

EDITED FROM THE STUDY BY  
**TIMOTHY  
KELLER**

**THIS IS FOR YOU  
TO READ, EXCITING YOU  
ABOUT GOSPEL CHANGE.**

**THIS IS FOR YOU  
TO FEED, HELPING YOU  
MEDITATE ON GOD'S  
WORD DAY BY DAY.**

**THIS IS FOR YOU  
TO LEAD, EQUIPPING YOU  
TO TEACH THE BIBLE TO  
OTHERS. THIS IS  
ROMANS 8-16  
FOR YOU**



# **Romans 8 – 16 For You**

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## Series Preface

Each volume of the *God's Word For You* series takes you to the heart of a book of the Bible, and applies its truths to your heart.

The central aim of each title is to be:

- Bible centered
- Christ glorifying
- Relevantly applied
- Easily readable

You can use *Romans 8 – 16 For You*:

**To read.** You can simply read from cover to cover, as a book that explains and explores the themes, encouragements and challenges of this part of Scripture.

**To feed.** You can work through this book as part of your own personal regular devotions, or use it alongside a sermon or Bible-study series at your church. Each chapter is divided into two shorter sections, with questions for reflection at the end of each.

**To lead.** You can use this as a resource to help you teach God's word to others, both in small-group and whole-church settings. You'll find tricky verses or concepts explained using ordinary language, and helpful themes and illustrations along with suggested applications.

These books are not commentaries. They assume no understanding of the original Bible languages, nor a high level of biblical knowledge. Verse references are marked in **bold** so that you can refer to them easily. Any words that are used rarely or differently in everyday language outside the church are marked in **gray** when they first appear, and are explained in a glossary toward the back. There, you'll also find details of resources you can use alongside this one, in both personal and church life.

Our prayer is that as you read, you'll be struck not by the contents of this book, but by the book it's helping you open up; and that you'll praise not the

author of this book, but the One he is pointing you to.

**Carl Laferton**, Series Editor

**Bible translations used:**

- NIV: New International Version, 1984 translation
- NIV2011: New International Version, 2011 translation
- AV: Authorized Version (also known as King James Version, KJV)
- ESV: English Standard Version
- NRSV: New Received Standard Version

## INTRODUCTION TO ROMANS 8 – 16

The book of Romans is the most sustained explanation of the heart of the gospel, and the most thrilling exploration of how that gospel goes to work in our hearts.

The first seven chapters explain the wonderful truths of the gospel: of justification by faith, of union with Christ, of salvation through Christ alone and not through our works. Those chapters have it all there, and have it in great depth. You'll find them unpacked, enjoyed and applied in the first volume on this book, *Romans 1 – 7 For You*.

Then comes the second half of the book. In chapters 8 to 16, Paul is going to continue to answer a question he began to ask in chapters 5 to 7: *How does faith in the gospel of Christ actually lead to change in real life?*

Paul was writing to the church in Rome in about AD57, during his third missionary journey, quite likely from Corinth, Greece. This was a church made up of Jewish and Gentile converts, a church of committed but young Christians. Though Paul had not yet met them personally, he knew that what they most needed was the gospel. But he did not merely want them to understand the gospel. Rather, he longed for them to love and to live the gospel. Christianity is not primarily a matter of the head or the will; it is a matter of the heart, a heart in which the Holy Spirit dwells and which is saturated in the gospel. That's the heart that leads to real change in thinking and behavior.

In one sense, Romans 8 – 16 comes in two sections, each beginning: "Therefore." First, in 8:1, Paul tells us: "*Therefore*, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." This is a summary of the whole ground of Christian assurance. For the believer, there can never be any condemnation by, nor separation from, their heavenly Father. Why? Because of the work of his Son on the cross and the work of his Spirit in our hearts. As Paul goes on to show in chapters 9 – 11, our salvation is all about God's choice, and

so we can be both humble about ourselves and confident in him.

Second, in 12:1-2, Paul says: “*Therefore*, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God ... Do not conform ... but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” This is a summary of the whole of the Christian life. The believer’s life is to be lived out of gratitude. We live to please our heavenly Father by obeying him, even at cost or inconvenience. The rest of Romans shows how we can offer ourselves “as living sacrifices” in all parts of our lives.

The great 20th-century Welsh preacher D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones wrote of Romans:

*“It is one of the brightest gems of all. Someone has said that in the whole of the Scriptures the brightest and the most lustrous and flashing stone, or collection of stones, is this Epistle to the Romans, and that of these [chapter 8] is the brightest gem in the cluster. The most moving [chapter in Romans] is this chapter 8.”*

*(Romans Chapters 7:1 – 8:4, pages 258-259)*

For me, perhaps the most wonderful part of the book of Romans is 8:5, where Paul summarizes how you change from the inside out; how you change deeply. “Those who live in accordance with the Spirit,” he says, “have their minds set on what the Spirit desires.” To grow in Christ and to be changed into people like Christ, we need to set our minds on spiritual things, on things above. We need to learn how to meditate and think about the gospel until it becomes real to our hearts and the foundation of everything we do.

I have always believed that at the heart of Romans 8 you have the secret to really using the gospel in your heart to change yourself in a profound way; and that the rest of Romans will show you what that change will look like in a practical way. My prayer is that as you read the second half of this wonderful letter, you will find your heart thrilled by the gospel, your mind shaped by the gospel, and your life changed by the gospel.

Romans is perhaps the most written-upon book in the whole of Scripture. It is tightly argued, and so included in the appendices is a detailed outline structure

for the last nine chapters of the letter. And chapters 9 – 11 are some of the most difficult in the whole Bible, both to understand and to appreciate; so there is an appendix giving a lengthier treatment of the doctrine of God's sovereign election.

But this resource is not intended to be an exhaustive, or final, word on this letter. It is not a commentary: it does not go into the depth that a commentary would, nor does it interact in detail with historical and recent scholarship. It is an expository guide, opening up the Scriptures and suggesting how they apply to us today.

## ROMANS CHAPTER 8 VERSES 1-13

### 1. Fighting Sin with the Spirit

In Romans 7, Paul showed us that Christians still wrestle with remaining, indwelling [sin](#)<sup>[1]</sup>. He says: “But what I hate I do” (7:15). But, at the same time, Christians have experienced a revolution in consciousness—a real disgust over sin and (now) an inability to find any lasting pleasure in it: “But what I *hate* I do.” These two facts keep us from either the legalism that says: *Real Christians don’t struggle with sin anymore*, or the permissiveness that says: *Real Christians are human; they sin just like anyone else*. The Spirit of God has come in and transformed our “inner being” and self (7:22) so we want God and holiness, but our “flesh” or “sinful nature” is still powerful enough to keep us from doing what our new desires want.

But Romans 7 does not say everything about the Christian life. Our new condition—a “double nature”—can actually lead to more distress unless we “live ... according to the Spirit” (8:4\*<sup>[2]</sup>). Paul gives us directions on how to live in the Spirit. Unless we do, we will find ourselves continually doing what we hate.

### No Condemnation

Before showing us how to live according to God’s Spirit, though, Paul wants to show us how God’s Son has given us life. **Verse 1** begins “therefore”—he could be reaching right back to sections such as 3:21-27 (as John Stott suggests) or to the previous two chapters (Douglas Moo’s position), where Paul has characterized the Christian as one in whom sin is still powerful, but whose inner “true” self is “a slave to God’s law” (7:25), and who can look forward to being rescued “from this body of death ... through Jesus Christ our Lord”.

However far back in his letter Paul is looking, the great truth of **8:1** is captured in two words: “no **condemnation**\*.” These two words tell us of our position as Christians. To be “not condemned” is, of course, a legal term; it means to be free from any debt or penalty. No one has any charges against you. A person who is in Christ Jesus is not under any condemnation from God. Paul already said this in Romans 5:16 and 18.

This is tremendous! It means God has nothing against us! He finds no fault in us. He finds nothing to punish us for.

However, the phrase Paul uses is not simply that Christians are “not condemned.” This is a much stronger phrase than that. He says that for Christians there is no condemnation at all. It doesn’t exist for us. It’s not that we have moved out from under it for a while, but that it could return. No; there is no condemnation for us *at all*—it doesn’t exist anymore.

The reason it is important to mention this is that many think that a Christian is only temporarily out from under condemnation. Many want to limit the meaning of this phrase to our past, or to our past and present. But Paul is saying categorically that condemnation no longer exists at all for a believer. It is not waiting in the wings to come back and cloud our future!

Many believe that Christians who confess sin and then live a good life are forgiven and are, at that moment, not condemned. But they believe that, should they sin, they are back under condemnation until they confess and repent again. In other words, if a Christian man were to sin, he would again come under condemnation and could be lost if he died in that state. If this were true, then Christians would be people who are always moving back and forth, in and out of condemnation.

But this view doesn’t square at all with the comprehensiveness and intensity of Paul’s statement. Paul says quite literally that condemnation itself no longer exists for us—“There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (**8:1**). Thus, the moment we come into Christ Jesus, condemnation is gone forever. There is no more condemnation left for us—it is gone. There *can never be* condemnation for us. There is nothing but acceptance and welcome for us!

## The Problem Of Forgetfulness

The great twentieth-century Welsh preacher D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones said that: “Most of our troubles are due to our failure to realize the truth of this verse.” What happens if we forget that there is “now no condemnation”?

On the one hand, we feel far more guilt, unworthiness and pain than we should. From this may come drivenness from a need to “prove ourselves”; great sensitivity to criticism, defensiveness; a lack of confidence in relationships; a lack of confidence and joy in prayer and worship; and even addictive behavior, which can be a reaction to a deep sense of guilt and unworthiness.

On the other hand, we will have far less motivation to live a **holy** life. We have fewer resources for self-control. Christians who don’t understand “no condemnation” only obey out of fear and duty. That is not nearly as powerful a motivation as love and gratitude. If we don’t grasp the full wonder of “now no condemnation,” we will understand each word of the rest of **8:1-13**, but completely miss the sense of it! Lloyd-Jones summed this up with a useful illustration:

*“The difference between an unbeliever sinning and a Christian sinning is the difference between a man transgressing the laws of ... [the] State, and ... a husband [who] has done something he should not do in his relationship with his wife. He is not breaking the law, he is wounding the heart of his wife. That is the difference. It is no longer a legal matter, it is a matter of personal relationship and ... love. The man does not cease to be the husband [legally, in that instance]. Law does not come into the matter at all ... In a sense it is now something much worse than a legal condemnation. I would rather offend against a law of the land objectively outside me, than hurt someone whom I love ... [In that case] You have sinned, of course, but you have sinned against love ... [so] You may and you should feel ashamed, but you should not feel condemnation, because to do so is to put yourself back ‘under the law.’”*

*(Romans Chapters 7:1 – 8:4, pages 271-272)*

## No Slavery

**Verse 1**, then, reminds us of the central argument of Romans 1 – 7: there is no condemnation for sin for believers. **Verse 2** explains a second aspect to God's victory, on our behalf, over sin—there is now no **bondage** to sin, either. “Through Christ Jesus” (v 2)—through faith in him—“the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.” As we saw in Romans 7 (see *Romans 1 – 7 For You*, page 168), Paul uses the word “law” to mean:

1. God's law or standards.
2. A general principle.
3. A force or power.

So in **8:2**, “the law” seems fairly clearly to carry the third meaning. The Holy Spirit comes to free us from bondage to the sin within our hearts. So **verse 1** tells us we are delivered from the legal condemnation of sin; **verse 2** that we are being delivered from the actual power of sin. Put another way, salvation deals with our legal guilt (v 1) and our internal corruption (v 2).

Some people wonder about the relationship of **verse 1** to **verse 2**. Paul basically says: *There is no condemnation for Christians because the Holy Spirit frees us from sin.* This could be read to mean that our **sanctification** by the Holy Spirit is the cause or the ground of our **justification**—that it is as we fight sin and obey God that we are made right with God.

But all of Romans up to this point denies that. Instead, Paul is likely saying: *We know we are out of condemnation because God has sent the Holy Spirit into our life to free us from sin.*

## How God Did It

In **verses 3-4**, Paul shows us how God has achieved the two aspects of salvation

(no guilt, no bondage). First, God sent his Son to become human (“in the likeness of sinful man,” v 3) and become a sin offering. In other words, the death of Christ defeats sin legally, by paying the debt. Second, God did this not simply to defeat sin legally, but to wipe it out actually in our lives: “in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who ... [live] according to the Spirit.” The work of the Holy Spirit within us empowers us to obey the law (albeit never perfectly, and thus never in a way that contributes to, nor undermines, our salvation). The great British pastor John Stott explained it this way:

*“We are set free from the law as a way of acceptance, but obliged to keep it as a way of holiness. It is as a ground of justification that the law no longer binds us ... But as a standard of conduct the law is still binding, and we seek to fulfill it as we walk according to the Spirit.” (Men Made New, pages 82-83)*

But why did God send his Son to bear our condemnation, and send his Spirit to break our bondage? **Verse 4** tells us that everything Christ did for us—his **incarnation** (“sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man,” v 3), his death and his resurrection—was all in order (for the purpose) that we might live a holy life. This is an amazing point. The thing Jesus lives for, the purpose of his entire life, is to make us holy, fulfilling “the righteous requirements of the law.” This is the greatest possible motive for living a holy life. Whenever we sin, we endeavor to frustrate the aim and purpose of the entire life, death and ministry of Jesus Christ! If this doesn’t work as an incentive for living a holy life, nothing will.

## Mind Matters

In the rest of this section (indeed, in the rest of the chapter), Paul is going to focus on the second great benefit of being “in Christ”—overcoming sin in our lives. After all, as he has shown in heartfelt detail in chapter 7, not only is there no hope in ourselves for our salvation, but there is also no hope in ourselves for our obedience. For any real change, we cannot rely on our own efforts, but only, as Paul now explains, on the work of the Spirit.

How do we overcome sin with the Spirit? Or, to put it another way, how do we “live in accordance with the Spirit” (8:5), in the way that our inner self truly desires (7:22)? The people who do this are those who “have their minds set on what the Spirit desires” (8:5). Paul says that the connection between living and thinking is a tight and close one. Literally he says: “For those being according to the flesh mind the things of the flesh, but those being according to the Spirit mind the things of the Spirit.” In other words, whatever you have set your mind on shapes your lifestyle and character. What does it mean to “mind” something or “set the mind”? Even in English, when the word “mind” is used as a verb, it has a stronger meaning than simply “to think about.” It means to focus intently on something, to be preoccupied with something, to have the attention and the imagination totally captured by something.

The twentieth-century Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple once said: “Your religion is what you do with your solitude.” In other words, wherever your mind goes most naturally and freely when there is nothing else to distract it—that is what you really live for. That is your religion. Your life is shaped by whatever preoccupies your mind. The overcoming of sin in our lives begins in our minds; and victory over sin is only ever the result of having minds set on the Spirit.

## Questions for reflection

1. Do you ever feel under condemnation? What causes you to feel this way; and how will you make sure you remember “there is now no condemnation” next time?
2. In what way(s) will knowing that Jesus’ ministry was in order to make you holy motivate you to live differently today?
3. What do you do with your solitude? How will you fix your thoughts on the gospel today?

## PART TWO

### The Things Of The Spirit

So a successful fight against sin begins by “mind[ing] ... the things of the Spirit” (8:5, AV translation). This is not the same thing as simply thinking about religion all the time, or **theology** in general. The “things” of the Spirit would be those things to which the Spirit draws attention; to “mind” the Spirit would be to be preoccupied by the things that preoccupy the Spirit.

What are those things? In the rest of chapter 8, we will see that the Spirit comes to show us that we are sons and daughters of the Lord. We will explore this more in the next chapter, but it is worth seeing here what the “things” or truths the Spirit wants us to “mind” are:

- Verse 14 will tell us that: “those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.”
- Verses 15-16 will tell us that the Spirit removes a fear of rejection and assures us that we are God’s beloved children.
- Verses 26-27 will tell us that the Spirit gives us confidence to approach God in prayer.

In other words, the rest of Romans 8 tells us what the Spirit is preoccupied with: how in Christ we are adopted, loved and welcomed.

A parallel passage is Colossians 3:1-4: “Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated ... your life is now hidden with Christ in God.” Here, Paul tells us to be preoccupied with “things above”: We are to remember that we have been raised with Christ and are accepted in him before the Father. The Holy Spirit is not mentioned here, but the principle is the same. We are to be preoccupied with our standing in Christ. We are to drill into our minds and hearts his love and adoption of us. To “mind ... the things of the Spirit” (Romans 8:5) means never to forget our privileged standing or the fact that we are loved, and to let this dominate our

thinking, our perspectives, and therefore our words and actions.

## Everybody Minds Something

Ultimately, Paul says, everyone will “mind” something—we will either be preoccupied by the things of the Spirit, or “the sinful nature” (v 5). “Sinful nature” is how the NIV1984 translates the Greek word *sarx*—ESV and NIV2011 render it “flesh.” It is the desires and would-be-dictates of our senses, a **worldview** that is worldly rather than godly and self-centered rather than Christ-focused.

Whatever preoccupies the mind controls the life—and one preoccupation results in death, the other in life and peace (v 6). Clearly, someone who does not possess the Spirit of God, and is therefore not a Christian (v 9b), is facing the eternal death of just condemnation from God. But it is not simply, or even primarily, future life and death that Paul has in view here. Rather, he is referring to the brokenness and sense of dislocation that are experienced in this life by those who “have their minds set on what [the sinful] nature desires” (v 5). God created mankind to flourish in relationship with him, enjoying knowing him as we live in his world. So being controlled by our own desires rather than his can only lead to a life that is far less than life should be. It must lead to conflict (internally and with others) instead of peace, to slavery instead of freedom (see Romans 6), and to death rather than life.

We can take any negative emotion and see how this works out. Let’s say I am becoming extremely worried about something. Concern is unavoidable unless you are a totally uncaring and indifferent person. If you care about causes or people or goals, you will worry or have concerns. But if the worry becomes **debilitating**, it is because I am forgetting that I am a child of God, and that my heavenly Father would only exercise his control over the universe in a way that would be loving to his own. Over-worry is forgetting the “things of the Spirit.”

Another example is when guilt and a sense of unworthiness drive us. A sign of this is when we take on too many things, when we assume a crushing number of

responsibilities, because we are trying to “work off” or “make up for” our sin. In this case, we are also forgetting the “things of the Spirit.” 1 John 3:20 says: “Whenever our hearts condemn us ... God is greater than our hearts.” If we remember we are adopted children, we “go over the head” of our hearts when we feel unworthy.

