermediate state? If our eternal home is in heaven, how will we remain with the Lord when he comes to earth?⁴

The Bible does not answer all these questions, for the simple reason that we do not need to know the answers. Those details have nothing to do with the way we live right now. Whether we are awake or asleep, with a body or not, does not change our need to trust in Christ, nor our duty to love one another.

Life between death and resurrection is simply a temporary state, and it is not our focus. Rather, we focus on what is eternal—life after the resurrection — what N. T. Wright calls “life after life after death.” And the most important fact about our future is that our life will be *with the Lord*. He wants to share life with us — he created us for that very purpose (verse 5).

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And it is not just a never-ending life — it is a life filled with never-ending love and joy. Eternal life is not just a change in quantity, but also a change in *quality*. And when we see that, it can make a difference in the way we live right now, because Christ wants us to share in his life *even in this age*.

Notice Paul's next thought: "So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it" (verse 9). Since he is giving us a good future, we try to give him a good present.

Endnotes

¹ This paraphrase is based on Philippians 1:21-24. It reads in the New International Version: "To me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know. I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body."

² N.T. Wright responds to this idea: "If the promised final future is simply that immortal souls leave behind their mortal bodies, then death still rules — since that is a description not of the *defeat* of death but simply of death itself" (*Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*, p. 15).

³ Spiritually, we are in Christ and he is in us; not even unbelievers are ever *completely* away from Christ. Although he is omnipresent, he is also more "present" in some places and some ways than in others. Paul's point is that we will be with him in a far greater way after we die than we are right now.

⁴ Wright offers an explanation: "Heaven and earth in biblical cosmology are not two different locations within the same continuum of space or matter. They are two different dimensions of God's good creation.... Heaven relates to earth tangentially so that the one who is in heaven [e.g., Christ] can be present simultaneously anywhere and everywhere on earth.... Though in one sense it will seem to us that he [Christ] is 'coming,' he will in fact be 'appearing' right where he presently is" (111, 135).

OUT OF HIS MIND? 2 CORINTHIANS 5:13-15

Some people thought that the apostle Paul was out of his mind. He used to be a high-ranking leader in the Jewish religion. Everyone respected him and respected his opinions. He was a clear thinker, and a persuasive speaker. He was on his way up in the world, and if you knew what was good for you, you wanted to be on his good side. If he was your friend, you had a friend in high places.

And then one day in the desert, it seems that Paul threw it all away. He was blinded by the brilliant desert sunshine, he fell off his horse, and some people say he must have hit his head on a rock.

Whatever the reason, he was not the same old guy he used to be. In fact, he started working against the very things he used to support, and he embraced the ideas that he once tried to fight. People told him that if he didn't stop it, they were going to kill him. He kept right on doing it anyway.

He risked his life. He had to flee from danger several times. He travelled land and sea not just to get away from his enemies, but also to try to convince more people of the ideas he now had – ideas about Jesus being the Savior of the world. Imagine that – some carpenter that the Romans executed as a criminal, being the Savior of the world!

Some people said Paul was out of his mind.

And yet he travelled onward, preaching to as many people as he could. He was shipwrecked at sea, thrown into prison, beaten with whips and sticks, and still he insisted on preaching about Jesus.

And sometimes even the people who believed Paul, who believed in Jesus, wondered if he was out of his mind. Why does he keep doing this

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even when he knows it is going to get him in trouble?

There were some people in the church at Corinth who were a bit embarrassed by what Paul was doing. He's not a very good leader, they said. He doesn't look very impressive – he's got a bald head and a crooked nose and bad eyesight, and a bit of a limp from where the robbers beat him up. He's not a very good example for us, because we can't be as fanatical as he is. He's not a balanced person – he is an extremist – rather unbalanced. They did not want Paul to be their leader – they wanted somebody else.

Well, news of this got back to Paul, and he wrote the church at Corinth a letter to explain what he was doing. And in that letter he told his friends how they could, as he put it, “answer those who take pride in what is *seen*, rather than in what is in the heart” (2 Corinthians 5:12). They are looking on the outside, he said, but what *you* need to do is look on the inside, because that's what counts the most.

He told them: “If we are ‘out of our mind,’ as some say, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you” (verse 13). If we are crazy, it's because we are crazy about God. And if what we say makes any sense, then it's because we are trying to help *you* see, what *we* can see.

Why do we risk our lives, and get thrown in jail, and we have to fight wild animals for the amusement of the people? He answers that in verse 14: “For Christ's love *compels* us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died.”

Now wait a minute! How does love “compel” people to do anything?

Maybe you've seen people who have fallen in love, and will do all sorts of things totally out of character, just because they are in love. For some people, it might mean that they are willing to go to a baseball game and sit through hours of nothing happening. For other people, it might mean they are willing to go shopping for hours without buying anything at all.

Love has compelled them. It's almost like they have gone out of their minds. No one is physically, forcibly compelling them to do anything, but they are doing it out of their own free will. It is suddenly what they would rather be doing with their time and their life. It's a change of character, a new purpose in life.

And that's what happened to the apostle Paul. Jesus wasn't physically and forcibly causing Paul to do all these crazy things – but Paul himself wanted to do them, because of his love for Christ.

And why did he have such a love for Christ? Because he was so

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overwhelmed by how much Christ loved *him*. Christ had such love for Paul, that Paul just had to respond.

What made Paul think that Jesus loved him? It was because Jesus died for him. Jesus was willing to do crazy things for Paul. Jesus was willing to risk his life for Paul, to be beaten and killed for Paul.

Paul says that “one died for all” – he means that one person died for everybody else. Jesus died for *all people*. He loves *everyone* as much as he loved the apostle Paul. Some people said Jesus was crazy, and the way he used his life just didn’t make any sense, according to the way the world thinks. He just got killed for his trouble. He *knew* he was going to be killed for it, but he did it anyway. He did it for you, and for me, and for Paul, and for the people in ancient Corinth, too.

That kind of love is compelling, Paul says. We’ll do crazy things when we experience that kind of love. Maybe we’ll go to the vacation paradise of America, and not vacation. Maybe we’ll give up our vacation and spend two weeks with underprivileged kids. They can never pay us back. They might stress us out, they might be a pain in the neck, but we do it.

Maybe it’s because Jesus has a crazy love for us, and then we respond to him by having a crazy love for helping other people. It doesn’t quite make sense to some people, but that’s OK. Jesus went to the cross for us, and that makes a major re-orientation of the way we look at our lives, and what our life is really for.

Notice what Paul says next: “one [person] died for all, and therefore all died.” And we say, Huh? How did everybody die when Jesus died?

That’s a difficult question. Paul is saying that everybody gets a new start on life with Jesus. The old approach to life goes to its grave with Jesus, and it’s not supposed to get resurrected. There’s a new way to live – and that’s what we see in the next verse: “And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again” (verse 15).

Here Paul is telling us the purpose of it all: Jesus died for everybody, *so that* we should no longer live for ourselves. We should not live just for what we can get out of it, just for our own benefit, but we should live *for Jesus*. He died for us, so we should live for him. Our sins and our selfishness died with him, so the life that we have now is a *new* life, a life that is compelled by the love of Jesus, to live for Jesus.

And since Jesus lived and died for other people, when we live for Jesus,

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that means that we live for other people, too, because that's what he would do. Jesus died for us, so that we might live for other people, helping them in the name of Jesus. And Jesus is working in us, or we should probably say that the Holy Spirit is working in us. The Holy Spirit is compelling to respond to the love of Jesus, compelling us to do things that other people don't want to do.

So, thanks for being here, and for responding to the love of Jesus, and for sharing the love of Jesus with other people. It's the best thing we can do, even if somebody else says that we are out of our minds.

THE GRACE OF GIVING

2 CORINTHIANS 8

When Paul met with the original apostles, they agreed to divide the mission field — Paul would focus on the gentiles, and they would focus on the Jews (Gal. 2:9). But they did make one request of Paul: that he remember that many believers in Jerusalem needed financial help (2:10).

Paul was happy to remember these needs, for it gave gentile believers an opportunity to have some involvement with Jewish believers. Since the gospel began among the Jews, it was appropriate for gentile Christians to acknowledge and be thankful for the Jewish people. They could do this by sharing some of their material blessings.

Therefore, as part of his work with the gentile churches, Paul coordinated an offering for the saints in Jerusalem (Rom. 15:25-28; 1 Cor. 16:1 etc.). He described the importance of this offering in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9.

Poverty and generosity

He began by describing how generous the believers in northern Greece had been: “And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity” (8:1-2). Although they were very poor, they were very generous, and Paul attributes this to the grace of God. God had given them the willingness to give what little they had, and to do it with joy.

“For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the

privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people" (8:3-4). Since the Macedonians were poor themselves, Paul did not ask them to give anything to the poor in Jerusalem, but they learned about the collection and wanted to help. They gave more than Paul thought they could. (We can read Paul's thank-you in his letter to the Philippians.)

"And they exceeded our expectations: They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us" (8:5). Why did they give? Because they gave themselves to Christ, which would include a willingness to use all that they had to further his work. As they submitted themselves to Christ, they wanted to participate in this offering.

Paul no doubt wanted the Corinthians to follow this example. The Macedonians showed that spiritual maturity leads to material generosity. The Corinthians had more money and should be even more generous.

Paul's appeal to the Corinthians

"So we urged Titus, just as he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part" (8:6). Titus had apparently begun the work of collecting the offering in Corinth, so Paul asked him to finish it. By calling the collection an act of grace, Paul connected it with the gospel and suggested voluntary generosity.

Paul then appealed to the tendency of the Corinthian Christians to think of themselves as better than others. "Since as you excel in everything — in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in the love we have kindled in you—see that you also excel in this grace of giving." (8:7). Some of the Corinthians boasted about superior faith, speech and knowledge. Paul says they should also strive to be sincere, loving and generous. They should demonstrate their faith by the way they live.

"I am not commanding you," Paul says, "but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others" (8:8). Paul did not tell them how much to give, but he would know how much they gave, and their quantity would be a reflection of their quality.

Many people today do not want to be compared to others, especially when it comes to donations, but Paul apparently felt that Corinth would be helped by a comparison. Their contributions showed their sincerity.

Paul then used the supreme example, Jesus: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich" (8:9). Although Jesus enjoyed equality with God, he willingly gave it up to save us

(Phil. 2:5-8). He became a curse for us so that we might escape the curse and be blessed instead (Gal. 3:13).

Through Christ's willingness to give, we share in his riches. Grace is not an abstract theory — it is practical. It had physical results in the life of Jesus, and it should have physical results in our lives, too.

According to ability

Paul then appealed to the Corinthians' previous generosity: "And here is my judgment about what is best for you in this matter: Last year you were the first not only to give but also to have the desire to do so. Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it" (8:10-11). In other words, keep up the good work.

Paul then added a qualification: "according to your means" (8:11). Give according to your ability, for God looks on the heart, on the willingness, not the amount. "For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what one does not have" (8:12).

Paul did not want the Corinthians to impoverish themselves (there was probably little risk of that), but for them to share some of their material blessings. "Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality" (8:13). If the wealthy Corinthians aimed for equality and gave according to their ability, their gift would be generous.

At that time, they had plenty and could share. But the time might come when they would be needy, and other Christians would then give to them. "At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. The goal is equality" (8:14).

Paul then adds a quote: "As it is written: 'The one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little'" (8:15; Ex. 16:18). This quote is from the story of gathering manna in the wilderness; it is not about people sharing with one another. Paul quotes it not as a proof, but as a proverbial saying that illustrates equality.

Three trustworthy men

To help the Corinthians be confident that their offering would be used in the right way, Paul put in a few good words for Titus, who would accompany the offering: "Thanks be to God, who put into the heart of Titus the same concern I have for you. For Titus not only welcomed our

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appeal, but he is coming to you with much enthusiasm and on his own initiative” (8:16-17).

Titus was concerned not only for the offering, but for the Corinthians themselves. He volunteered to travel to Corinth and serve as a security guard for the collection.

Paul then mentions a second person, whom he does not name: “And we are sending along with him the brother who is praised by all the churches for his service to the gospel. What is more, he was chosen by the churches to accompany us as we carry the offering, which we administer in order to honor the Lord himself and to show our eagerness to help” (8:18-19).

Paul’s letter to the Corinthians also served as a letter of commendation for the couriers he sent. He expresses his confidence in them, so that the Corinthians can also be confident that these people were trustworthy. Here, Paul mentions that the churches chose this man to accompany the offering to Jerusalem — and Paul reminds them that his own motivation is to serve the Lord and to help his people.

“We want to avoid any criticism of the way we administer this liberal gift. For we are taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord but also in the eyes of man” (8:20-21). Paul had been accused of improper motives when he preached the gospel; he was even more likely to be accused when taking up a collection. So he took precautions, much as we today might use an auditor to verify that the offerings are being used for the purpose for which they were collected.

Paul then mentions a third man: “In addition, we are sending with them our brother who has often proved to us in many ways that he is zealous, and now even more so because of his great confidence in you” (8:22). Paul commends this man in terms of his attitude to God and in his attitude toward the Corinthians; both are important in this offering.

Paul closed this chapter by praising the men again: “As for Titus, he is my partner and co-worker among you; as for our brothers, they are representatives of the churches and an honor to Christ. Therefore show these men the proof of your love and the reason for our pride in you, so that the churches can see it” (8:23-24).

We are proud of you, Paul says, so please give the kind of generous offering we know you are capable of. This will show the sincerity of your love not only to these three men, but will also be an example to other churches. Just as we told you of the Macedonians’ generosity, we will tell

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others about you.

Fund-raising is often a thankless job, but it is essential. In order for the people who have an abundance to share with those who have need, church leaders must communicate those needs, and must encourage people to be generous. Paul used several methods of persuasion: his own relationship with the givers, their relationship with God, their reputation with others, their desire to excel and prove themselves, the example of Christ, the example of others, and assurances of faithful handling of the offering.

Why would Paul, who focused on the cross of Christ, use so much of his letter asking for donations? Because he understood that there is a logical and spiritual connection between the cross and Christian behavior.

Jesus' willingness to give is an example that believers are to follow. Our priority in life is not our own comfort — it is service, and we are to serve Christ by serving others. His grace toward us should be reflected in our grace toward others — grace not only in forgiveness, but also in the material blessings we have been given and should share.

Our attitude about offerings has spiritual significance. Paul says it is evidence of our love — our concern for others. We all need to excel in the grace of giving.

RICH IN GOOD WORKS

2 CORINTHIANS 9

As Paul worked to spread the gospel in the gentile world, he also worked to have the gentiles give an offering to poor believers in Jerusalem. We see evidence of this offering in several of his letters; it was a consistent theme of his work.

Paul saw a vital connection between God's grace and our giving. Just as God has been gracious toward us, we should be gracious toward others, sharing the spiritual and physical blessings God has given us. Although good works can never pay for God's grace, they are an expected result of God's grace working in our lives.

Paul told the Corinthian Christians about this offering in person, and in a follow-up letter he wrote some more encouragement for them. We'll pick up the story in 2 Corinthians 9.

Don't let us down

"There is no need for me to write to you about this service to the Lord's people" (9:1). In other words, I've already told you about it. You know that this offering is going to help the believers in Jerusalem.

"For I know your eagerness to help, and I have been boasting about it to the Macedonians, telling them that since last year you in Achaia were ready to give; and your enthusiasm has stirred most of them to action" (9:2). The Corinthians (in southern Greece) had already told Paul that they were willing to give generously, and Paul had used their zeal to encourage the Macedonians (in northern Greece). In a similar way, he used the generosity of the Macedonians to encourage the Corinthians to be even

more generous (8:1-7).

But now came the time for talk to be turned into action: “I am sending the brothers in order that our boasting about you in this matter should not prove hollow, but that you may be ready, as I said you would be” (9:3). Paul is putting some gentle pressure on the Corinthians to live up to their word—he does this by saying his own reputation is on the line. The Corinthians had said they would be generous; Paul had said they would be generous, and now the time came to see whether they were right.

“For if any Macedonians come with me and find you unprepared, we — not to say anything about you — would be ashamed of having been so confident” (9:4). We do not want to be embarrassed, Paul says, and you don’t want to be embarrassed either. So put your money where your mouth is. It’s time to prove yourselves.

Paul expected the Corinthians to follow through on their promises, but he did not take it for granted. He wrote to remind them, to encourage them to do even better. He was not shy about financial matters. He expected total commitment from his converts, and he set high standards for them.

“So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to visit you in advance and finish the arrangements for the generous gift you had promised. Then it will be ready as a generous gift, not as one grudgingly given” (9:5).

Paul was zealous for the gospel. If he took time to coordinate this offering, it was because he thought it was very important. And because it was important, he sent reminders about it, he sent people to check up on it, and he used all his persuasive strategies to make sure that it was a successful offering.

If Paul suddenly showed up and caught the Corinthians unprepared, they would no doubt have given an offering. But the offering would have been given out of obligation, not well thought out, and not as generous as it could have been with some advance preparation.

Expect a blessing

“Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously” (9:6). Here Paul quotes a proverb — a saying that is generally true, although exceptions may exist. A farmer who sows a lot of seed will usually be rewarded with a good crop. But sometimes bad weather can ruin the crop. Even then, the farmer will probably receive in proportion to the amount sown.

Paul is saying that the same is true in financial generosity. A person who

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is generous will usually be rewarded. The reward doesn't always come in money, and it doesn't always come in this life, but God does bless people who are generous.

“Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver” (9:7). If we feel obligated to give, if we resent the offering, if we dread the request, then we are not really generous. True generosity is an attitude of the heart, and that is what God is looking for and that is what he rewards. So everyone should make their own decisions about how much to give. Paul is pointing out some factors we may want to keep in mind as we consider how generous we can be.

“God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work” (9:8). God is generous, supplying all that we need, so we do not need to hoard everything we have. He wants us to abound in good works, and generosity is one of them.

“As it is written: ‘They have freely scattered their gifts to the poor; their righteousness endures forever’” (9:9, quoting from Psalm 112:9). This quote is not about collections for the poor, but Paul nevertheless finds it appropriate here. It describes God's generosity and assures us that God will always be righteous, working for and blessing his people.

Paul makes the promise even more clear when he says, “Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness” (9:10). Paul is using “seed” as a metaphor. He is writing to people who live in a city, not on a farm. His point is that God is the source of all blessings.

Whatever our source of money is, God can cause the source to prosper, so that we will in time receive more and more. He can work in the entire picture, from its beginning in seed, to its final result in bread. And Paul is saying that if we are generous, then God will bless our source and our results.

But the most important blessing is the harvest of righteousness, the gift of being counted as righteous through faith in Jesus Christ. We are counted as righteous by his grace, and we are simultaneously called on to live in righteousness, to conform our actions to what he wants, and this includes generosity.

The harvest of thanks

“You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God” (9:11). If you are generous, God will bless you, Paul promises, so you can be generous in future occasions, too. He will bless the beginning of your income and the results of your work. He will supply your needs, so you can continue to give to others.

And as you do that, Paul says, people will be thanking God for what you do. This collection meets a real need, and the people who receive it will appreciate it and be thankful for it. We have many good reasons to feel good about helping them.

“This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord’s people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God” (9:12). The offering has both physical and spiritual value.

“Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, others will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else” (9:13). In this one verse, Paul makes many points:

- The Corinthians prove themselves by this offering. It shows that their love is genuine (8:8), that their word is good. Can it do the same for us?
- People praise God for good works (Matt. 5:16). Do they see good works in us?
- When we accept the gospel, when we accept Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, we should obey him. Is our faith accompanied by obedience?
- People particularly appreciate generosity. It is a visible and practical way to let the gospel have results in our lives.

People will not only give thanks, Paul says, but they will also pray: “And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you” (2 Cor. 9:14). If God gives you the grace of giving (8:7), then people will pray for you, no doubt asking God to bless you.

We can be confident that God will supply all our needs and give us blessings we can share with others. As we share material blessings, we also form spiritual bonds between brothers and sisters in Christ.

“Thanks be to God,” Paul concludes, “for his indescribable gift!” (9:15).

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Can we describe this indescribable gift? Is it the grace of giving, the willingness to be generous with what God has given us? Is it the assurance that God will supply our needs? Is it the spiritual results that generosity has—thanksgiving and prayer? Or is it the often-hidden way in which God blesses those who are generous? For all these and more, thanks be to God!

THE GOSPEL REVEALED

GALATIANS 1

Paul started several churches in the province of Galatia and then moved on to other regions. Then he learned that some other people had gone to Galatia and were teaching the people that the gospel involved much more than Paul had told them. “Jesus is good,” they apparently said, “but you need to go further. You need to obey the Law that God gave his people. Faith is good, but you need the laws of Moses, too.”

Paul was furious! The people were meddling in his territory, making false accusations about him, trying to hijack the work he had done, and worst of all, leading the people away from Christ. Paul wrote a letter¹ to defend his ministry and to explain what the gospel is. It has much to teach us today.

Introduction

Greek letters normally began by saying who wrote the letter and the people it is being sent to. Paul modifies this pattern by adding a lengthy comment about the basis of his authority: Paul, an apostle — sent not from men nor by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead — (verse 1).²

Several times in this letter, Paul denies that he was sent or authorized by other people, especially the apostles in Jerusalem. Apparently his opponents said that the apostles had sent Paul on a mission, a mission he supposedly had not finished, and the apostles had then sent more people to tell the Galatians about their need to obey the law of Moses (cf. Acts 15:5). Paul says that they are mistaken: *They* might have been sent by human authority,

but *he* had divine authority for his mission.

The letter is being sent not only by Paul, but also “all the brothers who are with me” — he has supporters, though the letter does not name them, perhaps because the Galatians do not know them. “To the churches of Galatia: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (verses 2-3, ESV). Greek letters usually began with *charain*, or “greetings.” Paul modifies this by using a similar word, *charis*, “grace,” and adding the Jewish greeting, “peace.”

In verse 1, he noted an action of the Father. Here, he describes the work of Christ: “who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father” (verse 4). This is the gospel in a nutshell: Jesus has taken care of our sins and rescued us, giving us a place in the age to come as children of God. Paul will elaborate more on this later in his letter. Here he specifies that this rescue is precisely what the Father wanted, and it is to his “glory for ever and ever. Amen.”

An astonishing curse

Most Greek letters included a brief prayer to the gods; Paul usually expands that by thanking God for the faith of the readers and asking a blessing on them. But in this letter, Paul gives no thanks — he begins abruptly and includes a curse instead of a blessing: “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel” (verse 6). “Paul’s expression of amazement...was a common expression of rebuke in Greek letters of his day.... The tone of rebuke pervades the...letter from 1:6 to 4:12” (G. Walter Hansen, *Galatians*, 36, 35).

The readers may have been astonished, too, because Paul is telling them that they are deserting God. That is not what they want to do, but Paul is telling them that’s what it amounts to. They had been called by grace, and if they give their allegiance to the law, they will be denying their call (compare with 5:2). The opponents claimed that their message was the original gospel, but Paul says that it is not: “not that there is another one” (1:7). It was bad news, not good. It was requiring elements of the old age, the age that Jesus had rescued us from.

“There are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ.” Paul then announces his curse: “But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed”³ (verse 8). Paul is not asking for personal loyalty

— he wants the people to be loyal to the message of Jesus Christ.

Paul is so insistent on this that he repeats himself: “As we have said before, so now I say again: If⁴ anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed” (verse 9).

After this strongly worded outburst, Paul asks, For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still⁵ trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ” (verse 10). His opponents apparently said that Paul focused on grace because he was afraid of telling people about the laws of Moses. But as Paul has just demonstrated, he is not afraid of offending people. He serves Christ, not public opinion. He was commissioned by Christ, not human beings.

Paul’s commission from God

To support his point, and to show that the opponents were not telling the truth, Paul tells his story, particularly his relationship with the apostles. In the book of Acts, Luke tells us many more details, but this is Paul’s own description of what happened.⁶ “The gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel” (verse 11). Paul is here responding to his opponents.

“For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ” (verse 12). It was not just a revelation *from* Christ — it was Christ being revealed to Paul (verse 16). Paul saw Christ, and *that* required a re-evaluation of everything that Paul had believed. Based simply on that appearance of Jesus, Paul could have understood quite a bit:

Jesus has been resurrected into glory, so he must be God’s Anointed, the Messiah. But I was persecuting his people! If zeal for the law caused me to persecute God’s people, something must be seriously wrong in my use of the law. Not only that, I was an enemy of God, and yet God spared me — I was accepted by grace, not by careful observance of the law.⁷ And the Messiah did not bring political blessings, so the salvation that he brought was a spiritual one — and that means it is for Gentiles as well as Jews.

But this is getting ahead of the story. Here’s the way Paul tells it: “For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it” (verse 13). They already knew the story, but Paul tells it here to highlight certain facts, and to present himself as a model they could imitate. If someone had been there, done that, and

found it deficient, then maybe it would not be wise for the Galatians to adopt a law-based approach to religion.

“I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers” (verse 14). Paul had viewed Judaism as a “performance” religion, in which some people did better than others, and he did particularly well. Following the example of Phineas, Elijah, and Mattathias, his zeal for the law caused him to persecute people who were leading others astray (see Numbers 25:6-18; 1 Kings 19:10; and 1 Maccabees 2:23-26, 58).⁸ This is one of the ways in which he worked harder than other people his age. According to their standards, he had everything going for him (see Philippians 3:4-6). But he gave it up:

“But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles...” (Galatians 1:15-16). The basic components of Paul’s calling are God’s grace, Jesus Christ the Son of God in him⁹, and the mission to the Gentiles.

Received through a revelation

Paul’s message had its origin in God, not in the apostles. “I did not immediately consult with anyone; nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia, and returned again to Damascus” (verses 16-17). Paul spent several days with Ananias and the disciples in Damascus (Acts 9:19), and they no doubt told him what they knew about Jesus.

Paul’s point is not that he didn’t talk to *anyone*, but that he did not ask anyone to tell him what to preach. The opponents in Galatia may have been trained by apostles, but Paul was not. And that’s good — the apostles did not yet know that God was calling Gentiles into his family, and if they had heard Paul talk about a Gentile mission, they probably would have tried to talk him out of it!

Paul does not tell us where in Arabia he went, or what he did there. If he began to preach in Damascus, then he may have preached in Arabia, too, perhaps in Nabatea, southeast of Judea. Jesus told him to preach to the Gentiles, so he probably did.

“Then after three years,¹⁰ I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas [the Aramaic name for Peter] and remained with him fifteen days” (Galatians 1:18). Peter no doubt told him as much as he could about Jesus, but it was

not a training session in which Peter told Paul what he should preach. Paul is stressing his independence.

“But I saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord's brother. (In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie!)” (verses 19-20). Paul's insistence that he is not lying indicates that he is responding to accusations — that he was an agent of the apostles. Paul's opponents claimed an equal authority, so they tried to “flesh out” Paul's message with more details. They have my story wrong, Paul says, and they have the gospel wrong, too.

Paul explained that he left the area: “Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. And I was still unknown in person to the churches of Judea that are in Christ” (verses 21-22). Antioch is the most likely location in Syria, and Tarsus in Cilicia. Paul's main point is that he did not stay in Judea. Jesus had not sent him to Judea either to preach or to put himself under the apostles' authority.

Paul's only relationship with the Judean churches was that they heard about him: “They only were hearing it said, ‘He who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy.’ And they glorified God because of me” (verses 23-24). So Paul abandoned his pursuit of Jewish traditions, and began to preach another faith, the one we call Christianity. The Judean Jewish Christians had not brought this about, but they were in substantial agreement with Paul's conversion and the faith that he preached.

Things to think about

- When God called me, was I aware that it was by the grace of Christ? (verse 6).
- Do I ever back away from the gospel because I am trying to please people? (verse 10)
- Was there ever a point in my life when I persecuted or belittled the gospel? (verse 13)
- Does God reveal his Son in me? (verse 16)
- Have I turned away from a law-based religion to trust the grace of Christ?

Endnotes

¹ Some scholars believe that this is Paul's earliest letter, written before the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15) — it is possible that Paul did not have

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time to travel back to Galatia because he planned to go to that Council, yet he wanted to address the problem in Galatia right away. Other scholars believe that the letter was written much later.

² He lists Jesus Christ first, and the Father's role is relegated to raising Jesus from the dead! Paul's commission came from Jesus, and when Paul was struck down on the road to Damascus, he was especially stunned that Jesus had been raised from the dead. That was tremendously significant for Paul's understanding of Jesus and his commission.

³ The Greek word is *anathema*. The NIV erroneously added the word "eternally." But if Paul could be forgiven for persecuting the church, others could be forgiven for preaching a false gospel; the word "eternally" does not seem warranted. Paul is not being vindictive or making objective theological statements — he is just using the rhetoric of his day to denounce his opponents. Sometimes an anathema is appropriate, but church history shows that the anathema was sometimes pronounced for petty differences. Paul was tolerant of diversity on some issues (e.g. Romans 14).

⁴ Greek has two words for "if." In v. 8, the word for *if* indicates a hypothetical, unlikely condition — it is not likely that Paul or the angels will preach a perverted gospel. But the "if" in v. 9 is a different word, implying something that is likely to be true: people are already preaching an erroneous message.

⁵ With the word "still," Paul implies that he *used* to be a people-pleaser. He measured his success in Judaism in comparison to others (verse 14).

⁶Historians generally prefer first-person accounts, and some biblical scholars are skeptical of Luke's accuracy, but we would scarcely be able to reconstruct a history of Paul's travels from the letters alone. Luke tells us several important facts that Paul does not: that he was from Tarsus, that he was a Roman citizen, and that he was converted while on his way to Damascus.

⁷ Three further lines of thought could have told Paul that the laws of Moses had come to the end of their validity. First, the resurrection of Jesus into glory indicated that the end of the age had come, and the law of Moses was not designed for the new age. 2) Since forgiveness is available without temple rituals, a large chunk of the Mosaic covenant had no purpose, calling into question the entire package. 3) The laws of Moses were not given to Gentiles, and never applied to Gentiles, and it would not make sense for

salvation to be more difficult for Jews than it would be for Gentiles.

⁸ What caused Paul to persecute the early Christians? Several Jews claimed to be the Messiah, both before and after Jesus, and that was apparently not considered blasphemous in itself. Two things in particular may have incensed Paul: 1) the claim that a crucified person was honored by God, when the law says such a person is accursed, and 2) at least some of the Christians were perceived as being against the law (cf. Acts 6:11). The biblical connection between violence and zeal for the law suggests that Paul saw the Jesus-disciples as violators of the law and a threat to the nation's covenant relationship with God.

⁹ Paul does not say that God revealed his Son *to* Paul, but *in* Paul. In Paul's work and sufferings, God continued to reveal his Son in Paul.

¹⁰ The chronology isn't clear. Did Paul stay in Arabia for three years, then go to Jerusalem by way of Damascus — or did he have a short stay in Arabia and then lived in Damascus three years? N.T. Wright suggests that he went to Mt. Sinai, then to Damascus, following the example of Elijah (1 Kings 19:1-15). The book of Acts says nothing about this three years.

JUSTIFIED BY FAITH, NOT BY LAW GALATIANS 2

Someone had been telling the Galatian Christians false stories about Paul's relationship with the original apostles and the Jerusalem church. Paul responds by recounting his history — and he uses that story as a launching pad for preaching the gospel of salvation by grace. Chapter 2 includes two important interactions.

An agreement between Peter and Paul

“After fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me” (Galatians 2:1, ESV). Grammatically, it is not clear whether this is 14 years after Paul's conversion, or 14 years after his first visit with Peter (1:18). It may have been A.D. 48 — perhaps the famine-relief visit that Luke describes in Acts 11.¹

“I went up because of a revelation and set before them (though privately before those who seemed influential) the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure I was not running or had not run in vain” (verse 2). Paul described his message to the leaders in Jerusalem — he was not asking them for instructions or orders (contrary to what the opponents in Galatia apparently said). Was Paul afraid that he was preaching the wrong message? Apparently not, but he feared that the apostles might undercut his work if they disagreed with his gospel.²

“But even Titus, who was with me, was not forced to be circumcised, though he was a Greek” (2:3). Paul hints that there was some controversy, but the apostles agreed with him on at least this much: that Gentiles did not need to be circumcised. Unfortunately, they did not seem to communicate

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this conclusion to the lay members, and that lack of communication later led to problems. People from Jerusalem traveled to other church areas and took it upon themselves to demand that other churches conform to their standards. The church visits may have been authorized by the apostles, but the specific requirements probably were not.

Paul says that the controversy arose “because of false brothers secretly brought in—who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery” (2:4). These people claimed to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, but at least from Paul’s perspective, they had missed the message. They did not just want to “spy on” believers’ freedom — they wanted to eliminate it. They wanted the new faith to be just as demanding as the old one. In Judea, tensions with Rome were rising, and some zealots were quick to accuse others of religious compromise.³ Paul says this pressure for conformity amounts to slavery. (He will use the “slave” language again in chapter 4.)

“To them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you” (2:5). Paul stood against the pressure not just for the convenience of his people, but for the truth of the gospel. The gospel is not just a message of how people are saved — it requires that people be freed from obsolete obligations and social barriers.

Did the leaders tell Paul to add some requirements to his gospel? No: “From those who seemed to be influential (what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality)—those, I say, who seemed influential added nothing to me” (2:6). Paul seems indirectly acknowledge that the other apostles were important in some way, but they were not essential for his mission. Although they eventually gave their approval, he did not *need* their approval in order to preach the message Jesus had told him to preach.

“On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised⁸ (for he who worked through Peter for his apostolic ministry to the circumcised worked also through me for mine to the Gentiles)” (2:7-8). They recognized that Christ had given Paul a mission, and they let him do it. Paul gives Peter a positive word here, but implies that he has authority only over Jewish churches, and not the Gentile church in Galatia.

So they agreed to go their separate ways: “When James and Cephas

[Peter] and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised” (2:9). Implied in this division of labor is that the leaders would not meddle in each other’s ministry — an agreement being broken by Paul’s opponents in Galatia, who were claiming to act with authority from Jerusalem.

“Only, they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do” (2:10). Paul had come to help the poor believers in Jerusalem, and his letters show that this continued to be part of his ministry (Romans 15:25-27; 1 Corinthians 16:1-4; 2 Corinthians 8:1-4). It was a humanitarian effort not to poor people in general, but to the poor members of the Jerusalem church. To Paul, it had theological significance, for it illustrated the unity of Gentiles and Jews.

So they agreed: Peter would go to the Jews and Paul to the Gentiles. But the plan failed to address one circumstance: what should be done in churches that contained both Jews and Gentiles? That is the next step in the story.

A disagreement between Peter and Paul

Paul’s next words are: “When Cephas came to Antioch...” Paul introduces this topic as if the readers *already knew* that Peter had gone to Antioch, and that they knew what Peter had done there. Paul’s opponents had probably told the story; now Paul tells his side: “I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned” (1:11).

Paul backs up to give the context of the story: “For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party” (1:12).

Old Testament laws did not require Jews to eat separately from Gentiles, but Jewish custom did (see Acts 11:3). Peter knew that this custom was not biblical, so he ignored it. However, when representatives of the Jerusalem church arrived, he changed his behavior.⁴ It was a change of behavior based on a desire to please people — the very thing Paul had been accused of (1:10).

However, this separation implied that the Gentiles were second-class citizens, that they would not be fully acceptable unless they conformed to Jewish laws. Paul saw this as a violation of the gospel. If God was willing to live in these people, then the Jewish believers ought to be willing to eat with them.

Other people followed Peter’s example: “The rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy” (2:13). The change in behavior was not consistent with their beliefs, and was not consistent with the gospel, so Paul spoke to them all by addressing Peter, who had set the example:

“But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, ‘If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile⁵ and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?’” (verse 14).

Peter had been living like a Gentile, and he should not pretend that he didn’t. He had been ignoring the rules that separated Jews from Gentiles, but his change in behavior implied it was wrong to be a Gentile. “Peter is in effect requiring the Gentile converts at Antioch to adopt a higher standard of Torah observance than he himself would normally follow.”⁶ Social discrimination violates the truth of the gospel.⁷

Unity in the church does not require that everyone follow the strictest opinions. God does not require Gentiles to live like Jews — and he does not require Jews to do it, either! Even the Jews are allowed to live like Gentiles, and the church should not let itself be tyrannized by overly conservative critics.

Paul explains that Jews are saved by faith, not by keeping the law: “We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners⁸; yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ⁹, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ¹⁰ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified” (verses 15-16).

Paul’s first statement about “justification” is that it does *not* come through the law. This negative way of introducing the term suggests that it was not Paul’s original way of explaining the gospel. Rather, his opponents were using the word, saying that people could be justified (or declared righteous) only by keeping the law.¹¹ Paul uses their terminology, but turns it around. Even those who try to keep the law cannot be justified by doing the law, because everyone fails at some point or another.

We cannot claim to be righteous on our own merits — if we are going to be declared righteous, it must be on some other basis. That is why the Jewish believers, like the Gentiles, put their trust in Christ, not in themselves. The implication here is that since Jews and Gentiles are

accepted by God on the same basis, for the same reason, then they ought to accept one another. Jews are not required to eat Gentile foods, but they should be willing to sit down at the same table!

A perfect source of righteousness

We are not justified by keeping the law. Does that mean that God doesn't care whether we sin? No. Paul asks, "But if, in our endeavor to be justified in Christ, we too were found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not!" (verse 17).¹² We are justified in Christ, by being united with him, so that he shares his righteousness with us. When we trust in Christ rather than ourselves, we admit that we are sinners, and that we cannot be declared righteous on our own merits. God accepts us even though we are sinners, but his pardon should not be interpreted as permission to sin. (The opponents were apparently saying that Paul's gospel encouraged people to sin.)

Paul's next statement is puzzling: "For if I rebuild what I tore down, I prove myself to be a transgressor" (verse 18). It seems that Paul was accused of being inconsistent, but it isn't clear what he is referring to.¹³ An inconsistency would prove that Paul broke the law either before or after his change.

His point seems to be about sin and the law, for his next statement is: "For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God" (verse 19). Elsewhere, Paul explains that people die to the law through Christ (Romans 6:3; 7:4). Christ suffered the worst penalty of the law on our behalf, and it has no further claim on us. Since we died with Christ, the law has exacted its penalty on us. But this does not mean that we are free to live however we please — rather, it means that we are to live for God. Paul will elaborate on that in the last third of his letter.

Paul explains his new outlook on life: "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 [literally, by the faith of the Son of God], who loved me and gave himself for me" (verse 20). Paul no longer views himself as an individual trying his best to keep the laws of God. That old approach was flawed, and it died with Christ. Paul considers all his previous merits as good as dead (see Philippians 3:7), and his life has value now only as it is empowered by Christ, only as it is in union with Christ.

He was united with Christ in his crucifixion, and he is united with Christ

in his resurrection. Whatever good he does, even his faith/fulness, is from Christ living in him. The reference point for Paul's life is not the law, but the fact that the Son of God loved Paul and gave himself to save not just the whole world, but for Paul himself. It became personal for Paul. Christ gave himself to save Paul, and when Paul started to believe that, he abandoned his own agenda for life and began to live for God, letting his life be directed by Christ. This emphasis on Christ does not promote sin — it promotes a radically God-centered life.

Paul concludes: “I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose” (verse 21). There is a contrast: Either righteousness is based on the law, or it is based on grace. Either it is earned, or it is given. And Paul figures that if there was any way on earth that people could get righteousness by keeping laws, then Jesus died in vain — and that is simply unthinkable.

Paul had seen proof with his own eyes that Jesus was alive, that God had given him resurrection life ahead of everyone else, which meant that he was the Messiah. And God would not let the Messiah suffer the most ignominious death unless it were absolutely necessary. The fact that God let his own Son be crucified was proof to Paul that righteousness could be attained in no other way. Salvation comes through Christ, not through the law!

Things to think about

- Peter went to the Jews, and Paul to Gentiles (verse 9). A comparable situation today might be that one preacher agrees to focus on European-Americans, and another on African-Americans. Is this approach wise, or racist? What problems might result?
- How well do I remember the poor? (verse 10)
- Does the “truth of the gospel” require that we eat with believers who have customs we do not like? (verse 14)
- Why is it that people cannot be declared righteous on the basis of keeping the law? (verse 15).
- If “I no longer live,” why does it matter *how* I live? (verse 20)

Endnotes

¹ Ben Witherington, *New Testament History*, 197. Some scholars identify

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the Galatians 2 visit with the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) instead, saying that Paul did not mention the Acts 11 visit because he had no discussions with the apostles on that visit and it was therefore irrelevant for his story. The topic in Galatians 2 and Acts 15 is the same: whether Gentiles should be circumcised. This would mean that Galatians was written *after* the Jerusalem Council. Support for the “late date” of Galatians also comes from the “northern Galatia” theory, which says that Paul is writing to people who are Galatian by ethnicity, and that Paul did not reach their region until after the Council.

Other scholars say that it is unlikely that Paul would have visited Jerusalem on the famine-relief visit *without* meeting with anyone and without discussing this topic, and in order to answer objections Paul would have had to include *all* his visits to Jerusalem no matter what was discussed. In Gal 2:2, he specifically says that the discussions were private, whereas the Acts 15 council was a public discussion. He says he went in response to a revelation, which comports well with Acts 11:28. And Galatians 2:10 says that the apostles wanted him to *continue* to remember the poor, which makes it sound like he had already done something for the poor — bringing famine relief. On a controversy like this, more than one discussion was probably necessary. This means that Paul wrote Galatians *before* the Jerusalem Council, and Paul was writing to people in Pisidia, Lystra, Derbe, and Iconium — in southern Galatia. Those cities were in the province of Galatia even though the people were not Galatian by ethnicity. Acts 2:9 shows that people could call themselves by their province, not just by ethnicity. But in the end, the scholarly controversy about the date of the letter and location of the recipients does not affect the interpretation of the letter.

² “If they reject the legitimacy of this mission, it will indeed make Paul’s work futile in one sense, for their rejection will thwart God’s intent to bring Jew and Gentile together as one in Christ” (Richard Hays, “Galatians,” *New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. XI [Abingdon, 2000], 223).

³ The sociological pressures may have been similar to what we see in some Muslim regions, where radicals threaten violence against anyone who does not adhere to strict standards — for example, shaving is supposedly a sign of weakening religious loyalty, so radicals may threaten barbers who shave their customers. “We will publicly shame you as a compromiser unless you conform to our standards.” Paul calls this tyranny of

judgmentalism an attempt to enslave.

⁴ We do not know if the men from James demanded this separation, or if Peter was merely afraid that they would want it. Perhaps he planned to do it temporarily, to avoid offense, but ended up causing offense to the Gentiles.

⁵ In this phrase, Paul has broadened the discussion beyond the question of *eating* with Gentiles, but it is difficult to determine exactly what he meant. In the first century, the distinction between Jews and Gentiles usually focused on circumcision, food laws, and Sabbath days. Some rabbis taught that Gentiles were required to keep the laws given to Noah. Galatians 3:17 suggests that the difference lies in the laws added in the days of Moses. Gentiles were expected to keep the laws that existed in Genesis, but were not required to keep those added later.

⁶ Hays, 235.

⁷ “One can betray the truth of the gospel not only by preaching false doctrines but also by engaging in false practices — particularly practices that fracture the unity of the church.... God has brought into being a new community that embraces Jews and Gentiles together as God’s people. This is not merely an implication of the gospel or an inference from the gospel; rather, it is an integral part of the gospel itself” (Hays, 248).

⁸ “The phrase hardly expresses Paul’s own view of Gentiles, and should probably be heard as an echo of what the group from James had said” (James Dunn, *Theology of Paul’s Letter to the Galatians* [Cambridge, 1993], 74).

⁹ The Greek says “the faith of Jesus Christ,” and some scholars take this literally — that people are saved by the faith/fulness that Jesus himself had (the Greek word can mean either *faith* or *faithfulness*). See Hays, 239-240. This would be similar to saying that his righteousness is imputed to us. We are saved by what he has done, not by something we do (see the last half of Romans 5:19). We need faith, but our faith is always imperfect — it cannot save us, so we must trust in Christ. Our faith and his faithfulness go together.

¹⁰ Again, the Greek says “faith of Christ.” If the meaning is our faith in Christ, the verse is repetitious. If the meaning is his faithfulness, then the verse says that we trust in Christ with the result that we are accepted on account of his faithfulness, not on account of our works. Paul may be playing on the two meanings of the word.

¹¹ “Before mentioning the positive basis on which a person *can* be

justified, or ‘righteoused’, Paul emphasizes the negative basis on which such justification is *not* possible. This order may well reflect the fact that the statement is made in a context where Paul is arguing precisely against those who do think that ‘the works of the law’ are necessary for all who would be members of God’s people” (David Horrell, *An Introduction to the Study of Paul* [2nd ed.; T & T Clark, 2006], 77). Paul apparently had not used the word *justification* when he was actually in Galatia.

¹² Since the original Greek did not have any quote marks, it is not clear how much of this passage was spoken to Peter in Antioch. The NIV puts the ending quote mark at the end of v. 21, but it is possible that vv. 15-21 are an expansion of the original statement. These verses seem to speak to the Galatian situation better than the one in Antioch. “Paul merges his response to Peter into the opening statement of his appeal to the Galatians.... Galatians is what he should have said to Peter at Antioch had time and sufficient reflection allowed it” (Dunn, 73). On the other hand, Hays thinks that the quotation extends through v. 21 because Paul continues to use first-person pronouns as if he is speaking to a Jewish audience — but he notes that “the desired effect is that the Galatians will hear the speech to Peter as being addressed to their situation as well” (Hays, 230).

Paul never tells us whether Peter agreed with him; most scholars conclude from this that Peter did not agree (Hays, 231). Some Jewish Christians maintained separate churches for several centuries after Christ.

¹³ Is he talking about rebuilding a barrier between Jews and Gentiles? Or were opponents saying that Paul would change his teaching on the law? Or is he using a proverb to talk about rebuilding *sin*, after preaching that Jesus died to destroy it?

REDEEMED FROM THE CURSE OF THE LAW: GALATIANS 3

How could anyone believe it? How could the people taught by Paul himself go so quickly astray into false doctrines? Paul, who had seen many things in his ministry, was flabbergasted. He was astonished that the Christians in Galatia were attracted to a “gospel” that heaped extra requirements on them.

Some people were saying that everyone needed to keep the laws of Moses. Paul wrote a strongly worded letter to stop this nonsense! In chapter 3 Paul explains that Christ died to *release* us from these obsolete rules.

By law, or by the Spirit?

In verses 1-5, he points out that the experience of the Galatians should have made it obvious — they received the Spirit by faith, not through the law.

Paul expresses his surprise: “O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified” (verse 1, ESV). We might say, Who has pulled the wool over your eyes?

Here’s the starting point for understanding the gospel, Paul says: Jesus Christ has been crucified. That is the foundation on which we build. Paul had made it abundantly clear that Jesus died on a cross; he would have also explained that this ignominious death had a purpose: Jesus died to save us. Salvation comes from him, not from anything we do. His crucifixion changes everything, as Paul will explain.

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A few questions should make it clear. “Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?” (verse 2). The answer was obvious: They received the Spirit by faith, by accepting what they heard. This is another foundational point.

Paul was astonished that the Galatians did not see the logical consequences of their experience with the Spirit. The Spirit was the promise of eternal life, and they already had the promise, so why would they think that more requirements might be necessary?

“Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?” (verse 3). The Spirit was given by grace, not law, so what did they hope to achieve by observing laws, such as circumcision of the flesh? It just didn’t make sense!

The Galatian Christians were apparently being taught that they needed to add the Law to their faith. False teachers were saying that they needed to progress further in the faith by observing the Torah. They were teaching circumcision and the entire Law of Moses (Galatians 5:2-3; Acts 15:5).

Paul says this is a ridiculous idea — if a person is given the Holy Spirit on the basis of faith, without deserving this gift, then Christianity is based on faith, and there is no place for works as far as salvation is concerned. (Paul will later comment on how Christians should behave in response to Christ’s work, but here he makes it clear that salvation is on the foundation of faith in what Christ has done.) Our goal cannot be attained by human effort, and that is why Jesus died on the cross. Whatever work had to be done, he did on the cross.

The Galatians had been persecuted for their faith, so Paul asks, “Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain?” (verse 4)

Paul asks, “Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith?” (3:5). The Galatians had already seen enough evidence: miracles in their midst. And God had done this on the basis of faith, not of works of the Law. The Galatians had been doing great without the law, so why would they now entertain the idea that they needed to start keeping the law?

Evidence from Scripture

Paul’s opponents were apparently saying that Scripture required people to observe the law in order to be counted as righteous (see, for example, Deuteronomy 6:25). They would have cited the example of Abraham, since Jews traced the promise of salvation back to him, and traced the

requirement of circumcision back to him, as well.

Paul accepts the challenge and notes that the Torah actually supports salvation by faith. “Just as Abraham ‘believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness?’” (verse 6, quoting Genesis 15:16). His faith was counted as righteousness, without any mention of the law.

Paul agrees that people need to be part of Abraham’s family, but he says that the law is not part of the deal: “Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham” (verse 7). Even in the Old Testament, a right relationship with God came through faith. God counted Abraham as acceptable because he believed, not because of his obedience. God will accept everyone who believes, because they are like Abraham in this significant respect.

Can non-Jewish people really have a relationship with God on that kind of basis? Yes, says Paul, and he again quotes the Torah: “And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘In you shall all the nations be blessed’” (verse 8, quoting Genesis 12:3).

The Torah says that non-Jews will be blessed through Abraham — and that blessing is by faith, not by the Law. Abraham did not need to be given the Law of Moses in order to receive the promise, and his spiritual followers do not need it, either. They are given the blessing even while they are Gentiles, that is, while they are uncircumcised.

Paul concludes: “So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith” (verse 9). We are blessed in the same way Abraham was: by faith. God’s blessing is by faith.

The curse of the law

Faith is one basis for being declared righteous. Is the law is another? “No,” Paul says. The Law brings penalties, not blessing. “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’” (verse 10, quoting Deuteronomy 27:26).

