

# Romans

by Gary S. Shogren

## SECTION I – Romans 1-8

Originally produced as a section in the *Comentario Bíblico Contemporáneo*, by Editorial Kairos, Buenos Aires, Argentina

Available on [www.openoureyeslord.com](http://www.openoureyeslord.com)

Or take a photo and download:



## Introduction

The epistle to the Romans rises to meet the reader on two levels: (1) as a treasure house of beloved gospel texts; (2) as an ancient missionary letter, written for a specific moment in Paul's work among the nations. *Both levels are valid.* Today's disciple first comes to know Romans because of its neat formulations of, for example, the deadliness of sin (3:23), the free gift of eternal life (6:23), the transformation of the new person in Christ (12:1-2). Beyond that, secondly, we must enter into the mind of Paul and appreciate his plan for the final years of the AD 50s – a missionary journey that would take the gospel farther west from Jerusalem than it had ever gone, across several of what we now call time zones. We then see that Romans, when first delivered, was a clear call to action for the believers in the capital to receive Paul for a time, and later to sponsor his trip to evangelize Spain. In the Americas too, we are arming ourselves to take the gospel to the nations, in particular unreached ones. We too will benefit from knowing, not just *what* Paul said about salvation, but *why* he said it to these Christians in Rome, and by extension *how* it is God's summons to us to show forth the gospel.

## Author and Date

Romans was written by the apostle Paul and almost certainly sent from the city of Corinth. While some commentators express doubts over whether the apostle really wrote Ephesians or the Pastoral Epistles, no-one has had any serious misgivings that Paul authored this document, dictating Romans to a Christian named Tertius (16:22), who wrote it down and perhaps polished its style. A Christian woman named Phoebe then took the letter to Rome (see comments on 16:1-2), a sea voyage of 2-3 weeks from Corinth.

At one time many believed that parts of Romans 15 or 16 were not part of the original epistle, but that Romans was sewn together from various letters. In that case, the last chapter might have been a short greeting sent to the church of Ephesus. This theory arose in part because it seemed unlikely that Paul could have known so many people in Rome, whereas he had spent years in Ephesus, which also happened to be Priscilla and Aquila's last known location (cp. 16:3 with Acts 18:26). Secondly, there seem to be too many benedictions and closing remarks for just one letter. However, the tide of opinion turned in the 1970s with the publication of new research, which indicated that Romans as we now have it was always one, integrated document, sent to Rome.

Paul wrote Romans near the end of his third journey, while he was spending three months in "Greece" or Achaia (Acts 20:2), which region included the churches in Athens, Corinth, and the port of Cenchrea (see 16:1). He possibly also wrote Galatians around that time. Romans can be dated to AD 58, although some believe that 57 is more accurate.

Paul's writing style reflects his dual upbringing. He had been trained to be a rabbi under the famed Gamaliel I, the very man who counseled the Sanhedrin to have patience with the followers

of Jesus (Acts 5:33-40). The rabbi-trainee Sha'ul would have been taught how to study the law, pass on traditions, and expound a theological position to other rabbis. It is particularly evident in 1:18-3:20 that he could speak in a Jewish manner to other students of Torah, using their own Scriptures to defend the gospel of Jesus. He also seems adept at the Greek language and rhetoric, perhaps gained as a schoolboy at Tarsus.

## **Historical Context**

Taken all together, the Christians in Rome may have numbered in the hundreds. The church was really a network of congregations, some meeting in Transtiberum, a poor and disagreeable neighborhood where Jews tended to live; Jewish Christians were probably low on the social and economic scale. Other congregations met in the homes of non-Jews. Among the Christians in Rome, as hints Paul in chapter 14, the gentile believers outnumbered the Jewish ones. Rome had a population of about 1 million, and experts calculate that there were perhaps 50,000 Jewish residents, that is, 5% of the population. We now know where some of the synagogues were, in and around Rome, buildings that were regarded as “houses of prayer” and also centers of instruction in the law, the Torah. The Christians were a tiny sect in a sea of paganism. They had no neighborhood synagogue buildings nor grandiose temples but met in crowded apartments or in larger private dwellings. Aquila and Priscilla hosted one congregation “that meets in their house” (see 16:3-5); Romans 16 probably alludes to others. Paul knew about 26 of the Roman Christians by name. It is possible that he encountered most of them around the time that Jews were expelled from Rome in AD 49; that’s how he met the exiles Priscilla and Aquila in Corinth (Acts 18:2).

Whether they gathered as one unified group to hear the newly-arrived epistle, or whether Phoebe read the scroll from house to house, it was very much an oral experience (see for example Rom 10:17), since most of the people were illiterate. It would take perhaps an hour to read it aloud, plus Phoebe would have been able to answer questions about its content – she had probably been present when Paul dictated it and was anointed by circumstances as the letter’s first expositor.

Reading 15:14-33 we see that Paul’s planned itinerary was: Corinth-Jerusalem-Rome-Spain. In fact, what happened is that he was arrested in Jerusalem (Acts 21:33) and by the time he eventually arrived in Rome, it was as a prisoner (Acts 28:14-16); so 2-3 years after writing his epistle he finally connected with the Roman believers. And a short time later the Roman church would confront its greatest trial – when Rome burned in the summer of 64, the emperor Nero put the blame on this tiny sect, leading to fierce persecution and martyrdom.

Scholars have put forward various theories as to the basic purpose of this letter. The viewpoint that we will follow here is that Paul wrote to (1) inform the Romans of his future trip to their city and, even more importantly, (2) ask their help for his new missionary initiative and (3) convince them that it was absolutely necessary that Spain hear the gospel, because after all, the whole world needs to hear it.

But why go to Spain? Because it was a territory as yet untouched by the gospel, and Paul was called to be a pioneer: “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” (15:20). If the hearer or the reader of Romans does not sense this urgency, perhaps he or she does not understand the gospel, since it tells us that our relatives, neighbors, fellow citizens, or the inhabitants “unto the ends of the earth” must hear and receive it, or else confront the wrath and anger of God toward those who do not obey the gospel (2:8). That’s why Paul is going to demonstrate that “it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile” or Greek (1:16), and thus for that reason every believer ought to be an activist in the work of evangelism.

And so, the epistle to the Romans is *missiological*, designed to enroll the Romans – and by extension, us – in the work of the gospel. We have other examples of this in Paul’s writings, for example Philippians 4:15-16, “Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid more than once when I was in need.” And with respect to Thessalonica, Paul asked them in 2 Thessalonians 3:1-2, “As for other matters, brothers and sisters, pray for us that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honored, just as it was with you. And pray that we may be delivered from wicked and evil people, for not everyone has faith.” Paul was seeking for support, both spiritual and economic, from the Roman church.

### **Literary Structure and Principal Themes of Romans**

The letter to the Romans is the largest that we have from the hands of Paul. It is also the most systematic in its structure, touching upon many facets of soteriology (the doctrine of salvation), but saying relatively little, for example, of the doctrine of the end times. He begins with the lostness of the world, then God’s solution in the death of Christ, the power of the new life in the Spirit, and later, details about how to live that Christian life. He also introduces a long section in chapters 9-11 to answer the questions *Why don’t Jews believe in their own Messiah? Will Israel come to God eventually?*

### **Study Questions:**

1. What could have compelled Paul to travel thousands of miles under harsh conditions in order to preach the gospel? As you read Romans, look for clues that the gospel is the unique path to God and that God himself sent Paul to take that message to the world.
2. We might be tempted to think, *let the missionaries take the gospel to the world, after all, they have a special gift*. When you read Romans, ask yourself: Did Paul expect normal Christians, whether the Romans or us, to be evangelistic?

## ROMANS – Outline

### I. Introduction (1:1-17)

- A. Greetings (1:1-7)
- B. Paul connects personally with the Roman church (1:8-15)
- C. Theme of the Epistle: *The gospel is powerful to save all; therefore, Paul is bold to preach the saving message* (1:16-17)

### II. The Coming Condemnation of All (1:18-3:20)

- A. God will condemn those who commit stereotypically Gentile sins: idolatry and sexual corruption (1:18-32)
- B. God will in fact condemn all who sin, whether they claim to respect the law of Moses or no (2:1-3:8)
- C. Even the Old Testament proves that Jews are equally as guilty as Gentiles (3:9-21)

### III. Salvation in the Gospel of Christ (3:21-5:21)

- A. Salvation may come through only one channel – Christ’s death, and faith in him (3:21-31)
- B. The heroes of the Old Testament prove Paul’s point (4:1-25)
- C. There are now only two peoples among humankind: those in Adam, those in Christ (5:1-21)

### IV. The Miraculous New Life in Christ (6:1-8:39)

- A. In Christ we are dead to sin, to death, to the Torah (6:1-7:6)
- B. Paul is not an apostate when he says we are dead to the Torah (7:7-25)
- C. The Spirit gives us victory in this life and into eternity (8:1-39)
  - 1. The Spirit gives a fresh start to the Christian (8:1-13)
  - 2. The Spirit helps us through the trials of this present age (8:14-27)
  - 3. Christians are assured that they are part of God’s eternal plan (8:28-39)

### V. The Historical Problem of the New People of God and God’s Ancient People Israel (9:1-11:36)

- A. The unbelief of Israel and the election of the Gentiles is in accordance with Scripture (9:1-10:4)
- B. Israel can receive righteousness of Christ if only it believes (10:5-21)
- C. Both the chosen Gentiles and the eschatological remnant of Israel will be saved (11:1-36)

VI. Details concerning how the New Life in Christ fulfills the Law (12:1-13:14)

- A. Christians offer themselves as living sacrifices (12:1-2)
- B. Christians live in love in the Church and in the world (12:3-21)
- C. Christians have a political responsibility (13:1-8a)
- D. Christians live according to the principle of brotherly love (13:8b-10)
- E. Christians live in two ages (13:11-14)

VII. The Resolution of a Particular Conflict in the Church of Rome (14:1-15:13)

- A. Christians are accountable to God with respect to ethical decisions (14:1-12)
- B. Christians must not cause harm to others, but edify them (14:13-15:6)
- C. God wants all believers to live in harmony (15:7-13)

VIII. The Priestly Ministry of Paul and his Itinerary (15:14-33)

- A. His ministry is centered on evangelizing areas which have no church (15:14-22)
- B. He plans on visiting Jerusalem, then Rome, and then on to pioneer territory in Spain (15:23-33)

IX. Conclusion (16:1-27)

- A. Greetings (16:1-16)
- B. A Call to Spiritual Discernment (16:17-20)
- C. Greetings and Doxology (16:21-26)

## SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Calvin, John, *Romans*, Calvin's Commentaries: 19, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1979. The reader may access this volume at <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom38.html>.
- Cevallos, Juan Carlos y Rubén O. Zorzoli, eds., *Romanos*, Comentario Bíblico Mundo Hispano 19, Mundo Hispano, El Paso, 1999.
- Cranfield, C. E. B., *Epistle to the Romans*, ICC, 2 vols., 2nd ed., T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 2004. The reader may prefer to use the abbreviated version, *Romans: a shorter commentary*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1985.
- Dunn, J. D. G., *Romans*, Word Biblical Commentary 38A-B, Nelson, Nashville, 1988.
- Hendriksen, William, *Romans: New Testament Commentary*, 2 vols., Baker, Grand Rapids, 1980.
- Jewett, Robert, *Romans: A Commentary*, Hermeneia, Augsburg Fortress, Minneapolis, 2006.
- Käsemann, Ernst, *Commentary on Romans*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1980.
- Keener, Craig S., *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, 2nd ed., IVP, Downers Grove, 2014.
- Ladd, George E., *A Theology of the New Testament*, rev. ed., Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1993.
- Moo, Douglas J., *Romans*, NICNT, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1996.
- Stott, John, *The Message of Romans*, IVP, Downers Grove, 2001.
- Wesley, John, *Wesley's Notes on the Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1987. The reader may access this volume at <https://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/wesleys-explanatory-notes/romans/>
- Wilckens, Ulrich, *La carta a los Romanos*, Biblioteca de Estudios Bíblicos 62, 2 vols., Sígueme, Salamanca, 1992.

## Introduction to the Epistle (1:1-17)

It is Paul's style that an epistle's introduction is a road map, to show where the apostle is going. A sermon is not like that! The pastor gives some announcements, he asks why the projector isn't working, he has to change the batteries in his lapel mike, he tells a story, funny in its way, but having nothing to do with his message. And finally, he launches his sermon into the deep.

An epistle has another nature, or to use the technical term, it is in the *epistolary genre*. In this case, Paul indicates from the first word where he is going to take us. That is why, if we compare Romans 1 with 1 Corinthians 1 or Galatians 1, it will be evident to which epistle belongs which introduction, since they are not interchangeable parts.

Years ago, in a class dedicated to the Pauline letters, the professor told us: *The introduction of an epistle is simply a way of saying Hello, there is no substance in it. So we can jump over the first two or four or six verses and move directly to the "body" of the letter.* With all due respect to the teacher, this idea is indefensible, and in fact many scholars have written about the introductions to Paul's epistles, showing that each one has its own agenda and also tone, and that they merit our full attention.

In 1:1-17, Paul drops several clues to show where we are going. One might speak of "foreshadowing", a literary figure in which something that happens early in the story hints at what will happen later on. One example in Romans: once we arrive at chapter 3, Paul will have proved that the Jews and the Gentiles have a desperate need for the gospel. And in that moment, we will see that his references to the Jews and the Gentiles (or Greeks) in 1:16 was no casual observation, but a foreshadowing of a vital part of the message to Rome.

Other foreshadowings in the introduction include:

- v. 2 – the Old Testament prophesied the gospel
- v. 3 – Jesus Christ is the descendant of David
- v. 4 – God declared him Son of God by the resurrection, and the Spirit of God is who gives him life
- vv. 5, 14-16 – the gospel is for the Jews and for all the nations
- vv. 5, 8, 12, 16-17 – one receives the gospel by faith

And others too; the reader will gain much by tracing these themes throughout the book.

## A. Greetings (1:1-7)



### 1:1

Imagine a narrow apartment in Rome, where you and your companions in the faith are seated shoulder to shoulder. When the time comes, you close their eyes to hear the words written on a scroll, read by Deacon Phoebe of Cenchrea (see Introduction). To recall Genesis 27, *The voice is the voice of Phoebe, but the words, these are from the Apostle*: “Paul, servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle...”

Epistles in the ancient world began with a formula in which the author identifies himself, then greets the recipient and offers some sort of blessing or prayer. A typical letter would thus start off with something general: *Paul, to the Romans, may God grant you grace and peace*. The fact that Paul takes seven verses to begin his epistle reinforces what we seen above, that he is adding extra material in order that his listeners might know from the very beginning which direction he is taking.

### 1:2-3

For example, he links the gospel of Christ with the Old Testament – the Savior is not some new unexpected figure; the prophets long ago predicted his coming as the Son of David (see 15:12; 1 Cor 15:3). That is one of the titles found in the gospels (for example, Mark 10:48; 12:35-37). It was vitally important to the gospel that Jesus be truly human and not just some spirit taking human form, as was a common motif in pagan mythology. In Romans 4 Paul will show how Abraham and David, two ancestors of Jesus, were accepted by God for their faith, not for obeying the law, that is, the Torah.

*Special Note: The Name of Jesus.* Because of teachings that are being widely circulated these years it is necessary to say a few words about the name “Jesus”, which is based on the Greek form of Yeshua, that is *Iēsous*. One hears bold conspiracy theories, for example, that the name “Jesus” was invented to insult the Messiah, to “paganize” his name.<sup>1</sup>

What are the data? Simply, Yeshua is the Hebrew and also the Aramaic form of the Hebrew name *Yehoshua* or *Hoshua* (Joshua) in the Old Testament. The short form found in Matthew 1:21 means “he [that is, Yeshua] will save.” The Lord Jesus in general or perhaps always spoke Aramaic (see our comments on 8:15); he also knew the Hebrew of the Bible and the synagogue liturgy, and perhaps Greek as well, in order to speak with Gentiles (e.g., Matt 8:5-13; 15:21-28) or with Pontius Pilate. For that reason, I believe that during his ministry, some would have called him by the Greek form of his name, *Iēsous*. After his resurrection and exaltation, the apostles went forth proclaiming him, consistently using the Greek

---

<sup>1</sup> See <https://openoureyeslord.com/2016/06/14/yeshua-iesous-jesus-some-other-form-whos-right/>

form *Iēsous*. The first sermon of Peter contained that form. There is no evidence of anyone using the form Yeshua in the New Testament or in the history of the early church. And I have searched firsthand the TLG database of all the Greek texts of that period, and clearly, only Jewish males used the name *Iēsous*, beginning with the references to Joshua in the Greek version of the Bible, the Septuagint (see for example, the Jewish Christian Jesus Justus in Col 4:11). The reason for the change from the *sh* in the Hebrew to *s* in the Greek is that there was no *sh* sound in Greek. Plus, one would add a final *s* to the name, because Greek men's names usually ended with that sound. All this to say that *Iēsous* is the authentic and ancient Jewish version of Yeshua, and that *Jesus* in English too is correct and inferior in nothing. Nor is "Messiah" a cheapened version of the Hebrew *Mashiach* – the basis for the change of pronunciation in this case is that English does not have a final *ch* sound, whereas Hebrew does.

1:4

The Holy Spirit is the one who resurrects and gives new life – this theme will be important in Romans 6 and 8 (also 1 Pet 3:18). When he raised him from the dead, Jesus was either "appointed" (or a synonym, CSB, NET, NIV) or "declared" the Son of God (see KJV, ESV, NASB, NRSV). The verb is also used in Acts 10:42, that Jesus "he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead." Some have taken this to teach a so-called "adoptionist Christology", that is that Jesus was merely human who only became the Son of God at his resurrection. Although grammatically that is possible, it contradicts other texts: for example, that he was already God's Son during his earthly ministry (Matt 3:17; 17:5); and that he was "in very nature God" before his incarnation (Phil 2:6). The best way to understand v. 4 is not that he was made Son of God, but that he was visibly revealed as "Son-of-God-in-power", that is, in the glorious resurrection (Cranfield, p. 1.62).

"Jesus Christ is Lord" is one of the earliest and briefest of all creeds, and was probably "confessed" by the new converts at their baptism (as shown in 10:9-10). The original Aramaic-speaking church acclaimed Jesus as Lord from the very beginning, as shown in the formula *Maranatha*, which means "Our Lord [Jesus], come!" (1 Cor 16:22). Paul knew Jesus as Lord directly upon his conversion (Acts 9:10, 17, 27; Gal 1:19). He preached Christ as Lord on his first missionary journey, and he sometimes referred to him simple as "the Lord." In fact, when he quoted the Jewish Scriptures, verses in which references to the Lord Yahweh ("Lord" or *kurios*) in the Greek version, the Septuagint, are applied direction to Jesus. Calling on the name of Yahweh for salvation (Joel 2:32) thus becomes calling on the Lord Jesus (Rom 10:13); and the Day of Yahweh becomes the Day of the Lord Jesus or Lord Jesus Christ (e.g., 2 Cor 1:14; 1 Cor 1:8). A major assumption of Paul's teaching is that Christ does what God does and deserves the honor God does. It should be noted that the Jews knew that the Messiah would be the Son of God (Ps 2:7; 2 Sam 7:14), but they did not infer from their Scriptures that he would be deity, that is,

from such texts as Psalm 45:6-7 and Micah 5:2. If Christ be not God and Lord, then Paul is a blasphemer.

### *1:5-7a*

Paul's call to evangelize the Gentiles, or "the nations", was part of his first encounter with Christ (Acts 22:21; 26:17-18; also Gal 1:16; 2:2; 2:9; Rom 15:12 among others). The modern reader might not realize that the mere possibility of a "Gentile Christian" was a hot topic of debate in the first century. Paul's gospel was that all people who believe in Jesus are registered in God's eyes as children of Abraham, branches of the olive tree of God's people, and that they are fully acceptable without circumcision, Torah observance, Sabbath-keeping (14:5-6), or other cultural trappings of Judaism. They are equal to a messianic Jewish believer in Jesus, and together they join the "choir" of God's people in singing praises to him *as non-Jews* – "Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles; let all the peoples extol him" (15:11, quoting Ps 117:1). According to 1:7a, all are beloved and his saints.

### *1:7b*

Paul will say much in this document about God's "grace and peace", which are relationship words to describe that God has taken the initiative to save people by his grace and to establish a peaceful relation between him and his former spiritual enemies. As he will sum up later on, "since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (5:1).

It should be noted that in these beginning verses of Romans and also in 1:8-15, Paul takes care to make sure that his entire letter is aligned with the truths of the gospel. A modern preacher might take a lesson from the apostle, since much of preaching today is a jumble of health and success, with a few nuggets about Jesus Christ thrown into the mix. The truth is, that if our message is not Christ in all and above all, then we are not preaching Christ at all.

## **B. Paul connects personally with the Roman Church (1:8-15)**

Another method that Paul uses in his epistles, is that he will spend a few verses in the introduction to connect or re-connect with his readers. Despite the relative ease of communication – only 2 weeks to take a letter from Corinth to Rome! – the Christians he knows there hadn't seen him for some years, and the rest knew him only second-hand. He mentions that the church has a widespread good reputation, and also that he prays regularly for them (compare 1 Thess 1:2-3; Col 4:2). To pray without ceasing means regular, strenuous prayer, the type found in Psalm 88:1-2 – "Lord, you are the God who saves me; day and night I cry out to you. May my prayer come before you; turn your ear to my cry." A century after Paul, Polycarp was another example of a true intercessor: even while he was fleeing persecution he did "nothing else night and day except praying for everyone and for the churches throughout the world, for this was his

constant habit” (*Martyrdom of Polycarp* 5.1, Holmes). The apostle thus signaled to the Romans that he was not simply using them for his own ends, but truly sought for them to experience God’s blessings.