## Hostile To God

Romans **8:7** is simple and stark: “The sinful mind is hostile to God.” The mind is not neutral ground, and cannot love one preoccupation without rejecting the other. A mind “that is set on the flesh” (ESV translation) must also be treating God and the desires of his Spirit as an enemy. This is why our minds are, naturally, unable to deal with sin. We may realize that a particular impulse is unhelpful, or that a certain course of action is destructive. We may even decide to cut it out, and may do so successfully. But the root of sin is still implanted in the mind—hostility to God. So sin will still grow unchecked in our lives.

And that hostility makes us incapable of pleasing God. **Verse 8** is an equally striking statement: “Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God.” Left to ourselves, we are totally unable to live in a way that causes our Creator to approve of us. Why? Because the mind that drives the actions is acting out of hostility to him. The person controlled by their own flesh is able to have a thought that is good, or perform an action that is right. But it cannot please God, since it is thought or done in enmity toward him.

Here is a helpful illustration: a man in a rebel army may look after his comrades, may keep his uniform smart, and so on. Those are “good”—but they are done in hostility to the rightful ruler. You would never expect that ruler to hear of this rebel’s conscientiousness or generosity and be pleased by his conduct in rebellion!

But none of this needs to be, or ought to be, the way “you”—Christians—live (**v 9**). Every Christian is “controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit,” since the Spirit lives in anyone who belongs to Christ. When we received Christ

and became righteous in God's sight, the Holy Spirit came in and made us spiritually alive. The Christian has a body that is decaying (v 10), yet also enjoys a spirit, a mind, that is alive.

And, Paul says, not only must our spirits/minds not follow our flesh now, but one day our flesh will follow our spirit. In Greek thought, the physical was bad, to be rejected and hopefully one day to be left behind; the spiritual was good, to be embraced. **Verse 11** overturns all this: "He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you." Someday, even our bodies will be totally renewed and made eternally alive by the Spirit. There is no dualism (body bad, spirit good) here—one day, both will be perfected.

For now, though, there is still within us the remaining sinful nature, which is hostile and **inimical** to our growing spiritual life. And even as we look forward to our bodies being given life (v 11), we must "put to death the misdeeds of the body" (v 13—the end of this verse is best seen as the end of a sentence, unlike in the NIV). As John Stott argues, Paul is still likely referring to an experience of life, and death, now—not in the future. Paul says here: *If you let the remaining sinful nature alone—if you allow it to prosper and grow—there will be terrible trouble. Instead, you must by the Spirit attack and put it to death. The more you put to death the sinful nature, the more you will enjoy the spiritual life that the Holy Spirit gives—life and peace* (v 6).

## Mortification

This process of "putting to death" is what earlier theologians used to call "mortification." They got it from the old King James Version translation of the verse: "If ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live" (v 13).

So what do **verses 12-13** tell us about what mortification is, and how we do it? First, it means a ruthless, full-hearted resistance to sinful practice. The very word translated as "put to death" (Greek word *thanatoute*) is violent and total. It

means to reject totally everything we know to be wrong; to declare war on attitudes and behaviors that are wrong—give them no quarter, take no prisoners, pull out all the stops.

This means a Christian doesn't play games with sin. You don't aim to wean yourself off it, or say: *I can keep it under control*. You get as far away from it as possible. You don't just avoid things you know are sin; you avoid the things that lead to it, and even things that are doubtful. This is war!

Second, it means changing one's motivation to sin by remembering to apply the **gospel**. This process of "mortification" goes deeper than merely resisting sinful behavior. It looks at the motives of the heart. **Verse 12** says: "Therefore, brothers, we have an obligation—but it is not to the sinful nature." This is a critical statement. "Therefore" refers to the statement before, in which Paul tells us we have been redeemed by Christ's righteousness and will someday be totally delivered from all evil and pain in the bodily resurrection. Then Paul turns and says: "Therefore ... we have an obligation..." Some translations express it differently: "We are debtors, not to the flesh" (NRSV). Paul means that if we remember what Christ has done and will do for us, we will feel the obligations of love and gratitude to serve and know him.

Paul is saying that sin can only be cut off at the root if we expose ourselves constantly to the unimaginable love of Christ for us. That exposure stimulates a wave of gratitude and a feeling of indebtedness. Sin can only grow in the soil of self-pity and a feeling of "owed-ness." *I'm not getting a fair shake! I'm not getting my needs met! I've had a hard life! God owes me; people owe me; I owe me!* That's the heart attitude of "owed-ness" or entitlement. But, Paul says, you must remind yourself that you are a debtor. If you bathe yourself in the remembrance of the **grace** of God, that will loosen, weaken and kill sin at the motivational level.

Therefore, "put to death" (**v 13**) is just a sub-set under "mind the things of the Spirit" (**v 5**). Mortification withers sin's power over you by focusing on Christ's redemption in a way that softens your heart with gratitude and love; which brings you to hate the sin for itself, so it loses its power of attraction over you.

In summary, then, we kill sin in the Spirit when we turn from sinful practices

ruthlessly *and* turn our heart from sinful motivations with a sense of our debt to love and grace, by minding the things of the Spirit.

## Preaching Grace To Our Minds

This means that, if we are serious about mortifying the misdeeds of the body (and **verses 6 and 13** should offer sufficient motivation to take this seriously!), we need to preach grace-centered mini-sermons to ourselves throughout our day, and especially when tempted.

Remember, your life is an expression of your mind (v 5). And many Christians try to control themselves with law-centered mini-sermons. We say to ourselves things like: *If I do that, God will get me* or: *It's against my Christian principles* or: *It will hurt people around me* or: *I will be embarrassed* or: *It will hurt my self-esteem* or: *I'll hate myself in the morning*. Some or all of these may be true—but Paul tells us they are inadequate! They don't kill sin. That is taking your temptation to the law and using fear to deter yourself.

But we are to use the logic of the gospel on ourselves. *Look what God's done for me! Is this how I respond to him?* We're to take our temptations to the gospel, and find God's love for us, in sending his Son to the cross and his Spirit into our hearts, showing us the vileness of that sin, motivating us to love our Savior, and removing our desire to live according to the flesh.

Here is how one Puritan pastor, John Owen, preached to his heart with the gospel:

*“What have I done? What love, mercy, what blood, what grace have I despised and trampled on? Is this the return I make to the Father for his love, to the Son for his blood, to the Holy Spirit for his grace? Do I thus requite the Lord? Have I defiled the heart that Christ died to wash? ... What can I say to the dear Lord Jesus? ... Do I account communion with him of so little value? ... Shall I endeavor to disappoint the [very purpose] of the death of Christ?”* (John Owen, *On the Mortification of*

*Sin in Believers)*

## Questions for reflection

1. Can you think of ways in which you have experienced, or are experiencing, the “death” of forgetting the things of the Spirit? And the “life and peace” of dwelling on them?
2. Is there a sin you are “playing games with” instead of seeking to mortify it?
3. How do you need to preach grace to yourself today?

## ROMANS CHAPTER 8 VERSES 14-25

### 2. Living as Children of God

If we want to understand who a Christian is, and why being a Christian is a privilege, we need to appreciate divine adoption. We need to begin to grasp the magnitude of Paul's statements that "those who are led by the Spirit ... are sons of God" (8:14); and that "we are God's children" (v 16).

*"The notion that we are children of God, his own sons and daughters ... is the mainspring of Christian living ... Our sonship to God is the apex of creation and the goal of redemption."*

*(Sinclair Ferguson, Children of the Living God, pages 5-6)*

Adoption was a much more customary legal procedure in Roman society than it was in Hebrew or Near Eastern culture. Paul, as a Roman citizen, would have been familiar with it. Adoption usually occurred when a wealthy adult had no heir for his estate. He would then adopt someone as heir—it could be a child, a youth, or an adult. The moment adoption occurred, several things were immediately true of the new son. First, his old debts and legal obligations were paid; second, he got a new name and was instantly heir of all the father had; third, his new father became instantly liable for all his actions (his debts, crimes, etc); but fourth, the new son also had new obligations to honor and please his father. All this lies behind the passage here.

Throughout this passage, Christians are three times called "sons" (*huioi*) of God (v 14, 15, 19) and three times called "children" (*teknon*) of God (v 16, 17, 21). In our day, only gender-neutral language ("children") is considered appropriate, and referring to men and women with a masculine pronoun ("sons") is considered insensitive. Some people studying this passage may express this as a concern. But we should not try to correct Scripture. It is true that in Rome "sonship" was a status of privilege and power given only to males. Yet Paul now has the **temerity** to apply this to us—to all believers! This shows

that God does not distinguish in giving honor. All Christians, male and female, are now his heirs. It was a **subversive** thing for Paul to take a masculine-only institution and show that, in Christ, the institution of “empowering-through-adoption” is used on females as well as males without distinction. Christian women should not resent being called “sons” any more than Christian men should resent being called part of the bride of Christ (Revelation 21:2). Christians are all sons and all the bride—God is even-handed in his use of **metaphors**! And each metaphor tells us something about our relationship with Christ.

## Who God’s Children Are

What makes us a son of God? Romans **8:14** is clear—it is having the Spirit of God. “Those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.” The English is fairly clear, but the Greek is even clearer. *Hosoi* (“those”) is very comprehensive and best rendered “all those” or “everyone who.” In other words, Paul says in effect: *The category of those who have the Spirit constitutes the category of those who are sons of God.* Everyone with the Spirit is adopted by the Father, and no one adopted by the Father will fail to have or be “led by” the Holy Spirit.

Many want to think that being “led by the Spirit” has to do with the Spirit helping us to make decisions—guiding us to choose the right spouse, job, living location, etc. But this overlooks the extremely tight connection of **verse 14** with verse 13. The NIV translation shows **verse 14** as a continuation of a sentence that begins in verse 13. In the Greek, **verse 14** is a new sentence, but it does begin with the word *gar* (“because”), tying what Paul is about to say to what he just said. In verse 13 he says that with the Spirit we really can triumph over the sin within us. Then he explains why this great power—power over sin—is available to us. It is because we are sons or children of God. So being “led by the Spirit” must be the same thing as “put[ting] to death the deeds of the sinful body” of verse 13. In other words, we are led to hate the things the Spirit hates (sin) and love the things he loves (Christ). We are thus led by the Spirit.

**Verse 14** is clear: if the Spirit of God hasn't entered you, you are not God's son, just as you do not belong to Christ (v 9). This is helpful, as it reminds us that the "equation" operates the other way round, too—if you, by faith, belong to Christ, you are a son of God, and have his Spirit. The three are inseparable—either all are true of us, or none are.

**Verse 15** underlines this—Christians are people who have "received the Spirit of sonship." The word for "sonship," *huiiothesias*, means literally to "son-ize," and so it can just as accurately be rendered "adoption," as in the ESV. The image of "adoption" tells us that no one is born into a true relationship with God. The fact that we "receive" our sonship status proves that there was a time when we were lost; we were not naturally God's children. This means that this Father-child relationship with God is not automatic. Originally, we were spiritual orphans and slaves.

Second, the image of "adoption" tells us that our relationship with God is based completely on a legal act by the Father. You don't "win" a father and you don't "negotiate" for a parent. Adoption is a legal act on the part of the father—it is very costly only for him. There is nothing the son does to win or earn the status. It is simply received.

It is important to see the clarity of this teaching because it is common today to hear people say that "all human beings are God's children" because God created them all. It is true that in Acts 17:29 Paul calls all human beings God's "offspring." The Greek word is *genos* though, meaning roughly "descendants." In this sense, we could call Henry Ford the "father" of the Model T car. But the Bible emphatically reserves all the richness of the term "children of God" only for those who have received Christ as Savior and Lord: "Yet to all *who received him*, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children [*tekna*] of God" (John 1:12). Sonship is given to those who receive him. No one has it naturally except Jesus Christ.

## **The Privileges Of Sonship**

Paul now sets out, in Romans **8:15-17**, seven breathtaking privileges that believers possess as adopted sons of God. Each is wonderful, and well worth pausing to **meditate** on and enjoy. For now, let's look at the first four (**v 15-16**).

- *Security*. We are not to fear, but enjoy sonship (see **v 15a**). An employee or a servant basically obeys out of fear of punishment, loss of job, etc. But a child-parent relationship is not characterized by a fear of losing the relationship.
- *Authority*. We have the status not of “a slave” but of “sonship” (**v 15a**). In a house, slaves have no authority. They can only do what they are told. But under their parents, children do have authority in the house—they are not mere servants. The children of God are given authority over sin and the devil. They are to move about in the world knowing that it belongs to their Father. There should be a confidence and poise about them. Children have the honor of the family name. There is a wonderful new status conferred on us.
- *Intimacy*. “By him we cry, ‘Abba’” (**v 15b**). We need to know the original language here. “Abba” was an **Aramaic** term which is best translated “Daddy”—a term of the greatest intimacy. A child does not always (or even often) address his father as “Father”; likely, he has a different term for him that shows his loving, trusting familiarity with his father, such as “Dad” or “Papa” or “Daddy.” And this is how Christians can approach the all-powerful Creator of the universe, who sustains every atom in existence moment by moment!

Martyn Lloyd-Jones is worth quoting at some length here:

*“‘Abba’ [was a] word lisped by a little child. Let us notice the word ‘cry’... we cry ‘Abba, Father.’ It is a very strong word, and clearly the apostle has used it quite deliberately. It means ‘a loud cry’ ... it expresses deep emotion. What then does it imply? Obviously ... real knowledge of God. God is no longer to us a distant God. He is not merely a God in whom we believe intellectually, theologically,*

*theoretically, **doctrinally** only. All this is possible to one who is not a child of God at all. [Our] worship and praying are spontaneous; it is the spontaneity of the child who sees the father ... and not only spontaneity, but confidence.”*

*(Romans Chapter 8:5-17, pages 240-242)*

- **Assurance.** “The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children” (v 16). When we cry out to God as “Abba,” the Spirit of God somehow comes alongside us (“with our spirit”) and gives us assurance that we truly are in God’s family. There is a lot of debate about the nature of this “testimony,” but it appears to be an inner witness in the heart, a sense that *yes, he really loves me.*

Paul is responding to the question: *How do we know we are children of God?* This is a great claim—how can we be sure it is true? Paul says that the Spirit bears witness or testifies along with our spirits that we are his. The Greek word translated “testify” is *martyria* (from which we get our word “martyr”). The word originally meant an authoritative witness who solved a difficult case and put the solution beyond doubt. The picture Paul is painting looks something like this: There is a trial going on and the defendant is being accused of a crime. There seems to be some evidence against her and some evidence in favor of her claim of innocence. Then, suddenly, the defense comes in with a new witness who can be proved to have been at the scene of the crime! The witness says: *I was there, and she (the defendant) was not. She is innocent!* This person “testifies with” the defendant. He says the same thing and puts the verdict beyond doubt. Notice, Paul says our spirit is already testifying: “The Spirit ... testifies with our spirit.” This means we already have evidence that we are Christians. We know we trust Christ. We have his promises. We see our lives changing and growing. All these pieces of evidence lead our “spirit”—our hearts—to have a measure of confidence that we really are his. But Paul says that the Spirit can come alongside us and, in addition to all we see,

“testify.” This seems to refer to a direct testimony of the Spirit in our hearts. This probably is a sense of God’s immediate presence and love that sometimes comes to us (something Paul has already spoken of back in 5:5). We don’t get this all the time, or even often; and it may not be a very strong feeling. But there will be times when, as we cry out to Abba, we find ourselves deeply assured that he really is *our* Abba. That is the Spirit’s work, testifying for us and to us that we truly are sons of the living God.

## Questions for reflection

1. Do you belong to Christ, by faith in him? If you do not, what is stopping you coming to him as your Lord and Savior?
2. If you are a son of God, what aspect of your adoption particularly thrills you today?
3. What difference will that aspect make to your thoughts, priorities or behavior today?

## PART TWO

A child of God knows security, authority, intimacy and assurance. **8:17** sets out three more privileges of divine adoption.

### Inheritance, Discipline And Family Likeness

- *Inheritance.* “Now if we are children, then we are heirs” (v 17). This means we have an incredible future. In more ancient times, the first son was the heir. There may have been many children, and all were loved, but the heir got the largest share of the wealth and carried on the family name. This was the way a great family kept its influence intact and did not have it divided and dissipated. (Paul’s reference should not be read as either supporting or rejecting this practice. It is simply illustrative.) Now, in a breathtaking turn, he calls all Christians “heirs of God.” This is a miracle, of course, because the heir got the lion’s share of the parent’s wealth. Paul is saying that what is in store for us is so grand and glorious that it will be, and will feel, as though we each had alone gotten most of the glory of God—as we’ll see more when we reach **verses 19-22**.
- *Discipline.* “Now if we are children, then we are heirs ... if indeed we share in his sufferings” (v 17). Fathers always discipline their children. When parents discipline a child, they allow or introduce a milder form of pain in order to teach or mature the child away from behavior that will lead to far greater pain later. Hebrews 12:9-10 explains: “We have all had human fathers who disciplined us ... but God disciplines us for our good.” A good father will lovingly discipline. He will not use his authority selfishly to indulge his own need to feel powerful or in control. But neither will he be so needy for his child’s love and approval that he never does what is hard or difficult. It is a (painful) privilege to be put through discipline by the most

loving Father in the universe.

- *Family likeness.* “We share in his sufferings” (Romans **8:17**). Christians will suffer, not simply in the pains of this world that all people face, but specifically because they are brothers and sisters of Christ. Christ faced rejection because of who he was, and because he had come to expose sinfulness, warn of judgment and offer salvation through himself. Likewise, his family will suffer in the same ways as they live for him and speak of him. We get to be like him! God works in us and through our circumstances so that we would “be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers” (v 29). Though we are adopted, God actually implants Christ’s nature in us. As sons of God, we actually come to resemble the Son of God. As we bear the family likeness of suffering, we become more and more like the Son, and our Father, in our characters and attitudes. This is how the Christian looks at persecution and counts it as a privilege (eg: Acts 5:41; 1 Peter 4:13, 16). We get to be like him!

## Two Spirits

All these privileges show what Paul means when he speaks of the “spirit that makes you a slave again to fear” that “you *did not* receive,” and the “Spirit of sonship” that we *have* received (Romans **8:15**). He is making a crucial point about the two ways in which we can approach living as a Christian: as a slave, or as a son. It is possible, having trusted in Christ to make us righteous, to have the spirit of a slave “again”—that is, to return to an attitude of performance-based acceptability, acting as if God’s **blessing** is maintained or increased by our work.