The Law is not a way to earn favor with God. It functions in the reverse way, since we all fall short of its demands. If the law is our standard, we are under the threat of a curse. The law can point out where we failed, but it cannot pronounce us righteous; that was not its purpose. If we think we have to observe the Torah, if we want to be under the Law, we will be under its condemnation.

EXPLORING THE WORD OF GOD: THE LETTERS OF PAUL

Paul concludes, “Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for ‘The righteous shall live by faith’” (verse 11, quoting Habakkuk 2:4). The Old Testament prophet connected righteousness with faith, not with law.

These two approaches are contradictory: “But the law is not of faith, rather ‘The one who does them shall live by them’” (verse 12, quoting Leviticus 18:5). The problem, Paul implies, is that no one “does them” well enough.

Righteous people should live by faith, but the Law is based on performance. The law emphasizes human effort and external behavior, but salvation is given by grace through faith in what Jesus has done.

Law-keeping cannot earn us God’s favor. If we look to it, it can bring only a curse, since we all fall short. But even in the curse, there is good news — God has provided a solution to our dilemma. It is in the crucifixion of Christ:

“Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree’” (verse 13, quoting Deuteronomy 21:23).

Christ, by becoming human, became our representative. On behalf of all humanity, he experienced the penalty prescribed by the law — its curse — death. He let the law do its worst on him, but it was on our behalf. We are rescued because our representative suffered the consequences of our failure. The law has no further claim on us.

Paul is using several lines of reasoning to show that Christians are not under the authority of the Law of Moses; we are not obligated to obey it. Not only is the law ineffective, bringing a curse rather than a blessing, Jesus has also paid its worst penalty, and that counts for all humanity. Jesus’ crucifixion gives Paul the basis for saying that Christians are not under the Law.

Why did Christ do this? “So that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith” (verse 14). The blessing is by faith as opposed to the Law. Christ removed humanity from the domain of law so that salvation would be given to Gentiles (as well as Jews) through Christ. By faith, we receive the Spirit, the guarantee of eternal life.

The law was temporary

Paul now explains with “a human example”—that of a contract: “Even

with a man-made covenant, no one annuls it or adds to it once it has been ratified” (verse 15).

In Greek, a human “covenant” may refer to a business contract, or to a “last will and testament.” Once a contract has been made, neither party can change it without permission from the other. Or for a will, no one (except for the person who made it, it goes without saying) can make any changes.

Paul then compares that to the covenant God made with Abraham, which includes being accounted righteous by faith. Paul writes, “Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, ‘And to offsprings,’ referring to many, but referring to one, ‘And to your offspring,’ who is Christ” (verse 16, quoting Genesis 12:7).

Paul knows that “offspring” [literally, “seed”] is a collective word including many people (verse 29), but here he points out that the singular meaning fits well with a promise focused on one person, Christ. This scripture finds its fulfillment most perfectly in one particular Offspring: Jesus Christ. It is through him that Gentiles can become part of Abraham’s descendants (verse 29).

In verse 17, Paul compares that to the covenant God made with Abraham: “This is what I mean: the law, which came 430 years afterward, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void.” What “law” is Paul talking about? The law given 430 years after Abraham — the Law of Moses.

God would be going back on his word if he originally gave an unconditional promise, and then later started adding conditions. Just as a human covenant cannot be changed, God’s promise cannot be changed, either. The law of Moses cannot impose requirements that take away the promise of salvation. The laws that came through Moses cannot change the fact that God accepts people as righteous on the basis of faith, not by human efforts.

Paul reasons: “For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise” (verse 18). Law and grace are contradictory. Salvation is either by laws and works, or by faith and gift. Paul does not try to combine the two — he is saying they cannot be combined. God gave the promise to Abraham as a gift, which means that it does not come by the law.

Purpose of the law

Paul has made three points:

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- 1) Justification is by faith,
- 2) The law cannot declare us righteous.
- 3) The law is contrary to God's promise.

So the obvious question is: "Why then the law?" And Paul answers, "It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made" (verse 19). Were laws added because the people were already breaking them? Or were they added so that people could see more clearly that they were sinners? Either way, the Law of Moses was added for only a certain length of time — until Christ came.

The law showed, for one thing, that people would continue to sin even after a written law was given. The law made it obvious that humans are incapable of attaining righteousness on their own, and that righteousness can come only as a gift. The Law accomplished its purpose, and is now obsolete.

The law, Paul says, "was put in place through angels by an intermediary. Now an intermediary implies more than one, but God is one" (verses 19-20). Jewish tradition said that the law was given through angels, and the intermediary is apparently Moses, but Paul's next point about "one" is obscure. There are three possible explanations:

- 1) an intermediary implies two parties — in this case, God and the Israelites.
- 2) an intermediary represents a group, not an individual — in this case, the Israelites.
- 3) an intermediary implies indirect dealings, and is not as good as dealing directly with God, as Abraham did (see Richard Longenecker, *Galatians* [Word Biblical Commentary 41; Word, 1990], 141). Actually, the verse does not seem necessary for Paul's logic, and perhaps we cannot see its significance because we do not know what Paul's opponents were saying.

Paul asks, "Is the law then contrary to the promises of God?" And he answers: "Certainly not! For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law" (verse 21). If the Law of Moses could have given life, then God would have used it to give life. But that was not its purpose; it was not designed as a means of salvation.

If *any* law could give life, or make us right with God, then God would have done it that way. But by its very nature, law cannot give life — it can only condemn. People who think they can improve their standing with God

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by keeping the law are misunderstanding its purpose and are not accepting the biblical evidence that salvation is by faith alone, without human efforts. We receive the Spirit by faith and are counted righteous by faith; keeping the laws of Moses cannot contribute in any way to our salvation.

So what was the result of the law? “The Scripture imprisoned everything under sin...” Everyone falls short of what the law requires. The law made it clear that humanity needs a Savior.

What was the purpose of doing that? “So that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe” (verse 22).

Instead of giving life, the Law brings penalties. The diagnosis is that everyone sins and falls short of what the law requires. Consequently, the promise of salvation can come only through God’s grace. God himself provides the solution: salvation is given (by grace) to those who believe the gospel of the crucified Messiah.

Paul summarizes: “Now before faith came” [that is, before Christ], “we [the Jews] were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed” (verse 23). The Jewish people were under the restrictions of the law, under its temporary jurisdiction or custody. The law gave requirements, but never rescued anyone from their tendency to sin, and this confinement lasted only until Christ came.

“So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came*, in order that we might be justified by faith” (verse 24). The law had authority from Moses until Christ. It showed that humans are prisoners of sin, unable to save themselves through human effort. It showed that salvation can be received only through faith, not by law.

*The 1984 edition of the NIV had “to lead us to Christ.” But the Greek means “into Christ,” and probably means “until” (McKnight, *Galatians*, 183). “We did not make our way, under the tutelage of the Law, progressively to Christ; instead, Christ came to us” (Hays, 270). In historical experience, we can see that the people who have kept the law (the Jews) have not been particularly “led” to Christ.

Now that the Law of Moses has fulfilled its purpose, it has become obsolete: “But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian” (verse 25). The law had power in the time before Christ, showing that humans are transgressors, prisoners of sin, unable to be justified by works. But now, the law no longer has authority over us; it cannot condemn us.

Christians are not to look at the law of Moses as if it has anything to do

with our salvation. It is not a way to get right with God. It is not a way to enter his kingdom nor a way to stay in his kingdom nor a way to improve our standing with God. Because of Jesus' crucifixion, our relationship with God depends entirely on faith.

Children of God

Paul concludes that the gospel of salvation by grace through faith treats all people equally: “for in Christ Jesus you are all [children] of God, through faith” (verse 26). Both Jews and Gentiles receive God's gift by believing the gospel.

“For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (verse 27). We have clothed ourselves with him. He gives us the robes of righteousness, and our life is now after the pattern he sets for us.

But the conclusion is even more sweeping than ethnic equality: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

The unity we have in Christ should have consequences in the social world. Slave-owners and slaves have equal status with God, and that should affect the way that they treat each other. If slave-owners realized that believing slaves were family members whom they should love as themselves, then the slave-owners would free the slaves. A person's status in the church should not be limited by the status an unbelieving society puts upon them.

In the same way, males and females are one in Christ, but the consequences of that go beyond equal access to salvation (which was not an issue when Paul wrote) — it should result in equal treatment within the church.

Paul returns to the point that salvation is available to all: “If you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise” (verse 29). Salvation is based on the promises God gave to Abraham, and we inherit those promises by faith, because that was the basis on which those promises were given in the first place.

Things to think about

- In what ways have I experienced the Spirit? (verse 5)
- Why would anyone *want* to rely on the law? (verse 10)
- In what way did Jesus become a curse? (verse 13)

- Did the covenant with Abraham have any conditions? (verse 18)
- Should we add some laws “because of transgressions” today? (verse 19) Do laws cause more transgressions, or fewer?
- Do people today make themselves “prisoners of the law” even though they are not really under the law? (verse 23)
- Do old social divisions affect the unity of people in my church? (verse 28)

The Greeks had a word for it: *paidagogos*

“The law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ,” says Galatians 3:24. The word “schoolmaster” is the King James translation of *paidagogos*, from which we get the English word *pedagogue*, meaning “teacher.”

But in ancient Greece, a *paidagogos* was not a schoolteacher. It is difficult to translate this word because it refers to something that does not exist in our society. The Greeks had a word for it because they had “it,” and we do not.

Paidagogos comes from two Greek words: *pais*, meaning child, and *agogos*, meaning leader. A *paidagogos* was usually a slave; he made sure the children went to school and did their homework. He taught manners and good behavior, but not academic topics. He supervised the children, and disciplined misbehavior. *Paidagogoi* had a reputation or stereotype for excessive discipline, and Greeks rarely had fond memories of the slave who supervised them.

The law was like that, Paul says. It watched over the Jewish people and gave them discipline until Christ came. He extends the analogy into chapter 4, saying that young children are like slaves — under the authority of others until a set time. And the Jews (he includes himself by using the word “we”) were enslaved until Christ came (4:1-3). But now that the true Teacher has come, “we are no longer under a schoolmaster” (3:25).

INHERITORS, NOT SLAVES GALATIANS 4

How can Gentiles inherit the promises God gave to Abraham? Some people said that Gentiles ought to keep the laws of Moses if they want to be part of the covenant people. Paul said *no!*

Paul ends chapter 3 by saying that Gentiles can inherit the promises of salvation without any need to keep the laws of Moses (Galatians 3:29). In chapter 4, Paul uses two analogies to explain what he means.

The underage child (verses 1-3)

“What I am saying is that as long as an heir is underage, he is no different from a slave, although he owns the whole estate” (NIV from this point forwards). If a father died early, he might leave his estate to a young child. The child, although the legal owner, would not have authority to run the estate. A trustee would manage the estate and would have authority over the legal owner, as long as the heir was under age.

In the analogy Paul is creating, the child is Judaism. Jews had the promise of salvation, but not salvation itself. They were heirs, but had not yet inherited the blessings. They were like an underage child in another respect, too: They were under authority. In wealthy Greek families, children were supervised by slaves, and the children had to obey orders just as much as the slaves did. The child “is subject to guardians and trustees until the time set by his father.”

The law was “put in charge” for a while, but we are *no longer* under its supervision (3:24-25). People who put themselves under the old covenant are putting themselves back into slavery, when the Father wants them to come out.

Paul includes himself in this description: “So also, when we [the Jews] were underage, we were in slavery under the elemental spiritual forces of the world.” These “basic principles” are the *stoicheia* (the word used to describe the ABCs, the schoolwork done by elementary-age children).

Before Christ, the Jews were under the detailed rules of the Mosaic law. God was treating them like children — which was appropriate when they first came out of Egypt. Just as Paul said that “we were held prisoners by the law” (3:23), he now uses a similar analogy: “we were in slavery” — under authority, like underage children. But now the time had come for change.

Coming of age (verses 4-7)

“But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law.” For this momentous transition in the relationship between God and his people, God did not send a prophet or a lawgiver — he sent his Son. But he did not descend from heaven like an angel — he came as a human being, born of a woman.

When we introduce our children, we do not point out that they were born of a woman. Birth is so normal that it is strange to mention it. Paul says that the Son of God was born of a woman because it was not what people expected. The Son of God, though divine, became an infant — an underage child. Moreover, he was “born under the law” — obligated to keep the old covenant.

Why did the Lord of all creation become a child under the authority of the law? He did it “to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship.” He became under the law so he could redeem¹ people under the law. He had to become *one of them* in order to rescue them. He had to become human in order to rescue humans. Salvation depends on the fact that he was “born of a woman” — fully human. His birth has become one of the most celebrated holidays in Christianity.

Now that he has done this, what is the result? We have the rights of adult children: 1) we are freed from the law, and 2) we have begun to experience the inheritance that God offers.

Paul addresses the Gentiles: “Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, ‘Abba! Father!’” (4:6). “Abba” is a term of respect and affection, similar to the English word “Dad,” used by children even after they come of age. We are adult children who can call God our Dad. Since the Spirit who lived in Jesus also lives in

us, we are God's children.

The Spirit shows that God has elevated us: "So you are no longer a slave, but God's child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir" (4:7). The same two points. God is treating us as adults, trusting us to be led by the Spirit.

Backwards into slavery? (verses 8-11)

Paul explains that Gentiles were enslaved, too: "Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods." The people were serving a falsehood.

"But now that you know God — or rather are known by God — how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable forces? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again?" In other words, Now that God has treated you as adults, why would you want to go back to kindergarten? The Gentile Christians were thinking of returning to bondage. They wouldn't have put it in those words, of course, but Paul is pointing out that this is what it amounts to.

Were the Galatians being tempted to go back *into idolatry*? Nothing else in this letter suggests that possibility. Rather, the letter repeatedly indicates that the problem was the old covenant law. Judaizers wanted the Gentiles to be circumcised and to keep the law in addition to having faith in Christ (4:21; 5:2-4). They were being tempted with a different sort of slavery than what they came out of.

They had come out of pagan principles but were in danger of going back into another set of rules — another nonfaith approach to religion. (Paul uses the Greek word *stoicheia* here for principles of the Galatian heresy, the same word he used in 4:3 for the slavery "we" had under the old covenant "basic principles." The letter as a whole indicates that the slavery the Galatians were falling back into was an obligation to old covenant customs.)

Paul is saying, You have come out of kindergarten. Why do you want to go back? You have been freed from an oppressive religion; why would you want to be enslaved to basic principles again?

Indeed, the people were already keeping some unnecessary laws: "You are observing special days and months and seasons and years!" It is likely that the Galatians had begun to observe the same days and times that circumcised people kept. But if Paul was talking about Sabbaths and festivals, why didn't he say so? It is because the Galatians were coming out

of one religion and into another. Paul used words that applied to both religions to point out the similarities involved.

Pagan religions had their special days, months, seasons and years; so did the old covenant. There was a different set of days, but it is a similar idea. They felt obligated (enslaved) to something that was not obligatory. The Galatians had come out of religious bondage, and were going back into a religious bondage. So Paul asks: How could you do such a thing? Don't you know that this can enslave you all over again?

No matter what days were involved, a focus on times is childish. Our relationship with God is based on Christ and the Spirit, not the calendar.

Have they given up on the grace they had in Christ? "I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you." Paul could assure the Corinthians, as immature as they were, that *their* labor was not in vain (1 Corinthians 15:58), so why would he be worried about whether his own efforts were wasted? Paul's comments in both letters must be viewed with some allowance for rhetorical exaggeration.²

Appeal for friendship (verses 12-20)

Paul's arguments have become less biblical and more personal. Indeed, verses 8-11 are not really an argument at all — just frustrated questions and exclamations. Now he begins to plead with the people on the basis of his previous relationship with them: "I plead with you, brothers and sisters, become like me, for I became like you."³

In what way did Paul become like them? Probably in the way that he lived. Like Peter, he lived like a Gentile (2:14). He was not bound by the laws that separated Jews and Gentiles, and he encourages them to be that way, too. An appeal for imitation was a common method of ethical exhortation.

"You did me no wrong." You have always done what I have asked... And then Paul rehearses how their friendship began: "As you know, it was because of an illness that I first preached the gospel to you." Unfortunately, we do not know what Paul is talking about; Luke says nothing about it in the book of Acts.⁴

"And even though my illness was a trial to you, you did not treat me with contempt or scorn. Instead, you welcomed me as if I were an angel of God, as if I were Christ Jesus himself." The people apparently helped Paul recuperate, and treated him like a king, we might say, and believed his every word.

"Where, then, is your blessing of me now? I can testify that, if you could

have done so, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me.” Some have speculated based on this verse (and 6:11) that Paul had an eye problem, but Paul is just using a figure of speech that was common in friendship: you would have given me your most precious possession.⁵ What he is really saying is: You used to love me. What has come between us?

“Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth?” They had become friends because they believed Paul; why do they doubt him now? It is because some interlopers are trying to convince them that Paul did not tell the truth.

Paul says that their motives are selfish: “Those people are zealous to win you over, but for no good. What they want is to alienate you from us, so that you may have zeal for them.” They are sheep-stealers, trying to drive a wedge between us so that you will be loyal to them instead of me. It’s not enough to be loyal to Christ, in their book — you have to do it their way, and be in their camp.

Zeal isn’t wrong, but if it’s genuine it will be consistent, not fickle. “It is fine to be zealous, provided the purpose is good, and to be so always, not just when I am with you.”

He throws in one more personal appeal: “My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you,⁶ how I wish I could be with you now and change my tone, because I am perplexed about you!” Paul is agitated, partly because he doesn’t know exactly what he’s fighting against. If he could be in Galatia and talk to them face to face, he might have a better response.⁷

Son of the slave woman (verses 21-31)

Starting in verse 21, Paul uses another analogy to dissuade them from the law: “Tell me, you who want to be under the law, are you not aware of what the law says?” Then he reminds them of a story in Genesis 16-21. He sees in it an ironic allegory.

“For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman. His son by the slave woman was born according to the flesh; but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a divine promise.” Ishmael was conceived in Hagar in the normal way; Isaac was conceived as a miracle, long after Sarah had passed menopause. One was the product of the flesh; the other was the result of God’s promise.

Paul sees in this a useful parallel between those who insist on circumcising the flesh. “These things are being taken figuratively: The

women represent two covenants. One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves: This is Hagar.” The covenant made at Sinai (the law of Moses) corresponds to the slave woman. This was an unexpected twist in the story; Jews never thought of themselves as connected to Hagar; her children were considered Gentiles.⁸

Although the Jews claimed to be descendants of Sarah, Paul claims that Judaism is the ideological descendant of Hagar: “Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem, because she is in slavery with her children.” In this allegory, Judaism and its followers are in slavery. Hagar represents the flesh; Sarah represents the promise.⁹

We are children of Abraham in a different way, and although we trace our faith to the same city, we are in a completely different status: “But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother. We, like Isaac, are children of promise.” We do not look to the flesh, so we are not concerned about circumcision.

Paul sees one more parallel in the story, corresponding with the fact that the Jews were persecuting people who felt freed from the law: “At that time the son born according to the flesh persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit. It is the same now.”

So Paul quotes Genesis 21:10: “But what does Scripture say? ‘Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for the slave woman’s son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman’s son.’” That is, get rid of those who teach slavery through the law! No one will inherit the promises of God by looking to the flesh, nor by looking to the calendar, nor by looking to the laws given on Mt. Sinai. We look to the child of promise — Jesus Christ.

In the next chapter, Paul will say more about how our freedom should be used.

Things to think about

- Do we have different rules for children as opposed to adults? (verse 3)
- Many people have had poor relationships with their fathers. What can they do if “Dad” is not a term of respect and affection? (verse 6)
- Do I sometimes long for the ABCs of an earlier age? (verse 9)
- Paul appeals for loyalty based on friendship, but what happens if the friendship actually had an erroneous basis? (verse 14)

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- In Galatians, Paul was writing to Gentiles. Would he use a word like slavery if he were writing to Jews? (verse 25)

Endnotes

- ¹ The word used for buying people out of slavery.
- ² Similarly, we understand that 1 Corinthians 4:8 does not mean what it says. There, Paul is using a different rhetorical technique: sarcasm.
- ³ “This is a heart-to-heart moment. Almost every line is an appeal to friendship, to family loyalty, to a mutual bond” (Tom Wright, *Galatians and Thessalonians*, 53).
- ⁴ Perhaps Paul became ill on the coast of Asia Minor and was advised to move to a mountainous region for recuperation — that would explain why he did not preach on the coast. Or perhaps he stayed longer in Galatia than he had planned because he became ill while there.
- ⁵ “The theme of friendship in antiquity often associates such things as giving one’s eyes as a demonstration of the depth of one’s commitment to a friend” (McKnight, *Galatians*, 219). Today, we might say, “You would have given me your right arm,” without anyone thinking that our own arm was defective.
- ⁶ A great example of a mixed metaphor: Paul has labor pains, but the baby is being formed in the Galatians!
- ⁷ 2 Corinthians 10:10 suggests that Paul was gentler in person than he was when writing letters.
- ⁸ Many scholars have noted that the story does not seem to be well suited to Paul’s argument. Indeed, it would be possible to use Sarah and Hagar to construct a different allegory with a different conclusion. It is likely that Paul used this story because his opponents were using it with a different conclusion. “It is just possible, though we must guess at it, that Paul’s use of the allegory here was determined by a similar appeal on the part of the Judaizers to Abraham’s son Ishmael, who was one of the fountains of the Gentiles” (McKnight, 230). Walter Hansen writes, “The [Genesis] text seems to fit the position of the false teachers better.... It appears that the Gentile believers in Galatia have already been told the story” (Hansen, *Galatians*, 140-141).
- ⁹ Both sons were circumcised, but Paul is exercising author’s privilege in choosing only those parts of the allegory that he finds helpful to his argument!

THE PURPOSE OF FREEDOM GALATIANS 5

Paul has vigorously argued that Christians are not enslaved to sin and not enslaved to law. How then do we live between these two errors?

Circumcision a mark of slavery (verses 1-6)

Paul begins chapter 5 with a bold slogan of spiritual liberty: “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.” Christ lived, died, and was resurrected so that we might be free.

Judaizers were saying that Gentiles had to join the old covenant if they wanted God’s blessings and salvation (cf. Acts 15:1, 5). In Galatians 3 and 4, Paul explains that this is false. If people submit to rules that have no authority, it would be like putting themselves into prison. In chapter 5, he exhorts them:

“Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.” Jews spoke favorably about “the yoke of the law,” as if the law would be a harness that helped them work effectively. But Paul turns that image around, saying that if the people turn to the law, the yoke would be one of slavery, and the work would do them no good.

Stand firm in your freedom, he says, and don’t be bullied by threats. We need not fear the day of judgment, because we are justified on the basis of faith, not works. We will always fall short when it comes to our works, but the gospel says that Christ has already done all the work we need.

If we turn to the law again, we would be saying that Christ was not enough. “Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all.” A physical procedure

cannot thwart God's grace (see verse 6), but if it is done as a means of entering the old covenant, it shows that the person no longer trusts Christ to be a fully effective Savior.

Paul reminds them: "Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law." The law is not merely burdensome — it is a guarantee of failure. The person who turns to law has turned away from Christ:

"You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace." The Judaizers wanted to add the law to Christ, but these two cannot be combined. If we are trying to get right with God by obeying a law, we are no longer trusting in the grace of Christ.

Paul explains the Christian way: "For through the Spirit we eagerly await by faith the righteousness for which we hope." God's Spirit assures us that God accepts us now, and will accept us on the day of judgment, because of Christ.

It does not matter whether we are Jewish or Gentile. "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love." Here is something that counts — something important. It is not a means of earning salvation, but something that flows from salvation. Faith in Christ expresses itself in our behavior.

Obligation to love (verses 13-15)

Paul sums it up in verse 13: "You...were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love." The word for "serve" here is *douleo*, the verb form of *doulos*, or "slave." Do not be a slave of the sinful nature, nor a slave of the law — but *do* be a slave in your love for one another.

Christ does not give us freedom so we can live selfishly — that would be slavery to passions — but he allows us to live the way of heaven: love. That obligation still remains (see Romans 13:8). If we want the kind of life that God offers, we should want to live that way even now.

Paul tells us *why* to love: "For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" To paraphrase Paul's logic: When we love one another, we have done everything that the law requires.

In chapter 3, Paul argued that the law was temporary, with authority

only until Christ came. Here, he writes as if the law should still be done. Paul is using the word “law” in two senses. Law, referring to the old covenant, was temporary, but law in the sense of obligation to God and fellow humans is permanent.

Regulations about fabrics, food, and festivals are obsolete. But love is a law that is valid forever, because it is the essence of God and his realm, and that is what he wants us to share in for all eternity. The need for love did not end when the old covenant ended, because love was valid before the old covenant began. If any part of the old covenant can be said to survive, it is only because it expresses what was already true anyway.

Paul’s opponents in Galatia were probably saying that grace is not a sufficient guide to life, that we need the law to help us resist sin. Paul responds by saying that the solution to sin-slavery is not law - slavery — it is being enslaved to one another in love. If we do that, we are doing what the law required all along.

But what was happening in Galatia instead? They were bickering about fleshly rituals like circumcision, comparing themselves with each other to see who was the most scrupulous about things that really didn’t matter. So Paul warns them, “If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.” An obsession with the details of the law does not come from love.

Life by the Spirit (verses 16-24)

Paul says more about how God’s Spirit (not the law) is the answer to the problem of sin: “So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.” When we are led by the Spirit, our lives change. We don’t just “do whatever comes naturally” — we will put to death the habits that hurt other people.

This is often difficult: “For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want.” We should serve one another in love, not serve ourselves in selfishness.

The Spirit is opposed to our sinful desires — but it is also opposed to the law. They are mutually incompatible: “But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.” Our allegiance is to the Spirit, not the law. The Spirit will lead us into acts of service and love, not into old covenant rituals.

Paul mentions some of the negative results of selfishness: “The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry

and witchcraft...” Those are obviously wrong.

Then Paul mentions a few sins — probably including a few things that the Galatians were currently experiencing in their doctrinal controversy: “hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy.” He ends with a few more “obvious” sins: “drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.” People whose lives are filled with selfishness do not even *want* to be in a kingdom that is filled with love.

In contrast, “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.” The law does not deal with most of these things — but the Spirit does. When we are led by God, we go beyond what the law required. People who are fixated on the old covenant have set their sights too low.

The law is not the solution to sin. Jesus Christ is. We need him not only for mercy on the day of judgment, but for living the new life we have in this age. “Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.” In Christ, we have put those ways behind us and now we follow the Spirit in the ways of love.

Things to think about

- Christ is the Savior of all people, even those who don’t believe (1 Timothy 4:10). So how could Christ be “of no value”? (verse 2)
- How does faith produce acts of love? (verse 6)
- Does Christian freedom mean that Christians are free to indulge their sinful nature? (verse 14)
- When we are led by the Spirit, how do we tell the difference between what we want and what the Spirit wants? (verse 17)
- Can we crucify our own desires and still remain the same person? (verse 24)

The Greeks had a word for it: σαρκ

The Greek word *sarx*, traditionally translated “flesh,” was rendered as “sinful nature” in 1984 edition of the NIV. That is because Paul sometimes uses the word to refer to evil inclinations, not just bodily appetites and physical desires. In listing “works of the flesh” in Galatians 5:19-21, Paul includes mental sins and social rivalries as well as more fleshly sins such as

sexual immorality.

Sometimes Paul seems to use the word as an alien power that we must fight against. “You are controlled not by the *sarx* but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you” (Romans 8:9).

The word *sarx* had a double meaning when Paul argued with Judaizers. In their focus on circumcision, they were worried about the flesh. Paul says that Christianity is focused on the Spirit, not the flesh.

DO GOOD TO ALL GALATIANS 6

In many of his letters, Paul concludes with a list of commands. In Galatians, he gives a series of proverbs. He wants his readers to be guided by the Spirit, not a list of laws, so he gives them principles that require some thought.

Restore a sinner gently (verses 1-5)

The Galatian Christians were probably concerned about sin — they were attracted to the law of Moses because it seemed to address the problem of misbehavior. But Paul is more concerned about the person than he is the sin: “If someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted.”

What kind of sin is Paul talking about — a moment of weakness, or a persistent problem? It’s not clear, but it alienated the person from the community, and restoration was needed. This must be done gently by Spirit-led people, who know their own tendency to sin in other, perhaps less public ways. We should treat others the way that we want to be treated, with compassion and patience.

As brothers and sisters in the faith, we are to help one another: “Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.” If you want a law, he seems to say, start with the law of helping others. Jesus served others rather than himself, and so should we. When someone is caught in a sin, we need to help the person — not make the burden heavier. This is love, which fulfills the purpose of God’s law (5:14).

Paul's next proverb is a truism: "If anyone thinks they are something when they are not, they deceive themselves." This seems to be a warning for people who think they are spiritual giants and never likely to be caught in a sin. If you think you can stand on your own, he says elsewhere, watch out, for you could fall, too (1 Corinthians 10:12).

"Each one should test their own actions. Then they can take pride in themselves alone, without comparing themselves to someone else." We are not the judge of how well other people are doing in the faith — but we should be attentive to whether we are doing what *we* ought. We can celebrate that we have grown, but we should not take pride in being better than others. Each person has his or her own journey in life. As Paul says, "each one should carry their own load."

On the surface, this appears to contradict what Paul said in verse 2. Are we to help one another, or to be self-reliant? Well, both. We should be attentive to our own life, but we should also help others—and we should recognize that we will sometimes fall short in our responsibilities, and will then need the help of others. Spiritual growth is a matter of cooperation, not competition.

Supporting teachers, doing good (verses 6-10)

Paul's next proverb concerns financial support for the leaders of the church: "The one who receives instruction in the word should share all good things with their instructor." When the people were spiritually immature, Paul was willing to support himself by making tents, but he also taught that believers should support those who labor in the gospel. If we want teachers to help us with their abilities, then we must help them according to *our* ability.

Paul says, "Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows." This principle could be applied in many settings; here, it seems to refer to financial support for teachers in the church. No matter how diligent our teachers are, if they have to support themselves financially, they will inevitably have less time to help others. When we give more, we receive more.

Paul applies the proverb to spiritual matters: "Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life." A self-centered life produces only material things that eventually waste away. A life curved in on itself doesn't even *want* the kind of life that God offers.

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But if we are attentive to spiritual priorities, the result will be more blessings from the Spirit. This is not a matter of earning eternal life through good works — it is simply an acknowledgment that spiritual choices have results. If we focus on ourselves, our life will produce nothing of value. But if we make decisions in life following the Spirit, we will be participating in the kind of life we will enjoy forever. The Spirit leads us and empowers us, but we still have the choice of how to live, and our decisions do have consequences.

Paul makes it clear that the works of the law cannot save us, but he has nothing against good works: “Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.” Why do we get tired of doing good? Because it doesn’t always have immediate rewards. But it will eventually have good results.

Paul concludes: “Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.” Since doing good is the right way to live, we should do good not just to our friends, but to all people — and yet Paul notes that we have a special responsibility to others in the church.

In Paul’s day, wealthy citizens often financed public banquets and new civic buildings: they were “doing good to all.” Be a public benefactor, Paul is saying, especially within the church. If you sow generously, you will reap abundantly (2 Corinthians 9:6).

Boasting in the cross (verses 11-18)

Paul now takes the quill and writes the closing words himself, as Greek authors often did. He writes in large letters either for emphasis, or simply because he was not as skilled as the secretary in writing on porous papyrus. “See what large letters I use as I write to you with my own hand!”

He adds a few thoughts about circumcision: “Those who want to impress people by means of the flesh are trying to compel you to be circumcised. The only reason they do this is to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ.” Basically, the false teachers wanted Christianity to be a sect within Judaism, and for all Gentile believers to become proselytes. They may have offered various religious reasons, but Paul says that what they really wanted was to be accepted by unbelieving Jews.

But there is an irony here: “Not even those who are circumcised keep the law, yet they want you to be circumcised that they may boast about your circumcision in the flesh.” As a former Pharisee, Paul knew the rigor

involved in keeping all the laws — and these people don't have that kind of zeal, he says. They just want to brag about bringing proselytes into the Jewish fold.

Boasting about achievements is hazardous to our spiritual health. "May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world." When we boast in the cross, we are "boasting" in our weakness, admitting that human effort ends only in death. We are proclaiming the gospel of what Christ has done.

Because of the cross, our old self is irrelevant. The new spiritual reality is that it doesn't matter whether a person is Jewish or Gentile. "Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is the new creation." In the cross, we died, and in the resurrection, we were made new. Our relationship with God is based on our connection with Christ, not on our flesh.

"Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule to the Israel of God." The "rule" is that circumcision doesn't matter. Paul is ending with a benediction on those who accept his teaching. They are "the Israel of God." If people want to be part of Israel according to God's definition, they should ignore the flesh and trust in their new status in Christ.

"From now on," he says, "let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus." Paul has been persecuted for Christ, and he points to his scars. If you want to look at the flesh, look at these scars as evidence that I'm trying to please God, not anyone else.

"The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers and sisters. Amen."

Things to think about

- Based on Paul's letter, how could believers in Galatia know whether they were "spiritual"? (verse 1)
- If I am dealing with a person caught in sin, what kind of words would help the person carry the burden? (verse 2)
- In the support I give my pastor, am I trying to please the Spirit, or have I grown weary? (verses 8-9)
- How do I boast in the cross of Christ? (verse 14)

The Greeks had a word for it: **καταρτιζω**

When Paul exhorted believers to "restore" a person who had sinned

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(Galatians 6:1), he used the Greek word *katartizō*. This comes from the Greek word *artizō* (related to the English words artistry and artisan), and the prefix *kata* (which can have a variety of meanings, but in this word conveys a sense of completeness).

This is the word that Mark uses to say that the disciples were mending or preparing their nets (Mark 1:19), and Jesus uses it for a fully trained student (Luke 6:40). In secular Greek, it was used for a doctor setting a broken bone so that it could heal. In general, it means to make something suited for its purpose.

By using this word, Paul is putting emphasis on the solution, not the problem. “The whole atmosphere of the word lays the stress not on punishment but on cure” (William Barclay, *The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians*, 53). “The goal here is not punishment or expulsion of the transgressor but restoration to the person’s former state” (Ben Witherington, *Grace in Galatia*, 422).

EPHESIANS: THE DIVINE PURPOSE IN CHRIST – INTRODUCTION

Series by Lorenzo Arroyo

“And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ” (Ephesians 1:9-10).

General introduction

The *Epistle to the Ephesians* stands out as one of the great masterpieces of Pauline theology. Ironically, this theology is one reason that some liberal scholars question the authorship of the letter as one genuinely written by the apostle Paul. Those scholars suggest that a disciple of Paul or a Pauline school of disciples are responsible for the work. One of the reasons given is the almost collection-like grouping of Paul’s best theological teachings. Ephesians is loaded with Paul’s greatest thoughts, which they believe to have been further developed by Paul’s disciples! However, this letter is so Pauline that it could not have been written by anybody else but the great apostle himself.

Paul wrote this letter along with several others while he was imprisoned in Rome about A.D. 60. After writing to the Colossians about a particular problem that they were dealing with, Paul apparently next wrote *Ephesians*. Both letters have many of the same themes in common. However, *Ephesians* focuses on similar Christological issues as applied to the church as a whole, rather than at the local level. This is also the reason why several scholars see

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the *Epistle to the Ephesians* as not written to address any particular problem at Ephesus, but as a circular letter sent to all the surrounding churches in general.

Special attention needs to be paid to the small phrase “in Christ” that so often appears in Paul’s writings, as is the case with *Ephesians*. It is a reference to every believer’s incorporation into all the spiritual blessings available in Christ via the Holy Spirit. The blessings possessed in Christ are not any less real because they are “spiritual.” It is because of the spiritual realm where Christ reigns in heavenly places that we can be assured of victory today and of the promise of a glorious inheritance, of which we have only begun to taste!

The theme of *Ephesians* is the disclosure of God’s eternal divine purpose, which is the uniting together and reconciliation of all things in and through the person and work of Jesus Christ. In God’s plan of reconciliation, Jesus Christ is at the heart and center of all that the Father wills. And at the heart and center of Christ’s work is his church. Christ as its Head has given the church an awesome responsibility and role as the redeemed organism by which he brings unity to this alienated, fragmented and fallen world. As the body of Christ, the church is to live out the purposes for which it was called. The church’s calling is to exemplify before the world the unity and love of reconciliation for which Christ died and rose. The gospel of God’s grace has bestowed upon believers a higher calling in Christ. Therefore, believers as a body and as individuals are to conduct themselves in this fallen world accordingly “in Christ” to his glory.

THE DIVINE PURPOSE IN CHRIST EPHESIANS 1:3-14

Key text: “And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment – to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ” (Ephesians 1:9-10).

Lesson objective: To understand that God’s ultimate purpose is to unite all things alienated in the universe into one harmonious whole through the one cosmic event of the reconciling work of Christ from which all blessings flow.

Introduction: Ancient epistles typically had a prescript and blessing at the beginning; Ephesians 1:1-14 is in this literary format. Of all the letters of the apostle Paul, this particular prescript is the most enigmatic.

The prescript is the salutation or greeting at the beginning of most ancient letters. In the letter to the Ephesians, it consists of the first two verses, where the author of the letter identifies both himself and those to whom the letter is addressed. And although the prescript identifies Paul and the saints (believers) he is writing to, the words “in Ephesus” are missing in the best ancient manuscripts. To whom, then, was this letter originally addressed?

Paul was in prison (3:1), most likely in Rome, when he wrote this letter. Several scholars believe that Paul wrote this letter as a follow-up to the letter he sent the Colossians. However, instead of sending it to any specific local church, he sent it as a circular letter, to be read by all the churches under his apostolic jurisdiction. Sometime after Paul’s death, when his

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letters were all collected, this circular letter somehow became associated with the church at Ephesus. Perhaps their copy, with “in Ephesus” inserted, was one of the surviving copies used among the early collections.

In any case, scholars have viewed Ephesians as the “Queen of the Pauline epistles” for its all-encompassing presentation of Christ’s unique relationship to the universal church and his purpose for it. In the blessing section (verses 3-14), which in the Greek is a single sentence, are presented golden nuggets of blessings from God to his people in Christ. Also, we find the praises or blessings from believers to God in response to those spiritual benefits. The unveiling of God’s mystery is that from all eternity God has known the solution to humanity’s predicament with its cosmic consequences on account of sin. God’s remedy is not something new or novel — it has always existed! What is new is only its disclosure in time, space and history.

The heavenly disclosure is the “good news” that salvation is the gift of God in and through Christ alone. Jesus Christ is at the very center of God’s divine purpose in bringing universal reconciliation in every sphere of life in heaven and earth. In him alone we have been chosen, adopted, redeemed, forgiven, sealed and consequently glorified. Halleluiaah!

Questions for Bible study

Read the following verses and respond to the questions:

1. Ephesians 1:1-2

- a. Who is the author of this letter? v. 1a. Do you think it could have been someone else using Paul’s name, as some scholars suppose? Consult the Introduction.
- b. What is meant by the word “apostle” in this context? v. 1b. If the word “apostle” simply means “one who is sent,” then are we not all apostles with the same authority as Paul? Explain.
- c. What other authority does the author invoke? v. 1b. How and when was Paul willed to be an “apostle”? Recall Paul’s heavenly calling and see Acts 22:3-16.
- d. What two descriptions does Paul use to identify the addressees? v. 1c. Are they exceptionally holy persons who through their sincere efforts have attained sainthood? See Hebrews 10:10, 14.
- e. In what place or city are the addressees located? v. 1c. See the lesson’s Introduction.
- f. In his greeting, is the word “grace” just a way of saying “cheers

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- everyone”? v. 2. Explain the theological depth of Paul’s meaning.
g. What about Paul’s use of the word “peace”? v. 2. Do you know the equivalent greeting in Hebrew? What does it mean for Paul?

2. Ephesians 1:3-6

- a. Who is the One being praised or blessed? v. 3a. Why is it necessary to mention Jesus when defining who God is?
- b. What reasons are given for God being praised? v. 3b. Who all has he blessed and where? What does Paul mean by the “heavenly realms”?
- c. In whom are all spiritual blessings contained? v. 3b. What does “in Christ” mean? See the Introduction.
- d. In whom was this group of people chosen? v. 4. Why? When did God plan to elect this body of people (the church) onto himself? With what ultimate purpose did God do this?
- e. What was God’s motive for the predestination of everyone who believes? v. 5a. To what is everyone who believes predestined?
- f. What was the significance of “adoption” in ancient Roman times? Consult a Bible dictionary. Through whom does this adoption take place?
- g. Why is it that such wonderful spiritual benefits should take place for repentant sinners in Christ? v. 5b.
- h. What is the basis or bottom line of how we obtain such spiritual benefits such as being chosen (election) and made heirs (adoption) of God’s provisions? v. 6.

3. Ephesians 1:7-10

- a. What is the first benefit of two more spiritual benefits mentioned here? v. 7a. Explain the meaning of “redemption in his blood.”
- b. What is the second spiritual benefit mentioned? v. 7b. In accordance with what are these blessing bestowed? v. 7c. Explain the meaning of the “riches of God’s grace.”
- c. What two other blessings does God confer on believers? v. 8. Why do you think these latter two are important?
- d. What does God make known to us? v. 9a. What does “will” mean?
- e. What is meant by: “which he purposed in Christ”? v. 9b.
- f. When is God’s divine purpose in Christ to be completed? v. 10a.
- g. What is the mystery of his will (God’s divine purpose)? v. 10b.

4. Ephesians 1:11-14

- a. Where do God's people (the church) fit into his eternal plans? v. 11.
- b. How do the believing Jews fit in to his plan? v. 12.
- c. How do believing Gentiles fit into his plan? v. 13. With what seal have we been marked? Explain.
- d. What does it mean to have the Holy Spirit abide in believers? v. 14. Explain the meaning of the term "deposit of guarantee" as applied to the Holy Spirit.

Contemporary interaction

1. If someone were to offer you 40 years of extraordinary wealth in return for your soul, would you take it? Does that sound like a good deal? Why or why not? What are God's riches and promises in Christ?
2. What plans or purposes have you made for yourself: personal goals, education, vocation, family, church and material goods? What plans has God made for you in Christ?

Conclusion

God is to be constantly praised for the richness of his grace and manifold blessings bestowed to us freely in Christ. His eternal divine purpose cannot be frustrated, but will give fruit at the appointed time and be fully realized to the glory of Christ!

THE DIVINE KNOWLEDGE AND POWER IN CHRIST: EPHESIANS 1:15-23

Key text: “I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe” (Ephesians 1:18-19a).

Lesson objective: To understand that all believers are called upon to increase their knowledge of God as he reveals himself, to understand the depth of God’s promise of glory, and to personally know the power of the risen Christ.

Introduction: As the *Epistle to the Ephesians* continues to unfold, the apostle Paul pauses to give thanks to God and to intercede in prayer on behalf of the addressees (1:15-23). In the cosmic battle between the forces of good and evil, a line must be drawn and allegiances chosen. Paul knows all too well that believers can sometimes be lulled to sleep, let their guard down and take their faith in God for granted, which can lead to dire consequences. It is easy to fall into the trap of giving only lip service to God while our heart drifts away. The one sure antidote for this malady is to come to know God in Christ more fully in a personal and loving way (verses 15-17).

Another related matter that also must be combated is the subtle philosophy of naturalism. This philosophy undergirds much of today’s scientific community and is often disguised as science in our public school system. Naturalism basically says, “What you see, is all there is.” All that really exists “out there” is *matter* in one form or another. The cosmos was an accident caused by chance, and life on earth is its blind product. When

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our sun burns out, as all stars eventually do, all that will remain is a burned-out sphere and a frozen lifeless earth. God is an invention (or fantasy) produced by the chemical processes of the human brain. There is no God, there is no afterlife, and there is no future! The logical conclusion of naturalism is the worldview of *nihilism*, which means “nothing.” Nothing matters.

For Paul and all believers in Christ, those vain philosophies could not be any further from the truth. There is a God who has revealed himself and has made himself known partially through the *created* world (Psalm 19:1) and ultimately in Christ (Hebrews 1:1-3). Also, there is a glorious future and inheritance awaiting all believers at the Second Coming. But believers do not have to wait until tomorrow to taste the future power of God’s kingdom! In the person and saving work of Jesus Christ, the kingdom of God has already arrived (Luke 17:20-21). And, in his death, resurrection and “session” (seated at the right hand of the Father), he conquered death itself and all other powers (Ephesians 1:19-23).

To know the power of Christ is to know God! Paul’s thanksgiving and prayer is urgently needed in his church today. The knowledge of what God has done and is doing for us in Christ is vital for a correct Christian worldview. And there is no better way to get this knowledge than the Holy Spirit through Paul’s inspired *Epistle to the Ephesians*.

Questions for Bible study

1. Ephesians 1:15-17

- a. What two reasons does Paul give for thanking God? v. 15. Explain why each of these reasons is important for the church.
- b. How often does the apostle thank God for them? v. 16a. When does Paul remember them? v. 16b. What does this say of Paul’s prayer life? How can one better cultivate their own prayer life?
- c. What does Paul keep asking? v. 17. What does the Holy Spirit give to believers? Is this similar to the concept of illumination? Explain.
- d. Why does he ask this? v. 17d. Why do we need further understanding from the Holy Spirit? See 1 Corinthians 2:14-16.
- e. What is the Trinity? Explain the Trinitarian presence in verse 17.

2. Ephesians 1:18

- a. What else does the apostle Paul pray for? v. 18a. What is it that Paul wants the church to know?
- b. What riches is Paul talking about? v. 18b.

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- c. Although our inheritance is a present experience in Christ, it is also a future glory. Read Romans 8:17-25 and describe our hope for a better tomorrow.

3. Ephesians 1:19-23

- a. What is Paul's third petition for believers to come to *know*? v. 19a. What is this power like? v. 19b.
- b. What historical event is referred to in verse 20? See Acts 2:24-36.
- c. Read Romans 8:9-11. What are the implications of this great power for believers?
- d. Read Hebrews 1:1-3. Try to describe the awesome power of the One seated at the right hand.
- e. What are the powers listed that are subject to Christ's rule? v. 21. When is this to happen: now, or sometime in the future? Explain.
- f. Philippians 2:5-11. To what height is Jesus' exaltation? Why? Is it because of who he is, or of what he has done? Or both?
- g. What two things has God conferred to Jesus as Messiah? v. 22. Who is the head of the church, and why? Can there be another head of the church, a representative or vicar of Christ on earth: bishop, anointed healer, TV-evangelist, pope, etc.?
- h. What metaphor does Paul use to describe the church? v. 23. How appropriate is the metaphor in relation to the metaphor of Christ as the head of the church?
- i. Read 1 Corinthians 12:12-27. What further implications of the "body" metaphor are delineated in this classic passage?

Contemporary interaction

1. How well do you *know* God: cognitive knowledge (the fact that God exists) and/or intimate knowledge in Christ (the experience of personal faith)? Which one of the two brings salvation? Which one is necessary but still does not save? Why?
2. What is your view of science and faith? Are they contrary to one another, or do they complement each other? Is there a difference between true science and scientific theories? Explain. Where does the macroevolution of Darwinism fit in your estimation? Why?
3. Do you believe that scientific knowledge is the measure of all truth within the sphere of reality, while faith or religious knowledge is subjective and exists only in the realm of the mind but not in reality?

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4. How would you defend the faith against those who say your beliefs are only a product of your own mind and nothing else? Do you believe blindly, or are there objective reasons for what you believe to be true?
5. How does God's revelation of himself in Scripture stand up as a pillar of objective truth for what we believe? How about the subjective illumination of the Holy Spirit to our mind? What about both?

Conclusion

Today there are all types of knowledge vying for dominance as the measure of all truth, for example: religious, scientific, philosophical, historical, medical, legal and so on. However, for the better part of the history of Christianity *theology* was thought of as the “Queen of the sciences.” And the reason for it should be obvious to all believers. Theology is the pursuit of the knowledge of God in Christ! There is no more important truth.

THE DIVINE GRACE IN CHRIST EPHESIANS 2:1-10

Key text: “But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions — it is by grace you have been saved” (Ephesians 2:4-5).

Lesson objective: To understand that this world is under God’s wrathful judgment and our only ticket out is the way God planned it: salvation by God’s merciful divine grace through faith alone in the full merits of Christ.

Introduction: When one takes into account the world history of this present age, it can be summed up into the words “aggression and strife for survival!” Once we have experienced biological life, we can be certain that death will mark the next phase. At some point in the beginning, sin entered the world, and death has accompanied it ever since. Our physical and psychological natures have carried the infection from one generation to another and passed it on like a virus. The symptoms of a sinful nature are pride, self-centeredness, the inclination to esteem ourselves better than others, despising the imposition of God’s authority, and the inner drive to satisfy illicit passions and lust at the expense of ourselves and others. And, the most damaging tool of all is our deceptive ability to be in denial of our sinful ways and thus to rationalize our thoughts and behavior as appropriate and politically correct!

The consequences of sin are that the world has severed its relationship to God, and God has condemned the world for its rebellion. Both Jews and Gentiles are condemned to death on the account of sin, having been found worthy to receive God’s divine judgment. They are legally and spiritually

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dead as far as God is concerned (2:1-3). However, God's love planned a way to save the world that he condemned. He has done so by condemning his only Son instead of you and me. In this way, God declares us just, pardons our sins and grants us life on the basis of the righteousness of the One who died and rose on our behalf. The riches of God's mercy and divine grace are shown in raising the spiritually dead to new life in Christ. Also, we will not only share in Christ's heavenly enthronement in the future, but through our spiritual union we are *already* seated with him in the heavens (verses 4-7)!

Salvation is a gift of God and appropriated by faith alone (verses 8-9). In other words, the fact of a person being saved does not depend on what merits or works he or she has done, but by God freely giving salvation on account of the grace he gives to everyone who is willing to believe via the Holy Spirit. Salvation is a God-human interaction. God provides the content of faith, that is, what we are to believe (Christ's death and resurrection), but *we* do the actual believing (no one else can believe for you). Faith is not a work, but the God-sought response of accepting and receiving what God provides (Romans 4). What is meant by faith alone is simply believing that Christ's redemption is more than enough for our salvation, without the need to add our own obedience or religious rituals.