Paul wanted to spend time in Rome, even though there was already a church there. This is hardly unusual, since any apostle would want to know how the gospel was growing in the imperial capital. And he wanted to be able to bless them and to be blessed in return (vv. 10-12) and also to make converts while there (v. 13). Paul does not mention that any apostle had gotten to Rome before he did, as runs the Catholic tradition that Peter evangelized Rome some time around the year 42. Nothing in the New Testament nor in the earliest tradition supports this. Yes, the best interpretation of 1 Peter 5:13 is that Peter wrote from spiritual “Babylon”, which was a name applied to Rome in that era; but this would put him in the capital only in the early 60s. It leaves room for the tradition that he and Paul were martyred in Rome under Nero; and in fact, recent excavation in the 21st century under the altar of the Basilica of Saint Paul Without the Walls (“without”, that is, “outside” the city walls), the traditional site of his burial, indicates that Paul’s remains might well be there.

The difficulty that Paul was facing in the year 58 is that he was running out of places where he could do pioneer church-planting among the non-Jews – in a little more than a decade, he had preached the gospel in the entire north-eastern arc of the Mediterranean, and once he evangelized Illyricum (15:19) he could only go further to the north-west or to some other new region. He was certainly not averse to evangelizing non-Greek speakers (v. 14), so there are huge areas to the north he could have gone to. Nonetheless, for some reason we are not told, he planned to go to Spain, where he would work with people who spoke Latin and Greek; from there he could indirectly reach out to those who spoke only the local dialects.

When he says that “I am obligated” to all, he does not simply mean that he would like to feel the blessing of evangelizing them, or that it would be spiritually profitable – rather, he knows that he must take the gospel to them: “I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!” (1 Cor 9:16).

*Practical Thought:* It is all too easy in ministry to direct our attention to people who have the resources and influence to do things for us or for the church. In that case we feel obligated to help the work of Christ along by allotting them more of ourselves and rationalizing that after all it will come back to the rest of the church in tangible blessings. What is more, those with few resources or family or connections might come to be regarded as “charity cases” rather than people to whom we are obligated. Like Christians before us we must renounce and subvert structures which are after all part of the “pattern of the world” which we must escape (Rom 12:2).

**C. Theme of the Epistle: *The gospel is powerful to save all; therefore, Paul is bold to preach the saving message (1:16-17)***

In some of his letters Paul uses another typical element of letter-writers of his day: the purpose statement (Latin *propositio*) is the declaration of the theme of the letter, to help his readers to understand where he was going in his teaching, for example: “that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you” (1 Cor 1:10; also Gal 1:6; 1 Tim 1:3). Like most of these articulations, 1:16 is densely packed with various aspects of the Christian message.

To examine the parts of v. 16 let us begin with “I am not ashamed.” Paul lived in two cultures, the Jewish and the Greco-Roman. In both, the concept of honor and shame was a key paradigm to guide one’s behavior. For example, in the parable of the Prodigal Son, the sin of the young man did not primarily consist in wild living, but in the fact that he brought shame to his father and also to his older brother. This made his brother’s attitude more understandable – if mistaken – and the reconciliation that the father offered the prodigal was that much more overwhelming in its mercy. Paul taught that God had chosen people of no reputation to bring shame to the wise and powerful (1 Cor 1:26-31). The person who has cause for confidence and reason to boast (1 Cor 1:31) is the one who lives to glorify the Lord Christ – “Therefore, as it is written: ‘Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.’” (quoting Jer 9:24).

Later in Romans 9:33, Paul quotes Isaiah 28:16 y 8:14 as messianic prophecy: “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.” All who stumble over this stone, because they think the gospel is for fools, will fall, but those with faith will never be “put to shame.” Paul’s confidence has little to do with his ability to speak well or propose a strategic plan – it rests on the fact that God will never let him down.

The next truth of 1:16 is that of the “why.” That is, Paul had good reason to be confident in the gospel, because “it is the power of God for salvation”. His confidence lies in the fact that the gospel, in the eyes of the world a poor and weak philosophy, is powerful, because Almighty God has chosen to work through it. This text too has a parallel elsewhere – “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Cor 1:18).

Thousands of Jews were crucified in the first century, but in only one case was a man resurrected and declared to be God’s Son and the Savior (1:4). “His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life” (2 Pet 1:3), beginning with the new birth and the gift of the Holy Spirit. This is why the apostle will not be muzzled – despite the opposition to the gospel, he has seen so many people be transformed, beginning with himself, that he loses any discomfort in sharing the message. He will keep evangelizing, despite the hostility he will inevitably face in Jerusalem, in Rome, and in Spain.

The next element is the “to what end” of this statement, the conclusion that salvation comes through faith: “to everyone who believes.” When the Philippian jailor, a non-Jew, wanted to

know what he should do to be saved, the simple message was “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ” – not get circumcised, not take long years of instruction in Torah observance, not to give up eating pork and shellfish. “Believe” is a verb, it is an action that people take when they come to Christ (1:5; also 1:8). Paul will spend much of Romans teaching what it means to have faith in Christ: in short it means having confidence in the crucified and risen Jesus, to the extent that we leave all other underpinnings, helps, supplement, and Plan Bs behind. For Gentile Christians that includes that they will not try to achieve salvation or to retain it, not even by a tiny fraction, through a fruitless attempt to observe the commandments of Torah.

It is no casual reference that the gospel is salvation for “everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. “Everyone” is a key word in this letter (see 2:9, 10, 12; 3:12, 19, 22, 23, etc.), with the surprising element being that people can become believers while remaining non-Jewish. (Paul literally uses the word “Greeks” in 1:16, not Gentiles, since most of the Gentiles he encountered were saturated in Greek culture and language). To be sure, the gospel went to the Jews first, since the Lord is the Son of David, but it is for the Gentiles too – “The Root of Jesse [father of David, hence ancestor of Jesus] will spring up, one who will arise to rule over the nations; in him the Gentiles will hope” (Paul quotes Isa 11:10 in Rom 15:12). Paul had a special call to evangelize non-Jews. Nevertheless, he conscientiously preached the gospel first to the Jews of each new town, giving them a chance to receive or reject it, be it in a town with no formal synagogue (Acts 16:13-15), or with one (Acts 13:14-48; 17:2-4). He continued onward, even when he occasionally was beaten by the synagogue authorities (2 Cor 11:24).

Let us be careful to gain a precise understanding of Paul’s “purpose.” If we put all the elements of the *propositio* together, we see that Paul is not affirming three or four separate ideas, but is putting together a case for how the Roman Christians themselves should act. This is what he later did for Timothy – and by extension the members of the church where he was ministering – “For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline. So do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner. Rather, join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God” (2 Tim 1:7-8). Hence, we may paraphrase Romans 1:16 in this way – *“I, Paul, am not ashamed of the gospel, thus I go on preaching it. And you believers in Rome, are you ashamed of the gospel that you have received and enjoyed? Really no? Then, are you likewise proclaiming it?”* And to take it further, *“And are you committed to support me in the mission to Spain?”*

This understanding of 1:16 helps us to interpret the rest of the epistle: Paul is not simply telling them about the gospel of Christ, the message that all of them know and understand more or less. Every reference to sin, to salvation, to God’s call to faith, to justification, to sanctification at the same time serves a parallel purpose: to clarify what the Roman believers can and must tell their relatives, people they meet at work, members of the same household, people in the street.

In 1:17a Paul develops further his point by the revelation of the justice of God. “Is revealed” in 1:17 and 1:18 are identical verbs, based on the root from which we get “apocalypse”, one of the names of the book of Revelation. The verbs refer to supernatural disclosures from heaven, one in v. 17 a blessing for the believer but in v. 18 one is a curse for the unbeliever. John Wesley gives a broad definition of “the righteousness of God” as “the whole benefit of God through Christ for the salvation of a sinner” (Wesley, p. 496); but it is possible to give further definition to the phrase. Some interpret the righteousness/justice of God to mean the fact that God shows himself to be just when he powerfully intervenes to save his people; it would thus be synonymous with “the power of God that brings salvation” in 1:16 (see Dunn, pp. 1.40-42). The traditional Protestant view, which we take here, is that it is the righteousness that comes from God, that is, “God makes us right in his sight” (NLT). As said Martin Luther: “For God does not want to save us but by an extraneous righteousness, one that does not originate in ourselves but comes to us from beyond ourselves, which does not originate on earth but comes from heaven” (cited in Hendriksen, pp. 1.62; see also Stott, pp. 63-64). This means that 1:17a has its parallel in the verb “justify”, the term that is so decisive for this epistle and that we will examine beginning in 2:13, meaning that God as judge will declare a person “just” rather than “wicked.” In that case, believers experience the justifying grace of God despite the fact that they are not in themselves just.

A strictly literal translation of what follows makes little sense in English, for example, “from faith to faith.” We would have to unpack this further, and would probably say that it is “by faith from first to last” (NIV) or “a way that starts from faith and ends in faith” (NEB). Paul is expressing in other terms what he has already said, that salvation is by faith – here in 1:17a, it can be only be by faith, and by faith alone.

If 1:16 is the purpose statement of Romans, then 1:17b is Paul’s proof text; in 1:2 he has already promised the reader that the prophets of old had foreseen the gospel, and Romans is unusually rich in texts from the Scriptures. Here he quotes a relatively obscure verse from Habakkuk 2:4 – “The righteous shall live by faith.” It should be noted that Paul is giving the text a meaning that would not have been obvious to other Jews in the first century, nor is it the only way to read the Hebrew, which could also be made to say “the righteous person shall live by his *faithfulness*”, that is, by his faithful observance of what God requires of him (the sect at Qumran used the same text, but had an entirely different interpretation than did Paul or mainstream Judaism). In that case, Jews everywhere might retort that Paul didn’t understand the Scriptures, that he was pulling the verse out of context. Paul approaches the text with the awareness that the Scriptures as a whole prove that “no one will be declared righteous in God’s sight by the works of the law” or the Torah (3:20), that is the “faithfulness” interpretation leads to nowhere. What Paul emphasizes then, is that God will give life – yes, even eternal life in the final resurrection! (6:23) – to the one who trusts in Christ.

*Practical Thought:* We seldom have to worry about whether we are understandable to Jews and Greeks. We do however have to attend to various people groups, be they divided by class, race, language, social structure. Those who believe that they are called to represent Christ to the world must communicate the good news in a holistic way: that is, explaining the gospel plainly and simply, and perhaps modifying the presentation depending on the group. And in a church culture where jokes and stage theatrics are used to capture a larger audience, we must take care that every word we utter and action we take is useful to present Christ to the audience and the audience to Christ.

### **Study Questions**

1. Paul said that he was obligated to all people (1:14-15), that is he did not neglect one part of his audience in order to favor another. Try to evaluate how Christians today might, wrongly, concentrate on one group or another, and what motivates them to do so.
2. The gospel is by faith from beginning to end (1:17). What are some of the ways we need to renounce our own efforts and simply trust in God's salvation?
3. The gospel is the message that God acts through in power (1:16). Think about how people you know need God's power to break through their sin in order to transform their lives.

### **II. The Coming Condemnation of All (1:18-3:20)**

Paul's goal is to prove that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (3:23) and that even more fatally, any and all sin is eternally disastrous for Gentile or Jew.

Foremost of course he is addressing the Christians of Rome, whether they are Jewish or not. But on another level, Paul is talking as if he were addressing an imaginary synagogue audience (see our description of "apostrophe" under 2:1). In 1:18-32, he first speaks about Gentile wickedness, in a way that his hypothetical synagogue would have certainly appreciated. It is precisely what the young rabbi Sha'ul would have heard or preached before he encountered Christ. Then, beginning in 2:1, he speaks to that same imaginary audience of Jews about how their own sins are enough to bring down God's wrath on their heads.

It is human nature that we feel most happy when someone judges the sins of "them" or "Those Others," especially if we are left in peace with our own behaviors. It is not hard to find a modern parallel:

Once there was a small country church, and two elderly women would always sit together in the first pew. One Sunday, the preacher began his sermon: "Brothers



and sisters: we must reject the use of intoxicating beverages!” One of the ladies turned to the other and said, “Amen! Amen!” Later he preached, “We must completely root out all illegal drugs!” Again, she said to her companion, “Amen, Amen!” Finally, the pastor said: “And we must totally abandon the practice of gossip!” The lady slowly turned to the other and whispered, “Well, now he’s just meddling.”

We will begin in 1:18-32 with the sins of Those Others, the Gentiles or non-Jews, and later on the sins of Us, the Jews.

#### **A. God will condemn those who commit stereotypically Gentile sins: idolatry and sexual corruption (1:18-32)**

After announcing that the gospel is powerful to save anyone, Paul leaps immediately into why salvation is necessary in the first place; that is, he moves in 1:18 from Solution (the gospel) to Problem (the wrath of God).

In any kind of persuasive speech – by a preacher, politician, or lawyer – it is a common strategy to first seek common ground with the listener, and then to proceed to areas of disagreement. For example, one popular evangelistic program says that we should not start off by saying that God is going to punish sinners, because the person will immediately retort, “Well, I believe in a God of love.” So instead they suggest that we begin with “God is love” and afterward go on to show that “God is righteous and must punish all unrighteousness.”

In the sermons recorded in Acts, Paul used this sort of method, and he certainly does so in Romans 1-3. Neither the synagogue nor the Christians thought that the pagans could escape the punishment of God, and Paul begins with these Gentiles since it will be the easier of the two points. This is an important concept in the letter, for example: “we will all stand before God’s judgment seat...each of us will give an account of ourselves to God” (14:10, 12). There are two and only two possible outcomes in the final judgment – on the one hand, condemnation; and on the other vindication, which is also known as justification.

The apostle enumerates four broad reasons for the condemnation of the Gentiles – idolatry (vv. 18-25); the result of their “sinful desires”, especially homosexual fornication (vv. 24, 26-28); a list of vices (vv. 29-31); the fact that they applaud others who do evil (v. 32).

#### *1:18*

The wrath of God is not merely symbolic language, as some have argued; nor is meant to coerce people into behaving better. Paul means to say that there will be eternal condemnation for the wicked, that it is just as real as is salvation, and just as eternal (see 3:5; 9:22; also 6:23). Once again Paul uses the key word *all*, that is, all “godlessness and wickedness.” Although it might

escape the first-time reader, this word “all” will turn out to have a great impact on Jews, who believed that they would be spared from God’s judgment, despite having committed some sins.

Later in this epistle (5:12ff.) Paul will speak of the Fall of Adam and how that event led to death and sin for the whole race. In Romans 1 Paul is focusing on the history of the nations more than the Fall. There is ongoing idolatry and depravity, plus, divine wrath is already being poured out during this age (1:24).

Paul gives some value to what is called “general revelation”, that is, that by looking at God’s creation one might gain some understanding of who God is. Paul returns to the same theme in 10:18, quoting Psalm 19:4, that Israel has had a clear though limited message from the heavens about who God is. God has not “written his gospel in the stars”; the best we can say about general revelation is that “...the manifestation of God, by which he makes his glory known in his creation, is, with regard to the light itself, sufficiently clear; but that on account of our blindness, it is not found to be sufficient. We are not however so blind, that we can plead our ignorance as an excuse for our perverseness” (Calvin, p. 71).

#### *1:19-23, 25*

The Roman empire was filled with magnificent temples, and much of its capital city was given over to the worship the pagan gods. The military camp in the city was named for Mars, god of war. Besides the traditional gods of Jupiter, Juno, and the rest, Greek, Egyptian and other religions had their adherents. The “emperor cult” was also a feature of religion in Paul’s day, with temples to Julius Caesar and Augustus. All of this is the background of Paul’s condemnation of so many kinds of idols, “images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles” (v. 23); the whole endeavor is a “lie” (v. 25). It is noteworthy that neither did the philosophers of the day believe in the idols as such; their deities were more abstract and sometimes identified with Fate or Providence. Hence some would assent with Paul that God was invisible (1:20); the philosophers in Athens probably agreed with Paul that the one God “does not live in temples built by human hands” (Acts 17:24). Nevertheless, even Socrates practiced the religious rites of his city, up until the very end of his life, as did most of the educated and ruling classes – the Athenian philosophers were “very religious” by this definition of strict adherence to rituals (Acts 17:22). In part they did not want to be the cause of the city’s or the empire’s downfall by displeasing heaven, and in part they regarded religion as a means of controlling the lower classes. Paul’s point in vv. 19-20 is not that everyone should become a theist, a believer in some deity, but that they should worship the true creator God from Genesis (see Rom 5:12-17), that is the God of Israel (9:5), and that true religion includes being grateful to him and walking in holiness.

While Paul does not specifically name the Gentiles here, nevertheless this is the implication of the stereotypical language that he uses. For the Jews of the Second Temple, the root of all Gentile evil was idolatry. One rabbi commented, two centuries later – “Whosoever recognizes

idols has denied the entire Torah; and whosoever denies idols has recognized the entire Torah” (*Midrash Sifre Deuteronomy* 54). Thus, the final coming of Yahweh to judge the world would have as its aim the destruction of religious apostasy.

1:24, 26-27

The wrath of God is not just an anxiety for some far-off time; spiritual rebels are already feeling its effects: humans abandoned the true God (vv. 23, 25, 27) and in turn God “gave them over” (v. 24, 26, 28), that is, he abandoned them to their evil practices. The pagans have “sinful desires” and pant after “sexual impurity” (v. 24); in this context it is a synonym of “fornication” and refers to any sort of illicit sexual desire or activity. There is a similar phrase “shameful lusts” in v. 26. That is, in both their minds and behaviors they were apostate from the true Creator.

*Special note on sexuality.* Whereas in some cultures, sex is linked with romance or child-bearing, many in the Americas view it as a casual activity – highly to be desired, but ultimately with little meaning. Although one might argue that our society is crazy about sex, another way to look at it is that it devalues sex into a biological transaction. “It’s just sex!” is a popular slogan; but far from revealing that people enjoy bodily pleasures too much, it shows they enjoy them too little. Many assume that God, if he exists, is so vast and remote that he could not possibly be interested in whether a couple has relations. While this axiom could work in some philosophies, it does not fit into the Christian message: God has given us fair warning that sexual deeds cannot be reduced to what I do with “just my body” – therefore Paul commands, “let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit” (2 Cor 7:1; also 1 Cor 6:19-20).

Vv. 26 and 27 have traditionally been interpreted as a condemnation of all homosexual activity between women and between men (see for example Stott, pp. 76-78, and almost all commentaries); that is the conclusion we will eventually take here. But first, we will begin with some cultural background; then explore the other principal text on this theme, 1 Corinthians 6:9; and then return to Romans 1.

*Special Note: Homosexuality in Antiquity.* Many or most people of Paul’s day who engaged in homosexual acts would, in modern terms, be categorized as bisexual. Homosexual activity in Greco-Roman society ran the full spectrum from positive consensual relationships to outright exploitation and rape. Young Greek male friends sometimes formed a sexual relationship while awaiting marriage, and there were those who argued that sex with another male was a superior relationship than sex with the “inferior” sex. Also, it was not unusual for a man to engage in sex with weaker males, be they slaves, young boys, or *protégées*. Even the Greek supreme god Zeus, whose appetite for females was voracious, had an

eye for handsome boys: in one instance, he kidnapped Ganymede, and made him his cupbearer and sex object (the word “catamite” is derived from his name).

Paul, we assume, had seen a great deal in his journeys – he encountered people from all walks of life and probably knew that some homosexual relationships were consensual and that some were not.

Paul had also received standard Jewish training. While there are plenty of times when Paul rejects the rabbinic interpretation of the Scriptures, the entire passage of Romans 1:18-32 is not one of them. The rabbis took Leviticus 18:22 (also 20:13), “Do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman,” as a prohibition of all sex between males. They coined the Hebrew term *mishkav zakur* (to sexually bed a male) as their regular label for it. The Alexandrian theologian Philo cites that verse and explicitly refers to the vice of “the love of boys”; but he also clearly condemns boys and men who voluntarily, consensually submit to other men – “a subject of boasting not only to those who practise it, but even to those who suffer it, and who, being accustomed to bearing the affliction of being treated like women, waste away as to both their souls and bodies, not bearing about them a single spark of a manly character to be kindled into a flame...[they] are not ashamed to devote their constant study and endeavours to the task of changing their manly character into an effeminate one” (*Particular Laws* 3.7 §37 [Yonge]). He would also say, “And it is natural for those who obey the law to consider such [men who commit homosexual acts as] worthy of death, since the law commands that the man-woman [that is, a man who takes the part of a woman] who adulterates the precious coinage of his nature shall die without redemption...” (Philo, *Particular Laws* 3.7 §38 [Yonge]). Josephus, who like Paul was from a Pharisaic background, interpreted Leviticus in the same way – Moses forbade “the lying with a male, which was to hunt after unlawful pleasures on account of [male] beauty. To those who were guilty of such insolent behavior, he ordained death for their punishment” (Josephus, *Antiquities* 3.12.1 §275 [Whiston]). Like the other Jewish interpreters of the law, Paul regarded the desire for same-sex relations and their practice as an abomination.