In the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32), the younger son rejects his family and goes off to squander all his inheritance in riotous living. Then he comes to his senses—he realizes his sin. He decides to return home, but he has no expectation that he is worthy to be called his father’s son. All he hopes for is

to be retained as a hired servant (Luke 15:19). Now it is quite natural for people who approach God—including **professing** Christians—to basically believe the same thing. We say: *Ah—I am certainly not worthy to be a child of God! All I can hope for is to struggle along as his employee. If I perform well, God will “pay me my wages”—he will answer my prayers, give me his favor and protect me. But if I perform poorly, he may fire me.*

But a child of God is never afraid of being “fired.” Even human parents have a saying: *Well, regardless, she’s still my daughter! or: Even after all he’s done, he’s still my son!* The relationship is based on unconditional love, not performance standards.

The “Spirit of sonship” that Paul speaks of is, therefore, an ability that the Holy Spirit gives us to approach God as a Father instead of as a boss or slavemaster. In our natural state we will approach him in a spirit of fear, on a performance-to-standards basis only. But the Holy Spirit wipes away this whole stance. He brings into our hearts the deepest spiritual and emotional security possible—a sense that we can approach God on a family basis, as his beloved children. It is “by him” (the Spirit) that we cry “Abba” (Romans **8:15**).

Here is the difference between a spirit of slavery and the spirit of sonship:

| A slave                                                      | A son                                                 |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|
| Obeys under compulsion, because they have to                 | Obeys out of love for and joy in “Daddy”              |
| Works under threat of pain or loss; punishment “pays back”   | Discipline is not retribution, but loving instruction |
| Insecurity: If I slip up, my master might beat me            | Security: If I slip up, my father will forgive me     |
| Concentration on external behavior and compliance with rules | Concentration on relationship and attitudes           |
| Has to work, but is given no honor                           | Is honored, and invited to join the work              |

## Is It Really Worth It?

In **8:17**, Paul says that God's family will share in our brother Jesus' sufferings, and that if we do so, "we may [ie: will] also share in his glory." But is it worth it? Is the inheritance Christians have been given worth all the hardship and heartache of living as a child of God in this life? Many people—including, most likely, some whom we know—answer *no*. They profess faith as Christians, and seek to live God's way, for a while—but in time, they find that their present sufferings are not worth it, and they fall away. But Paul answers the question with an emphatic yes. In fact, "our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us" (v **18**). Paul is saying: *If you know where you are heading in the future, you won't even entertain the idea that your current problems and pain aren't worth it.*

So, what is this glorious inheritance toward which the Christian walks, sometimes with painful steps, day by day? This is what Paul is laying out in **verses 19-23**.

"The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed" (v **19**). There is a glory coming that will be so blindingly powerful that when it falls upon us, it will envelop the whole created order and glorify it along with us—we will bring nature with us into a renewed, restored, **redeemed** reality. It is not completely clear what it means for the "sons of God"—us—"to be revealed"; but it must mean that our sonship will be publicly revealed, evident and acknowledged; and it likely also means that we will be finally and fully "conformed to the likeness of [the] Son" (v 29). We will be as perfectly holy as Christ, and thus as dazzlingly beautiful as he is. That is what glory is.

And this is why we do not yet enjoy this glory. The human race fell into sin when the first human, Adam, sinned (see 5:12-21); and **8:20** tells us that nature, the created order, has shared somehow in that fall. It has been "subjected to frustration." Nature is not what it ought to be, or what it was created to be. The word "frustration" here—*mataiotes*—is the same word as the one translated as "vanity" in the book of Ecclesiastes in the Septuagint, the Greek version of the

Old Testament. It means nature is **alienated**, both from us (who were meant to live in harmony with nature, as its directors, or rulers—see Genesis 1:29), and from itself. It is not as beautiful or great as it was meant to be. It has become frustrated, not through its own choice, but by “the will of the one who subjected it” (Romans **8:20**). This is referring to God, since the subjection was accompanied by “hope” of liberation (**v 20-21**). Just as God cast Adam and Eve out of Eden, subjecting their lives to frustration, but also gave them hope of eventual reversal (Genesis 3:20-24,15), so he subjected creation itself to imperfection, yet had a reversal and restoration in mind. This is why creation is able to wait “in eager expectation.”

For now, though, creation is in “bondage to decay” (Romans **8:21**). It is caught in a continuous cycle of death and decomposition. It is wonderful to see how nature’s life-giving quality continually seeks to re-establish itself, bringing new life out of death (eg: flowers grow from the fertilizer of dead organisms). But the whole universe is deteriorating and running down, losing more energy than it can generate. Everything in nature wears down and dies. Nature is currently a killer.

And so nature is a realm of pain and suffering. It “has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth” (**v 22**). There is relentless pain that comes from first to last, as things decay. As life is born (childbirth) and life is lost (death), there is pain and misery. In this creation, no experience is untainted by pain, even if it is only the pain of knowing that that experience cannot last.

But none of this is the last word. “The creation itself will be liberated ... and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God”(**v 21**). First, instead of frustration, there will be fulfillment. When we consider the majesty and greatness of the oceans, mountains, valleys, forests and so on *now*, it staggers the mind to imagine what the world will be like when it is free to be itself! Second, instead of decay there will be strength and newness. Currently, each moment things get older, faded, weaker and more incoherent. But in this new earth, things are new, beautiful, strong, coherent—forever. Third, instead of pain, there is only joy. This is why the best metaphor for the current state of creation is as being in childbirth (**v 22**—Jesus used the same image in Matthew 24:8)—the painful pangs are not meaningless, because the world is giving birth

to a new version of itself.

## Labor Pangs And Firstfruits

This is the future—fulfilling, renewing, joy-giving—that creation can look forward to *because it is the future that God’s children are looking forward to*. This is Paul’s answer to the question about whether our future glory makes our present sufferings worth bearing. *Even creation*, Paul says, *urges you to say: Yes!*

Present pain and future glory explain why the Christian will “groan inwardly” even “as we wait eagerly” (Romans **8:23**)—just as creation does, and just as a woman in labor does. In this verse, Paul points us to one thing that sons of God already have, and one that they do not have. We “have the firstfruits of the Spirit.” The firstfruits of an incoming harvest were, literally, the first batch—and they were a foretaste of what was to come. Currently, the spirit is making us internally alive (v 10); giving us gradual, internal freedom from the effects of sin and death, making us slowly more like Christ (v 29). But this is only the firstfruits—just a taste of the complete, total freedom from the effects of sin and death in our bodies and spirits that the Spirit will one day give us. This will come only when we have what we currently do not have, and yet eagerly await: “our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies” (v 23). How can Paul tell us to wait for this, when in verse 15 he has said we are already adopted?! It means that though we are legally adopted, we have not yet received the fullness of family resemblance, and not yet enjoyed the final celebration of our status. We are adopted, and will be made into full family members.

Sometimes, we realize that we have grown more like Christ in some way; perhaps we notice a way in which we are less flawed than we were, or more loving than we used to be, or we act in a more godly way than we used to. At those moments, we should remind ourselves that the pain both of being part of Christ’s family in a world of frustration and rejection, and of being changed to be conformed to the image of the Son, cannot be compared to the glory that we are awaiting. We know that we are not what we will one day be, that we do not

already have all that we one day will have (v 24). We know that all our best days lie ahead of us, and that one day all our painful days will lie behind us. We wait eagerly and yet also patiently (v 25), knowing that the pain will pass and that this life is not all there is. We look forward to the day when, as C.S. Lewis memorably puts it:

*“[God] will make the feeblest and filthiest of us into a god or goddess, [a] dazzling, radiant, immortal creature, pulsating all through with such energy and joy and wisdom and love as we cannot now imagine, a bright stainless mirror which reflects back to God perfectly (though, of course, on a smaller scale) his own boundless power and delight and goodness. The process will be long and in parts very painful; but that is what we are in for. Nothing less. He meant what he said.”*

*(Mere Christianity, pages 174-175)*

## Questions for reflection

1. How are you growing in resemblance of Christ? How do you need to pray to do so more?
2. What is causing you to “groan” at the moment?
3. How will you remember the glory you are heading to? How will it transform your view of your life?

### 3. Facing Life with Confidence

A Christian's hope for the future—their own future, and that of the whole of creation—is a foundation for enabling us to face each day, and all it brings, with confidence. In these following verses, Paul points us to two more foundation stones.

The first has to do with being helped in what we do not know (**v 26-27**); the second, with knowing that we are being helped (**v 28-30**). First, Paul points to the work of the Spirit when we have no words to pray; second, to the work of the sovereign God in all the circumstances of our lives. These three—future hope, the Spirit's help, and God's work in everything—then form the foundations for his remarkable, impassioned question-and-answer section in **verses 31-39**. This passage is the end of Paul's answer to the implicit question of 8:17-18: how can a Christian face the sufferings and temptations of life with overwhelming confidence, and a deep assurance that all the strife is more than worthwhile?

#### The Spirit And Our Prayers

**Verse 26** begins: “In the same way, the Spirit helps us”—just as our hope helps us (**v 23-25**), so does the Spirit. He does so by helping us in our prayers. There are times when “we do not know what we ought to pray for” (**v 26**). Christians do find themselves wanting to pray, but having no words to pray with. We may be facing deep personal loss, or be wrestling with a life-changing decision, or confronting our own failings and flaws. But when human vocabulary proves insufficient, the language of the Spirit does not. “The Spirit himself **intercedes** for us with groans that words cannot express.” When we feel too weak to act

like children of God, confidently approaching our Abba, the Spirit helps us. When we feel we have no words to pray, we do not need to feel that we cannot pray.

Further, we never need feel that we cannot pray because we feel we do not know what we ought to pray. As the Father “searches our hearts” (v 27), hearing the groans beneath our words, knowing our affections and the motives behind our requests, the Spirit “intercedes for the saints in accordance with God’s will.” The Spirit enables us to pray in line with God’s plan and purposes for his world and his people—to groan, along with the creation (v 22), as we wait patiently and eagerly for the “glory that will be revealed in us” (v 18). The Spirit enables us to pray prayers that please our Father.

Our prayer, then, involves all three members of the Trinity. We cry to the Father, with the confidence of children. How can we do this? As Douglas Moo puts it, it is because:

*“There is one in heaven, the Son of God, who intercedes on our behalf, defending us from all charges that might be brought against us, guaranteeing salvation in the day of judgment (8:34). But there is also, Paul asserts in these verses, an intercessor ‘in the heart,’ the Spirit of God, who effectively prays to the Father on our behalf throughout the difficulties and uncertainties of our lives here on earth.” (The Epistle to the Romans, page 527)*

There is never any need, or any reason, for any of us not to pray!

## **The Good, The Bad, The Failings**

The Spirit helps us when we do *not* know how to pray. But even in those times when words run out, there is something, Paul says, that the Christian can know for sure: “that in all things God works for the good of those who love him” (v 28). Here is a promise that transforms the way we face the good, the bad, and the failings of life.

First, it leads us to gratitude and joy, even for the “routine” good things in life. Notice, Paul does not say that “things” work together for good by themselves! Only God makes the factors of life turn to our good. Christians do not believe the world is a nice place, or that life by nature will be happy. Many people are shocked and disillusioned by the tragedies and hardness of life. Not Christians. We don’t expect things in life to “work for good” of their own accord. When we find things working out beneficially for us, it is all of God, all of grace, all of him. When things work out, Christians never say: *Of course—that’s as it should be!* Rather, they praise God for it. So Christians can maintain a positive view of life without adopting a sweet, sentimental and unrealistic view of things.

But second, this truth removes general fear and anxiety when life “goes wrong.” We know it hasn’t gone wrong at all! If God “works” in “all things,” it means his plan includes what we would call “little” or “senseless” things. Ultimately, there are no accidents. “The **lot** is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD” (Proverbs 16:33). God is working even in the flips of a coin.

This must lead to some ability to relax! We are not in the grip of blind chance or fate. The Greeks thought that even Zeus was subject to the fates. Not us! The universe is not a mechanism run by blind chance; it is run by a person—and not just any person, but our Father. We don’t need to fear life and circumstances.

Further, this helps us see God’s purpose in difficulties. If God is working for our “good” in everything, then we see that both the good things and the bad things serve the purpose of furthering the good in our life. This wonderful text leads to the following logical deduction made by the 18th-century pastor and hymn-writer John Newton:

*“Everything is needful that he sends; nothing can be needful that he withholds.”*

Thus, if we think we require some good thing that God has withheld from us, in reality we don’t absolutely need it. It also means that if we feel our life has been ruined by some bad thing, in reality it is playing some very important role in our lives. It is teaching us, molding us, enriching us, humbling us, and so on. Romans **8:28** teaches us to look at life’s troubles as part of God’s loving

purpose for us.

Life's troubles, of course, include suffering. This verse shows us a balanced view that people seldom maintain toward suffering. On the one hand, there are people who despair in suffering and say: *Nothing good can come out of this!* This text denies that. On the other hand, there are people (including many Christians) who embrace suffering. They see it as something that allows them to feel more noble or virtuous than others. But the text does not say that the “things” are good—but that God works them “for the good.” Difficulties are not to be enjoyed or welcomed! They are not good, but their results can be.

Then third, this wonderful verse gives us confidence that we cannot ruin God's good purposes for us. “All” really means all! So it includes even our backsliding and our sin. Now, sin is always bad, always a terrible thing, and we will always live to regret its painful consequences in our lives. But God is so great that he weaves it into our ultimate good. He can use even our sins and failures to humble us and teach us a right view of ourselves and a greater appreciation of Christ. He makes use of sin to show Christians our weakness and frailty. And he even works through sin to save his people. This does not excuse our sin, but it does cause us to look for how God is working through it—how we might be able to echo Joseph, who told the brothers who had sold him into slavery: “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good” (Genesis 50:20).

## **All For Good, But Not For All**

The truth that God is working for people's good is not a universal one, however. It is easy to overlook the fact that the promise that “in all things God works for the good” is made only to “those who love him, who have been called” (Romans **8:28**). These are two ways to describe the same people—Christians—but they are both important.

1. In the Bible, “those who love him” ordinarily means people who have made a commitment to live for God. A commitment means to serve God in

recognition and appreciation of who he is. “Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me” (John 14:21). Love in the Bible is never merely theoretical and intellectual, nor merely sentimental and emotional, nor merely duty and will-based. Love is setting the heart on God so that in all you do, you determine to please him. Lloyd-Jones comments:

*“I believe that Paul had a special reason for using the term ‘love’ rather than the term ‘believing’ at this point. One of the best ways whereby we can decide immediately [if] we love God or not is our reaction to adversity ... There are many people ... who ... when trials and tribulations arise ... they give up. They feel they have been let down.”*

*(Romans Chapter 8:17-39, page 186)*

If you love God for who he is in himself, you make a commitment and you endure difficulty. But if you are using God for what he gives you, you bail out when suffering comes.

2. Those “who have been called according to his purpose” (Romans **8:28**). This phrase probably does not mean everyone who has ever heard the message or the challenge of the gospel. (Anyone who has ever heard the gospel has been “called,” in the general sense of having been invited, but it would not make sense that anyone who has ever heard of Christ would get this promise.) As **verse 30** shows, a certain number of people are “called.” That is, to be “called” means that God has brought us into relationship with him.

Since Paul says that the entirety of life’s circumstances (“all things”) work for “the good” only of those who love God, there is the strong implication that they do not work for the good of those who do not love him. The text says that both the good and bad things of our lives have a good effect on us only because of how God overrules and uses them in our lives; and so it looks as though both the good and bad things that happen to a non-Christian work ill for them.

How could that be? Paul very directly says regarding the rebellious that God “gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts” (1:24). This is startling. Paul is saying that one of the worst punishments God gives people is to let them have the desires of their sinful hearts. He lets them have what they want. This means that “good” things are bad for those who don’t love God. Why? People outside of God already have the illusion that they are self-made people in control of their lives. At least bad circumstances wake Christians up to our true humanity and our actual condition as dependent, mortal creatures. But when an unbelieving heart experiences a string of successes and pleasures, it only reinforces the illusion and can make the worst sins in the human heart—pride, over-confidence, self-centeredness, etc—grow and take over.

In an unbeliever, therefore, “good” circumstances can harden and delude, promote weak, selfish character and set up a person for disaster. For believers, “bad” circumstances can humble, educate, develop in them a strong, compassionate character, and most importantly make someone more like Christ. Good circumstances can be terrible for you, and bad circumstances wonderful for you, as Paul knew in his own experience: “To keep me from becoming **conceited** because of these surpassingly great revelations [a good thing], there was given me a thorn in my flesh [a very painful thing]” (2 Corinthians 12:7).

There is a common maxim that applies here: “The same sun that melts wax hardens clay.” In other words, what makes a life “good” is not a particular set of circumstances, but how the heart interacts with them. All by itself, this is a major principle for understanding and living life. Shakespeare was getting at it when he wrote in *Julius Caesar*: “The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves.” It is not as important to change our circumstances as it is to change our heart’s attitude and stance toward them. It is only if we believe, meditate on and live out of Romans **8:28** that we will be able to meet with triumph and disaster, and treat them both the same: viewing them as circumstances that, as we love the God who has called us to know him as Father, he will work in and through for our ultimate good.

## Questions for reflection

1. Have you experienced feeling too weak to pray with words? How does it encourage you that the Spirit intercedes for you?
2. Reflect on which outworking of the truth of Romans 8:28 most grips you today.
3. Is there a way in which you are seeking to change your circumstances, where you need instead to seek to change your heart's attitude toward them?

## PART TWO

### The Good That God Is Working For

Our confidence lies in our future hope; the internal work of the Spirit; and God's sovereign work for our good in all the circumstances of our lives. But what is that "good"? What can we confidently expect to see God doing "in all things"?

**Verses 29-30** provide the answer. They show us that God's definition of "good" is much greater and higher than ours tends to be. The word "for" shows the close connection between **verse 28** and **verses 29-30**. So verses 29-30 are Paul's explanation of what God's "purpose" actually is—what God is working out in all the circumstances of life. Why did Paul add verses 29 and 30 instead of leaving us only verse 28? Because **verse 28** is not meant to tell us that when we have troubles, they will just work out in some general, abstract sense.

Rather, Paul means that everything that happens to us is working out for our final and ultimate sanctification, holiness, and salvation. Everything is working together so we will be "conformed to the likeness of his Son" (**v 29**).

This shows us that "the good" God always is working for us is character change. He is making us as loving, noble, true, wise, strong, good, joyful and kind as Jesus is.

It is therefore extremely important to read **verses 29-30** whenever we read verse 28! Some people read verse 28 as teaching that God gives more good things or different kinds of circumstances to Christians over non-Christians, but Paul is not saying that. Paul is not promising Christians an easier, more comfortable life. He is not saying that Christians will have a higher percentage of "pleasant" over "unpleasant" circumstances than unbelievers. Rather, Paul says that "all things"—the same basic range of good and bad things that happen to all people, with the addition of the suffering that comes from following a suffering King—are used by God in our hearts so we are taught, humbled, and refined into the likeness of Christ. As we said above, the same circumstances

have a different effect on unbelievers.