This new relationship with God produces a new creation in us, that is, new life in Christ (verse 10). Our old sinful nature has been subdued by an all-new outlook on life with Jesus at the center of it. As a result of our new relationship with Jesus, we are to produce good works that are in accordance with **God's** character and design. Although good works are never the basis or cause of our salvation (for the root is Christ), yet they are the fruit or result of our new covenant relationship with the risen Lord.

Questions for Bible study

1. Ephesians 2:1-3

- a. In this letter, who is Paul addressing? v. 1a. Note: Paul often distinguishes between himself and other Jews from Gentiles by the use of "we" and "you," respectively.
- b. What was the condition of the addressees at one time? v. 1b. Why was this so? What does Paul mean by "dead"? In what sense: spiritually dead (meaning the annihilation of human free will); or spiritually dead (meaning the corruption of free will, with a legal sentence of death imposed on account of sin)? Explain. See

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Colossians 2:13-14.

- c. What manner of life did these Gentiles lead in the past? v. 2a. Who is this ruler that they followed? See 2 Corinthians 4:3-6.
- d. Among whom does this “spirit” work? v. 2b. Do you think that the majority of his followers are consciously aware that they follow him? What do they think?
- e. What does Paul mean by “all of us”? v. 3a. See Romans 3:9-10. Note: Here Paul is all-inclusive and means both Jews and Gentiles. In what manner did they once live? v. 3b. See Galatians 5:19-21. What about you? How did you once live?
- f. What was their common lot with the rest of humanity? v. 3c. Why? See Romans 3:19-20.

2. Ephesians 2:4-7

- a. What attribute within God moved him toward us? v. 4a. What other attribute of God do we desperately need? v. 4b. How much of this attribute does God have?
- b. What has God done for us? v. 5a. See Luke 15:24; John 5:24. When did God bring us to life in Christ: when we are made ourselves perfect, or when we were yet sinners? See Romans 5:8.
- c. How or through what means have we been saved? v. 5b. Explain and illustrate this great concept. Note: Even the most religious persons often fail to grasp its meaning!
- d. What has God done for us in Christ? v. 6. How have we become partakers of his resurrection, ascension and session? Explain each of the three in theological terms. Can you grasp the enormity of our position in Christ? Explain what this means in our Christian walk.
- e. What is it that God wants to demonstrate from this present age to the age to come (the resurrection age)? v. 7a. How has this been expressed, and through whom? v. 7b.

3. Ephesians 2:8-10

- a. What emphasis regarding salvation is given here again? v. 8a. The grammatical tense of the word “saved” is in the past. Can you explain?
- b. If God’s salvation is by grace, what is the human response to it called? v. 8b. What is “not of ourselves” — salvation itself or the response of faith? Note: The answer is salvation itself. Although

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faith is not a meritorious work, it is “our” response to God’s saving act in Christ. We do the believing. See Romans 4:1-7.

- c. What is salvation called? v. 8c. Why? See Romans 3:22-24.
- d. What is salvation definitely not by? v. 9a. See Acts 13:38-39; Galatians 2:16; Philippians 3:7-9; Titus 3:5. For what reason? v. 9b. See Romans 3:27-28.
- e. As a result of God’s saving grace, what are we now? v. 10a. In whom are we newly created, and for what reason? v. 10b. Explain, and consult the Introduction. See 2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 6:14-15.

Contemporary interaction

1. Describe to what depth human depravity can sink. Take into account some of humanity’s recent history: The Nazi-Jewish problem; Marxism in Central America; death squads in Latin America; Jewish-Palestinian conflict; genocide in Africa; the World Trade Center attack; the war in Iraq; and Muslim terrorist organizations on a global scale.
2. As Christians with a higher calling and indebted to God’s saving grace, what do you think is the role of the church in today’s world? How do we reach out to a world in conflict?

Conclusion

This world seems to be spinning as fast as it can away from God and toward its own destruction. Nevertheless, God’s love has found a way from the despair of death to the joy of the gift of life in Christ. Saved by divine grace!

THE DIVINE RECONCILIATION IN CHRIST EPHESIANS 2:11-22

Key text: “For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of two, thus making peace” (Ephesians 2:14-15).

Lesson objective: To understand that the former world was divided into two hostile groups of Jews and Gentiles. But since the cross of Calvary, both groups are being reconciled into a third group, the new humanity in Christ.

Introduction: In the ancient world there were many schemes in which to classify people. There were the rich and the poor; free persons and slaves; men and women; Romans and barbarians; and so on. But from a theological point of view, there were only two major divisions: Jews and Gentiles (2:11-12). Israel was a privileged nation under the one true God, a chosen people. To them were granted the oracles of God, the covenant law at Sinai, the Temple worship and the promises invested in Israel’s coming Messiah. The Gentiles in general were left to grope in darkness and wallow without hope in their twisted pagan religions.

However, even Israel’s light was a dim one at best, for God’s greater glory had not as yet been revealed in full. Israel learned quickly of the need for barriers between themselves and God. The Sinai covenant emphasized these divisions (verses 14-16). The Temple in Jerusalem was itself a structure of several barriers. Outside the Temple there was a yard, called the court of the Gentiles, and a wall. On the wall at intervals was placed a

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warning for a Gentile not to enter further on the penalty of death. On the other side of that wall, the next court was reserved for Jewish women. Another barrier kept them from going any further in. Inside that barrier only Jewish men were permitted, but only to find another barrier for the priests alone to enter. But even then, a final barrier existed where only the high priest could enter the sanctuary of the holy of holies, and that only once a year! How could there be peace as long as all these distinctions remained?

However, in God's eternal plan and wisdom he made a way to eventually remove these barriers and allow full access to himself, not only for Jews but for Gentiles as well (verses 13, 17-18). First, the covenant-law given at Sinai was only temporary. At the cross, Jesus made full atonement for the sins of all humanity, therefore annulling in its entirety the old system of laws that marked divisions between Jews and Gentiles. **Jesus** is the way! Second, God has called a new people to himself based on the promised new covenant. This new humanity would no longer be Jews or Gentiles but Christian believers. In other words, this was God's plan for the reconciliation of both Jews and Gentiles into one new people in Christ.

And finally, Gentile believers would no longer occupy the outer court, nor women excluded from God's presence, nor men subjugated to a priestly caste for an audience with Almighty God (verses 19-22). Jesus Christ changed this forevermore! Believers of all walks of life now have immediate and uninterrupted access through the blood of Christ and the residence of the Holy Spirit. Hallelujah!

Questions for Bible study

1. Ephesians 2:11-13

- a. What are the Gentiles called, and by whom? v. 11. What are the implications of this name for the Gentiles? See 1 Samuel 17:26. What about the name for the Jews? See Leviticus 12:1-3.
- b. What is the first of five conditions attributed to the Gentiles? v. 12a. (The Greek word "Christ" means "Anointed one").
- c. What is their second state of affairs? v. 12b.
- d. What is their third circumstance? v. 12c.
- e. What is their fourth plight? v. 12d.
- f. What is the implication of the fifth in regards to salvation? v. 12e.
- g. How is it possible for their former circumstances to be radically changed? v. 13. What does Paul mean by "far off" and "brought near"?

2. Ephesians 2:14-18

- a. Who made the peace? v. 14a. What two have been made one, and how is this done? v. 14b. What is the barrier called? v. 14c. Why? Consult the Introduction.
- b. What was abolished in Christ's "flesh" or his death? v. 15a. What law is Paul referring to? See 2 Corinthians 3:3, 7, 11; Galatians 3:19-25.
- c. What was God's purpose in annulling the law (Torah)? v. 15b. See how easily the law becomes a barrier in Galatians 2:11-16, 21. Give examples of how the law may have been a barrier for you before becoming a believer in grace.
- d. Through what means alone can reconciliation take place? v. 16.
- e. To whom was peace (the gospel) preached? To only the Gentiles? How about the Jews? v. 17. Why?
- f. Who has access to the Father? v. 18. In this verse, can you detect the Trinity at work in the reconciliation of humanity?

3. Ephesians 2:19-22

- a. What are the results of reconciliation as opposed to our previous condition as Gentiles? v. 19. Are we second-class citizens after Jewish believers? How about just good friends of the family? Why not?
- b. Can you describe the architecture of this spiritual building? v. 20. Who are in the foundation? Why? Who is the chief cornerstone? Why?
- c. Who or what is this building that is being addressed? v. 21. Who is the one keeping it together? What kind of temple is it?
- d. What are we built to become? Who inhabits this place? v. 22. Do you think the system of access was better with the Temple? Why or why not?

Contemporary interaction

1. Although Israel as a whole are not yet believers in Christ, do you think the United States should continue to politically support their cause over against the Palestinians? Why?
2. Do you think that there will ever be a true reconciliation between orthodox Jews and evangelical Christians? Most Jews say that Jesus was just a man or at best a misunderstood prophet, and that Paul was an apostate Jew. What do you say?
3. If the church is God's instrument in Christ for reconciliation

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between peoples of all kinds, how can it prove itself to the world when reconciliation is difficult even among its own members?

4. What steps can the local church take to improve relationships among its own ranks? It has been said sarcastically that the church is the only army that shoots its own wounded. What do you say?
5. What is Christ's role in the redemptive task of reconciling all people unto himself? What is Christ's role in the church when its members hurt?

Conclusion

There is so much to be grateful for when we can look from inside the comfort of God's grace outward to a lost world. But, remember, we at one time were also on the outside not knowing how to find our way in. Praise God in Christ for his divine reconciliation in calling forth a new humanity. Jesus Christ is the way!

THE DIVINE MYSTERY IN CHRIST EPHESIANS 3:1-13

Key text: “This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Jesus Christ” (Ephesians 3:6).

Lesson objective: To understand that Paul, the commissioned apostle to the Gentiles, now imprisoned in Rome on their account, is God’s chosen instrument to disclose God’s divine plan of the hidden mystery in Christ through the message of the gospel given to him by revelation.

Introduction: The apostle Paul had an enormous missionary vision that began with humble beginnings. It was at Antioch in Syria where prayer was made to send Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey to Asia Minor (Acts 13:1-3). Within a few years Paul was to make a second and a third journey, moving from Asia Minor into Greece. His mission to the Gentiles flourished with churches being established in nearly all the major cities of the time (Acts 17:6). He hastened to reach Rome itself, the capitol of the world-ruling Roman Empire, with one focus in mind: to preach the gospel!

Paul’s Gentile mission field was fertile and ready for the harvest. The Holy Spirit worked in Paul in a mighty way. Paul’s plan was to establish himself in the west in Rome as he had done in the east in Antioch (Romans 15:14-32). He would blaze a trail from Rome all the way across the Western Empire to Spain – and planting churches in every place he would stay along the way. However, God had other plans for Paul. Paul was to go to prison on account of his preaching to the Gentile world; and eventually die a martyr’s death for the glory of God. Paul did arrive at Rome, but in chains

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awaiting trial (Acts 28:16-30). This is how the inspired book of Acts ends.

Nevertheless, that the power of God might be manifest even while his greatest apostle is in chains, Paul penned what are termed the “prison epistles.” Our letter to the Ephesians stands among them. To the glory of Christ and future missionary endeavors to come across the ages, the divine mystery in Christ is fully disclosed and preserved in the written Word of the new covenant Scriptures. This mystery was not fully unveiled in the past, even though glimpses of it are present in the old covenant Scriptures. However, the full implications of Christ’s death and resurrection were made known only through direct revelation from God to the apostles and prophets (Ephesians 3:1-5).

The chosen champion of the Gentile mission is the apostle Paul (verses 7-13). It is through his pen that we learn of the amazing grace of Christ’s law-free gospel to the Gentiles. The mystery was this: How could law-observing Jews ever be reconciled with law-free Gentiles? Would the Gentiles have to accept circumcision as a sign of entrance into the covenant and submit themselves to Moses? Paul’s answer is emphatically: NO!

The divine mystery in Christ has revealed that believing Gentiles are on the very same footing as Jewish believers: First, Gentiles as well as Jews are free from the law; the old covenant law is no longer binding on believers in Christ (2:14-15). Second, Gentiles are co-heirs with believing Jews (3:6a). Third, through Christ both are made into one body (verse 6b). And finally, believing Jews and Gentiles do not exist in two different covenants, but share equally in the one and same new covenant promise in Christ (verse 6c). Amen.

Questions for Bible study

1. Acts 21:17-36

- a. What happens when Paul arrives in Jerusalem? v. 17.
- b. What do Paul and his companions do the next day? v. 18.
- c. What report does Paul give? v. 19.
- d. What was the positive reaction of those who heard Paul’s report? v. 20a. What mixed reaction did they then display? v. 20b. Why? v. 21.
- e. What was their true concern? v. 22. What remedy did they propose? vv. 23-24. Do you think this was a good idea? Why do you think that Paul went along with it? See 1 Corinthians 9:19-20.
- f. In regard to the Gentiles, why does James quote the Jerusalem Council’s decree? v. 25. Note: The Jerusalem Council decreed, in

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effect, that the Mosaic law as a covenant is not binding on Gentile believers. Gentile believers are free from the law with all of its restrictions (Sabbath-observance, dietary laws, feast days, etc.) except those few listed by the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:1-29; Galatians 2:1-10).

- g. What does Paul do the next day in an attempt to satisfy the elders' concerns? v. 26.
- h. Who all recognized Paul, and what scandal and accusation did they provoke? vv. 27-29. Why?
- i. What was the immediate reaction of the crowd? v. 30. Why such a violent reaction against Paul?
- j. What was the crowd trying to do to Paul? v. 31a. Who intervened to save his life? v. 31b-32. What did the commander do then? v. 33. What was the overall reaction of the crowd against Paul? vv. 34-36. Note: Paul for his own safety was eventually moved to the prison in Caesarea, and after having appealed his case to Caesar, he was sent to Rome to await trial. There, he was placed under house arrest, and from there, he wrote *Ephesians*.

2. Ephesians 3:1-6

- a. What is Paul moved to do on account of "For this reason"? v. 1a. Consult Paul's restart after a long digression. See v. 14.
- b. What does Paul call himself? v. 1b. Why?
- c. What had they heard concerning Paul and *the administration of God's grace, mystery, and revelation* given to him? vv. 2-3. See Galatians 1:11-17.
- d. What does Paul mean about this mystery not being made known in the past but is now revealed? vv. 4-5. See Romans 16:25-27; Colossians 1:25-27.
- e. What is this multi-facet mystery in Christ as Paul explains it here? v. 6. What threefold disclosure does he give? Why the need to emphasize these particular points?

3. Ephesians 3:7-13

- a. What event in his life is Paul referring to? vv. 7-9. Consult Acts 9:1-19.
- b. What is God's purpose in forming the church? v. 10. Who are the rulers and authorities Paul mentions?
- c. Through whom was this eternal purpose accomplished? v. 11. With

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what results? v. 12.

d. What sufferings is the apostle referring to? v. 13. See v. 1.

Contemporary interaction

1. Have you ever been accused of a wrong that you did not commit? How did you feel? Angry? Prayerful? Both? Can a person really pray when angry?
2. Have you ever been thrown in jail for preaching the gospel? Have you been persecuted and ridiculed? Does ridicule depress you, or are you thankful for the opportunity to serve the Lord?
3. Although the mystery of the gospel in Christ has been fully revealed for nearly 2000 years, why do so many still misunderstand and obscure the gospel? What about Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons and Seventh-Day groups?

Conclusion

The apostle Paul is God's evangelist *par excellence* and defender of the faith. Praise Jesus for having commissioned, to the Gentiles, one as Spirit-filled as Paul. May we imitate Paul in his gospel-zeal to the glory of Christ. Amen.

THE DIVINE LOVE IN CHRIST EPHESIANS 3:14-21

Key text: “And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ” (Ephesians 3:17b-18).

Lesson objective: To understand that although we are finite beings, yet through the working of God’s power via the Spirit we can come to the knowledge of the incomprehensibility of the love of Christ and the fullness of all that God is!

Introduction: Philosophers have often pondered over the reasonableness of finite beings ever being able to comprehend the infinite. Almost by definition one would think the concept is unattainable. Humans are finite beings and thus limited in ability and capacity to grasp only that which their finite minds can extend themselves to: other finite things. When we say something is infinite, one is saying that the principle is beyond our ability to understand! As far as scientists are concerned, they have no choice but to “limit” their knowledge to what they can observe. For science has no “eyes” to see further than the limited reach of the Hubble Space Telescope, and other finite instruments. No matter how good those instruments are, they will always be finite, that is, limited.

On the other hand, theologians for centuries have pondered over the incomprehensibility of God. Since God is an infinite being, how can humankind ever come to know him? Let us dispel at least one myth. Because something is infinite does not mean that we cannot know something about it. We would need an infinite mind to grasp infinite knowledge, but not in order to understand a finite amount of that infinite

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knowledge. I may not be able to understand it all, but I can understand a portion of it! I can understand enough of numbers to do basic math without fully grasping the concept of infinite numbers, and we admit that they exist! So, when theologians speak about the incomprehensibility of God, they do not mean that people cannot know anything at all about God. Indeed, people do have knowledge about God, although in a limited way (Romans 1:20).

But Paul in his prayer for all believers in Christ goes far beyond some obscure limited knowledge about God (Ephesians 3:14-21). The infinite God has intervened in the history of the human race, became finite, and entered this world. In the person of Jesus Christ, God was present in his fullness in bodily form (Colossians 2:9). The attribute of his love embraced us while we were yet sinners, and he gave his earthly life as atonement for our sins by dying in our place on the cross. God wants us to fully comprehend his love by the very power that raised Jesus from the dead, the power that abides in every believer. The Holy Spirit imparts the love of Christ, so that we may come to know its width, length, depth and height!

From infinity, God has reached down and touched the earth and bathed it with the blood of his only Son. Our ultimate delight, through the Holy Spirit, is to come to know the divine love of Christ in all its fullness to the glory of the Father. The love that God has given his sons and daughters in Christ is not a philosophical contemplation or a scientific theory or a theological treatise, but a living and binding love to be shared with one another and with our Lord. Amen.

Questions for Bible study

1. 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

- a. In Paul's classic passage on divine love (Gr. *agape*) in Christ, what is a person with the gift of tongues like, when he or she has no love?
 - v. 1. Have you ever heard music badly out of tune? What was your impression?
- b. According to Paul, what is the gift of prophecy able to do? v. 2a.
Very impressive, don't you think so? What can the gift of faith do?
 - v. 2b.
- c. What do these gifts mean if the person has no love? v. 2c. Why?
- d. What if one has the gift of generosity to the poor and even becomes a martyr, but has no love? v. 3. Don't these noble works count for something? Explain.

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- e. What five attributes of divine love are mentioned in this verse? v. 4. Briefly describe each one.
- f. What are the next four attributes? v. 5. Briefly explain each one.
- g. What five attributes are mentioned next? vv. 6-7. Are these Christian characteristics to be cultivated in our spiritual walk with Christ? Or does Paul expect too much from us? If we can't live up to the high calling of divine love, why not quit trying? Note: Even though in experience we may fall far short of God's high calling, yet in Christ we are seated with him in the highest position in heaven, not on account of what we do, but because of what he has done on our behalf. Now *that* is good news!
- h. In the end, what will fail and what will not fail? v. 8. Why will all of this happen? v. 9-10.
- i. What is the point of comparison that Paul is making with this illustration? v. 11.
- j. How does Paul see *now* in comparison to *then*? v. 12a. What does Paul know *now* in comparison to *then*? v. 12b. What do you think Paul is referring to when he speaks of *now* vs. *then*?
- k. What remains for *now*? v. 13a. Of the three mentioned, which is the greatest one? v. 13b. Why?

2. Ephesians 3:14-21

- a. Before whom does Paul kneel? v. 14. How is the Father described? v. 15.
- b. What does Paul pray for on behalf of his readers? v. 16a. How is this accomplished? v. 16b. For what reason? v. 17a.
- c. What second thing does the apostle pray for? v. 17b-18.
- d. What is Paul's third petition for them? v. 19a. With what desired results? v. 19b. See Colossians 2:6-9.
- e. Can God give us such infinite knowledge of his being and love? v. 20a. Through what means? v. 20b; see 1:19-20.

3. Romans 8:31-39

- a. Paul captures the width and length and height and depth of the divine love for us in this passage. What is the answer to Paul's rhetorical question? v. 31. How can we be sure? v. 32.
- b. What accusations can be made against us? v. 33a. Why not? v. 33b.
- c. What condemnation can be brought against us? v. 34a. Why not? v. 34b.

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- d. What things are mentioned that might threaten the divine love for us? vv. 35-36. What answer is given? v. 37.
- e. What is Paul so convinced of? vv. 38-39. Why?

Contemporary interaction

1. Through the Holy Spirit, we come to comprehend God's love in Christ for us, especially through the gospel message. How far do you think his love for us transcends our understanding to reach our hearts to enable us to love one another as he loves us?
2. Are there times when you feel unlovable, times when you lash out and hurt others by what you say or don't say, times when your forgiveness is superficial and lacks depth? How do we overcome?
3. Express in your own words the dimensions of God's divine love for you in Christ.

Conclusion

The invisible God made himself visible and demonstrated his great love while we were yet unlovable sinners. Christ became the unlovable *man of sorrows*, so that by his sacrifice we might become the most loved of all, in him. Hallelujah!

THE CALL TO UNITY IN CHRIST

EPHESIANS 4:1-6

Key text: “There is one body and one Spirit — just as you were called to one hope when you were called — one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Ephesians 4:4-6).

Lesson objective: To understand that God has called his new covenant people (the church) to live out in a worthy manner our unity in Christ, which is expressed in early creedal formulas that are Trinitarian, gospel, and/or Christological in character.

Introduction: Creeds have been an important aspect of the life of the church from its beginning down to our very day. The early church formulated several of them and they are now part of Holy Scripture (e.g., 1 Corinthians 15:3-7; Philippians 2:6-11; 1 Timothy 3:16). Ephesians 4:4-6 is an early Trinitarian *credo*. These concise creedal formulas contain the fundamental beliefs of the Christian faith. These statements were most likely used on to instruct baptismal candidates on the essential matters of the faith. They were also used to help distinguish essential Christian beliefs from pagan and heretical teachings. In this way these creeds helped establish a belief system that helped believers tell the difference between orthodoxy and heresy.

After the completion of the biblical canon, the life of the church continued to express itself in Trinitarian terms. Each local church formulated its own short creed based on a general rule of faith, which summed up salvation history. One such creed that has kept its universal appeal is the one known as the *Apostles' Creed*. Although not formulated by

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the original apostles, it is an example of similar creeds that flourished early on in the life of the church. Our present Apostles' Creed, after several additions, did not reach its standard form until approximately A.D. 700. Here is an earlier Greek text of the Apostles' Creed (Marcellus, A.D. 340):

I believe in God the Father almighty.

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord;

Who was born by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary;

Was crucified under Pontius Pilate and was buried;

The third day he rose from the dead.

He ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of the Father,

From where he shall come to judge the living and the dead.

And [I believe] in the Holy Spirit,

The holy Church,

The forgiveness of sins,

The resurrection of the body,

And life everlasting.

This succinct format incorporates into creedal form at least 12 basic beliefs of the Christian church. This is one way of bringing unity to the body of Christ. Scripture itself sets certain creedal parameters to test if a belief is truly of the faith or not. More extensive statements are required to delineate other points and check against other heresies, and the church has formulated these as well. Yet, the simplicity of scriptural creedal formulas has a freshness all of its own, and they are indispensable in the outreach and missionary endeavors of the church.

Questions for Bible study

1. Ephesians 4:1-6

- a. What does Paul urge his readers to do? v. 1. What does Paul mean by “calling”?
- b. What four worthy mannerisms are mentioned? v. 2. Why these four?
- c. What else does Paul ask them to do? v. 3. What does Paul mean by: “keep the unity of the Spirit”? Note: Paul is speaking of the fruit of Christ’s reconciling work on the cross, that is, the peace of his reconciliation to be lived out by the church in the here and now.
- d. What three elements make up the first part of the creed? v. 4. What does each one mean, and in what way are they related to each other? See Ephesians 1:18; 2:14-18.
- e. What is the second triad of the creedal formulation? v. 5. What does

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each one mean, and in what way are they related to each other? See Romans 6:3; 10:9.

- f. What is the seventh part of the creed? v. 6. How is this one related to “one Spirit” and “one Lord”? See 1 Corinthians 8:6; 12:4-6.

2. 1 Corinthians 15:3-7

- a. What very early Christian *credo* did Paul receive and pass on? v. 3.
Note: This passage is the earliest creedal formulation of the gospel. It is among the first of early Christian oral traditions, coming even before Paul’s conversion.
- b. What two other essential components of the gospel are in this creed? v. 4. Were these matters foretold in the O.T. Scriptures? Cite at least two O.T. passages that support these claims.
- c. What witnesses are offered as proof that the gospel events (the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus) took place? v. 5.
- d. How many other witnesses confirmed that Jesus had risen from the dead? v. 6a. At the time of Paul, were these eyewitnesses dead or disappeared and no longer available for questioning? v. 6b. What is the significance of this?
- e. What other appearances did Jesus make, and to whom? v. 7. At the end of this short gospel creed, what final item does Paul add? v. 8.

3. Philippians 2:6-11

- a. This passage is apparently an early Christian hymn, that is, a liturgical creed outlining what the early church believed about Christ. Who is in the very nature of God? vv. 5-6a. Explain what it means to be in the very nature of God.
- b. Although equal with God by his very nature, why did he decide not to hold on to his glory? vv. 6b-7. Explain the Incarnation. [now that’s a tall task!]
- c. To what extent does Jesus’ humiliation on behalf of humanity reach? v. 8. Why?
- d. What exaltation does Jesus receive for his messianic sacrifice on behalf of sinners? v. 9. What is he given? Note: This is not something brand new for Jesus, for he is and has always been God; rather, it is a return to the glory he had before his humiliation in becoming human. Now, however, he is the triumphant Messiah. See John 17:5.
- e. What happens when this Name is called out? v. 10. From whom does

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he receive worship?

- f. What name is every tongue to confess? v. 11. Note: The name “Lord” is *kyrios* in Greek, and corresponds to *adonai* in Hebrew, which is a reference to the Tetragrammaton: YHWH. Jesus is worthy of worship because he shares his Father’s name, for they are one in divine essence (nature), although they retain distinct personhoods.
- g. In the following briefer creedal formulation, can you identify Christ’s stages of humiliation and exaltation? 1 Timothy 3:16. Explain.

Contemporary interaction

1. Many contend that brief summaries of the Christian faith are only watered-down versions designed to attract everybody and anybody with no real convictions. Others say that longer statements of faith are designed to keep away as many as possible unless they think exactly alike, like an assembly-line church. What is your own assessment?
2. Others say that creeds and statements of faith do not promote unity, but to the contrary, they are the main cause of divisions and disunity in the church. What do you say?

Conclusion

God has called us to live in peace and unity as much as possible in this fallen world. And while there is room for disagreement within the church on nonessential matters, the gospel truth of Christ’s reconciliation is the only basis for unity in this age or the next. Glory be to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit! Amen.

THE CALL TO MINISTRY IN CHRIST EPHESIANS 4:7-16

Key text: “It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up” (Ephesians 4:11-12).

Lesson objective: To understand that the high calling of Christ is not for the purpose of individual accomplishment and recognition, but to be team members with the sole purpose of serving the whole body for the edification of all.

Introduction: The Olympic Games are internationally recognized events where each competing nation presents the best of their athletes. In theory, they all compete under the rules of fair play, but in reality the better trained and equipped athletes, with few exceptions, are the better financed and also the medal winners! This does not mean all the competitors don’t try their best, because they certainly do, but one can hardly call it *fair play!* Even so, all the individual and team performances are geared up for one thing only: To win that coveted gold medal. Or, if the losing party protests with enough big media backing, the judges may even grant double gold medals! I suppose for “home and country” we can all be Olympic fans to some degree.

While many get carried away with the glamour and politics of the Olympics, it seems that the church unconsciously follows a similar pattern. When the church loses its focus, it also becomes competitive and political. The church competes for members, positions, programs and dollars. Power-plays become evident among its clergy, while members eagerly await

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the next scandal! Sometimes it seems that the church can't tear itself down fast enough and bring down as many as it can on its way down. Obviously, this is not the way God planned it!

The church regains its focus when it turns from self-centeredness and looks once again to its Head, Jesus Christ. In Christ the church is built up, not torn down. Through his death and resurrection, Christ has defeated and triumphed over all the foes of the church. And he has given gifts to every member of his body, the church (4:7-10). In giving apostles and prophets, he has given foundational gifts on which the church can stand. He gives functional gifts of ministry or service by equipping the church through evangelists, pastors and teachers (verse 11).

Every member is uniquely gifted in one ministry or another for the building up of his church (verse 12). The purpose of Christ's gifts is so the church may mature into the fullness of adulthood and not be swayed by false teachings (verses 13-16). The church universal and at the local level needs to mature in love so as not to lose focus and blur its vision with the carnality and egocentrism of this fallen world.

As Paul states, like the games, we run a race, but the race we run is not for gold, silver or bronze medals (1 Corinthians 9:24-27). We run a race for the prize of the high calling in Jesus Christ (Philippians 3:10-16). We continue in the path of our Lord and Savior and await his glorious coming and the crown of righteousness unto eternal life (2 Timothy 4:6-8). Now, that is a prize worth running for! And, in Christ it is already ours (1 John 5:13). Amen!

Questions for Bible study

1. Ephesians 4:7-10

- a. What has been apportioned? By whom? To whom? v. 7. What does Paul mean here by the word "grace"? See 1 Peter 4:10.
- b. In the context of Ephesians, why does Paul quote this psalm? v. 8. See Colossians 2:15. Note: The analogy is taken from a victorious military leader returning home with a procession of prisoners of war following behind him. Tribute from the spoils of the conquest is rewarded to the victor, who in turn showers the cheering spectators with generous gifts.
- c. What is Paul's messianic interpretation of the psalm? v. 9. What does he mean by the "lower, earthly regions"? Does he mean that Christ descended to the abode of souls in hell? Note: It is probably more

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correct to contrast heaven with the great gulf that separates it from the lower earth, that is, earth is at the bottom. If this is the case, then Paul is referring to the Incarnation (Christ's First Advent), when he came here below.

- d. To what event is Paul referring to here? v. 10. Explain. See Acts 1:9-11; 2:29-36; Hebrews 4:14; 7:26.

2. Ephesians 4:11-12

- a. Who is it that gave these gifts to the church? v. 11a. See Acts 2:32-33. What is meant by the foundational gift of "apostles"?
- b. What is meant by the foundational gift of "prophets"? v. 11b.
- c. What is meant by the functional gift of "evangelists"? v. 11c.
- d. What is meant by the functional gift of "pastors and teachers"? v. 11d.
- e. What purpose do the above gifts serve? v. 12a. How is this done in practical terms in your local church (be specific)?
- f. What have *you* been equipped to do as a local member of the church? Have you been trained for ministry (service)? Why or why not (be constructive in your answer)?
- g. What should be the result of implementing a united ministry? v. 12b. Is this taking place in your local church? Why or why not? What can you do to improve the situation?

3. Ephesians 4:13-16

- a. What three goals are outlined in this verse to ensure the well-being of the church? v. 13. Note: The first two have to do with unity and the third is the resulting outcome.
- b. In your opinion, what level of maturity has your local church reached? Do you consider yourself a mature or immature Christian? Why?
- c. What is one sure sign of having reached Christian maturity? v. 14. Note: The analogy is that of a ship without a steady rudder. The ship is tossed back and forth with every wave and every wind that comes upon it.
- d. How well do you know the Holy Scriptures? How well do you know orthodox evangelical doctrine? Can you defend yourself against heretics who know the Scriptures well but twist them to fit their false cultic teachings? Give examples of when you have had to defend the faith against false doctrines.

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- e. What is another sure sign of Christian maturity? v. 15a. Why?
- f. What is God's desire for every member of the church? v. 15b. How is the whole body benefited in this way? v. 16.

Contemporary interaction

1. How well are you running the race of Christian maturity? Are you still at the starting gate? Or are you halfway there but out of breath? Or maybe you are on the last lap and stretching out for the finish line? See 1 Corinthians 9:24-27.
2. How many "believers" do you know who started out well but lost focus along the way? How does one get to that final lap and maintain his or her eye on the finish line? See Philippians 3:10-16.
3. When your life is through in this world, what epithet would you like to be remembered with by the church? See 2 Timothy 4:6-8.
4. We share many tasks or vocations (callings) in this life, but our highest calling is to share in the ministry of Jesus Christ. There is one ministry, but a variety of services to perform. To which of these are you called? How effectively do you contribute to the edification of the whole body?

Conclusion

Jesus Christ has showered his church with an abundance of gifts that overflow into the seats and aisles of its ministry. May every believer answer his or her calling and mature in love to the building up of the whole body. Amen.

THE CALL TO GOOD CONDUCT IN CHRIST EPHESIANS 4:17-32

Key text: “So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking... You, however, did not come to know Christ that way. Surely you heard of him and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus” (Ephesians 4:17, 20-21).

Lesson objective: To understand that every believer is called to the same high standards of conduct worthy of their honored position in Christ. True believers are to “walk the talk” and bind belief with Christian moral conduct to God’s glory.

Introduction: Changes in one’s routine of life are among the most stressful times in any person’s life. Even joyous occasions, such as planning a wedding, or a newborn’s arrival into the family, are difficult adjustments. Stress points are added when a person leaves home and when one takes on a new job or changes careers in mid-stream. Also, times are hectic when one buys a home or has to move to another area. Of course, there are the more challenging times, when one loses employment or when divorce is imminent or when a loved one passes on. Certainly more can be added to the list, such as loss of health, etc. But among the most mysterious and wondrous changes of all is a person’s conversion to Christ. It is remarkably joyous but stressful as well.

A person’s philosophy of life and personality are often radically altered upon conversion. One was traveling 100 miles per hour in one direction and is suddenly pulled in the opposite direction. An encounter with the living Christ is a life-altering event. In Ephesians, Paul reminds his readers

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of that fact (4:17-24). They are not who they used to be! In the world today, the philosophy of life seems to be “take what you can get and roll over anyone who gets in your way” or “use persons to your own advantage and whenever they become a liability, dump them!” But this kind of thinking is futile, short-sighted, and in the end can only spell disaster. It matters not how much power, sensuality or wealth you accumulate or how you did it, in the end it is all staying behind! There is no hope without Christ. For this reason, Paul urges believers to leave the “old self” behind and be clothed with the “new self” in Christ.

Believers in Christ speak the truth, seek out reconciliation and share what they have received, while the world thrives on falsehood, anger and stealing in one form or another (verses 25-32). A true Christian is known by his or her good speech and kindness toward others, while many today spew out foul language like a turned-on fire hydrant, and they are not even aware of it! It should be no surprise that this world is plagued with ever-increasing hatred and animosity among nations, races and even religions! For the disease is in the sinful condition of a heart that knows not Christ.

God’s plan in Christ is to bring every believer’s moral conduct in line with the high position in Christ to which he has called the person. And this means living out the Christian life in the here and now, no matter what the stress! Our philosophy of life is to treat others as we would like to be treated (Matthew 7:12), even when they treat us badly! And we believe Jesus when he said: “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35). And while none of us will be perfect in this life, for Christ is our perfection, yet God has set a goal of godly moral conduct for the sanctification of the members of his church; he has changed their lives through the cross and via the Holy Spirit, to his glory!

Questions for Bible study

1. Romans 1:18-32

- a. In this passage regarding the Gentile world of Paul’s day, what is said of God’s attitude toward the Gentiles? vv. 18-20. Why?
- b. What was the Gentiles’ attitude toward the one true God? vv. 21-23. Has the disposition of the Gentile world improved since Paul’s time? Explain.
- c. What is God’s first wrathful response to the unbelieving Gentiles’ rejection of the one true God and their own corrupt conduct? vv. 24-25. What specific sins did they practice? How about today?

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- d. What is God's second wrathful response to the vile corruption taking place within the Gentile community? vv. 26-27. What sins did they practice? How much have matters improved today?
- e. What is God's third wrathful response to the continual rejection of the one true God and to the Gentiles' depraved conduct (which is a consequence of their own making)? vv. 28-32. Give examples of the ongoing truth of Paul's claim, such as the pornographic use of the Internet and political and corporate scandals, etc.

2. Ephesians 4:17-24

- a. What does Paul emphatically insist that his readers not do? v. 17a. What is the main problem with them? v. 17b. Which do you believe — that right conduct leads to right thinking, or that right thinking leads to right conduct? Why?
- b. What has happened to the Gentiles' thinking (mind, emotions and will)? v. 18. Explain why.
- c. What are the practical results of the Gentiles' wrong thinking? v. 19. Who is responsible for their condition: themselves or God? Read the text of verse 19 carefully.
- d. What does Paul remind his readers about in negative terms? v. 20. Why do you suppose he needs to remind them?
- e. What does Paul remind them about in positive terms? v. 21. Who is the foundation or bedrock of the truth that they were taught?
- f. What were they taught to do concerning their former life as unbelieving Gentiles? v. 22a. Why is this necessary? v. 22b.
- g. What are they taught to do concerning their present condition as Christians? v. 23a. What new disposition does God create in believers? v. 23b. Why? Explain what happens when only the old is discarded without applying the new. See Luke 11:24-26.

3. Ephesians 4:25-32

- a. What does it mean to put on the "new self"? v. 25. Is this the standard of conduct among the members of your local church? If not, why not? Comment constructively.
- b. What is the practical meaning of Paul's standard of Christian conduct in this verse? v. 26. What can happen when we fail to do what Paul is saying? v. 27. See 2 Corinthians 2:9-11.
- c. What admonition does Paul give to those who once lived as thieves? v. 29. Why? See 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12.

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- d. How does our false conduct affect the Holy Spirit? v. 30. What kinds of negative conduct affect him? v. 31. Explain.
- e. What same conduct in Christ has God called all believers to? v. 32. Is this the standard of conduct that your local church lives by? What percentage is in theory only, and how much is in practice?

Contemporary interaction

1. What is your philosophy of life, that is, your daily attitude and conduct toward life, both publicly and privately? Does being a Christian make a difference?
2. What is the primary stress that you are undergoing right now? In what way does your faith make a difference in how you handle yourself?
3. Most polls taken today concerning the moral conduct of the church in Western society show very little difference in behavior between professed Christians (even evangelicals) and the rest of our society. What is your assessment of this information?

Conclusion

God has called every believer to the same higher standard of conduct in Christ. He has given us the Holy Spirit, although at times he is grieved by our misconduct. May the Lord lead his church in paths of righteousness for his glory!

THE CALL TO EXAMPLE IN CHRIST EPHESIANS 5:1-20

Key text: “Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Ephesians 5:1-2).

Lesson objective: To understand that the Christian community is called upon to follow the ethical example of God’s love in Christ to a fallen world; there exists a vast difference between light and darkness, and between wisdom and folly.

Introduction: All of us set goals for ourselves whether they are short-range ones or long-range ones. Of course, this is not always done consciously or even planned out in detail, but nevertheless we are headed somewhere.

However, rarely do people set goals for their ethical behavior. People are usually molded morally by what is deemed acceptable behavior within their own particular culture. This explains the variety of ethical behaviors in different lands. This is not to say that all is relative, because it certainly is not. All societies, no matter how different, still retain some basic moral codes that are similar, even though they may be administered differently. And in some cases a culture can become so depraved that only a faint shadow remains, but these perverted cultures always prove to be self-destructive. The world at large gropes in the darkness of their own understanding to find ways of justifying their actions even against the most basic moral prohibitions in the name of civil authority, religion or a particular cause.

Believers don’t have to live with a foggy notion of what is right and

wrong. The Christian love-ethic goes far beyond universal basic moral prohibitions against such behaviors as stealing, adultery and murder. The Christian community has been blessed with the light of revelation in the written Word and by example (verses 1-7)! This is why the apostle Paul reminds believers not to be conformed to the pattern of this world (Romans 12:2). There is a difference between good and evil like that of light and darkness (Ephesians 5:8-14), just as there is a marked difference between living spiritually and living carnally — or as Paul describes it, between wisdom and foolishness (verses 15-20).

For all these reasons, Paul calls true Christians to become imitators of God (verse 1). Now, that is one tall order! How can we mortals, who have never seen God, imitate him? We may have never seen God in all his glory, but we have seen him in the person of Christ, who is God in the flesh (John 14:8-9). Paul points to Christ's example as the one to follow (Eph. 5:2). In this way, all Christians have a example *par excellence* of what God planned humans to be. God's divine purpose is to restore and unite all things in Christ, and this includes our ethical walk. We might not reach the ethical heights of Christ in this life, but that is where we are headed! Paul beckons us to get a good start in the here and now!

In the days of Paul, the Jerusalem Temple was still standing. Paul was fully aware of the significance the Temple had for the Jews. The Temple was their place of worship, where lambs were still being brought for sacrifices. The old covenant had required such sacrifices not only as guilt offerings but also as offerings of thanksgiving. The smoke and aroma of the sacrifice filled the air and was described as a fragrance pleasing to God.

But with the coming of the Messiah, things had dramatically changed! Everything the Temple once stood for was a mere shadow compared to the reality of the God-man Jesus Christ. The ultimate place of worship and sacrifice is now invested in Christ Jesus alone under a new and better covenant. Christ is now the only fragrance of redemption acceptable to the Father. Christ's motive for providing such a complete redemption was his love for us. Paul urges the church to live a life motivated by Christ's example of love, an ethical fragrance pleasing to God.

Questions for Bible study

1. Ephesians 5:1-7

- a. What does the apostle Paul propose? v. 1a. What does he mean by “imitators”? v. 1b. How well do your own children imitate you?

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Give examples of habits (good or bad) picked up by children.

- b. What kind of life are we to live? v. 2a. What supreme example does Paul commend? v. 2b. Why? What old covenant analogy does Paul use to get across his point? Consult the Introduction (last paragraph). Also compare with Romans 12:1-2.
- c. What three vices are mentioned here? v. 3a. Why are they mentioned? v. 3b.
- d. What three other examples of lewd conduct are mentioned? v. 4a- b. Why are these mentioned? v. 4c. What attitude should Christians reflect? v. 4d.
- e. What is it that we can be assured of regarding unrepentant persons? v. 5. What description of such person is given? Compare with 1 Corinthians 6:9-11.
- f. What if a person remains an unrepentant sinner? (After all, God is love.) v. 6. Explain. See John 3:36.
- g. What is Paul's conclusion on the matter? v. 7. Why?

2. Ephesians 5:8-14

- a. What were they before knowing the Lord? v. 8a. Explain what Paul means by "darkness." What are they after knowing the Lord? v. 8b. See Matthew 5:14-16.
- b. What does the fruit/light image represent? v. 9. Compare with Galatians 5:22-23. Do you know through personal experience if this pleases the Lord? v. 10.
- c. What does the fruitless/darkness image represent? vv. 11-13. Compare with John 3:19-21.
- d. What makes everything visible? v. 14a. What does Paul quote to prove his point? v. 14b. See Romans 6:3-4. Note: Many expositors believe that Paul is quoting an early baptismal hymn used by the congregation as they greeted new converts emerging from the baptismal waters.

3. Ephesians 5:15-20

- a. What caution does Paul give to believers? v. 15. Why? v. 16a. Compare with Colossians 4:5-6.
- b. What does Paul mean by: "because the days are evil"? v. 16b. See Galatians 1:4; Philippians 2:14-15.
- c. What contrast does Paul make in this verse? v. 17. Why?
- d. What vivid illustration of living foolishly vs. living wisely does Paul

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make in this verse? v. 18. See Proverbs 23:31-35; Luke 15:13; 2 Timothy 1:7-10; 1 Peter 4:1-5.

- e. What kind of celebration do believers practice as opposed to those involved in carnal living? vv. 19-20. See Colossians 3:15-17.

Contemporary interaction

1. As a believer in Christ, how often do you seriously reflect on your behavior in all spheres of life as becoming of your Christian calling?
2. Do you routinely analyze the moral behavior of our society at large, or do you just go along with the flow? Why or why not?
3. As a believer, are you conscious of the fact that your Christian moral behavior is an example and witness of Christ's love for the world?
4. What kind of reputation do you have 1) at home, 2) in the church, 3) among your neighbors, 4) with your co-workers or schoolmates? Are you considered loving and friendly, or a complainer and a grouch?

Conclusion

It is never easy being a Christian, but when we look at our calling as a vocation of ethical-discipline via the Holy Spirit, then matters can and do improve. May we study our Lord's example so as to live out who we are: True believers in Christ!

THE CALL TO SUBMISSION IN CHRIST EPHESIANS 5:21-33

Key text: “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up to her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless” (Ephesians 5:25-27).

Lesson objective: To understand that all believers are called to mutual submission to one another, and this is especially true for husbands and wives, who are called to live together honorably after the pattern of Christ and the church.

Introduction: In America, many marriages today last only five to seven years. The last half-century has seen a proliferation of divorces and remarriages. And the statistics for church members are not much different from the rest of society! Analysts claim that several factors have contributed to the demise of marriage as a life-long arrangement. The following factors are often mentioned:

- the disdain for institutional authority beginning in the 1960s,
- the declining influence of American Christian culture,
- the economic liberation of an ever-increasing army of women in the workplace,
- the relaxation of moral taboos within society,
- the adoption of a pluralistic-toleration for opposing belief systems and lifestyles, and so on.

However, it is difficult to say how much blame can be placed on

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society's ever-changing landscape and how much responsibility each individual carries, especially, if they are believers in Christ!

In Paul's day, divorce was not practical for the poorer classes, but readily available for the more affluent. Of course, there were plenty of marriages that existed in name only, as is the sad case today. But Paul had a different vision for the new Christian community, one based not on short-term erotic love (Gr. *eros*), but on Christ-like unconditional love (Gr. *agape*). Paul knew that the only way to make a marriage work according to God's intentions is by the principle of mutual submission to one another in Christ (verses 21-24). If the church has failed to maintain the sanctity and integrity of life-long marriages, it is because individual members have failed to apply and live by the code of mutual respect and submission.

No greater example can Paul give of what a marriage ought to be, but that of the *agape* relationship that exists between Christ and the church (verses 25-33). By bringing this example to the fore, Paul automatically dispels any warped paradigms of each partner's role in the marriage. No tyrannical husband can ever make the claim of living a Christian marriage. Nor can a back-talking, nagging wife can ever claim the same.

Christ loved us, the church, to the point of giving his life for us. And the church has accepted the responsibility of submitting freely to our Lord in gracious response to his loving act. There is a great mystery here! The mystery is that in a profound way that surpasses all understanding, like Christ and the church are united spiritually as head and body, so too husband and wife are united as one integrated soul and body. This is why divorce hurts so much, because it tears into the very fabric of what were once two integrated beings.

God did not intend for marriages to break up (Matthew 19:1-9). Sin in many forms is ultimately what is responsible for marriage disasters. Couples that refuse to submit to one another in the Lord display their egos, pride and carnality in their defensiveness, false superiority, immaturity, verbal abuse, and even violence to beat one another into submission!

Christian marriages need to renew their commitment to the principles of unconditional love and mutual submission in Christ. Three major reasons for break-ups today are arguments over religion, money and sex. When a husband unconditionally demonstrates loving affection to his wife, and a wife freely submits to her husband, then there is true love. In the Lord, difficulties over money and other intimate matters can be dealt with in a

Christ-like manner, always maintaining mutual respect and a life-long commitment.

Questions for Bible study

1. Matthew 19:1-9

- a. Where does Jesus go and what is he doing? vv. 1-2.
- b. Who comes to him, and with what motives? v. 3a. What test question do they ask Jesus? v. 3b. What is meant by “lawful” and “for any reason”? Note: The Jews were divided into two camps over the issue of divorce. The conservative school of Shammai held to lawful divorce only in the case of marital unfaithfulness, while the liberal school of Hillel held to lawful divorce “for any reason,” even burning supper! The test was to identify which camp Jesus supported.
- c. What was Jesus’ answer to their test question? vv. 4-6. Note: In his initial response, Jesus does not take sides with either school, but transcends them both to reveal God’s true intentions for marriage.
- d. What rebuttal in the form of a question do the Pharisees make to Jesus’ first response? v. 7. Note: The whole dispute among the rabbis was centered on their interpretations of Deuteronomy 24:1-4. It was here where both schools sought, on Mosaic legal grounds, the *righteousness* (or right-ness) for divorce!
- e. How did Jesus respond when they appealed to Moses? v. 8. Note: Under Moses, divorce was never commanded, but only permitted or tolerated, and that because of sin! In other words, although divorce is permitted, there is no “righteousness” in it, for any reason, because divorce was never God’s intent for humankind. Also, see Malachi 2:16a.
- f. What is Jesus’ bottom line concerning divorce? v. 9. What exception does he make? Under what negative circumstances does even this exception arise? Note: Both rabbinic schools missed the point of God’s true and righteous intentions for marriage. Even the school of Shammai sought grounds for divorce in the law itself. Jesus shows that there are no such grounds in God’s righteousness. Divorce, although legally permitted, is always the result of sin. Even where one party is not at fault, both are affected. Remarriage after a legal divorce was never an issue, for the Jews always permitted it. Jesus only questioned the motives behind it (this is the reason for the exception clause).

2. Ephesians 5:21-33

- a. What is Paul's appeal to all believers? v. 21a. Why? v. 21b.
- b. What is Paul's appeal to Christian wives? v. 22. In what manner are they to submit?
- c. What reason does Paul give for this submission? v. 23. Explain the spiritual analogy that Paul uses to illustrate his point. What does Paul mean by the words: "in everything"? v. 24. What do you think it does NOT mean?
- d. What is Paul's appeal to Christian husbands? vv. 25-27. Is this something that has already taken place, or something yet to take place? Or both? How can husbands "give themselves" for their wives on a day-to-day basis? What does the analogy convey?
- e. To what extent should husbands love their wives? vv. 28-29.
- f. What parallel mystery is presented here between husband and wife, and Christ and the church? vv. 30-32.
- g. What is Paul's summary of mutual respect and submission in marriage? v. 33.