*Special Note on 1 Corinthians 6:9-10.* Paul excludes the *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* from the coming kingdom; we will say more about translation issues below. In this text, Paul says nothing there about motivation or what we would call sexual orientation, but only of behaviors. It is very likely that he bases his teaching on Leviticus: “Do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman; that is detestable” (Lev 18:22). Paul’s word *arsenokoitai* is uncommon in Greek, but it is an exact literal translation of the Hebrew *mishkav zakur*. The term *malakoi* was a common slur against men who acted in an effeminate manner

and/or played the female role in a homosexual act. Some authors have argued that these *malakoi* were unwilling participants, for example, slaves or forced prostitutes or boys. The strongest argument against this is: why in the world would Paul say that the *malakoi* would never enter God's kingdom, if they were by definition the victims of another's predation? Victims of the wickedness of others, including sexual lust, are not to blame if circumstances are beyond their control. In his 1 Corinthians commentary, Origen points to that noun *malakoi* and shows that it may refer to consensual acts: he warns his young adult male students about *voluntarily* submitting to another man, charging them "to keep your youth pure and not to be defiled with such a womanish defilement."<sup>2</sup>

One senses in the English Bible translations a certain delicacy about spelling out what the two terms *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* mean; after all, they are meant to be read out in church. Still, there are better and worse translations. The Message paraphrase completely flouts the original with its vagary: "Those who use and abuse each other, use and abuse sex." The 1984 edition of the NIV rendered it, "nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders." To begin with, it is too broad with the latter term, since the original speaks only of males, not all "offenders." But that edition (along with NAB, NASB, NLT, NRSV) errs further when it makes the *malakoi* out to be prostitutes, that is, men or boys who have sex with other men as part of an economic transaction. A better translation for *malakoi* is "men or boys who voluntarily submit themselves sexually to another man" (and thus will not enter the kingdom of God); and for *arsenokoitai*, "men who sexually use men or boys as they would a woman." The 2011 edition of the NIV is a great improvement on the 1984; along with many other versions (the ESV for example) it conflates the two words together to form "men who have sex with other men." It is also clearer than the King James Version. One must mention that neither edition of the NIV is a gay Bible, nor was its views on sex influenced, as an urban legend has it, because of a supposed lesbian translator.

Let us return to our text: whereas in 1 Corinthians 6 Paul focuses on behavior, not sexual inclination, in Romans 1 he speaks to both desire and behavior; and in Romans he also addresses lesbian sexuality (v. 26), a theme that appears only in this Bible text (see especially Dunn, pp. 1.64-66).

It has been argued that in Romans 1:26-27 Paul is not condemning loving homosexual relationships, but only those which are linked with idolatry or with those that are caused by lustful and perhaps exploitative passion. Another interpretation is that Paul is condemning only that homosexual activity which goes, literally, "against nature" (v. 26). This argument runs that,

---

<sup>2</sup> This untranslated work is available here: Origen, *Fragmenta ex commentariis in epistulam i ad Corinthios*, ed. C. Jenkins, "Documents: Origen on I Corinthians," *JTS* 9 & 10 (1908).

wholesome homosexual activity so long as it is natural for the partners: that is, if they are naturally attracted to same-sex, then going against one's own homosexual inclinations could be thought to be unnatural and wrong. Nevertheless, Paul nowhere speaks positively of homosexual inclination or activity, and he came from a rabbinic culture where Torah was thought to be explicit about the issue.

Paul pointed to homosexual desire and activity in Romans 1, not because that was the only "sexual impurity" (v. 24) he could think of, but because it was so common among Greeks and almost unheard of among Jews – thus for the rabbis it was a litmus test of how depraved the Gentiles had gotten.

*Practical Thoughts:* The question that faces all readers of the text is, what to do with what Paul says? Those who reject the traditional interpretation might take the following strategies: (1) Some argue that we have misunderstood Paul, and that he didn't say anything about loving, positive same-sex relationships. But Paul, in these two places and probably also in 1 Timothy 1:10, shows that he continues in the traditional reading of the Torah, that voluntary homosexual activities are sinful as such. He went out of his way to condemn them, in an environment where his stance went against the tide of Greek culture. (2) Or that Paul simply did not apply consistently other, more fundamental, truths of the gospel, that is the law of love and our equality in Christ; and that if we would only put his erratic attitudes on homosexuality to one side, we would be honoring the spirit of his teaching if not the letter. (3) That Paul was a product of his rabbinical training and that he could not imagine an alternative answer to that issue – today we have other scientific insight that might have given him a different perspective had he lived now instead of then. (For example, studies today hint that genetics and *in vitro* conditions might influence – but not determine – sexual orientation; I know of no reason why those findings run counter to biblical teaching.) (4) That one's hermeneutic is never objective, and therefore if a Bible reader concludes that the text speaks contrary to homosexual behavior, then that is the prejudice that that person brought into the text, that is, that only a person who already rejects gay people would be able to find such teaching in the Bible. (5) That Paul was not an infallibly inspired writer, and therefore we can take or leave his teachings as we think proper.

If one listens closely to the current debate, then there seem to be people who use all five arguments at once, despite the fact that they are inconsistent with each other and thus create a paradox. A more logical approach, in theory, is #5, to simply give up on Paul being 100% right all the time, and thus not taking his thoughts here as authoritative. The difficulty for the evangelical, of course, is that once one switches off some verses, we have given ourselves the authority to reject

others which cause us discomfort in some way. Nor does it do us much good to say that, well, only 6-7 of the 31,000 verses of the Bible mention the topic, therefore we can discount it – there are a number of Bible truths that show up only rarely, but are still counted as valid.

From this point, let us ask what a Christian approach to gay and lesbian people would look? First, it must be loving, and also just. Latin American culture, for example, with its emphasis on *machismo*, can be particularly harsh on homosexual men. In fact, many rapes against males are inflicted by “straight” men, who use sexual violence in order to demonstrate their own virility. This is also a common story in the prison system; and it has been demonstrated that the majority of sexual predation in the United States military is carried out by men against men. The church needs to expose and stand firm against all such unwanted violence, particularly since many Christians view prison rape as just deserts for people who are criminals anyway. There are many other issues where the church should seek justice for all people regardless of their sexual orientation, for example, in housing and labor rights.

But more importantly, the church also needs to point to the cross of Christ as the solution to all our spiritual issues. Our basic spiritual issue is that God’s judgment is about to fall on sinners. Sexual sin, be it heterosexual or homosexual, along with the list of sins Paul mentions in Romans (e.g. gossips, slanderers, insolent, arrogant, vv. 29-30) and in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 (e.g. greedy, drunkards) require one and the same solution.

### 1:28-32

In 1:29-31 Paul writes up a so-called vice list. Vice lists and virtue lists were a common figure of speech in that era, whereby the author would compile a list of behaviors and present them with little elaboration, in order to give his readers direction toward holiness and away from wickedness. One example from the Dead Sea Scrolls: “to the spirit of deceit belong greed, sluggishness in the service of justice, wickedness, falsehood, pride, haughtiness of heart, dishonesty, trickery, cruelty, much insincerity, impatience, much foolishness, etc.” (1QS IV, 9-11). Philo wrote one list that contains a whopping 147 elements. We have already mentioned 1 Corinthians 6:9-10; two other vice lists were likewise connected with exclusion from the eschatological kingdom (Gal 5:19-21; Eph 5:5). The fruit of the Spirit are presented in the form of a virtue list (Gal 5:22-23).

Paul mentions 20 elements in this list, ranging from breaking the Ten Commandments (“they disobey their parents”) to the mundane (“boasting”). If the greatest commandment of Torah was to love Yahweh with all one’s being (Deut 6:4), then to be a “God-hater” (v. 30) is the greatest

form of wickedness. We might add that the “indifferent to God” are no less guilty.

Even people without the Torah have some sense of divine justice and that these behaviors are actionable, but they not only do them but cheer on others who practice them (v. 32).

*Special Note: Evolution and Ethics.* It has become fashionable to explain every type of human behavior as the legacy of some hypothetical evolutionary past. This sort of argumentation is by definition weak, since one can take just about anything about human nature and imagine some sort of reason why it was needed by an ancient ancestor. Do you get irritable and angry when it’s past your dinner time? Well then, this is because your primate ancestors needed a boost of adrenaline to go out and hunt some animal quickly in order to preserve his progeny. Do men desire more than one mate? It is because they have the primeval drive to breed with many females in order to continue the species through as many children as possible. An article I recently read stated that women gossip because that is how their ancestors built a network of friends and gained information in order to survive: and thus, there is nothing intrinsically wrong with the behavior.

Any behavior can in theory be justified, through anthropology, sociology, psychology, biology. But our higher standard of what we should practice and what reject has to be God’s Word – he alone as our creator is able to give us the truth and perspective that we lack.

**B. God will in fact condemn all who sin, whether they claim to respect the law of Moses or no (2:1-3:8)**

Up until this point, both the church and the synagogue would have been in general agreement: the Gentiles are not only sinful, but they are astonishingly so. Their judgment is deserved, and God’s wrath will indeed fall on them. But now Paul changes direction and speaks to another group: *Israel apart from Christ*.

In the city of Rome, where roughly 95% of the population was pagan, where there were idol temples in every neighborhood, where sex and carousing and violence were daily events in the home and on the night-time streets, the Jews could imagine that the people of the covenant were set apart, a holy colony of God’s people within a metropolis of the lost.

This exceptionalism did not exactly lead Israel to think of itself as “saved by works.” It is a common misconception that, since Christians believe in a gospel *by grace alone* (hence the slogan, *sola gratia*), that Israel therefore must have believed in a gospel *by works alone* (a sort of *solis operibus*). In fact, Israel has always believed that if anyone is saved, it is by the mercy of God. A better description of Judaism is that God established a covenant with Abraham; and his



descendants are God's people, so long as the males are circumcised, and the individuals keep the Torah. If and when a Jew sinned – and they believed that all sin at some time or another – then the law even made provisions about how to repent and offer the appropriate sacrifice. For the Jew, then, the central concern was not, “What must I do to be saved?” but rather “What must I *avoid* so as not to miss out on salvation?”

This theology gave the Israelites much cause to hope. For example, the *Testament of Moses* was a document supposedly given by Moses to Joshua; in fact, it is more or less contemporary with the New Testament, and has a typically Jewish perspective on the end of the age –

Then his kingdom will appear throughout his whole creation. Then the devil will have an end. For God Most High will surge forth, the Eternal One alone. In full view will he come to work vengeance on the nations. Yea, all their idols will he destroy...Then will you be happy, O Israel! And you will mount up above the necks and the wings of an eagle. Yea, all things will be fulfilled. (*T. Moses* 10.1, 7-8 [Charlesworth])

When God appears, he will destroy the idolatrous Gentiles (the sort you find in Rom 1:18-32!) and rescue Israel, at least that part of Israel that has not gone apostate.

Paul must have believed something similar as a youth, but he came to reject it. Of his own experience he later would say that, “I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers” (Gal 1:14). But what happened? When he met Christ on the way to Damascus, his world was turned upside-down, and he realized that he was the greatest of sinners, despite his careful obedience to Torah (1 Tim 1:15).

Paul's argument here makes sense only if all Israel was already lost without Jesus Christ. Step by step, he begins to prove the “why” of 1:16, by dealing with this point: *If the Jews regard themselves as members of the covenant, and if that the covenant is enough to lead them to final salvation in the resurrection, then why does Paul divert precious resources by evangelizing them?* This is no mere hypothetical question. When Paul finally arrived in Rome (Acts 28:17-28), he immediately set up a meeting with the Jewish leaders in order to explain his gospel to them.

2:1-11

In our Bibles there is a useful division made between 1:32 y 2:1, a “speed bump” in the argument. In 2:1 it appears that he is no longer speaking of Gentiles, given that Gentiles were just said to approve those who excel in sin. Rather, here are people who disapprove of sinners, but ironically they too are wicked: “You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge another, you are condemning yourself, because

you who pass judgment do the same things” (2:1); “so when you, a mere human being, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God’s judgment?” (2:3).

And who is the “you” (singular, thus the KJV “thou art”) in 2:1 and other verses? Bit by bit, between v. 1 and v. 9, he gives us to understand that he is still thinking of an invisible gathering of Jews, probably dictating in his letter the sort of thing he said in the synagogues. He uses a literary device known as “apostrophe”, a rhetorical device that has been popular for many centuries. With it an author or speaker addresses someone or some group that is not present, using the second person (you, singular or plural) as if they were there with him, and using a sharp tone to denounce them. Someone might use this device in a speech in the UN, for example: “And you terrorists! Know that we will not tolerate your despicable actions!” But when members of the audience turn and glance around, they whisper to one another that there are no terrorists present in the meeting room! No, it’s just that the speaker is using “apostrophe” to make a point.

It does not impress God favorably if an individual condemns sin in another, not when he is doing the same sort of transgressions. God’s forgiveness is not extended to those who are spiritually well-informed or are discerning or who have moral “good taste.” One must do righteous deeds, otherwise that person too will face God’s wrath (2:2, 3, 5). Thus, in light of the coming judgment, he should spend his energies coming to grips with how God’s mercy might lead to his salvation (2:4).

Paul now uses a verse from the Jewish Scriptures to demonstrate to a Jewish hearer that he is right in what he says. Psalm 62:12 says that God “will repay each person according to what they have done.” The emphasis is on the verb “do.” What is it that you actually do? The synagogue taught that if Jews did not stray far, then they are safe. Not so, says Paul, not according to the Bible, which says that sin is sin, and that any sin leaves us open for damnation – this will be his conclusion to the matter in 3:23. If the gospel is for the Jews first (2:10; 1:16), then “distress” also is for them first (2:9). He concludes that God has no “favorites” in the world, not at the final judgment, and that apart from the gospel no-one has an advantage (2:11). At this point, some rabbis in Paul’s imaginary audience will certainly begin to murmur, since it is a fundamental of Torah that Israel is indeed God’s chosen people as descendants of Abraham (Gen 18:19) and thus “advantaged”.

In 2:10 the apostle touches on a topic that might strike us as un-Pauline, since it seems to connect salvation to good works: in the eschatological final judgment there will be “glory, honor and peace for everyone who does good.” In part this is a hypothetical, since in this section he is proving that 100% of humanity falls short of “does good.” Nevertheless, this is a theme he will pick up at 2:14-15, 29 – that there is a subset of humanity, composed of Jews and Gentiles, who in fact *are* walking in righteousness, not through their own efforts, but because of the work of God in changing their hearts (so Cranfield, pp. 1.150-53).

Paul now compares the relative states of Jews and Gentiles, giving special attention to lost Jews and righteous Gentiles. First, he reiterates the truth of 1:18-32, that Gentiles without Torah will be condemned apart from the Torah, that is, they will not be held liable for laws that they had never received. The other side of coin, however, is disturbing for the Jews, since “all who sin under the law (or, as has the CEV, “everyone who knows what it says”) will be lost.” In fact, people who are privileged with Torah will be more, not less, liable when judgment comes.

The apostle offers one of the fundamental truths both of the Old and New Covenants – “it is not those who *hear* the law who are righteous in God’s sight, but it is those who *obey* the law who will be declared righteous” (v. 13, emphasis added). He uses the verb “hear” instead of what we might say, “read” the Bible, since most Jews and early Christians received its teaching orally. James has the same principle – “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says” (James 1:22). And the Lord Jesus taught the same in his Sermon on the Mount – the man who built his house on the rock is the one who *does* what Jesus says (Matt 7:24-26). Paul is beginning to introduce an element of doubt: “Of course,” he implies, “I affirm that you hear the Torah; what I cannot affirm is that you actually obey the Torah.”

But there is another side: Gentiles who “do by nature things required by the law.” Taken in isolation, this seems either nonsensical or, as we saw in 2:10, purely hypothetical, a “what would happen if”, followed by, “well, I suppose that people might follow a sort of law, even though they don’t have the Torah; but they don’t do so, because they don’t have a righteous nature.” Others think Paul is speaking of Gentiles doing *relatively* good things, but not consistently (Dunn, p. 1.99; Calvin, pp. 96-97), although that hardly helps Paul to make his point. No, the linchpin here is that Gentile believers in Christ receive a new nature – what Paul will call “being in Christ”, “dying with Christ”, “risen with Christ” later in the epistle. Paul uses language that belongs to the New Covenant (see also our comments on Rom 5:5), especially the key concept that God will write his commandments, not just on stone tablets but on people’s hearts: “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts” (Jer 31:33). And so Paul is trying to entice the Jewish fictional audience to consider, *All Gentiles are wicked, but what would happen if God rewrote their basic nature? Would they not be given salvation on the day of judgment?*

*Practical Thought.* Here is a “Bible church”; let’s drop in. When the service begins, someone reads one of the psalms. They sing choruses that are based on Bible passages. There is a time for people to stand up and share how a certain Bible verse has helped them this week. The children are taken off to Sunday School, where they learn Bible stories, and memorize Bible verses. Meanwhile the pastor goes to the pulpit and announces that he will be speaking on a Bible text. Everyone looks it up in their own Bible, or they can read it off the screen. He explains what the Bible means and how it should affect us. He closes the service

with a benediction taken from the Bible. The bulletin proclaims that the church is dedicated to the Bible and therefore is built upon the rock. What is more, “Bible” is part of the church’s name.

Let us admire this church’s single-mindedness, especially given that so many churches use the Bible just to give the occasional embellishment, while the preacher goes off in some random doctrine.

Nevertheless, a congregation is not righteous for having listened to the Bible, but by doing it. If it was true for Israel that they would be condemned despite hearing and teaching the Torah, such will also be the case for people who possess both Testaments in their own language, even more so: *all who sin with a knowledge of the Bible, by that same Bible will they be judged*. A church full of people who do not practice the Bible is built on the sand and should fear for the coming storm.

It is also true that preachers tend to condemn sins of “The Others”, that is, people who don’t tend to go to that congregation or people who have little recognition inside the church. I have heard many sermons that condemned gay marriage, but very few that treated the likelier sins of the congregation, such as internet porn, domestic violence, incest. I have heard many criticisms of workers who are lazy and talk back to their bosses, but maybe only one or two where the pastor reproaches employers for providing unlivable wages or dangerous working conditions. Churches that avoid uncomfortable topics are not biblical and should beware of God’s judgment just as should non-evangelical groups.

2:17-27

“I hate double-minded people [i.e., hypocrites],” David wrote, “but I love your Law. You are my refuge and my shield; I have put my hope in your word. Away from me, you evildoers, that I may keep the commands of my God!” (Ps 119:113-115). How excellent these reflections, Paul might have thought. But how much better *if someone really did this, and consistently!* He will show that no-one obeys Torah, and he will use the Jewish Scripture itself to prove his point.

Paul now makes explicit, who his fictional audience is – the Jews (v. 17). The Jewish synagogue was a house for prayer and also the reading of the Scriptures (or Tanakh) – every week there would be a reading from the law of Moses (Torah), and then one from the Prophets. The faithful Jews would listen, memorize, and in theory put it into practice. Very well, says Paul, and he lists this ability to access Torah as one of the wonderful aspects of being Jewish (3:2; 9:4). But what good is hearing the law if one does not do it?

Paul heightens the “apostrophe” (see under 2:1) or fictional address to Jews with “you then”, giving some examples of how people claim to respect the law but do not obey it. He appeals to

the synagogues' optimism, for example, that a good teacher of Torah can enlighten a Gentile and lead him to conversion. Well and good, but what does that do for the teacher if he himself does not live by Torah? The reader might have expected Paul to mention some minor points of the law, but he moves directly to some major infractions, such as theft (2:21), adultery (2:22), robbing temples (is this vandalizing pagan temples, or holding back tithes, or stealing from the fund for the Jerusalem temple? 2:22 – it is not certain), dishonoring God (2:23).

Greek and Roman writers regularly made fun of Jews and their God: supposedly the Jews kept aloof from others because they hated humanity; helped needy Jews but not Gentiles; mutilated their genitals; refused to eat pork; polluted temples; they were poor and dirty (according to the sharp-tongued Juvenal in his *Satires* 3, in the following century); they engaged in the occult practice of interpreting dreams (*Satires* 6); they were too lazy to work every seventh day. Josephus's writings, in particular his *Against Apion*, were designed to present and defend the history of Israel against this anti-Jewish feeling.

Since Juvenal would hold little truck with Israelites, Paul now brings in as a witness none other than the prophet Isaiah, in order to prove that Jews cause the name of God to be slandered – “God’s name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you” (Isa 52:5). This is from a chapter that for Paul and the early church was messianic, just two verses away from the coming of the gospel, the “good news”, in 52:7.

In rabbinic writings too, one encounters the tension between (merely) hearing and doing, that is, at least in theory nobody was in favor of religious hypocrisy. But we must not misunderstand Paul here: his point is not that hypocrisy is evil and that his fellow Israelites need to renounce it and live more sincerely. Rather, he is proving that if sin brings down the judgment of God on Gentiles, then wrath will also fall from heaven when Jewish people sin – and sin they do. In that way Paul rejects completely the paradigm of Second Temple Judaism, as reflected in the *Testament of Moses* (see above), and announces doom for all who are apart from Christ.

## 2:28-29

The reader should consult our comments under Romans 11 for further help in these verses. Paul is saying that only those Jews who are spiritually circumcised (see Col 2:11-12) can claim to be true Jews; they have experienced the New Covenant (see our comments on Rom 5:5; Wilckens, pp. 196-98). Gentiles too are spiritually circumcised, as shown in Colossians 2, but Paul does not draw the conclusion here that believing Gentiles are the true Israel.