God's purpose for all of history is seen in this phrase: "to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers" (v 29). It is an astounding statement.

It teaches us that, first, God is conforming us. It means God has a master design or form ("his Son"), and now every circumstance—"all things"—is designed to shape, polish, melt, smooth, sculpt, frame, cast and contour us into that master design. He is pouring us into the mold of Christ's perfect greatness. The idea of "conform" does not mean a superficial likeness, but something total. We are being remade from the inside out, from the depths. It is a likeness of essence. "We, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit" (2 Corinthians 3:18).

We will be his "brothers" (Romans 8:29). We are not just legally adopted into God's family (see verse 15); we are also getting his "family resemblance." We are told that when we are born again, we get God's very nature, his "DNA"—we "participate in the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4). Through the circumstances of life, God is drawing that out and shaping us into brothers and sisters of Christ, who resemble him and our Father. "In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering. Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers. He says, 'I will declare your name to my brothers; in the presence of the congregation I will sing your praises'" (Hebrews 2:10-12).

Lloyd-Jones writes:

*"Ultimately, the proof of a right approach to these doctrines is that you find in them the greatest urge to holiness and sanctification. If your belief of these doctrines has not driven you to holiness you are in a dangerous condition ... you are misusing them to say: Well, it is all right with me, it matters not therefore what I do. I am saved ... No one can truly see these doctrines without being humbled." (Romans Chapter 8:17-39, pages*

## A Glorious, Unbreakable Chain

Now, in **Romans 8:30**, Paul lays out the process by which God conforms his children to the likeness of his Son. He lists five active verbs that describe what God has done. The key to understanding this verse is to use the “controlling insight” that each verb refers to the same set of people. It is not: *Some of those he foreknew he called, some of those he called he justified*, and so on. Rather, the same group God foreknows, he also predestines, calls, justifies, and glorifies. It is not “some” or “most”; it is always “those,” in other words “all those.” If one of these verbs applies to a person, all do.

Here is what God has done for Christians:

- “Foreknew”: God set his love on us.
- “Predestined”: God planned a glorious destination for us.
- “Called ... justified”: God works out his plan in time.
- “Glorified”: God completes the plan in eternity.

We need to look at each of these stunning verbs in turn.

- *Foreknew*. Of course God in his omniscience knows the future, and sees everyone who has ever lived and will ever live; but that is not what Paul is referring to here (otherwise, since those he “foreknew” he also “justified” and “glorified,” this would be teaching that everyone will be saved). In the Bible, when we are told God “knows” someone, it means he has set his love on him in a personal way. For instance, when Jesus says to some: “I never knew you” (Matthew 7:23), he doesn’t mean he won’t know about them, but that he will have no relationship with them. Therefore “foreknew” means “forelove.” A survey of the other places where “foreknew” or “foreknowledge” is used (Acts 2:23; Romans 11:2; 1 Peter 1:2) shows this.

Thus, God set his love on us back before the beginning of time. This is stunning!

- *Predestined*. This means just what it appears to mean in English. To predestine means to set a destination for ourselves or someone else. It means to make a plan ahead of time. In Greek the word is *prohorizdo*, meaning to determine a horizon and set out for it. God, because of his love for us, has set a destination for us—to be with him in glory, conformed to the likeness of Christ.
- *Called*. As we saw in Romans **8:28**, the “called” are people who “love God.” In **verse 29**, the “called” are the same group who are “justified” and “glorified”—thus anyone who is called by God in this sense must eventually become justified and glorified. This is therefore an internal illumination that God sends to awaken us to the truth. A perfect example is in 1 Thessalonians 1:4-5. Paul says: “We know ... that he has chosen you.” How could he know that? “Because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction.” Though Paul has preached to many people, those who respond with deep conviction only do so because they are “chosen.” They are called by God through Paul’s sermon.
- *Justified*. To be “justified” is to be pronounced and treated by God as legally righteous and blameless because of the work of Christ in his life and death. This status is transferred to us when we believe in him. The whole book of Romans is about this, so we will not spend any more time on it here! The point in Romans **8:30** is to see that justification is not an isolated incident, but inextricably linked to the whole plan of God’s purpose and activity, beginning in eternity, coming into time/history, and ending again in eternity. **Verse 30** shows us that no one is justified unless he or she is also foreknown, called, etc.
- *Glorified*. To be glorified means to have all sin eradicated and to be made perfect in body and soul. It is what Paul has already spoken of in verses 18-

21: “glory ... will be revealed in us ... the glorious freedom of the children of God.”

But notice that here Paul speaks of our future glorification in the *past* tense. He is saying that it is as certain as any other part of the verb-chain in **verse 30**. It is so certain that it might as well already have happened. The links in the chain cannot be broken; they all go together. James Denney puts it like this:

*“The tense in the last word [‘glorified’] is amazing. It is the most daring anticipation of faith that even the New Testament contains.”*

*(Quoted in Lloyd-Jones, Romans Chapter 8:17-39, page 258)*

How does this look from the vantage point of our present lives? Christians have experienced being called as they heard the gospel, and enjoy being justified because they have put their faith in that gospel. Now, Christians are able to look back “down” the chain, and know that before creation God fore-loved them, and predestined them to be justified. And a Christian can look on “up” the chain, and know that in eternity they will know unimaginable glory in his presence. If we love God, we are called (v 28). And if we are called people, then we are fore-loved, predestined, justified, soon-to-be-glorified people. This is wonderful!

## What Shall We Say In Response?

“What, then, shall we say in response to this?” Paul asks (**v 31**). Here is the attitude of the Christian who knows the truths of **verses 26-30**. Paul asks five questions:

- **v 31**: “If God is for us, who can be against us?” If the God who has purposed our glory is all-powerful, why are we afraid of any opposition at all?
- **v 32**: “He who did not spare his own Son . . . how will he not also . . . give us all things?” If the God who has purposed our glory is willing to give up

his most precious possession, his Son, why worry about our needs?

- **v 33:** “Who will bring any charge ...? It is God who justifies.” If the God who has purposed our glory has declared us righteous, why ever feel guilty or unforgiven?
- **v 34:** “Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died ... was raised ... is also interceding for us.” If the Christ who lived a perfect life and died a perfect death is standing before the Father on our behalf, why ever feel guilty or unforgiven?
- **v 35:** “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?” This is the last question because all the other questions were really just other versions of this one. The only thing that we would really have to fear, that would really harm us, is to be separated from the love of Christ.

So, the central question of the Christian life—the one that prompts all our doubts and worries and tensions—is this: *Is there anyone or anything that can separate me from Christ’s love for me?* And as Paul’s first readers, and his readers today, look around, we see many things that would seem to. Trouble, hardship and persecution come to all Christians. Famine, nakedness, danger and sword come to many. The experience of God’s people through the ages has very often been—in the words of Psalm 44:22, quoted by Paul in Romans **8:36**—to face death daily. There are many obstacles and much opposition, and surely any one of them could detach us from Christ’s love?

No, says Paul—and in fact, even in these worst of circumstances, “we are more than conquerors” (**v 37**). None can break the chain of **verse 30**. Christians triumph through and over the worst that life brings. Why? Because God does not lose any of “those [he] foreknew.” God is always working for the good of those who love him. He is in loving, sovereign control of every aspect of human history. And so Paul is “convinced” (**v 38**) that nothing “will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (**v 39**). Nothing in human experience (“neither death nor life,” **v 38**); in the spiritual realm (“neither angels nor demons”); in time (“neither the present nor the future”); in anything that opposes God’s people (“any powers”); in space (“neither height nor depth,” **v 39**); nothing “in all creation.” Nothing! Nothing can separate us

from Christ's love! Why? Because God loves us simply because of his choice, not because of anything in us (which may change), nor anything around us (which may change). He loves us because he loves us.

At this point in our walk through Romans, many questions about predestination may arise. Romans 9 – 11 deal more fully with these issues—for the moment remember that Paul's main point is not to raise the old **determinism** vs. **free will** controversy, which is a philosophical problem. Rather, he is stating firmly that we must face life—not only troubles but even our own sin—with a towering, infallible confidence! The Almighty God of the universe has purposed to make us perfectly holy and gloriously happy (these two things are inseparably linked), and literally nothing can thwart God's purpose for us!

Consider how practical Paul is being. He is saying: *Friend, have you been called? Have you found the gospel coming home to your soul with power? Have you asked God to justify you? Fine! Now realize this—that would not and could not have happened unless the great God of heaven had set his love upon you in the depths of eternity before time, and is now infallibly working out his plan to live with you forever in his family.*

The purpose of the questions is to almost beat us out of our disbelief that we are saved totally by grace and are therefore completely safe to face life without fear. It is incredible, relentless, intense logic—it is what Lloyd-Jones called logic on fire! Paul is saying: *Think! Are you afraid (8:31)? You aren't thinking! Are you worried (v 32)? You aren't thinking! Are you feeling guilty (v 33)? You aren't thinking! See the logic of free grace and justification! These aren't dry doctrines; they are life itself. And if you are not living with overwhelming assurance and power, you haven't really fully understood them.* The remedy is to read, re-read, deeply ponder and learn to live out of the truths of verses 18-30!

## Questions for reflection

1. How has your reading today motivated you to holiness and Christlikeness?
2. How has looking back up and on down the “chain” of verse 30 thrilled you today?
3. How do you need the truth—that nothing can separate God’s love from God’s people—to comfort you today?

## ROMANS CHAPTER 9 VERSES 1-29

### 4. God's Sovereignty

Many people see almost no relationship between chapters 9 through 11 and the previous eight, or the subsequent five. The first eight chapters are about how we are made righteous, and how God works in and for his righteous people; the last five detail how righteous people live. But in between come three complex, difficult chapters that can be seen as a long diversion from the letter Paul sat down to write (and, we may think, should have written!), in which 8:39 is followed by 12:1. Why are chapters 9 – 11 in the book of Romans at all?!

Romans 8 ends in a tremendous **crescendo** of confidence, as Paul explains that God guarantees our final **perseverance** because our salvation is not based on our will and strength. Rather, God has called us, opened our minds to the truth and now carries us on to final glory. “Those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified” (8:30). But now Paul can imagine someone coming and saying: *Hold on, Paul! You say that when God calls someone, he always brings them all the way home. But what about the Jews? God called them and came to them but most Jews have rejected Christ at the present time. So maybe God’s calling and purpose can be rejected! If God promised that Israel would be his people, yet the majority did not believe in Christ, does that mean God’s promise, power, or mercy is failing?*

So the question of Jewish unbelief is of vital importance not only to first-century churches containing both Jews and Gentiles, but for us, too. It takes us deep into who God is, and how he works.

### Unceasing Anguish

Perhaps one of the most striking aspects of Romans 9 is also the least mentioned—Paul’s emotional agony. Paul is not a weak man—he has gone through beatings, shipwreck, hunger, mockery and slander (2 Corinthians 6:4-10). And so Romans 9:1-3 is astonishing. **Verse 1** establishes the seriousness with which he makes his statement: it is true, is not untrue, and his conscience knows it is true! And the truth is that “I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart” (v 2). Why? Because of the rejection of the gospel by “my brothers ... my own race, the people of Israel” (v 3-4). Paul knows what it is to know Christ and enjoy his righteousness; he also knows the consequences of rejecting God’s offer of salvation. And so he wishes “that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ,” if that would somehow bring his Jewish cousins to faith in the Messiah.

This is staggering! Paul is saying: *I would give up all the benefits of knowing Christ that I have been speaking of in the last eight chapters, if somehow that meant my Jewish brothers and sisters were saved.* Here is a glimpse of the love of others that, along with his overriding concern for the glory of God, drove Paul. And here is a great reminder that the apostle, while logical in his writing, was never cold in his feelings. He felt the “unceasing anguish” of knowing that his people had rejected their Savior, and instead of seeking to ignore it, or altering his doctrine to **negate** it, he lived with it. If the next three chapters pose a challenge to us, and confront us with truths that we have to wrestle with, perhaps these first three verses need to remind us that Paul was not writing in an ivory tower, but with a heart that longed to see Jewish salvation so greatly that he would have traded his own for theirs—yet with a heart that also cared most for the glory of God, and for his people to know who he is, and how he has worked in and for them. This is a subject of great intellectual importance—but one of great emotional importance to the apostle as well.

## Privilege Rejected

In one sense, Jewish rejection of Christ is almost inexplicably surprising, because they enjoyed such benefits (v 4-5), benefits that should have prepared and pointed them to Christ.

- “The adoption as sons” refers to Exodus 4:22 and other places where Israel is called God’s “son.” This should have prepared Israel for Jesus’ teaching that, through him, we can approach God on intimate terms such as “Abba” (Mark 14:36).
- “The divine glory” refers to God’s visible glory cloud—called the *shekinah*—the **manifestation** of his presence, dwelling in their midst in the tabernacle and temple (Exodus 29:42-45; 1 Kings 8:10-11). Jesus is a greater manifestation of God’s presence: “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory” (John 1:14).
- “The covenants” refer to God’s making a relationship with the people through Abraham (Genesis 15), Moses (Exodus 24:8) and David (2 Samuel 23:5). In each case God creates a relationship with them and promises to bless them. In all the cases, however, he tells them of a Messiah or future figure who will come to fulfill the agreement (see Genesis 12:1-3; Deuteronomy 18:18; 2 Samuel 7:12-13).
- “The receiving of the law” refers to God giving the Ten Commandments and all of the law by revelation to Israel (Deuteronomy 4:8). Paul told us in Romans 2 that if we truly understand the law, we will see that we cannot merit salvation and will look to God for a provision.
- “The temple worship” was a visible order of service. Hebrews 9:1-5 describes it well. It outlined how the people could approach God. There needed to be a blood sacrifice, a washing and preparation for purification, and a priest to go in on your behalf. All these God-given rituals showed that we could not approach God in just any manner—we needed blood to atone for sin, and a priest-substitute. Jesus is our sacrifice, our priest, our purity, our bread, etc. (Hebrews 8:1-6).
- “The promises” refer to the numerous Old Testament prophecies and promises about the coming of a Messiah. (Notice Genesis 3:14-19; Genesis 49:10; Psalm 2:2-7; Psalm 16:9-10; Psalm 22; Isaiah 7:14; 9:6-7; 52:13-15; Micah 5:2.)

- “The patriarchs” probably refer not just to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but also to men like Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Samuel and David. Now, all nations have great leaders, but Paul seems to be pointing out that God spoke to Israel through these men. Virtually all of them predicted and foreshadowed the coming of the Messiah.
- “From them is traced the human ancestry of Christ.” This is obvious but often overlooked. Jesus was Jewish. For the Son of God to become human, he had to become part of some race and culture. By becoming a Jew, God was giving the Jews not only a great honor, but making it “easier” for them to relate to the Son of God than anyone else.

## Not All Israel Are Israel

So why have the Jews not recognized their often-promised, long-awaited King? Paul wants to rule out one answer straight away—“it is not as though God’s word had failed” (Romans **9:6**). God had given these promises and covenants through the “patriarchs” and prophets to Israel; for example, God told Abraham that he would bless his “descendants” (Genesis 12:1-3). But Paul makes an important, and radical, distinction. “Not all who are descended from Israel are Israel” (Romans **9:6**). In other words he says: *We must define “Israel” properly!* Some who are racially descended from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are not true Israel, and others who are not physically descended from them are (Paul has said this before, back in 4:11-12, 16).

Then, to prove his point, he turns to two Old Testament examples. He says: *Look at the promises of God carefully.* God promised Abraham that his descendants, his “people,” would be blessed, but Abraham had two sons—Isaac and Ishmael. And it was “through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned” (**9:7**—Paul is quoting from Genesis 21:12). Only one of Abraham’s sons was accepted by God; Ishmael was Abraham’s physical descendant but not his spiritual descendant. Thus, Paul says, only Isaac was a “[child] of the promise” (Romans **9:8**)—only he was the one born to Sarah, the one who inherits God’s

blessings (v 9).

Paul then shows the principle again in the twin sons of Isaac and his wife, Rebekah. Though they “had one and the same father” (v 10), and so both were physical descendants of Abraham, only one became a spiritual descendant and inherited the promises. But as he deals with the case of Jacob and Esau, Paul goes deeper in his treatment of Isaac and Ishmael. He tackles the very thorny question: *Why is it that some of Abraham’s descendants love God and are true Israel, and others do not?* (Of course, Paul’s answer will therefore be dealing with the wider question of why anyone loves God, and why anyone does not.)

Paul’s answer is hard to avoid or miss, though it is not always easy to accept. First, God’s choice to bless Jacob and not Esau was made prior to their birth, “before the twins were born” (v 11).

Second, that choice was not made based on what he knew about how the two boys would turn out. The choice was made “before the twins ... had done anything good or bad.” Some people argue that God simply “foresees” who is going to accept and who is going to reject God’s way, but **verse 12** reinforces the point by saying that blessing comes “not by works, but by him who calls.”

Third, and following from the first two aspects to the answer, the only difference between Esau and Jacob was “God’s purpose in election” (v 11). The Greek word for election is *ekloge*, meaning to pull out, or to choose.

For good measure, in **verse 13** Paul paraphrases God’s words through the prophet Malachi (Malachi 1:2-3): “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.” We must be careful not to think of this hatred as identical to the emotion we ordinarily call by that name. There is a Hebrew **idiom** behind this. Jesus told his disciples that they had to “hate” their families to follow him (Luke 14:26). That does not mean literally to hate our parents, but to prefer Jesus over them. Nevertheless, Paul is saying that God chose to put Jacob above Esau, but not because of anything about Jacob that was morally superior to Esau. The only reason Jacob received the promise was because of God’s gracious choice.

This teaching is easy to understand, but not easy to accept. Paul’s answer has given people difficulties for centuries. It is why Romans 9 – 11 is often skipped

over. You will find an appendix dealing with these difficulties and issues in more detail, but here we need briefly to deal with two particular objections.

1. *Does this mean that God is arbitrary? Does God choose people, in a sense, by saying: Eeny, meeny, miney, moe?* No. Paul is not saying that God has no reasons. All we are told is that the reasons are not in us. There is no superiority of believers over unbelievers.
2. *Why do we have to insist on the doctrine of election? It causes so many problems.* Yes, “election” causes many difficulties. But the best reason for accepting the doctrine is that every alternative creates even more problems and difficulties. The first is this: without “election” you compromise the central teaching of the Bible that we are saved by grace alone, not by our works. If the difference between the unbeliever and the believer is ultimately in us (a greater humility, a greater openness, etc), then we are the real authors of our salvation.