Contemporary interaction

1. How do you think most people would describe their marriages: Happy, content, marginal, conflictive, or war zone? Where do you place your own marriage? Why? (be constructive in your answer)
2. What do you think Paul's marriage principle of mutual respect and submission means? Can this principle work and the husband remain head of the household? Why or why not?

Conclusion

The principle of mutual submission is of paramount importance for Christians to follow, especially in marriage. In the church we all have different roles, but in the end we all submit to the Lord and to one another, and so it is also with marriage.

THE CALL TO SUBMISSION IN CHRIST EPHESIANS 6:1-9

Key text: “Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men, because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free” (Ephesians 6:7-8).

Lesson objective: To understand that the rise of the Christian faith had such an impact on the Gentile world that it changed the status quo of personal relationships across family and social barriers, through the principle of equal treatment and mutual submission in the Lord.

Introduction: The world was very different in Paul’s day. The Roman Empire was pagan to the core, and there was no sense of equal treatment (a concept we have today based on creation and redemption). Christianity was to play a major role in planting the seeds of change in the ancient world by example and unreserved commitment to Christ. Those seeds would eventually give fruit to the freedoms that we enjoy so much today in the “free world.” Make no mistake about it; the freedoms we enjoy are Christian-based principles. Without Christ, there would be no such freedoms today!

In ancient Rome, children were very vulnerable and often thrown out and abandoned, or worse. As long as a child’s father lived, the child was under the father’s absolute power. The son or daughter could be a grown person and still be beaten, and or at the father’s whim have their very lives taken from them. Also, a father had the sole authority to decide whether to retain a newborn child or throw the baby out. The expositor William Barclay mentions an ancient letter where the father’s request to his pregnant wife is that if the child is a boy to let him live, but if a girl to throw her out!

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This kind of thinking was common. However, in the ever-growing minority group of Christians, this behavior was not tolerated. Christ's example set a new standard for the Gentile world. Mutual submission in the Lord was the new order of the day for both children and their parents (6:1-4).

In ancient Rome the institution of slavery was alive and thriving. Slavery was embedded in the very fabric of society. It was like a plague from humanity's early beginnings that stretched across millennia well into the 19th century! Israel had known slavery and had slaves themselves. God acknowledged the presence of slavery as he had polygamy, but never condoned either! It was the way the fallen world was, and it would take time for the world to mature and understand the fuller implications of the gospel.

The Roman Empire had more than 60 million slaves! There were more slaves in Rome than free persons. Obviously, slavery would not disappear overnight, but it eventually did! And as odd as it may seem, the seeds of freedom were sown in the benevolent treatment of Christian slaves by their Christian masters, and vice versa (verses 5-9).

Perhaps the greatest New Testament account of the principle of equal treatment and mutual submission is that of Philemon and his slave Onesimus. Paul's epistles, such as *Philemon*, which he wrote while in prison, helped forge the abolitionist movements in 19th-century England, America and other parts of the world. Unfortunately, slavery is still present in the world today, but it is no longer the worldwide institution it once was, thanks to Christ's perennial example and the maturing of the Christian faith.

Questions for Bible study

1. Ephesians 6:1-4

- a. Who does Paul directly address? v. 1a. What instructions does he give to them, and in what manner are they to obey? v. 1b. Why? v. 1c.
- b. What old covenant commandment does Paul appeal to? v. 2a. See Deuteronomy 5:16 and Exodus 20:12.
- c. What is so special about this commandment? v. 2b. What promise did the original commandment refer to? Note: The original commandment was the heart of the old covenant made with Israel concerning the Promised Land in Canaan.
- d. By apostolic authority, what change does Paul make to the commandment as now applied to the new covenant church? v. 3.

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- e. Who does Paul address next? v. 4a. What imperative does Paul give them? v. 4b. What does Paul mean by “do not exasperate”? Explain and illustrate with real-life examples.
- f. How should fathers help in bringing up their children? v. 4c. Whose teachings are children to be given? Note: Here the words “of the Lord” are referring to Christ’s example and teachings. This also brings new light to a favorite old proverb, Proverbs 22:6.

2. Ephesians 6:5-9

- a. Who does Paul address here? v. 5a. What instructions does he give them, and in what manner are they to obey? v. 5b. What pattern are they to imitate in this regard? v. 5c. How difficult would this be, knowing in your heart that slavery is wrong?
- b. What superficial manner of work did many slaves display? v. 6a. How was this to be different for a Christian slave? v. 6b.
- c. What kind of service are they to render? v. 7. Why?
- d. What motivation does Paul give to Christians bound in slavery? v. 8. How would you answer the charge that the rich have their heaven on earth at the expense of the poor in the here and now?
- e. Who does Paul address next? v. 9a. What imperative does Paul give them? v. 9b. What are they admonished not to do? v. 9c. Why? v. 9d. What does Paul mean by “no favoritism with him”? v. 9e.

3. Philemon 1-25

- a. From this brief description, who do you think Philemon is? vv. 1-3.
- b. From the following description, what kind of character does Philemon have? vv. 4-7. How well does Paul know him?
- c. On what basis is Paul making an appeal to Philemon? vv. 8-9. What is Paul’s physical condition that prompts Paul to communicate by letter?
- d. On whose behalf is Paul making this appeal? v. 10a. What does Paul mean by a certain person becoming his son: Did Paul have a *biological son* while in prison, or is Paul writing of his newly *adopted son* according to Roman custom, or does Paul mean his new *spiritual son* via personal evangelism? v. 10b.
- e. What former connection is Paul acknowledging between Onesimus and Philemon?
v. 11. Note: Philemon was a wealthy slave-owner turned Christian. Onesimus was Philemon’s runaway slave. He apparently stole

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something valuable and fled to Rome, where somehow he met Paul in prison and was converted to Christ!

- f. What does Paul tell Philemon that he is about to do? vv. 12-16. What reason does Paul give concerning God's providence and Onesimus?
- g. What is Paul's appeal to the Christian master Philemon regarding the treatment of his Christian slave? vv. 17-20. Would you not say that this was radical for the times?
- h. What are Paul's expectations of Philemon concerning Onesimus? v. 21. Note: What Paul implies, although he does not say so directly, is that he wants Philemon to free Onesimus.
- i. How does Paul show his resolve to make sure that Philemon does what Paul has asked him to do? v. 22. How does Paul conclude? vv. 23-25.

Contemporary interaction

1. What is your assessment of Christian parenting in the 21st century? How well are Christians instructing and training their children in the Lord?
2. Although there is an enormous cultural difference in Paul's instructions to slaves and masters, how may the principles be applied today?

Conclusion

God's ultimate purpose is to gather all things under the headship of Jesus Christ, and this includes our attitudes and responses across family and social barriers. May our way of living with family and others reflect his grace and glory!

THE CALL TO ARMOR IN CHRIST EPHESIANS 6:10-20

Key text: “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes” (Ephesians 6:10-11).

Lesson objective: To understand that believers are not left defenseless in this world against attacks from evil and hostile spiritual forces, but that every believer is commanded to wage spiritual warfare dressed in full spiritual battle attire.

Introduction: The free world is continually at war against hostile forces seeking political power and even world domination. Freedom-fighting forces are on search and destroy missions in order to curtail and squash the best-laid plans of dictators and terrorist organizations. But where one enemy outpost is crushed in one part of the world, behold, another lifts its ugly head in another. It’s like firefighters chasing arson fires all over the city — as soon as they put one fire out, three more rise up. Of course, freedom-fighting forces could just give up and say: *it’s not worth it!* However, the consequences would be more horrendous than the present solution! It would be like the fire department saying: *let the arsonists have their way and let the whole city burn down!*

To prevent the forces of chaos from reigning, nations need military power capable of defense and offense. A state of readiness, with the best technology available in strategic weapons, makes for a good strike force at a moment’s notice. Although our technology is new, the lessons of readiness are as old as Rome! The ancient world depended on it for its survival! Rome had conquered the world of its time by this very method. It took five years

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just to train one Roman legion in the logistics and art of war. No wonder Rome ruled the world!

Paul was a prisoner in Rome when he penned Ephesians, and he was accustomed to being chained to Roman soldiers. He even converted some of them to Christ! Paul knew of a greater battle taking place, not in the battlefield of flesh and blood but in the spiritual realm of evil adversaries (6:10-12). This is the most dangerous and deadliest battle of all. It's a fight to the finish with the believer standing on solid ground, but on the edge of the slippery slope of temptation's beckoning. Christians must hold their ground and not give an inch!

The good news is that the war was won at the cross of Calvary. But that does not mean that believers are completely out of harm's way — the battles must still be fought. Believers have every assurance that they will prevail, but at the same time believers are warned that they still have a fierce fight on their hands!

Paul, Christ's ambassador in chains, gives a stern warning and an imperative to put on the *panoply of God* (verses 13-17). Panoply (Gr. *panoplian*) refers to the whole or complete battle dress, including every piece of armor that goes with it — the whole outfit! Paul had seen the Roman soldiers dressed in their full battle gear as they guarded him. If this was true in the material world, how much more important is a constant state of readiness in the spiritual world! Every believer, in order to be spiritually effective, must put on the complete outfit of spiritual armor that God has provided. Christians are to be dressed and constantly vigilant with truth, righteousness, gospel, faith, salvation and the word of God. With the full armor of God we are to hold our ground, defeat the evil spiritual forces of the enemy, and watch and pray (verses 18-24). Amen.

Questions for Bible study

1. Ephesians 6:10-17

- a. What imperative does Paul give in bringing his letter to a close? v. 1. What "mighty power" is Paul referring to? See 1:19-20.
- b. How is one made "strong in the Lord"? v. 11a. What does Paul mean by "the full armor"? Consult the introduction of this lesson. Why does Paul give such a command to believers? v. 11b. See 4:26-27.
- c. What reminder does Paul give of the kind of war being waged? v. 12a. Compare with 2 Corinthians 10:3-5.
- d. Who are the true adversaries of every believer? v. 12b-d. How many

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of them are named, and where do they dwell? See 2 Corinthians 4:4; Ephesians 2:2; Colossians 1:13; 2:15.

- e. What does Paul emphasize for a second time? v. 13a. In preparation for what? v. 13b. With what outcome for the well-equipped believer? v. 13c, d.
- f. What imperative to resist does Paul give? v. 14a. Identify and define the first piece of spiritual armor mentioned. v. 14b. Why does Paul compare this spiritual virtue with that part of the Roman uniform?
- g. Identify and define the second piece of spiritual armor. v. 14c. Why the comparison with that specific Roman soldier's item?
- h. Identify and define the third piece of spiritual armor. v. 15. See Romans 10:15. Why the comparison with military footwear? What does Paul mean by the gospel of "peace"? See Ephesians 2:14-18.
- i. Identify and define the fourth piece of spiritual armor. v. 16. Explain how this item was used in battle as described in the verse. In what ways is it analogous to faith?
- j. What is the fifth piece of spiritual armor? v. 17a. Explain the comparison.
- k. Identify the sixth piece of spiritual armor and explain the comparison. v. 17b, c.

2. Ephesians 6:18-24

- a. Although it has no counterpart in the Roman soldier's armor, what seventh "strategic weapon" does Paul mention? v. 18a. How and when is this to be done? Explain its importance.
- b. What two requests does Paul make of believers? v. 18b. Why?
- c. What does Paul ask for himself? v. 19. Why do you think he would ask for such a thing when he is in prison? Note: Paul is about to go before Caesar Nero and hopes to find there a great opportunity to witness for Christ, even at the risk of his own life! See 2 Timothy 4:16-18.
- d. What kind of ambassador is Paul? v. 20. Explain the main thrust of his ministry. See 2 Corinthians 5:18-21.
- e. Who is Tychicus, and what is his commission? vv. 21-22. See Colossians 4:7-9.
- f. What three elements are included in Paul's closing benediction? v. 23. Explain the importance of each one.
- g. What other element is included here? v. 24. Who are the recipients of these blessings?

Contemporary interaction

1. Now that you have studied Paul's Ephesians letter, if you were asked to explain the "mystery of the gospel," what would you say?
2. There are some "Christians" who see a devil in every corner and in every human problem. Their solution is to go from house to house practicing exorcisms everywhere they go. Do you believe that this is what Paul means by resisting evil spiritual forces?
3. There are other "Christians" who believe that the devil and his cohorts are nonexistent, and that devils, witches and occultic phenomena are nothing but old superstitions that have no part in reality. Do you believe that Paul is using superstition to scare naive believers into doing what's right?
4. Sometimes Christians are so busy analyzing supernatural adversaries that they forget to focus on the spiritual full armor of God. Does God's armor work? How do you know — have you tried it? Explain by personal results.

Conclusion

God has provided his church with an invincible spiritual armor. All we have to do is put it on and use it! God's divine purpose is to gather all things under the headship of Jesus Christ. May we believers be the first in line to his glory! Amen.

- End of section written by Lorenzo Arroyo -

GRACE AND PEACE

EPHESIANS 2

By Michael Morrison

Paul’s letter to the church at Ephesus is filled with numerous theological and practical insights. Chapter 2 takes us from death to life, from hostility to peace. This chapter shows us that there is an important connection between God’s grace and human interrelationships.

Spiritual death

Paul begins by telling his readers: “You were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live” (Eph. 2:1-2). All humans start in a state of spiritual death, whether we have many transgressions or only a few. A life not oriented to God is dead.

Paul is talking about average people, socially respectable people. When they “followed the ways of this world,” they were following the devil — “the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient” (verse 2). In living the way they thought best, they were unwittingly imitating the devil and disobeying God.

Christians did it, too: “All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath” (verse 3). We lived with no thought other than to take care of our desires, and as a result, we were objects of wrath — under the judgment of God (Rom. 2:5).

Spiritual life

But God’s wrath is not the end of the story: “Because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions — it is by grace you have been saved” (Eph. 2:4-5). The judge of all humanity is full of mercy, and even when we were guilty and without excuse, he forgave us. Insofar as we sin, we are dead, but as much as we are in Christ, we are alive.

Life in Christ is much more than the physical existence we are familiar with — our new life has a different quality to it, a heavenly quality, an eternal quality. When we become Christians, our identity changes. We become new people. The old self dies, and a new person lives. We died with Christ, we were buried with Christ, and we also live with Christ.

“God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus” (verse 6). Those who have faith in Christ are seated with him in glory. It is so sure that Paul can say that it has been done.

God did this “in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus” (verse 7). God’s grace is already at work in our lives, but the extent of his grace will be revealed with much greater clarity in the future.

Paul then summarizes the way God is working: “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God” (verse 8). In Greek, the words grace and faith are feminine, but Paul uses a neuter form of the word *this*. Paul is not saying that faith is a gift of God, or that grace is a gift of God — they are, but here Paul is saying that all of salvation is a gift of God. None of it comes from ourselves — “not by works, so that no one can boast” (verse 9). No one can brag about having faith or works. Since God has done it, he gets all the credit.

“For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (verse 10). Even our good works are a result of the way God is working in us. He created us for his purpose, to do his will.

Paul expects believers to be obedient. He says that we used to be disobedient, but that in Christ we are created anew, so that we might have a different foundation for how we live. This new life is a result of our salvation, not the cause of it. Our works should be good, but they can never be good enough that we deserve to be saved. We are saved by grace, by God’s mercy and love, through Jesus Christ.

Unity in Christ

Paul then begins to address a practical matter within the church, the tensions between Jewish and gentile believers. Because we are saved by grace and because we are saved for good works, our attitudes and behavior toward one another ought to change.

He begins by writing to the gentiles: “Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called ‘uncircumcised’ by those who call themselves ‘the circumcision’ (that done in the body by the hands of men) — remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world” (verses 11-12).

The Jews looked down on the gentiles, calling them “uncircumcised.” This insult was a reminder that the gentiles were not in the covenant of Abraham and not included in the blessings promised to him. Although circumcision was a human work, it reflected a spiritual reality. The gentiles were separated from Christ, God, hope and promise. But that has now changed: “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ” (verse 13). Once they were separated from Christ; now they are united with him. Once they were excluded; now they are included. They have hope, and they have God, through the death of Jesus Christ.

“For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one” (verse 14). What “two” is Paul talking about? He is talking about Jews and gentiles. The peoples who used to be in different spiritual categories are now united in Christ. The Jews were just like the gentiles in being spiritually dead; the gentiles are now like Jews in that through Christ they are members of the people of God.

Jesus has made the two peoples one by bringing the outsiders in, by bringing the gentiles just as close as he does the Jews. Through Christ they both have the promises, the citizenship and the hope, and they have God. Where there was rivalry between Jews and gentiles, Jesus has made peace, because both peoples are equally saved by grace and no one has any reason to feel superior.

Abolishing the law

How did Jesus make peace between Jews and gentiles? It is because he “has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility” (verse 14). And

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what was the wall that created hostility between Jews and gentiles? Paul answers this question when he says that Jesus destroyed the barrier “by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations” (verse 15).

The wall of hostility was the law, which had commandments and regulations separating Jew from gentile. This law defined who was on which side of the barrier, it said who had the promises and who belonged to the people of God.

Some of the Jews had created laws that made the Jew-gentile hostility worse, but Paul is not talking about human-made laws. Christ did not need to abolish human-made laws, because they had no spiritual authority in the first place, and Paul is talking about barriers in connection with God. He is talking about spiritual realities, not human traditions.

Paul is talking about laws that divided Jew from gentile in the sight of God, laws that had to be abolished by the cross of Christ (verse 16). Jesus did not have to die to eliminate human regulations. Rather, he died to bring an end to the old covenant. Ephesians 2 is therefore in agreement with what we read in Acts 15, 2 Corinthians 3, Galatians 3-4, Colossians 2 and Hebrews 7-10.

The old covenant came to an end with the death of Jesus Christ. The old covenant had defined Jew and gentile, creating the distinction, and Jesus made the two peoples one by destroying that divider. Jesus abolished the old covenant with its regulations and commandments. The people of God are no longer defined by old covenant laws.

Christ’s purpose, Paul says, “was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility” (verses 15-16). Before Christ, there were two kinds of people: dead Jews and dead gentiles. Both peoples needed to be reconciled to God, and this is what Christ did on the cross. The result is a new people, a people who are alive in Christ, alive to God.

“He came and preached peace to you who were far away [gentiles] and peace to those who were near [Jews]. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit” (verses 17-18). Paul is proclaiming equality for gentile believers and unity of all Christians. People of different ethnic groups, people of different denominations, are one in Christ.

One building

“Consequently, you [gentiles] are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household” (verse 19). Through Christ, we are members of God’s family.

Paul then shifts to a different metaphor: “Built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets” (verse 20). Moses is not our foundation. The apostles and prophets are — and Paul is probably speaking of New Testament prophets, as he does in Ephesians 3:5. But even more important than this foundation is the fact that “Christ Jesus himself [is] the chief cornerstone.” He is our primary point of reference.

“In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord” (verse 21). Our unity is in Christ, and as we are growing in him, we are a place of acceptable worship.

“And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit” (verse 22). As we are in Christ, through faith in Christ, through seeing ourselves as his people, we are growing closer to one another, and God is living in us by his Spirit. If the Holy Spirit is living in us, then God is living in us, for the Holy Spirit is God.

CHRISTIAN LIFE AND MARRIAGE

EPHESIANS 5

In Ephesians, Paul makes it clear that we are saved by grace, not by our works (Eph. 2:8). But he makes it equally clear that God has made us and called us so that we do good works (verse 10). In the last half of his letter, he gives some specific exhortations for the kind of behavior that reflects our Christian faith.

At the end of chapter 4, Paul exhorts the Ephesian Christians to forgive one another, just as God in Christ had forgiven them (verse 32). We are to pattern our behavior after God himself. Paul states this general principle as he begins chapter 5: “Follow God’s example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (verses 1-2, NIV 2011 edition in this chapter).

We should be like our heavenly Father, and the imitation of God is a basic principle of Christian ethics. We do not imitate him in authority, but in humility, because God is revealed to us most clearly in the self-sacrifice of Jesus Christ. This is the clear example of forgiveness and love that we should follow. When we love others, we are a sacrifice that pleases God (Hebrews 13:16).

A call for purity

Love does not mean promiscuous sex, however: “But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God’s holy people” (Eph. 5:3). Paul does not say what sort of “impurity” he is thinking of. Greed is wrong

because, among other things, it is an opposite of love.

Not only should Christians avoid even the hint of immorality, Paul advises, “Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving” (verse 4). Obscenities are common in American culture now, but Paul exhorts us to conform to Christ rather than to culture (Romans 12:2). When sin becomes a joke, more people sin. Sex is a gift of God, and it should not be tarnished by referring to it as a joke or as an insult. Our speech should set a good example, and Paul suggests that if you have to say something, say something good. “Thanksgiving is an antidote for sin” (Klyne Snodgrass, *Ephesians*, p. 276).

Paul then emphasizes how important this matter is: “Of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person — such a person is an idolater — has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God” (Eph. 5:5). That behavior, and that sort of speech, is contrary to the character of Christ. How can we be scrubbed of such impurities? Through Christ — and having freed us from corruption, Christ wants us not to go back to wallowing in the mire (2 Peter 2:22).

“Let no one deceive you with empty words,” he warns — let no one tell you that God doesn’t care about such things, “for because of such things God’s wrath comes on those who are disobedient. Therefore do not be partners with them” (Eph. 5:7-8). Paul is saying here that God is angry with people who give themselves over to corrupt behavior. Sin hurts people, and since God loves people, he hates sin, and he opposes those who persist in it.

Greed and immorality hurt people, and even though they are common in society today, we should not join in with people who do them. Indeed, we should avoid even the hint of impropriety, such as the dirty jokes. This requires a difference in behavior, not physical separation. “We cannot share the gospel if we separate from unbelievers. The light is to shine in the darkness” (Snodgrass, 278).

Children of light

In verses 8-10, Paul uses a figure of speech common in Greek literature: light as the good, as the intelligent choice: “For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord.”

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You once lived the way the world does, he says, but now you have a different standard — Christ — and in him we are people of light. When we follow him, our lives will be characterized by goodness, righteousness and truth. We need to find out what God wants, and we need to do it.

“Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. It is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret” (verses 11-12). Paul again mentions the need for us to keep our speech pure. How do we “expose” wrong behavior? With light—with goodness, righteousness and truth — setting a good example, having good words.

“But everything exposed by the light becomes visible — and everything that is illuminated becomes a light” (verse 13). I suspect a translation problem here, because no matter how much we illuminate a sin, it never becomes a light. However, people can become transformed into lights, and that fits the context: Everyone who is exposed by the light becomes visible, and everyone who is illuminated (that is, transformed by Christ) becomes one of the children of light, who live in Christ.

Paul talks about a personal transformation in the next verse: “This is why it is said: ‘Wake up, sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you’” (verse 14, source of quote unknown, but perhaps adapted from Isaiah 26:19; 60:1). Here Paul uses resurrection as a figure of speech for coming to faith in Christ (see Eph. 2:1 for a related figure of speech). In Christ, we rise to a new life — no longer a slave to the deeds of darkness.

Transformed by the Spirit

Since God cares about what we do, Paul advises: “Be very careful, then, how you live — not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil” (verses 15-16). Immorality and coarse jokes were common in Paul’s world, too, but he calls us to buck the trend and be different. Because sin is so common, we need wisdom in discerning how we should live — we can’t just go along with what everyone else is doing.

“Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is. Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery” (verse 17). When people are drunk, they are more apt to sin in other ways too. Paul contrasts that with life in the Spirit: “Instead, be filled with the Spirit” (verse 18).

Instead of to the misery of debauchery, the Spirit leads us to joy and thanksgiving: “speaking to one another with psalms, hymns and songs from

the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (verses 19-20). This is the kind of party we need!

Submission in marriage

Grammatically, verses 18-23 form a very long sentence: “Be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another...submitting to one another, wives to their own husbands.” These participle clauses tell us how we are to act when filled with the Spirit: speaking to one another, singing, and submitting to one another. The grammar indicates that Paul is continuing the same subject rather than switching to something new (even though many translations start a new sentence and new paragraph at verse 21 or 22).

One of the results of the Spirit in our lives is that we “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ” (verse 21). We look to the needs of others (Philippians 2:4). When we respect Christ, we respect those who are in Christ.

The first example Paul gives is submission in marriage: “Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord” (Eph. 5:22). Many Greco-Roman writers told wives to submit to their husbands, but Paul puts that advice into a new context: our relationship with Christ. Just as we should all submit to Christ, wives are to submit to their husbands. Paul will soon balance this with some surprising advice for husbands.

“For the husband is the head of the wife...” (verse 23). Commentators argue vigorously about whether “head” implies authority or source (the latter meaning can be found in the phrase “headwaters of the river”). Apparently the Greek word could have either meaning, but here the context (especially the word “submit”) suggests that authority is in view. We “submit” to a source if it has authority over us. Nevertheless, Paul does not focus on authority, but on responsibilities.

The husband is head of the family in the same way “as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything” (verses 23-24). How well does the church submit to Christ? Imperfectly, but Christ does not beat the church into submission. That kind of behavior is inappropriate in marriage — and it is hypocritical for a husband to badger his wife about submission when he has problems with submitting himself to Christ.

Unfortunately, Paul’s words have often been used by men to demand

that wives obey: “The Bible says that you are supposed to submit to me.” However, the wife could say, “Yes, but the Bible also says that you are to give yourself up for me — so stop making demands.” This sort of exchange is fruitless, because it tries to use the Bible for selfish purposes. The better way is to let the Bible speak to each person, without any self-serving “assistance” from us.

Obviously, a wife should not submit “in everything” — not to commands that are contrary to Christ. In the same way, she does not have to submit to abuse, for abuse is also contrary to Christ.

Responsibility of husbands

After Paul gives the culturally common advice to women, he gives a surprising command to the men: “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (verse 25). The love that Paul calls for was a radical idea in Jewish and Greek society — that husbands had obligations to make sacrifices for their wives. In using the word *love*, he is essentially telling husbands to submit to the needs of their wives. “In the final analysis, submission and *agape* love are synonymous” (Snodgrass, 296).

What are the results of Christ’s love for the church? “...to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless” (verses 26-27). Husbands cannot do this for their wives, of course, but they should have the same attitude: They need to view their wives as spotless, holy and pure, because Christ has made them so.

“In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies” (verse 28). Just as Christ sacrificed himself to serve the church, men should make sacrifices to serve their wives. They should do nothing from selfishness, but in humility regard their wives as better than themselves — and the women should do the same (Phil. 2:3). Paul is calling for *mutual* respect and submission.

“He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church — for we are members of his body” (Eph. 5:28-30). Unfortunately, some people do hate their bodies, but Paul’s point is clear: Husbands should treat their wives as the husbands want to be treated by others (Matt. 7:12).

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To show that husbands and wives are united as one body, Paul quotes Gen. 2:24: “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh” (Eph. 5:31).

How can two people be one? Paul says it “is a profound mystery — but then he says, I am talking about Christ and the church” (verse 32). Since we are all united with Christ, we are one in him. Not just in marriage but also in Christ, our spouses are part of our body, and we need to treat them as well as we do ourselves.

Paul summarizes the discussion in v. 33: “However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.” Whether we are male or female, when we are filled with the Spirit, we should love, respect, and submit to one another.

Things to think about

- How realistic is it for us to try to imitate God? (verse 1)
- Would Paul encourage us to use obscene words when we are with people who don’t consider them obscene? (verse 4)
- How should we expose sin? (verse 11)
- How can we understand what the will of the Lord is? (verse 17)
- Is it fair for us to remind other people about what God commands them?
- Should wives really submit “in everything”? (verse 24)
- In what way can husbands give themselves up for their wives? (verse 25)
- Does the Bible command anyone to exercise “leadership”?

JOY, HOPE AND LOVE: PAUL'S LETTER FROM PRISON

By Ronald Kelly and Paul Kroll

Paul has been called the greatest Christian who ever lived. He also suffered greatly for the name of Jesus Christ. When Paul defended his calling to the church, he defined suffering as a major proof of his spiritual office. "I have worked much harder," he insisted, "been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again" (2 Corinthians 11:23).

Paul's many trials did not deter him from living a Christian life. Neither did they restrict his preaching the gospel. To the contrary, suffering seemed to motivate him to even greater spiritual service. He said something remarkable about his adversities: "For Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:10).

We shouldn't, however, think of Paul as an indestructible superman. There were times when the tremendous hardships he confronted were more than he could bear. After suffering one rather malicious incident of persecution, Paul admitted he and his companions "despaired even of life" (2 Corinthians 1:8).

But Paul had faith in the living God to see him through his trial. "On him we have set our hope," wrote Paul, "that he will continue to deliver us" (verse 10). But as Paul's life demonstrates, God often delivers us *out of* troubles we are already in, not necessarily *from* troubles before they begin.

Yet, as we must, Paul was able to rise above his many afflictions. How did he do it? And how can we surmount our trials and troubles? Paul didn't overcome by his own strength or will. He never took personal credit for being able to bear his painfully heavy cross. He attributed his spiritual muscle to its true source — Jesus Christ. Paul said, "I can do everything through him who gives me strength" (Philippians 4:13).

He rejoiced, not in his own will and courage, but in the power of Christ in him. And by that example we know that we, too, have access to the same spiritual power and courage.

Apostle of spiritual joy

Paul maintained this Christ-centered faith during at least four years of suffering as a prisoner of the Roman government, first in Caesarea and then in Rome, possibly in other places as well. During his imprisonment, Paul wrote four letters that survive in our New Testament. They are Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon. We, living almost 2,000 years later, are fortunate to have these letters to teach us the inspiring truths of God. We are the beneficiaries of Paul's spiritual wisdom forged in the crucible of personal suffering.

These four letters are among the most hopeful and encouraging Paul wrote. They help us understand how we can find joy in our trials and peace in our suffering. The upbeat message in the prison letters contrasts markedly with Paul's grim physical condition. Such a contrast teaches us a fundamental truth about our Christian faith: No matter what our misfortune or difficulty, God reigns supreme and sovereign. He can — and will — see us through any calamity.

Christ the center

The Rome of the apostle Paul's day was a breathtaking city. Rome — the nucleus of the mighty Roman Empire. Rome — the axis of political power. Rome — the hub of the Western world's social and economic systems.

In his book *Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians*, New Testament scholar William Barclay described how Rome had united the world:

In the Roman Empire a new unity had come to the world. The *pax Romana*, the Roman peace, was a very real thing. Kingdoms and states and countries, which had struggled and warred with each other, were gathered into a new unity in the Empire which was Rome. (page 67)

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When Paul was brought to Rome as a prisoner of the empire, he must have been impressed with the city. Perhaps Rome's greatness suggested a metaphor to Paul that expressed a profound truth about Jesus Christ. As Dr. Barclay wrote: "It may well be that in his imprisonment Paul saw with new eyes how all this unity centred in Rome; and it may well have seemed to him a symbol of how all things must centre in Christ" (page 67).

That is, Jesus Christ is the heart and hub of all that exists. All that exists has its focus in him. In Christ, "all things hold together," says Paul (Colossians 1:17). Paul reasons that through Christ's death, Jesus brought the discordant elements in this world together (verse 20). Jesus reunited person with person and humans with God. To Paul, Jesus was God's imperial moving force for reconciliation (verses 19-20).

Paul emphasizes Jesus as the focus of this spiritual union. God has purposed to "bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ," he writes (Ephesians 1:10). Paul describes the center of this unity in Christ as occurring within the church — not in an empire ruled by an emperor from Rome. He says Jesus has been appointed by God "to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way" (verses 22-23).

The church, then, is the place in the world where the unity of Christ is experienced. Dr. Barclay says: "It is within the church that all the middle walls of separation must be broken down" (page 67).

Paul shows exactly in what way the church is unified. The church is one body and one Spirit. The church has one hope, "one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (Ephesians 4:5-6).

The Roman Empire of Paul's day had one leader who unified the empire: Emperor Nero — a reigning potentate with near absolute power, if he wanted to use it. Nero had lofty titles and broad rule throughout the world. He was the Pontifex Maximus — the high priest of the empire — a mediator between the gods and the people.

Paul may have been thinking of a comparison between Nero and Christ as he was dictating his letter to the Ephesians. Here was Nero, mighty in this world but puny when compared with the Creator's power. Jesus Christ is the true king of the universe, having all rule and every title that can be given, including High Priest. He is both Lord of the world and Savior of his people.

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Paul writes that God has placed Jesus Christ “at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given” (Ephesians 1:20-21). Thus, the unseen Christ is Lord of all. But his rule can be seen only among those who are Christ-centered — that is, those who are part of the Body of Christ.

No matter that we may face adversity, persecution, affliction, hardship or disaster. God’s remarkable purpose for us is so much better, that it is not to be compared with this life’s sufferings, says Paul. Beyond that is the wonderful news that we can have the spiritual strength to endure trials when they strike our lives. Paul says to us that we do not face life’s problems alone, but do so with the Holy Spirit — through Christ in us.

That’s how Paul was able to remain assured in his terribly unsure years in prison. We should think of a spiritually joyful Paul in prison, not someone downcast and fearful. He is striding around some small room or dismal cell in Rome, perhaps in the presence of — or even chained to — a Roman soldier. We see Paul carefully dictating a profoundly positive letter to encourage the church. Paul writes hopefully of his future in spite of the obvious hopelessness of his predicament.

This contrast between Paul’s rather hopeless physical situation and his hopeful reaction reverberates through a letter he is writing. It is one of the four prison epistles. This one is to the Philippians, and it becomes a message of joy. The word *joy* occurs 16 times in its various forms in the letter. Spiritual joy, rejoicing in Christ, is a major theme. “I will continue to rejoice,” Paul writes to concerned believers while he is under house arrest in Rome (Philippians 1:18). He continues, “For I know that through your prayers and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance” (verse 19). Paul has confidence in the outcome of his situation. No matter how bleak it is, no matter what ominous turn it may take, God’s will shall be done.

Meanwhile, the power of the Holy Spirit will see him through his predicament, no matter how difficult. Through Christ, Paul will face the worst and come out the best. What may happen to him in the near future is not the issue.

Paul’s present prison life, admittedly, is less than ideal. However, that is not the issue for the apostle Paul. He learned to be content whatever the circumstances. Encouraging the people he knew and loved, Paul says: “I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have

learned the secret of being content in any and every situation” (Philippians 4:12).

Paul encourages the church

Here is Paul in an uncertain and trial-filled position. Yet *he* is the one encouraging the church to have hope, joy and peace. He virtually *demand*s the members to feel triumphant: “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” (verse 4). Paul, who is suffering in prison, pleads with the Philippians: “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God” (verse 6).

Paul is no bootstrap psychologist. Church members need not attempt to manufacture this confidence and exultation. They should have joy and peace *within* because these are fruits of the Holy Spirit living within us (Galatians 5:22). So Paul can tell the church: “And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:7).

Paul’s prison message is always hopeful, his outlook confident, his future bright. This especially shows through in another prison letter, the one to the Ephesians. When writing this letter, Paul is in chains, with little to look forward to in this world. But he is exuberantly thankful for God’s priceless spiritual gifts.

It is these gifts — joy, peace, faith, hope — that will get Paul through his trial. Paul tells the Ephesian Christians that God and Christ are the source of all these spiritual blessings — ones we need to support us through life. He writes: “To him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen” (Ephesians 3:20-21).

Yes, says Paul, God has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in Christ (Ephesians 1:3). Joy, peace, faith, hope — these spiritual blessings are ours if Christ lives in us. These spiritual qualities are indestructible because they have their source in Christ, who is always with us. Because we cannot lose Christ, our spiritual blessings are secure.

JOY IN JESUS CHRIST PHILIPPIANS 1

Paul's letter to the church in Philippi says more about joy than any other New Testament book. Even though Paul is under arrest and in chains, he rejoices because of the gospel of Jesus Christ. He writes to thank the Philippian Christians for the help they gave him and to encourage them to face their own trials with joy rooted in their faith in Christ Jesus.

Prayers of joy and love

Paul follows first-century custom by first saying who he was, then the people he was writing to: "Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons" (1:1, NRSV in this chapter).

In some letters, Paul introduces himself as an apostle. But since the Philippians already accept his authority, here he introduces himself simply as a servant of Christ Jesus. He views his chains, his mission and his entire life in the context of doing Christ's work. He writes to "the saints" — the holy ones, those who are set apart for God.

First-century Greek letters often began with *chairein*, "greeting." Paul modifies this to *charis*, "grace." Grace is part of his identity, and he begins writing with a prayer for grace and peace "from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (verse 2).

He then praises the Philippians — not directly, but by thanking God for them (verse 3). Not only is this giving credit where it is due, it reminds and encourages the Philippians that God is working in their lives.

Paul writes that he is "constantly praying with joy in every one of my

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prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now” (verses 4-5). The Philippians supported Paul’s missionary work, and had sent him help (4:15; also see 1 Cor. 8:1-5). Paul rejoices that these people have such a zeal for the gospel, and this letter shows them his gratitude that God is using them in this way.

Paul’s joy is rooted in God’s faithfulness: “I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ” (verse 6). Since the Philippians had begun so well, Paul knows that they will persevere in the faith — not on their own strength, but because God will continue to work in them. “All of you share in God’s grace with me” (verse 7).

Prayer for love

God knows how much I care for you, Paul writes — I care for you as much as Jesus himself does (verse 8). The Philippians are concerned about Paul, but here, the man in prison expresses compassion for those who are not. As we will shortly see, they faced some trials of their own.

Then Paul tells them what he prays for: “that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God” (verses 9-11).

The Philippians already love. Paul wants their love to grow into wisdom and good behavior, and this letter will help them do that. As they grow in knowledge, they will have a better foundation on which to make decisions, and their behavior will come not from their own righteousness, but from Jesus Christ working within them. And the praise will go to God, because he is the source of the righteousness.

Priority of the gospel

Paul then begins to address their concern for him. They had heard of his arrest and imprisonment, and he reassures them “that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel” (verse 12). The gospel is what is important, he implies, not my comfort. So what looks like misfortune for Paul is really turning out quite well. Since he could talk to his guards, “it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to everyone else that my imprisonment is for Christ” (verse 13).

Instead of other Christians being frightened by Paul’s arrest, they

became encouraged by Paul's boldness in captivity. "Most of the brothers and sisters, having been made confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, dare to speak the word with greater boldness and without fear" (verse 14). Paul could be restrained, but the gospel was spreading even more.

Some people were trying to take advantage of Paul's restrictions, but Paul does not worry about them. He judges everything by one standard: the gospel. "Some proclaim Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill. These proclaim Christ out of love, knowing that I have been put here for the defense of the gospel

"The others proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but intending to increase my suffering in my imprisonment. What does it matter? Just this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true" (verses 15-18). Paul is encouraged by those who preach out of love, but he sees good even in what the others are doing, because more people are learning about Christ.

And because of this, Paul says, "I rejoice." His joy was in the gospel, not in his own advantage.

Paul has reason to be confident, because his confidence is in Christ. "I will continue to rejoice," he writes, "for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance" (verse 19). Paul knows that he will be released, but in the meantime, the gospel is going to more people. So he is happy.

To live is Christ

Paul does not know whether he will be released alive, or released by death. No matter which, he is sure that Christ will give him strength to be faithful. "It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way, but that by my speaking with all boldness, Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death" (verse 20). If Paul escapes alive, he will praise Christ. If he is killed for his faith, that will also be a witness for Christ.

"Living is Christ and dying is gain" (verse 21). Death can be "gain" for Paul only because he knows he will get more after death than he has in this life. He trusts his Savior for eternal life, so he uses this mortal life to serve his Savior. If he dies, he will be assured of a reward. If he lives, he can preach the gospel. Because his life is in Christ, and Christ is his priority, both possibilities are good. No wonder he rejoices!

"If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do

not know which I prefer. I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you” (verses 22-24). If it were just for himself, Paul would rather die, escape his troubles and enjoy life with Christ. But he has an assignment to preach and teach, and he is convinced that he is not yet finished.

“Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again” (verses 25-26). His work among the saints is to help them experience joy in their faith. His release from prison and his ministry among them will help the Philippians focus on Christ as their source of joy.

The gift of suffering

Paul then hints at troubles the Philippians themselves are facing. This may be why he mentioned the possibility of death, why he set an example of viewing death as gain, why he encouraged them to view everything through the lens of Christ. Whether in life or in death, their goal should also be to exalt Christ, to bring glory to him, to demonstrate that he is worthy of their trust.

No matter happens, he wants the believers in Philippi to “live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ” (verse 27). Their behavior should show that they trust in Christ even when threatened. “So that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel” (verse 27). Imitate me, he seems to be saying. Face your trials just as I am facing mine — rejoicing in Christ, holding fast to the faith. And he urges unity, a point he will address again in later chapters.

Stand firm, he says, “in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God’s doing” (verse 28). If the Philippian Christians keep their faith even when threatened with death, it will be evidence that they are thoroughly convinced of a glorious afterlife with Christ. This will exalt Christ, and might convince some people that they need the salvation that these saints so strongly believe in.

Paul then writes about a surprising gift: “For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as

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well – since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have” (verses 29-30).

Yes, they are to view their sufferings as a gift, as part of their faith in a crucified Savior. Just as the Philippians share grace with Paul (verse 7), they also share in persecutions. Yet they are to rejoice, for the sufferings are part of joining Jesus in his journey to glory, and these sufferings exalt Christ, showing him to be more valuable than all earthly comforts, more valuable than life itself. Whether they live or die, they have reason to rejoice, for they have Christ!

THE EXAMPLE OF JESUS PHILIPPIANS 2

Paul, in prison, is writing to thank and encourage Christians in Philippi. They face their own trials and have their own problems. They, like many churches today, had some petty disagreements and selfishness. Paul points them to a better approach to interpersonal relationships and gives them three examples they can imitate.

Consideration

Paul begins by reminding them of blessings they have been given by Christ: “If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion...” — he assumes that they have enjoyed all of these — “then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose” (Phil. 2:1-2).

He is not just asking them to think like one another. As he will soon explain, he wants them to be like-minded with Christ — to be encouraging, comforting, sharing, tender and compassionate, as Christ is. He wants them to have the same kind of love as Christ has, being like him in attitude and goals. That is the only sure way to be united with one another. When the Philippians put this into practice, Paul’s joy among them will be complete, for his gospel will have produced its fruit.

The bottom line, he says, is to “do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit” (verse 3). Do not be motivated by selfishness or pride, for they destroy unity and are the essence of sin. Instead, “in humility consider others better than yourselves.” Paul does not say that others are better —

only that we should consider them better. Objectively, everyone cannot be better, yet Christian unity must be built on considering others ahead of self.

“Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others” (verse 4). We may consider our own interests, but we must also look out for others. This is the way of Christ. He, the best of all humans, did not put himself first, but considered the needs of others.

Humility

“Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness” (verses 5-7). Scholars call this passage “the Philippian hymn,” because its style and rhythm cause some to think that Paul is adopting words that Christians were already singing — words of praise for Christ Jesus.

Paul is using these words to remind his readers of the example they are to follow: someone who was divine, having the greatest of honor, yet who did not cling to his rights and privileges. The 2011 edition of the NIV puts it this way: Jesus “did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage.” Though the Philippians had important rights as citizens of a Roman colony, they were to focus on others, not themselves.

Jesus willingly set his rights aside, in humility becoming a human, serving our needs. “And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death — even death on a cross!” (verse 8). His humility, his desire to serve, was complete. He endured the most painful and most shameful form of death, just to serve our needs.

The result? God resurrected him and “exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (verses 9-11).

What is the name above all other names? The name of God. In Isaiah 45:23, God says, “Before me every knee will bow; by me every tongue will swear.” Paul is saying that Jesus should be given the same honors as God. When we bow to Jesus, God gets the glory.

Jesus is in the highest place, worthy of worship, worthy of the name “Lord.” Because he was humble, he is now exalted. Humility is the praiseworthy way.

Contentment

How should we respond to Jesus' humility and service? Paul pleads for action: "Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed — not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence — continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling" (verse 12). The Philippians have been a responsive church, eager to do what is good. Paul is asking them to take one more step, applying the humility of Christ to their interpersonal relationships.

They are to work not in order to get into salvation (salvation is a gift that they already have), but to work out its implications — to diligently apply it in their lives by imitating their Savior. They are to work, and yet realize that they are not working alone: "for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (verse 13). We cannot make ourselves more like God — only he can, and he does it by changing our desires and our actions. He does not force us, but enables us. We work, trust him to do his work, and give him all the credit (see 1:3 and 1 Cor. 15:10).

"Do everything without complaining or arguing," Paul writes, "so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life" (verses 14-16). In other words, as you share the gospel, be aware of the example you set (see 1:27). Be content, be peaceable, and you will be seen as points of light. Society doesn't make it easy to be Christlike, but instead of viewing this as an obstacle, see it as an opportunity to make the gospel attractive.

Paul then makes his appeal personal: "in order that I may boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor for nothing." This will complete his mission, he says, bringing the people toward maturity in Christ.

Paul then elevates the significance of what they are doing — he is a sacrifice for God, and so are they. Their lives are given together as an offering to God. "But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you" (verse 17). Although I am in jail, he says, I rejoice because of the way that you serve the Lord. "So you too should be glad and rejoice with me" (verse 18).

Timothy

“I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, that I also may be cheered when I receive news about you” (verse 19). Paul hopes to send a friend to them, who will (if we read between the lines) report on whether the Philippians put Paul’s exhortations into practice.

Without directly saying so, Paul writes that Timothy is a good example, already doing what Paul is exhorting. Timothy “takes a genuine interest in your welfare. For everyone looks out for his own interests, not those of Jesus Christ” (verses 20-21). Timothy does not act from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility he looks to the interests of others, of Jesus and the gospel.

“But you know that Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel” (verse 22). Look to him, and hear what he says. “I hope, therefore, to send him as soon as I see how things go with me” (verse 23). As soon as I find out whether I will get out of prison, I will send him, my son in the faith, to serve your needs. “And I am confident in the Lord that I myself will come soon” (verse 24).

Epaphroditus

But Paul did not wait. He sent his letter with someone else: “But I think it is necessary to send back to you Epaphroditus, my brother, fellow worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger, whom you sent to take care of my needs” (verse 25). Epaphroditus, apparently one of the leaders in Philippi, had come to visit Paul in prison. Now Paul is sending him back with special commendation:

“For he longs for all of you and is distressed because you heard he was ill” (verse 26). In other words, he is looking out for your interests. He is distressed not because he was sick, but because he doesn’t want you to be worried about him.

“Indeed he was ill, and almost died. But God had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me, to spare me sorrow upon sorrow. Therefore I am all the more eager to send him, so that when you see him again you may be glad and I may have less anxiety” (verses 27-28). I care for you, too, and I will be less anxious about you when he is there.

“Welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honor men like him” (verse 29). He is setting a great example, and if you honor people who serve, more people will serve. Epaphroditus put his life on the line: “he

almost died for the work of Christ, risking his life to make up for the help you could not give me” (verse 30). Be willing to serve, Paul says, and you will be great. Humble yourself for him, and he will exalt you with Christ!

Things to think about

- In my own experience, what role does self-interest play in squabbles?
- When others consider me better, do I tend to agree with them?
- Do I sometimes assume that other people want what I want? Do I “serve” them as a means of getting what I want?
- What rights and privileges do I have? Am I willing to give them up to help others?
- If I can’t complain (2:14), what can I say about things that are wrong?
- Can I trust God to do his work within me? Does he sometimes seem to work too slowly?
- What examples of humility do I know locally? Do I honor them?

STARTING RIGHT AND FINISHING WELL

PHILIPPIANS 3

Paul writes to the church in Philippi to encourage them to rejoice in their trials and to be considerate of one another. In chapter 3, he comments on the foundation of the faith and exhorts them to finish well. He tells them that salvation is not by works, but he exhorts them to work. Let's see how he balances these two thoughts.

The true people of God

Although Paul is only in the middle of his letter, he indicates his transition by writing, "Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord!" (3:1). He wants to stress that joy is found "in the Lord."

"It is no trouble for me to write," he says, "the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you" (3:1). In other words, I've told you before, but I think it will be helpful if I remind you. Then he warns them about false teachers.

"Watch out for those dogs, those men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh" (3:2). Paul is referring to Judaizers, who taught that people must be circumcised in order to be saved. This heresy was apparently not an urgent problem in Philippi, but Paul wanted to be sure that the Philippians wouldn't fall for it.

He uses harsh words about those who taught salvation by works — dogs, evil-doers, mutilators. He used the Gentile objection to circumcision — that it was a mutilation of the flesh. Paul was not opposed to Jews circumcising Jews, but in this letter, writing to a primarily Gentile church, he felt free to use the Gentile perspective.

“Dogs” was Jewish slang for Gentiles. Why does Paul refer to the Judaizers by their word for Gentiles? He considers them not truly the people of God, not part of the true Israel. “For it is we who are the circumcision,” he writes (3:3) — and by that word *we*, he is including his Gentile readers. Although they are not physically circumcised, they are part of the true circumcision (Romans 2:29).

Those who have faith in Christ have the circumcision that counts, the circumcision of the heart. We Christians, not the Judaizers, have the true worship: “we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh” (3:3). Our hope of salvation, he says, is not based on our flesh, anatomy or genealogy. Our confidence is in Christ.

Past performance is worthless

If salvation were based on genetics and Jewish laws, Paul would do well. Even though he has those, he trusts in Christ, not in his works. “Though I myself have reasons for such confidence. If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more” (3:4).

Then he lists his merits: “circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless” (3:5-6).

Paul has everything the Judaizers have, and more. He was born a Jew, educated in Judea, zealous even by the standards of the strictest group. He did everything he could, but it was not enough. Not because he failed, but because even at its best, the old approach does not work. He had to start over.

