

**Exploring the Word of God:
Reading Through Romans**

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 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)

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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.

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.

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 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?

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## 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).<sup>1</sup>

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 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)

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**

<sup>1</sup> 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.

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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 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 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 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 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.

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## **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 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)

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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 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.

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.

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 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. 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)

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## **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 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.

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)

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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 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 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 format 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. 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.

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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).

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## **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 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?

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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 (Exodus 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 Genesis 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’ [Genesis 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" (Exodus 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; Exodus 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.

Questions

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).

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## 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 Deuteronomy 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 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 verse 8, and then he quotes Deuteronomy 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 verse 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 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.’” 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.

## Questions

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?

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“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 Deuteronomy 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.”

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.

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. 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.

Questions

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?

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## **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 Corinthians 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 Corinthians 9:20). At other times, it is necessary to stand up for the truth of the gospel (Galatians 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 Deuteronomy 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.

### **Questions**

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)

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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 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.

Questions

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)

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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 Corinthians 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; 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.

Questions

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 (Galatians 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?

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## **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 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 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 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 [*koinos*] 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? 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.”

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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 Corinthians 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; Deuteronomy 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; Psalm 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, 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.

Questions

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 verse 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)

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## 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 verse 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.

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 Corinthians 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 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. Genesis 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 Corinthians 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).

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.”

## **Questions**

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)

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## About the author...

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Grace Communion Seminary

Grace Communion Seminary serves the needs of pastors and others engaged in Christian service who want to grow deeper in relationship with our Triune God and to be able to more effectively serve in the Incarnational life of the church.

Grace is the essence of our lives. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ reveals God to us, grants us life in him, leads us in forgiving and being forgiven, and gives us salvation. Our Triune God and his grace and love revealed through Jesus Christ is the center of our theology.

Communion defines the relationship we have with God, Jesus, and one another (2 Corinthians 13:14). The communion of the Holy Spirit binds us with Jesus, enlivens God's love in our hearts, and unites us as followers of Jesus Christ. We live in inseparable unity in Christ in the perpetual effects of the Incarnation, Crucifixion, Resurrection, Ascension, and Pentecost.

Seminary describes the scope of our educational goal. We offer graduate-level courses on the Internet. You can earn a nationally accredited master's degree entirely online, without any need to travel. We want to help you minister more effectively where you are, not to uproot you. We teach from a perspective of Trinitarian Incarnational theology. For more information, go to www.gcs.edu.

Grace Communion Seminary is accredited by the Accrediting Commission of the Distance Education and Training Council, www.detc.org. The Accrediting Commission of DETC is listed by the U.S. Department of Education as a nationally recognized accrediting agency. The Commission is also a recognized member of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation.

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