## **Has God’s Promise Failed?**

So, Paul has given a comprehensive (if perhaps unsettling) answer to the question: *Has God’s promise to Israel failed?*

First, the promises of God given in the Old Testament were never given automatically to anyone who was physically descended from the patriarchs. A spiritual faith was necessary to inherit the promises to Israel.

Second, he asserts that the spiritual faith that inherits the promises is ultimately a function of God’s choice. God has not chosen all of racial Israel, and so not all of racial Israel has believed. It should be noted that this is Paul’s answer “so far.” In Romans chapter 11, Paul says that the current unbelief of Israel is not permanent. There will be a large-scale turning of Jews to Christianity in the future. Nevertheless, Paul here has established clearly the doctrine of election: that those who freely come to God are those whom God has freely chosen.



## Questions for reflection

1. Why does it matter whether or not God's promises have failed?
2. How does the emotional nature of Paul's language move and/or challenge you?
3. How does the fact that your salvation is entirely the result of God's election move you to greater gratitude?

## PART TWO

### Is God Unjust?

The beginning of Romans **9:14** suggests that Paul has taught this material before! He has just stated that when people don't believe, it is because God has not chosen them. Then he immediately says: "What then shall we say? Is God unjust?" He asks that question, of course, because he knows it is the first reaction of everyone who hears this teaching! It is normal to ask: *To choose only some and not all—that is not fair! Isn't God being unfair?* But Paul counters: "Not at all!"

In **verses 14-18**, he moves on from looking at the faith of the patriarchs to focus on the time of the exodus; the time of Moses and Pharaoh. And his central argument is that God has mercy on those he chooses. In Exodus 33:18-19, as Moses begged God to continue to be present with Israel even though they had rejected him, Moses asked the LORD: "Show me your glory." Moses was asking: *Please, God, show me who you are, what it is that makes you God.* God's response? "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion." So in Romans **9:15** Paul is talking about an aspect of God that is at the very core of his character.

Yet at first, these sound almost like the words of an arbitrary bully... until we reflect. Mercy by its very definition cannot ever be an obligation. To say that mercy is "unfair" is to say that it is owed to all. But a mercy is undeserved, and thus is totally free. So see Paul's argument. To say: *It is unfair for God only to have mercy on some* is a self-contradictory statement. Paul is reasoning: *Are you saying that God owes anyone salvation? Of course not!* And if he owes no one salvation, then he is *free* to give it to (a) all, (b) some, or (c) none. John Stott says:

*"Paul's way of defending God's justice is to proclaim his mercy. It sounds like a complete **non sequitur**. But it is not. It simply indicates that the*

*question itself is misconceived, because the basis on which God deals savingly with sinners is not justice but mercy.” (The Message of Romans, pages 268-269)*

So salvation “does not ... depend on man’s desire or effort” (v 16)—that is, on anything we want or strive for or achieve—“but on God’s mercy.” And therefore no one can accuse God of unfairness in not extending his mercy to more than he chooses to. Salvation is about his mercy and his gift, not our work and our right.

As an example, consider a rich person who decides to choose twenty inner-city kids and guarantee their full college tuition. There are literally thousands of equally worthy recipients. And this rich woman could help a lot more than twenty children. But can anyone say that since she has helped some, she is being unfair to everyone else? No. She has no particular obligation to help any of the children. Since all she has given is sheer mercy, there can be no talk about being “unfair.”

Nobody has any claim upon God’s mercy (if they did, it would no longer be mercy). Since “the wages of sin is death” (6:23), the shock is not that God does not extend his compassion to *everyone*, but that he extends it to *anyone*.

## Pharaoh’s Hard Heart

Having considered Moses, the great leader of God’s exodus people, Paul now turns to the Israelites’ great enemy, the Egyptian Pharaoh who kept them as slaves and refused to let them go free. And he did this simply because God had decided he would do it: “I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth” (9:17, quoting Exodus 9:16). Just as God mercifully has compassion on those he chooses to have compassion on (Romans 9:15), so “he hardens whom he wants to harden” (v 18).

These verses are pretty difficult; but again, they make sense after some reflection. In **verses 17-18**, Paul uses Pharaoh as a case study of how God’s

sovereignty relates to human responsibility. If we go back to Exodus 4 – 14 and read the account of what happened, we see a fascinating picture. On the one hand, the Bible tells us that God hardened Pharaoh's heart: "I will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go" (Exodus 4:21—see also 7:3; 9:12; 10:1, 20, 27). God says he hardened Pharaoh's heart to fulfill his plan (Romans **9:17**). But, on the other hand, we are told that "Pharaoh hardened his heart" (Exodus 8:15—see also 8:19, 32; 9:7, 17, 34). And God tells Pharaoh that he is being punished because "you ... set yourself against my people" (Exodus 9:13-18).

What is the Bible saying about hardening? Some think that Pharaoh was a fine fellow, but God came and turned his heart hard and cold. But that is not a fair interpretation. If we look at Exodus itself, we find Pharaoh enslaving and seeking to wipe out (through infanticide) a whole people group, the Israelites. And there are many statements about Pharaoh hardening his heart, as well as those about God hardening it. Somehow, both are true. In addition, Paul has already spoken to this in Romans 1:24. He has said that people's hearts are full of lusts and "therefore God gave them over" to their desires. So Paul already has explained more fully the point he is making in **9:17-18**. God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart was a "giving him over" to his own stubbornness. Pharaoh decided to resist God; God reinforced him in that position. God gave Pharaoh what he chose.

When God hardens someone, he doesn't create the hardness; he simply allows the person to go his or her own way. God hardens those he wants to harden. And all those whom he hardens want to be hardened.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones writes:

*"The world fell into sin, but God put a limit, a restraint upon it, and this world would be complete chaos and hell if he did not do so. But the moment he draws back his restraining influence [at any point] there is hardening [there] ... So that is one of the ways in which God produces hardening ... He leaves them to themselves." (Romans Chapter 9, page 176)*

## Don't Answer Back

Next, Paul makes a further case for why God is not unfair to have mercy on some and to pass over others, particularly now that he has established that God hardens whom he wants to harden. In a sense, Paul has already answered the question through the example of self-hardening, God-hardened Pharaoh. But here are three more points.

First, in **verses 20-21**, he says that God made us, and that therefore he has rights of ownership. All by itself, this would be a sufficient answer to the question of “fairness,” of why “God still blame[s] us” (**v 19**). “Who are you, O man, to talk back to God?” (**v 20**). We are so far below God that we have neither the wisdom nor the right to question our Creator. This is God’s own approach to Job when Job questions why God has put him through such suffering. As readers, we know the answer—Satan wants to prove Job only loves God for what he receives from him, not for who he is himself, and so God has allowed Satan to test Job (1:8-12). God could choose to let Job in on this spiritual dimension—instead, he challenges Job’s right even to ask (Job 38 – 41). Who is Job, a man, to question or to answer back to his Creator? We must beware of standing in judgment over God, rather than remembering he is judge over us; and must most of all beware re-creating God in a way that is more pleasant or palatable, rather than acknowledging that he is our Creator. He is the divine Potter; we are human clay (Romans **9:21**).

Second, in **verse 22** Paul says that while God is the author of our salvation, we are the authors of our damnation. Notice that Paul says here that God “bore with great patience the objects of his wrath.” This shows that evil people are not made evil by God. He bears with them. He never gives anyone quite what they deserve. He is unjust to no one. And then Paul adds that these objects of wrath are “prepared for destruction”—but he doesn’t say by whom. Contrast this with **verse 23**, where it says clearly of the objects of God’s mercy that “he prepared [them] in advance for glory.” By implication, it appears that the vessels of wrath are prepared for destruction by themselves (remember 1:24, where God hands people over to the life and death they have chosen).

Third, in **9:23** Paul says that God is showing “the riches of his glory” by

having mercy on some and passing over others. This is the heart of the mystery. Somehow, if God had mercy on all or condemned all, we would not see his glory. I don't think Paul is giving us much more than a hint here, but it is a very suggestive hint. For the biggest question is: *If God could save everyone, why doesn't he?* And here Paul seems to say that God's chosen course (to save some and leave others) will in the end be more fit to show forth God's glory than any other scheme we can imagine. This may seem strange to us, but that is the point—we are not God, and cannot know everything or decide what is best (v 20—Paul will return to this idea in 11:33-36).

In summary, in election God comes in, softens our hearts and makes us good. In hardening, God simply passes over and lets people have the way they have chosen. In John Stott's words:

*“If ... anybody is lost, the blame is theirs, but if anybody is saved, the credit is God's. This **antinomy** contains a mystery which our present knowledge cannot solve; but it is consistent with Scripture, history, and experience.”*

*(The Message of Romans, page 270)*

D. James Kennedy offers a very helpful illustration here:

*“Here are five people who are planning to hold up a bank. They are friends of mine. I find out about it and I plead with them. I beg them not to do it. Finally they push me out of the way and they start out. I tackle one of the men and wrestle him to the ground. The others go ahead, rob the bank, a guard is killed, they are captured, convicted, sentenced ... The one man who was not involved in the robbery goes free. Now I ask you this question: Whose fault was it that the other men died? ... Now this other man who is walking around free—can he say, “Because my heart is so good, I am a free man”? The only reason that he is free is because of me; because I restrained him. So those who go to hell have no one to blame but themselves. Those who go to heaven have no one to praise but Jesus Christ. Thus we see that salvation is all of grace from its beginning to its end.” (Truths That Transform, pages 39-40)*

## The God Of Surprising Reversal

So Paul is now ready to turn back to his first question, about Jewish unbelief. What matters is not physical descent, but God's calling (9:24)—and he has called Jews and Gentiles. Having looked at the patriarchs (v 7-13) and the exodus (v 14-18), he now moves on to the time of the prophets. The function of the four Old Testament verses Paul quotes in **verses 25-29** is to establish that God has always worked to make and keep promises, and this has often involved surprising reversals. Jewish history itself is a record of how God calls those who are not his people "my people" (v 25)—so that those who were once not his people become his children (v 26). Paul is quoting from Hosea, who was prophesying about what would happen to ethnic Israel in the exile—here, Paul appears to be using it as a template for what God is now doing for the Gentiles. He is saying to the Jews: *You know God has always been the God who blesses those who do not deserve it and could not have predicted it.* If the Gentiles are flocking to become Christ's people, should that really surprise us?

And the reverse is also true. Old Testament history should show the Jews that God has not promised to bless all ethnic Israel—in fact, quite the reverse. Speaking again of the exile, God promised through Isaiah that "only the **remnant** will be saved" (v 27), because Israel faced his judgment (v 28). It was only God's mercy on the remnant that prevented Israel from being destroyed in the way Sodom and Gomorrah, the great Old Testament examples of God's righteous judgment, were (v 29). Paul is saying: *You know God has always been the God who rejected those who thought they deserved his blessing and presumed on it. If the Jews are rejecting Christ and his people, should that really surprise us?*

God is a God who keeps his promises through surprising reversals. He is a God who keeps his promises in ways that cannot always be predicted. And he is a God who is utterly free to choose to give his undeserved mercy to whomever he wants, and to continue to choose to give others over to the life, and the destiny, that they have chosen. He always has been—in Abraham's day, Moses' time, the prophets' era, and today.

## Questions for reflection

1. How would you use Romans 9 to answer someone who says God is unjust?
2. Meditate on verses 20-21. How does this humble you and help you exalt God?
3. Do you have questions about this doctrine that you need to wrestle with or find out more about?

## 5. Our Responsibility

The situation Paul has been describing all along in Romans 9 is that a growing majority of the church was Gentile. In general, the Gentiles were more responsive to the gospel than the Jews—even though the Jews were God’s Old Testament people.

### Unsought, But Obtained

The topsy-turviness of the situation is depicted by Paul in his striking statement of Romans **9:30-31**. “The Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it” (v **30**). This is something of an understatement! The unbelievers (described in 1:18-19) first of all did not have a full picture of righteousness as did the Jews, who had the full law of God. The Gentiles had a basic outline in their consciences (2:14-15). But they did not follow their consciences; rather, they pursued selfishness and pleasure. This is also true of modern unbelievers.

But ironically, the Gentiles who lived such wicked lives were more open to the gospel, “a righteousness that is by faith” (**9:30**). On the other hand, “Israel, who pursued a law of righteousness, has not attained it” (v **31**). The Jews had a deep awareness that they needed righteousness to go before God, while the Gentiles had no such developed understanding. Yet the Jews’ pursuit of righteousness was “by works” (v **32**). Because they sought to create their own righteousness as a way to stand before God, they stumbled over the concept that God’s righteousness must come as a gift through Jesus Christ.

The topsy-turvy irony can be put in several ways. The ones who knew the most about God did not come to know God, while the ones who knew the least about God came to know God best. The ones who most wanted to be righteous

ended up dead in their sins, while the ones who least wanted to be righteous ended up holy and blameless in his sight.

It is not that difficult to understand what happened to the Jews and the Gentiles if we think about the different ways that “religious/moral” people and “irreligious/unbelieving” people respond to the gospel today. The latter may well trample the gospel underfoot, especially when they are young, but as time goes on they often come to recognize their own sin. Many come to feel their own spiritual emptiness quite poignantly. But religious people are much less honest with themselves about their sin, and generally have a smugness, a condescending attitude toward others, and a feeling that: *I try hard, so God owes me*. Religious people are either offended by the gospel (*You mean you could be a criminal and believe in Jesus and be saved? That’s too easy!*) or else they run the message through their own works-righteousness grid and reinterpret it to fit in, emptying the grace from the gospel. Thus this type of “religious” person thinks they have already heard the gospel. As Richard Lovelace observes:

*“We all automatically gravitate toward the assumption that we are justified by our level of sanctification ... We start each day with our personal security resting not on the accepting love of God and the sacrifice of Christ but on our present feelings or recent achievements in [religion]. Since these arguments will not quiet the human conscience, we are inevitably moved ... to a self-righteousness which falsifies the record to achieve a sense of peace.”*

*(Dynamics of Spiritual Life, page 211)*

## Stumbling Over Christ

The first half of **verse 32** explains what Paul means by his assertion that the Jews have “stumbled over the ‘stumbling’ stone” in the second half. This stone is Christ, a “stumbling-block to Jews” (1 Corinthians 1:23). Why do people stumble over Jesus? Because faith in him requires that we lay down any idea of self-righteousness and accept his. He demands that we humble ourselves before

we can be raised up. As long as anyone pursues salvation “as if it were by works” (Romans **9:32**), they will stumble and fall when confronted with Christ. As Paul shows, by combining two quotations from Isaiah (28:16 and 8:14) in Romans **9:33**, Christ is a rock we either found our lives upon, or stumble over. As Paul pointed out in verses 4-5, the Jews had all the light they needed to see that Jesus is a stone in whom “the one who trusts ... will never be put to shame” (v 33). Instead, they stumbled over him, tripped by their cloaks of self-righteousness.

Yet up until verse 29, Paul has been attributing that unbelief to God’s sovereign purpose. So when we seek to keep 9:1-29 and **9:30 – 10:21** together, the two sections at first seem contradictory. If unbelief is due to God’s sovereign control, how can any human be held responsible for it?

Now we can, of course, assume that this is a contradiction, but that does not give Paul much credit. Even if we do not believe in the inspiration of the Bible, we must conclude that Paul was a superior intellect. After all, he formulated the Christian faith and strategically spread it in such a way that it conquered the Roman empire and became the single greatest religious movement in history. So it is not likely that a man of that caliber would write an ordered treatise on theology and unwittingly contradict himself within one chapter. But if this is not a contradiction or mistake, then what is going on?!

Paul is showing us that God’s sovereignty and human responsibility stand in relationship to each other as an “antinomy”—as an apparent contradiction. One famous example of an antinomy is the fact that light sometimes behaves as particles and at other times as waves. We don’t understand fully how that could be—it is an apparent contradiction of physics. But we expect to understand it in the future as we get more information. So it is here. The Bible never says: *This event happened totally in accord with God’s plan, therefore the human beings were not responsible for their actions.* Nor does it say: *The human beings were responsible for their actions, therefore the event was not certain to happen according to God’s plan.* No. Rather, the Bible holds both of these truths together:

1. The complete sovereignty of God over all history

## 2. The complete responsibility of every human being for his or her behavior

The following quote from Martyn Lloyd-Jones does not explain all of the “antinomy” but it helps us see how God can save people through election, and yet people who disbelieve are still responsible for their behavior.

*“In [Romans 9] verses 6 to 29, [Paul] explains why anybody is saved—it is the sovereign election of God. In these verses [v 30-33] he is showing us why anybody is lost, and the explanation of that is their own responsibility ... So this is what the Bible teaches. Election alone accounts for the saved, but non-election does not account for the lost ... No [one] would be saved were it not that God in a sovereign manner has chosen him, as we have seen abundantly from verses 6 to 29. It is God’s action alone that saves a man. So why is anybody lost? Is it because they are not elected? No! What accounts for the lost is their rejection of the gospel ... We are responsible for our rejection of the gospel, but we are not responsible for our acceptance of it.” (Romans Chapter 9, page 285)*

## **Zeal Without Knowledge = Fanaticism**

Remember, all of this matters deeply to Paul. This is not an intellectual, abstract issue for him, a merely theological issue that needs to be explained. He is emotionally involved, because those who have stumbled are his brothers, who desperately (though they do not see it) need to be saved. His mind is engaged, but also his heart is stirred: “My heart’s desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved” (10:1). Notice that because Paul believes the truth about God, and because he cares about those around him, he prays. Our prayer lives—whether we pray, and what we pray—tend to reveal what truly lies in our heads *and* hearts.

What seems particularly to pain Paul is that the Jews are “zealous for God” (v 2). This is, of course, something Paul knew first hand, since he himself, as a Jew, was extremely zealous to please, honor, and serve God. They were willing to go to any lengths to obey him. Paul is giving credit where credit is due, and granting how good it is for Israel to feel so keenly the importance of honoring

God.

But Paul says that the reason for Israel's going astray is that zeal is not enough; the zeal must be based on knowledge. This is a complete contradiction of a common proverb of our time: "It doesn't matter what you believe as long as you are sincere." *Well, says Paul, the Jews were sincere and zealous in their beliefs, but their beliefs were erroneous and mistaken!* The truth is that zeal without knowledge or understanding is fanaticism, even terrorism. Imagine a lady who loves her neighbor and sincerely brings her a big bouquet of flowers, not realizing that her neighbor is desperately allergic to them. That is zeal without knowledge and it could even be fatal. Imagine a person who intensely believes that a poison solution is not fatal. If she drinks it, she will still be dead. Her zeal not only did not help her, it helped her die.