Paul is posing his own answer to an age-old question that occupies the rabbis to this day: “Who is a Jew?” (the Hebrew expression is *Mihu Yehu'di*). The traditional answer today is that if one’s mother was Jewish, then you are too, but the topic is a difficult one, given that many Jews are secular, or children of mixed marriages. Some strict rabbis in effect demand that people who always thought of themselves as Jewish must “re-convert” to the faith. The question has become

even more relevant since the formation of the Jewish state of Israel, which has the Law of Return enshrined in its constitution, that all Jews have the right to become citizens. That's fine, but how does one define a Jew?

According to Paul, only a believer in Christ/the Messiah is a true descendant of Abraham, and thus authentically Jewish.

In order to open the door to the gospel, Paul first has to close every other door, every alternate, to belief in Christ. For the Gentile, the gospel is by definition the "gospel" or "good news" (thus the Greek word *euangelion*, see 1:15-16). But the Gentile cannot begin to appreciate what the gospel means until he hears the "bad news" that God is furious with him or her and will eventually pour out his wrath for their evil thoughts, words, and deeds. And for the Jew who stands to one side, nodding his head about Gentile wickedness, there is a double dose of "bad news" for him, since he should have known better, and the wrath of God is on the schedule for his life as well.

### 3:1-2

In order to maintain a balance, Paul now goes on to mention the benefits of having been born Jewish; he is anticipating what he will say more broadly in 9:4-5. Here in 3:2 "the Jews have been entrusted with the very words of God", that is the Old Testament Scriptures. One would think that that was enough motivation for them to be living in repentance and faith in God and his Messiah. But Paul is about to demonstrate in Romans 3 that what was meant to be a blessing turns into a curse if Israel disobeys its own Bible. Jesus made the same point – "You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life" (John 5:39-40).

### 3:3-8

Paul raises some questions with his imaginary opponent. First, he wonders whether the unfaithfulness of Israel as a whole means that God's promises to them were false (v. 3). Not at all, since the Bible itself (Ps 51:4 is quoted in v. 4) anticipated this sort of tension between human failure and divine faithfulness. Second, he wants to refute a "slandorous claim" in 3:8, that someone is charging the apostle with being an antinomian, that is, one who imagines that the ideal Christian life consists in sinning in order that God's mercy is highlighted (see also Acts 21:20-21; 2 Pet 3:14-16 and other instances throughout church history). Paul completely rejects this notion in 6:1ff. among other texts.

Paul's gospel is that if a Jew sins, then he or she is a sinner and liable to divine wrath (3:5); and if someone wants to argue that he is an exception because he is a descendant from Abraham, then even more is it true that "Their condemnation is just!" (3:8b)

### C. Even the Old Testament proves that Jews are equally as guilty as Gentiles (3:9-21)

3:9

Paul continues to press home his main point, using words such as “alike”, “all”, “there is no one.” His point is that everyone is fatally sinful apart from the gospel – he starts with “Jews and Gentiles alike are all under the power of sin” (3:9b), then summarizes that “Jews and Gentiles alike are *all* under the power of sin” (3:19b, emphasis added); and adds in the famous verse that “*all* have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (3:23, emphasis added).

3:10-18

Paul here uses another rhetorical device, a *catena*, from the Latin, meaning “a chain.” It is a list of verses about one theme, quoted simply and without commentary, to prove a point. In 1:18-32 he did not bother to cite Bible verses to prove that Gentiles were sinners – one needed only to open one’s eyes and take a glance out the window to see the very obvious! But when he wants to prove that Jews are sinners, he takes his imaginary audience to their ultimate authority, the Hebrew Scriptures, in large part the book of Psalms.

In 3:10-18 he starts off with “There is no one righteous, not even one”, quoting Psalm 14:1-3 (Ps 53:1-3 is the same text); then Psalm 5:9; Psalm 140:3; Psalm 10:7; Isaiah 59:7-8; Psalm 36:1. The student of Romans would do well to look up these verses in their original settings. The language of these verses is as shocking as it is universal – Paul is quoting verses that in the Old Testament were directed toward Jewish people and implying that their sins are equal in wickedness to the sins of Gentiles in the first century AD. In the Isaiah passage, God is specifically condemning the Israelites for their sins, saying that “your iniquities have separated you from your God” (Isa 59:2). If that is true for Israel in the days of Isaiah, then isn’t it also true for the days of Paul?

*Practical Thought:* It is a good lesson for the Christian of today, that we should think and pray about how best to share the gospel with the world. Paul did not quote the Scripture when he was preaching to Gentile groups, since they did not regard it as authoritative (see Acts 14:14-17; 17:22-31); but in the synagogue he went right to the Bible (Acts 13:14-41). A modern example is from the Japanese author Shūsaku Endō in his book *Life of Jesus*. He recognized that it was very difficult to explain the significance of Jesus in his society. Finally, he decided that the best opening was to emphasize, firstly, that Jesus died for the love of his disciples. He secondly underscored the treachery of the apostles when they abandoned him at Gethsemane, and then that Jesus forgave them when he said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” Even so, Endō says, one way to begin to explain the gospel in Japan is to say, salvation means to experience Christ’s love, and sin means to abandon him.

“Whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law” (v. 19a). If they truly believe in the Torah as Paul did (Rom 7:7 – “I would not have known what sin was had it not been for the law”) – and the faithful Jews must say they certainly did – then they have to believe even those verses that say how wicked they are. Paul has driven them into a corner: either they accept they are sinners, apostate from Torah; or they reject that the Scripture says about them, making them again apostate from Torah. When Paul says that “through the law we become conscious of our sin” (v. 20b) he is thinking concretely of what he has just demonstrated in 3:9-18.

Again, Paul uses the words “everyone”, “no one.” The language of “every mouth may be silenced” has to do with judgment day, but it also has application for people today who want to boast of their spiritual performance (see 3:27).

V. 20a opens the door to what Paul will teach in the rest of this section concerning “justification” – “no one will be declared righteous in God’s sight by the works of the law.” Some exegetes take this to mean that no-one should feel confident before a holy God because they observe those particular rituals that set Israel apart from the world, beginning with circumcision (Dunn, pp. 1.153-55); this would mean that Israel erred in being proud of their covenant status before God. Nevertheless, Paul does not make any separation here between the ritual law and the moral law, as do Christians today: when he speaks of the righteousness of God, the scope is its broadest (so Calvin, pp. 132-33; see especially Stott, pp. 109-11). He deals in Romans with every sin from gossip (1:29) all the way to idolatry (1:22-23). When he proves that no-one can obey God’s commands, he goes to one of the Ten Commandments, “You shall not covet” (7:7). We conclude that Paul means in 3:20a that “no-one will be declared righteous on judgment day on the basis that they have obeyed *anything* that the Torah demands of them”, because everyone “does evil” (2:9).

We will define “justify” (the Greek is *dikaioō*) in our comments on 3:26.

*Additional Notes:* Many years ago, we used to see the bumper sticker, “Jesus is the Answer!” Later on, another came out: “If Jesus is the Answer – Then What was the Question?” It is the same here: Paul has to invest more space to prove the bad news, in order to show the Jews that they too are in hot water. In Romans 1:18-3:31, Paul dedicated approximately 10 verses to describing the Solution (the good news or *euangelion*). He then goes on to dictate approximately 68 verses to the Problem, that is, the bad news. Of these 68 verses, 15 have to do with Gentiles, and 53 with Jews. That is, it’s very simple to demonstrate to the Romans that their Solution was Christ (they already were Christians!); it is relatively easy to demonstrate that the Gentiles deserve God’s condemnation; but it is relatively difficult to demonstrate that the non-Christian Jews also deserve condemnation, and what is more, there exists no other way of salvation for them.



In the 1930s, the famous English theologian C. H. Dodd wrote about the (supposedly) bad conscience that plagued Paul, in two articles called “The Mind of Paul: A Psychological Approach.” At the time the theories of Sigmund Freud were very much in play, and so Dodd wanted to interpret his conversion from that perspective. His idea was that Saul was going around under a mountain of guilt because of his cruel persecution of the Christians. Then, on the road to Damascus, he suffered a crisis, a nervous collapse. So, what are Dodd and some others saying? That he realized that he had a Big Problem, and suddenly he decided that Jesus was the Solution.

But with respect to Paul, the Bible indicates that the reverse was true, as he himself spells out in Philippians 3:7-11: he first of all encountered Christ, and then only later came to understand that, “I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.” It is the same impression he gives Galatians 1:11-17, and in Acts as well; only in hindsight did Paul realize that he had been a gross sinner: If Christ died to redeem me, then logically it must also be true that I sinned and was falling far short of God’s glory.

The gospel states that our principal problem in life is that we are cut off from God and thus awaiting his condemnation. The solution is Christ. One alternative message we hear today is the gospel of inner healing: *One’s principal problem is that the individual needs to be healed from past hurts, usually from childhood. This trauma scars our relationships with others, with our self, and with God. God is there as the Great Therapist. We should avoid talking about God’s judgment, since that notion is merely a projection of one’s own shame or past hurt.* If consistently applied, then there should be no interest in the new birth or the new nature in Christ, since that idea is based on the false and toxic claim that we are fundamentally broken or unlovable. Rather, deliverance and change comes from God’s loving and therapeutic presence, to improve us but not to demand that we repent.

It does the Christian good to remember that Paul’s original audience for this epistle consisted of people who were literal slaves, who were physically, sexually and emotionally abused, from a legalistic background, robbed, cheated, abandoned by parents and so forth. Christians from that era survived what we do today, and often with fewer resources.

Christians indeed may benefit from counseling, but if the counseling model sets aside the Bible agenda for change, either by replacing the true gospel or by diminishing it, we stand in jeopardy of losing clarity in our relationship with the Savior, and trading in the power of the Holy Spirit for self-help.

### Study Questions:

1. In this section Paul shows the fatal nature of all sin, whether they are thought of as minor or major. What sins do we attempt excuse, whether in our lives or in the life of the church?
2. We have said that people invent other “gospels” as a substitute for the one true message of salvation. What new gospels have you encountered, and how did they distract from the saving message of Christ?
3. Shūsaku Endō worked to make the gospel understandable in Japan. What are some ways we can explain the relevance of the gospel in our culture without compromising its fundamental message?

### III. Salvation in the Gospel of Christ (3:21-5:21)

Paul has moved step by step to reach his goal, “that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God” (3:19b); he needed, as previously noted, approximately 68 verses to close everyone’s mouth. But now that he has arrived at the solution for the human dilemma, he needs fewer than 10 verses. This disparity reveals what was the mindset among the Roman Christians – no-one doubted that salvation was through Christ; some *may* have doubted that Christ was indispensable for Jews (in Spain? in Rome?) who were faithful to Torah.

#### **A. Salvation may come through only one channel – Christ’s death, and faith in him (3:21-31)**

##### *3:21-22a*

Paul now reiterates the heart of the gospel that he announced in 1:16-17, that it is only through Christ, and faith in him, that one can experience the righteousness of God, now “revealed” (compare 3:21 with 1:17) in human history. It is testified by the Torah, but comes “apart from the law”, that is, apart from doing what it commands.

The phrase “faith in Jesus Christ” has come under new scrutiny, since Paul’s intention is less clear than the NIV and the other versions make it out to be: it might also be translated “the faith *of* Jesus Christ”, that is the faith that Jesus had; or even the faith that comes to people *from* Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, given that the believer’s faith in Christ is the theme of this section (3:26), the NIV and the others are to be regarded as correct.

##### *3:22b-23*

Again, we must keep in mind that Paul is constantly thinking of the Jews – at times arguing that they are no better off so long as they reject Christ, and at times arguing that Jews and Gentiles are equally acceptable before God if only they believe. 3:23 is often used as a proof text that all people need Christ because they are sinners. This does not distort the verse, but it does weaken its meaning by removing it from v. 22b and v. 24. The case that Paul is making is not that all people sin; but rather that all people, who in fact universally sin, are in an equally catastrophic position. The pessimism in v. 23 in particular is often underestimated today, since people make it to say something like “we all make mistakes, therefore we are all sinners”. This is not at all Paul’s point, namely – any and every sin, by anyone in any race, has the end result that they “fall short of the glory of God”. This is probably a reference to a traditional interpretation of Genesis: before the Fall, Adam and Eve were supposedly clothed with God’s visible glory; when they sinned, “the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked” (Gen 3:7 and, from the first century AD, the apocryphal *Life of Adam and Eve* [Apocalypse] 20.1-2 [Charlesworth] captures the reaction of Adam: “And at that very moment my eyes were opened and I knew that I was naked of the righteousness with which I had been clothed. And I wept saying, ‘Why have you done this to me, that I have been estranged from my glory with which I was clothed?’”). In that case, Paul is saying “all of us have sinned as ruinously as did the first parents, which led to sin and death” (the themes the apostle will develop in Romans 5). We might paraphrase him as saying that “all have sinned; all who have sinned are sinners; and all sinners are cut off from God”; that is, they are as bad as the apostate Gentiles in 1:18-32. And in the end, believers will once more be “glorified”, in the resurrection (3:2; 6:4; 8:17; 8:18; 8:21; 8:30).

### 3:24-25b

Paul now provides a densely-packed set of verses, putting on dazzling display the special vocabulary of Christian soteriology: justification (which we will examine under v. 26); redemption; sacrifice of atonement (so NIV); faith in his blood. Equal disaster in v. 23 is met by equal relief in v. 24, that all the sinners of v. 23 can one and all come to the same justification. This is through faith, and the redemption found in Christ.

In his theological vocabulary, Paul uses the word “redemption” in two ways. First it is eschatological, the future time at which God through Christ will restore his creation. This includes the resurrection of the saints (Rom 8:23; Eph 4:30; see also Eph 1:13-14), but also the redemption of the whole universe (Rom 8:21). But redemption is also an experience for this age, and it is this present redemption that is Paul’s topic here. In Romans, sin is the master of all humanity (see Rom 7:14-25) and Christ’s death is the price to pay for their deliverance (see also Acts 20:28; 1 Cor 1:30; 6:19-20; Gal 1:4; 3:13; Eph 1:7; Col 1:13-14; Tit 2:14). Christ has redeemed his people from sin, from death, and also from Torah.

The next term (in the original *hilasmos*) is controversial; it is rendered as “sacrifice of atonement” or expiation or something similar by the NIV, NEB, NAB, NRSV, REB; it is “propitiation” in other versions (D-R, KJV, NKJV, NASB, ESV). The same word is used again only once – Jesus Christ “is the atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 John 2:2 NIV). Most commentators today take it to mean that the sacrifice of Christ was “atonement” directed *toward* the sins committed by people, that it covered them up. Others take “propitiation” to mean that the sacrifice was designed to turn away wrath (Rom 1:18), that it, that it was directed *toward* an angry God in order to appease him. Of course, some reject from the outset the idea that God is wrathful, and that could eliminate the idea of propitiation. But this hardly resolves the issue, since many scholars believe that God’s wrath is real but that “atonement” is the better rendering of the verb in v. 25. We accept the traditional view of “propitiation” (as Stott, pp. 121-24). The important point of the word is that Christ’s death on the cross altered forever the relationship that God had with sinners, meaning that we are now regarded as righteous in his eyes through Jesus and his sacrifice of blood (see also Rom 8:3).

### 3:25b-26a

Paul touches lightly upon a part of his preaching that one also finds elsewhere – “In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30). Paul is not saying that sinners in other times and places were allowed to go free; no-one who had written Romans 1 would make that concession. Rather, he now presents Jesus as the Savior to all in human history, and from now on no-one has any excuse.

### 3:26b

This is the key verse to understanding Paul’s doctrine of justification as the acquittal of believers in Christ: “so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus”. The sentence holds in tension two ideas that, according to normal logic, should be contradictory. First is the truth that God always acts righteously as a judge, that is, he recognizes sin and righteousness for what they are, and unlike human judges he cannot be bribed or misled – “for the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes” (Deut 10:17). In the dialogue between Abraham and God over Sodom, Abraham declares, “Far be it from you to do such a thing – to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?” (Gen 18:25). In this passage he was not asking God to bend the rules, or even to show mercy to Sodom. Rather he was asking God to spare the city if there were 50 people therein whom God would recognize as already righteous. The Scriptures are filled with such verses about divine justice, for example, “Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the King of heaven, because everything he does is right and all his ways are just. And those who walk in pride he is able to humble” (Dan 4:37). And so, one side of the equation is that God will not “justify” (the crucial verb *dikaioō*, see below) the guilty (Exod 23:7).

The other side is that God will declare to be just certain individuals who according to all the evidence have been wicked. The question then becomes, *How can God set criminals free and still be a just God?* The answer is Christ, says Paul. Just as the Torah had a system of sacrifices for different situations, so Christ is the one sacrifice for all sin. Sinners are not made acceptable because God shows favoritism (see 2:11), but because they have received forgiveness in the cross.

This then is the miracle of “justification”. The corresponding Greek verb *dikaioō*, “justify”, is related to the words “just” and “justice”. The verb is used in two ways in the Greek Scriptures. First it means “to declare someone to be righteous because in fact he is righteous”. This is its principal forensic or legal meaning in the Greek version of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, thus: “When people have a dispute, they are to take it to court and the judges will decide the case, acquitting [*dikaioō*] the innocent and condemning the guilty” (Deut 25:1). In the New Testament, apart from Luke-Acts and Paul, *dikaioō* has that same meaning: “For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned” (Matt 12:37; see also 1 Cor 4:4; Acts 13:39). But the apostle introduces a special, “Pauline” usage of the term, which is found throughout Romans (with the exception of Rom 3:4), Galatians, and for example in 1 Corinthians 6:11 and Titus 3:7. In this case *dikaioō* means not that God declares righteous those who really were righteous; but rather that through their faith in Christ, he declared righteous – acquitted – those who were sinners at the time of their act of faith: “those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified” (Rom 8:30). God will condemn or justify people on judgment day, but just as the wicked are already feeling the revelation of divine wrath (Rom 1:18), so also believers have already been exonerated in anticipation of the End.

This Reformed viewpoint has always been at odds with the Roman Catholic, which is that justification involves the transformation of the sinner (see the 1997 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §1266); “[the Catholic theologians] think that these two things well agree, – that man is justified by faith through the grace of Christ, – and that he is yet justified by the works, which proceed from spiritual regeneration; for God gratuitously renews us, and we also receive his gift by faith. But Paul takes up a very different principle ...” (Calvin, p. 135). Even among Protestants the Reformed viewpoint is less popular today, as some wonder if the Reformers were not interpreting Paul’s writings through their lens of their own debate with Rome in the 16th century. Nevertheless, Paul shows that justification brings about the pardon of sins apart from all sorts of works, be they covenant rituals or attempts at morality. Thus, the view we will take in this commentary is that justification is “forensic”, that is, that it has to do with God’s work as judge in declaring his people free from judgment because they are now identified with Christ, in whom they trust.

The justifying act of God is not simply a mathematical equation, but the establishment of a right, comprehensive, and joyful relationship between him and his people: “since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom 5:1).

3:27-31

Paul now asks three rhetorical questions, which will answer any lingering Jewish objections to his gospel, but also lead the reader to the exposition in Romans 4:

*Where is boasting?* (vv. 27-28)

*Is God the God of the Jews only?* (vv. 29-30)

*Do we nullify the law by this faith?* (v. 31)

There is no room for national or personal *boasting* in his gospel. One way in which Israel might boast would be to glory in its selection by God to receive the covenant. In addition, we must take Paul seriously when he says that some, or many, Israelites were confident of their own performance of the law's requirements. That is how he remembers his own experience prior to the Damascus Road (Gal 1:13-14) and he contrasts confidence in Torah observance with "boasting" in Christ (Phil 3:3-6). In Romans he argues that synagogue teachers, especially those who fancied themselves to be guides to the blind, were typical candidates for falling into self-justification (see 2:17-20). But if the only way to justification is through faith in a crucified Savior, then all boasting is taken away and believers can boast only in God (Rom 5:11; 1 Cor 1:29, quoting Jer 9:24; Gal 6:14; Eph 2:9).

Vv. 29-30 has a key truth that must be regarded as fundamental to Romans, that God is not the God of the Jews only, but of all nations, Jews and Gentiles. Paul will deal with this in 15:8-12, that it is God's ultimate goal to have all nations united in singing his praise. Paul taps into the basic creed of Judaism, the Shema confession, that *Yahweh Elohenu, Yahweh echad* – "Yahweh your God, Yahweh is one" (Deut 6:4). If God is one, then he is the only true God for Gentiles as well as Jews. Of course, as Wilckens points out, the synagogue could retort that anyone could join themselves to Israel if they wished, making God in a sense the God of all who repent – but otherwise God's power will condemn the wicked nations; but this is not Paul's point at all: "The gospel, on the contrary, proclaims the one God as he who shows his power, superior to all, for the salvation of all" (Wilckens, p. 307, our own translation), that is, "of all" regardless of their nationality. Says Paul: God is the God of the Gentiles if Gentiles seek him through the only path he has laid out, through faith in Christ.

The final question (3:31) is *Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law.* Paul consistently refuses to allow anyone to label him an apostate from Torah; this is why he states that the Torah helps us to prove that the gospel is true. He will also spend time in Romans 7 showing that the Torah fails to make us righteous, but that the fault lies in us. And he will also show that believers, new creations, actually do fulfill the intent of the law in their thoughts, words, motives, deeds (Romans 12-13). He is also thinking ahead to Romans 4,

where he will show that the Torah teaches us that Abraham was saved by faith too, not by circumcision or Torah.