No one can accuse Paul of preaching grace for his own benefit or to ease a troubled conscience. Paul has gone from being a respected rabbi, to being a persecuted apostle, for one reason only: he is persuaded that Christ is the truth, the way and the life. “But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ” (3:7). He counts those things as spiritually valueless. They cannot bring him any closer to God.

“What is more,” he writes, “I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things” (3:8). Paul was willing to give up all his Jewish advantages, all his merits, because Christ is so much more valuable. Paul is still a Jew, of course, but genetics and traditions cannot save him.

“I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ” (3:8). Circumcision is not wrong in itself, but it is worthless for salvation — and actually harmful if someone trusts in it. Only Christ counts; only he is of value for our relationship to God. Paul wants something far more valuable than anything Judaism can offer, and that is Christ.

On judgment day, Paul wants to be found in Christ, “not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ — the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith” (3:9). True righteousness does not come through law-keeping (no matter how well we keep the laws) — it comes only as a gift of God to those who trust in Christ. This is the right place to start.

Eyes on the goal

Paul’s goal is “to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead” (3:10-11). Now he knows only in part (1 Cor. 13:12), but he wants to know Christ fully, and he will experience this only in the resurrection.

But to share in Christ’s glory, Paul also shares in his sufferings, and by doing so, he will in some way attain the resurrection. Not that he will earn salvation through his sufferings, but that through faith he is united to Christ, including his crucifixion and death (Rom. 6:3-6). He shares in Christ’s sufferings as well as his glory. Both are part of being “in Christ” through faith. He has joined Jesus in the journey of salvation, and he is willing to follow him wherever he leads.

But Paul has not yet achieved what he wants: “Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me” (Phil. 3:12). So Paul works hard to perform the work for which Jesus called him. This is part of knowing Christ — knowing his will and being eager to do it. Paul wants to experience the riches of Christ, even if they involve some suffering. His confidence in Christ does not make him complacent or lazy.

And again he says: “Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus” (3:13-14). He does not rest on the many good things he has already done — he works, for that is what Christ called him for. Paul is not talking about qualifying or earning the prize, but about his zeal for it.

Good examples

Paul has a reason to explain his eagerness — he wants the Philippians to share his approach. “All of us who are mature should take such a view of things” (3:15). Those who are mature recognize that they are not yet complete, but the immature sometimes claim victory prematurely. So Paul adds, “And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you” (3:15). As you mature in Christ, you will learn to think this way, too.

“Only let us live up to what we have already attained” (3:16). Those who are in Christ should live like it (Eph. 4:1); we should let Christ make a difference in our lives, changing us, giving us zeal for his work. And to reinforce this active faith, we are to be attentive to good examples. “Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you” (Phil. 3:17).

Be zealous for Christ, he says. “For, as I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ” (3:18). Here Paul equates the gospel with “the cross of Christ.” The good news is based on a crucified Savior, for salvation comes through what Christ did, not on what we do. But many people are embarrassed by the cross and stress works instead.

“Their destiny is destruction,” Paul says (3:19). “Their god is their stomach” — they seek financial support — “and their glory is in their shame.” They glory in the flesh, in circumcision and works of the law. But now that Christ has come, it is shameful to choose these things instead of Christ, or to insist on both, when Christ is all that we need. Paul concludes, “Their mind is on earthly things” (3:19).

In contrast, Paul says, “Our citizenship is in heaven” (3:20). Our minds are set on heaven, not on earth. We focus on the spirit, not the flesh. Our hope is in the future, not in this world. “We eagerly await a Savior from there [heaven], the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body” (3:20-21).

When Christ returns, we will be like he is (1 John 3:2). He will give us the righteousness we need, and that is why we can so eagerly strive to do his will. “Therefore,” Paul concludes, “that is how you should stand firm in the Lord” (Phil. 4:1). Be eager, press onward, and trust in Christ!

Things to think about

- Have I been fairly successful at keeping biblical laws? Does that tend to give me confidence?
- Do I count my past (whether good or bad) as rubbish, as irrelevant?
- Do I want the fellowship of sharing in the sufferings of Christ?
- Does confidence in Christ make me zealous, or complacent?
- Can I trust God to teach people who think differently than I do?
- What is my attitude toward the cross of Christ?

THINK ON GOOD THINGS PHILIPPIANS 4

As Paul nears the end of his friendly letter to the church in Philippi, he encourages his readers to focus on the positive, and he closes with thanks and praise that can encourage us.

A plea for peace

Verse 1: “Therefore, my brothers, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, that is how you should stand firm in the Lord, dear friends!” As he explained in chapter 3, we cannot trust in our imperfect performance — we must trust in Christ and in the transformation that he will bring us when he returns (3:21). By keeping a clear focus on Christ, we can stand firm until the end.

As he exhorts them, Paul reveals how much he likes these people who have helped him: he loves them and longs for them. They give him joy and honor, and he can appeal to them as friends.

Paul then turns to a specific problem within the Philippian church, mentioning two women by name: “I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord” (4:2). The disagreement between these Christians was apparently not a private matter, but had caused problems within the congregation. Paul does not cast blame and does not give orders, but treats them both the same.

Paul then asks someone to help: “Yes, and I ask you, loyal yokefellow, help these women who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life” (verse 3).

Paul not only pleads — he praises. These women had been a big help in Paul’s evangelistic team, but good gospel workers can have weaknesses in other areas, and these two needed some help in patching up their differences. So Paul calls on an unnamed but faithful friend to be a mediator. After all, these women are in the book of life and will live forever with each other, so they ought to try to get along now.

Peace and joy

Paul then goes back to a persistent theme in this letter: “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” (verse 4). But it’s hard to rejoice when we have persecution and personal disagreements. Nevertheless, we are to rejoice, for we are in the Lord. We have much to be happy about: a salvation that no one can take away from us.

“Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near,” Paul exhorts. This is good advice for anyone, anytime, whether in a time of persecution or a personal squabble. Gentleness is better than retaliation.

“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God” (verse 6). We are encouraged to pray about everything that concerns us, confident that God will take care of our needs. Rather than worrying or fighting back, we can be thankful, even in times of trial. Paul is helping the Philippians to concentrate on the positive.

“And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (verse 7). With confident prayer, we can have inner peace. Although circumstances around us may be in turmoil, we can have a peace that by normal standards doesn’t make sense. But our faith is in Christ, not the circumstances of this world.

“Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable — if anything is excellent or praiseworthy — think about such things” (verse 8). If you want inner peace and interpersonal peace, then think on good things. Love looks for good things, not bad (1 Cor. 13:5-6). If you have a problem with someone, look for whatever is true and good and praiseworthy. Give your problems to God, and you will find peace.

“Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me — put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you” (Phil. 4:9). Paul again appeals to his own example among the Philippians. He tried to live the gospel as well as to share it, and he encourages the readers to do the same.

A thank-you note

Paul then thanks the church for the help they sent him while he was in prison: “I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you have been concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it” (verse 10). Although Paul is thankful for the physical help they gave, he also uses this opportunity to point the readers away from the physical, toward faith in Christ:

“I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength” (verses 11-13).

Paul had times of plenty, and times of poverty. In both cases, he looked to the Lord, not to his physical circumstances. He was content even when in poverty, because he looked to Christ. Christ did not give him strength to break out of jail, but to stay in jail. Christ did not give him the ability to turn stones into bread, but to endure hunger. This is the kind of strength Christ gives — perhaps not the kind we want, but the kind we need most.

Verse 13 is sometimes lifted out of context to say that Christ enables us to do anything we want, such as to succeed in business. But this is not what Paul meant. Rather, Christ enables us to endure all circumstances. The new revision of the NIV makes it clear that we need to consider the context: “I can do all *this* through him who gives me strength.”

Paul does not preach in order to get a salary, and he is not dependent on anyone. But Paul praises them for the help that they gave, because it reflects a spiritual virtue within them. “Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles. Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid again and again when I was in need” (verses 14-16).

When Paul was ministering in Corinth, for example, he received financial help from Philippi (2 Cor. 8:1-2) rather than being supported by the Corinthians (1 Cor. 9:7-14). Although the church at Philippi was poor, and some of the Corinthians were wealthy, the Philippians supported Paul’s missionary work. And in Thessalonica, too, they continued to help him.

Paul appreciates this not so much for his own benefit, but because it is a spiritual value for the Philippians. “Not that I am looking for a gift, but I am looking for what may be credited to your account” (Phil. 4:17). Frank Thielman says, “The imagery is of a bank account that receives compounded interest” (*Philippians*, p. 237). God will reward them for the good that they have done, and Paul was eager for them to be blessed as a reflection of their generosity. When we serve God in physical ways, we benefit spiritually as God is working in us.

“I have received full payment and even more; I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God” (verse 18). This financial help is more than enough for me, he says, and then he points out its spiritual significance: It is a sacrifice that pleases God. We worship God in our offerings, whether they are given to the poor or to missionary workers.

And in return, “my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus” (verse 19). The reason that we can be generous is because God will supply everything we need, including the strength to endure difficulties.

Closing comments

Paul ends his letter with a traditional doxology, praising God: “To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen” (verse 20).

Then, as a customary postscript, he adds a few personal greetings: “Greet all the saints in Christ Jesus. The brothers who are with me send greetings. All the saints send you greetings, especially those who belong to Caesar’s household” (verses 21-22).

Who are these people from Caesar’s household? We do not know — they may have been part of Caesar’s staff that worked in various parts of the empire. Paul mentions them here perhaps to drop a hint that the gospel is bearing fruit in significant places.

“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen” (verse 23).

Things to think about

- Would I want my name to be in a public letter, with an apostle asking me to quit arguing with another member? (verse 2)
- Am I willing to give all my anxieties to God in prayer? (verse 6)

EXPLORING THE WORD OF GOD: THE LETTERS OF PAUL

Am I willing to be thankful even in difficult times?

- How well do I concentrate on the praiseworthy, rather than the things that irritate me? (verse 8)
- Poor people are more likely to be Christians than wealthy people are. Do I find it easier to trust in God when I am poor, or does wealth tempt me to trust in my money? (verse 12)
- What kind of strength is Christ giving me in my circumstances? (verse 13)
- Do I view my offerings as a form of worship, or as payment for services that I want to benefit from? (verse 19).
- How often do I greet saints in other cities? (verse 22)

THE COLOSSIAN HERESY

Jewish legalism — dissident liberalism — or pagan superstition?
What was the problem that shook God’s church at Colossae?

While Paul was in prison, probably in Rome,¹ heresy entered the church at Colossae, in Asia Minor. The news was brought to Paul by his close friend and co-worker, Epaphras (Colossians 1:8), who was a minister at Colossae (1:7; 4:12).

Scholars disagree in the way they understand the problem at Colossae and in the way they interpret Paul’s admonitions. Did Paul intend to stop the advance of some philosophical sect? Was it to warn Judaizers who were arguing for circumcision? Was Paul informing the Colossians of their freedom from ordinances or from the ceremonial laws of Moses?

Paul’s purpose — the main point of the letter — is disputed, and it will be analyzed below.

The source of modern confusion

The problem at Colossae is clouded by an assumption that pervades commentaries and other exegetical works: that Paul’s warning to the Colossians to beware of “hollow and deceptive philosophy” (2:8) indicates that a Greek or local philosophical sect was invading the Christian congregation to entice members away.

Based on this assumption, scholars and laymen alike have looked for a solution that would involve an intrusion of Greek philosophy in a Christian setting concerning Old Testament practices (Colossians 2:16). This has led to endless debates and general frustration. What *Greek* philosophy would be

EXPLORING THE WORD OF GOD: THE LETTERS OF PAUL

concerned with Old Testament ceremonial laws?

The search for a direct influence of Greek philosophical schools of thought on Colossae pervades the work of ancient and modern commentators.

Clement of Alexandria (A.D. 150-215) proposed that it was the Epicureans who were involved at Colossae. A similar thought was expressed in the West by Tertullian (A.D. 160-220), and commentators have followed suit ever since. Neo-Platonic thought has also been proposed as the underlying problem at Colossae, as well as a mixture of Eastern and Western philosophy, all because of the superficial reading of the term *philosophy*.

Older and traditional commentators generally propose a conflict between Paul's teaching and the discipline of philosophy. In his commentary, Thomas Scott writes, "The Judaizing teachers seem to have blended their system with speculation borrowed from the Pagans, and their different sects of philosophers." He adds: "The worldly elements of heathen superstition or philosophy were blended with legal and other external observances."

Finally, he looks back at his explanation and says, "Unless something of this kind be supposed, it will be found difficult to understand the apostle's discourse: for he spoke of philosophical delusions and legal ceremonies at the same time" (*Commentary*, Whiting & Watson, New York, 1812, volume VI, referring to Colossians 2:8-9).

Once wrong assumptions are removed, the epistle to the Colossians can be examined with a fresh outlook on the problem.

Internal evidence

Paul attacks the heresy in Colossians 2:8-23. If we treat this passage as an oblique description of the problem, we could use the information given by Paul to draw up the following outline of its basic tenets:

1. It denied that the fullness of the Godhead dwelt bodily *in Christ* (2:9).
2. It denied that the Christian was *complete in Christ* (verse 10).
3. It tried to supplement the freedom in Christ by introducing ways of heightening Christian spirituality.

Some of the spiritual supplements, as recorded in Colossians, were:

1. circumcision (verses 11-14),
2. defunct principalities and powers (verse 15),
3. eating, drinking, new moons, sabbaths, etc. (verses 16-17),

4. voluntary humility and the worship of angels (verse 18), and
5. ascetic restrictions (touch not, taste not, etc., culminating in a neglect of the body) (verses 19-23).

The above points indicate neither that the heretics were denying the value of conversion to Christianity nor that they were endorsing a departure from the church of God at Colossae. They show that the heretics denied the adequacy of Christ (points 1 and 2). They were saying that Christians needed more for their salvation than what Jesus Christ had to offer. They felt they needed to re-appraise circumcision and certain ceremonial laws, along with some spiritual supplements, such as an attitude of humility and worship towards angels. To these they added a form of asceticism.

Paul's observation in 2:18-19 is that these teachers were "puffed up" in their minds and had "lost connection with the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow." This tells us that they were Christians rather than outsiders. They were holding to Christ to some degree, otherwise Paul would have said that they had *rejected* Christ. In such a case, he could have dismissed them as unbelievers.

The heretical teaching about circumcision indicates that these teachers were of Jewish extraction. They were Jewish Christians and, most likely, from Colossae. Had they come from another area, Paul might have made a point of mentioning it, as he did in writing about false believers in Galatians 2:4.

That the church at Colossae was primarily gentile is evident from the comment that its members once were "alienated" and "enemies" (1:21) in their uncircumcision (2:13), but now had been shown the riches of God's glory "among the Gentiles" (1:27). Paul's comments would be true even if Colossae included some converts from Judaism.

A Judaic philosophy

At the time Paul was writing, Judaism was often referred to as a philosophy, even in Jewish writings. The Jewish philosopher Philo (10 B.C.-A.D. 50) wrote of "the philosophy of Moses" (*De Mutatione Nominum* 39). He also referred to Judaism as "the philosophy of our fathers" and as "Judaic philosophy" (*Legatio ad Gaium* 23 and 33). Similarly, Josephus wrote of the three Jewish sects as "three philosophies," i.e., three schools of philosophy (*Antiquities* 18.1.2). Philo and Josephus, writing in Greek, wanted to lend an air of dignity to Judaism.

In this context, a closer look at Paul's statement in Colossians 2:8 would be of some interest: "See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy." In some translations, one gets the impression that Paul warned the Colossians against two evils: 1) philosophy, and 2) vain deceit. If Paul had meant that, however, Greek grammar would require him to repeat the preposition: "through philosophy and through vain deceit."

Paul was not objecting to the discipline of philosophy; he was objecting to "*the* philosophy"—the philosophy known to his readers—that he designates as a "vain deceit." In other words, "Beware lest anyone take advantage of you through the empty deceit of the Jewish philosophy you have come into contact with."

The presence of the article in the original Greek ("through *the* philosophy") indicates that the Colossian heretics used that term for their teaching, perhaps for credibility (as did Philo and Josephus), and that the Colossian members also knew it or referred to it by the same name. Paul was not denouncing philosophy in general, but the deceit that this particular philosophy entailed.

The worship of angels

Paul's statement in Colossians 2:18 shows that the self-appointed teachers at Colossae taught a doctrine of "false humility and the worship of angels." But neither the pagan Greeks nor the Phrygians had any concept of angels. This is a tenet of Judaism. The tenor of the false doctrine at Colossae was that the Colossians were not *complete* in Christ (verse 9) and needed to approach God through angelic beings. Since the angels are much inferior to the Supreme God, the Colossians would have to lower their sights, so to speak, by approaching angels first!

Knowing how angel worship developed in the Gnostic schools of the second century A.D. (the schools of Cerinthus and of Valentinus), it is easy to see how the Colossian error fitted an earlier type of Gnostic doctrine.

The basic thought seems to have been the Christian's need to reach beyond Christ to a Supreme God through the mediation of angelic beings. These beings were of lower standing on the ascending scale to ultimate truth. Therefore the believers who sought to reach God directly or through one mediator, Christ, were presumptuous and needed a measure of self-abasement that would enable them to begin lower down on the scale. They could seek *gradual* completeness by invoking the mediation of lower, but

more readily accessible, beings. This self-imposed humility, along with the active neglect of the body, would enhance their spirituality and their quest for completeness.

Paul's evaluation of the Colossian heresy was that it did not amount to true humility, as they had thought, but to a type of pride and carnality — a mere “appearance of wisdom” (2:23) — that was denying the significance of Christ.

Paul's teaching was that believers were members of the Body of Christ, who is the Head. Since Christ had triumphed over all “powers and authorities” (2:15), the members of Christ's Body did not need anything beyond Christ.

The roots of Gnosticism

Prior to 1945, Gnosticism was known only from the counter-arguments of early Christians such as Irenaeus and Hippolytus. Although their writings contain Gnostic excerpts, their reliability was undetermined.

In 1945, an Egyptian peasant came across a jar full of Gnostic books, known as the Nag Hammadi texts. These books not only have served to confirm the accounts of the early church Fathers, but have indicated that some Gnostic ideas can be traced back to New Testament times. An example of early Gnostic teaching is given in the Gospel of Thomas.

The Gospel of Thomas is believed to have been compiled around A.D. 140. Professor Helmut Koester of Harvard University has suggested that “the *Gospel of Thomas*, although compiled c. 140, may include some traditions even *older* than the Gospels of the New Testament, ‘possibly as early as the second half of the first century’ (50-100) — as early as, or earlier than Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John” (Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, Vintage Books, 1981, pages xv-xvi).

The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947 has also shed light on Gnosticism, because the Jewish sect of the Essenes cultivated some Gnostic ideas.

In light of the above discoveries, Josephus' excursus on Jewish sects becomes enlightening. Josephus' description of the Essenes speaks of a dualistic approach in the life of the Qumran community. They believed that “coming forth from the most rarefied ether they are trapped in the prison-house of the body...but once freed from the bonds of the flesh, as if released after years of slavery, they rejoice and soar aloft” (*The Jewish War*, tr. G.A. Williamson, Penguin, 1959, page 374).

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The Essenes held to this doctrine so dearly that they vowed to impart it “to no man otherwise than as he himself received it” — after rigorous initiation. The books of the sect were preserved with similar care, “and in the same way the names of the angels” (page 373).

The ascetic practices of the Essenes included abstinence from certain foods. The Essenes could touch neither oil, nor meat, nor wine. Sabbath-keeping was the strictest possible among the Essenes. They “abstain from seventh-day work more rigidly than any other Jews.” Their extremism on Sabbath-keeping comes out more clearly in another statement of Josephus, in which he notes that they “do not venture to remove any utensil or go and ease themselves” (page 373-74). The Essenes adhered to strict discipline. They avoided the pleasures of the body, they prohibited marriage, the possession of wealth or property, all secular talk, even the changing of shoes and clothes.

In searching for the broader roots of Gnosticism, one finds isolated but relevant ideas in apocryphal works, both Jewish and early Christian. The Jewish-Christian work of the second century A.D., *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, lists seven orders of angels and uses the same terminology as was used by the Colossian heretics. The two highest ranks of angels are in the seventh heaven, and are known as “thrones” and “powers” (compare Paul’s reference in Colossians 2:15). Similarly, the Book of Enoch, the best source of information for the development of Judaism (written by Chassidic or Pharisaic Jews around 163-63 B.C.), speaks of “angels of power and angels of principality” (Enoch 51:10).

The picture of 24 seats surrounding God’s throne was not introduced first in Revelation 4:4. Even before Revelation was written, the Jews were almost unanimously (not the Sadducees) teaching that everything had its angel. In the Book of Enoch 82:10 ff., the stars have their angels; each of the four seasons has its angel; each of the 12 months of the year has its angel and each of the 360 days of the year (the full extent of the year at that time) had its angel. The Book of Jubilees claims that, on the first day of creation, God created various orders of angels: of the Presence, of the winds, of the clouds, of cold, of heat, of hail, of thunder, etc.

Paul’s reply

Paul dismissed the doctrines that had been elaborated on the basis of premises such as the above. That is the impact of Colossians 1:20, where he stressed that Christ was able, through his death, to “to reconcile to himself

all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.”

By including earth and heaven, Paul was leaving nothing outside the mediating power of Christ. The vain deceit of the heretics was exposed. They were teaching the Colossians to give their allegiance to principalities and powers that, as Paul explained, were rendered defunct by Christ’s triumph (2:15).

Paul’s advice was that they should not let anyone usurp Christ’s portion and take their prize from them (2:18). To think otherwise was to be deceived into a sense of false humility, into the lamentable state of worshipping created beings (angels) rather than the Creator himself. The heretics were dishonoring Christ by trying some other approach to God.

Paul was explaining that, in the teaching of the heretics, Christ was losing the place he had in God’s plan of salvation. It is for this reason that Paul began to explain Christ’s office and function early in the book by pointing out that “God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him” (1:19), and that the fullness dwells “bodily” (2:9). The term *fullness* was a special one for the Gnostics. The Colossian Gnostics may have used it, and Paul decided to put it in context for them using superlative language. Christ has the preeminence. He is *firstborn* of the dead, the *Head* of the church, the *fullness* of God (1:15-20).

Asceticism

“Touch not; taste not; handle not” (2:21) are not prohibitions of the Old Testament, neither are they an elaboration of any Old Testament command. As Paul pointed out, they were “based on human commands and teachings” (2:22). They have only a semblance of wisdom, but, in essence, they are a pretense that does not lead to any honorable end (2:23).

The Essenes had strict prohibitions with respect to meat and wine — even oil. Such items were not to be touched, let alone tasted. Self-imposed asceticism provided a feeling of superior spirituality. It gave the impression that the successful ascetic had managed to rise above fleshly desires and was now in a separate category. Even circumcision can appear to the ascetic to be valuable, simply because it can be presented in dualistic terms. By mortifying the body of the flesh, the ascetic can claim to uphold the life of the spirit.

Paul’s explanation dismisses the whole question. If Christians have buried the entire old self in the grave symbolized by the waters of baptism,

why would they want to pretend that it could now help their spirituality?

Circumcision repelled the Gentiles. It does not appear to have been a major issue at Colossae, otherwise Paul would have elaborated on it in Colossians 2:16-23.²

Judging others

Paul's warning concerning judging "what you eat or drink" (2:16) needs clarification. The original says nothing about food or drink; it speaks about the act of eating and the act of drinking. The terms *brosis* and *posis* refer to acts, not substances (compare 1 Corinthians 8:4 and 2 Corinthians 9:10 with 1 Corinthians 6:13, 8:8, 10:3 and Hebrews 9:10).

As mentioned earlier, the Essenes abstained from eating meat or any meat product. Similarly, they would abstain from oil and reject any food that had been touched by defiled hands. Had they been in Elijah's position, they would not have eaten food touched by a crow. They would not believe that God would command ravens to feed a prophet (1 Kings 17:4).

As for drinking, there is no prohibition in the Old Testament that would affect anyone but a priest (Leviticus 10:9) and a Nazarite (Numbers 6:3). An ascetic teaching, however, such as that of the Essenes, could prohibit wine and milk. It could prescribe times and conditions for the use of other foods; it could also regulate the amounts so as to protect the members from the evils of luxury or excess.

Paul's answer to the ascetic content of the Colossian heresy is that such matters are "destined to perish with use" (Colossians 2:22). The sense of this verse is similar to that conveyed by Matthew 15:17 and 1 Corinthians 6:13. There is no moral value in prohibitions enjoined for purposes of asceticism.

One can imagine how silly the Colossian heresy was in attempting to hold onto Jewish ceremonial rules, for example, once a Christian had lost sight of Christ's direct mediation. As Paul points out with logical force, what is the point of subjecting oneself to decrees of any sort after the fullness of Christ has been set aside? Nothing can replace Christ. Without Christ at the center, absolutely nothing would stand, no matter how many commandments one would care to keep, and no matter how strictly one were to keep them.

The reason for this claim is plain: Such acts *do not involve the removal of sin*. Only Christ, with his sacrifice, is able to nail every person's spiritual debts to the cross (2:14), thus triumphing over all traditional and nontraditional

principalities and powers. Whatever had power over man's spiritual life — whether an order of angelic beings, or an ascetic principle — it was already superseded by Christ. He was now “the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow” (2:19).

The judging that was going on at Colossae was misguided (2:16). The matters listed, despite the claims of the Colossian heretics, could not transcend Christ who is now the body, the substance, the very center of God's plan of salvation. All else is a mere shadow that holds no value as a replacement for Christ. After all, the Colossians were members of the very Body of Christ!

The heretics were trying to push the church of Colossae out of the light and into shadows. Even though God's law had a “shadow of the good things that are coming,” it could not “make perfect those who draw near to worship” (Hebrews 10:1).

In summary, the Colossian heresy was caused by Jewish Christians who had fallen prey to early Gnostic teachings. Paul addressed this problem, not by reference to the Old Testament, but by centering the minds of the Colossians on the completeness and fullness in which they shared as members of the Body of Christ.

Endnotes

¹ Some scholars pose the possibility of Ephesus as the place of Paul's imprisonment; others cite Caesarea. A case can be made for each of these locations, though not with equal force. For the purposes of this article, these differences, which are peripheral to the nature of the Colossian heresy, will be laid aside.

² The Old Testament is nowhere quoted in Colossians because it is not in question.

ALREADY IN THE KINGDOM COLOSSIANS 1

Colosse was a small city in Asia Minor, not important for much of anything — it is known to us chiefly because the apostle Paul wrote a letter to the believers who lived there. The church was started by Epaphras, who had learned about Christ from Paul, so even though Paul hadn't started the church, he felt a sense of responsibility for its health and growth.

Strange ideas were circulating in Colossae. False teachers were saying that knowing about Jesus was a good beginning, but that believers needed deeper wisdom and some new ascetic practices in order to reach their true potential. Epaphras had tried to set them straight, but Paul thought it would be helpful for him to assure the Colossians that the gospel they heard from Epaphras was indeed the complete gospel.

Address information (verses 1-2)

The letter begins by saying who wrote it: “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother.” Greek letters didn't normally name companions as co-authors, so it is likely that Timothy helped write this letter.

Next, the recipients are greeted: “To God's holy people in Colossae, the faithful brothers and sisters in Christ: Grace and peace to you from God our Father” (NIV 2011 edition in this chapter). Paul believes that they are faithful; he does not seem to think that they are in serious danger of apostasy — they just need some reassurance.

Prayer of gratitude (verses 3-12)

Greek letters often began with a prayer or blessing; Paul modifies this custom to tell the Colossians what he prays about. He praises them indirectly, giving God the credit for their faith and love: “We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all God’s people.”

Their growth comes from knowledge the gospel has given them: “The faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven and about which you have already heard in the true message, the gospel that has come to you.” By the word “hope,” Paul is referring to the *object* of our hope — a heavenly reward. Christian life, including faith toward God and love toward others, is given a foundation by knowing that God gives us eternal life.

Paul reminds them that they are part of a growing movement: “The gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and truly understood God’s grace.” He assures them that they have heard *all* the truth — they do not need any supplements or add-ons to bring them to a higher level of spirituality.

“You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, and who also told us of your love in the Spirit.” Since Paul could not go everywhere, he trained people like Epaphras to be part of a missionary team that carried the gospel into outlying areas. He brought back news to Paul that the people in Colosse were responding to the gospel.

After this, Paul resumes the description of his prayers for the people: “For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you. We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives.” Paul did not wait for a crisis to pray for the people — as soon as he heard about their love, he started praying for their growth in wisdom. He did not need additional information — he wanted them to grow in their understanding of the message they had already received.

Why did he pray for this? Because he wanted to see their faith and love be evident in the way they lived: “so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way.” Paul then lists four ways in which

believers might please God:

1. “Bearing fruit in every good work,
2. “growing in the knowledge of God,
3. “being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and
4. “giving joyful thanks to the Father.”

Paul wanted the believers to know God’s will so they would do good works, learn more about God, have strength to withstand difficulties, and remain thankful.

Already qualified (verses 13-14)

One reason to be thankful is that God has already “qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light.” We could not qualify on our own, but God did it for us. How did he do that? “He has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.”

Our sins would disqualify us from the kingdom of light, but God, in Jesus, has forgiven our sins, so we are now qualified. Just as God redeemed the Israelites out of Egypt and gave them land as an inheritance, he redeemed or rescued us from the dominion of darkness and sin, and has given us our inheritance.

Christ is supreme (verses 15-23)

In a poetic passage, Paul then describes how great Christ is: “The Son is the image of the invisible God...” He shows us what God is like — not in physical characteristics, but in spiritual attributes such as love and righteousness. He is also “...the firstborn over all creation.” This does not refer to a birth or any other beginning in time. Rather, “firstborn” refers to a pre-eminent status.

Christ has this superiority because he is the Creator: “For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him.” Christians do not need to appease government officials or spirit beings; we are already approved by Christ, the highest of all powers.

Paul summarizes: “He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” He sustains all that he has created.

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After recounting Christ's role with creation, Paul describes his role in redemption, the new creation: "He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead [the first to be raised from the realm of the dead], so that in everything he might have the supremacy."

Paul again mentions that Jesus is a complete representation of the Father, and a complete Savior: "For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him [Jesus is fully divine], and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross."

Earlier, Paul used the metaphor of redemption. Here, he describes salvation as reconciliation, making peace between enemies. God achieved this peace by sending Jesus, who was not only fully divine, but also fully human — someone who could represent all creation in his atoning death on the cross. The Creator became part of creation in order to rescue us from our own sinfulness. In him we died, and in him we are raised to new life — life with God.

"Once you were alienated from God, Paul says, and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior." Yes, our sins had separated us from God. "But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death."

Why? "To present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation." The debt has been paid, the sin has been erased; there can be no accusation for those who trust in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:1, 33-34). When we appear before God, we are holy in Christ — fully qualified for his kingdom.

There is one requirement: "...if you continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel." You are on the right boat, headed to the right destination. Don't jump ship — this is the right ship. The ticket has been paid for, so you don't need to work for it. Jesus has done all that needs to be done — he is the only one who could, and the only one who did.

"This is the gospel that you heard," Paul assures the Colossians, "and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant." You have heard the real gospel, and you already know enough, Paul says — you do not need any secret, obscure information or any extra rituals. You are already in the kingdom of Christ.

It's good news!

Paul's work for the church (verses 24-29)

After Paul mentions that he is a servant of the gospel, he reflects on the fact that his ministry is rewarded not with wealth, but with persecution. (Col. 4:2 indicates that he is writing from prison.) But he sees a positive role for his troubles: "Now I rejoice in what I am suffering for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church."

There was nothing lacking in Christ's afflictions — what he did was fully sufficient for our salvation. What is lacking, from Paul's perspective, is that Paul has not experienced nearly as many afflictions as his Lord did. So in his sufferings he is filling up this deficiency, and he is glad to do it, because he is suffering for serving Christ, for helping the church grow.

He serves Christ by working for his body, the church: "I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness." Here Paul again mentions that the Colossians have the complete gospel. He describes the message as "the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the Lord's people." It's not a mystery anymore — it is revealed.

"God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory." Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, is doing his best to help everyone hear the message: Christ is in you, and he is our assurance of glory. In him we have forgiveness, redemption, and reconciliation with God. By being joined to him, we are transferred into his kingdom, and there is laid up for us in heaven a great reward.

"He [Christ] is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ." There is no secret part of the message, or additional levels of initiation, as many Greek religions had. No, Paul is proclaiming the full gospel, enough to bring everyone to complete glory. Christ is all they need to know.

"To this end I strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me" (verse 29). Just as he gave God thanks for the faith and love of the Colossians, here he gives Christ credit for all the work that he is doing. Just as creation was done by, through, and for Christ, the new creation is being done by him, through him, and for him, too.

Things to think about

- How often do I pray that others might grow in wisdom and knowledge? (verse 9)
- Is it *possible* for people to live a life worthy of the Lord and do everything he wants? (verse 10)
- Do I *feel* like I am in the kingdom of Christ? (verse 13)
- Is Christ supreme in my life and thought? (verse 18)
- When I was alienated from God, did I *feel* alienated? (verse 21)
- What supplements do people try to put on the gospel today?
- Have I suffered in letting people in on the secret of Jesus? (verse 24)

VICTORY ON THE CROSS COLOSSIANS 2

In chapter 1, Paul prays for the readers' wisdom, understanding, and Christian life (1:9-14). He reminds them of how great Christ is, and that they have been reconciled to God through Christ. Paul is working hard to teach everyone about Christ. At the end of Colossians 1, Paul explains that he struggles to teach believers so they can be complete in Christ (1:28). Our goal is in Christ, and is not found in any other message. Paul continues this theme in chapter 2 and explains the power behind our salvation and transformation.

Source of all truth

Paul moves from general principles to mention his readers: "I want you to know how much I am struggling for you, and for those in Laodicea, and for all who have not seen me face to face" (2:1, NRSV in this chapter). Colosse and Laodicea were 11 miles apart, and Paul wanted this letter to be read in Laodicea, too (4:16). As Paul's missionary co-workers spread the gospel in this area, Paul wanted to help the new Christians be well grounded in their beliefs so they would not fall for some counterfeit message.

"I want their hearts to be encouraged and united in love, so that they may have all the riches of assured understanding and have the knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ himself" (2:2).

Greek "mystery religions" were popular in the first century, offering special rituals and passwords to advance to different levels in the spiritual world. Apparently the Colossian Christians wanted to understand mysteries, to have wisdom and knowledge — but they were so eager to have special

teachings that they were listening to false teachings.

Paul uses the terminology of “mystery” but reverses it, because the “mystery” of Christ had been fully revealed. Paul gives the complete message — there is no second or third level. When we are united with Christ, we are united with the highest possible level. We are already in the palace and do not need to buy a ticket to a train station that is only halfway there.

Paul’s sufferings and labors (2:1) were evidence that he was teaching not for his own benefit, but to benefit others. He is the one who had the true wisdom and the true understanding of the mysteries of Christ.

In Christ “are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (2:3). Other religions might have part of the truth, but Christ has it all. We don’t need speculations about intermediate levels of spiritual power — what we need is a better understanding of Christ. Paul wants to focus his readers on Christ.

“I am saying this so that no one may deceive you with plausible arguments” (2:4). The religious competition might sound sophisticated or well-educated, but Paul wants his readers to remain faithful to Christ — and he is confident that they will: “For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, and I rejoice to see your morale and the firmness of your faith in Christ” (2:5). The people are doing quite well, but Paul wants to help them resist not only bizarre teachings, but also those that subtly deviate from the simplicity that is in Christ.

“As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving” (2:6-7). Epaphras had already given them the full gospel message (1:7). There are no additional secrets to learn — all they need is to better understand the message they already received, continue in it, and to be thankful for what God has given us in Christ!¹ Christianity is not a search for the mysterious and the exotic — it is a simple faith in a Savior who died for us. It does not need to be complicated with extra ideas.

Fullness in Christ

Paul warns them again: “See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ” (2:8).

The Colossians probably knew what Paul was talking about, but it is

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difficult for us to be sure. The ancient world had a wide variety of religious ideas and philosophies. Many of them offered special mysteries for the select few. Others were taught by traveling philosophers who tried to show how sensible and practical their ideas were.

In contrast to that, Paul taught salvation through a crucified man. He taught that God was in this man who was killed, and that God had brought the body back to life. (Most other religions taught that physical bodies were inferior and not worth saving.) Paul taught that this Christ would return on some future day to bring all bodies back to life and to judge the entire world.

In other words, Paul's gospel did not depend on human wisdom — in some ways it went against human wisdom. It had a wisdom of its own. It did not depend on principles that most people already agreed with. It did not depend on clever arguments. It depended on Christ alone, on who he was and what he had done.

Gospel wisdom is backwards. Most religions try to figure out what people's problems are, and from that, figure out what they need to solve those problems. But the gospel has a reverse logic. It begins with what Christ did, and from that, it discerns what the human problem is, and what it is that we need to be saved from. Once we see that the answer is Christ, we are better able to ask the right questions.

From what Paul says in verses 21-23, the "philosophy" taught a variety of restrictive rules, or self-abasement. Verses 11 and 16 suggest that it included Jewish customs such as circumcision and sabbaths. In Gal. 4:3, Paul uses the phrase "elemental spirits of the world" to refer to Judaism. The Jewish historian Josephus uses the word "philosophy" to refer to different schools of Jewish thought.

In several cities, Paul struggled against people who tried to mix Jewish ideas into Christianity, and it is likely that this was also going on in Colosse. People had added human traditions to Judaism (Mark 7:8), and were trying to add them to the gospel. Paul is telling the Colossians that they shouldn't fall for it. It might sound good on the outside, but it is empty on the inside.

Christians have something far better: "For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily" (2:9). Christ is fully divine, and he has (present tense) a human body. If we have Christ, we do not need any other ideas added on. Christ is superior to everything else, and all Christians have fullness in Christ, and he is fully God.

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It is not only Christ, but *we also* “have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority” (2:10). Our salvation is complete in Christ.² When we are in him, we are brought into divine life. We do not need anything else. Through belief in Jesus Christ, we are already connected to God, brought into the life of the triune God. Christ is not only supreme, but also sufficient.

Paul then begins to explain the practical significance of how thoroughly we participate in Christ:

- “In him also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ” (2:11). On several occasions, Paul argued against people who said that Christians ought to be circumcised and obey the laws of Moses. It seems that someone suggested that the Colossian Christians ought to be circumcised. That isn’t necessary, Paul responds, since you have already been circumcised spiritually, through your faith in Christ. How were they circumcised? In Christ.” Physical circumcision could only *symbolize* the removal of sin, but Christ performs the reality in our lives, making the symbol unnecessary. Through Christ, we are cut free from the rule of the flesh. The reality has been achieved, so the ritual is not needed. When we have Christ, we have enough. We do not need to add physical circumcision.
- “When you were buried with him in baptism
- “You were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead” (2:11-12).

These are the results of faith in a Savior who is fully divine. The old person, corrupted by sin, is dead and buried. Paul is speaking spiritually and figuratively. Through faith in Christ, we are united with him, and what he has done is effective for us. He died for us, for our sins, so that our sins are no longer counted against us. He has paid for them.

In the death of Christ, our sinful self (spiritually uncircumcised) received the wages of sin. And in the resurrection of Christ, we also live with new life. What God did in Jesus Christ, he also did it for those who have faith in Christ. One practical significance of this is that our sins are fully forgiven. We do not need to do anything extra to kill them, pay for them or make up for them.³ Through Christ, we have the spiritual status of being circumcised. It is done *in him* and *by him* because of our union *with him*.

Enemies are defeated

Paul tells us what we were apart from Christ: “when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh ...” God solved this twin problem: He “made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses” (Colossians 2:13). When we followed the desires of our flesh, we were spiritually dead and cut off from God — but in Christ, the sins that separated us have been forgiven, and because they are gone, we live with Christ.

In verse 14, Paul describes this forgiveness: “erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross.” “The record” comes from the Greek word *cheirographon*, which often refers to a note of indebtedness; this is what was against us. We are forgiven and given life because our debts (our sins) were cancelled by Christ. They were transferred to him on the cross, and paid in full.⁴

Paul is using this financial illustration to again make the point that our sins are effectively and completely taken away in Christ. Those sins have no power over us; sins cannot impose regulations about what we have to do, because they were removed on the cross of Christ — gone. Christians do not need extra rules to deal with sin — we have Christ.

The forgiveness we have in Christ is a strategic victory for us: “He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it” (2:15).

Paul again uses the phrase “rulers and authorities,” probably referring to something the false teachers were teaching. Perhaps they were saying that Christians should do something to please or get help from some mystical powers. Paul is saying that Christ has conquered them all. When we have Christ, nothing else has power or authority over our lives.

The power called sin has no authority over us. We do not need special rituals to break that power — what we need is Christ, who has already triumphed over that power. And he has done it *in public*. Here Paul refers to the parades that victorious generals had — after disarming their enemies, they would take many of the conquered people as slaves, displaying them as booty from the conquest.

To most observers, it would seem that any crucified person had been conquered and publicly humiliated. Paul reverses that image, proclaiming that Jesus was the one who really won the battle. Because his death freed us from our debts, the “rulers and authorities” lost the power they had over

us. We owe them nothing, and they are exposed as powerless imposters. There is no special secret involved. All we need is faith in Christ, and our old sinful self is considered dead, and our new life is with Christ.

Jewish rituals a shadow of Christ

Because of Christ's victory, Paul writes: "Therefore do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths" (2:16). Since we are fully forgiven and fully qualified in Christ (1:12), we should not let anyone question our salvation due to our "failure" to obey rules about diet and days.⁵

The false philosophy criticized the liberty that the Christians enjoyed, and Paul is saying, Pay no attention to their objections. You don't have to obey those rules because you have been given everything you need for salvation in Christ. You are forgiven, and that philosophy has no authority over you.

The false teachers were saying that food and drink would somehow help people deal with sin in their lives. Whether they were saying a person had to avoid certain foods, or that a person had to eat certain types of foods, does not matter. Food and drink have no power to take away sin.

Paul is saying that we are fully forgiven in Christ, and we should therefore not let anyone judge us or criticize us about what we eat and drink. Of course, we cannot prevent what people *think* about us, no matter how careful we are. What Paul is saying is that we should not accept their judgments — we should not believe that our standing with God depends on food and drink regulations.

Similarly, because we are fully forgiven in Christ, we should not let others judge us with regard to festivals, new moons or Sabbaths. These, like circumcision, were part of the Jewish religion. Apparently the false teachers of Colosse included a mixture of Judaism in their heresy.

But how could people in Colosse observe festivals, new moons, and Sabbaths? They could not do any of the sacrificial rituals in Asia Minor. Even Jews in Jerusalem did not think of sacrifices when they thought of how they observed the weekly Sabbath. Ordinary Jews observed the weekly and annual Sabbaths by not working. The false teachers were saying that this cycle of annual, monthly and weekly observances would help the Christians deal with sin in their lives.

That's not true, Paul said. Abstaining from work does not help anyone deal with sin. It does not forgive past sins, nor does it give power to avoid

sin in the future. Sin was dealt with completely by Jesus' crucifixion, and as a result, we should not let others judge us by what we do or don't do on various days of the calendar.

Those rules may have had some value before Christ came, but are not needed now: "These are only a shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ" (2:17). The dietary rules and sabbaths, like circumcision, symbolized a reality that we now have in Jesus. When we have the fullness, we don't need the silhouette.

The Jewish worship days were a shadow, a silhouette, of things to come. Paul does not elaborate about whether these days had any predictive value. He does not say how the new moons were shadows. He does not comment on how accurate a picture these days gave. He could see, however, that most of the people who kept such days did not accept Jesus as the Christ.

No matter what Paul meant by shadow, no matter whether the things to come are past or future, the result is clear: these days had no effect on sin. We should not let others criticize us regarding any portion of these days — nor should we judge others. As far as sin is concerned, these days are irrelevant.

Paul then makes this contrast: "but the substance belongs to Christ." The Greek literally says "but the body of Christ." This part of the verse has no verb, so we need to add one. Translators usually add the verb "is," because Greek often omits the verb "is." It was also common in Greek to contrast shadow and body as terms for picture and reality. The meaning is that food, drink and days are shadows, but the reality is Jesus Christ. Christ deals with sin in reality; foods and days can do it only in picture. Paul is saying that Christ is important; the shadows no longer are.⁶

False humility has no value

Paul said, "Do not let anyone judge you about diet and days." Now he gives a parallel admonition: "Do not let anyone...disqualify you" (2:18). No one can actually disqualify us, of course — Paul means that we shouldn't let anyone make us think that we have to keep special rules in order to qualify.

These unnamed people are "insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels." The rules may look like a demonstration of humility, but in actuality, they arrogantly claim that Jesus did not do enough for us. The false teachers, in addition to ideas about circumcision, foods and days, seem to have had some strange notions about angels. The people may not worship angels directly, but may claim that certain behaviors will help us

join the angels in their worship of God.⁷

Paul reveals more about the false philosophy when he says that those people were “dwelling on visions, puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking” (2:18). The people (like various Jewish writers of the time) probably said they had visions of heaven, and although they offered humility, they were actually full of pride, leaving Christ out of the picture.

Their focus had taken them away from Christ: “and not holding fast to the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows with a growth that is from God” (2:19). Growth comes from Christ, not from secret information and special rules. This person is not helping the body grow.

Paul now uses another argument, building on what he has already written: “If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the universe [and he implies that we did], why do you live as if you still belonged to the world? Why do you submit to regulations, ‘Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch?’” (2:20-21).

The Christian life is not lived by worldly wisdom. The things that sound good to religious philosophers are often wrong. We do not live by those regulations, but by Christ. When Christ died to “the elemental spirits of the universe,” we died to those regulations, too. Those petty rules have no authority over us. Our victory over sin does not come from our ability to keep rules — it comes from Christ on the cross.

“All these regulations refer to things that perish with use; they are simply human commands and teachings. These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-imposed piety, humility, and severe treatment of the body, but they are of no value in checking self-indulgence” (verses 22-23).

Rules about avoiding certain foods, or avoiding work on certain days, may sound good and wise. They might make it look like we have power over our bodies, but they cannot break the power of sin. Only Christ can do that, and he has done it fully and effectively on the cross.

Things to think about

- How much do we need to know about Christ in order to be saved? (verse 3)
- What deceptive ideas endanger Christian faith today? (verse 8)
- Does my union with Christ change the way I view myself? (verses

11-12)

- If God forgave all my sins (verse 13), why does the Lord’s prayer include a request for forgiveness?
- What powers used to hold a grip on me? Does my life show that I am now freed? (verse 15)
- Has anyone ever tried to tell me that I wasn’t qualified for salvation? (verse 18)
- Why do restrictive rules appeal to people? (verse 23)

Endnotes

¹”The first three participles are in the passive voice, ‘implying that divine action is essential in Christian growth.’ Paul’s readers have not rooted themselves, built up themselves, or strengthened themselves; God has” (David E. Garland, *Colossians and Philemon*, NIVAC, 140, quoting Murray Harris, 89). “The primary dynamic that should govern Christian behavior is...a living out of our relationship to Christ, an appropriating of what God has already accomplished in Christ. This also puts the emphasis where it belongs in Christian living — not on human willpower or effort but on God’s grace — and enables such living to be characterized by thankfulness” (A.T. Lincoln, *New Interpreter’s Bible* XI, 621).

²By using the word “fullness” for us right after using it for the Deity, Paul seems to be hinting at something we find in 2 Peter 1:4 — through Christ, we “participate in the divine nature.”

³Garland and Lincoln argue that the circumcision of Christ was his *death*, in which he put off the flesh. But it seems to me that the people in Colosse, who did not have Romans 6, would not have understood it in this way. Either way, he represented us in what he did.

⁴It is not clear what the “regulations” are; Paul uses a similar word in verse 20 for the ascetic rules of the non-Christian “philosophy.” It is likely that the philosophy taught various rules as a means of dealing with a person’s spiritual debts; Paul is saying that since Christ has cancelled the debts, we do not need to do anything further to reduce them.

⁵Paul’s opponents taught restrictions (2:21); it is not likely that they would object to Jewish restrictions about wine, meat, and days on which people must abstain from work. But they would object to the freedom that the gospel gives Christians to eat and drink (cf. 1 Corinthians 10:25) and to ignore restrictions about days (cf. Romans 14:1-6).

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⁶ Some have suggested that we should add a different verb: Don't let anyone judge you by food and days, but [let] the body of Christ [judge you]. It is true that Paul sometimes uses "the body of Christ" to refer to the church, but Paul does not say that we should let the church judge us. He has just explained that our sins are fully forgiven in Christ; he is not going to reduce that idea by saying that we should let the church judge us. This is not in his thought or in the context. His point is that Christ is the reality that foods and days could only hint at. Moreover, most people who say that we should let the church judge on this matter, have ironically rejected the judgment that the church *has* already given regarding foods and days.

⁷Paul may be using sarcasm to imply that the philosophy gives so much attention to angels that it's like they are worshipping them. Paul would probably react more strongly if people were overtly worshipping angels.

THE “HANDWRITING OF REQUIREMENTS” COLOSSIANS 2:14

Christ “wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us...having nailed it to the cross” (Colossians 2:14, NKJ). What kind of requirements are being discussed?

The Greek word for “handwriting” is *cheirographon*, used in common Greek for a document written in one’s own hand as legal proof of indebtedness. Some modern translations call it a bond of indebtedness.

Christ wiped out a note of debt. What kind of debts did Christ cancel? He canceled our spiritual debts, our sins, our transgressions of God’s law, and this is what the note of debt refers to. In his crucifixion, Christ symbolically nailed our note of debt to his cross because his sacrifice paid our debts. 1 Peter 2:24 uses a similar analogy.

The Greek word for “requirements” (KJV “ordinances”) is *dogmasin*, a form of the word *dogma*, which is used only five times in the New Testament. *Dogma* can refer to decrees of Caesar (Luke 2:1, Acts 17:7) or apostolic decrees (Acts 16:4). In other writings of that era, *dogma* could also refer to the commandments of God (3 Maccabees 1:3, Josephus, *Against Apion* 1, 42) or the commandments of Jesus (Barnabas 1:6, Ignatius to the Magnesians 13:1).