Why blame them, then, if their problem was ignorance? Looking closely, we see that Paul says: "Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God ... they did not submit to [it]" (v 3). We see that the ignorance is "**vincible**" ignorance. There is a sincere zeal at its base, but Israel stays ignorant not because the information is unavailable, but because it suits them to stay ignorant. Fanatics are people who have zeal and sincerity (they are often willing to die for their cause), but it is a zeal that refuses reflection. They refuse to stop and think things through. Though they are sincere, they can also do a lot of damage. When they do, we hold them responsible because they should have known better.

## Why Israel Should Know Better

Israel should know better, and is without excuse, for two reasons. First, because Christ has come, and second, because the Scriptures told them even before he came. "Christ is the end of the law [of seeking to establish one's own righteousness] so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes" (v 4)—the righteousness that is "from God [and] comes through faith in Jesus Christ" (3:21, 22).

When Paul says that Christ is the “end of the law,” he is putting in startling terms what he has taught in the earlier chapters of the letter. It is a direct confrontation with **legalistic** moralists and religious people (the types he is talking about in this chapter). Paul is not saying here that the very category of the law is ended, or that the binding nature of the law is ended. Rather, Christ ended the law as a way of righteousness, as a way to be acceptable to God. How do we know that this is the way he is using the word “righteousness” here? When Paul talks of the righteousness that comes to those who believe (as he does in the last part of **10:4**), he is referring not to general morality, but rather the state of “rightness with God” that means you have favor with him. Thus Paul is saying: *Christ’s work shows that the law as a way of righteousness is ended, so that faith may be seen as the way of righteousness.*

From Romans 6:1 – 8:4, we know that what has ended for the Christian is being “under the law” *as a system of salvation*. What has not ended is our obligation to obey the law *as a way to please and express our gratitude* to the God who has saved us by grace.

The second way in which Paul shows that their ignorance was vincible is by references to the Old Testament. He quotes Moses twice to show that though Moses could be read as teaching moralism, he did know that law-keeping was not enough.

First, in **10:5**, Paul quotes Leviticus 18:5, where Moses says about the law: “The man who does these things will live by [because] of them.” On the surface, that seems to mean that Moses was teaching the possibility of getting salvation (“life”) through law-keeping. Actually, all Moses was saying was: *If you could obey the law perfectly, you would receive eternal life*. That of course is true! But that is not the whole picture.

Then, in Romans **10:6-7**, Paul goes to Deuteronomy 30. To understand Paul’s argument, you need to understand the whole of Deuteronomy 30:1-14. Though he only quotes verse 14, he makes allusions to the whole passage. In Deuteronomy 30:1-2, Moses alludes to the fact that Israel will stray from God and receive “curses” and punishment. Then in 30:6 he says: “The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts ... so that you may love him with all your heart

and ... soul, and live.” Then in 30:11-14 he says: *Now what I am telling you is not impossible to do! You don’t have to go to heaven or over the sea to do it!*

So Paul quotes Moses in Romans **10:6-7** to show what faith knows. Faith knows that we don’t need to do anything to be righteous. You don’t need to scale heaven (Christ has already come down from it), or deal with your own sins in death (Christ has already done that). Paul is showing that Moses knew that something more than law-keeping was required; and that God had done all that was required: “the word is near you” (**v 8**). Moses knew that faith is simply about what you say with your mouth because you believe it in your heart. Zeal-with-knowledge would mean trusting Christ for righteousness, building on him as the foundation of life, and obeying God’s law out of gratitude and (as we’ll see in the next part of this chapter) speaking God’s gospel out of love.

## Questions for reflection

1. Have you seen people (perhaps yourself!) who were not seeking righteousness, and yet in whom God worked to bring to faith?
2. Are you naturally someone who needs to add zeal to your knowledge; or knowledge to your zeal?
3. Have you realized that faith in Christ means the end of any reliance on law-keeping for your security? What difference does this make to you?

## PART TWO

### Confess And Believe

“The word is near you” (v 8)—but what is the “word of faith we are proclaiming,” which (unlike the law) brings true righteousness? How does it save us? **Verse 9** explains. First, this “word” is a truth that must be known. That content is seen as consisting of:

1. *Jesus’ person.* “Jesus is Lord” is a reference to all we know about Jesus’ divine identity. The Greek word Paul uses for “Lord” is *kurios*. In the Greek Old Testament, the word *kurios* was the translation for God’s personal name of *Yahweh*. So to call Jesus *kurios* was not only to claim his **deity**, but to claim that he was supreme authority over the world (the Caesars also claimed the title *kurios* or supreme ruler).
2. *Jesus’ work.* “God raised him from the dead.” We must believe he was raised from the dead, and thus that he died. In other words, we must believe in Christ’s life, death, and resurrection for our sins.

There must be a basic body of content put before us. You cannot be saved by believing in believing! The hymn writer Horatius Bonar expressed it this way:

*Upon a life I did not live,  
Upon a death I did not die.  
Another’s life, another’s death,  
On this I stake my whole eternity.*

Second, this “word” is a truth that must be believed. This does not mean that the whole heart must be purified perfectly. In the context of the rest of Romans 10, we can see what “believe” means. The heart is a token of the whole self. Thus we are to trust our whole self to the person and work of Christ as our righteousness. We are to transfer our trust from our own efforts to be righteous to Christ’s righteousness on our behalf. That is the faith that saves—not merely a general belief that Christ lived or in his teaching. We must trust in his work

(his death and resurrection) for us.

**Verse 10** is a re-stating of the truth of the previous verse. But it also shows us that confessing with the mouth and believing in the heart are not separate actions—they are two sides of the same coin of real faith. And equally, justification and salvation are essentially the same thing. As John Stott explains:

*“The **parallelism** is reminiscent of Hebrew poetry in the Old Testament, and the two clauses ... are to be held together rather than separately. Thus, there is no substantive difference here between being ‘justified’ and being ‘saved.’ Similarly, the content of the belief and that of the confession need to be merged.”*

*(The Message of Romans, page 283)*

In other words, to “confess with the mouth” is simply part of “believing with the heart.” They both mean to “profess” faith in Christ. Anyone who does believe expresses this belief.

If we misunderstand the Hebrew **literary device** of “parallelism,” we might think Paul was saying that we have two separate things to do; first to confess verbally that Jesus is Lord, and secondly to believe internally that Jesus is raised. But that would contradict the rest of Romans, for that would be to require a kind of “work” to be saved, a public profession of some “magic words.” Instead, all that is necessary is to transfer all our hopes out of our hands and our control, and into Christ’s. Paul promises that we will never regret trusting in him instead of ourselves (**v 11**). And Paul reminds us that “anyone” can do this—there is no difference between Jew and Gentile when it comes to the necessity of Christ’s salvation, nor when it comes to its availability (**v 12**). Joel 2:32 sums up these wonderful truths, quoted in Romans **10:13**: “Everyone [Jew or Gentile, religious or irreligious, good or bad] who calls on the name of the Lord [recognizing who Jesus is, and our need for him] will be saved [utterly loved, blessed and justified eternally by God].”

## How Can They Call?

All that anyone needs to do, then, is all that anyone can do: call “on the name of the Lord” (v 13). God, through his Son, has done everything already. How do people come to call on the Lord? First, they must believe (v 14). This is what Paul has been talking about in **verses 9-10**—this belief in the truth about Jesus in our hearts is what makes us Christians. But “how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard?” (v 14). The message must be heard. Paul probably has more in mind than mere exposure. This means that saving faith cannot happen mystically, but must occur in response to the content really penetrating the understanding. For example, just to read the Bible does not save; it is not a process of magic. The message of the Bible needs to be really heard, and really understood. A person cannot believe unless the message is given a hearing.

But “how can they hear without someone preaching to them?” (v 14). The message must be communicated. The word translated “preaching” is *kerysso*, which means to be a “herald” or to make announcements. A herald was, in a sense, a living newspaper; heralds were a major means of transmitting news by making announcements in the marketplace and city streets. So the word “preach” does not refer only to what today are called “sermons.” Heralds operated in the streets.

“And how can they preach unless they are sent?” (v 15). Someone must do the communicating, must be the herald. The Greek word rendered “sent” is *apostello*. Paul probably has two aspects in mind when he writes “sent.” First, that Christ has sent us authoritative witnesses and teachers, the apostles, whose message is in the Bible. Second, “sent” likely also refers to the way Christ through his church sends out missionaries, preachers, and ordinary Christians in all places and all times to be messengers of that apostolic word. God has sent us with the message of salvation. He may send us overseas, into the pulpit, or across the street to our neighbor. But ours are the beautiful feet, bringing good news (v 15).

Notice what Paul is teaching about evangelism here:

- It is absolutely necessary: “How can they believe ... without someone preaching to them?” (v 14).

- It requires a willingness to speak out (preach).
- It requires not just proclamation but persuasion, getting a person to understand and see the importance of what they have understood (hear).
- It requires the transmission of a body of truth that is not a person's opinion but the authoritative revelation from Christ and his apostles.

## Beauty Unrecognized

“How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!” (v 15)... but the beauty is often not recognized. This is what has happened in Israel, Paul says: “Not all the Israelites accepted the good news” (v 16). “Accepted” is better translated “obeyed” (as in the ESV). To reject the beautiful gospel message is to disobey God. Ironically, the Jews, in insisting that they could gain righteousness through obeying God, were disobeying God by rejecting the gospel of salvation through faith!

In fact, as Paul has alluded to before (9:27-29), Jewish rejection of God's plan of salvation is nothing new. 700 years before Jesus' birth, Isaiah was reporting: “Lord, who has believed our message?” (10:16). What was lacking in the Jews was faith—faith in “the word of Christ” (v 17). If the Jews had heard and understood the gospel message, then the only thing lacking in the chain of salvation (God sent... Christians preached... people heard... people believed and called on Jesus) is the last link.

But perhaps there is still room for excuses. Perhaps they did not hear the gospel (v 18). Paul answers: “Of course they did” (v 18). He quotes Psalm 19, which is a little surprising, for it speaks of how God's creation (the mountains, the heavens) declares the glory of God all over the world. Paul probably meant that the spread of the gospel was as widespread as that. Before anyone objects that the gospel even now has not reached every part of the world, realize that Paul is thinking of the Jews. Wherever a Jewish community existed, the gospel had been preached. They had heard.

But perhaps Israel did not understand (Romans **10:19**)? By asking this question, Paul is showing that it is possible to be exposed to the gospel and not really understand it intellectually. But he answers that they did understand. He quotes Deuteronomy 32:21 to show that only the Gentiles had “no understanding.” They did not know the nature of God (his holiness), the need for righteousness, the promises of forgiveness by substitution implicit in the tabernacle and temple worship, all the promises about a Messiah, or (especially) the fact that the Lord could become our righteousness for us (Jeremiah 23:5-6). Thus the Gentiles, not the Jews, did not understand the ways of God. Deuteronomy 32:21 shows that God in a sense shows the Jews up with the Gentiles, making the Jews “envious” of them.

So why did Israel not believe? It could not have been because they did not understand, because God can work to overcome that, as he had for the Gentiles (Romans **10:19**). It cannot be because they were not searching for God, because God works to reveal himself to those who have not asked for him (**v 20**). And to Israel, God “all day long” has “held out my hands” (**v 21**). But they did not respond because they are disobedient and obstinate. This is an amazing indictment. God didn’t “hold out [his] hands” to the Gentiles as he did to the Jews. He did not give the Gentiles anything approaching what he gave to the Jews. Yet they have responded better than the Jews. Thus Israel is not to be excused for their refusal.

God is sovereign. But this does not mean that there is any excuse for disobeying his summons to believe the gospel, to call out in trust to his Son and enjoy salvation. We are, in our sin and in our rejection of the gospel, “without excuse” (Romans 1:20). This passage leaves us with two stark truths: that every human is responsible for how they treat the “word of Christ”; and that every Christian is responsible for communicating that “word of Christ.” Everyone will answer to God for whether they supplied the last “link in the chain”: whether they believed. We must ensure that, wherever it is that God has placed us, no one around us can say they have not heard or understood.

## Questions for reflection

1. Do you count it a privilege to be part of the way that God saves people?  
How does that motivate you to “preach”?
2. How could you have “beautiful feet,” sharing good news today?
3. Do you ever find yourself making excuses for “good people” who have rejected the gospel message? How do Paul’s words about his own people challenge you?

## **6. God and Israel**

God chooses those he will save through faith in the gospel. We are responsible for our rejection of him and his gospel. So the Jews are responsible for their refusal to turn to Christ; and they have not come to faith because God has not chosen to have mercy on them. That is a summary of the teaching of Romans 9 – 10. But therefore the question remains: “Did God reject his people?” (**11:1**). Did God reject ethnic Israel? After all the promises God made to Abraham and David, and so many others throughout Israel’s history, why doesn’t God turn their hearts to him? Has he now utterly abandoned them? Paul immediately answers the question with a big **NO!** The rest of Romans 11 details why he answers *no*—and his central argument is: *God has not rejected Israel, because Israel’s unbelief is not total.*

Before we look in more detail at each verse, we need to recognize that this chapter is one of the most difficult in Scripture to understand. To get a brief overview of how the chapter flows, see the appendix summarizing the structure at the end of this book. We should not expect a guide of this length and depth to answer every question or pause at every complexity the passage contains; but we can pray that we will come to know God better, and praise him more, as a result of our time looking at this part of his word.

### **God Has Not Rejected Israel**

Paul gives four arguments to demonstrate that God has not, in fact, rejected Israel, his ancient people.

1. **Verse 1**—the “Paul argument.” Paul points out that he himself, the major

missionary of the early church, is a Jew. He is saying: *Look at me! I am a Jew and I was a very blasphemous and hardened person. How can we say that God has given up on the Jews when he didn't give up on me? He took me and is using me mightily in his work.*

2. **Verse 2**—the “election argument.” In chapter 9 we saw that to foreknow is more than to foresee. Paul is saying that God has determined—has foreordained—to bring Jews to faith in him. Those he has foreknown can’t fail to believe.
3. **Verses 2-4**—the “Elijah argument.” Elijah was someone who thought that God had abandoned Israel and that no one believed apart from him: “The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left,” he told God (1 Kings 19:14). But God contradicted Elijah’s perception as Paul points out in Romans **11:4**: “I have reserved for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal” (Paul is paraphrasing God’s answer to Elijah in 1 Kings 11:18). In other words, there has always been in Israel a “faithful remnant,” the spiritual Israel within Israel—even during times when it seemed that Israel had utterly rejected God, and he them.
4. **Verses 5-6**—the “grace argument.” Paul says: “So too, at the present time,” to show that, like Elijah, we are mistaken to think all Israel has been rejected. No, says Paul: “There is a remnant chosen by grace ... no longer by works” (Romans **11:5-6**). Paul means this: what guarantees that there will always be a faithful remnant is not that there is always a set of good, decent people who will believe, but rather that there is always the grace of God. It is God who preserves a remnant. Those who believe do so entirely because of his grace.

Another way to put it is that Paul is using one argument with two illustrations. His argument is “election-grace”; God has chosen a faithful remnant by his sheer grace. His two illustrations are the faith of Paul, and the mistake of Elijah.

## How Israel Missed Righteousness

**Verse 7** reminds us that “not all who are descended from Israel are Israel” (9:6). “What Israel”—ie: the nation as a whole, or the great majority—“sought so earnestly it did not obtain, but the elect”—Israel’s believing minority, such as Paul—“did. The others were hardened.” Remember from 10:3, what Israel “sought” was righteousness. Here, Paul says they searched for it “earnestly.” But they pursued it by trying to establish their own, rather than receiving it as a gift from God through Christ (10:3-4).

Here then seems to be the order: first, Israel sought the righteousness of God, but when confronted with the choice of getting it by works or gift, the majority sought it through works, while the “elect” accepted it as a gift. Then the majority was hardened. I think it is fair to paraphrase Paul in **11:7** like this: *Israel sought the righteousness of God earnestly but wrongly, except for the elect. As a result, the majority was hardened.*

Therefore the hardening we have here is a “judicial” hardening, a punishment for having a proud heart that rejects the message of grace. Again, Paul quotes from the Old Testament, because he wants to show that this is how God has always treated ethnic Israel—if they hardened themselves, he hardened them, giving them “a spirit of stupor, eyes so that they could not see and ears so that they could not hear” (**v 8**). Notice what Paul is doing by selecting this particular quote. He is quoting from Isaiah, who himself was paraphrasing Moses’ words in Deuteronomy. So Paul is saying: *Moses warned Israel in his day that their rebellion resulted in God giving them spiritual blindness... Isaiah told Israel that this had continued “to this very day”... now I am telling you that this hardening is still ongoing.*

Thus in **verses 9-10** (quoting from Psalm 69), we see that the “darken[ing]” of their eyes is a “retribution.” A retribution is a punishment that exactly fits the crime. Hardening is thus a fitting punishment for a proud spirit. Pride and self-centeredness lead to hardness and lovelessness. Rejection of God leads to rejection from God. Though God executes it, it is a natural consequence.

## Seeking, Yet Rejecting

Paul is saying something very striking in these verses—that the people who “sought [relationship with God] so earnestly” (Romans **11:7**), who so wanted to please God, were the same people who rejected his love for them and were hardened by him. How is this?

We must remember that “hardening” does not necessarily mean bitterness, wrath, and hostility toward Christianity *per se*. It does not necessarily mean harshness. A hardened person is someone who is completely **obtuse** to the gospel of free justification and adoption.

**Verse 7** thus gives us a picture of a **dynamic** that can happen today. The amazing concept is this: a person can be trying so desperately hard (earnestly) to please and serve God that he or she comes to vigorously resist the idea of grace. How? Well, you could very easily conclude that God is holy and majestic, and that he cannot abide evil in any way. Therefore, you conclude that you must cleanse and purify your heart to approach him. You find any concept of free, total and unconditional acceptance dishonoring to a holy God. *Imagine!* says a person with this view: *The idea that a convicted murderer can just say words of repentance and come right in to God like a person who has worked for years to be good! How illogical! How insulting to the righteousness of God!* You can see the gospel as an insult to the greatness of the Lord.

This is a form of spiritual “judo” done on the heart by sin and the devil. “Judo” uses the enemy’s forward motion against him. It is good to seek God’s righteousness, but that eagerness can easily be used to make the gospel seem unworthy of that righteousness. So, through a real desire to please God—mixed with an unwitting pride in one’s abilities—the heart becomes deeply allergic and hard toward the mercy and love of God through Christ.