### **Study Questions:**

1. What substitute “gospels” do you hear today, from television, the internet, books, the pulpit? What criteria will you use to distinguish the false gospels from the one true gospel?
2. God says that we already may enjoy acquittal from God’s final judgment, even now during our lifetime. How does that truth allow us to live free from fear and anxiety?

### **B. The Heroes of the Old Testament prove Paul’s point (4:1-25)**

Already Paul has argued that the Torah is God’s word, and that as such it points forward to salvation in Christ through faith; “the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify” (3:21) and – in a verse that is unfortunately cut off from 4:1 by a chapter division – “we uphold” or the Torah (3:31). He already used the Old Testament, especially psalms where the author is complaining about his wicked adversaries, to demonstrate that the entire human race is in need of Christ. Now he will ask both of his audiences, the Roman Christians and the fictitious Jewish synagogue (see comments on 2:1), to consider the major hero of the Scriptures, Abraham. Paul is saying that, *If you were to ask God how Abraham came to be considered his friend, the answer would not be that he was circumcised, but that he had faith in God.*

4:1-3

Paul calls Abraham “our forefather”. While he is thinking of Father Abraham as the ancestor of the children of Israel, “according to the flesh” (as the NIV and other versions correctly retain), in fact he will go on to show that Abraham is the father of all who believe, be they circumcised or not (vv. 11-12). The synagogue said that he was acceptable before God because he did what was required of him: leaving Ur, circumcision, being willing to sacrifice Isaac, and of course, also demonstrating faith in God’s promise. Paul returns again to “boasting”, the sin of magnifying oneself in the presence of God and others, in the case of the synagogue, because they have the Torah (2:23, also 2:17). Paul calls upon Genesis 15:6 as the key to understanding his relationship before God, since it is the principal statement of Abraham’s faith – when God promised him a seed, Abraham believed. This is not to say that faith was counted as a good work, but that it meant that Abraham was given credit for all righteousness – faith is the foundation of any relation with God. Through that faith Abraham was declared to be right with God (see our comments on *dikaioō* in 3:20). In fact, the just God can declare righteous any believer, even though he is a “ungodly” at that critical moment (v. 5).

4:4-8

As Dunn (p. 1.202) explains, “The subsequent exposition (vv. 4–21) focuses on the meaning of the two verbs used in Gen 15:6”, that is *believe* (vv. 9-21) and *credited* or *accounted* (vv. 4–8).

Paul now brings King David as the other example of a man who was justified and forgiven despite his wickedness. If these two towering heroes of the Old Testament, Abraham and David, could not be justified on the basis of their works, then what hope do the rest of us have? And so, Paul cites Psalm 32:1-2, which is considered one of the psalms he wrote concerning his wickedness with Bathsheba and his forgiveness and reconciliation to God in response to Nathan. The point is, that God is willing and able to forgive even gross offenses such as exaggerated sexual sin (Rom 1:24!) and even murder (1:29). Paul sees in the text another example of justification apart from works. This proof text is perhaps not as clear as Genesis 15:6, since after all David is following the path that all Jews did, by repenting of his sin. Nevertheless, whereas Abraham is important since he is the father of all who believe, David is crucial as the ancestor of Jesus according to the flesh (1:3): and if the father can be justified by faith, then the Son can be the Savior of those who likewise have faith to be forgiven.

We must remember that Paul is not giving us an objective textbook description of the Jewish theology of salvation in these verses, but is exaggerating it for effect: Abraham would have reason to boast! (v. 2) David would have earned forgiveness like a paycheck! (v. 4) What he does here, as in 7:14-25 (see our comments there), is reduce to an absurdity the teaching of the synagogue. The synagogue would have expressed itself in subtler shades: Abraham had faith, but his faith worked together with his works and his fidelity to the covenant; David had faith, which was expressed in his repentance, as stipulated by the Torah. Paul wants to show that both traditional paths terminate in a dead end.

#### 4:9-12

Paul raises another rhetorical question for his Jewish compatriots – “Is this blessedness only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised?” (v. 9). From the Jewish rabbis the answer would have been more complicated than simply saying “those who are circumcised”. The rite of circumcision is never a mere formality, it is the first step in a commitment to following the whole covenant as a newly-added child of Abraham. And so, a more considered answer might have been: *In the first instance, this blessing is only for the circumcised, including the “blessed” proselytes or converts.* A minority of rabbis might have allowed that Gentiles who did the best they could would be shown a measure of mercy (that is what most modern rabbis teach), but the norm then was that Gentiles could not have it both ways.

Paul says that the Gentiles can experience forgiveness and reconciliation with God, without requiring them to become Jews, and without petitioning an indulgent rabbi for leniency. How might that work? Paul uses the history of Abraham’s experience to demonstrate his point – Genesis 15:6 says that God accounted him as righteous, but when did that happen? Any Jew would know the order of events as told by the Torah: Abram was declared thoroughly right with



God in Genesis 15, and only decades later received the sign of circumcision in Genesis 17. The rabbis might respond that Paul's statement in 4:11 could form the basis for a Judaizing gospel. But for Paul, this glimpse at salvation history opens up a possibility that the one individual on the planet who was even a monotheist, right with God, and walking in righteousness remained uncircumcised for years; doesn't that open door to saying that there are Gentile believers in Christ who are right with God through faith in Christ, who thus have an inner or spiritual circumcision, and who in fact obey God more authentically than Jews who reject the gospel? (see 2:27 - "The one who is not circumcised physically and yet obeys the law will condemn you who, even though you have the written code and circumcision, are a lawbreaker"). Paul used a similar logic with the Galatians (Gal 3:1-6) who were following after a Judaizing gospel, again quoting Genesis 15:6 – didn't the Galatians receive the Spirit long before they decided to accept circumcision, thus straying from the right path? And if God gave them the Spirit, that meant he had already accepted them solely on the basis of faith – *ergo*, Gentiles not only didn't need to become proselytized, it was actually dangerous for them to do so, since "[you] have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace" (Gal 5:4).

In vv. 11-12, Paul now makes explicit what he had merely hinted at in 4:1 – Abraham is the father, the root, of all who believe in the gospel, whether Jewish or Gentile. There is a special note in v. 12 – that Jews are right with God only if they "follow in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised" (see also 4:16). That is, there is no "second way" for Israelites who choose to opt out of the gospel of Christ – and this is a major point of Paul in this epistle, that it is imperative that all Jews – be they in Jerusalem, in Rome, in Spain – hear the gospel and be urged to receive it.

We will argue later in the commentary (see 11:17-24) that in the "olive tree" allegory, the "root" is Abraham, and that all who believe in Christ are now genuine descendants of his. If they do not happen to be Jewish, no matter, since Abraham, both lineally and spiritually, is the father of "many nations". On the other hand, Jews who reject Jesus are not truly children of Abraham (9:6-13).

#### 4:13-17

Jesus is the heir of the promise to Abraham, and through him all believers in Christ will be the "heir of the world" (v. 13). Paul now becomes repetitious, but it is because he is making a case that most other Jews would find feeble: the promise was "not through the law". Now we are moving even further into the future, across the hundreds of years between Abraham's justification and the reception of the Torah in the desert. Paul makes a division, a dichotomy, between faith and Torah here, once again breaking with the teaching of the rabbis. They would argue that, of course, we cannot separate Torah and faith – after all the Torah teaches us to trust God, and people without faith in the God of the covenant are apostates; thus, Paul would be absolutely mistaken to say that for people of the Torah "faith means nothing" (v. 14). But in

order to prove his point, he utters what is close to sacrilege – that the Torah does not empower people into being better (see Rom 2; Rom 7), but serves mainly to stipulate punishments for doing wrong. That this was the case was inarguable, since many of the commandments have to do with punishment. Break the Sabbath, and you will be executed (Exod 31:14-15); likewise with sexual offenses and disobedience to one's parents.

In v. 16 Paul once again restricts the options to two: either one tries to be saved by the Torah, or one comes to God by faith, but there is no admixture of the two. He now cites another key verse, that Abram receives his new name Abraham, because it means that "I have made you a father of many nations" (from Gen 17:5). The synagogue might have taken the Genesis verse to mean that, Abraham would be the progenitor of many nations, beginning with the descendants of Ishmael. He was also the father of many kings, starting with David. But as Christians now know, Abraham is the father of another king, Jesus: "the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham" (Matt 1:1, and of course Rom 1:3-4). What is more, Abraham is "the father of us all" (v. 16).

Paul now reiterates the truth that Abraham is the spiritual ancestor of all who do as he did and believed God (v. 17b); he is the common denominator among all Christians. Abraham's faith was not some virtuous decision to be a faithful person in his ways – his hope was in the one Creator, the "God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not" (v. 17b). First, God allowed him and Sarah to have a son even though they were as good as dead and infertile. From them God created new life. Later Abraham offered his son on the altar in faith that God would provide a sacrifice (Gen 22:8). The author of Hebrews comments that "Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death" (Heb 11:19). Paul also points out that God "calls into being things that were not"; in another place he says, "God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things – and the things that are not – to nullify the things that are" (1 Cor 1:28) to show why God chose people of little repute and power in Corinth to be his people and to shame the wise of this age.

#### 4:18-22

Here in Romans 4 there is no reference to Sarai's laughter, nor to the scheme whereby they conceived Ishmael. Instead, Paul focuses on how "against all hope, Abraham in hope believed" (v. 18); "he did not waver through unbelief" (v. 20); he was "fully persuaded" (v. 21). The picture of Abraham in Genesis is less black and white. Still, if he were to concede that Abraham's faith was multi-faceted, it would not have helped his opponents either, since they were assuming that Abraham was accepted by God primarily on the basis of his fidelity and good works.

Let us not imagine that it is the measure of one's faith that is powerful; it is the measure of the power of the true God that matters. Paul uses the noun *dunatos* here, which is related to the word *dunamis* that he used in 1:16 – the gospel is the power of God. If "God had power to do what he

had promised” (v. 21b) in patriarchal times, then that same God is the one whose power can saved all who believe now, both Jews and Gentiles.

#### 4:22-25

In vv. 22-24a the apostle shows the neat parallel between Abraham’s experience and that of the Christian. Genesis 15:6 applies to believers in Christ, who are now accounted righteous. Paul has just mentioned God’s power, and he now links the life of Abraham to other gospel words: faith, righteousness, accounted, resurrection, justification. If Abraham believed that God could raise the dead, how much more so can Christians believe in the resurrection, given that Jesus himself has been raised to be their Savior and declared Lord of all. Paul will develop this truth later, in Romans 10:9 – “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”.

The reader will benefit by underscoring the first-person plural pronouns in what follows: “but also for *us*, to whom God will credit righteousness – for *us* who believe in him who raised Jesus *our* Lord from the dead. He was delivered over to death for *our* sins and was raised to life for *our* justification” (vv. 24-25). Far from being a model of how the covenant of how and why circumcision saves, Abraham turns out to be a near letter-perfect pattern of how people come to God in this new age.

Before moving on we should think about James 2:18-26, which bears a close resemblance to Romans 4. Some scholars point out that the parallel is so striking, even to the point of using Genesis 15:6, plus the rhetorical figure of diatribe (arguing with an imaginary opponent), that perhaps both Paul and James were using a form of tradition that was current in Second Temple Judaism. The position we take here is that James was not engaging the epistle to the Romans, but that he was speaking into a very different context than was Paul. Paul wanted to show that Gentiles (and Jews) are saved by faith in the resurrection of the Lord. He assumes for the sake of argument that one’s faith is genuine – after all, that is what everyone would have assumed about the faith of the patriarch Abraham. James, for his part, thinks in terms of a claim to faith that in fact is dead (James 2:17; 2:26) – not ill, not weak, but without all life and therefore devoid of any value (2:20). Our position is that if Paul were dealing with that same set of circumstances, he would have had an answer similar to that of James, and like him be energetically committed to the good works that must follow upon salvation. We should also note that Paul himself complained that people were interpreting his gospel as “Let us do evil that good may result” (Rom 3:8). Galatians 5:6 has a very useful summary of Paul’s approach, that true faith produces works: only “faith working through love” counts for anything. In the same way, says James 2:21, Abraham “worked” when he obeyed God and went to sacrifice his son.

*Practical Thought:* Although the story of Abraham took place four millennia ago, we must follow the apostle’s lead and understand why his example is completely relevant today.

First, we Christians are a part of a very long story. The Latin American church, like the church in many regions, has a collective amnesia with regard to its historical roots. The church where we attend celebrated its 50th anniversary not long ago, but not many congregations have roots that go even that deep. Maybe we belong to a denomination, such as the Methodist, which particularly treasures its history. But for most of us, we have only a vague memory that the pastor came from somewhere a few years ago, and started the congregation where we attend. Romans 4 shows us the great value in coming to an understanding of our relationship to other people of faith, Abraham or David, that they too were people like us who struggled with their faith but were ultimately victorious. In the seminary where we teach, we also insist that students study the history of the church, from Pentecost to the present – this even though some students find it distasteful to learn “Catholic” history.

Second, and church history also reminds of us this, we must interpret the Old Testament correctly. Many of the heresies throughout the church had a strange understanding of the role and meaning of the ancient Scriptures. For example, the Sadducees and the Samaritans accepted only the five books of Moses, and this had a harmful effect on their doctrine. The Gnostics of the 2nd century AD and later rejected completely the Old Testament canon; this meant that the teaching about Abraham in this chapter was irrelevant, as was the teaching about Adam in Romans 5. At the other extreme are those who focus their energy on conforming to the Torah, to the expense of studying the New Testament. For his part, Paul rejected all of those paradigms. He taught that the Scriptures God’s Word, hence “it is not as though God’s word had failed” (9:6), that they foretold the salvation that would come by Christ (1:2); are given for the instruction of all (15:4) and for “endurance and encouragement” (15:5), but that the regulations of Torah were not binding on the Gentile believer.

**C. There are now only two peoples among humankind: those in Adam, those in Christ (5:1-21)**

*5:1-4*

In this section, Paul turns from using the rhetorical “we” from early chapters and now speaks of the “us”, himself and the Christians at Rome. This passage must be read in terms of what comes before it (especially Rom 4:22-25).

In v. 1 there is a textual variant. Some early manuscripts read “*let us have peace with God*”, as if this were a goal for which the Christian must seek. Other manuscripts, including those that back the *Textus receptus*, have a different form of the verb, meaning “*we have peace with God*” as a settled fact. The reason for the confusion is that both forms of the verb sound identical and thus

were confused early in the transmission of the text. “We have peace with God” (NIV, contra D-R) is correct, and indicates that Paul is now beginning to speak in positive, non-polemical terms about the wonders of the Christian life. Abraham came to be the “friend of God” (an idea not mentioned in Genesis, but see 2 Chron 20:7; Isa 41:8; also James 2:23), because God initiated a relationship with him through his faith. And we Christians are at peace with God (v. 1); reconciled, that is, friends and no longer enemies (v. 10).

The first two benefits are that we have access to God’s grace (v. 2), not simply a once-for-all justification by faith but a way of life in which we can count on God to be receptive and loving to us through Christ. Beyond this the believer can look forward to the eschatological glory, which was lost in the fall (see our comments on 3:23) and will be restored at the final resurrection.

God’s plan for his people does not need to tarry until Christ’s return, since he equips us to live a full life in the now, even if it is within a context of social ostracization, persecution, poverty. In vv. 3-4 there is the promise that the hardships of Christian life produce a range of virtues: they make tougher people, more centered in the hope that awaits them.

*Special Note, persecution.* It is conventional wisdom among some Christians that persecution automatically leads to revival, in numerical growth and in greater depth. Some even say that if we want revival, then we should pray that persecution come upon our land. Both the Scriptures and church history tell a different story: Paul taught that believers should pray that they have a good, peaceful and predictable environment in which to preach the gospel (see 1 Tim 2:1-4). And history has shown that persecution might result in major damage to the church, for example in Turkey during the Middle Ages; in Spain and France during the Reformation; in Mali, Egypt, South Sudan, Iraq, North Korea today. If we really want revival in our land, then revival is what we should pray for, not tribulation.

5:5

A “paradigm shift”, as defined today, is not simply coming up with new answers to an old problem; rather, it involves questioning one’s assumptions and attempting to reframe the most fundamental questions. In Romans 5 Paul offers sweeping paradigm shifts: in v. 12, he will appeal to Adam as the cause of human sin, and he will also demolish the idea of the “two impulses” or inclinations. But the first new paradigm appears in v. 5, where he appeals to the New Covenant/Spirit as the basis for the Christian life. He had hinted at this new element somewhat abstractly in 2:14-15, that Gentiles could do what the Torah requires – that is, the life of love that is the goal of the Torah (13:10). The new element is the gift of the Spirit in the New Covenant, predicted in the prophets and now brought to fruition in this age. Jesus said that by shedding his blood he was initiating the New Covenant (1 Cor 11:24-25), and Paul self-identifies

as a minister of that same covenant (2 Cor 3:6). It is the basis for transformation of believers in this age (1 Thess 4:9-10). All of this might escape the attention of the casual reader, who is accustomed to see references to the Spirit and his transforming power everywhere.

In Jeremiah this covenant would involve full transformation of God's people Israel: "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts" (Jer 31:33) and the forgiveness of their sins. It is this same New Covenant, Paul agrees, that will bring about the eschatological transformation of "all Israel" in the end of the age: "and this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins" (Rom 11:27). Ezekiel 36:22-28 contains a reference to the gift of God's Spirit and also the sprinkling of purifying water, the two elements that underlie Jesus' teaching of the new birth (John 3:5). Another important prediction, fulfilled on Pentecost, is that the Spirit would fall upon all of God's people (see Joel 2:28-32). What is lacking from these promises is any indication of the scope and the early arrival of this covenant: that Gentile believers would experience its forgiveness of their sins, the gift of the Spirit, the righteousness guidance of God; and that the gift of the Spirit would be experienced not just in the age to come, but now, during this age. As we mentioned in Romans 4, it is important for Paul to demonstrate that the gift of the Spirit comes before anything else in the Christian walk (see Gal 3:1-6). Galatians 5 and of course Romans 8 are constitutions for the Christian life as a life in the Spirit. And if God himself promised that "I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols" (Ezek 36:25) – the very evils they inevitably fall into (Rom 1:23, 24) – then it becomes ridiculous to argue that they would be better if only they would follow the hundreds of statutes of Torah in order to keep them on the narrow path. Paul will pick up that theme again in 6:15.

*Special Note: Modern Judaizers.* It is commonplace in Latin America today to hear that "salvation is of the Jews" (John 4:22b). The point seems to be that, if someone wants to find salvation, then he must turn to Judaism as the revelation of God's mercy. The problem is that the quotation is taken completely out of context. The Samaritan woman is wondering aloud whether people should worship in the Jerusalem temple or the Samaritan. Jesus replies, in short, that the Jews know God and the Samaritans do not. But he goes much further and rejects the old paradigm entirely: "Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth" (John 4:23-24). Although that statement sounds like a conventional theology of worship for us Christians today, in fact it was a revolutionary statement: *Yes, go to the Jerusalem temple!* says Jesus. *But the time is already upon us when temples don't matter, since the believer can worship truly, exclusively through the Holy Spirit.* By the time John wrote his gospel, that new arrangement had been the norm for decades. This is language of the New Covenant, and it shatters the old system of temple worship in favor of God

transforming the lives of Jews and Gentiles who believe in Jesus, and serve him wherever in the world they find themselves.

### 5:6-11

Paul goes on to cheer up his readers with the joys of being reconciled to God. What comfort to know that God revealed his love for them even before they existed, by sending Christ to die “for us” (v. 8), who were “ungodly” and “powerless” (v. 6). In v. 7 it might seem as if he were backtracking, first saying that no-one would die even for a just man, but then conceding that perhaps someone would do so; we take it that Paul is not changing his opinion, but is using a rhetorical device. History is full of people who have followed great leaders into death; the Romans had their own tale in the slave rebellion of Spartacus, who followed their leader to their fate in crucifixion. If Christ died for us while we were sinners, then the believer has hope that God will finish the work he has begun in them, unto the resurrection (Rom 8:30) or redemption of the body (8:23; also 11:26) or until the Day of the Lord Jesus Christ (see Phil 1:6). The salvation Christ has bought is not a cheap or incomplete product, but one which covers every contingency.

In vv. 9-10 he twice uses a common rhetorical device, “from the greater to the lesser” (in Latin it is called an *a fortiori* argument; in Hebrew the rabbis called it *qal wahomer*; see another example in 8:32). He has already named the most difficult part of the gospel in v. 8, that “*while we were still sinners*, Christ died for us”. If people have been saved by Christ’s blood (the hard thing to accomplish), how much more are we saved from his wrath, that is, we are already “justified”. If God reconciled us while we were his enemies (the hard thing), how much more easily are we saved now! And if we are reconciled to God, then we can not only relax, we can positively boast (v. 11) – boast about God’s works, not our own.

It was a part of the Judaism of Paul’s day that God’s people suffer during this age, given that the wicked wield power and hate the righteous. As we noted in the introduction, the greater part of the Jewish population in Rome lived in a poor section of the city. And like Christians they too expected that God would vindicate them at the end of the age. One major difference in Christian theology is that their Savior, Christ himself, suffered and died, and that his death and resurrection are the path to the renewal of God’s creation at his return.