Commentators generally agree that *dogma* in Colossians 2:14 refers to God’s laws. That makes the most sense in the context, because our spiritual debts have come from breaking God’s laws. However, some commentators have erred in saying that God’s laws have been against us and were nailed to the cross.

The meaning becomes more clear if we notice that *cheirographon* is

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singular and *dogmasin* is plural. It is the *cheirographon*, the note of debt, that “was [singular] against us, which was [singular] contrary to us. And He has taken it [singular] out of the way, having nailed it [singular] to the cross.” The last part of verse 14 is about the handwriting, not the requirements.

God’s laws are not against us. It is the note of debt, our sin, that has been against us. The validity of the laws is not in question here; the fact that we incur a debt if we fail to keep the requirements implies that Paul is referring to laws that are valid.

NEW CLOTHES FOR NEW PEOPLE COLOSSIANS 3

Paul has explained that we were buried with Christ and raised to new life in him (Col. 2:12). We are new creations, new people, and our identity is now in Christ. In chapter 3, Paul draws some conclusions about the kind of behavior that should characterize our new identity.

Throughout Colossians, Paul stresses that Christ has done everything that is needed for our salvation. But this does not mean that we sit back and do nothing — Paul gives instructions for how we should respond to what Christ has done.

A life hidden with Christ

Paul begins with general principles: “Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things” (Col. 3:1-2). Earlier, Paul had drawn conclusions from the fact that we died with Christ (2:20). Here, he draws conclusions from the fact that we have a new life with him.

Since we are united with Christ, and Christ is with God, that is where we should set our affections. That is what we should desire, and that is what we should think about. This does not mean that we ignore earthly things (Paul has much to say about how we live in this world),¹ but that we bring heavenly qualities to our earthly lives. Paul is moving from a rebuttal of the false teachings, and moving toward a positive statement of how faith works in our lives.

Don’t worry about what you used to be. “For you died, and your life is

now hidden with Christ in God” (3:3). The old “you” is gone, killed with Christ on the cross and buried with him. Our new identity is in Christ, in God. Although it may not look like it, our real self is to be found with him.

Christ has brought us into the heavenly places (Eph. 1:20), and that should transform the way we think — including the way we think about ourselves. Our new life is to be patterned on the reality that Christ has brought us into the divine life, into the fellowship of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We belong to God, and we should think and act like it.

Our true identity is hidden. “By no means everything about Christian living is apparent, not only to outsiders, for whom much of it appears foolish, but also to Christians themselves, for whom there remains mystery and much questioning until the final revelation.... Its hiddenness necessitates that Christians live by faith and not by sight and, therefore, without all the answers to the meaning of many events in their lives” (A. T. Lincoln, *New Interpreter’s Bible IX*, 641).

However, it will be evident to everyone in the future: “When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory” (3:4). Yes, we will be with him in glory in the future — but even now, Christ is our life. We should live in a way that is appropriate for those who live and move and have their being in him.

Out with the old

Paul tells us how to respond to the fact that Christ defines our new life: “Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry” (3:5). We are to eliminate five vices — not just desires for illicit sex, but also for desiring too much stuff. In chapter 2, Paul criticized the people who said, “Don’t do this, don’t do that.” But here in chapter 3, Paul has also given a list of things to avoid. There is an important difference. The false philosophy was restricting *things*; Paul is telling us to avoid actions that hurt other people — actions that weaken a sense of community among the people of God.²

“Because of these, the wrath of God is coming” (3:6). God does not like it when some of his children hurt the other children, and punishment is appropriate. But there is no condemnation, and no punishment, for those who died with Christ and now live in him (see Rom. 8:1 and 1 Cor. 6:9-11). Our old life included wrong actions and desires: “You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived” (Col. 3:7). But we should stop living that

way. “You must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips” (3:8³). As people of Christ, our attitudes and words should conform to a new standard. We should eliminate any habits that hurt other people.

“Do not lie to each other.” Why? Because “you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on⁴ the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator” (3:9-10). We are to change our approach to life because we have a new life.

God is re-creating us, but he does not force this change upon us — he tells us to do it: to put on, or to clothe ourselves, in something new. We are to make choices in the light of who we are. We are to become more and more like Christ is, because that is who we are. “No system of ‘dos and don’ts’ can create the image of God in humans.... The new life of obedience does not depend on [our] own feeble moral resolve but comes from being united with Christ” (David Garland, *Colossians and Philemon*, 203, 207).⁵

In with the new

Our identity is not in our ethnic group, our education, or our social status. “Here [in Christ] there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian⁶, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all” (3:11). Christ is the epitome, the standard, the model, of everything that humanity was ever intended to be, and everyone finds their true identity in him. Rich and poor, sophisticated and simple, young and old, we are one in Christ.

How then should we live? “Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness⁷ and patience” (4:12). Since God has already chosen us, we should respond with these five virtues. These behaviors cannot make us worthy of salvation, but they are part of “a life worthy of the Lord” (1:10).

We are to be like Christ, and we should treat others the way he has treated us: “Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you” (3:13).

The chief virtue, the umbrella term that includes all good behavior, is love — which is also the one-word description of God’s nature. “And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity” (3:14).

“Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one

body you were called to peace. And be thankful” (3:15). It is hard to be angry and thankful at the same time. When we remember that we are a barbarian saved by grace, it is hard to be angry at the Scythian who is also saved by grace.

Paul concludes with more general exhortations: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs⁸ with gratitude in your hearts to God” (3:16). As we speak to each other and worship together, the message of Christ should dominate our thoughts. He has changed our identity, and that should change everything else.

“Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (3:17). All of life, both words and deeds, are done in Christ, because he is our life. Verses 15, 16, and 17 all end on a note of thanks. Praise God for what he has done for us in Christ!

Christian households

Paul includes brief comments for Christian marriages: “Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh⁹ with them” (3:18-19). Paul’s advice for women is typical for that time and culture, but his advice for husbands is unusual: It calls the men to self-sacrifice and puts limits on their authority.¹⁰

Greek philosophers sometimes gave similar comments for wives, children and slaves¹¹—these are called “household codes.” The husband, father, and master were usually the same person; Paul gives instructions for him according to these three roles.

Paul’s next set of instructions is also brief: “Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged” (3:20-21). Paul addresses the children as morally responsible people who care about their relationship with the Lord. Fathers, who had primary responsibility for discipline, are warned to be careful in their role, and to consider the emotions of their children.

Paul’s advice for slaves is much more extensive¹²: “Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to win their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord” (3:22).

Paul does not really mean “in everything.” If the masters told the slaves

to stop believing in Christ, Paul would not want them to obey! He is speaking in generalities here, just as he did for wives and children. Repeatedly, Paul connects his commands with the Lord. For slaves he says, “with...reverence for the Lord.” Our Master has something to say about the way we function in society.

“Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men” (3:23). Slaves should work sincerely, not reluctantly, whether or not the master sees them. Their station in life, although far from ideal, is a way in which they can serve Christ. Paul does not publicly call for an immediate end to slavery—that would only invite persecution for something that was then politically impossible. But his teachings paved the way for eventual abolition.¹³

Although our society is far different, the advice Paul gives here is often relevant to modern employment. Even if we feel trapped in an unpleasant job, we should be a good worker, because we are servants of Christ. But we show him no disloyalty if we look for a better job.

Reliable workers are often rewarded in this life, but there is an even more significant reward for Christians: “since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving” (3:24). In the Roman Empire, slaves could not inherit anything. But in Christ’s kingdom, they do. We belong to him, work for him, and are rewarded by him.

Paul next says, “Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for his wrong, and there is no favoritism” (3:25). Paul is apparently referring to the rewards (or penalties) of the final judgment. Misconduct will be viewed negatively—and this applies to slave masters as well as slaves.¹⁴

Paul addresses the masters directly: “Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven” (4:1). Masters should realize that they are slaves of Christ,¹⁵ and this should affect the way they treat their slaves. They should conform to what is right and fair. In time, Christians would ask whether slavery itself was fair—and when they had the freedom to campaign against it, they led the way in eliminating this immoral practice.

Things to think about

- Does my behavior reflect the fact that my life is hidden in God? (verse 3)
- Would Christianity have a different reputation if churches

preached more against greed? (verse 5)

- If God has wrath (verse 6), why should Christians eliminate anger? (verse 8, same Greek word)
- How do social divisions affect Christian unity today? (verse 11)
- What happens if I don't put on the clothing that Paul describes? (verse 12)
- In my congregation, do we teach and admonish one another? (verse 16)

Endnotes

¹ “This is not...a call to an other-worldly detachment or disinterest in life in this world, for the subsequent instructions in 3.5ff are very much concerned with practical living out of a life ‘worthy of the Lord’ (1.10) here in this world” (A.J.M. Wedderburn, *The Theology of the Later Pauline Letters*, 52).

² “The vices and virtues selected are those that will either disrupt or enhance the life of the Christian community” (Lincoln, 645).

³ Ephesians 4:22-32 is a similar passage. Garland comments on “filthy language”: “We can see that perversion in modern slang, which uses gutter terms to describe the sexual union in terms of acts of hostility, assault, and abuse” (Garland, 228).

⁴ Same verb as the one in v. 12 translated “clothe yourselves.”

⁵ “When we interpret ethical passages, we face the temptation of reverting back to the approach of the Colossian errorists. We may want to issue edicts, develop strict rules, and engage in diatribe in order to rein in immorality. But...our godliness is not measured by the things we do not do. It comes from being in Christ, dying with Christ, and being raised with Christ.... We should never confuse being moral with being Christian, *but we cannot claim to be Christian if we ignore morality*.... Our behavior as Christians becomes an advertisement for what being in Christ does to a person's life.... Unbelievers look at Christians and ask how are they any different from anybody else” (Garland, 219, 228).

⁶ Scythians were nomadic peoples who lived north and east of the Black Sea, renowned for equestrian and military skill.

⁷ “Lindemann defines it as the power which, in a situation of conflict, enables us to criticize another's conduct so that they experience it as help and not as condemnation” (Garland, 211).

⁸ We do not know how these three types of songs differ from one another. One plausible suggestion is that they refer to Old Testament

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psalms, Christian hymns, and spontaneous singing.

⁹ “The verb...is in the passive voice and may be translated, ‘Do not become embittered [or resentful] toward her.’ Anyone can refrain from harsh treatment of others; Christians must do more, however. They must refrain from being flushed with rage or petulant when others treat them or respond to them in ways that irritate them. This directive addresses the eventuality that the wife might not always be properly submissive” (David Garland, *Colossians and Philemon* [Zondervan, 1998], 245).

¹⁰ Ephesians 5 includes much more detailed instructions for wives and husbands (see the study of that chapter here). Some scholars have suggested, based on differences in early manuscripts of Ephesians, that Ephesians was a circular letter designed to be sent to numerous cities in Asia Minor. Some then speculate that it is the “letter from Laodicea” (Col. 4:16) that Paul wanted the Colossians to read. This would explain why the advice for families is so brief in Colossians—Paul expected them to get the longer instructions in the letter we now call Ephesians.

¹¹ “Comparable instructions from other literature usually address only the male, adult, and free person” (Garland, 258, citing Eduard Schweizer, 213-14).

¹² Paul may have dealt with a runaway slave from this area: Onesimus. Similarities between the people mentioned in Colossians and Philemon indicate that the letters were sent to the same area at about the same time. It is possible that the letter to Philemon was sent first, and he freed his slave, who then went back to Paul with a report about the false philosophy that was affecting the believers in Colosse.

¹³ Slaves were an important part of the social and economic structure of the Roman Empire, and sudden abolition would have created social chaos. If Paul and his team of evangelists advocated the overthrow of slavery, the government would have taken quick action to silence them.

¹⁴ This verse may “function both as a warning to slaves and as a reassurance to them. Not only if they do wrong, but also if they are treated wrongly, they can know that there will be an impartial judgment” (A.T. Lincoln, *New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. XI, p. 658).

¹⁵ Since all Christians are slaves of Christ, the exhortation to slaves “is able to represent most adequately the relation of all Christian of Christ” (M. Gielen, cited by Lincoln, p. 657).

RELATIONSHIPS IN AND OUT OF THE CHURCH: COLOSSIANS 4

Good words for everyone

In chapter 4, Paul begins to address everyone: “Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should” (4:2-4). Prayer should be a consistent part of our lives, and we should be watchful, or alert.¹

Paul does not ask that his prison cell be opened, but that the door might open for the gospel, and that the message might be clear, so people know what they are being asked to accept. Paul has years of experience in preaching the gospel, but he still asks for God’s help. He may also be hoping that the Colossians apply these ideas to themselves— that opportunities might arise for *them* to relay the message, and that they do it clearly.

“Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity” (4:5). One element of wisdom is knowing that our conduct with others may affect their attitude to the gospel. If we are selfish, opinionated and judgmental, our neighbors may find our message a bit hard to believe.

“Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone” (4:6). If our words are gracious, they will make the gospel more attractive, more likely to be accepted.²

Exchange of greetings

Ancient Greek letters often closed with an exchange of greetings, and Paul follows this custom, though he mentions many more friends than most letter-writers did: “Tychicus will tell you all the news about me. He is a dear brother, a faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord” (4:7). Tychicus is probably the one who carried the letter to Colosse.

“I am sending him to you for the express purpose that you may know about our circumstances and that he may encourage your hearts. He is coming with Onesimus, our faithful and dear brother, who is one of you. They will tell you everything that is happening here” (4:8-9). Paul says three times that these messengers will bring news of Paul’s circumstances—this hints at something important. Perhaps they will give details that Paul did not want to put in writing lest they be intercepted or censored.

“My fellow prisoner Aristarchus³ sends you his greetings, as does Mark, the cousin of Barnabas” (4:10). Paul once objected to Mark (Acts 15:37-38), but he is on good terms with him now: “(You have received instructions about him; if he comes to you, welcome him.)

“Jesus, who is called Justus, also sends greetings. These are the only Jews among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God, and they have proved a comfort to me” (4:11).

Paul saves his longest comments for Epaphras, the person who started the church in Colosse (1:7): “Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured. I vouch for him that he is working hard for you and for those at Laodicea and Hierapolis” (4:12-13).

Epaphras had a special fondness for these people, and Paul could hear his concerns and felt that it would be helpful to tell the Colossians what Epaphras wanted for them: steadfastness, maturity, and confidence.

“Our dear friend Luke, the doctor, and Demas send greetings” (4:14). Luke is the author of a Gospel and the book of Acts. Paul says nothing about Demas here; we learn from 2 Tim. 4:10 that he eventually deserted Paul.

Paul then greets people in and near Colosse: “Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house” (4:15). Nympha’s church may have been nearby, in Hierapolis.

Paul tells them to exchange letters: “After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea” (4:16).⁴

“Tell Archippus: ‘See to it that you complete the work you have received in the Lord’” (4:17). Archippus was part of the church that met in the home of Philemon (Phm. 2). We do not know what “work” he was doing, but Paul encouraged him and affirmed its importance.

Letters were normally penned by scribes who had experience in writing on papyrus, but the real authors often signed the letter themselves. So Paul takes the pen and writes, “I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you” (4:18). Grace is central to the Christian life, and Paul ends most of his letters on a note of grace.

Things to think about

- How do some parents embitter their children? (3:21)
- What options did first-century slaves have when masters commanded them to do something immoral? (3:22)
- How might trade unions and corporations make it difficult to apply verse 22 in the modern world?
- How can good behavior help me answer people’s questions? (4:6)
- Am I wrestling in prayer for someone? (4:12)

Endnotes

¹ “Three elements of prayer are featured in this section: the necessity of alertness, its characterization by thanksgiving, and its participation in the mission of the proclamation of the gospel” (Lincoln, 663). Thanksgiving “functions as a test of whether a person has truly understood that the gospel is one of grace” (ibid.). Prayer “will focus on both the missionaries and their message” (ibid.).

² Some interpreters have suggested that “seasoned with salt” means that we should leave people thirsty for more. This may be a good evangelistic strategy, but Paul seems to be giving advice for how to answer people, not to make them ask more questions. When we use salt in foods, our goal is to improve flavor, not to make people drink more.

³ When Paul wrote the letter to Philemon, he called Epaphras a fellow prisoner, but he did not say that for Aristarchus (Phm. 23); it seems that Epaphras and Aristarchus had traded places by the time he wrote Colossians.

⁴ If the letter was from the Laodiceans, we do not know the people it was written to, and it would be odd for Paul to require them to read it. One possibility is that this might be Ephesians. Others have suggested that it is what we now know as Hebrews, or that it is Philemon.

A MODEL FOR ALL BELIEVERS

1 THESSALONIANS 1

After a short ministry in Thessalonica, Paul was forced to leave (Acts 17:1-10). Probably less than a year later, Paul heard that the believers there were being persecuted. Paul wrote to reassure them that their faith and sufferings were not in vain. This is one of his earliest letters.

Salutation (verse 1)

Verse 1 presents the authors and the audience: “Paul, Silas and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace and peace to you” (NIV 2011 edition in this chapter).

This letter does not follow some of the literary patterns Paul used in other letters. He says nothing about who he is, either as an apostle or servant of Christ. He names the church as being of the people (rather than “church of God”) and says that they are “in God” (rather than “in Christ”).

He begins the letter with grace, and ends it with grace (5:28), but never uses the word grace anywhere else. Apparently the Thessalonians were not worried about the way in which Christ saved them; they had other pastoral needs.

Received with joy (verses 2-6)

Greek letters often began with a brief prayer. Paul says that he has been praying about the believers in Thessalonica: “We always thank God for all of you, and continually mention you in our prayers. We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Paul begins with faith, love and hope, observing that each of these virtues has results in a person's behavior. He will later say more about how hope helps us endure difficulties, and the kind of life that flows from faith.

Paul assures the readers that they did not make a mistake in accepting the message: "For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction."

Was the power in the preaching, or seen in the people who believed? What did the Holy Spirit do? Was conviction in the preachers, or in the audience? Paul does not write enough for us to be sure.

Paul notes how the people responded: "You know how we lived among you for your sake. You became imitators of us and of the Lord; for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit." Paul does not say what he did, other than living "for your sake." He does not say what aspect of Jesus' life they imitated, but his comment does imply that he told people something about the way Jesus lived.

An exemplary faith (verses 7-10)

Paul's focus is not so much the example *he* set, but the example that the Thessalonians set—an example that had begun to teach other people: "And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia." Paul praises them for what they did, indirectly encouraging them to continue in it despite the troubles they faced. Unbelievers in Thessalonica may despise them, but people from other places admire them.

Their example spread like ripples in a pond: "The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere." Paul really doesn't mean "everywhere"—this exaggeration is an example of motivational rhetoric, not an objective description of facts.

Paul follows that with another figure of speech: "Therefore we do not need to say anything about it, for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us." Paul could go into other cities and people would say, "I hear that people in Thessalonica believed your message. What were you preaching?"

Paul repeats major elements of the message: "They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from

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the coming wrath.” This was Paul’s message for pagans: repent of idolatry, serve God, and believe in Jesus, who died and was resurrected and will return, and through him we are saved from the judgment.

Paul does not say what the “wrath” is, nor the way in which Jesus rescues us. This letter does not even mention the cross; it is designed more for motivation than for instruction.

Things to think about

- How often do I thank God for other believers? (verse 2)
- In my experience, what kind of power and conviction came with the gospel? (verse 5)
- Am I a model for other believers to see and imitate? (verse 7)

WE WERE NOT A BURDEN: 1 THESSALONIANS 2

Paul began preaching the gospel in Macedonia somewhere around the year A.D. 50. After some success, he was forced to leave Philippi. He and his group journeyed west 100 miles to Thessalonica. After a short ministry there, they were again forced to leave (Acts 17:1-10). Probably less than a year later, Paul heard that the believers in Thessalonica were being persecuted. Paul wrote a letter to reassure the believers that their faith and sufferings were not in vain. As he writes to encourage them, he reviews his ministry and relationship with that church.

Trying to please God (verses 1-6)

Paul reminds them that he preached despite persecution: “You yourselves know, brothers and sisters, that our coming to you was not in vain, but though we had already suffered and been shamefully mistreated at Philippi, as you know, we had courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in spite of great opposition” (NRSV in this chapter). Since the gospel always comes with opposition, the readers should not be surprised if they encounter difficulties as well.

“For our appeal does not spring from deceit or impure motives or trickery, but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the message of the gospel, even so we speak, not to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts.” The ancient world had its share of traveling snake-oil salesmen, and whether people were accusing Paul or not, Paul defends himself against possible misunderstandings.

A critic might have said: Paul gave his sales pitch in Thessalonica, but

only a few gullible people fell for it, and they had no money, so Paul left to try his luck somewhere else. He didn't really care about the people who fell for his scam. So Paul responds: Our time in Thessalonica was not a failure. We are not trying to trick anyone — we are serving God, delivering his message, and that's what we did. We get beaten up for our gospel, but we keep preaching because that's what God sent us to do.

“As you know and as God is our witness, we never came with words of flattery or with a pretext for greed; nor did we seek praise from mortals, whether from you or from others.” There is no evidence to support any accusation. Paul does not fit the pattern of a traveling trickster — there was no flattery, no self-promotion, nothing shady going on.

Working hard, helping others (verses 6-12)

Paul could have asked for some financial support, but he did not: “Though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children.” Although teachers were normally paid by their students, Paul did not ask for payment — he did not want people to question his motives (1 Cor. 9:12). He was as gentle as a woman taking care of a baby. He supplied their needs, but did not ask them to supply his. That is evidence of sincerity, and along with it, the truth of the gospel.

“So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us.” Paul cared for the people so much that he shared his life with them. (This may have been a cliché expressing friendship.)

“You remember our labor and toil, brothers and sisters; we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God.” This is quite an achievement: Paul, Silas and Timothy could move to a strange city and quickly find jobs that supported them. This was part of Paul's strategy: he did not want to be confused with the traveling speakers whose main motive was money.

“You are witnesses, and God also, how pure, upright, and blameless our conduct was toward you believers.” He says this not to boast, but to forestall any accusations that would cast doubts on the gospel. This is the example he set for them to follow.

“As you know, we dealt with each one of you like a father with his children, urging and encouraging you and pleading that you lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.” Fathers

did not always deal with their children kindly, but Paul is appealing to the ideal: a father was supposed to help his children and encourage them to be good citizens.

What is a life that is “worthy” of God? Taken literally, this is an impossibly high standard. But this is motivational rhetoric, not a formula for earning salvation. It simply means, I urge you to live the way that characterizes God and his kingdom — the way of love.

Accepting the word of God (verses 13-16)

In chapter 1, Paul thanked God for choosing the believers in Thessalonica. Now, he gives thanks that they believed the gospel: “We also constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God’s word, which is also at work in you believers.” The word of God had begun to work in their lives.

What is the evidence that their faith was genuine? It was their willingness to endure persecution: “For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you suffered the same things from your own compatriots as they did from the Jews...” Paul draws attention to this example because he wants them to continue in it, to be faithful despite the persecution.

In the ancient world, people wanted the gods to give them good crops, good health, and good fortune. When people were suffering, it was assumed that they had offended the gods in some way. So when the believers in Thessalonica experienced difficulties, others would say: “Trusting in Jesus isn’t doing you any good, is it?”

So Paul says that persecutions are not proof that the gospel is false — God’s truth has always encountered opposition. The pattern began where the gospel began — in Judea. (Apparently Paul had already told them a little church history.) The unbelievers didn’t like the gospel there, either.

Paul then comments on the Jewish persecutors: They “killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out; they displease God and oppose everyone by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. Thus they have constantly been filling up the measure of their sins; but God’s wrath has overtaken them at last”

These words are surprising — unlike anything Paul wrote anywhere else. They are anti-Semitic, some say, and an unfair condemnation of an entire ethnic group. But Paul is not condemning all Jews. He is referring only to

the Judeans who killed Jesus and drove the early believers away (see Acts 7 for similar comments). Paul is not presenting a calm analysis of the place of Jews in God's plan (for that, see Romans 9-11). Rather, his purpose is to strengthen the Thessalonian believers to remain true to their convictions. The context implies that a similar criticism could be said for the Macedonian persecutors.

Paul says that God's wrath has come upon the Judeans. We do not know what he is referring to. Apparently God's wrath can happen without making much of an impact on history. In some cases his wrath means only that he lets people continue doing the sins they want to do (Romans 1:18-32; John 3:18). It is difficult to know precisely what Paul means by the term.

Paul's desire to see the Thessalonians (verses 17-20)

Paul reviews the history of his relationship with the people: "As for us, brothers and sisters, when, for a short time, we were made orphans by being separated from you—in person, not in heart—we longed with great eagerness to see you face to face. For we wanted to come to you—certainly I, Paul, wanted to again and again—but Satan blocked our way."

Paul does not say *how* he tried to return to Thessalonica, but the person who carried the letter could explain the details. It might have been risky to put them in writing, in case the letter was intercepted.

Paul explains that he takes pride in the Thessalonians: "For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? Yes, you are our glory and joy!" When Christ returns and assesses Paul's ministry, he will praise work that had lasting results (1 Cor. 3:10-15). If all of his converts fell away, what would it say about his ministry?

This is emotion-laden rhetoric, not a statement about the way eternal rewards are given. Paul wants to assure the Thessalonians that they are important to him. If they are skeptical that Paul is motivated by love, then Paul explains another reason: This is what the Lord wants Paul to do, and Paul wants to do it for him.

Things to think about

- Do I know anyone who has been tricked into following a false religious message? How can I tell the difference between a deliberate fraud and an honest misunderstanding?
- Should all religious leaders work night and day to support themselves? (verse 9)

- How can I urge people to live a life “worthy of God” without being legalistic? (verse 12)
- Have I suffered because of the gospel, or was it my own fault? (verse 14)
- Is my hope and joy for the future centered on other people? (verse 19)

The Greeks had a word for it: ἐκκλησία

The Greek word *ekklesia* comes from *ek*, meaning “from” or “out of,” and *kaleo*, meaning “to call.” So the roots of *ekklesia* mean “people who are called out.” Root meanings can sometimes shed light on an obscure word, but they do not determine what the word actually means (for example, consider the English word butterfly). A word’s meaning is based on the way the word is used, and that can change as the years roll by.

In ancient Greece, an *ekklesia* was the town council—citizens called out of their homes and into the amphitheater for a meeting (Acts 19:39 is an example). The people are not called *out*, as much as they are called *together*. “Assembly” is a good translation.

Ekklesia eventually became used for the church, the gathering of believers — but when Paul wrote his letters, that meaning was not yet common, so Paul had to specify which *ekklesia* he was writing to. He was not writing to the assembly of the Thessalonians — that would be the town council — he was writing to the assembly of those who were “in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (1:1).

PAUL'S CONCERN FOR THE THESSALONIANS: 1 THESSALONIANS 3

Paul, Silas and Timothy had been chased out of Macedonia, but they did not abandon the infant churches they left behind. Indeed, they were worried because the new believers in Thessalonica were being persecuted. Paul did not know how they would cope.

Sending Timothy to help (3:1-5)

“So when we could stand it no longer, we thought it best to be left by ourselves in Athens.” Paul’s stay in Athens is described by Luke in Acts 17 — Paul went there after he was forced to leave Berea. Silas and Timothy stayed in Berea for a time, but soon rejoined Paul (Acts 17:15).

“We sent Timothy, who is our brother and God’s fellow worker in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith.” Timothy has already been there, so why is Paul telling them things they already know? The details remind them that their relationship with Paul has some historical depth — it is evidence that Paul cares for them and has not abandoned them.

Why was it necessary to send Timothy? “...so that no one would be unsettled by these trials.” Paul is vague on these trials — the details do not serve his purpose. Unbelievers might say that trials show that Christianity is false, but Paul reverses the idea: these trials *confirm* the message, because they were predicted. “You know quite well that we were destined for them. In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way, as you well know.”

So Paul tells them again: “For this reason, when I could stand it no

longer, I sent to find out about your faith. I was afraid that in some way the tempter might have tempted you and our efforts might have been useless.” Timothy’s trip was not just to encourage them — it was also to find out if they were still faithful.

Was it really possible for Paul’s efforts to have been useless? He later wrote, “You know your labor in the Lord is not in vain” (1 Cor. 15:15). If he could say this to the Corinthians, despite their spiritual immaturity, it seems safe to say that efforts to serve Christ are *never* in vain, never useless. Paul is exaggerating his fears to highlight the relief he felt when he learned of the Thessalonians’ faithfulness.

Since Paul sometimes exaggerates (see 1 Thess. 1:8), we have to be cautious when interpreting some of his comments. Sometimes he writes as if believers can never fall away. Here, he implies that they *can* lose their faith. His expressions of confidence encourage the readers, but his actions (sending Timothy to strengthen them) suggest that Paul knew the importance of encouragement and personal contact in helping Christians endure trying times and overcome the temptation to give up.

Timothy brings good news (3:6-10)

Paul completes the history by summarizing Timothy’s report: “But Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love. He has told us that you always have pleasant memories of us and that you long to see us, just as we also long to see you.” The desire for face-to-face meeting was frequently included in Greek letters of friendship. By putting this in the letter, Paul encourages the Thessalonians to continue what they are doing.

He reminds them that he endures persecution, too, and that their faithfulness has helped him: “Therefore, brothers, in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith.” He adds, with some exaggeration, “For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord.” Good news like that really lifted our spirits, we might say. It makes our work feel worthwhile again.

Paul thanks God for their continuing faithfulness: “How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you?”

Paul has finished recounting his history with the readers, but the relationship is not finished. It continues by means of this letter, but Paul also hopes that it continues with personal contact.

Paul's prayer (3:10-13)

Just as Paul turned his joy toward God in thanks, he also turns his hopes for the future toward God in prayer: “Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith.”

What was lacking in their faith? Perhaps Paul means that he wants to tell them more about the *content* of their faith — faith in the sense of “the Christian faith.” Judging by this letter, they lack very little; Paul does not criticize what they are doing.

He prays that he will be able to visit them: “Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you.”

And he prays for their spiritual growth: “May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.”

Does “blameless” mean that Paul expects them to be morally perfect by the time Christ returns? Paul's prayer here means about the same thing as “I hope that you achieve everything that God wants you to achieve.” It is a sentiment, not a prophecy, and not a formula for salvation.

First Thessalonians is a letter of encouragement, not a letter of doctrinal instruction, and we should not try to squeeze doctrine out of passages in which Paul is not trying to explain a doctrine. Some parts of the Bible are doctrinal, but other parts are more like a story, and some are motivational. God inspired every type, and we need to receive it the way it is, not try to force it into something else.

Paul will have more to say about love, blameless conduct, and the coming of Christ in the next chapter.

Things to think about

- Have I ever felt that my work in the church was useless? (3:5)
- When have I felt “really alive”? (3:8)
- Who can supply what is lacking in my faith? (3:10)

The Greeks had a word for it: περιχωρησις

Actually, they didn't have a word for it, so they had to make one up. It was in the 7th century, and John of Damascus wanted a word to describe relationships within the Trinity: the Father in the Son and Spirit, the Son in the Father and Spirit, and the Spirit in the Father and Son.

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So John used the word *perichōresis*, which comes from the Greek word *peri*, meaning “around,” and *chōreo*, meaning to “contain,” “hold,” or “make space.” The idea is that the members of the Trinity contain each other, or penetrate or permeate each other.

Interestingly, a similar Greek word, *choreuō*, means “to dance,” and some people have therefore thought that *perichōresis* means literally “to dance around.” It doesn’t. The connection is more of a pun, not a literal definition. However, although the real meaning is mutual indwelling, not dancing, Christian writer Paul Fiddes points out, “The play on words does illustrate well the dynamic sense of *perichoresis*...” (*Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* [Westminster John Knox, 2001], 72; see also the *Journal of Theological Studies*, 1928, pages 242-254).

It is into this dynamic, loving Trinitarian life of the Father, the Son and the Spirit that the Father’s beloved Son Jesus has brought all humanity. As one of us, and as our perfect representative, Jesus presents us to the Father fully redeemed and reconciled in his perfect humanity on our behalf. In Jesus, we dwell with him and the Father and the Spirit in *perichōresis*, mutual indwelling — God in us and we in God.

PREPARING FOR THE LORD’S RETURN: 1 THESSALONIANS 4

Paul has reminded the believers in Thessalonica of their faithfulness in midst of some trials. Now he reminds them of what he taught them about Christian life. Although the Thessalonians had been idolaters (1:9), Paul does not say anything about the need to avoid idolatry. He focuses on sexual purity, love, and work.

He begins with a general principle: “Finally, brothers, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more” (4:1). Paul’s message in Thessalonica was not just about how to get eternal life on the day of judgment — it included instruction about behavior, as well. Some ways of life are more pleasing to God than others — not because God has arbitrary pet peeves, but because our behavior can help or hurt the people he loves (including ourselves).

Paul praises the Thessalonians for already doing what he had told them, and he encourages them to continue, because the instructions are not just Paul’s personal preferences — he was acting as God’s messenger: “For you know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus.”

Sex and sanctification (verses 3-8)

“It is God’s will that you should be sanctified,” Paul begins. “Sanctified” means to be holy, or to be “set apart.” In one sense, all Christians have already been set apart or sanctified or made holy by Jesus Christ. But Paul also encourages believers to set themselves apart for God’s use.

We are already children of God, but Paul exhorts us to act like it, to

make our behavior consistent with what God says that we are. God wants us to set our lives in a certain way.

What does sanctification include? The first thing Paul mentions, and the topic he gives the most space to, is sexual conduct: “that you should avoid sexual immorality.” Greco-Roman religions had few restrictions on male sexuality, and as a result, sexual conduct was always high on the list of moral exhortations given to Gentiles. Paul does not specify here exactly what was included in “immorality” (he and Timothy may have already covered those details) — he just reminds them to avoid what they had already been taught is wrong.

Paul explains this instruction not on the basis of Old Testament laws, but on a more general principle: “that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable.” Self-control was one of the primary virtues of Greco-Roman civilization, and Paul appeals to that cultural value to argue against a common cultural vice.

He contrasts self-restraint with people who are driven by carnal urges: “not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God.” Paul uses the word *ethnē*, which means “nations” or “Gentiles.” His readers were Gentiles, but they are not to live in the same way as everyone else around them. If they indulge in sexual immorality, they are acting as if they are ignorant of who God is and what he wants. They are letting themselves be controlled by the flesh, not the Spirit.

Paul further says that in this matter “no one should wrong his brother or take advantage of him.” Sexual immorality hurts other people, and it should not be done to fellow believers — nor to anyone else, for that matter. People are not to be used for one’s own self-gratification.

Paul adds yet another reason for sexual purity: “The Lord will punish...for all such sins, as we have already told you and warned you.” Part of Paul’s message in Thessalonica was that God would eventually punish selfish behavior that hurts other people. (The 1984 NIV has the word “men,” but in a passage about sexual sin, this could easily be read as referring only to males, when the Greek text is not gender specific. A more literal translation is “the Lord is an avenger concerning all these things.”)

Paul brings the discussion back to God’s will: “For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life.” God wants sexual purity. Anything else is impure, unholy, unspiritual, and unchristian.

Most of Paul’s exhortations are given without supporting

argumentation, but when it comes to sex, it seems that Paul felt that more support was needed. Perhaps the Thessalonians had asked for some reasons for what was, in their culture, an odd restriction. So Paul gives several reasons:

- immorality comes from a lack of self-control,
- 2. it hurts other people,
- 3. God wants us to avoid it, and
- he will punish it.

Paul concludes by reminding the readers that this is God’s idea, not just his own: “Therefore, he who rejects this instruction does not reject man but God, who gives you his Holy Spirit.” Since God is sharing his life and nature with us, and this is the life we want for all eternity, then, as best as we can with his Spirit transforming us, our lives should be holy and conformed to the pattern that Jesus Christ gives us.

Respectable behavior (verses 9-12)

Paul then moves to two other areas of life — love and work. He does not say much about either one, apparently because the Thessalonians are already doing well, and a brief reminder will be sufficient. “Now about brotherly love we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other.” Paul is using two Greek words for love: He did not need to write to them about *philia* love (mutual love) because they already had *agapē* love (unilateral love) for one another.

“And in fact, you do love all the brothers throughout Macedonia.” (Apparently they had some contact with the church in Philippi, and perhaps Berea.) “Yet we urge you, brothers, to do so more and more.” In other words, good job! Keep up the good work!

Paul turns from their behavior with other believers, to their role in the larger society around them: “Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you.” If you want to be ambitious, count yourself a success when you stay out of trouble — that’s a pretty ambitious goal in itself. If you are going to be persecuted, make sure it is for the gospel and not for bad behavior. And don’t be lazy (some Greeks thought that manual labor was beneath their dignity).

He gives two reasons for this: “so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody.” Let your behavior make the gospel more attractive to unbelievers (similar to

Titus 2:5, 8, 10), and don't become financially beholden to someone else. Mooching doesn't do the gospel any favors. Be an asset to society, and people might be a little more willing to listen to what you have to say.

The coming of the Lord Paul's next topic is the return of Christ — the only place in his letters where he gives details about what will happen. The Thessalonian believers wanted to know more about this topic. We'd like to know more, today, too, because some of the things Paul says are puzzling.

He begins by discussing the resurrection of believers who die before Jesus returns. It sounds like someone in the Thessalonian church had died — although it's possible that the people were asking a hypothetical question.

Paul assures them that people who die will not miss out on the great event. They will have places of honor as the saints rise to meet the returning King.

The return of Christ (verses 13-18)

“Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope.” It seems that the Thessalonians had asked about what happens to believers who die before Christ returns. Paul replies that we do not grieve in the way that unbelievers do. Death is still an enemy, so we may grieve, but our sorrow is mixed with hope because we know that we will all live again in far better circumstances.

Paul begins by stating the doctrine: “We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.” Because Jesus has been raised from the dead, we will be, too, if we are spiritually united with him. Those who die will come with Jesus. Just what they are doing in the meantime, Paul does not say.

He quotes a saying of Jesus — one that is not in the Gospels: “According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep.” By using the word “we,” does Paul imply that he expects to live until Christ returns? Many scholars think so, and they suspect the Thessalonians had a similar belief, thus causing their worries about those who die in this age.

However, it is not necessarily so. If Paul had used the third-person “those,” he could have implied that he would not live until the return, and since he did not know one way or another, he used the more pastorally

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optimistic “we.”¹ Paul knew that believers could die before Christ returned, and simple logic would tell him that he might be one of them.

Paul’s point is that people who live until Christ returns will not have any advantage over Christians who die. The living ones will not rise to greet Christ while the dead ones are still struggling to get out of their graves!

Paul sketches a simple sequence: “For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.” There will be a loud sound, and the dead will rise. Do they come with Christ from heaven, or do they rise from graves on earth?

Paul is not dealing with that question — he is just addressing sequence. “After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.” This is the key verse of the “rapture” theory, which says that Christians will rise into the air to meet Christ and then go with him to heaven while the Great Tribulation savages unbelievers on Earth.² Those ideas are not in this verse; they come from other books of the Bible.

Actually, no verse teaches the rapture — it is only when verses from different sections of the Bible are combined, that anyone can construct the theory. The Bible does not promise that believers will escape the Tribulation, nor does it say that Christ will come once for the saints, and then a few years later for the Last Judgment. The believers in Thessalonica would not understand Paul to be saying anything like this.

What would they think? Paul refers to the presence or *parousia* of the Lord; the word *parousia* was also used for the arrival of a king in a city. Whenever the ruler visited, there was a lot of pomp and ceremony. Heralds announced the impending event, and city officials formed a procession to greet the king as he approached, and they would escort him into the city.

By using the word *parousia*, Paul is suggesting that kind of scene: Christ the king will come and his people will go to greet him and escort him as he comes to where they live. The Thessalonian believers were asking about who would be first in the welcoming procession. Those who die are not left out of the party —they’ll be raised so everyone can celebrate together.

The bottom line is simple: “And so we will be with the Lord forever.”

And then Paul writes, “Therefore encourage each other with these words.” What are the encouraging words? Is it that the dead in Christ will be in the welcoming delegation? That we will be in the clouds? Those are

good, but such details pale into insignificance when compared with the eternal result: We will be with Christ forever. That is the message that puts all our trials into perspective, and gives us courage to be faithful until the end.

Things to think about

- How would I respond if someone starting giving me commands I already knew about, and I was already doing a good job in that area? (verses 1, 10)
- How “set apart” is my life for God’s use? Are there areas of my life that are not given to him? (verse 3)
- Why does Paul specify that we should not harm a brother (or sister) in sexual immorality? (verse 5)
- Are all people taught by God to love each other? (verse 9)

The Greeks had a word for it: πορνεία

Paul told the Thessalonians to avoid it. He told the Corinthians to flee from it. He told the Galatians it was a work of the flesh. “It” was sexual immorality — referred to by the Greek word *porneia*. This word comes from *pornē*, prostitute, which comes from the word *pernao*, meaning “to sell.” *Porneia* is what prostitutes sold. The English word pornography comes from this same root word.

Although *porneia* originally meant to consort with prostitutes, it was also used for a variety of other sexual practices outside of marriage, including incest (1 Corinthians 5:1), adultery (Matthew 5:32), the orgy at Sinai (1 Corinthians 10:8; Numbers 25:1), and the immorality in Sodom (Jude 7). “Among you,” Paul writes in Ephesians 5:3, “there must not even be a hint of *porneia*.”

Endnotes

1 Ben Witherington III, *Jesus, Paul, and the End of the World* (InterVarsity, 1992), 24.

2 For a more thorough analysis of this theory, see the chapter below.

DON'T BE SURPRISED: 1 THESSALONIANS 5

In almost every one of his letters, Paul refers to the return of Christ. But he rarely gives any details. His letters to the believers in Thessalonica are exceptions. Apparently they had asked for more information on this topic.

No need for surprise (5:1-11)

After Paul tells them that Christ will return, he discusses the timing in more detail: “About times and dates we do not need to write to you, for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.” Jesus also referred to a thief in the night in the Olivet prophecy (Matt. 24:43). This may have been a common proverb about someone coming at an unexpected time.

“While people are saying, ‘Peace and safety,’ destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.” Labor pains are not totally unpredictable, but this was probably another proverb for something that could not be scheduled precisely.

What sort of “destruction” did Paul have in mind? He refers to “wrath” in verse 9, but he doesn’t give us many details about it. Paul may be referring to the turmoil or tribulation that was expected before the day of the Lord, or perhaps to the day of judgment itself, when some people will find that the world is ruled by someone they don’t like, and they will suffer the consequences of their own actions.

Paul’s purpose is not to tell us about destruction, but to encourage us that we will not experience it: “But you...are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief.” They do not know when the day will

be — Paul’s point is that they won’t suffer loss, because they are always ready.

“You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness.” Paul is using “darkness” as a spiritual category, just as some of the Dead Sea Scrolls do. The believers are children of light, children of God, not of evil and darkness, and that should change the way they live.

“But since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet.” Paul here uses another metaphor, perhaps adapted from Isaiah 59:17. Faith, love, and hope should cover and protect our hearts and minds.

“For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.” God does not want us to experience the unpleasant consequences of sin. He has planned something far better for us — salvation.

In this letter, written to people who were already Christians, Paul does not say much about how a person is saved. The only glimpse comes in verse 10: “He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him.” This is where the discussion started: Whether we live until Christ returns (are awake), or if we die (are asleep), either way, the purpose and result is the same: we will live with him. That’s the salvation he obtained for us.

Paul concludes: “Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.” As the young church struggled to hold on to their faith in a time of persecution, they saw that everything, whether life or death, made sense only in Christ.

Things to think about

- Am I disappointed by the idea that Christ may not return in my lifetime?
- What will I think as I rise into the air to greet Christ?
- Have I used these words to encourage others?
- How does a belief in resurrection lead me to self-control?

The Greeks had a word for it: παρουσία

The Greek word *parousia* comes from the preposition *para*, meaning “near,” and the participle *ousia*, which means “being.” Literally, it means “being near”; in everyday Greek it meant “presence” or “arrival.” In

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addition to these ordinary uses, it also “became the official term for a visit of a person of high rank, especially of kings and emperors visiting a province” (F.W. Danker, ed., *Greek-English Lexicon*, 2000, 781.)

Paul referred to his own presence (Phil. 1:26), and the presence of the “man of sin” (2 Thess. 2:9), but when he used this word he usually meant the presence of Jesus Christ, returning visibly and in strength. As a result, *Parousia* has entered English as a theological term for the return of Christ.

2 THESSALONIANS

Punishment of the unbelievers

The letter tells us that it is from the same three people – Paul, Silas and Timothy, and to the same people: the Thessalonians. They start by giving thanks to God, in this case for the peoples’ faith and love (verse 3). The readers are suffering under persecutions *and* afflictions (verse 4), but are still faithful. “Exactly how Paul has become aware of such developments,” Gorman says, “we do not know.”¹

We are bragging about your endurance, the writers say—which subtly implies that if they quit, the apostles will be embarrassed. (Similarly, Paul encouraged the Corinthians to give more generously because he had been bragging about them to others – 2 Cor. 9:2.)

“This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God and is intended to make you worthy of the kingdom of God” (verse 5, NRSV used for 2 Thessalonians). Grammatically, it is not clear what “this” refers to. It would sound odd to say that the persecutions show that God is righteous, because he has not yet punished the persecutors. The best suggestion, it seems to me, is that “this” refers to the fact that their faith is growing *despite* the persecutions. Bruce writes, “Your *endurance* of tribulation is a sure token of God’s righteous judgment...”² Similarly, Michael Holmes writes:

Paul interprets the fact that the Thessalonians are not only persevering and trusting in the midst of persecution, but actually growing and increasing, as a sign of God’s blessing, not judgment.... The growth, increase, perseverance, and faith demonstrated by the Thessalonians together give evidence that they are indeed part of

God's people.³

Do people become “worthy of the kingdom” by going through trials? I don't think Paul intends that – the writers are trying to encourage the afflicted, not trying to tell us how to be saved. They want to say that faithful endurance will have good results, even eternal rewards.⁴ I wouldn't phrase it the way Paul does here – but maybe I am missing part of the context...

In the future, God will turn the tables on the persecutors, and it will be right for him to do so: “it is indeed just of God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to give relief to the afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels” (verses 6-7). In some unspecified way, God will punish the people for the evil they do, and the believers will have relief when the Lord returns.

Jesus will be “inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel” (verse 8). We are not talking about people who live in the jungles of Borneo – we are not talking about *everyone* who lacks knowledge – we are talking specifically about the people who are persecuting the Thessalonian believers. It's as if this letter is saying, “Your persecutors may be calling you ignorant and disobedient, but *they* are the ones who are really unaware and rebellious, and they will be punished for it.” The goal here is to encourage people who are being persecuted.

“These will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, separated from the presence of the Lord and from the glory” (verse 9). Some say here that eternal destruction means annihilation, but if so, it would seem unnecessary to mention that they will also be separated from God. Paul simply doesn't give us enough detail here for us to know what his beliefs about punishment are.

On the other hand, when the Lord appears, he will “be glorified by his saints and...marveled at on that day among all who have believed” (verse 10). We will praise and honor him, because we believe the gospel message.

So the writers pray again: “asking that our God will make you worthy of his call and will fulfill by his power every good resolve and work of faith” (verse 11). They ask God to help the readers keep their faith even in their difficulties – for God to *make* them worthy. The result will be that both Jesus and the believers will be given more glory (verse 12).

Signs of the end time

“How long, O Lord?” the Thessalonians were no doubt asking, “How

long will it be until we are vindicated, until we get relief, until our enemies are punished for the evil they are doing?”

Some apparently thought it was quite soon, so Paul and his companions write, “We beg you, brothers and sisters, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as though from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord is already here” (2:1-2). Perhaps someone claimed to speak under inspiration, to have a special word of knowledge, or perhaps this was in a letter – we don’t know, and it is possible that Paul didn’t, either. Johnson writes,

Three things have contributed to shaping the crisis: the immaturity of the community, Paul’s instructions in 1 Thessalonians, and the classic apocalyptic scenario of the end-time.... For those already confused concerning when “the Son from heaven” would come to relieve their suffering and bring them salvation (1 Thess. 1:10), the temptation would be great to see in every increment of persecution the final progress toward that climactic moment when God would intervene.⁵

The point is that the Thessalonians should not think that the day of retribution is in the immediate future. (Surely they didn’t think it had *already* arrived, for they were still suffering “The day of the Lord” refers not to a 24-hour period, but to a general span of time, and it seems that they thought this time period had already begun.) As Wright observes, “If ‘the day of the Lord’ meant ‘the end of the world,’ the Thessalonians would not need to be informed of such an event by letter”⁶

It is natural for people undergoing persecution to want an immediate end to their difficulties, and perhaps they were overly ready to believe a claim that the end is near. But it is also possible that a local legend made them especially susceptible to speculation. Macedonia had been the location of the Cabirus cult. Cabirus had supposedly been murdered by his brothers, but had been made one of the gods, and he would eventually return.⁷ The Romans had combined this cult with the Thessalonian city cult, apparently against the wishes of some, and it is possible that “some of the Cabirus cult’s original adherents, having lost what their recently co-opted faith had provided for them, may have found a suitable substitute in the gospel.”⁸

So it was easy for the people to believe that Jesus died, went to heaven, and would return and give benefits to those who believed in him, and it was easy for them to believe that this would happen very soon. When Paul

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called for watchfulness, they may have interpreted it to mean an increased interest in prophecy, whereas he meant it as good behavior.

However, as deSilva notes, it is “not clear what threat this collapse of the future ‘Day of the Lord’ into the present posed to the community beyond the error itself.”⁹ It might make the people look foolish, but isn’t this a harmless error that would, in time, correct itself?

Perhaps, but the hope of future reward can help motivate people to be faithful in times of trial, and if there is no more hope, faithfulness may be seen as pointless. Urgent or not, Paul and his friends have the opportunity to correct the error, and they do so. They do not attack anyone, or get all excited – they simply correct the problem with a little more teaching. They get more emotional in chapter 3 when they are dealing with lazy believers; that is a more serious problem.