This is the case with many people around the world today. Very sincere religious people (whether Jews or Hindus or Muslims and so on), for example, misguidedly reject the gospel because it seems to weaken the need for moral

effort. Right standing with God is seriously, earnestly sought—but at the same time, his loving offer of that standing is being rejected. Inside the church this dynamic is working as well. It can be seen in congregations motivated almost completely by fear, guilt, and a need for approval.

## The Future For Israel

The question in **verse 11** is essentially the same as the one in verse 1. Has Israel, because of their rejection and God’s retribution, fallen “beyond recovery?” And the answer is the same: “Not at all!” In fact, the way that the gospel has been received by Jew and Gentile is all part of God’s sovereign plan—a plan that includes Jews coming to faith, not just non-Jews. In **verses 11-16**, Paul sets out three stages that Israel will go through with regard to the gospel of Jesus:

In the first stage, Israel “transgress[ed]” (**v 11-12**), but it brought salvation to the Gentiles. This is fascinating. Paul means that, though many Jews believed, there was a lot of hostility to Christianity among the majority of Israel. If this had not happened, the early Jewish Christians could have easily concluded that the gospel was only for ethnic Israel; and there would have been little impetus to preach the gospel to anyone else. In the book of Acts, there is a repeated cycle:

1. The gospel is preached in a synagogue.
2. The Jewish community is fractured, with some believing but many becoming hostile.
3. As a result, the preachers turn to the Gentiles in town and find many converts there.
4. Finally the church is multi-ethnic, with both Jews and Gentiles.

Imagine if the whole synagogue had been converted in every town. Christianity could have been seen only as a renewal movement inside ethnic Israel. This is how “their [the Jews’] transgression means riches for the world” (**v 12**).

In the second stage, the Gentiles make Israel “envious” (v 11). Paul goes on to say that one of the goals of his ministry is to make his own people “envy and [therefore to] save some of them” (v 14). Ordinarily, we use the word “envy” in a negative way. In fact, Luke mentions that the Jews were envious of the apostles (Acts 5:17; 13:45; 17:5), meaning that they were jealous of their success, acclaim, and growing influence and power. In Acts 8, Simon the Sorcerer became jealous of the apostles’ miracle-working power and asked for it. He was severely condemned by Peter.

The kind of envy Paul probably has in mind is described well by John Stott:

*“Not all envy is tainted with selfishness, because it is not always either a grudging discontent or a sinful covetousness. At base, envy is ‘the desire to have for oneself something possessed by another,’ and whether envy is good or evil depends on the nature of the something desired and on whether one has any right to its possession. If that something is in itself evil, or if it belongs to somebody else and we have no right to it, then the envy is sinful. But if the something desired is in itself good, a blessing from God, which he means all his people to enjoy, then to ‘covet’ it and to ‘envy’ those who have it is not at all unworthy. This kind of desire is right in itself, and to arouse it can be a realistic motive in ministry.” (The Message of Romans, page 297)*

Here, then, is a remarkable insight. Just as the Gentiles could only have heard because Israel largely rejected Christ, now the Jews can only believe because those who accepted Christ were largely Gentiles. In other words, the Jews will see many Old Testament promises fulfilled in the Gentiles, and believe.

A possible example of this is Acts 6:1-7. After the early church sets apart officers (deacons) to care for the needy, we are told (v 7) that a lot of Jewish priests then converted to Christ. Why? The priests were supposed to bring the people’s tithes and resources to the poor, but that did not happen as it should have. Now the Christians, under the power of the Holy Spirit, were being generous and creating a community in which every needy person was cared for. That was what Israel was supposed to be (Deuteronomy 15:4-5)! It seems the priests saw it and were “envious,” and convicted, and listened to the gospel. Paul probably has something like this in mind in Romans 11. First, the Jews

won the Gentiles, but in the second stage, the Gentiles will win the Jews.

Finally, Paul speaks of a third stage sometime in the future. In the second stage, the envy of Israel only wins “some of them” (v 14). But Paul envisions a time of greater riches (v 12), of acceptance (v 15). He’ll go into more detail on what this stage looks like in verses 25-27.

**Verse 16** is a hard verse to interpret. It probably means that the faithful remnant should be seen as a “firstfruits” of a far greater harvest later. The gospel faith of Jews such as Paul is a sign that there will, one day, be many more like him.

Notice that Paul is “talking to you Gentiles” (v 13). Paul wants the non-Jewish Christians in the church in Rome to understand that God has not given up on his ancient people; neither has Paul; and neither should they. There is an implicit challenge to the Gentile Christian community, and to Christian communities today: *Are we creating a community that is the fulfillment of what God had called Old Testament Israel to be? Would a devout Jew look at our church and be aroused to envy, and give the gospel a hearing?*

## Questions for reflection

1. Are there people you think are beyond God's reach—that he has given up on? How will you undermine this attitude?
2. Have you met people who have such a high view of God's holiness that they cannot accept his grace?
3. Could someone looking at your life clearly see, and so come to envy, the benefits of the gospel you enjoy?

## PART TWO

### Branches Grafted In

In **verse 16**, Paul compared current Jewish believers to a root, promising more “holy ... branches” to come. In **verse 17**, he continues with the image of a tree—an olive tree—but changes what the branches and root represent.

To understand how Paul is warning the Gentile Christians here, we need a brief horticultural lesson! William Ramsay, the Scottish New Testament scholar, provides insight here:

*“In exceptional circumstances ... it is customary to reinvigorate an olive tree which is ceasing to bear fruit by grafting it with a shoot of the wild-olive, so that the sap of the tree **ennobles** this wild shoot and the tree now again begins to bear fruit.”*

*(The Expositor, quoted in Stott, The Message of Romans, page 300)*

This approach to horticulture is a great metaphor for Paul. The “wild olive branch” is a dynamic growing thing, but it is able to draw and produce life only because it is grafted into the tree, from which it draws nourishment. At the same time, the presence of the branch renews the whole tree, kicking on all its systems. Paul applies the metaphor specifically to “you Gentiles” (v 13). They are the “wild olive shoot[s]” that have been “grafted in” to the people of God so that they can “share in the nourishing sap from the olive root” (v 17)—the life-giving gospel of justification by faith, which has been the faith of believing Israel ever since Abraham, the founder of the Jewish people.

And Paul’s warning to the Gentiles is that they must not boast (v 18), must not look down on “those branches” that have been “broken off”—unbelieving Jews. They must realize that they are the beneficiaries of Israel’s biblical religion (see 9:1-5). They have been grafted into the tree of Israel. They inherit the promises given to Abraham because they have the faith of Abraham (9:6-7). But in all this they come and stand in the flow of biblical history and promise that come through Israel. Thus they must not look down on the Jews, but respect them.

“You do not support the root, but the root supports you“ (11:18). It is most inappropriate for the Gentiles to be disrespectful of the Jews. We have a Jewish Bible and a Jewish Messiah!

The Gentiles are warned not to be arrogant, but rather, afraid (v 20). It is true that “[Jewish] branches were broken off so that I [a Gentile] could be grafted in” (v 19), in the sense that Jewish rejection brought the gospel to the Gentiles (v 12, 15). But no Gentile should think that a Jew is therefore less deserving, and they more, of their place in God’s people. Since “you stand by faith” (v 20), and since “God did not spare the natural branches” when they refused to put their faith in Christ (v 21), Gentile Christians should respond with reverent fear. Whatever our background, all that keeps us from being “broken off” is the faith that God has mercifully granted us.

So Paul calls us to meditate on “the kindness and sternness of God” (v 22). Whether his kindness or sternness rests on you depends on whether you believe or disbelieve. The example of disbelieving Israel should prevent any casual complacency.

It is normal to wonder how this kind of talk squares with all we have heard from Paul in Romans 8 and 9. He said we are only justified believers because we were chosen by grace (8:30-31; 11:5-6). He said that our salvation is certain, that nothing in heaven or earth can separate us from God’s love (8:38-39). So why warn us to “be afraid”?

The point Paul is making is that faith is not presumption. Throughout Romans, his whole argument about the Jews is: *Though they were the chosen people, they began to think they were the choice people. They became confident that they were “in” no matter how they lived, simply because they were Abraham’s physical descendants. That is not the case.* So now Paul says: *Don’t fall into the same presumption!* He exhorts them to “continue in [God’s] kindness” (11:22). The only way we know that God’s sovereign love is upon us is that we continue; we persevere in seeking to be like Jesus, until the day we meet Jesus. If that continuing disappears—if we start to live for ourselves and live in sin, or start to rely on our own performance for our relationship with God—then we will and should begin to wonder if his kindness is upon us, if we were ever

chosen.

We must not pit this kind of exhortation against 8:30 (“those he justified, he also glorified”) and the many other passages where Paul insists we are safe in God’s love. 1 John 2:19 says: “They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us.” There is no talk of “losing salvation” here, only of *the revelation of counterfeits*. Hebrews 3:14-15 is similar: “We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first. As has just been said: ‘Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts...’” If we have faith in Christ Jesus, we can be assured; but we must never be arrogant.

## All Israel Will Be Saved

Paul now returns to discussing Israel’s future. First, he points out that it is perfectly possible for Jews to be included in the people of God. “If they do not persist in unbelief ... God is able to graft them in again” (Romans **11:23**). If he was able to save those who were “wild by nature” (v **24**)—the Gentiles—“how much more” able is he to bring the Jews, the “natural branches,” back “into their own olive tree!” Paul is saying to the Gentiles: *Since God can save you, you who were born without all the privileges of 9:4-5, then he can certainly save a Jew, who was born into them!*

And so he reveals a “mystery” to help the Gentile brothers not to “be conceited” (**11:25**). And the mystery is that Israel’s hardness is not permanent, and that “all Israel will be saved” (v **26**). This is a startling verse! What does it mean?

*Who is in view here?* What does Paul mean when he says “Israel”? Some want to say that it is only the elect remnant of Israel, but that makes this a meaningless statement (of course all the elect will be saved!) Besides, in **verse 25** the word “Israel” clearly means ethnic Israel in contrast to the Gentiles. So this refers to the Jews as a whole body.

What is being said about them? What does it mean when Paul says “saved”? The quote that immediately follows in **verses 26-27** (from Isaiah and Jeremiah) refers to a “deliverer ... come from Zion” who will “take away their sins.” This is clearly Jesus. So what Paul is saying is that at some point “Israel” as a whole will experience salvation through Jesus Christ. This means that Paul is most strongly encouraging the continued evangelization of Jewish people. John Stott provides an interesting comment which is well worth quoting at some length:

*“It is understandable that since the holocaust Jews have demanded an end to Christian missionary activity among them, and that many Christians have felt embarrassed about continuing it. It is even mooted that Jewish evangelism is an unacceptable form of anti-Semitism. So some Christians have attempted to develop ... a ‘two-covenant theology’... namely that there are two different salvation ‘tracks’—the Christian track for the believing remnant and believing Gentiles, and the track for historical Israel which relies on God’s covenant with them ... Romans 11 stands in clear opposition to this trend because of its insistence on the fact that there is only one olive tree, to which Jewish and Gentile believers both belong. Jewish people ‘will be grafted in’ again ‘if they do not persist in unbelief.’ [We are to ‘be afraid’ at what unbelief has done to some of them.] So faith in Jesus is essential for them ... The two-covenant theology also has the disastrous effect of perpetuating the distinction between Jews and Gentiles which Jesus Christ has abolished ... ‘The irony of this,’ writes Tom Wright [in *The Climax of the Covenant*, page 253], ‘is that the late twentieth century, in order to avoid anti-Semitism, has advocated a position (the non-evangelization of the Jews) which Paul regards precisely as anti-Semitic. It would be quite intolerable to imagine a church at any period which was [either] simply a Gentile phenomenon or consisted only of Jews.’”*

*(The Message of Romans, pages 304-305)*

How many will be saved? What does the word “all” mean in **verse 26**? “All Israel” probably does not mean every Jew without exception, F. F. Bruce explains:

*“‘All Israel’ is a recurring expression in Jewish literature, where it need*

*not mean ‘every Jew without a single exception’ but ‘Israel as a whole.’”*  
(Romans, page 209)

Likely, it means a great mass of the Jewish people. That is how the word “Israel” is used through the rest of the chapter. Paul often uses it to refer to the majority of Israel over and against the minority of believing Jews. That is, though he himself is part of Israel ethnically, he does not include himself when he speaks of “Israel” rejecting the gospel.

Many people think that Paul must mean a last-minute, large-scale mass revival of Christianity among Jews—and that could be the case. But Paul’s language allows for the possibility of a steady but growing flow of Jews into Christianity until we arrive at the place where more or most Jews have come to believe.

So, how should the Gentiles view the Jewish non-Christians? Despite their hostility (v 28), God loves them because of his promises to their ancestors, “the patriarchs,” and “God’s gifts [the promises] and his call [his commitment to make Israel his people] are irrevocable” (v 29). Further, in **verses 30-31**, Paul says that the Jewish unbelievers are to be viewed with hope. The Christian is to say to themselves: *I disobeyed God and refused to believe the gospel, and look at me now—here I am, a Christian, in part because the gospel reached beyond disbelieving Israel (v 30). So if God can reach me with his mercy through their disobedience, he can certainly reach them with his mercy through my faith (v 31)! What part might I play in his wonderful sovereign purposes for his ancient people?*

**Verse 32** is (almost) Paul’s conclusion to the chapter, and to the section that began at 9:1. The ESV translation is more helpfully accurate: “God has consigned all to disobedience [ie: hardened their hard hearts, 9:17-18], that he may have mercy on all.” Because Paul uses the word “all” for those God will have mercy on, many have thought that Paul is teaching universal salvation—that eventually God will simply have mercy on all and save all. But the rest of Romans does not allow us to interpret this in such a way. Romans 2:5-8 tells us clearly that some will receive God’s judgment at the end. Instead, we should understand **11:32** (along with **verses 30-31**) as teaching that God is not showing preference. He uses the Jews to reach the Gentiles and the Gentiles to reach the Jews. All peoples—both the Gentiles and the Jews—have been disobedient, and

yet all peoples—from the Gentiles and Jews—will find God’s mercy (or rather, be found by it). God’s mercy is coming to all means that, as F.F. Bruce puts it, it is coming “on all without distinction, rather than on all without exception” (*Romans*, page 219).

## How Unsearchable His Judgments!

**Verse 32** is the end of Paul’s argument—but it is not the end of the chapter. In **verses 33-36**, we find Paul breaking into spontaneous worship! These are wonderful verses to read through and meditate on. We can learn many things about our own worship from his example—here are four:

1. *There should be no worship without truth.* Paul is quoting Scripture as he praises God spontaneously. In **verse 34** he quotes Isaiah 40:13 and in **verse 35** he quotes Job 41:11. Knowing Scripture intimately makes an enormous difference in both the ignition of praise in the heart and its expression. Many books teach meditation and/or spirituality techniques that center on “visualizations” of incidents in one’s past or on phrases, images, or even nothing at all. True worship does not come from meditation in general, but through meditation on Scripture in particular. The Bible must always be the center of any public or private praise and worship.
2. *Conversely, there should be no teaching or study of truth without worship.* Paul does not teach or study doctrinal truth without using it immediately to praise God. He never treats truth simply as something to be known or even applied, but as a gateway into the praise of God. He uses truth to see God. We are never to study God or the Bible in a detached, cool manner. We must let ourselves be disturbed, comforted, and challenged by the truth. We must always allow ourselves to feel its power.
3. *Doctrines that exalt God lead to the greatest joy.* Paul does not find the deepest impulses for praise in looking at human accomplishments. Praise

comes to the degree that we see our weakness, impotence, and complete dependence on God. In other words, the doctrine of God's complete sovereignty in salvation is what leads Paul to the greatest joy and praise. We have never given God anything—he owes us nothing. These are the ideas that bring Paul the most joy in worship.

4. *We do not need to understand everything to praise the God who does.* Paul does not even get troubled by the aspects of God's ways which he cannot discern or figure out. "How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" (Romans **11:33**, ESV). Many people feel they cannot worship God unless they can understand everything about him, but Paul knew that to be an impossibility. A God whose counsel we could fully grasp, whose ways we could fully discern, and whose nature we could fully explain in our human minds, would be a fairly limited "God." The God of the Bible is far bigger than us. So, with Paul, we do not need to be worried that we do not understand everything about him and his plan. We praise him for all he has revealed. And we praise him that there is so much more that he has not revealed. We may not be able to understand everything about him, but we are able to marvel at him. We echo Paul in **verse 36**: "To him be the glory forever! Amen."

## Questions for reflection

1. What would go wrong in your Christian life if you remembered only the kindness or the sternness of God, and not both?
2. How do these verses change your view of the Jewish people?
3. Meditate on the truths of Romans 9 – 11. Let them lead you into praising God for his character and his works.

## ROMANS CHAPTER 12 VERSES 1 TO 8

### 7. NEW RELATIONSHIPS: To God and the Church

Chapter 12 marks a turning point, the beginning of a new chapter. “Therefore,” (v 1) Paul begins; he is about to give an outline of Christian living that should issue from a knowledge of and trust in the gospel he has been explaining. Thus, **verses 1-2** are a summary of the whole of the Christian life!

#### Why Obey?

What is the motivation for Christian living? **Verse 1** gives us our primary motive, summed up in two words. “Therefore,” indicates that we give ourselves to God because of all Paul has been explaining in chapters 1 – 11; namely, that we are justified by grace alone through faith alone because of Christ alone.

The second word, “in view of God’s *mercy*,” essentially says the same thing. In short, the only sufficient motivation for the Christian life is gratitude for grace.

This is especially important in light of Paul’s magnificent and unsurpassed argument in Romans 8, that Christians cannot lose their salvation or their place in God’s love. If a Christian could lose salvation, then surely the overriding motivation for obedience would be fear. Non-Christians generally do not believe in God’s wrath and thus do not find it very frightening. But we do know about it, so if a Christian believes it is possible to come back under that condemnation, the fear would be immense. Fear-based obedience is more negative (afraid of punishment) than it is positive (grateful for grace).

If fear is the primary motivation for our obedience, we should see the following effects:

1. Our motivation will lose its power over time. Fear as an emotion is very draining. It moves you to great feats at first, but eventually it is exhausting. People who live in great fear experience a numbing effect after a while. Slowly, one becomes too tired to care, indifferent to what happens. Fear-based religion therefore often tends to be short-lived.
2. Also, fear-based obedience has a great deal of trouble with repentance. When we are motivated by fear, we believe that somewhere there is a “line”; if we sin too much, we cross it, and God will condemn us. But we don’t know where that line is. As a result, repentance is not a sweet thing but very bitter. We don’t have the security to admit our sins for fear of reprisals from God, so we do a lot of rationalizing and blaming.
3. Fear-based obedience will always make it difficult to endure suffering or troubles. The fear-based person will either think: *God is paying me back! God has abandoned me! Maybe I crossed the line this time...* or: *This isn’t fair! I obey so that God will bless me, so that these bad things won’t happen!* In other words, despair or bitterness will be the result of suffering if one’s Christian life is fear-based.