*Practical Thought:* A Christian might live in slum conditions and still be on the path to the most glorious existence in Christ’s kingdom. There is no contradiction between having God as one’s Father (8:14-16) and being forced to live without adequate food, shelter, pure water, education, and other services. The Christian must balance a life of fearlessness (8:15), hopefulness (5:2), and still drive to seek social and economic justice for himself and his fellows.

### 5:12-21

Beginning in 5:12 Paul offers one more change of paradigm, that one can now divide the whole race, with every nation and tongue, into just two camps. For the synagogue that line would of course be drawn between Israel and the Gentile nations: “We have Abraham as our father” (see John the Baptist’s message in Matt 3:9). Paul will now take them to a new level with a new idea: first, whether you are Jewish by race or Gentile, your common ancestor is Adam; and second, that this genealogy is more determinative than having Abraham as an ancestor. This assertion is of course straight out of the Hebrew Scriptures: “Adam, Seth, Enosh...Serug, Nahor, Terah and Abram (that is, Abraham)” (1 Chron 1:1, 26-27).

There is an ellipsis at the end of v. 12, that is, it is an incomplete sentence, which Paul only continues at v. 18 – “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 – just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people, so also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all people”.

*Special Note, Adam.* There has been an ongoing discussion since the 19th century over whether Adam really existed, or whether he is a symbol. This is not entirely new; in the 5th century AD, Augustine (see below) believed in Adam but rejected a creation within six literal days. Traditionally, Adam was created thousands of years ago (although not necessarily in 4000 BC) and therefore may be regarded as the ancestor of all humankind. This is the view that Paul seems to take. For those who regard the earth as thousands of millions of years old, then Adam – if he was a literal individual – appeared very late in time, and in fact much later than earlier hominids. In that case, some suggest, Adam and Eve were perhaps the first true *Homo sapiens*, even though the DNA evidence that has come to light in the 21st century raises some objections against this possibility. Others think that God selected the pair as representatives of all their kind. None of these viewpoints is without problems (see especially Stott, pp. 181-85). This is an important question for Romans, since Paul predicates the coming of sin and death upon Adam’s disobedience as recounted in Genesis (see also 1 Cor 15:21-22, 45-49); and like most of his contemporaries in Judaism refers to Adam without hesitation as to an individual human being; this contrary to the philosophies current in his day and ours.

5:12 is a key verse in Romans and its meaning has been debated for centuries. First, we can see that Paul is rejecting the paradigm that was all but universal in Judaism, the idea that every human being had two inclinations or impulses (in Hebrew *yetser*; in Greek *diaboulion*; the Essenes spoke of having two “spirits”), one good and one evil, and that the individual with his conscience was able to choose between them. This doctrine still shows up in cartoons today: when the person has to make a decision, a good angel appears on one shoulder and speaks good



counsel to him, and an evil angel on the other shoulder gives wicked advice. The Jewish book Sirach (Ecclesiasticus), which is today a book in the Roman Catholic canon, says the following:

It was he who created humankind in the beginning, and he left them in the power of their own free choice. If you choose, you can keep the commandments, and to act faithfully is a matter of your own choice. He has placed before you fire and water; stretch out your hand for whichever you choose. Before each person are life and death, and whichever one chooses will be given. (Sir 15:14-17 NRSV)

It has been the conventional Jewish perspective for over 2000 years that when Adam and Eve sinned, they fell, but that act did not fatally contaminate their offspring. In effect, each of their descendants was free to choose righteousness or evil. Gentiles chose evil, because they did not have the Torah to show them a better way; meanwhile the Jews went to synagogue and heard the Scriptures, which gave them the motivation and information they needed to serve God. All to say that, the synagogue has never had a doctrine of the Fall in the Christian sense. Paul will deal with the doctrine of the two impulses, we will argue, in Romans 7:14-25.

What is Paul's approach? First, that because of Adam's fall, death came to all people (Gen 2:17), but also that death comes to all because they have personally sinned. In the end there is no need to differentiate between whether we experience death because of Adam or because of ourselves; both are true. And Adam's fall resulted in the condemnation of all, even before they did good or evil (5:18), and through his sin many were made sinners (5:19) – not influenced to be evil, but actually made so. The phrase “because all sinned” in 5:12 and its relation to Adam's sin is a point for theological argument; we agree with the viewpoint that all have sinned because they sinned in Adam their forefather (see the discussion in Cranfield, pp. 1.274-79).

Paul now brings in the role of the Torah – for long millennia people sinned, without having a written code to tell them what was right and wrong. When Paul says that sin was not “sin is not charged against anyone's account where there is no law” (5:13) he does not mean that they are let off free, but rather that there is no way to keep score when there is no objective standard of righteousness. Still, sin clearly was having its way all the time from Adam to Moses (v. 14), which is plenty of proof that people were condemned.

Paul's message is based on the contrast of Adam and Christ. Adam sinned and many – all! – died, but Christ brought grace to the many (v. 15). “The judgment followed one sin and brought condemnation, but the gift followed many trespasses and brought justification” (v. 16). And in a nice play on words, death “reined” over the race, so Christians “will reign” (v. 17): this is eschatological, it is their participation in Christ's kingdom when they will be resurrected and reign together with him (see 2 Tim 2:11-12).

As the Savior, Jesus is the perfect obedient man, the one who did what Adam chose not to do, and because of his death and resurrection, he is able to “bring about justification” (v. 18; a better translation than the NIV with its “many will be made righteous”, v. 19).

*Special Note: Augustine and Pelagius on Romans 5:12.* Christians have never been united as to what Paul meant in 5:12. Around AD 400, a monk named Pelagius came from Britain to Rome. He modeled a strict holy life, and argued that if God told people to obey, then logically they have the means to do so; this was particularly true of Christians, that in theory, at least, they should be able to live completely in righteousness. The main damage that Adam caused us was that he gave us a bad example. His opponent was the mighty theologian and pastor Augustine. He argued that Romans 5:12 means that we are born already contaminated by sin; we are subject to death and we have a corrupted nature, the flesh. To put it another way, Pelagius believed that everyone has their own fall into sin; Augustine that simply by being descended from fallen Adam, everyone had already fallen (v. 14). The church condemned Pelagius and upheld Augustine at the Council of Carthage in AD 418.

If Pelagius were alive today he might have expressed his message thus: we fall into sin because of the bad example that our own parents gave us. And if we trace our ancestry back as far as it can go, Adam and Eve were the original dysfunctional parents – because of their wickedness, Cain killed his brother, and sin only multiplied from there. Pelagius would urge us to take the first baby steps toward God, and we would find that he is willing to reach out to us. We can reject what our ancestors have impressed upon us. “You can make the right choices!” might have been his slogan. It is not hard to imagine Pelagius with his own television program, books and DVDs, urging his listeners to reject their past and to make better life choices.

Augustine was a forerunner both of Roman Catholic doctrine and that of the Reformers. On the Roman side, he taught that when babies are baptized, that grace removes original sin. On the Reformed side, the Augustinian view of total depravity forms the basis for the doctrine of election

Another view in the last several centuries is the Arminian one, which teaches that God gives “prevenient grace” to all fallen people, which attracts them to the gospel, and is enough of a push to allow everyone to have saving faith in Christ if they so choose.

The view we take in this commentary is that Augustine was right about the effect of Adam on our nature, but not correct with regard to baptismal grace. Rather than

baptism, we each depend on God's call is the summons of the Spirit to believe, given to those whom God foreknew (8:30).

Paul cannot help but again bring in the Torah at this point, since he is aware that he seemingly skipped over an important chapter in saving history – the Sinai covenant. It was brought in “so that the trespass might increase” (v. 20). This statement is consistent with Paul's statement earlier, that “sin is not charged against anyone's account where there is no law” (v. 13).

v. 21 is one of those “dense” Pauline declarations, whereby he packs much meaning into few words. We are helped by knowing that “eternal life” in this context is the eschatological life of the resurrection (see also 6:23), that is, it is the foil to “death” – through God's grace we are justified and have the promise of the resurrection – and all of this, and Paul wishes to use his full title in dramatic fashion, “through Jesus Christ our Lord”.

Paul leaves us on a very positive note in Romans 5:21 – and beginning in 6:1 he will take the Romans into the realm of “how will we, in Christ, serve God during this age”?

### **Study Questions**

1. How have you reacted when suffering came into your life? Has it helped you to become a better Christian? (5:3-4).
2. Through the blood of Christ we have become “friends of God”, just like Abraham was; God took the initiative to show love to us (5:8), and now we have peace with him (5:1). What does it mean to be God's friend?

### **IV. The Miraculous New Life in Christ (6:1-8:39)**

Ask citizens of the Majority World, “What is the main human dilemma?” and they might respond with legitimate concerns: economic inequality, or perhaps corruption, political oppression, lack of education, destruction of the environment. But according to Romans 1-5, our most basic and universal and intractable predicament is that we all, Jew or Gentile, are cut off from God through deliberate or even unconscious rebellion, meriting his anger. The only solution is forgiveness and reconciliation, freely offered through Christ. All other issues are secondary, all further discussion mere commentary.

“While Romans 5 speaks of this new life as a life of peace with God, Romans 6 speaks of it as a life free from the dominion of sin” (Cevallos y Zorzolli, p. 114, our translation). Paul begins with the question of whether Christians should go on enjoying sin, since God is going to forgive them anyway. Of course not, he retorts: God demands righteousness of his people, and Christ died to destroy sin, not simply conceal it. But Paul does not simply tell them to drop their old behavior.

Rather he shows how they are transformed into a new breed of humanity, freed from sin, death and the law of God.

The reader of Romans may be helped by using the word “Torah” instead of “law”; some Jews prefer to translate it with the less negative term, “instruction”. Judaism affirmed that God had graciously redeemed Israel and then handed down his Torah from the mountain. Like the Hellenistic Jews, Paul translated Torah as *nomos*, which is usually rendered in English as “law”. It has always said that the law was not a burden, but a delight: “the law of the Lord is perfect...by [it’s rules] your servant is warned; in keeping them there is great reward” (Ps 19:7, 11). But Paul has already proved that not even Israel was helped by the Torah. “There is no one righteous, not even one” (Rom 3:10); “all have sinned” and for that reason “fall short of the glory of God” (3:23).

The Jews believed in God’s grace, but they minimized its role, placing much confidence in their membership in the covenant and their ability to follow the instructions of the Torah. “It is not that anyone [in Judaism] said, ‘Righteousness is by law and not by grace’; no one posed grace and law as alternatives; rather they saw law as the gift of grace. It was *Paul* who posed them as alternatives...” (Dunn, p. 1.326). For his part, Paul teaches that salvation is wholly by God’s grace by faith, apart from Torah observance. If not wholly by grace, salvation is not by grace at all; if it is not equally available to a non-Torah observant Christian, then the gospel is not powerful to save anyone, and we should be ashamed to believe in it (Rom 1:16).

*Practical Thought:* People, in and of themselves, cannot live according to God’s will. We must be changed from the inside out, as we see in this parable:

“God wants you to fly!” you say to a fish. He races to the surface, but at best he might leap out of the water by a few centimeters. “But, but...God’s Book says you must do it!” you implore. “Simply flap, quickly, and don’t stop!” The fish can only stare back at you, befuddled. It is not in his nature to fly, and it doesn’t matter whether he attends weekly lessons or even memorizes verses about the importance of air travel.

This illustrates why Paul had little patience for those who looked to the law of Moses to make people spiritually successful. What matters is having the Spirit and being one with Christ.

People apart from Christ have the *old self* or *old nature* (6:6), which is also called life in “the flesh”. When a person comes to faith in Christ, he or she is not simply forgiven, but identified with Jesus so much so that they are a new creation in their way of feeling, thinking and acting. To extend our metaphor further, instead of teaching a fish to fly, God takes a fish and transforms it into a bird. We may still

look the same; in fact, I have known a Christian whose unsaved twin brother looked just like him, but inside the men were entirely different beings.

### **A. In Christ we are dead to sin, to death, to the Torah (6:1-7:6)**

#### *6:1-10*

Shall we keep sinning, since “where sin increased, grace increased all the more” (5:20)? No! In 6:2, the apostle uses the phrase “By no means!” or “absolutely not!” (in Greek, *mē genoito*; in this section see 6:15, 7:7, 7:13). There have always been those who want to obtain forgiveness from God and go on living any way they pleased; such a “gospel” is an abomination (see too 2 Pet 2:1-3). In fact, the Christian has had the power and the responsibility to refuse to sin since the moment of the new birth. In other passages, Paul uses the word “sanctify”; in his vocabulary it usually means a once and for all experience when we received Christ: already “you were sanctified” (1 Cor 6:11). If we are united with Christ, and if he died, was buried, and lives again, then we too in an instant died to the old life and were resurrected to the new one. Paul does not say we should “act as if” or “pretend” that this is true. It is a fact that in our deepest beings we are dead to sin’s power and enabled to live in righteousness, to the extent, of course, that we depend on God in faith.

When we are baptized (vv. 3-4), we are told that we have died to sin and are raised to a new life. But the baptism that transforms us is not just the contact of our bodies with water; rather, it is the invisible inner baptism or immersion of our beings into Christ by the Holy Spirit at the moment of conversion, even before we approach the water of baptism (Cranfield, pp. 1.301-302; contra Stott). As Paul says elsewhere, “we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body” (1 Cor 12:13a). And baptism reminds of that we have the hope of the future resurrection when Christ returns (Rom 6:5; see v. 8).

The majority of Roman Christians were slaves or had been slaves, and so beginning in v. 6 the apostle gives an illustration that tapped into their life experience. Before Christ, sin was our slave master, and we had to do whatever he demanded. But in real life, some slaves receive freedom: some because their masters set them free, but others – and this is relevant here – because once a slave died the master no longer had authority over him. Thus, a Christian is no longer the slave to sin, since he or she has on a fundamental level escaped its authority. When sin issues his commands, the believer can hold his ground and say *No*.

But this is only the first half of the truth, since if we are united to Christ we are alive before God (vv. 4, 10). “...the Apostle does not simply exhort us to imitate Christ, as though he had said that the death of Christ is a pattern which all Christians are to follow; for no doubt he ascends higher... [Rather, Paul teaches that] the death of Christ is efficacious to destroy and demolish the depravity of our flesh” (Calvin, p. 221). For his part, Jesus used the term “born again” (John 3:3) and “born of water and the Spirit” (John 3:5; see 1 Pet 1:3); in another place Paul says that the

believer is a “new creation” or creature (2 Cor 5:17). Jesus was physically raised from the dead, and this we will experience only when he returns again to earth: we will live (future tense) with him (Rom 6:8; also 8:11; 1 Cor 15:22; see 2 Tim 2:11 – “If we died with him, we will also live with him”; all of these refer to the End Times). Meanwhile in this life we will be sick, grow old, die; and also wrestle daily against sin.

Some theologians believe that Paul borrowed this idea of union with Christ from the “mystery religions” of his day. These were cults that promised that the initiate would die and be reborn with some pagan deity. But these groups did not believe in resurrection in the Bible sense and probably did not affect Paul’s language of union with Christ (see especially Cranfield, p. 1.301).

*Special Note: the Victorious Life.* It is typical of false sects that they ignore some part or another of passage, and so they fail to live the life that God expects. The legalist believes that we need more, stricter rules in order to live a victorious life. But we know that this doesn’t happen, that mountains of laws don’t make our citizens better people, just as a command to fly does not transform a fish into a bird. In the country where I live there is a fine if people throw trash on the street – but just yesterday I saw a man open a package and throw the plastic wrapper on the ground: the law instructed him and there was a slight possibility that he might receive a fine, but the law did not – could not – transform him. In the gospel, the believer must start with the facts of his new nature and only then through daily faith in Christ begin to taste spiritual victory.

Other groups have gone astray by focusing too much on the new nature and forgetting that life is still a battle against sin. They say that they are resurrected to a new life and therefore they are perfect (see 1 John 1:8-10; perhaps also 2 Tim 2:18). So taught the heresy Gnosticism in the 2nd century and beyond, a movement that is again popular in Europe and in South America. They believed that the spiritual resurrection at the point of conversion was the single and final event, and thus all Gnostics are already made perfect. But not even Paul had reached this stage! “So, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal” (Phil 3:11-12). One theologian reminds us that “it would be a bad misinterpretation of Paul to think that the believer is thereby removed from all contact of influence with the old realm of sin. While belonging to a new realm, the believer brings with him into it many of the impulses, habits, and tendencies of the old life...” (Moo, p. 352).

#### 6:11-14

But the story is not finished; Christians must act on the truth! Paul now uses imperative verbs, “commands”. The phrase “count yourselves” (v. 11) must be handled with great care. The verb

*logizomai* (“consider, reckon, count”) appears 19 times in this epistle. It was critically important in Romans 4:3, where God considered Abraham righteous because of his faith. Paul does not ask the Romans to *pretend that* they are dead to sin, or *act as if* this pleasing narrative were so; his point is that believers must remember, take into account, and act upon what is already true, that already they are “dead to sin to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus” (6:11).

What are our new abilities? The believer is able, with God’s power, to say no to sin. Sin still orders us to obey its “desires” (6:12), and scowls and shouts and persuades, but he is a pretender and has no right or power to tell us how to live. Paul speaks of our body parts as *instruments* (or tools or weapons; the word is used in 13:12, but with a different sense). Christians might surrender their mouth, or hands, or feet or other parts for sin to use, but they don’t have to do so; and they must take decisive steps not to. This is why Paul later issues commands to the Romans that they live in righteousness: beginning in Romans 12:1-2 he will show how the Christian must engage in specific behaviors.

Paul then concludes in v. 14 with an idea that he had hinted at earlier in the epistle, that by faith in Christ one may be totally acceptable before God without obeying the Torah, since “you are not under the law” (see comments on 7:6). Abraham not only had no law, but he was an uncircumcised Gentile when he was declared right with God! The same is true for Gentile Christians, whether in 1st-century Rome or elsewhere.

One school of thought is that Paul is speaking in this section only about certain ritual laws, such as circumcision and food regulations. That cannot be so; firstly, because the Scripture does not distinguish between moral and ritual law; nor for that matter, does it distinguish between the law of God and the law of Moses. “Law” means any and every commandment. Secondly, in Romans the apostle cites six of the Ten Commandments as examples of the law: stealing, murder, idolatry (2:21-24), adultery (2:22, 7:7-11), Sabbath (14:5), plus provoking others to take God’s name in vain (2:24).

The believer can and must live righteously, not because he focuses on the law, but because in his new nature – and through the Spirit enlightening him in his reading of the Scriptures – he will know what is God’s true path: “when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts sometimes accusing them and at other times even defending them” (Rom 2:14-15). They will love others because God has taught them to do so from within his being, a supernatural fulfillment of what is written in the Word (Rom 12:9-21; 13:8-10; especially 1 Thess 4:9-10).

Torah-observant legalists come in many forms. One might say, *You have to obey the laws of Moses in order to become right with God. And oh, yes, you have to believe in Jesus too.* Such

words should leave us aghast. Believe in Jesus *too*? May we be delivered from such a weak and watery gospel. It is salvation is by Jesus, period, or it is not the true gospel.

Another might insist that even Gentile believers obey the 613 commands of the Torah, which include rules about the sowing of two plants in a garden (Deut 22:9); blended fabrics (Deut 22:11); and putting tassels on the fringe of one's robes (Deut 22:12); among many others. Or someone will say that, *You don't have to obey rules such as this, but you do have to obey the Sabbath and other Jewish feasts and you have to adopt Hebrew names* – as if some 21st century “rabbi” had the power to add to or take away from how we might obey God's Torah! An especially pernicious form of legalism says, *Of course you cannot earn salvation by works; nevertheless, the truly committed follow of Jesus will gain sanctification only if he or she follows the hundreds of laws of Moses.*

“Saved by grace, sanctified by works” is a heresy, a silly attempt to get good credit before God or to obtain his power through good deeds, which are, after all, works of the flesh. Our continuing growth in the Lord is, like justification, an act of faith.

Yet, Paul did not teach that we should have faith in Jesus and then do nothing. He said that we should take decisive, righteous action, seeking the power of God to make right choices, weed out bad attitudes, curb wrong behavior.

Some Christians state their philosophy thus: “Well, we shouldn't be too legalistic; and of course, we shouldn't be unprincipled. No, the middle of the road is where we should walk!” This “balanced” viewpoint too is alien to the gospel. Submitting ourselves to God is an absolute command, akin to Jesus saying that “Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it” (Matt 10:39) or to take up one's cross to follow him (Matt 10:38). It is nothing less than a full daily surrender, a life of faith and repentance (Rom 2:4).

6:15-23

Paul regularly heard this attack from his theological enemies: *Isn't it true that once you tell Gentiles that they are free from the law, then they will run amok in idolatry, sex and cruelty?* And now he asks a similar question of the Romans (v. 15): *Shall we sin because we are not under the law but under grace?* Not at all! For life under God's gracious rule is a life of justice.

On the other side, he warns that a Christian, who in fact is free from sin and Torah, could make a choice to obey sin (vv. 16-22). And by that act of voluntary submission, the Christian in effect makes sin his master once again, since *you are slaves of the one you obey*. Turn back and follow sin, and you will place yourself on the road to death. But Paul reiterates that this is a choice that goes against nature, since they truly are liberated from sin and slaves of righteousness. The believer must decisively follow one path or another, since he can serve only one of two masters (Luke 16:13a). The believer must surrender herself as the slave of God (v. 22). This surrender is



not a once-and-for-all decision (see our comments on Rom 12:1); it is a way of life which must be daily embraced.