No matter what the cause of the idea, Paul, Silas and Timothy respond that certain things must happen before the Lord’s return – a rebellion, a lawless one, and a mystery of lawlessness. Paul (singular) had told them these things earlier (verse 5), but I guess they hadn’t paid enough attention.

Despite all sorts of modern speculations about the apostasy and the son of perdition, we do not know what was meant. One of the ideas out there might be right, but we don’t have enough information to prove which is right. The Thessalonians knew what was restraining him (verse 6), but we do not. Gorman writes:

Paul’s major concern here is not some dogmatic stance about the “antichrist”; and even far less about this figure’s actual identity. (Suggestions for what Paul had in mind include an emperor, a Roman military figure, or a false prophet and/or miracle worker.) His overriding concern is pastoral – to stress the futurity of the parousia (2:3) and to encourage faithfulness to the Lord.¹⁰

Whether this passage cooled their eschatological excitement, we do not know. As we see with modern prophecy speculators, people can get just as hyped up about “signs” of the end as they can about the end itself.

Marshall asks, “What do we make of the fact that nothing that can reasonably be identified as corresponding to this description has happened? The nearest that we have is the desecration and destruction of the Jewish temple in AD 70, but that is not a close fit.”¹¹ Others say that with a little creativity, it’s close enough, and creativity is appropriate when it comes to prophecy. But considering the low chance of making a correct

identification, and the low difference it would make in our Christian life, it's not worth a lot of research time.

The lawless one, with satanic power, will work signs and wonders to deceive people. They are “perishing because they refused to love the truth and so be saved” (verse 10). And because they refused, “God sends them a powerful delusion, leading them to believe what is false” (verse 11), making them worse off than they were before. (See Pharaoh for an example – he hardened his heart, and God hardened it some more.)

These people are really set in their ways. We are not talking about people who never heard of Jesus, or of babies who die in infancy. We are talking about people who heard the truth and refused it, and “took pleasure in unrighteousness” instead. These are the people who will be condemned (verse 12).

Exhortations for believers

But the believers are in a different category. The writers have another thanksgiving section, noting that the Lord loved the Thessalonian believers and God chose them for salvation through the Spirit and through faith (verse 13). As Gorman says, they have a “special calling to be in relationship with the triune God: God (the Father) who elects, the Lord (Jesus) who loves, and the Spirit who sanctifies.”¹²

Verse 14: “He called you through our proclamation of the good news, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Because of this calling, the believers should hold fast to what they have been taught by the apostles.

After a brief benediction and prayer for comfort and strength (verses 16-17), there is another request that the Thessalonians pray for the apostles – not only for success in the gospel, but also deliverance from persecutors (3:1-2). This request would help the Thessalonians remember that they are not the only ones being persecuted.

The writers add, “But the Lord is faithful; he will strengthen *you* and guard *you* from the evil one” (verse 3). It seems that even when requesting prayers for themselves, the writers are thinking primarily of the persecution that the *Thessalonians* are suffering. Their prayer request is designed to encourage the readers.

They express confidence that the Thessalonians will obey (hint of a command that will soon come?), and give a brief prayer for love and steadfastness (verses 4-5). Perhaps they need an extra prayer because of the

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difficulty of the command...

Verse 6 has a forceful command “in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” – they should “keep away from believers who are living in idleness.” This had apparently become a serious problem. Some scholars suggest that people had quit their jobs because they thought the return of Christ was near, but others point out that idleness was a (minor) problem even in the first letter. Perhaps both were involved: the lazy people seized upon the eschatological excitement as an excuse for their laziness.

We are not talking about independently wealthy people here – they were expecting other believers to give them food while they were “living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work” (verse 11). Wright says that this may imply “common distribution of food, perhaps even regular eating of main meals together.”¹³ The Thessalonians had enough problems with persecution from outside; slackers like this on the inside could undermine their morale and lead outsiders to ridicule the gospel.

The writers again remind the Thessalonians to imitate the apostolic example: “You ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you, and we did not eat anyone’s bread without paying for it; but with toil and labor we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you” (verses 7-8). Since the apostles imitated the self-sacrificial behavior of Jesus, the people should imitate the apostles; that is why Paul can give this command “in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.” This is the way of Christ.

So they repeat their command: “Anyone unwilling to work should not eat” (verse 10). They are not welcome at the community meals.

They command the slackers to change their ways (verse 12) – and they command the congregation to shun those who won’t (verse 6) – and repeat the command in verse 14: “Take note of those who do not obey what we say in this letter; have nothing to do with them, so that they may be ashamed.” Marshall observes, “It is assumed that the church has some authority over its members and their way of life.”¹⁴ Whether we should excommunicate a person for laziness today is quite another question. We do not have communal meals.

The believers are growing in love for one another, so it may be psychologically difficult for them to ostracize anyone. So Paul and his companions write, “Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right” (verse 13). You might not like to obey this one, he might say, but you need to do it anyway. Otherwise, the leeches will continue sucking blood

out of the body. The goal is not to kick them out, but get them to change their ways (verse 15).

Paul signs the letter with his own handwriting (verse 17) – a way in which the readers might be able to identify unauthorized letters. Presumably they know what his signature looks like.

Endnotes

¹ Gorman, 171.

² F.F. Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians* (Word Biblical Commentary, 1982), 149.

³ Michael Holmes, *1 & 2 Thessalonians* (Zondervan, 1998), 212.

⁴ “Affliction is not simply an external force to be endured but is a positive factor in the strengthening of their identity. It enables them to grow in faith and love” (Johnson, 289).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 288-89.

⁶ Wright, 147.

⁷ deSilva, 528.

⁸ Simpson, 935.

⁹ deSilva, 545.

¹⁰ Gorman, 177.

¹¹ Marshall, 68.

¹² Gorman, 177.

¹³ Wright, 158.

¹⁴ Marshall, 69.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT “THE RAPTURE”?

By Paul Kroll

The “rapture” is a belief among some Christians about what happens to the church before Jesus’ coming in glory, commonly called “the Second Coming.” They use the phrase “the rapture of the church” to refer to their belief that Christians will be “caught up” to be with Christ sometime around his glorious return. The rapture event is said to protect the church from a period of great tribulation. Those who believe in a rapture rely mainly on one passage of Scripture, 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17:

According to the Lord’s own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.

The rapture doctrine seems to have originated with a man named John Nelson Darby in about 1830. He divided the time of the second coming into two stages. Darby said Christ would come *for* his saints (the “rapture”) before the tribulation and he would come *with* his saints after it, which he thought was Jesus’ true coming in glory or second coming.

Those who believe in the rapture disagree as to when it will occur in

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relationship to the “great tribulation” before Christ returns. They are divided over whether the rapture will happen before, during or after the tribulation. These groups are called *pretribulationists*, *midtribulationists*, and *posttribulationists*. A less prominent variation of the rapture theory is that only the faithful elect within the Christian church community will be caught up at the beginning of the tribulation.

What is our view on the rapture? If we look at 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17, the apostle Paul seems to simply say that at “the trumpet call of God” the dead in Christ will rise first and those believers who were alive would be caught up together with them “in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.” There is no discussion of the church, or a part of the church, being raptured or taken away before, during or after a tribulation period.

Matthew 24:29-31 seems to be describing a similar event. In Matthew, Jesus says that the saints are caught up “after the distress of those days,” which includes the tribulation. They are caught up at Jesus’ second coming. From such Scriptures, it’s hard to see the distinctions that exponents of the rapture attempt to make.

For this reason, the church historically has chosen the straightforward reading of the Scriptures mentioned above, which do not describe a special rapture. The verses in question simply say that the dead saints will be resurrected and will be joined by those who are yet alive when Jesus returns in glory.

The question of what specifically will happen to the church before, during and after Jesus returns in glory is not clearly addressed in Scripture. What we can be sure about is what Scripture is clear and dogmatic about: Jesus will return in glory to judge the world. Those who are found in allegiance to him will be resurrected and live with him in joy and glory forever.

WHO IS THE “ANTICHRIST” AND “MAN OF SIN”?

By Paul Kroll

Christians throughout the history of the church have been fascinated about the identity of the “antichrist,” mentioned in the New Testament. The list of possible candidates to fit his description includes many past and present religious and political leaders.

However, when we look at the scriptural passages that mention the “antichrist,” it becomes clear that they don’t refer to any specific historical personage at all. The Bible uses the term “antichrist” only four times, and it appears only in the letters of John (1 John 2:18,22; 4:2-3; 2 John 7). Jesus, Paul and Peter do not mention the “antichrist.”

In the contexts in which John uses this term, he seems to have been most interested in showing that his *immediate* readers – not some group of Christians living in future times – were in what could be called “the last days.” John’s use of the term “antichrist” was a label that applied to people teaching certain heresies who were or had been associated with the church of his day. Primarily, it was applied to those who denied that Jesus was God Incarnate – that God had come in human flesh (John 1:1, 14). By reading John’s letters, we can see that this “antichrist” teaching was one that existed in *his* day. The people whose teachings John labeled as “antichrist,” and which he had in mind, were ones that must have been then alive.

Any discussion of the “beasts” of Revelation 13 and 17, and especially of the “image” of the beast in 13:11-18 identified by the number 666, causes people to wonder if this is a description of the “antichrist.” In fact,

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Revelation does not use the title “antichrist” for any of the “beasts” – or anything else. As mentioned earlier, the specific name “Antichrist” appears only in John’s epistles. Therefore, whatever Revelation has in mind when it speaks of “the beast,” it is different from the “antichrist” mentioned in John’s letters.

Let us come back to the “antichrist” and ask what it was that such a person taught. If we read the verses mentioned above, we will note that the term “antichrist” described someone who denied that Jesus had come in the flesh (2 John 7) or that Jesus was the Christ (1 John 2:22). This heresy must have referred to individuals who denied the divinity of Jesus and his Incarnation, reducing him to the status of a mere man. It’s also possible some may have taught that the body of Christ was only a spirit, and that it was not real.

Another view of “antichrist” is that the term could refer to those who stood in the “place of Christ,” that is, claimed they were the Christ. Based on what Jesus said about false Christs and false prophets (Matthew 24:4-5, 24), John may have thought he and the church were living in “the last hour” because such heretics had appeared (1 John 2:18).

Who was an “antichrist”? Whoever these people were and whatever their specific teachings may have been, they had left the body of believers (verse 19). This means they were once part of the church but had now departed, presumably to start their own group or groups. John’s controversy was not with unbelievers, but with people who at one time claimed to have been Christians or members of the church.

In conclusion, the term “antichrist” can refer to any individual who opposes the true doctrine about the Incarnation and divinity of Jesus – and his work of salvation as God in the flesh. “Antichrist” has no specific prophetic application to any living or dead political leader such as a Hitler, or to any group, such as a so-called “satanic cult.” John did not pin the title “antichrist” on any single individual. He was identifying any person who denies the Incarnation of Jesus or his deity as true God of true God as such an individual, an antichrist.

Any person who claims to be Christian but denies that Jesus as the Son of God came in the flesh, or who claims to be Christ himself, could fairly be called an “antichrist.” Of course, any individual, group or power that opposes the purposes of God especially as it relates to his work in Jesus, would, in a general way of speaking, be antichrist and anti-God.

The “Man of Sin”

Both Old and New Testaments speak of an individual, representing a system of evil – symbolizing sinfulness – who would arise in the “last days.” The Jewish apocalyptic writings, the Sibylline Oracles, describe this man of evil as a revived Roman emperor Nero coming from Babylon (5:143-148).

The source of this belief in a “man of sin” goes back to Daniel. He had spoken of a fierce king who would arise at the time of the end. This king, said Daniel, “Will exalt and magnify himself above every god and will say unheard-of things against the God of gods. He will be successful until the time of wrath is completed” (11:36).

In this connection, we should mention the apostle Paul’s reference to a “man of lawlessness” or “man of sin” in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12. Sometimes this person is referred to as the “antichrist,” though Paul does not use the word in connection with this individual.

Paul said that something was holding back this individual from accomplishing his nefarious deeds. The implication is that the restrainer, and thus the “man of lawlessness,” was alive in Paul’s day. This means Paul was concerned with someone living in his day, not in the future. Yet, Paul wrote of this “man of lawlessness” as though he would be revealed in the day of the Lord (2 Thessalonians 2:3), which Paul said had not yet arrived (verses 2-3).

Paul said of this person: “He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God’s temple, proclaiming himself to be God” (verse 4). The question arises as to what Paul might have meant by “the temple.” Was it the physical temple in Jerusalem or was he speaking of the church, which he called “God’s temple” (1 Corinthians 3:16-17)?

Commentators point out that Paul wrote his letter less than ten years after the Roman emperor Caligula tried to set up an image of himself in the temple’s Holy of Holies at Jerusalem. Josephus, the Jewish historian, refers to this provocative gesture as well (*Antiquities*, 18:8). A similar desecration of the temple was described by Daniel (9:27; 11:31). This actually occurred during the reign of the Syrian king Antiochus Epiphanes in 167 B.C.

Jesus also said that the temple would once again be desecrated. His words are recorded in Matthew 24:16: “When you see standing in the holy place ‘the abomination that causes desolation,’ spoken of through the prophet Daniel – let the reader understand – then let those who are in

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Judea flee to the mountains...” This probably referred to the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple by the Roman armies in A.D. 66-70, though some see this as a yet future occurrence.

We can see that there is biblical as well as historical precedent for describing the appearance of an evil ruler who would challenge the worship of God. We can, based on the biblical material, appropriately call him “the man of sin.” However, while the biblical allusions to this individual, individuals or system are provocative and interesting, it is impossible to identify any specific person, government or other entity as representing either one.

PAUL'S POLICY ON WOMEN: THREE KEY QUESTIONS ABOUT 1 TIMOTHY 2:12

In 1 Timothy 2, verse 12, Paul writes: “I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent.” Primarily because of this verse, many denominations do not ordain women as elders. Many other denominations do ordain women. Many people have misunderstood what the verse means.

This article does not pretend to give a thorough analysis, but to briefly identify three key questions that can help us clarify what this verse means. For more details, see <http://www.gci.org/church/ministry/women10>.

1. Was this Paul's permanent policy, or was it a temporary policy?

Answer: It was apparently a temporary policy, needed for the situation that Timothy was in. This can be seen by looking at 1 Corinthians 11, verses 3 to 16. In this passage, Paul said that women should have something covering their head whenever they prayed or prophesied. Scholars do not agree on precisely what this head covering was, and for our purposes it does not matter. What is important is that Paul was allowing women to speak.

Where were the women speaking? Paul would not need to give instructions about how women appeared when they were in private. This was some sort of public setting in which male and female believers gathered, prayed, and spoke to one another. This sounds like church.

What were the women speaking about? We know what prayer is, but

what were the women doing when they prophesied? Paul tells us what prophecy is in chapter 14, verse 3: a message spoken to strengthen, encourage, and comfort other people. It might concern the future, but need not. It might be like modern preaching, or might not. The important thing is simply that the women were speaking in a church meeting. Verse 5 says that these messages edify or build up the church.

So the women in Corinth were being inspired by God to give messages that helped men and women in the church. Paul allowed some sort of speaking in Corinth, but in 1 Timothy 2:12, he said that the women should be silent. So to avoid contradiction, at least one of these verses must be seen as temporary. If silence was a permanent policy, then Paul violated his own policy when he allowed women to speak in Corinth. But if permission was the normal policy, it would still be possible for Paul to issue a temporary restriction due to some need in Timothy's situation.

So this line of analysis tells us that 1 Timothy 2:12 should be seen as a temporary policy. Indeed, that is the way that Paul himself describes it: "I do not *permit*..." This was his policy at the time he wrote.

2. This was Paul's policy at the time; was it also God's policy?

In question 1, we focused on the *silence* that Paul commanded, and saw that Paul did not always require women to be silent in meetings of believers. Now we can look at the issue of *authority*. When Paul wrote 1 Timothy, he did not allow women to have authority over men. So we must ask, are we today supposed to have the same policy as Paul did? Or we can ask it another way: Does God have this policy? Does he ever allow women to have authority over men?

Yes, he does. Judges 4:4-6 gives a clear example. Deborah was a prophetess God used to lead the nation of Israel. She "held court under the Palm of Deborah," which was a public place that people could come to. God spoke to her, gave her commands, and she gave those commands to Barak, the military leader of Israel (verse 6). God gave her authority over Barak and the other Israelites.

This was not a worship service, but it is a clear case in which God allowed a woman to have authority over men. However, when Paul wrote 1 Timothy, he did not allow women to have authority over men—and he made no distinction about civil and religious authority. (Deborah made no

distinction in the two types of authority, either, since in her case they were combined.) In question 1, we saw that Paul’s policy about women speaking in church was apparently a temporary policy. Here, we see that his policy about authority is also temporary, since God does not make that sort of restriction permanently.

3. Is 1 Timothy a manual for how churches ought to operate today?

Sometimes people assume that if Paul had a particular policy, then we ought to, too, because he was inspired by God. But if we take a careful look at his letter, we will see that parts of it don’t apply to us today. It was, after all, written to Timothy in first-century Ephesus, not directly to all of us. The letter has a lot of good material in it we *can* apply today, but is also has some things in it that we don’t.

The best example is in chapter 5, verses 3-16. Paul is telling Timothy to put widows on some sort of list (apparently a list for financial support) only if they were over age 60. He says that younger widows are probably going to want to get married and will end up breaking “their first pledge” (apparently some sort of vow they took in order to be on the list for financial support).

Nowadays, we do not maintain this sort of list, and we do not put age restrictions on which widows we will help. Our social and economic circumstances are quite different, and almost all church leaders and biblical scholars recognize this. Nevertheless, Paul gives several commands in this passage that we ignore—even *commands* can be limited to the culture they were given in. How much more so the *policy* that Paul states in 1 Timothy 2:12?

Paul also commands in verse 8 that men should lift their hands when they pray. We do not enforce this as a command today, nor do we greet one another with a holy kiss, as several letters command (for example, 1 Thessalonians 5:26). The principle of friendly greeting is good in today’s church, but Paul went beyond generalities and commanded a specific *form* of greeting that is not appropriate in our culture today.

Clearly, there are some things in Paul’s epistles that do not apply in our culture. The question that we should ask is, Is 1 Timothy 2:12 one of those temporary instructions? From our analysis above, apparently so. This does not mean that it is less inspired, or that we are choosing to ignore the Word

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of God—no more so than when we decide not to command kissing in church, or commanding women to wear head coverings, or when we decide that men do *not* have to raise their hands when they pray. We are not ignoring the Word of God when we recognize that some of it was written for ancient Israel, or for the ancient church, and it does not necessarily apply today in all its details.

Now, not all Christians agree on this matter. Some people believe that the church should restrict women from having leadership roles in the church. We believed that way ourselves for a long time, but we believe that we have now come to a better understanding of the scriptures—more like what Paul really meant, and what God really meant, and what the epistle really is. We believe that when God gives pastoral gifts to women—the ability to teach, to encourage, and to inspire people to follow Christ—then those women may be recognized as elders or leaders within the church.

GOOD PEOPLE NEEDED

1 TIMOTHY 3

Paul gives Timothy instructions about how the church should function and how to address some problems in first-century Ephesus. In chapter 3, Paul describes the kind of people Timothy should appoint as leaders for the churches.

A virtuous person (verses 1-3)

Paul says, “Anyone who desires to be a church official wants to be something worthwhile” (Contemporary English Version used throughout). The Greek word translated as “church official” comes from root words meaning to “look over”; it refers to someone who looks after others. Paul does not say whether it is good or bad to desire this role; he simply says that the role is good.

Then he gives some personal qualities needed for this position: “That’s why officials must have a good reputation and be faithful in marriage.¹ They must be self-controlled, sensible, well-behaved, friendly to strangers, and able to teach...”

Paul is focusing on the *person*, not the duties. Being “able to teach” suggests that leaders are supposed to teach, but Paul doesn’t say much about the details. The character of the person is more important than the specific duties. If you have good people, they will be good for the church.

Paul continues the virtues needed: “They must not be heavy drinkers or troublemakers. Instead, they must be kind and gentle and not love money.” They should not be in it for the money (see also 1 Peter 5:2).

Good management (verses 4-7)

“Church officials must be in control of their own families, and they must see that their children are obedient and always respectful. If they don’t know how to control their own families, how can they look after God’s people?” The church is like a family – we are children of God, and Jesus is our brother – but a church is not exactly like a family. A person might “control” the family, but leaders “look after” the church.

Families and churches are different today from what they were in the first century. In ancient times, a “family” could include dozens of people: children and their spouses, grandchildren and servants, all living together. Culture gave the head of household (usually the oldest male) nearly absolute power over the family. First-century churches were usually small, and met in houses; they found it natural to interact as a household.

People now have different expectations of family and church leadership. The biblical culture was not perfect, and neither is ours, but we all need to work where God has placed us. Paul’s point is that leaders in the church should care for the church in a similar way as they care for their own family, and that their success in their own family is some indication of how well they will do in the church.

Paul is describing the *ideal* candidate – he is not creating a list in which every item must be perfectly met. We see an example of that when he writes, “They must not be new followers of the Lord. If they are, they might become proud and be doomed along with the devil.” Paul did not include that requirement for the church leaders in Crete (Titus 1), because all the believers there were new. Titus just had to pick the best he could.

Paul is not saying that all church leaders must be heads of household; a single person might be an effective leader in some cases. Similarly, personal failures 20 years ago need not disqualify a person who has more recently been a good example. Paul expects Timothy to use common sense and good judgment in the way he applies this list. If no one meets *all* the qualifications, then Timothy should just pick the best person he can find.

Last, Paul says, “they must be well-respected by people who are not followers. Then they won’t be trapped and disgraced by the devil.” Paul himself wouldn’t meet this qualification very well. He was frequently in trouble with religious leaders and government officials. This again shows that Paul is presenting a list of “things to look for” rather than absolute requirements.

Good assistants (verses 8-13)

Paul next describes the personal characteristics needed for another leadership role in the church – the Greek word is *diakonos*; the traditional translation is “deacon.” In many respects, they should be like people in the first group. These are qualities needed not just in church leaders, but in all mature Christians:

“Church officers should be serious. They must not be liars, heavy drinkers, or greedy for money. And they must have a clear conscience and hold firmly to what God has shown us about our faith.” Paul does *not* say that they should be able to teach; this indicates that deacons did not have a teaching role.

Paul suggests a probationary period: “They must first prove themselves. Then if no one has anything against them, they can serve as officers.” In one sense, all church leaders need to “prove themselves” through good personal conduct ahead of time. They need to be “doing the job” before they are formally appointed. Paul also seems to suggest here that the congregation has a role in approving such appointments.

Paul next mentions qualities needed by another group: “Women² must also be serious. They must not gossip or be heavy drinkers, and they must be faithful in everything they do.” Paul will say more about the proper behavior of women in chapter 5. Here, he continues his description of a good deacon:

“Church officers must be faithful in marriage. They must be in full control of their children and everyone else in their home.” A person whose home life is chaotic would probably be unreliable in the church as well. Paul summarizes: “Those who serve well as officers will earn a good reputation and will be highly respected for their faith in Christ Jesus.”

Summary of our religion (verses 14-16)

“I hope to visit you soon,” Paul writes. “But I am writing these instructions, so that if I am delayed, you will know how everyone who belongs to God’s family ought to behave.” Most likely, Paul was never able to visit Timothy in person, but his letter could address a few urgent needs. Due to the way that the Gentile churches were developing, he saw a need to say more about Christian behavior.

Timothy knew well that grace was the basis of our salvation. But perhaps he needed to be encouraged to say more about the way that people

should respond to God’s grace. The gospel of grace teaches that we should have good behavior (Titus 2:11-12). God is sharing his life with us; we are to let him live in us and change us. God gives us life, yes, but if we are going to *enjoy* that life, then it matters a great deal about how we choose to live.

Paul connects our behavior with the message about Christ: “After all, the church of the living God is the strong foundation of truth.” We are to reflect truth in our actions as well as in our words.

“Here is the great mystery of our religion: Christ came as a human.” Although he was divine, he was also human. “The Spirit proved that he pleased God.” As led by the Spirit, Jesus was fully obedient. “And he was seen by angels.” This is not part of the normal apostolic message; it seems to refer to angelic approval while Jesus was living on earth.

“Christ was preached to the nations. People in this world put their faith in him.” This describes the spread of the church in response to what Jesus did. “And he was taken up to glory.” This seems out of chronological sequence, but it suggests that the growth and response of the church continues to give glory to Christ.

The Greeks had a word for it: **ἐπίσκοπος**

The word *episkopos* comes from the Greek roots *epi* and *skopos*, meaning “over” and “one who looks.” It refers to someone who looks after other people. The word *supervisor* is similar, because it comes from Latin words for looking over. “Overseer” is the English-root equivalent. *Episkopos* was eventually shortened to *piskop*, and then became *bishop*, and that is the traditional translation.

The New Testament uses several words for church leaders – overseer (or bishop), elder (presbyter) and shepherd (pastor). The terms seem to be interchangeable. Peter wrote to the elders and told them to be shepherds (pastors) watching over (like a bishop) the believers (1 Peter 5:1-2). Paul gave Timothy qualities of an *episkopos* (1 Tim. 3:2) but not for an elder, even though Ephesus had elders (1 Tim. 5:17). In Titus, the description of elders blends right into that of bishops (Titus 1:6-9).

The Bible does not describe exactly what these leaders were to do – that may depend on local circumstances.

Endnotes

¹ Some translations say “married only once,” but this is misleading, since

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the Greek word was used for behavior *within* a marriage, not the number of marriages. A single person can be a good leader for the church; so can a person who has remarried after death of a spouse or a divorce.

The Greek words literally mean “a one-woman man.” Rules were often put in the masculine even if they applied to women as well. For a lengthy study of whether women can have positions of leadership in the church, see <http://www.gci.org/church/women>.

² Grammatically, it is not clear whether Paul means female deacons, or the wives of the male deacons. I think that he is referring to female deacons, because it would be odd to mention qualities needed for the wife of a deacon, when Paul has said nothing about the wife of an overseer. If Paul *is* referring to wives, then he is also implying that they had special functions within the church, and had a distinct role of their own.

THE STRANGE LIST OF WIDOWS

1 TIMOTHY 5

Most people read this chapter without thinking much about it. Almost no one has ever heard a sermon on it. But it is an important passage for helping us understand what the Bible is, and how we use it in the church today.

Various age groups (verses 1-2)

The church in Ephesus had a variety of problems, and Paul sent Timothy, one of his best assistants, to Ephesus to set matters back on track. Paul delegated his authority to Timothy, and he did not want Timothy to act arrogantly. So he advises:

“Do not sharply rebuke an older man, but rather appeal to him as a father, to the younger men as brothers, the older women as mothers, and the younger women as sisters, in all purity” (NASB throughout).

This is good advice: treat people with respect, as if they are part of your own family. Even if you have authority over others, don't just give orders. Instead, try to persuade people, and explain reasons for cooperation, instead of demanding it.

Maintain purity in your relationships—not only with young women, but with all people. Don't take advantage of people who are weaker than you are.

Widows with families, and those without (verses 3-8)

Paul then gives advice on dealing with widows. From what he writes, we can see that there had been some sort of problem with widows in the

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church. He begins by implying that some widows should be treated differently from other widows: “Honor widows who are widows indeed.”

Some widows are not really widows, he seems to be saying. And then he explains: “but if any widow has children or grandchildren¹, they must first learn to practice piety in regard to their own family and to make some return to their parents; for this is acceptable in the sight of God.”

If the widow has family members who can take care of her, then they should be taking care of her. She is not a “real” widow, and the church does not need to treat her in the same way that the church deals with a widow who has no one to help her. The TNIV explains the idea in this way: “Give proper recognition to those widows *who are really in need.*”

What should Timothy do with widows who have no children to take care of them? “Now she who is a widow indeed and who has been left alone, has fixed her hope on God and continues in entreaties and prayers night and day.” The genuine widow is not only “alone”—without any family to support her—she is also pious, depending on God to take care of her, praying constantly.

But just as not all children are willing to take care of their familial responsibilities, not all widows are willing to dedicate their lives to God: “But she who gives herself to wanton pleasure is dead even while she lives.”

Some widows are more focused on worldly pleasures than on serving God. No matter whether they have children to support them or not, they are “dead”—they are not participating in the life that God has designed for them.

So what is Timothy supposed to do about it? “Prescribe these things as well, so that they may be above reproach.” But just what are “these things” that Timothy is to prescribe? Perhaps that a widow without children should look to God, rather than giving herself to wanton pleasures.

But Paul’s main concern here seems to be on widows who have children or grandchildren—Timothy is to “prescribe” to the children that they should take care of their widowed mother. This is made clear in the next verse:

“But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.” This verse is often taken out of context to say that a man should provide for his wife and children. That is a valid application of the principle—but in *this* context, it means that children should provide for their widowed

mother.

The problem in Ephesus apparently involved widows whose children claimed to be believers, and yet wanted the church to take care of their widowed mother. But if adult children won't support their own mother, then they are acting worse than pagans, and presumably they should not be counted as believers; they are refusing to act in accordance with the faith.

The list of widows (verses 9-12)

Paul then refers to a "list": "A widow is to be put on the list only if she is not less than sixty years old." As we read further, we will see what sort of list this is.

Just as Paul gave qualifying characteristics of church leaders in chapter 3, now he describes the sort of person who can be "on the list":

As already mentioned, she must be 60 or older,

"having been the wife of one man,
having a reputation for good works;
and if she has brought up children,²
if she has shown hospitality to strangers,
if she has washed the saints' feet,³
if she has assisted those in distress,
and if she has devoted herself to every good work."

Perhaps it is not yet clear what this "list of widows" is. But if we skip ahead to verse 16, we will see that it involves financial assistance from the church. Widows with adult children should be supported by their children; widows without children may be supported by the church.

How strict should Timothy be in including widows on this roster of support? What if she had been widowed twice—does she therefore not meet the description of being "the wife of one man"? Literally, she does not—but the Greek word was not used in such a literal way. A widow who remarried could still be considered "the wife of one man" if she was faithful to her second husband.⁴ (The TNIV captures the meaning by saying "faithful to her husband.")

What if the woman was age 59, but handicapped in some way? What if she never had any children to bring up? What if she had been a slave, or was too poor to "show hospitality to strangers"?

In a list like this, Paul is not trying to cover every possible situation. Rather, he is giving a general description, and he assumes that Timothy is sensible enough to make exceptions based on the circumstances. Similarly,

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we need to *read* with some common sense, not just in this list but also in chapter 3, making allowance for the situations we find ourselves in.

Paul wants to ensure that the widows on the assistance roster really need to be there, and that people should not abuse the charity of the church. But something more than financial need is involved. Paul is also concerned about the behavior of the widows: “But refuse to put younger widows on the list, for when they feel sensual desires in disregard of Christ, they want to get married, thus incurring condemnation, because they have set aside their previous pledge.”

What is this “previous pledge”? It is apparently a vow to not marry again. Widows could not be on the support roster unless they had promised to remain widows for the rest of their lives. In return for support from the church, they were to spend their lives in prayer.

But Paul did not think that a woman of age 50 or 55 could be trusted to do this: she is likely to have “sensual desires” so strong that she will break her promise and remarry. She should not be on the roster of widows who received assistance from the church.⁵

Was Paul correct in his assumption about a woman’s sensual desires? Perhaps it was generally true in first-century Ephesus, perhaps not; we have no way of knowing. But we cannot assume that the same is true today. It is not true that all women under age 60 are so prone to sensual desires that they are unable to keep a pledge of celibacy.

Paul lived in a particular culture, received some of his ideas about women from his culture, and he was writing to people who lived in that same culture. His advice may have been good in his cultural setting, but it would be wrong for us to insist that his assumptions hold true in our culture as well.

When we read Scripture, we need to be aware that it was written in a certain cultural context, and that culture affected the way it was written—not just in language (Greek) but also in the way beliefs are explained. We today live in a different culture, and our culture affects the way that we *read* Scripture. We bring our own assumptions to the text. Neither culture is “correct,” and our goal in reading is not that we re-create the ancient culture, but to learn from how God inspired the ancient writers to instruct people in the ways of God *in that situation*.

The instructions are usually good for us as well, but sometimes they address social circumstances that are so unlike our own that we would be

wrong to follow the instructions to the letter. Just as Timothy needed to use some common sense in applying the description of a “widow indeed,” we need to think about how we apply his instructions to our day.

Does that mean that we let modern culture tell us what is right and wrong? No—but neither can we assume that what was “right” in first-century Ephesus is necessarily right for the church today. Despite what Paul commanded Timothy to do, we do not set up a roster of widows age 60 and over who vow to remain unmarried. What was appropriate then, is not now.

Most Christians have not thought much about *why* we ignore this passage of Scripture. Even in fundamentalist churches, there is no movement to “get back to the original church” in regard to widows. Why not? It is because *everyone* reads with cultural assumptions, and people in the 19th and 20th centuries, for example, looked at this chapter with a filter that says “we don’t do this nowadays.”

And yet when they looked at 1 Timothy 2:12, they responded, “We ought to do this; this is inspired instruction from an apostle of Christ, and anyone who thinks otherwise is disobedient to the inspired Scriptures.” But they never gave much thought as to why they could ignore one passage, even though it contained several commands, and yet insist on the other, which simply stated Paul’s current policy. They were *selectively* literalist, because their own culture caused them to be more aware of some issues than others. They turned commands into suggestions, and suggestions into commands.

This is only to be expected. Writers and readers all live in a certain culture, and each culture affects which questions we address, the way in which we address them, and the way in which we read what others wrote in different settings. Our goal is not to do church and family in exactly the way it was done in Paul’s day, but to hear the Holy Spirit in applying the love of God in the situations *we* are in.

Advice for younger widows (verses 13-16)

As we continue reading this passage, we will see more about the situation Paul was addressing. He says this about the younger widows: “At the same time they also learn to be idle, as they go around from house to house; and not merely idle, but also gossips and busybodies, talking about things not proper to mention.”

The problem was not just that young widows were a financial drain on

the church—there was also a behavioral problem: the women were spreading gossip instead of praying, and teaching things they should not.⁶ Paul concluded that this problem affected all women under age 60. His conclusion may have been true in first-century Ephesus, but we should not assume that it is true in all cultures and all ages.

What should younger widows do instead? “Therefore, I want younger widows to get married, bear children, keep house, and give the enemy no occasion for reproach; for some have already turned aside to follow Satan.”

Paul states this as his preference (in this, it is similar to 1 Corinthians 7:7 and 7:26). God inspired Scripture to include opinions of the writer; not everything in Scripture is a command for all peoples in all situations.⁷

Paul’s desire is nearly impossible for a widow aged 55—she is not likely to “bear children” even if she does marry. Although Paul’s desire is in inspired Scripture, we cannot assume that his advice is always appropriate for the church today. Our circumstances are different.

Paul concludes: “If any *woman* who is a believer has dependent widows, she must assist them and the church must not be burdened, so that it may assist those who are widows indeed.”

His instructions here could apply quite well to a *man* who had dependent widows. So why did Paul specify a woman? I suspect it was because a specific woman was involved in the problem in Ephesus: a woman in the church did not want to support her own mother and/or grandmother, and expected the church to take care of them. Meanwhile, she and other women spent their time in spreading gossip and indulging in “wanton pleasures.”

So Paul gave a few rules that would prevent such a problem—but the advice he gave for first-century Ephesus is not designed to be a policy manual for all churches in all cultures and all centuries. We should not assume that all Scripture is inspired for this particular purpose, or that it must be applied “to the letter.”

The challenge for us today

All of Paul’s letters were written to specific churches, to address specific situations. Some of his teachings apply today; others *need* to be adapted for our situations. This means that we need to read cautiously, and to read with *humility*.

An attitude of “God said it. I believe it. That settles it” may sound good at first, but it is erroneous and arrogant. The error can be shown in that we could find commands in Scripture that such people ignore. The arrogance is

that such people think that their *own* understanding of Scripture settles the matter. They think they know everything that needs to be known.

Almost anyone in modern society is able to read Scripture, and able to benefit from the reading. Scripture has long been a key component in spiritual formation and growth. But a person could memorize the entire Bible and still not understand how and when to apply it. Reading, in itself, does not make anyone an expert in the subject.

Parts of Scripture are hard to understand, and some parts are easy to *mis*understand. We read them and *think* we know what they mean, when we have missed the point entirely. Some expertise is needed—an expertise that we cannot expect every believer to acquire.

Every believer should try to understand, but with the humility that is aware that some misunderstanding might be present as well. So we need to read Scripture in a community, and listen to what others in the Christian community say about Scripture—especially those who have studied it more than we have. Scripture is like most any other subject: people who spend more time generally learn more, and people who enroll in *formal* study generally learn much more.

Each of us does something for our own health every day: we eat, we get some exercise, we avoid certain dangers. But when things go wrong, we usually seek professional help, from people who have more experience in dealing with this particular type of problem and how it might be fixed.⁸ The existence of experts does not minimize the importance of our daily attempts to take care of our health, but if we are willing to listen, the experts can help us make our daily routines more effective.

In the same way, the church has various levels of specialization in theology and Scripture. This does not mean that believers should roll over and play dead, passively absorbing whatever the “experts” teach. Rather, it means that believers should be willing to learn from people who have studied more, so that each believer might study Scripture more effectively, think about God more accurately, and live more fruitfully.

Although we do not maintain a list of widows in the way that Paul commanded for Ephesus, we can nevertheless learn much from this passage. Indeed, it is precisely because we do *not* maintain a list of widows, that we can learn from this passage about the nature of Scripture itself, what it was inspired to contain, and the care that we need as we read instructions written to other people in a different era and a different culture.

Endnotes

¹ The “children or grandchildren” under discussion here are presumably members of the church, who are willing to “practice piety” by taking care of their own family. Paul does not say what Timothy should do if the children are unbelievers who shirk their duty toward their widowed mother.

² The requirement that she has raised children is surprising, since another requirement is that if she has children, they should be supporting her. If we are strict about the requirements, she would qualify for the list only if all her children have died.

³ Footwashing is a metaphor for serving others. If everyone in the church literally washed someone’s feet in an annual ceremony, everyone would meet this requirement and there would be no need to mention it.

⁴ Paul uses a similar word in the qualifications for church leaders: “husband of one wife” (3:2). But Paul is not concerned about whether the person has been married before—the concern is for how the person is currently functioning in marriage. The TNIV says, “faithful to his wife.”

⁵ We might think that the problem was the pledge, but Paul does not seem to entertain that thought. He believes that the pledge is necessary, and the problem is that people might break it.

⁶ This is probably one of the reasons why Paul was not, at that time, allowing women to be teachers in the church (2:12). There was a problem in Ephesus specifically with women.

⁷ 1 Timothy 2:12 is another example—it is given as Paul’s policy, not as a command for all situations. But even when Paul states something as a command, it may be colored with his own cultural assumptions and preferences. When he says, Greet one another with a holy kiss, he is phrasing his command with terminology appropriate to his culture, but not appropriate for ours.

We see another example in 1 Timothy 5:23: “Use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments.” This advice was intended for one specific person: Timothy. Nevertheless, it is part of inspired Scripture. We go wrong if we assume that everything in Scripture is designed directly for us.

⁸ Generally, we want our doctors to have legitimate degrees, to be recognized by other experts as having achieved a certain level of expertise. There is no need for every Christian to become an expert in the study of Scripture—just as there is no need for everyone to become an expert in

electricity, even though we use it every day. When electrical problems arise, we often have to call upon someone who has more experience and training than we do. The electrician may use technical terms that are not part of our vocabulary, but that is only to be expected. Every field of study has its own specialized vocabulary, and we admit that we do not know everything there is to know about electrical work.

The same is true in health and medicine. When medical problems arise, most people are quite willing to call on specialists who work full time learning more about the way the body works, and the way that problems can be fixed. And when we seek such help, we do not want someone who is self-taught, or who has purchased a certificate from the fictitious “University of Central Zanzibar.” No, we want some assurance that the person is legitimate, and actually knows something about our problem.

Some people do all their own electrical work, and some of them do a very good job at it—especially if they have previous experience. But others create a house full of hazards, a nightmare for the next person who owns the house. And some people insist on doing their own health care. Some do a good job; others create health hazards for everyone who listens to their quack ideas.

In the same way, some people insist on studying the Bible all by themselves. There is nothing wrong with studying the Bible—the problem arises when people insist on doing it alone, as if they alone have the inside track on what the Bible means. They may even be ordained by some odd group, but they are essentially self-taught, and usually proud of it. They are hazardous.

PAUL'S FAREWELL LETTER 2 TIMOTHY 1

During the reign of Emperor Nero, the apostle Paul was placed on “death row” in a Roman prison. Although he had been released from prison several times before, Paul now senses that death will be his only escape. He writes his last letter to the man who had worked with him the longest. He encourages Timothy to continue his work.

Paul begins by explaining who he is: “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, for the sake of the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus” (NRSV in this chapter).

Timothy already knows that Paul is an apostle, so why does Paul include it? He probably wants Timothy to see himself in similar terms: appointed by the will of God and promised life in Christ. Timothy should not view his work as optional, and even if officials threaten to kill him, he needs to remember that life is guaranteed in Christ, not in the Empire.

“To Timothy, my beloved child: Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.” By calling Timothy his “beloved child,” Paul sets a tone of affectionate advice.

Be bold with the gospel (verses 3-7)

Paul begins with indirect praise: “I am grateful to God—whom I worship with a clear conscience, as my ancestors did—when I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day.” Paul gives God the credit for all the good that he sees in Timothy, and he assures Timothy that he is praying for him. He mentions his “clear conscience” — something he wants Timothy to have, too.

“Recalling your tears, I long to see you so that I may be filled with joy.” We do not know what the tears were about —perhaps Timothy’s sorrow at leaving Paul, thinking that it might be the last time they would see each other.

Paul reminds Timothy of his roots: “I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you.” Paul wants Timothy to continue in this same path.

“For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands.” Since you have faith, Paul says, put it to use. 1 Timothy 4:13-14 implies that Timothy’s “gift” was preaching the gospel. And as we continue reading this letter, we see that this is what Paul wants him to do.

“For God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.” Don’t shrink back, Paul says — be bold. God gives us what we need: strength, love for others, and self-discipline. When it comes to the gospel, many people have a spirit of timidity, but timidity is not from God. So we might need to pray for strength, or love, or self-discipline. All of these come from God.

Was Timothy timid? Paul’s words might simply be a rhetorical strategy. He had sent Timothy on several difficult missions; it seems that Paul was confident in Timothy’s ability and willingness. He wanted to encourage him to continue the good work he was already doing.

Don’t be ashamed of suffering (verses 8-12)

Since God gives us what we need, “do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner.” Most people *would* be ashamed: Paul was on death row for telling people that Jesus, not Nero, was Lord and King. Jesus had been executed as an enemy of the Empire, and Paul seemed headed for that, too. Timothy had helped Paul spread his message.

“But join with me in suffering for the gospel, relying on the power of God ...” You will suffer for doing it, but God will give you the help you need.

And then Paul reminds Timothy of what the gospel is, and why he should preach it: God “saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace.” The word *holy* means “set apart for God.” God not only gives us eternal life, he

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tells us that our life has purpose — we are set apart for God’s use.

“This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.” Even before God created us, he knew that we would need a Savior, and he forgave us ahead of time.

Although the plan for salvation was in place all along, people didn’t know about it until Christ came. He defeated our worst enemy, death, and gave us the good news of eternal life. “For this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher.” Timothy already knows Paul’s commission, but Paul says it here because it applies to Timothy, too. He is passing the baton to someone who will continue the work. The job is larger than anyone can do, so part of the job is recruiting, training, and passing it along to others.

The message is good news, and yet it is not always accepted as good. “For this reason I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know the one in whom I have put my trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day what I have entrusted to him..”

Timothy has also been appointed as someone who should testify about Christ and the immortality Christ has revealed. Timothy need not be ashamed, nor afraid of prison and death, because he knows that Christ is faithful — we can trust our lives to him, and he’ll keep every promise he has made.

Keep the treasure safe (verses 13-18)

After explaining his own commission and commitment, Paul then addresses Timothy more directly: “Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.” I did it — now you do it. Don’t change the message — repeat it.

“Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us.” The “good deposit” is the message of salvation, and it is preserved with the help of God’s Spirit. Paul is not explaining doctrine — he is creating a motivational message, mixing commands, personal testimony, and assurance to help Timothy carry on without him.

Paul then refers to his own situation in Rome: “You are aware that all who are in Asia have turned away from me, including Phygelus and Hermogenes.” These men didn’t necessarily desert Christ, but they were afraid to help Paul in his most recent troubles.

In contrast to them, Paul praises someone who was not afraid: “May the Lord grant mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, because he often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chain.” Onesiphorus had helped Paul in prison, and now Paul asks God to help his family. Was he still alive? We do not know.

Instead, “when he arrived in Rome, he eagerly searched for me and found me.” This is an example that Timothy might need to copy when he comes to Paul (4:21).

“May the Lord grant that he will find mercy from the Lord on that day!” Did Paul think that he needed to ask God to show mercy to a loyal worker? No; Paul is playing on words: Just as Onesiphorus *found* Paul, Paul wants him to *find* mercy. Paul knows that the Lord *will* give him mercy, because the Lord is full of mercy, and it has already been granted, even before time began. Nothing can change that.

Things to think about

- Is there someone for whom I frequently thank God? (verse 3)
- Has God given me a gift that I should fan into flame? (verse 6)
- Am I embarrassed by the gospel? (verse 8)
- Am I willing to be embarrassed by the gospel?
- How does the Holy Spirit help me guard the gospel? (verse 14)

The Greeks had a word for it: συνείδησις

The Greek word *syneidēsis* first meant to be aware of something, to be conscious of something. 1 Peter 2:19 uses it in that sense, referring to a person who “is conscious of God”— aware of his existence.

But *syneidēsis* came to be used primarily for self-awareness, especially beliefs that one’s actions are right or wrong: the conscience. People can have a good conscience, thinking that they have done right (2 Tim. 1:3), or a bad conscience, believing that they have done wrong (Heb. 10:22). The conscience can lack sensitivity (1 Tim. 4:2) or be overactive (1 Cor. 8:10-12).

The conscience not only evaluates past actions, but also considers whether future actions are right.

WORK HARD FOR THE LORD

2 TIMOTHY 2

In this letter, Paul gives final exhortations to Timothy, encouraging him to be a faithful worker in the word of truth. The work will be difficult, but it will be worth it.

Strengthened by grace (verses 1-7)

Paul exhorts Timothy: “You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.” Being “strong in grace” could have several meanings: 1) to be confident in God’s grace toward humanity, 2) to emphasize grace in preaching, or 3) emboldened by God’s grace, to be confident in all of life.

Paul knows that he is going to die, and Timothy will die, too. So Paul wants him to train some replacements, to create an expanding network of teachers: “And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others.” This is a good principle for ministry today.

Timothy will encounter problems, persecution, and sometimes even boredom. Timothy needs to be mentally prepared for the challenges. So Paul reminds him that he needs to be committed: “Endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus.” Timothy is not alone — he is enduring it “with us.” And he is not working for himself — he is working for Christ.

“No one serving as a soldier gets involved in civilian affairs — he wants to please his commanding officer.” It’s OK to be *involved* in secular affairs — Paul sometimes worked as a tentmaker — but Timothy should not be *entangled* in the secular world, looking there for his sense of self-worth. He is primarily a servant of Jesus, and he should seek to please Jesus, even if he

has a secular job.

Paul moves to another metaphor: “Similarly, if anyone competes as an athlete, he does not receive the victor’s crown unless he competes according to the rules.” Paul hints at a “victor’s crown” for Timothy, when the work is done the way his commander wants it done.

A third metaphor: “The hardworking farmer should be the first to receive a share of the crops.” Paul again hints that Timothy will receive something in return.

Paul was not the first to use soldiers, athletes and farmers as examples of diligence — various Greek writers used the same three metaphors. Paul uses this trio to point out that gospel work involves toughness, focus, obedience and hard work. He concludes by inviting Timothy to see himself in these metaphors: “Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this.”

The gospel (verses 8-13)

Paul now moves to another topic, and a different style. He begins with a pithy saying: “Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel...” It’s about Jesus, summarized here by his resurrection and his role as Messiah in the line of David.

Paul sometimes gave more prominence to the crucifixion, but as he sat on death row, the resurrection might well grow in importance. And Jesus’ Davidic role may be what got Paul into the most legal trouble: he was proclaiming that Christ was king.

It is the gospel “for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal.” But ironically, “God’s word is not chained.” The work is still being done, because Paul gave the message to reliable workers who could teach many more.

“Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory.” Why should Timothy work hard and risk persecution? Earlier, Paul hinted at a reward. Here, he emphasizes the results it has for other people — he wants others to become aware of and grasp the salvation that is (already) in Christ. That is something he can feel good about forever: the reward is intrinsic to the work.

Paul includes another summary of the message — this one has rhythm to make it easier to remember. “Here is a trustworthy saying: If we died with him [and we did], we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also

reign with him” [another hint of reward].

And what happens with the opposite extreme? “If we disown him, he will also disown us. If we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself.” In the first three pairs, we are like Christ. In the fourth, Paul breaks the parallelism: If there is any failure in the process, it is because *we* have rejected our Savior. If we follow him, we will get what we want: eternal glory. If we reject him, we will also get what we want: he will let us leave. His desire for us continues; the question is, whether we will continue to desire him.

Good work (verses 14-19)

In another change of style and topic, Paul begins to warn Timothy that some doctrinal discussions are a waste of time: “Keep reminding them of these things” — of the central truths of the gospel. “Warn them before God against quarreling about words; it is of no value, and only ruins those who listen.” What words were people arguing about? We do not know.

In contrast to fruitless arguments, Paul advises Timothy to “do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.” Timothy needs to work with the gospel correctly, with no regrets when he presents himself to God.

The context, in the verse before and the verse after, is not people who refuse to work, but people who use the truth in a crooked way. They distort it, argue about irrelevant concepts, or go on and on without ever getting anywhere. So Paul advises, if you don’t want to be embarrassed, then “avoid godless chatter, because those who indulge in it will become more and more ungodly.” Don’t waste your time with pointless discussions.