The life of sin leads to predictable “wages”, eternal death (v. 23), which is the resurrection unto judgment. If a person, transformed by God, lives in righteousness, he receives eternal life, not as a payment, but as a “gift”.

*Eternal life* in the language of John’s gospel is a gift that a person receives in this life (“whoever believes in the Son has eternal life,” that is, has it already; John 3:36). Yet the phrase in other authors, including Paul, means the eternal life we will receive when Jesus returns; it is the “life of the final resurrection” (Rom 2:7; 5:21; 6:22-23). Christians are being *led to* that future life. We can paraphrase the end of 6:23 that *God’s gift to us, purely of grace, is that he will include us in the resurrection at Jesus’ return.*

Every believer, at some time, even frequently, follows temptation into sin, even though technically he does not have to do so. One who falls regularly becomes what the Bible calls a person of “double-minded” or “indecisive or inconstant” (James 1:8; 4:8). Christians who do not repent might even fall into addictive sin.

#### 7:1-6

Paul now develops the theme that he began in 6:14 but then left to one side: believers in Jesus are no longer obligated to obey the law. This was a supremely controversial position to take. In fact, we will see in 7:7-25 that Paul had to defend himself against the charge of apostasy from the Torah.

He speaks to his *brothers and sisters*. The underlying Greek term, *adelphoi*, is grammatically masculine, but means “brothers *and* sisters” (in this section 7:4, 8:12; see also 8:29). The apostle sometimes uses it to attract the attention of his hearers after a long section and to take them into fresh territory. “Those who know the law” might be all his Roman readers, but perhaps he is hinting that he will once again speak to an imaginary synagogue audience, as he did in 1:18ff.

“The law has authority over someone only as long as that person lives.” People who have died to sin and to death have also died to the Torah. In vv. 2-3, he uses the example of a husband and wife to show that death severs the authority of the law, once one party is dead.

While I was working on this commentary, there was a bad accident in front of my office – a man illegally ran across a busy highway, was hit by a truck and killed instantly. I went outside and saw that the victim lay on the street under a covering. For two grisly hours he remained there as the police arrived and closed the road; took the testimony of witnesses; interrogated the truck driver; and finally cleaned up. I noticed that one thing they did not do was issue a ticket to the

pedestrian, even though he had broken the law. Dead to all, he was “free” from the law, no longer obligated to it.

In Judaism, once an Israelite died, he no longer had to concern himself with the Torah’s instructions on dress, food, sacred days. And those who have died to the law are free to be “married to” or in allegiance with a new master, Christ (7:4). And it is only through union with the dead and resurrected Christ that we are able to bear righteous fruit, fruit we cannot begin to manufacture on our own “in the flesh.”

Paul contrasts the flesh and the Spirit frequently in Romans, and even more in Galatians. Great care must be taken to define the word “flesh” (Greek *sarx*) in 7:5 and throughout the following chapters. Sometimes Paul uses the word to refer to the physical aspect of our being (1 Cor 15:39; 2 Cor 7:1). Now, if Paul had been a Greek philosopher, a Platonist, he might have believed that the physical body was morally weak and mortal, but that the inner spirit was good. Lust and anger and jealousy come about because we are bodily creatures. In that case, death would be a relief, since the pure spirit would ascend to the heavens and leave its physical vessel behind. But Paul was no Platonist; he had been trained in the truth of Genesis, which says that God created human beings to have a physical body and that it was “very good” (Gen 1:31).

A better understanding of “flesh” is that Paul is thinking of human nature since the fall of Adam (Rom 5:12). Two descriptors characterize the human race in this age, apart from the grace of God: first, it is sinful, and the NVI translates *sarx* as “sinful nature”. Second, it is powerless to do righteousness; for that reason, the Spanish version, the TLA renders 7:5 (“when we were in the realm of the flesh”) as “vivíamos sin poder” – “we lived without power.” “Flesh” in this sense could be expressed thus: *humanity that by its nature consistently and willfully rebels against God, and that couldn’t obey God even if it wanted to*. This latter half is the key truth in Romans 7-8 – people can serve God only because God transforms them by the Spirit. Still, Christians must ever wrestle against the “flesh” while in this life: “If ‘flesh’ means unregenerate human nature, the believer still possesses this nature, even though she or he has received the Spirit” (Ladd, p. 515).

In Christ, the believer is not subject to the law (7:1 NIV has it as “the law has authority over someone”), and not called to obey it (v. 6). For some, this verse makes no sense, and one pseudo-“messianic” translation (the Spanish language Versión Israelita Nazarena) adds words in brackets that completely distort Paul’s meaning: “but now that we have died from [the condemnation of] the law” (our rendering in English). This same version alters the Bible in the same way in 6:14-15, and completely rewrites the point of 7:5. But Paul is not speaking of condemnation, but of the obligation to obey Torah. Another (the Código Real New Testament, our rendering in English) states that we have died to the “*legalistic* obedience of the law”, as if Paul were saying we must obey the law but only with a sweeter attitude. This of course makes nonsense of the text. Others will say that even though you are not *saved* by the law or *oppressed*

or *condemned* by it, you should still obey God by following the ancient code. Or, as this same “messianic rabbi” expresses it:

The impossibility of the law is due to the fact that [the law] is not functioning in that person who is not tied to it in a covenant relationship, like the marriage covenant, for example, which is the figure that Paul uses in this context. In order for the law to be functioning, the sinful nature, here represented as a cruel and despotic master and husband, has to be taken away, so that the inner man, the divine soul that is spiritual, might be united to the divine law that is likewise spiritual. (*El Código Real*, p. 301, our rendering into English).

To paraphrase, the author is saying that it is impossible to obey the law *unless* you are fully committed to do so by accepting the covenant of Moses in the inner person and trying hard to obey. But this is nothing but double-talk, reading a Bible text that says no-one can obey the Torah, no matter how hard they try, and explaining it to mean that, *Oh but, yes you can, so long as you try really, really hard.*

Paul will have none of that: his point is that, if you try to serve God through Torah-piety, you will find yourself growing more weak within and less righteous in deed. His point goes against intuition, which says that having more rules and putting forth more effort to obey those rules will make you a better person. In fact, it makes you a worse person! The Torah does not kill “sinful passions” (7:5); it awakens and arouses them, and the more we try the more we fail. To the extent that Christians make themselves servants of the Torah or some other set of rules, to that extent does fleshly religion push grace out of their lives.

The Christian life is by the Spirit, and not by the written law of Moses (v. 6b); the NIV is right to capitalize the word Spirit here, since it is the Holy Spirit he speaks of, not some inner part of the person. He has said something similar in 2:29, that the true circumcision is “circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code.” A related verse is the famous 2 Cor 3:6 – “He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant – not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.” This last verse has been terribly twisted in our day to mean something like “Don’t quote Bible verses at me, I will do what I feel the Spirit is telling me!” In none of these verses is this the idea: rather, they all deal with the New Covenant and the victory we have over sin by the Spirit, not by Torah-observance.

Legalists love to compose lists of rules. An always popular category is women’s clothing; one North American website has a long list – this kind of blouse, yes; this kind of swimsuit, no; this many inches here, this many there, a bit less of this, a bit more of that. Oh and, of course, these lists are always labeled with the warning, “Now we’re not being legalistic!” Some Latina friends of mine have been refused communion because the usher who was distributing it saw that they were wearing nail polish and were thus clearly not in fellowship with God. The clothing from the men’s wardrobe, of course, rarely comes under such close scrutiny.

Legalists also love to believe that their rules are universal; to go back to clothing again, I once saw one pastor who had his wife stand in front of the congregation; at that point he implied that her outfit from the (I am relatively sure) 1980s was God's style for all women in every time and place. By nature, the legalists tend to be inflexible; confident in self; competitive; condemning of others; but to their great surprise, also frustrated at the paltry harvest of their own spiritual growth. In short, they are just what Paul meant by the word "carnal."

Carnal behavior cannot be limited to, for example, sexual sins or permissive attitudes. For believers living "by the flesh" are those who may be making a massive effort to please God, but doing it their own way and in their own power. Thus, a Christian who, let us say, commits fornication is "fleshly," but so is the Christian who makes every effort to obey the Torah, following his or her own strength. This is what was happening in Galatia, and that is why Paul says that the legalists themselves were producing works of the flesh and not fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:19-23 as read in its context).

Woe to us if we water down the words "dead to the law", turning them into something that Paul never intended. There are people who say, *Yes, we're dead to the Torah, but we still have to obey it.* That is not what the apostle wrote, but rather, given that we are released from Torah, we do not have to obey it. What could be clearer? And so while believers should carefully study the Old Testament, through the guidance of the Spirit, they are not obligated to follow its hundreds of laws; if they try to do so, they are guaranteed to make themselves ever more feeble and discouraged.

A Spirit believer focuses on love for God and love for others. This doesn't mean we are warm and childlike personalities who go out and do whatever feels right. It does mean that love is the supreme judge of all rules, behaviors, thoughts, attitudes, goals. We will deal with this in detail in Romans 13.

### **Study Questions:**

1. What is the most important thing that God wants for your life in Christ?
2. Believers are dead to sin's power, but they can still yield themselves to its mastery. What are some ways you are returning to King Sin to obey him?
3. Who in your life is giving you rules to follow that are not warranted by the Bible? How have they affected your standard of living in Christ – are you more successful or less? And why?

### **B. Paul is not an Apostate! (7:7-25)**

7:7-13

Some take this paragraph to be a description of Paul's own experience at his Bar Mitzvah, when he was recognized as an adult in Israel, personally responsible to follow the Torah. Nevertheless, it better to take it, along with 7:14-25, as a general description of life in the Old Covenant. Paul shows that even if a person knows the law, it makes no difference in their behavior.

In v. 7b he uses the 10th commandment as an example: "You shall not covet". What effect does that law have? The hearer understands that coveting is wrong before God. But that is all the positive help it can give; the person remains the same.

But let's go further, says the apostle. That commandment not only does not help, it makes matters worse. It awakes in the hearer all kinds of coveting (v. 8). For example: if I tell you not to think of a giraffe, you know that it will be impossible not to picture one. Likewise, tell an unregenerate to not covet, and all of a sudden that's what they think of doing. So, Paul says, I was doing well before I heard the 10th commandment (v. 10), but when someone reads it to me "I died" spiritually.

How can the perfect law leave a person spiritually dead? Paul does not want the reader to think that he finds fault with the law, even though he believes that "the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death" (v. 10). The problem is with the sinful human nature.

Paul has already said in 5:12 that when Adam fell, it left the human race estranged from God and unable to obey him. Despite the differences between them, Calvinists, Arminians, Roman Catholics and some other theologies (but not Pelagianism) parts company with Judaism on this point. The rabbis for over 2000 years have taught that Adam's Fall affected only him; he gave us a bad example to follow, but we are still free to choose to obey God's commands, if we try really hard. An example from the 1st century AD –

And not only over the fiery passion of sexual desire does reason evidently exercise control, but over all desire. For the Law says, *You shall not covet your neighbor's wife or anything that is your neighbor's*. Surely then, since the Law tells us not to covet, I should the much more readily persuade you that reason has the power to control the desires. (4 Mac 2:4-6a [Charlesworth], emphasis added).

Sometimes the apostles are in agreement with rabbinic teaching (as in Rom 1:18-32), sometimes no. In this case, Paul firmly rejects his background: *Judaism says that you can obey God if you want, so the Jews should just go ahead and do so; in Paul's gospel, you cannot obey God, even if you know his law, and so we need God to transform us by the new birth.*

7:14-25

One of the most controversial passages in Paul's letters is this section about the Wretched Man (see the overview in Cranfield, pp. 1.342-47). Some say that it is about the regenerate person's struggles (Augustine, Calvin, Hodge, Barth, Cranfield, Dunn, Cevallos y Zorzolli; some take it as the struggles specifically of an immature Christian). Others that it is about the life of the unregenerate (Wesley, Käsemann, Wilckens, Fitzmyer, Moo). Within these two camps are further divisions, for example, that this is autobiographical and describes Paul's struggles, either before he met Christ or after.

In favor of the "regenerate" viewpoint, the man delights in the law and wants to do the good; and "not so does Paul describe the unregenerate man" (Cranfield, p. 1.346). But Paul in fact *already* has said that the Israelite apart from Christ delights to find God's will in the Torah (2:17-20), that he wants to obey it, but does not (see 2:21-24). Word for word, this is precisely the dilemma of the Wretched Man.

Great care must be taken, because many read the passage and exclaim, "This describes me exactly!" and decide that it is a narrative of the Christian life, similar to Galatians 5:16-18, this despite the fact that Galatians assumes we can obey God, while Romans 7 leaves zero hope for victory. So, what was the original intention of this story?

1. He is a slave to sin (v. 14), literally, "sold as a slave to sin." Many commentators state that this is an appropriate label for a Christian; they are mistaken. This enslavement is not simply the possibility of sin; rather, traditionally it was a label for an unbeliever and apostate. 1 Kings 21:20 (the Greek form Paul uses is found in 3 Kingdoms 21:20 LXX; see 1 Mac 1:15, below): "you have sold yourself to do evil in the eyes of the LORD." Remember that apart from Christ, people are slaves of sin (6:13-14) and set free when they come to Christ (6:11). Thus, it means: "I am an unbeliever, apart from God, a slave to sin!"
2. He loves the Torah (7:14, 16, 22, 25). While this might seem to describe a believer in Christ, in fact Paul has already shown that Israel would like to obey the law but cannot (2:17-24); contrast the positive outcome of the Christian life: "in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us" (8:4).
3. He hopes in vain for victory (7:15-20); not that, he doesn't always have victory over sin, but rather he never has victory. Spiritually he is 100% a loser.
4. He is by nature completely "carnal" (7:14) or as the NIV has it, "unspiritual". This too is the language of an unsaved person, see under 7:5.
5. He makes no reference to the Spirit in his life. This silence is significant, since life in Christ is fundamentally life in the Spirit (8:3b-4).

V. 25a is an interruption of this man's lament; it is as if Paul could not stop himself from pointing to Christ as the solution of his problems, the answer he will develop in 8:2, that "the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death." But in the end, he

goes back to the dark, hopeless conclusion. The experience seems to be that of an Israelite apart from Christ, similar to what Paul has already shown in Romans 2 that they will be defeated by sin if they do not receive the gospel.

Beginning in 8:1 Paul will give a description of the Christian life, which is a life of victory in the Spirit. So, what is he trying to prove in 7:7-25?

First, this is the sort of material that he might have preached in a synagogue, to those who “know the law” (7:1). His point would be that Jews as well as Gentiles needed to turn to Christ in faith if they want to live in righteousness.

Second, he is demonstrating to the Roman church once again that the gospel is a universal message. Just as Gentiles cannot live apart from Christ, so the Jews cannot. Paul is trying to create excitement for his mission to Spain, where he will evangelize all people. May no Roman claim that the gospel of Christ is for Gentiles only!

Third, he is defending himself against possible charges that he is an apostate from Israel. In fact, just months after writing this epistle, he would go to Jerusalem and be charged, “you teach all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to turn away from Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or live according to our customs” (Acts 21:21). For a Jew, this was the gravest possible sin. After all, two centuries earlier the Maccabees had fought against the apostate Jews who “built a gymnasium in Jerusalem, according to Gentile custom, and removed the marks of circumcision, and abandoned the holy covenant. They joined with the Gentiles and sold themselves to do evil” (1 Mac 1:14-15 NRSV; the festival of Hanukkah commemorates this Maccabean revolt). The rabbis taught that the one who denies that the Torah comes down from heaven “has no share in the world to come” (*m. San* 10.1 [Neusner]).

Stephen had been killed because of the accusation of defection from Israel (Acts 6:11-14). Is Paul a possible apostate too, one who teaches that the law is sinful (7:7)? Absolutely not! His point is that the law of God cannot transform people into obedient children, and thus Judaism is mistaken about human nature when it optimistically states that people can obey if they really want to and they study the Scriptures.

For these reasons, I take the Wretched Man first and foremost as a description of a Jew apart from Christ and without the power of the Spirit; that it is not about Paul’s own experience but a sort of parable, in which he shows that utter defeat awaits those who reject the gospel.

Next, in Romans 8, Paul will turn a corner and show how the person who is dead to sin, the law and death can live in obedience, if he or she is in Christ and has the Spirit.

*Practical Thought.* Because of sin, good instructions might lead to my death. I remember a television series on the eating disorder known as bulimia. People,

usually young women, believe that they are badly overweight. And so, they consume mass quantities of food, and then “purge” themselves through vomiting, laxatives or excessive exercise. The producers of this program had the best intentions: *We must inform the public about bulimia, show how dangerous it is, and then tell them not to do it!* The problem is that it produced mixed results. I have known some women who have seen such presentations, and they tell me that only then did it occurred to them: *Wait! You mean I can lose weight simply by vomiting after meals?* So, what was meant to be a helpful warning turned out to be an invitation for wrongdoing.

Although the Wretched Man has to do with life apart from Christ, we can read a subtle warning for the Christian life, which is: *If you, a Christian, turn your focus away from the power of the Spirit; if you follow the invitation to Torah observance, mixing the law with the Spirit; then the result will be spiritual failure* (so Stott, pp. 232-40). To the extent that a Christian tries to live the Torah by his own efforts, to that extent the Spirit will withdraw from his life and all him to fall back into misery. Greater effort on our part means even more shocking failure.

A final application, and an important one. People cannot use this text as excuse for their own spiritual failure. “Well, I try and try,” they say, “but you know what Romans 7 says – I can’t do the thing I want to do.” *Certainly not!* would have been Paul’s response. *Don’t you know that you can achieve victory through the Spirit? (8:4).* In this age, perfection is not a possible outcome, but regular victory certainly is.

### **Study Questions:**

1. How have you tried to excuse your continuing sinful behavior?
2. If someone says that you are being unfaithful to the laws of the Old Testament, how would you respond?

### **C. The Spirit gives us victory in this life and into eternity (8:1-39)**

Paul now invites the reader to gaze in amazement at the miraculous new life we have in Christ Jesus, expanding upon what he said in 6:22 – “But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life.” *Is it really possible, he now explores, that a Gentile can not only be saved from condemnation but even live a holy life apart from Torah observance?* Indeed it is true!

#### **1. The Spirit gives a fresh start to the Christian (8:1-13)**

8:1-4



Let us place the emphasis where the apostle wants it: there is one group and one only who will in the end escape God's condemnation: "those who are in Christ Jesus." (Some manuscripts – the 5th century Codex A is the oldest – add "who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit," see the KJV; it was probably accidentally "borrowed" from v. 4 in transcription). This condemnation is the very wrath of God that has been hanging like a sword of Damocles over our heads ever since 1:18. We used to be in bondage to "the law of sin and death"; here "law" may refer to a general principle, as in 7:23 – it is the principle that no human effort, whether oriented to Torah or no, can yield anything but eternal death (see Moo, pp. 476-79). But a new law or "principle" has freed us – the coming of the Spirit. Neither Jew nor Gentile had access to this level of Spirit power before the day of Pentecost; everyone lived according to the flesh, the sinful and weak nature apart from Christ (see the definition of *sarx* in our section on 7:1-6). But with the death of Christ for sin, as Paul announces in 3:25a, "God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood – to be received by faith." On that basis, for we who walk by faith, in the Spirit, the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us (v. 4; see also 5:18). *Does God want people to be devoted to him?* He gave Moses a Torah that said so, but only the Spirit enables us to do so. *To love other people?* Again, people who live "according to the Spirit" can do this, not by vainly trying to internalize the rules of the Old Testament plus a long list of rabbinic traditions, but because the Spirit teaches them on the inside to live by righteousness.

Although Paul did not consider himself obligated to the law of Moses, he lived according to certain statutes in order to be a fruitful evangelist to other Jews (1 Cor 9:20b). But Paul has no illusions about the Torah: not only is it unhelpful, it can damage the Christian life if one tries to mix grace and law. Any effort in our own power is of the "flesh" and automatically offends God. To illustrate, some medications have a warning: "Don't take this pill if you are already taking this or that medication, because it may cause bad side effects." So too, once a person tries to mix a religion of Torah, even a microscopic amount, with the gracious gift of the Spirit, he or she will have a severe reaction, a failed life of holiness.

### 8:5-13

Every Christian, by definition, has the Spirit (v. 9); see also 1 Corinthians 12:13a, "we were all baptized by one Spirit." To be sure, some are more full of the Spirit than others, some are more gifted. Nevertheless anyone who is a true believer in Christ has the Spirit since the first moment. A person is a temple of the Spirit or not; there is no gray area. Thus, for Paul, there are Christians-with-the-Spirit and everybody else, people of the "flesh".

In Judaism and early Christianity, writers used the trope of the Two Ways: the way of evil and the way of holiness. Paul does something similar here. For him the two ways are not legalism versus flexibility; not Gentile versus Jew; but people who walk by the flesh versus those who walk by the Spirit. The latter group has righteousness and life (Rom 8:5-7). The "mind set on

what the flesh desires”, is literally “the mind of the flesh”, including “its outlook, assumptions, values, desires and purposes” (Cranfield, p. 1.386).

In v. 7 Paul states that the carnal person “does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so”. One might have expected that he would go on to say that the spiritual person is able to submit to God’s law, but he does not (see v. 10b). Only the Spirit will give eternal life, the resurrection, to those who live by God’s grace (6:23); and since the Spirit has already raised Jesus from the dead, clearly he can give life “your mortal bodies” (v. 11). There is much confusion over the words mortal, immortal, and “the immortal soul”. Mortal is the proper word to describe human beings before the resurrection, that is, they are subject to death; compared with people only God is truly immortal (1 Tim 1:17). At Christ’s coming he will give us the gift of immortality, “when the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality” (1 Cor 15:54a).

*Special Note: The Holy Spirit is a Person.* Until recent times the Latin American church understood the Spirit’s personhood, but in recent days even that truth has come under attack. The Jehovah’s Witnesses describe the Spirit as a force like electricity. Others have played strange language games, based on the fact that the Hebrew word for spirit (*Ruach*) is feminine, whereas the Greek uses a neuter noun *pneuma*, and Latin languages such as Spanish a masculine one. This notion is rooted in a confusing of sex with grammatical gender.

What does the Bible say? First, the person who is the Spirit “distributes” spiritual gifts (1 Cor 12:11); in other words, he makes choices about who receives which gift. We would never say that “the electricity chose to power the lamp.” Second, in John 14-16 the Spirit teaches, reminds (14:26), testifies (15:26), guides, speaks, declares (16:13-14) – these are all activities of a person, not a blind force. Third, in verses such as John 16:14, despite the fact that Jesus uses the neuter noun *pneuma* to refer to the Spirit, he uses the masculine pronoun “he” (*ekeinos*) to speak of the Spirit, not “she” (*ekeinē*) or “it” (*ekeino*); this is a clear indication that the Spirit is a person and is “he”.

Paul ends this section with a call to action. The person who has died to sin has an obligation: he or she must not live according to the flesh, neither in Gentile wickedness nor in the form of Torah observance.

The miracle is that in the Spirit, and only by him, a believer may “put to death the misdeeds of the body” (v. 13). This is not an ascetic lifestyle, or starving the passions by fasting, vigils, or vows and resolutions and an ever-increasing list of rules. Paul believes those things have no power to control wrong desires (see especially Col 2:23). God’s plan is simple, but not simplistic. He gives victory to the spiritual (or better “Spiritual” or “person of the Spirit”) person,

and we receive his power simply by asking: “how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” (Luke 11:13).

## **2. The Spirit helps us through the trials of this present age (8:14-27)**

8:14-25

Believers in Jesus have the Spirit (v. 14), through whom God adopts them as children (v. 15). This is the same paradigm that Paul used in Galatians, where both Jews and Gentiles are liberated from slavery and made adopted children of God and also of Abraham (Gal 3:23-5:1), free to live in true holiness: free from licentiousness and free from a set of rules.

Only the person who has the Spirit can truly call God his “father”. *Abba* (v. 15) is not Hebrew, but Aramaic, the language of the pagans and the Jews of the eastern Mediterranean, and also the language of the rabbis for many centuries. All the evidence indicates that Jesus taught in Aramaic: some examples are *Talitha cumi* (Mark 5:41); *Ephphatha* (Mark 7:34). Nor did he hesitate to use Aramaic as his prayer language, calling his Father *Abba* (Mark 14:36). It was the language of many early Christians, which is why some words passed directly to the Greek, e.g., *Maranatha* (“Our Lord come!”; 1 Cor 16:22) and the word *Abba* here and in Galatians 4:6. It has become fashionable to translate *Abba* as Daddy or Papa. In fact it means simply “father”: that’s how it translates *Abba* here in the Greek, and among the Jews it was the word that both children and adults would use to address their fathers. In both 8:15 and Galatians 4:6, the indwelling Spirit teaches us regard God as our Father and to address him as such, just as Jesus did when he used to pray (see also “Our Father,” Matt 6:9; that prayer too was probably taught in Aramaic).

*Practical Thought:* We now live with the tensions of an in-between time: experiencing the blessings of the age to come but living in the present evil age (see Gal 1:4). Even the cosmos experiences anxiety and is frustrated (Rom 8:19-20). It is not entirely clear what this means in scientific terms, but at least we can say that creation is waiting for the time when God will put it in order, according to the way it was meant to be in the beginning. Not only has the primeval sin harmed the cosmos, but people since the beginning have abused their environment. In the first century “imperial ambitions, military conflicts, and economic exploitation had led to the erosion of the natural environment throughout the Mediterranean world, leaving ruined cities, depleted fields, deforested mountains, and polluted streams as evidence of this universal human vanity” (Jewett, p. 513). In particular, the country of Spain today shows how the Romans denuded the forests, which led to the catastrophic loss of topsoil. So, just as Christ’s people will be raised from the dead, so nature too will be renewed as an answer to the prayer “your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt 6:10). Of course, that does not give us an excuse to degrade the planet that God prepared for us.

If we are one with Christ in his death and resurrection, we will also reign with him in his future kingdom (vv. 17, 19). Paul even says, “if we endure, we will also reign with him” (2 Tim 2:12a; see also Matt 19:28; Rev 1:6, 3:21). Although the believers are *en route* to eternal glory at Jesus’ second coming, they suffer during this present age. The apostle commonly taught that “we must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). Within a short while, Christians would be accused of setting Rome afire, and Nero would torture and burn many Christians, probably including Paul and Peter and many of the original recipients of this epistle. The Roman historian Tacitus records in his *Annals* 15.44.4 [Jackson] –

Therefore, to scotch the rumour, Nero substituted as culprits, and punished with the utmost refinements of cruelty, a class of men, loathed for their vices, whom the crowd styled Christians...First, then, the confessed members of the sect were arrested; next, on their disclosures, vast numbers were convicted, not so much on the count of arson as for hatred of the human race. And derision accompanied their end: they were covered with wild beasts’ skins and torn to death by dogs; or they were fastened on crosses, and, when daylight failed were burned to serve as lamps by night.

When will things change, so that believers can pass from suffering into glory? It is at the point of their future resurrection at Christ’s coming, which Paul calls “the freedom and glory of the children of God” (v. 21) and “the redemption of our bodies” (v. 23). Before that time, life for the child of God is often harsh: the reader might go through 8:18-27 and underline the hard words: *frustration, decay, sufferings, corruption, groaning, weakness, not knowing what to ask for* (see also 8:35). And the apostle was not speaking in hypothetical terms: Priscilla and Aquila had risked their lives for Paul (16:4); some had been in prison for their faith (16:7); others undertook hard labor (16:12). And within months Paul would be arrested and spend years in jail. But even the harshest suffering cannot compare with the future glory at Christ’s coming (v. 18; see 9:23).

To use another metaphor, we enjoy the “firstfruits” of the Spirit during this age (v. 23; compare with Eph 1:13); this symbolizes that there will be a bountiful harvest in the end of time, when we possess the complete fullness of the Spirit.

*Practical Thought.* Too many Christians accept the notion that their eternal destiny consists in dying and going to be with the Lord and that is that. This leads to questions such as, *But will we recognize each other in heaven?* The New Testament is unanimous in teaching that our ultimate goal is the resurrection, when we become like Christ in his glorious new body and spend eternity in that form. We will live in a state where you will be you and I will be I, as recognizable individuals. That is our final hope and goal (vv. 24-25).

8:26-27

Prayer is not only giving thanks or asking forgiveness: it is also a militant, disciplined petitioning of God by his people, the church. During this age, the Holy Spirit helps us to pray, beginning with the very first cry of “*Abba, Father*” (v. 15). In the confusion and difficulty of life, we don’t know what to ask God for, we don’t know how to fill in the blank of “your will be done” (Matt 6:10). But the Spirit knows, and he groans within us, in the temple where he dwells. What this means is not immediately clear; since these groans cannot be expressed in words, Paul isn’t speaking about the gift of tongues, which are spoken out loud. The likely meaning is that the Spirit intercedes for us above and beyond what we can possibly do; he knows what we would want and even better what is God’s plan for us.

*Practical Thought, Suffering Today.* The Voice of the Martyrs (<http://www.persecution.org/>) is an excellent online resource to become aware of how Christians are suffering around the world. While persecution is highest in a handful of countries, without doubt, there are believers who are suffering privation in your country and your city. In many cases, this is due to oppressive work conditions, and ironically their suffering might be caused in part by wealthier believers. Instead of praying just for the small sufferings in our own lives, we must include other believers in our intercessions, and decisive action in our economic choices.

Many Christians believe that the church cannot go through the Tribulation but that the rapture of the church happens beforehand. Since I once held this viewpoint, I know and can follow the arguments for it. But now it strikes me that a main reason for a pretribulational rapture doctrine is that people who are not suffering now cannot imagine that the church is destined to suffer tribulation, period. But here, right in this beloved chapter, it says that if we are not suffering physically, socially, and emotionally for the name of Christ, then our experience is abnormal.

### **3. Christians are assured that they are part of God’s eternal plan (8:28-39)**

8:28-30

“In all things God works for the good of those who love him” (see Cranfield, pp. 1.425-28 for the textual and translation difficulties). This text is precious to many; yet it is often misunderstood. Paul is not saying, *Well, don’t worry, everything will work out; things will be better tomorrow; behind every cloud is a silver lining.*

Rather, Paul is taking the long look at God’s “purpose”, from where we are in the world today, all the way to the day of our resurrection at the coming of Jesus when we will be glorified (compare v. 30 with vv. 17, 18, 21). His promise is that God will take us to a glorious end, no matter what we have to pass through in the interval.

For the rest of the chapter, Paul develops God's "purpose" that he mentioned in 8:28. It is a common Jewish and Christian teaching that God has a plan that cannot be stopped: Proverbs 19:21 – "Many are the plans in a person's heart, but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails"; and Romans 9:11, concerning Rebecca's twins, refers to "God's purpose in election". Paul takes us step by step through God's plan who love him. It is crucial to see the connections Paul is forging: there is a group of people, the "foreknown"; and "those who" God foreknew, that is, the very same group, he also predestined. There is a principle of mathematics called the transitive property. It says that, if  $A = B$ , and  $B = C$ , then  $A = C$ . Paul is using the same logic when he says that those who were foreknown in v. 29a will be the very same group, no more and no less, as those who will be glorified in v. 30b.

What can it mean that God "foreknew" people? This is language of the Hebrew Scriptures. When used of God's actions, to foreknow does not just mean that he foresaw the future. It is synonymous here to "select" or "elect," and means that God chose to form a relationship with people, even before they were born. This was so of the prophet Jeremiah: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart..." (Jer 1:5). God knew the nation of Israel before their existence (Rom 11:2), and likewise the church (see 1 Pet 1:2). We might translate the phrase in v. 29 as "God long ago decided to establish a relationship with them."

People today place great value on their right to make their own decisions; they stiffen when they see the words election or predestination in the Bible. They feel the need to respond that, *But, I know that I chose to follow Christ!* In fact, Paul affirms that intuition in verses such as 10:13, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved". So, when I myself became a Christian I was conscious of the Lord inviting me to faith. But I later learned that my choice of Christ, while a genuine decision, was part of a much larger picture: before I heard the gospel, long before I existed, God chose to establish a relationship with me and planned for my glorious future with him. My decision and God's decision are both authentic, but God's choice of me is from eternity and prior to me being called to believe – it is the more significant of the two choices.

Those whom he foreknew, "he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son". And God planned for me to be like Christ, during this life, but perfectly in the future resurrection. In this way Christ is our older "brother" or prototype. What he is as a human being – perfectly holy and loving and with an immortal body – so we will be.

Next, he "called" the predestined; this echoes "called according to his purpose" (v. 28). The New Testament uses "call" in two ways. First, God calls upon everyone to repent and believe the gospel (Rom 1:5; John 12:32). No-one is to go around trying to guess, *I wonder if this person is predestined to glory and will be called?* We preach the gospel to all and devote ourselves to prayer that all will respond (e.g., Rom 10:1; also Col 4:3).

*Special Note: God's special call.* Apart from the general call, the gospel includes a special call to salvation or to blessing. For example, Abram received a special invitation – he was “called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance” (Heb 11:8). This was, as the Greek dictionary BDAG says, “to choose for receipt of a special benefit or experience.” In this sense, God called Abram only from among people of his generation. So too, there is a group of people who have received a special call in which God enables them to have faith and to call upon the name of the Lord (see Rom 1:7; John 6:44; 1 Cor 1:9; Rev 17:14). This is the doctrine of *special calling* or *vocation*. That call was not in vain – each called one went on to be justified, saved of sin, and no-one goes missing along the way. As in Pisidian Antioch, “all who were appointed for eternal life believed” (Acts 13:48). This means that “the history and composition of the Church is not due to chance nor to human decisions (Cevallos y Zorzolli, p. 155, our translation). But of course, human decision also has a critical role in salvation. God illuminates the person so that he may believe, but also “effectually drawing them to Jesus Christ: yet so, as they come most freely, being made willing by His grace” (*Westminster Confession of Faith* 10.1). The reader can and should wrestle with what election, predestination and vocation mean, but there is no way to cut them out of the New Testament. Still, Paul shows no interest in luring us into an abstract discussion of free will, fatalism, election. The question *Am I of the elect?* is known ultimately only by God. The question that should preoccupy us is, *Am I in Christ?* And a positive answer is what should satisfy all of the soul's doubts.

We return to a main theme of the letter, that God “justified” his people. He has already proven from 1:16 onward that they are justified by faith, whether Jews or Gentiles (1:17). The saints have been declared righteous at the moment of their faith; they will also be finally declared righteous at the final judgment.

The timing of “he also glorified” is not immediately clear. The verb is in the past tense, as if believers were already in glory; but this doesn't accord with 8:17, where they suffer now and are glorified in the future (see also 9:23). It is better to take it in this sense: the glorification of the saints in the final resurrection is so certain that it is as good as done, making it appropriate to use the past tense.

And thus Paul has traced God's redemptive plan from eternity past to eternity future. He has not done so simply to satisfy the curiosity of his readers. Rather, he writes to prove that God has always had his people in mind; that is, “God is for us” (8:31). No-one should lose hope during the tribulations of this age – they are temporary and will be soon replaced by the future glory.

8:31-39

Paul finishes this section with the language of the heart. “What, then, shall we say in response to these things?” Much may be said! Since “God is for us”, no-one can be against us in any serious sense. To be sure, Satan fights us, and so do the enemies of God (vv. 35-36) and hostile forces of nature, but in the end they will not matter.

In v. 32, as in Romans 5:8-9, Paul uses a figure of speech called an *a fortiori* argument; the Jewish rabbis called it *qal wahomer*, “light and heavy.” It is an argument from the lesser to the greater: if A is true, how much more is B true. *If God gave the most precious gift, his Son, then how much more is it true that we will inherit all things?* By “all things” Paul is not saying that God will guarantee us with prosperity in this age, but that in the age to come we will be co-heirs with Christ (see 8:17). And we will inherit not just a small tract of land in the Middle East, but the whole renewed cosmos.

Vv. 33-34 offers a reflection upon many of the themes of this chapter. “Bring a charge”/“condemn” are the opposites of “justify”. The one God is almighty; if he has chosen us, and if he says that we are in a right relation with him, then who is powerful enough to contradict him? Paul is probably thinking of the story of Job; Satan was given permission to harm, but not to destroy him. We too will face combat, but God will not allow his elect to be wiped out (see too Matt 24:22). There is a translation issue with these verses, since “it is God who justifies” (NIV and other versions) could be translated as a rhetorical question “Is it God, who justifies us?” with the implied answer, *Of course not*. Both versions lead to the exact same truth; as one translation puts it, “No one – for God himself has given us right standing with himself” (v. 33, NLT).

V. 34 has the same structure, and the *a fortiori* focuses our attention on the work of Christ: Christ died; even more, he was resurrected; what’s more, he intercedes for us at God’s right hand (see also 1 John 2:1 – “we have an advocate with the Father – Jesus Christ, the Righteous One”). Christ’s intercession and prayer for us is, sadly, a neglected doctrine. A beautiful expression of it is found in the *The Book of Common Prayer* (1928 version):

O Lord, the only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ; O Lord God, Lamb of God, Son of the Father, that takest away the sins of the world, have mercy upon us. Thou that takest away the sins of the world, receive our prayer. Thou that sittest at the right hand of God the Father, have mercy upon us.

Our meager prayers are taken up and made powerful, since the Spirit helps us pray and intercedes for us when we do not know how (8:26-27), and at the same time the Son is in heaven, constantly speaking of us to the Father.

As in the NIV of v. 35 the original text is literally “the love of Christ”. The phrase could be taken in two ways: as the love we have for Christ, or as the love he has for us. The same translation issue shows up at the end of v. 39, which is literally “the love of God”. In both of these cases, the



context (see v. 37) shows that it is God or Christ's love toward us; as in "God demonstrates his own love for us" (see also 5:8). In these nine verses then, the emphasis is not on our faith in God or our love for him (as it is in 8:28); rather God and Christ are the protagonists of this section, and their love for us is Paul's theme.

The perils that the apostle mentions are taken from real life; with one exception he had already suffered all these things, and the threat of the "sword" was not far in the future. History tells us that he was likely beheaded for his faith: Nero "was led on to the slaughter of the apostles. It is, therefore, recorded that Paul was beheaded in Rome itself" (Eusebius, *History of the Church* 2.25.5 [NPNF]). Try as he might, Paul cannot think of anything that will break our relationship with God.

In v. 36 he quotes Psalm 44:22 in order to show why even death is no threat (also v. 38). The psalm refers to the love that God has for his people Israel and how he decrees victory for them (Ps 44:3-4). But then in 44:9-16 the author complains that God has turned them over to defeat and exile. All this, "though we had not forgotten you; we had not been false to your covenant" (Ps 44:17). As in so many psalms, the author states that on the one hand, God is just and protects the righteous; but then the righteous find themselves battered by the world and, why does God take no notice? Within that context is the reference to the slaughter of sheep. Paul must have seen in his own experience the same tension: *I am serving God, yet God does not spare me from hardship. In fact, my life is much worse than if I hadn't been called to be an apostle!* The psalmist concludes (44:26), "Rise up and help us; rescue us because of your unfailing love." Paul used to pray to escape from persecution (see 2 Thess 3:1-3; 1 Tim 2:2), but here he goes further and shows that God's final answer will come only in the future, when he vindicates his people. V. 37 is a gem of a statement: in God we do not merely survive; we are not conquerors; we are – and here Paul strains to find the right words – "*more than conquerors*".

Only by stopping to praise God can Paul lead us to grasp the gospel truth (vv. 38-39; see also 11:33-36). He gives a long and breathless sentence, in which he touches upon so many aspects of the cosmos: life and death; angels and demons; present and future; height, depth, "nor anything else in all creation." Nothing can stand between us and God, and if we need proof of our salvation, all we have to do is look at the cross of Christ. For the believer there will be no eternal separation from God (see 2 Thess 1:9).

The apostle launched his epistle with the bold statement that God was understandably furious with us and planning our judgment (1:18). In the conclusion of the section he rushes to tell us the good news: in Christ, God loves you so much that words cannot describe it, and he promises that from now on there is no cause for anxiety.

Paul's teaching in this section is not, *What happens to a backslider or even someone who comes to deny the faith?* The Bible states that people do go astray; for example, Paul would come to lament that "Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone to Thessalonica"

(2 Tim 4:10; see especially Matt 13:22). Like the other voices of the New Testament Paul affirms that a true believer is known by visible behavior, not just words (Rom 2:28-29; also Matt 7:16-20). This is why it is so bewildering when someone says that you can deny Christ entirely but still be saved in the end. The Bible says nothing like this. In fact, one of the evidences of being one of God's elect is that you will persevere: "the one who stands firm to the end will be saved" (Matt 24:13). Therefore, Romans 8 gives great comfort that salvation is secure; but it gives no comfort to those who grow cold in their faith or deny Christ. Such people must "make every effort to confirm your calling and election" (2 Pet 1:10).

*Special Note: Prosperity Teaching.* Perhaps the greatest enemy of the true gospel today is the prosperity teaching, also known as the Word of Faith or the Rhema doctrine. The idea arose in the North America, but in Latin America in particular, there is a tendency to equate suffering with the Catholic church, one more ancient notion to be rejected. And so the doctrine "rescues" the believer with its doctrine that, just as God created the universe with a "word" (in Greek, *rhēma*), so we can create our own reality by voicing it aloud; or alternately, create negative circumstances by our words. Its non-Christian parallel is the popular book *The Secret*, by Rhonda Byrne. If someone starts from that framework, Romans 8:28 seems to fit right in: "all things God works for the good." *Are you sick? God is obligated to heal you. Are you poor? God has to prosper you. Everything will work out if you have faith!*

The difficulty of course is how to explain why there was so much suffering in the early church and why most or all of the apostles endured horrible deaths. Logically one would have to say that, *Well, in olden times the apostles were called to suffer, but they were special cases* (this by the way directly contradicts 1 Thess 1:6, and also Rom 8:35-39). Or perhaps the early believers must not have had the same quality of faith that modern "faith preachers" do, who live well, jet in and out of meetings, and collect large sums of money.

Paul says nothing about speaking an alternate reality into being; he tells us we should pray, that is, address our concerns to God, not to the cosmos or to air; Christ speaks to the Father about us, and the Spirit helps us to know what to ask for (8:26). And we are not told to dissolve away our tribulations by uttering a *rhema*, but to remember that already we are more than conquerors, whether in hard times or easy.

### **Study Questions:**

1. Paul warns us not to mix God's grace with legalistic rules. In what ways does the church rely on such rules to keep its members living correctly?

2. How can your future destiny with Christ help you through the trials of your daily life in this world?

3. Have you ever wandered away from Christ, reasoning that he will save you even if you let him go? Or on the other hand, do you live in terror that God will abandon you and you will be lost? Give details about how this chapter should correct your thinking.