If we give them a platform to speak from, “their teaching will spread like gangrene.” And then Paul gives a specific example: “Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have wandered away from the truth. They say that the resurrection has already taken place, and they destroy the faith of some.”

We are not sure how those two men got that idea. Maybe they took Paul’s idea that we are raised with Christ, to conclude that we already have *all* that God has to offer. That idea would not be very attractive to an apostle on death row! They probably thought their idea was the most important teaching in the church, but Paul says it was a waste of time, and it had caused some people reject Christianity.

Even though some people lead others astray, “nevertheless, God’s solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription: ‘The Lord knows those who are his,’ and, ‘Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness.’”

The Greco-Roman world had many buildings with inscriptions. If God’s church had a foundation stone, what would be inscribed on it? Paul says it would have a promise, and a warning. God will be faithful to his people, and his people need to stay away from sin. If we want the results of righteousness, we need to do what is righteous. We need to be faithful to our commanding officer.

A noble instrument (verses 20-26)

Paul turns from the building, to objects inside the building: “In a large house there are articles not only of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay; some are for noble purposes and some for ignoble.” Some are fine dinnerware; others are good for scraping mud off your boots. Some are ornate decorations, and others are chamber pots.

But what is Paul’s point in this analogy? “If a man cleanses himself from the latter, he will be an instrument for noble purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work.” There’s a good way to live, and a bad way. If we want the results of righteousness, then we need to put wrong ways out of our lives. So Paul advises Timothy to “flee the evil desires of youth, and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart.” All of us who follow Christ should love these virtues.

And then Paul returns for a third blast against fruitless disagreements: “Don’t have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels.” Some people may try to divert your attention toward *their* favorite topic of disputation, but don’t take the bait.

“The Lord’s servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful.” Just teach the truth; don’t get involved in personal attacks (which were common in the ancient world; there was intense competition for status and honor, often at the cost of insulting and tearing down possible competitors).

Paul explains how to deal with enemies: “Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to

do his will.” They have a distorted view of reality, and they unwittingly serve the devil’s purposes. But we do not condemn — we hope for the best, praying that God will eventually help them see the truth.

When personal resentment rises up within us, we need to respond not only with prayer for our opponent, but also prayer for ourselves, that we too might escape the trap of the devil.

Things to think about

- Is my pastor training the next generation of leaders? (verse 2) Is there anything I can do to make it easier for my pastor to do that?
- Do I feel like a soldier or an athlete working for Christ? (verse 5)
- What does it mean for Christ to be faithful even to the faithless? (verse 13)
- What is the most recent fruitless argument I have seen? (verse 14)
- What “ignoble” activities reduce my usefulness to the Master? (verse 21)

The Greeks had a word for it: ορθοτομέω

Orthotomeō comes from *orthos*, meaning straight, and *temnō*, meaning to cut. We see *ortho* in English words such as orthodontist and orthodoxy; we see the root *tom* in words such as appendectomy and atom (something that supposedly could not be cut).

Literally, *orthotomeō* means to cut straight, a skill needed in tentmaking and other crafts. Paul uses the word in 2 Timothy 2:14 as a metaphor for accurate work in the “word of truth.” The emphasis is accuracy, not surgery. Paul is not talking about dividing the truth, nor is he talking specifically about Scripture. Rather, he wants the gospel to be handled correctly, and that Timothy not be distracted away from its central truths.

The word is used in other Greek literature for cutting a road through a forest — the emphasis is on making a straight path, not on cutting the forest in two. In the context of 2 Timothy, Frederick Danker suggests that the word implies to “guide the word of truth along a straight path (like a road that goes straight to its goal), without being turned aside by wordy debates or impious talk” (*Greek-English Lexicon* [University of Chicago Press, 2000], 722).

STAYING ON TRACK WHEN OTHERS ARE NOT: 2 TIMOTHY 3

In Paul's last letter to his favorite assistant, he warns Timothy about the opposition that Timothy will face, and encourages him to continue what he already knows is true.

Living in terrible times (verses 1-5)

This chapter begins with a warning: "But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days." Many Jews speculated about what the future held, and many predicted that society would reach its worst point just before God intervened to straighten everything out. As verse 5 makes clear, Paul is saying that the "last days" are already under way (see also Acts 2:16-17 and Hebrews 1:2).

But that was almost 1,950 years ago. How could the first century be the "last days"? Either Paul was mistaken as to how soon Christ would return, or else we are mistaken in how Paul is using the language of prophecy. Or both.

It is a mistake for us to look at Paul's description, see it happening around us, and conclude that Christ will soon return. We live in the last days, yes, but so did Paul. If Christ's return could be 2,000 years away from Paul, it might be for us, too. It could be very soon, but it might not, and current events do not prove it one way or the other.

Let's look at Paul's description: "People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers

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of pleasure rather than lovers of God — having a form of godliness but denying its power.”

Missing from this list is torture, murder and genocide; the list seems a bit tame in comparison to atrocities that also existed in the ancient world. Paul is not describing the worst of all possible worlds — he is describing Timothy’s opponents: people who might look like they are godly, but who are actually rejecting the gospel.

Paul does not say here what his opponents taught, but other ancient writings help us make an educated guess. Many Greeks thought that spirit is good and matter is bad, so a good God did not create the physical world. Rather, he created a lesser god, who created a yet lesser god, who created another, who created another, etc., in a long series of gradually less-good gods, one of whom was finally so far removed from perfection that he created the physical world, and human souls somehow got trapped in physical bodies.

Salvation was seen as the process of escaping matter, and it required a person to learn the genealogy of the gods and the way to navigate up through these levels in order to reach the original perfection. There was no evidence for these speculations, but they were attractive to some Christians in the first and second centuries. Paul’s advice was simple: “Have nothing to do with them.”

Truth will prevail (verses 6-9)

Paul describes the result such people were having in the early church: “They are the kind who worm their way into homes and gain control over weak-willed women, who are loaded down with sins and are swayed by all kinds of evil desires, always learning but never able to acknowledge the truth.”

These smooth-talking salesmen were able to convince some women (sections of 1 Timothy seem to address the same problem), and even though the women learned all sorts of secret “knowledge,” they never really learned anything useful. Their anxiety about their sins and desires made them easy prey for a philosophy that offered a way for them to work their way out of the problem. The real truth is much simpler: Christ has done it for us; we do not need to be burdened with guilt or enslaved to our own desires.

Paul compares them to Egyptian magicians: “Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so also these men oppose the truth — men of depraved

minds, who, as far as the faith is concerned, are rejected.” “Rejected” is too strong of a translation; the Greek word *adokimos* may also mean “incorrect” or “unapproved.” God has not totally rejected them, but we should reject them *as far as the faith is concerned*, that is, we reject what they teach.

“But they will not get very far,” Paul concludes, “because, as in the case of those men [i.e., Jannes and Jambres], their folly will be clear to everyone.” Paul does not tell us when or how (indeed, he says in verse 13 that the deceivers will soon get worse). His purpose is not to make a specific prediction, but to encourage Timothy to stick to the truth because eventually everyone will see that Timothy’s opponents are wrong.

Staying on track (verses 10-14)

Paul reminds Timothy that he has a firm foundation: “You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love...” Timothy has heard the arguments, but Paul does not point him there. Rather, he points to the way in which Paul lived out the truth of the gospel. Paul’s own steadfastness is an important testimony to the validity of the message.

Not only did Paul have desirable qualities, he also had some undesirable experiences. Timothy knew about these, too: “endurance, persecutions, sufferings — what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured [see Acts 13-14]. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them.” Paul writes this from prison, and expects death, so he knows that the Lord does not rescue his people from *all* situations. The point is that he *can*, and often has, so Timothy can be confident that the Lord will take care of him.

Timothy will experience some trouble, too: “In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” Indeed, it will sometimes look like the bad guys are winning: “while evil men and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived.” Paul’s purpose here is not to make specific predictions — the purpose of this “battle rhetoric” is to steel Timothy for the hardships that will come. If he expects the worst, nothing will catch him off guard.

“But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it.” Elsewhere, Paul tells Timothy to keep the faith because it is true — but here he tells him to persevere because he knows the people who taught him. Some of the strongest evidence for the gospel is the example set by

people who taught Timothy, especially Paul. If Paul can be faithful through persecutions and problems, Timothy can be, too.

The written word (verses 15-17)

Timothy has another reason to be faithful: “from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures” — which for Timothy would be the Old Testament — “which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.” Paul does not say *how* the Old Testament informs people about Jesus, but the book of Acts and several of Paul’s letters provide more than a hundred examples of how Paul used Scripture. The Old Testament describes our need for a Savior, predicts salvation through a suffering Servant, and teaches that God is completely trustworthy.

“All Scripture is God-breathed,” Paul says. He does not say which books are in Scripture; nor does he specify how God breathed these writings. In context, Paul is talking about the Old Testament rather than the New, but the early church said the New Testament writings are inspired Scripture, just as the older writings are.

The important thing about inspiration is not the precise method used, but the purpose: It “is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” Scripture is not designed to teach us grammar, geography, math or science. It has a more practical purpose: telling us about salvation through Christ, and after that, how we should live. We focus on those, rather than on speculations about the future.

Things to think about

- Is humanity more sinful today than it was a century ago?
- Why did the ancient deceivers target women in particular?
- Am I loyal to the people from whom I learned the truth?
- Does the Old Testament teach me about salvation through Christ?

The Greeks had a word for it: θεόπνευστος

Theopneustos is a combination of *theos*, meaning God, and *pneō*, meaning “to breathe or blow.” Ancient Greek writers used this word to describe wisdom, dreams or speech that came from the gods. In the New Testament, it is used only in 2 Timothy 3:16, where the focus is on the usefulness of the inspired writings, and not on the precise means by which God caused his message to be written.

THE TIME HAS COME FOR MY DEPARTURE

2 TIMOTHY 4

We now reach the last chapter in Paul's last letter. He is in prison, waiting for his last trial. He knows that he will probably lose and then be executed for preaching the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ. He is ready for death, and he encourages Timothy to continue the work in the coming years.

A commission (verses 1-5)

This chapter begins with a solemn and formal declaration of duties: "In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge..." Paul is reminding Timothy that his primary allegiance is to Christ, and that Christ will evaluate Timothy's work.

His assignment is to "preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage — with great patience and careful instruction." That is, deliver the message, all the time, and in doing that, you will sometimes have to correct problems and rebuke heresies. You will need to teach again and again, so be patient. People's enthusiasm will wane, so you'll need to encourage them.

Why? "For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths." Timothy should teach diligently because heresies will come — indeed, they have already come. But Paul's logic implies that Timothy can prevent some of

the heresy by teaching faithfully. Every teaching, whether good or bad, is desired by someone or another, but it must all be judged by the word of the gospel.

“But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.” In doctrinal controversies, Timothy needs to keep his cool and accept some discomforts. In everything, he needs to preach the gospel, and in doing so he will fulfill his assignment.

For the immediate future, Paul wants Timothy to visit him in prison (verse 9). But Paul’s commission here will provide a focus for Timothy after Paul is dead.

My time has come (verses 6-8)

Paul explains why he gives Timothy this commission: because Paul will soon die. He sees it as the culmination of a life well lived, in service to his King: “For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure.” He is in the final season of his life, and he looks back with some satisfaction:

“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.” These metaphors are different ways to say the same thing, and all convey a sense of completion.

“Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day — and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.” Paul again refers to the Day of Judgment, and the rewards Christ will give.

A “crown” (*stephanos*) may refer to the laurel wreath given to people who won a race. The point is not that we will literally have something on our heads, but that we will be rewarded with the gift of being accepted by God. The righteous status we now have will then be ours permanently and in its fullness. We need to keep our eyes on the future reward.

Personal requests (verses 9-13)

In the last part of his letter, Paul refers to a number of people and circumstances. In most cases we can only speculate about the details. “Do your best to come to me quickly, for Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone to Thessalonica.” We do not know the nature of his desertion, or why he went to Thessalonica.

“Crescens has gone to Galatia, and Titus to Dalmatia.” Perhaps Paul

sent these men, or they simply decided to get out of Rome.

“Only Luke is with me.” Verse 21 shows that other people are with Paul, too; what Paul probably means here is that Luke is the only one remaining from Timothy’s generation of co-workers.

“Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry.” Many years earlier, Mark had deserted Paul, but he later helped Paul in prison (Acts 13:13; Col. 4:10). How he helped is not known.

“I sent Tychicus to Ephesus.” He may have carried the letter to Timothy — and by staying in Ephesus, he would make it easier for Timothy to leave.

“When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, and my scrolls, especially the parchments.” As winter approached, he needed that cloak. What was written on his parchments? Perhaps books of the Old Testament; perhaps copies of his own letters.

Resisting the enemy (verses 14-18)

“Alexander the metalworker did me a great deal of harm.” We do not know if this is the man mentioned in 1 Tim. 1:20. He must have done something either to get Paul thrown in prison, or to lose a trial.

No matter what, Paul did not retaliate: “The Lord will repay him for what he has done.” However, Paul does not want Timothy to forget the danger of a repeat performance: “You too should be on your guard against him, because he strongly opposed our message.” We do not know whether Alexander’s objections were political, pagan, Jewish, or Gnostic.

“At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them.” Paul implies that he will have a second defense, although due to imperial policy in Rome, condemnation was probably inevitable.

But good came out of his trial anyway: “But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it.” Paul was not put in prison for any criminal action — the only accusation against him was his message, so it would be natural for him to present that message in court.

“And I was delivered from the lion’s mouth.” He escaped immediate punishment, but his case was forwarded to another judge, perhaps Nero himself, who was almost certain to order an execution.

Paul believes his time is up, but he says with confidence, “The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly

kingdom.” In context of this chapter, this seems to mean that the Lord will keep him faithful, and although his enemies can kill the body, they cannot kill the soul (cf. Matt. 10:28). Paul’s salvation is secure in Christ. “To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen.”

Final greetings (verses 19-22)

Paul takes his last opportunity to greet some old and dear friends: “Greet Priscilla and Aquila and the household of Onesiphorus.” Onesiphorus himself may have died.

“Erastus” — possibly the man mentioned in Rom. 16:23 — “stayed in Corinth, and I left Trophimus sick in Miletus.” Even Paul couldn’t heal everyone.

“Do your best to get here before winter.” Not only does it get cold in winter, it is difficult to travel, so if Timothy procrastinates, he might have to wait three more months, and that may be too late.

“Eubulus greets you, and so do Pudens, Linus, Claudia and all the brothers. The Lord be with your spirit. Grace be with you.”

Things to think about

- What would it take for me to be at peace with my own death? Do I have a sense of completion?
- In what way could I encourage someone in the next generation to continue the work of Jesus Christ?
- Is it possible for the Lord “to rescue Paul from every evil attack” by letting him be killed? Can I trust a God who lets evil get its way?

The Greeks had a word for it: *καιρός*

Greek had two main words for time. Sometimes they meant essentially the same thing, but sometimes they had different connotations. *Chronos* referred to a quantity of time, time that could be measured by a clock.

Kairos, the other word, could refer to a time that was significant in quality, a significance that went beyond the number of minutes or days. It was a season of opportunity, an occasion for a special event. In 2 Tim. 4:6, Paul said that the *kairos* had come for his departure. It was not just a date on the calendar, but a tremendously significant milestone in his life and ministry.

LEADERS IN TRUTH

TITUS 1

In the first chapter of his letter to Titus, Paul describes the qualities of a good church leader. He warns that some people try to lead believers away from the truth. Even in the 21st century, Paul's advice is still needed.

Introduction

Paul begins by announcing his role and his purpose: “Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the sake of the faith of God’s elect and the knowledge of the truth that is in accordance with godliness...” (Titus 1:1, NRSV in this chapter).

In the Roman world, a slave in charge of the emperor’s business had a higher social status than many free people did. Paul, as slave to the ruler of the universe, had tremendous importance and status. He was sent by Christ as an apostle or official messenger with two major purposes: 1) to bring God’s people to faith and 2) to teach them truth to help them live godly lives.

Our beliefs and behavior are built on a solid foundation: They are built “in the hope of eternal life that God, who never lies, promised before the ages began” (verse 2). Our hope is more than a wishful thought — it is as secure as God himself. Our eternity is secure because God has power over time itself.

This promise of eternal life was announced in the gospel: “in due time he revealed his word through the proclamation with which I have been entrusted by the command of God our Savior” (verse 3). Paul here combines a term usually used for the Father with a term usually used for the

Son, and it is not certain here which one he means.

After describing himself and his mission, Paul begins: “To Titus, my loyal child in the faith we share: Grace and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Savior” (verse 4). Titus was a Gentile (Gal. 2:3), but Paul calls him a “true son,” who faithfully continued Paul’s work. Earlier, Titus had successfully dealt with a difficult problem in Corinth (2 Cor. 7:6-7).

Qualities of a good leader

Paul then announces the purpose of his letter: “I left you behind in Crete for this reason, so that you should put in order what remained to be done, and should appoint elders in every town, as I directed you” (Titus 1:5).

Titus already knew what Paul had told him, and he already knew the points Paul made in verses 1-4. But Paul includes these things in his letter because the letter would be read out loud in the churches in which Titus worked — and in this way the members in Crete would accept what Titus was doing, and then Titus could move on.

For the benefit of the congregation, Paul lists the characteristics of a good elder: “someone who is blameless, married only once, whose children are believers, not accused of debauchery and not rebellious” (verse 6).

If we take Paul too literally, we might think that elders must be married, or that they cannot be remarried even after death has released them from their vows (Rom. 7:1-3). If we read this as a list of legal requirements, then Paul himself could not be an elder! However, his purpose is more general — he is saying that elders, *if* married, should be faithful in marriage (in that society, mistresses were common).

Elders should also be responsible in their families, but we should not take this legalistically, either. One child who went astray 20 years ago would not automatically disqualify an otherwise well-respected leader.

“For a bishop, as God’s steward, must be blameless; he must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or addicted to wine or violent or greedy for gain” (verse 7). An elder or bishop (Paul uses the words interchangeably) should not be bossy, irritable or selfish. Rather, “he must be hospitable, a lover of goodness, prudent, upright, devout, and self-controlled” (verse 8).

After this list of personal virtues, Paul briefly addresses the doctrinal needs: A church leader “must have a firm grasp of the word that is trustworthy in accordance with the teaching, so that he may be able both to preach with sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict it” (verse 9).

Elders must know the gospel and be able to pass it on accurately. They must teach the truth, and denounce the counterfeits.

False teachings

The believers in Crete needed good leaders because the truth was being distorted: “There are also many rebellious people, idle talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision” (verse 10). Paul’s greatest adversaries were Judaizers who taught that Gentiles should be circumcised and keep the laws of Moses (Acts 15:5; Gal. 5:3).

“They must be silenced,” Paul writes. If they teach a false gospel, they should not be allowed to speak to the congregation — a good leader must be willing to exclude them (Rom. 16:17). Why be so strict? “Since they are upsetting whole families by teaching for sordid gain what it is not right to teach” (Titus 1:11). Some false teachers want money; others want to bolster their ego. Either way, it is dishonest gain.

Paul then quotes “one of them, their very own prophet” — Epimenides, who lived on Crete six centuries earlier: “Cretans are always liars, vicious brutes, lazy gluttons” (verse 12). This is a philosophical riddle: If Cretans are *always* liars, can Epimenides be telling the truth? Paul says, “That testimony is true.” Every culture has its own problems; the people of Crete had these.

Paul gives the solution: “For this reason rebuke them sharply, so that they may become sound in the faith, not paying attention to Jewish myths or to commandments of those who reject the truth” (verses 13-14). Titus is to rebuke the false teachers, so the *members* will be sound in the faith, so they will not be led away from the gospel of grace.

“To the pure all things are pure, but to the corrupt and unbelieving nothing is pure” (verse 15). This verse is a proverb that can apply to various situations. But in this context, it refers to Judaizers who declared all sorts of things “unclean.”

Even today, some overly zealous people see a problem under every bush, paganism in every custom. The problem is in the eye of the beholder, Paul says: “Their very minds and consciences are corrupted. They profess to know God, but they deny him by their actions. They are detestable, disobedient, unfit for any good work” (verses 15-16).

Paul uses strong words, because he was passionate about the gospel of Jesus Christ. Those who teach legalism, he says, have a tragically distorted concept of God. By their focus on works, they show that they do not trust

him to be the author of love and grace — God our Savior.

Things to think about

- If time had a beginning, will it ever end? (verse 2)
- Why does Paul list personal virtues before doctrinal accuracy? (verse 9)
- When churches today designate elders, what additional qualities do they consider? (verse 19)
- In a culture that values freedom of speech, should anyone be silenced? (verse 11)

MAKING GRACE LOOK GOOD

TITUS 2

In the second chapter of Titus, Paul tells us that people often judge the gospel by the way we live. Do we make the gospel look good, or do we give people a reason to complain? The gospel teaches grace, and grace teaches us something about the way we live.

Self-control: a good example

Paul tells Titus, “You must teach what is in accord with sound doctrine.” He then describes teachings that are reliable: “Teach the older men to be temperate, worthy of respect, self-controlled, and sound in faith, in love and in endurance” (Titus 2:1-2). Titus is working with believers who need some guidance about their behavior.

Paul begins with three virtues praised by Greek philosophers—not going to extremes, acting respectably and having self-control. He then gives three virtues important in Christianity: having right beliefs, showing love, and maintaining these qualities even when it is difficult.

For women, Paul gives slightly different advice: “Likewise, teach the older women to be reverent in the way they live, not to be slanderers or addicted to much wine, but to teach what is good” (verse 3). These vices are not typically associated with women today, and Paul could easily point these teachings at men—they are appropriate for all Christians.

Paul expects older women to be able to teach: “They can train the younger women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands” (verses 4-5). Paul does not tell Titus to teach the young women

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directly, but he asks the older women to lead them.

Paul lists a number of roles that women had in first-century society and then explains why Christian women should perform them: “so that no one will malign the word of God.” Christianity has several beliefs and practices that unbelievers do not like, and Christians cannot do everything that unbelievers want. But in many customs, Christians can conform, and this is what Paul wants.

If people are going to criticize, let it be for essential matters, not for unnecessary differences. If we break social customs, people will be more skeptical about everything we say, so we want to keep our differences to a minimum. Paul is concerned about how our behavior might affect the gospel.

“Similarly, encourage the young men to be self-controlled. In everything set them an example by doing what is good” (verses 6-7). Titus will teach not just by words, but also in what he does. Even his style of teaching is important: “In your teaching show integrity, seriousness and soundness of speech that cannot be condemned.” Why? Because our reputation as bearers of the gospel is important: “So that those who oppose you may be ashamed because they have nothing bad to say about us.” People will disagree with our beliefs, but we do not want to give any extra offense.

Paul then comments on one more social group: “Teach slaves to be subject to their masters in everything, to try to please them, not to talk back to them, and not to steal from them, but to show that they can be fully trusted, so that in every way they will make the teaching about God our Savior attractive” (verses 9-10).

Paul is advising believers to perform their social roles well—he is not necessarily saying that those social roles are good. But we can with some modification apply what Paul says to employment situations today. Believers should perform their jobs well, being cooperative, trustworthy, and respectful to everyone.

Why? To make the gospel attractive, so that people will be more likely to listen to what we say about Jesus. The way we live, the way we work, the way we treat our families and neighbors, all make a difference in how receptive people will be to the message we share.

Grace-based behavior

Paul then gives a theological reason for teaching people to be well-behaved: “For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all

men” (verse 11). Or the Greek could also be translated, “The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all” (NRSV). Not everyone has seen it yet, but salvation is available to everyone on the basis of grace.

And what does this grace do? “It teaches us to say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age” (verse 12). Grace—if we understand it correctly—teaches us to reject sin and to do good. As children of God, we want to be like the Son of God, but we cannot do this on our own strength. It is only by God’s grace that we are enabled to do what he wants.

This is a good way to live “in this present age,” but the rewards are not necessarily seen in this age. Therefore, “we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ” (verse 13). Here, Jesus is clearly called God, and Paul says that we await his return.

What did Jesus do? He “gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good” (verse 14). He redeemed us from sin. But Christ has a purpose for us beyond that: He wants to purify us, to eliminate the sin, and to create in us a desire for good behavior.

So Paul summarizes his point: “These, then, are the things you should teach. Encourage and rebuke with all authority. Do not let anyone despise you” (verse 15). Jesus wants people who are eager to do good, so Titus, as a messenger of Christ, should encourage good behavior and speak out against bad behavior. He should not do anything that would cause people to despise him, because they would then despise the Savior he represented.

As Titus reads this letter to his congregation, Paul is also speaking to them: “Titus is going to have to correct you on some of your behavior. But he is simply doing what I would have done, and doing what grace tells you, if you are willing to hear what it says.” In the same way today, we should not despise those who exhort us to resist sin and do good.

Things to think about

What virtues are most needed in our culture? (verse 2)

What behaviors today, although not sins, might cause people to despise the gospel? (verse 5)

Paul said that slaves should submit (verse 9). Was it therefore wrong for Christians to try to abolish slavery in the 19th century?

Grace means that we are not penalized for sin; how then does it teach us to avoid sin? (verse 12)

SAVED BY GOD'S MERCY

TITUS 3

Paul left Titus on the island of Crete to organize the newly planted churches there. But Titus was not a permanent pastor — he would soon have to move on. What was he supposed to teach on this temporary assignment? Paul gives some final advice in chapter 3.

Doing good is not good enough

“Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is good” (verse 1). As Paul explained in chapter 2, good behavior puts the gospel in a good light. Although the gospel says that our Lord is Jesus Christ (not Caesar), we do not want officials to think that the gospel tells people to disrupt society.

Christians should “slander no one,” Paul says. “Be peaceable and considerate, and...show true humility toward all” (verse 2). For many believers, Paul was asking for a big change in their behavior. He explains in verse 3: “At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another.”

In some ways this list is a mirror image of the good qualities Paul wants Titus to teach. Be obedient, even though you used to be disobedient. Be peaceable, even though you used to hate one another. We were once foolish and ill-tempered, Paul says — implying that we are not that way anymore.

What caused the change in our lives? It was Jesus.

“But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy”

(verses 4-5). God's love appeared to us in the form of Jesus (Rom. 5:8), and he saved us not because we deserved it, but because of his mercy and grace.

We were not living a righteous life, but even if we were, those righteous things would not be good enough to save us. We are saved by God's mercy, not by anything we could ever do to earn it.

"He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit." He did not save us through a physical washing, but by a spiritual washing and renewal. The word "washing" is an allusion to baptism, suggesting that our physical baptism symbolizes the rebirth that comes from the Holy Spirit.

God poured the Holy Spirit "on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life" (verses 6-7). We are saved by God the Father, working through the Son and Holy Spirit.

We are justified by grace — put right with God — as his gift to us (and as Paul explains elsewhere, we receive it by faith). The result is that we become inheritors of eternal life, which gives us tremendous hope and confidence about our future. But the Bible also says that we have eternal life now, in this age (John 6:47). We have it as a down payment of much more yet to come.

"This is a trustworthy saying," Paul notes. We can be sure that God saves us by his mercy, not by our works. He then adds, "I want you to stress these things..." (verse 8). Titus should stress the Holy Spirit, grace and eternal life.

Why? "So that those who have trusted in God may be careful to devote themselves to doing what is good." When we realize that God has saved us by his mercy, we should respond with changes in our behavior. Sin caused the death of our Savior, and we do not want to participate in behavior that caused his death.

So we trust in God alone, but we also strive to do good works. We have been saved for that purpose (Ephesians 2:10). Good works cannot save us, but they are still good, and they are characteristic of people who trust God. God's people are *devoted* to doing good; they are *eager* to do what is good (Titus 2:14). Grace leads us to a better life. "These things are excellent and profitable for everyone."

Something to avoid

As part of his closing comments for Titus, Paul warns, "But avoid

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foolish controversies and genealogies and arguments and quarrels about the law, because these are unprofitable and useless” (verse 9). Many of us have experienced “quarrels about the law” — debates about whether this or that is required or forbidden. If we try to base our salvation on keeping laws, we will inevitably end up arguing about which laws apply, about definitions of what is restricted, and whether there are any exceptions.

Debates like that miss the point. They are useless, because salvation is not based on the law. We should not waste our time with arguments about things that don’t really matter.

However, if people are convinced that laws are important, they are rarely willing to drop the argument. So Paul gives Titus some pastoral advice: “Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him” (verse 10). If the person can’t drop the subject, if he is stirring up trouble in the congregation by preaching salvation by works, then he should be avoided.

If someone says, You have to keep these laws in order to be saved, then that person is usually attempting to divide the congregation — he is saying that it’s not enough to trust in Christ. If the person won’t stop preaching this error, a division is unavoidable, and Titus can minimize the severity of that division by making it early. The person should not be allowed into the congregation to cause more trouble.

“You may be sure that such a man is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned” (verse 11). He preaches that people will be saved or condemned by their works, and such a person *will* be judged by his works. By his own standard, he will be condemned. Divisive behavior is the opposite of what God wants.

Paul closes, as ancient letters often did, with some notes about personal contacts and travel plans: “As soon as I send Artemas or Tychicus to you, do your best to come to me at Nicopolis, because I have decided to winter there” (verse 12). Titus’s assignment as interim pastor would soon be up. Paul wanted to spend the winter with him in western Greece.

“Do everything you can to help Zenas the lawyer and Apollos on their way and see that they have everything they need” (verse 13). They were probably the ones who carried the letter to Titus, on their way to somewhere else.

Paul then repeats an important theme: “Our people must learn to devote themselves to doing what is good, in order that they may provide for

daily necessities and not live unproductive lives” (verse 14). If people work for their food and stay out of trouble, that is good (1 Thess. 4:11).

“Everyone with me sends you greetings. Greet those who love us in the faith. Grace be with you all” (verse 15).

Things to think about

- We should be law-abiding citizens who do good (verse 1). Is there ever a time when we should disobey the law?
- People who are saved by grace should be eager to do good (verse 8). Why are some Christians not devoted to good works?
- When can people have erroneous beliefs without being divisive? (verse 10)

PHILEMON: A SLAVE AS A BROTHER

Some scholars have read Paul's letter to Philemon as sowing the seeds of abolition, as suggesting that all Christian slavemasters ought to view slaves as members of the family, and should therefore free them all. Other scholars have read this same letter as saying that Christians who find runaway slaves ought to return them to their owners.

Some people today are embarrassed that Paul told slaves to obey their masters, and he did not directly tell slave-owners to free all their slaves. They think that Paul was far too soft on the evil of slavery.

So, the same letter can be viewed in different ways, depending on the point of view you are coming from – but slaves in the first century apparently were not too troubled by this. They accepted Christianity quite readily, even if it did not mean their freedom. They were happy with the spiritual benefits even if there were no social or economic benefits to go with it.

Introductory material

Verse 1 says: “Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our dear friend and co-worker...” (NRSV throughout). This is the way first-century letters normally began. This is the way that modern letters begin, too, if we count the information on the envelope: the return address tells us who is writing, and then it says who it is being sent to.

This letter is from both Paul and Timothy. In many of his letters, Paul includes the names of his co-workers as co-authors. In this case, Timothy may have had a lot to do with the way the letter is written. Paul could be quite forceful, but this letter is tactful and subtle, perhaps well-suited to

Timothy, who seems to have been of a more gentle nature.

Paul introduces himself as a prisoner of Christ Jesus. In some letters, he calls himself a *slave* of Jesus Christ, but that may have been too much irony for this particular letter. But he is a prisoner, apparently in jail.

There are three possible locations for this imprisonment: Rome, Caesarea, or Ephesus. Acts tells us he spent a couple of years imprisoned in Caesarea, and a couple of years in Rome, so those are possible locations. But it is hard to imagine a runaway slave going all the way from Colossae to Caesarea. The scenario is more plausible if Paul is jailed in Ephesus. The problem is that the Bible never mentions Paul being jailed in Ephesus. David deSilva writes,

Acts is silent about such an imprisonment, but Acts, like all history, is selective in the story it tells. Paul refers to some ordeal in Ephesus (see 1 Cor 15:32; 2 Cor 1:8-9) and speaks of suffering imprisonments in the plural (even before his Caesarean and Roman imprisonments) in 2 Corinthians 6:5; 11:23. A run-in with the authorities in Ephesus resulting in a brief imprisonment is therefore a plausible scenario.¹

An imprisonment in Ephesus also makes more sense for verse 22, where Paul says that he wants to stay in Philemon's home. Someone who gets out of jail in Rome would hardly be expected to go to a small inland city in Asia, especially when he has already announced plans to go to Spain.² But it would be plausible for someone who was leaving Ephesus. However, the exact location of writing doesn't affect the way we interpret the letter.

Verse 2 continues the address of the letter: "to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house." Apphia and Archippus are probably in Philemon's family, perhaps as wife and son, perhaps leaders in the church, though we cannot be sure. Nor does it matter, for they do not play any further role in the story.

It is significant that a church meets in Philemon's house – this means that Philemon is wealthy enough not only to have a slave, but also to have a house large enough for a small church to meet in. He was in the upper class, probably in the top 5 or 10 percent.

It is also noteworthy that this letter is written to the whole church; the letter would be read to all the members. This could put Philemon on the hot seat: not only is Paul asking him to free a slave, but also everyone *knows* that Paul is asking him to do this, and everyone will be able to see whether

he does. It is an acknowledgement that Philemon's actions affect the whole community. Gorman writes, "Paul wants Philemon, as a believer and especially as a church leader, to know that the subject of this letter is not a personal matter."³ The relationship of one member to another can affect the entire church. deSilva writes,

Paul turns what appears to be a private matter into a household matter in the broader sense of the Christian family. The local community of faith will become a witness to Paul's request and thus also to Philemon's response. Philemon cannot act privately in the matter of Onesimus, who now is part of the larger household of God and not merely Philemon's household.⁴

Paul writes, "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (verse 3). The normal Greek greeting in a letter was *charain*, greetings. Paul always changes this to a similar Greek word, *charis*, meaning grace, and he adds the typical Jewish greeting, *shalom* in Hebrew, *eirene* in Greek, meaning peace – and he notes that both grace and peace come to us from God. In his other letters, he usually mentions Jesus Christ as an equal source of that grace and peace.

Introductory prayer

A typical Greek letter, even a "secular" one, usually began with some sort of prayer. Paul follows this custom, and his introductory prayers are not a formality – they are tailored to the content of the letter. Here he writes, in verses 4-5, "When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus." Paul will ask Philemon to exercise that love for one saint in particular, and Philemon will need some faith to do so.

Verse 6: "I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ." Paul isn't talking about evangelism when he mentions "sharing your faith." The phrase here most likely has a passive sense, not an active one: Philemon shares his faith with the people who have faith. We all have that in common; we share the same beliefs, and the fact that Philemon has the same faith as other believers should be "effective" – it should have results in his life in the way that he treats other believers (Onesimus, in this case).

And Paul hints at some "good" that Philemon may soon have opportunity to do – not just for another believer, but for Christ himself. Our faith in Christ should affect the way that we treat other people who

have that same faith (see all the commands in the New Testament about the way we treat “one another”), and the way we treat them is in some sense the way that we treat Jesus Christ himself (see Matthew 25).

Paul has also been blessed because of what Philemon has done for others: “I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother” (verse 7). Paul will refer to “refreshing the heart” again in this letter. At this point in the letter, it is a seed that will come to life a bit later. Paul wants Philemon to repeat the praiseworthy behavior.

Getting to the purpose

In verse 8, Paul gets to the business of his letter: “For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty...” Paul was normally bold enough to issue commands, but in this letter he is content to drop strong hints. He is dealing with a touchy issue, and he wants Philemon to make his own decision, not just follow orders.

Also, if Paul issues commands, he is acting like a slaveowner, a behavior he wants Philemon to stop.⁵ He wants Philemon to give up some of his customary rights, so Paul is willing to set an example for him by giving up some of his own.⁶ Nevertheless, Paul is hinting that Philemon has a *duty*, something he *ought* to do as a result of his faith in Christ.⁷

He writes: “Yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love—and I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus” (verse 9). The love here is apparently Philemon’s love for Paul. Paul adds a little emotional *pathos* by mentioning that he is an old man in prison. He is powerless, asking for a little pity. If Philemon loves Paul, he will respond.

Paul’s appeal or request is seen in verse 10: “I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment.” Onesimus was a common name for a slave, for it means “useful.” (Slaves were commonly given new names when they were sold.) This man has now become a Christian.

We do not know how it happened that Onesimus came into contact with Paul. Was it accidental, or did Onesimus seek Paul out on purpose? Would a runaway slave hang around a prison? It seems more likely to me that Onesimus looked for Paul on purpose.

Social custom may explain why. A slave was not legally considered a runaway if he went to a mutual friend, to seek that friend’s intercession with the owner. Onesimus may have committed a huge blunder (verse 18 may

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hint at some problem), and he wanted Paul to act as a mediator to help restore him without too much penalty. So Onesimus went to Paul, heard the gospel, came to faith in Christ, and began helping Paul. No matter what the past history, Onesimus is not *legally* a runaway – he is in the category of a slave seeking mediation through a friend of the owner. But in this legal status, he cannot stay with the friend forever – he must eventually be sent back to the owner.

Perhaps with a little rhetorical exaggeration, Paul admits that Onesimus had not been a very good slave. “Formerly he was useless⁸ to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me” (verse 11).

He is useful to *Paul*, but it is not clear how he is useful to *Philemon*. Perhaps Paul is speaking of the help that Onesimus has given to Paul, and Paul is counting that *as if* it came from Philemon, and Onesimus has been useful to Philemon by giving Paul the help that Philemon would have done if he had been there (verse 13). That’s a bit convoluted, isn’t it? But it’s part of the psychology of the letter: Paul is praising Onesimus as much as he can so that Philemon finds it easier to grant his request.

Verse 12: “I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you.” Paul calls Onesimus his heart (Greek *splanchna*, meaning internal organs, a metaphor for deep emotions), and this probably has a function later in the letter. Paul is sending him back, for Philemon is the legal owner.

(It bothers some people today that Paul sent Onesimus back, as if he was still property belonging to Philemon. However, it could have been counterproductive for Paul to say that Christianity required the abolition of slavery. It would also have been problematic for Onesimus to remain a fugitive; it was better to clear up his legal status. Slaves were 20 to 25 percent of the population, and universal emancipation would have meant social and economic chaos, and most of the slaves would not have ended up any better for it.⁹ If Paul had said that Christianity was against slavery, it could have hindered the gospel among the upper class, given slaves ideas of rebellion, and caused more government persecution against the gospel. For whatever reason, Paul treaded carefully when it came to slavery.)

In verse 13, Paul reveals what he really wants – or at least it seems to me that this is the clearest statement of what he wants: “I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel.” Paul wanted Onesimus to stay with Paul, helping him in his imprisonment (which would include bringing him food,

for example, since first-century prisons did not provide food). Philemon could not do it (he would have if he could, Paul implies) because he lived too far away, but euphemistically speaking, Onesimus did it for him, in his place.

“But I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced” (verse 14). Paul wanted to keep Onesimus, but Onesimus did not belong to him, and he didn’t want to keep him *without permission* (is this a hint?).

So Paul again says that Philemon has the opportunity to do a good deed (that is, letting Onesimus stay with Paul). This is what Philemon has the opportunity to do voluntarily, rather than being ordered to do it. Marshall writes, “Paul hoped that it might be possible for Onesimus to spend some time with him as a missionary colleague.... If that is not a request for Onesimus to join Paul’s circle, I do not know what more would need to be said.”¹⁰

Supporting discussion

“Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while...” (verse 15). The reason for the “separation” may have been that Onesimus ran away, but Paul tactfully puts this in the passive. By doing this, he suggests that the “separation” may have been God’s doing—Onesimus was temporarily absent so that he could be restored more permanently—perhaps not Onesimus’s original intention, but that’s the way it is working out now.

The purpose: “so that you might have him back forever.” Does this mean that Paul wants Onesimus to stay in Colosse with Philemon? I think the other verses in the letter hint at something different, and I think that here Paul means that Onesimus will be restored to Philemon in a more figurative sense, as it says in verse 16: “no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother...” Paul is saying that Philemon should receive this good-for-nothing slave (to paraphrase v. 11) as a beloved brother, not as a slave. In other words, he should be freed. Don’t treat him like a runaway slave—treat him like a long-lost brother!

This is a rather tall order, a difficult request, and it is no wonder that Paul deals with it so delicately. If Philemon frees the runaway, what will his other slaves think? They might think: “Let’s get our freedom by pretending to believe in Christ.” What will the neighboring slaveowners think? “If Christianity means having to free your slaves, I don’t want my slaves to hear

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about it.” Paul seems to be putting Philemon in a tough spot.

Onesimus is a brother “especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord” (verse 16b). Onesimus is Paul’s son and Paul’s brother; now Paul is asking Philemon to treat him as a brother not just spiritually, in the church, “in the Lord,” but also “in the flesh,” in physical life. Achtemeier et al. write,

The reference to receiving Onesimus as a brother “both in the flesh and in the Lord” (verse 16) may indicate Paul’s desire that Onesimus be freed, so that he can be Philemon’s brother both within the Christian community (“in the Lord”) and in secular society (“in the flesh”).¹¹

In other words, some social benefits ought to go along with the change in spiritual status. When people are equal in the Lord, believers should treat them equal in the flesh, too. (A principle that supports gender equality, too.) Our theology should affect our ethics.

“So if you consider me your partner,” Paul asks, “welcome him as you would welcome me” (verse 17). “Partner” is the Greek *koinōnos*, someone who shares in something. If you are with me in the faith, Paul is saying, treat him like you would treat me.

Let’s put this in a modern context. Imagine that you are a business owner. One of your worst employees has taken the company truck without permission and wrecked it. He goes to your pastor, gets converted, and your pastor then asks you to give the guy his job back, give him a raise, and even to treat him as an honored guest. In first-century culture, Paul is asking for more than that!

“If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account” (verse 18). Most scholars believe that this is a polite way of admitting that Onesimus wronged Philemon in some way—perhaps by being a lazy worker, perhaps by stealing something to help him on his unauthorized journey, or perhaps it was an accidental destruction of property, something that caused Onesimus to take off in the first place.

Whatever it is, Paul says, I’ll pay for it, and he signs it in his own handwriting to make it a legal note of debt: “I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it” (verse 19). I’ll pay for that truck, the pastor says.

But then he reminds Philemon that Philemon already owes Paul a great deal: “I say nothing about your owing me even your own self.” Whatever I owe *you*, Paul says, you owe *me* even more, because I have fathered you in

the faith. DeSilva puts it in the terminology of the social customs of the time:

Paul claims to be Philemon's *patron* on the basis of bringing Philemon the message of salvation.... Paul claims authority to command Philemon's obedience as Paul's *client*, a social inferior whose response of service may be commanded on the basis of Paul's benefaction of salvation."¹²

Financially, Philemon was probably a patron, but spiritually, Paul was the patron. So, no matter how much I ask for, Paul seems to imply, you ought to do it. Paul here has moved from being a helpless old man in prison and started to act like a person in authority. He is the "father" in the family of faith, and as head of the family he has authority over both Philemon and Onesimus. But he says he is not mentioning this. Luke Timothy Johnson writes:

In the realm of the Christian *oikomene* [household] (which includes not only Philemon's immediate household, but all the Christian households in the larger Pauline communities), Paul possesses the authority of a "head." This means, in effect, that Paul has authority over Philemon's own household, including Onesimus, thus trumping the Greco-Roman social hierarchy of obligation.... Paul is Philemon's patron and "head" in the Christian household, so he did not have to return the runaway slave. But while Philemon is now the recipient of Paul's benefaction, he can again become the great benefactor of Paul's mission by "giving" Onesimus to Paul.¹³

Similarly, Christians today are asked by Christ to make personal sacrifices—but we are never asked to give more than what we ourselves have been given. deSilva points toward a modern application of this story:

Paul removes a major obstacle to unbegrudging generosity, namely, the excuse that we may have been injured in some way by the person in need. Paul tells Philemon not to withhold kindness from Onesimus because of any loss he may have suffered on Onesimus's account, but rather to symbolically charge that to Paul's own account. Similarly, we are challenged to measure other people's "debts" to us against our debt to God, to forgive as freely as we have been forgiven, to share and help as generously as we have been helped and sustained.¹⁴

Whatever obligations people have against us, whatever wrongs they have done against us, we should charge that to Jesus' account, and remember that our debt to him is far greater than what he asks of us.

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So Paul asks again in verse 20: “Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ.” He wants a benefit, he says, and this is what it is: Refresh my heart, my inner organs. This may be a figure of speech, a general phrase, but even if it is, I think Paul is using it tongue in cheek, wanting Philemon to catch his allusion. He has already called Onesimus his heart – here he seems to be asking Philemon to *restore* him, or send him back.

“Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say” (verse 21). Earlier, Paul indicated that he would not command Philemon (verse 8), but here he implies that there *is* a command that should be obeyed—in context, the command to refresh Paul’s heart—and to do even more than that, whatever that may be. He is indicating that he has been beating around the bush rather than coming right out and saying what he wants.

David Garland suggests another point of application: “We may not be able to undo all the injustice in the world, but in our local neighborhood we can stand with those individuals who are oppressed” (366). Paul could not eliminate slavery in entirety, but he could eliminate it for one person. He did what he could, rather than fretting about what he could not – and he did it by 1) showing that the gospel leads to social equality and 2) appealing to principles of the faith, not by issuing blunt commands.

He ends with one last request in verse 22: “One thing more—prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping through your prayers to be restored to you.” Travel plans were often part of the closing comments in a letter, so Paul’s comment could be seen as a routine note, in this case also expressing confidence that Paul will soon be released from jail.

This request also says that Paul wants the friendship between them to continue. He does not want to impose on that friendship, but he does have an important request to make of his friend.

Closing comments

In verses 23-24, Paul closes with the greetings that typically ended a first-century letter (though Paul has more companions than most letter-writers do). This seems to be his whole ministry team at the time he wrote: “Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.”

Epilogue

Did Philemon do what he was asked? Walter Elwell and Robert Yarbrough note the following:

An ancient inscription discovered at Laodicea, a village very near Colossae, was dedicated by a slave to the master who freed him. The master's name: Marcus Sestius Philemon. We cannot be certain that this is the same Philemon as the one Paul addressed, but the identical names from the same locale do raise the possibility.¹⁵

Another interesting bit of history: Around the year A.D. 110, Ignatius of Antioch mentions that the bishop of Ephesus was named Onesimus. Since Onesimus was a name generally given to slaves, it is likely that the bishop of Ephesus in 110 was a former slave. We cannot be certain that this is the same Onesimus, but it is possible. Garland notes, "If Onesimus were twenty years old when Philemon was written, he could have been seventy at this time."¹⁶ What Paul did in this short letter may have had repercussions in church history.

Paul closes with a benediction: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit" (verse 25). And that is a good benediction here. May God's grace be with your spirit—and may his grace radiate out from you to bless everyone you meet. May the spirit of liberation, emancipation, and equality bring blessings to your relationships in Christ.

Endnotes

¹ David deSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (InterVarsity, 2004), 668.

² Similarities with Colossians (cf. Col. 1:1; 4:9-10, 17) make most scholars conclude that Philemon lives in or near Colosse.

³ Michael Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord* (Eerdmans, 2004), 456.

⁴ deSilva, 669. If Philemon decided not to free the slave, he probably wouldn't have the letter read in church, either. But if he did decide to free the slave who had undesirable behavior, the letter would help explain the slaveowner's strange action.

⁵ "Slavery is a system of bossing people around" (Paul Jewett, quoted in David E. Garland, *Colossians, Philemon*. NIV Application Commentary [Zondervan, 1998], 367).

⁶ "Paul himself is imitating Christ by denying himself the use of a certain

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status and power.... The text echoes similar refusals to use apostolic privilege (1 Thess. 2:7; 2 Thess. 3:7-9; 1 Cor. 9, esp. v. 19, all of which in turn are based on texts about Christ's self-denial (e.g., Phil. 2:6-8; 2 Cor. 8:9)" (Gorman, 465).

⁷ "Conformity to the pressures of authority is not what God seeks, but conformity to the mind of Christ.... If a pastoral leader must use authority to coerce rather than facilitate transformation, he or she may win a minor victory at the expense of the larger campaign for Christlikeness" (deSilva, 683).

⁸ Paul is playing a little on words. *Onesimus* means "useful," but Onesimus was useless as a slave. "Useless" is the Greek word *achrēstos*, and indeed Onesimus had been *a-christos* – without Christ. But now that he is in Christ, he has become useful (*euchrēstos*).

⁹ First-century slavery was not as oppressive as American slavery was — some slaves had white-collar jobs; others were blue-collar skilled workers. Emancipation was common upon age 30 or so. Some people actually sold themselves into slavery because the slaves had some economic security, whereas freedmen had to scramble to find jobs day by day. However, some first-century slaves did have it bad — forced to work in mines, fields or as oarsmen on ships —but those jobs were usually given to slaves who had already misbehaved. "The number of papyri dealing with runaway slaves suggests that it was not a benign institution" (Garland, 349).

¹⁰ Marshall et al., 146-147.

¹¹ Paul J. Achtemeier, Joel B. Green, and Maryanne Meye Thompson, *Introducing the New Testament* (Eerdmans, 2001), 423.

¹² deSilva, 671, 673.

¹³ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament* (Fortress, 1999), 388-389.

¹⁴ deSilva, 676.

¹⁵ Walter Elwell and Robert Yarbrough, *Encountering the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1997), 323.

¹⁶ Garland, 306.

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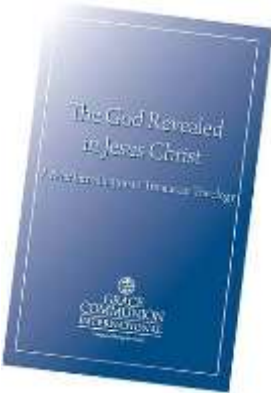
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