## Living Sacrifices

Thus, Paul gives us a springboard for the Christian life in a disarmingly simple phrase: “Therefore ... in view of God’s mercy” (12:1). And then he “urge[s]” his “brothers” to do two things; the central features of a life of following Jesus. One is in **verse 1**, the other in **verse 2**; and we now turn to the first: “Offer your bodies as living sacrifices.”

Paul uses temple terminology here. The metaphor he uses is that of a worshiper at the temple who comes in with an offering. Now, some offerings in

the Old Testament were “sin offerings,” in which the worshiper was shedding blood and asking forgiveness. But Jesus is our sin offering—that is what the entire book of Hebrews is about. Therefore, the offering Paul points to is not a sin offering.

The second kind of offering was a “whole burnt offering,” which was a valuable animal from your flock. It had to be without defect (holy and without blemish). Why? Such an animal was expensive! It showed that all you had was at God’s disposal—you did not give God your leftovers! The burnt offering was always burnt totally and it represented complete consecration and devotion to God.

To be a “living sacrifice” is to be fully at God’s disposal. It means, actively, to be willing to obey God in anything he says in any area of life; and, passively, to be willing to thank God for anything he *sends* in any area of life.

Another way Paul communicates the idea of totality or entirety is by urging his readers to offer their “bodies.” This was probably startling to Greco-Roman readers, who were brought up to believe that the body was negative and bad, and that spirituality involved cultivating the mind and soul. Paul is saying that God does not want a purely inward and abstract worship, but a practical and total one. He wants us to give him everything we do. We are not to give God the leftovers!

John Stott writes:

*“Paul made it plain, in his exposure of human **depravity** in 3:13ff, that it reveals itself through our bodies, in tongues which practise deceit and lips which spread poison, in mouths which are full of cursing and bitterness, in feet which are swift to shed blood, and in eyes which look away from God. Conversely, Christian **sanctity** shows itself in the deeds of the body. So we are to offer different parts of our bodies ... to God as ‘instruments of righteousness’ (6:13, 16, 19). Then our feet will walk in his paths, our lips will speak the truth and spread the gospel, our tongues will bring healing, our hands will lift up those who have fallen ... our arms will embrace the lonely and the unloved, our ears will listen to the cries of the distressed, and our eyes will look humbly and patiently*

*towards God.” (The Message of Romans, page 322)*

The word “living” may mean that the sacrifice is a constant thing. The word “sacrifice” actually means “to kill.” That makes it a “living killing!” It means we must continually renew our position as wholly obedient and at God’s disposal. It is what Jesus meant when he said that a follower of his “must deny himself and take up his cross daily and ... [lose] his life” (Luke 9:23-24). This is what a “holy” life looks like (Romans **12:1**). To be holy is to be utterly pure and completely set apart. The Christian life is to be a daily giving over of our lives and our bodies in obedience to God, motivated by the view of God’s mercy that we have as we stand at the foot of the cross and see his Son dying there for us.

## **Pleasing To God**

“Holy ... to God” describes the quality of the life we should pursue. “Pleasing to God” describes its results. The gospel radically reorients our aim in life, so that we are no longer hoping and seeking to please others, or even ourselves, but our Father. As Paul put it to the Thessalonian church: “We are not trying to please men but God, who tests our hearts” (1 Thessalonians 2:4).

The gospel both motivates and frees us to live lives that please our Creator. In the gospel, we find that trusting in Christ brings God’s full and complete favor and approval. The Spirit changes us from those whose minds were “hostile to God” (Romans 8:7) to those whose real natures desire to love and serve God (7:22). When God sees the believer, he sees Jesus and his perfect obedience (Galatians 3:25-27)—and so he says to us what he says of him: “With you I am well pleased” (Mark 1:11). God is pleased with us.

And because God is pleased with us, we can live in a way which pleases God. We know that as we obey sacrificially, we are pleasing our heavenly Father. So we long to obey God, not for ourselves so that God will save us, but out of gratitude to God, who we know has already saved us. God’s approval liberates us to live in a way which God approves of. We are his children, by his grace—in view of this, we long to please the God who is pleased with us.

Here is a helpful illustration. Imagine a father watching his young son play baseball for his team, having spent hours in the yard teaching him batting technique. This father already loves his son fully and completely. If his son forgets his father's instructions and strikes out, it will in no way lessen his father's love for him or approval of him. The son is assured of his father's love, regardless of his performance.

But the son will still long to hit that home run. Not for himself to gain his father's love—but for his father, because he is already loved. If he doesn't know his father loves him, his efforts will be for himself—to win that love. But because he knows his father already loves him, his efforts are for his father—to please him.

Having a good view of God's mercy provides us with both a powerful assurance, and the possibility of and motivation to live a sacrificially obedient life, pleasing to God.

## **Rational Worship**

It is living this way, says Paul, that is “your spiritual act of worship” (Romans **12:1**). What does this mean? Unfortunately, the English translation in the NIV1984 and ESV (“spiritual”) and NIV2011 (“true and proper”) obscures an important point. In the Greek, Paul says this offering of ourselves is our “rational” (*logican*) worship. The word is literally “logical.” This means first, that it is only in light of God's mercy that offering our whole selves can be seen as rational, or logical; and second, that clear thinking on this subject means the only logical response is to make such a sacrificial offering of our lives. In short, once you have a good view of God's mercy, anything less than a total, complete sacrifice of yourself to God is completely irrational! If you give yourself partially or half-heartedly, you are simply not thinking; you are not looking at what Jesus did. If what he did does not move you or break the ice over your soul, you must ask yourself if you have ever understood the gospel.

## Transformed, Not Conforming

Paul is laying out a radical way of living. It will require a transformed mind to pursue it. So he tells us: “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed” (v 2). What does this mean? Two patterns are held up: the pattern of the world and the pattern of God’s will. Paul tells us to recognize and reject the pattern of thinking, feeling, and behaving that characterizes the world, and to embrace God’s will for all character and life.

The word “conform” is in contrast to “transform,” however, and that is interesting. “Transform” is the Greek word *metamorpho*. The only other place where Paul uses it is in 2 Corinthians 3:18: “We, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord.” It clearly refers to an inner transformation rather than mere outward conformity. Notice that such an inner transformation is necessary because the will of God has to be “tested” by us (Romans 12:2). It takes wisdom and goodness to discover more of the wise and the good!

Paul is telling us that the Christian life occurs through the “renewing of your mind” (v 2). Paul does not really explain what this means but it is important, for it is the way in which we are to be transformed into the pattern of Christ. Perhaps the best way to understand this is to see the mind renewal as just another way to talk about viewing God’s mercy and responding in rational worship. We are to have our minds inflamed with the truth about Christ! Elsewhere, Paul gives us hints about mind renewal. It is not less than intellectual; it does mean to have truth from God’s word “dwell in [us] richly” (Colossians 3:16). But it is more than that. In Ephesians 4:23 Paul tells us to “be renewed in the spirit of your minds” (ESV). This probably means not just that we think true thoughts, but that the governing influence of our mind is reoriented. In modern terminology, one’s “imagination” is captured by Christ. Who he is and what he did fires the imagination and controls our minds. But this only happens when the Holy Spirit uses the truth in us in that way (1 Corinthians 2:11-14). Thus our mind is renewed through the word of God and the Spirit of God, resulting in “holy reasonings” that move us to offer ourselves as sacrifices.

## How To Overcome Spiritual Stagnation

Romans **12:1-2** shows us the way to overcome spiritual stagnation or ongoing disobedience; the way to bring our hearts joyfully to offer ourselves wholly:

1. View the mercies of God. (KJV and ESV have “mercies” instead of “mercy”; we are not to think of God’s mercy in general, but his specific acts and deeds—supremely, to look back at the cross.) If we lack a passion or interest in being holy, it comes from a failure to contemplate God’s mercies toward us. There is no way to sustain a pattern of holiness in Christian living without a kindling of our hearts by deep meditation on God’s mercy and grace; we need to begin reflecting on the mercies of God.
2. Remind ourselves that the only rational response to Christ giving us all of himself is to give all of ourselves to him. To fail to give ourselves in complete obedience to God is not only offensive morally, it is a failure to think clearly. We come to grips with the One who surrendered himself utterly for us only to the extent that we surrender ourselves utterly to him. It is the only sensible thing to do!
3. Remember that our minds need renewing; we are not to be conformed (either to the world, or to a new, external moral standard), but rather, transformed from the inside out. Again, this requires us to make time regularly to meditate on who Jesus is and what he has done, and to reflect on what his will for us is in the circumstances he sends our way—how he would have us behave, and how he may be changing us.

## **Questions** for reflection

1. How will you keep God's mercies in view over the next week?
2. Do you ever obey God out of fear? What would change if you obeyed him out of gratitude and a desire to please him?
3. Identify a way in which you regularly disobey God. How will you apply the three means of overcoming stagnation laid out in the previous sections?

## PART TWO

### Not Too High, Not Too Low

Part of being transformed in view of God's mercy is to have a right view of ourselves. Paul says to "every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought" (Romans 12:3). Paul tells us to avoid being "high-minded" about ourselves. Despite all the warnings our culture gives about the danger of low self-esteem, the real danger is self-centeredness and **egocentricity**. Most of the world's religions have identified humanity's worst problem as stemming from inflated views of one's own importance, abilities and rights (Buddhism is particularly insistent on this point). We are all prone to exaggerate our own wisdom, competence, sincerity and power. As Christians, we must avoid this. C.S. Lewis said he knew of no one, except Christians, who ever admitted to being proud and conceited. Paul shows us that we must always be on the lookout for this danger. We need to accept what we are not, what we cannot do—which opens us up to being able to rely on others.

But equally, Paul tells "every one of you [to] think of yourself with sober judgment" (v 3). Sobriety here means just what we think of as an alternative to drunkenness. To be sober means to be rigorously accurate, completely in touch with reality. Paul does not say here: *Be humble* or: *See others as better than yourselves*. At this point he warns against thinking less of your abilities than is warranted. We need to acknowledge what we are good at and what we can do—because doing this makes us able to serve others. We are to think straight about ourselves; neither too low nor too high.

### How To Think About Yourself

As soon as Paul tells the Romans to "think soberly" (KJV), he tells them to do so "in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you" (v 3b). He then proceeds to give them another way to think of themselves, as persons with different gifts in one body (v 4). This is how to think of ourselves rightly.

Most people reading this verse have thought that the “measure of faith” means “the amount of faith”—that is, that Paul is saying that our opinion of ourselves depends on the amount of faith we have, God having given some people more faith than others. In the context of all Paul has been saying in Romans, though, that seems unlikely. Besides, the word “measure” is the Greek word *metron* (from which we get “meter”), and it most likely means a standard of measurement, not an amount. In other words, Paul is saying: *All of you have been given your saving faith in Christ crucified, and that is how you are to measure yourselves.* That means we need first of all to realize that we are *all the same*. Regardless of our background, abilities, etc, we are all saved in Christ. God loves us equally in Christ.

The gospel prevents us thinking more highly of ourselves than we ought—we are sinners, and all our efforts earn only judgment, and we are saved entirely by Another’s kindness. And the gospel prevents us thinking in a more lowly way than we ought—we are *saved* sinners, and we are loved and valued in the gaze of the only One whose opinion ultimately matters.

This, then, is a direct command to start our self-appreciation by remembering who we are in the gospel. The first “measure” by which we evaluate ourselves is the gospel we believe.

Then, second of all, we are to think of ourselves as having distinct gifts and abilities within the body of Christ. In other words, we are *all different*, too. We are not clones. We are the same in our standing in the gospel, but we are different in our varied abilities to minister to each other. Paul says in Ephesians that every person who is saved is “God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (2:10). We have each been given distinct personalities, temperaments, histories and abilities that equip us for a particular set of good works that God has created us to do. God has deliberately ordered his church as he has ordered the human body, to be inter-dependent and so that we belong to each other (Romans 12:5).

Paul puts it at greater length in 1 Corinthians 12: “If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body,

every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I don’t need you!’ And the head cannot say to the feet, ‘I don’t need you!’” (v 17-21).

Again, this image of the body prevents us thinking more highly of ourselves than we ought (we need all the other members of our church); and in a more lowly way than we ought (the other members of our church need us).

“We have different gifts” (Romans **12:6**). And, crucially, we need to remember that these gifts come to us “according to the grace given us.” God’s grace is not only seen in him giving us righteousness; it is also seen in him giving us abilities (see Ephesians 4:7-12); and these are given not for our own self-service, but to be used for the good of the body to which we belong.

So the second way to get a correct view of ourselves is to remember to whom we belong—to our church body; not to ourselves, because we belong to Christ—and then get to work in ministry, finding out what God has equipped us to do best, and doing it with all our might!

## God’s Gifts

Paul then goes on to list a selection of gifts that God gives to different members of his people. This list is not complete (and neither are the other lists in 1 Corinthians 12:8-10, 28 or Ephesians 4:11). Generally speaking, spiritual gifts break into three categories:

- Speaking gifts (eg: prophecy, teaching, exhorting, knowledge)
- Leading gifts (government, administration, wisdom)
- Serving gifts (giving, mercy, hospitality, miracles, tongues and their interpretation, healing—some people put these latter three in a separate category of “sign gifts”)

These gifts are given so that they can be expressed through ministries, particular

channels of service that focus on people's needs. A particular ministry may require one specific gift, or a combination of gifts (consider what it takes to teach the Bible to children).

Here is a brief definition of the gifts Paul lists here in Romans 12:

- *Prophecy (v 6)*: This probably is not the gift of giving divinely inspired messages from God. In some places in the New Testament, prophets seem to give divine messages as in the Old Testament (eg: Agabus in Acts 11:28), but in 1 Corinthians 12:28 Paul puts the prophets in a position subordinate to the apostles, who had divine authority. Also, here the prophet is told to prophesy “in proportion to his faith.” Many people read that as meaning “the amount of his faith,” but literally the Greek reads “according to the **analogy** of his faith,” a word that means “the standard.” In other words, Paul is saying that the prophet must not prophesy in a way that contradicts Christian doctrine. Now, if prophecy were a divine word direct from God, why would such a rule be laid down? It could be that the word “prophecy” has more than one meaning. Here in Romans **12:6**, it seems to mean preaching or **anointed utterance**.
- *Service (v 7)*: This is the word *diakonia*, which means “practical service.” People with gifts of service are good at the practical tasks, and good at administration. They are great team workers and do not need the spotlight.
- *Teaching (v 7)*: This is the gift of making truth clear and understandable. A good teacher may not be a good preacher and vice versa. And teaching gifts can vary greatly: some are better in small groups, others in large groups, some with children, some with peers, and so on.
- *Encouragement (v 8)*: This is the word *parakaleo*, which means to “come alongside.” “Encouragement” is a good translation, but it also includes most of what today we would call “counseling”—support, inspiration. Encouragers are not necessarily trained, formal counselors. They can serve as advisors, supporters, greeters, and welcomers in many ways.

- *Giving (v 8)*: People with this gift not only enjoy giving in unusual proportions, but are wise in their gifts. Their generosity is spiritually very fruitful.
- *Leadership (v 8)*: Leaders are people with the gift of getting people to follow them. They can put a vision before a group and inspire them to get there.
- *Mercy (v 8)*: This is a gift of people specifically moved to work with the poor, the sick, the weak, the prisoner, the addicted, the elderly, and so on.

## Discerning Your Gifts

How do we discern our own spiritual gifts? Paul gives us three things to do:

1. Self-examination. Paul wants us to “think of yourself with sober judgment” (v 3) with regard to gifts. To begin with, we look at our hearts to discover gifts. We can look at our feelings. We ask: *What do I enjoy doing? What kind of ministry is satisfying and attractive to me?*  
We can look at our perceptions of needs. *What problems do I most notice? Do I feel burdened for the poor? For people with counseling needs? Do I feel the church is too disorganized?* In other words, it is possible that you are especially sensitive to the kinds of needs that God has called you to meet.  
We can look at our effectiveness. *Am I any good at what I enjoy? Do people get helped?* Ask those who know you to be sure that your judgment is “sober” and rigorously accurate.
2. Experience. In **verse 6**, Paul says that if someone has a gift, “let him use it.” In general, you don’t learn your gifts before you do ministry. You learn your gifts as you minister. Do you think you have a set of gifts in a particular area? Well, work in that area. You may revise your understanding of your

gifts as you do ministry. It is best to try all kinds of ministry as a way to learn your spiritual “aptitudes.”

3. Study the biblical lists. These lists are probably there to help readers to take an inventory. It is hard to discern your gifts without some categories of spiritual ability through which to assess yourself. So it is helpful and important to look at the spiritual-gift lists and the characters of the Bible to process better your own experience.
4. “Use it” (v 6); “do it” (v 8)! Once we have identified a gifting, we are to use it in service of others in the church. God gives his gifts as he chooses, and we’re not to say: *I would like a different gift!* or: *I want to use my gift in a different way!* Part of living as a sacrifice to God is to give over our abilities and gifts to him, to be used in his service. We’ll only do this joyfully as we keep his mercies to us in view.

## **Questions** for reflection

1. How have these verses changed the way you think of yourself?
2. How have they changed the way you view your church?
3. How will they change the way in which you use your gifts in and for your church?

## ROMANS 12 VERSES 9 TO 21

### 8. NEW RELATIONSHIPS: To Friend and Enemy

12:1-2 looked backwards to the previous eleven chapters—“in view of God’s mercy”—and forwards to the rest of the letter, because for the next five chapters, Paul is showing how the Christian life is transformed by a renewed mind and a body offered as a “living sacrifice.” In the rest of chapter 12, he continues to talk about our relationships within the church, with fellow believers, and then begins to consider how Christians are to relate to those outside.

#### True Love

**Verse 9** gives three **imperatives**: “Be sincere. Hate ... evil; cling to ... good.” All of them tell us what it means to live a life that is truly about “love.” All three are about truth.

First, we are told that our love must be true to our hearts. Literally, the word “sincere” in Greek is *anhypokritos* (unhypocritical). We are not to be phony in our dealings with people. We are not to be polite, helpful, and apparently warm on the outside, while despising them on the inside. This is important because a culture of “niceness” can develop within the church (and any community that emphasizes traditional values). A **veneer** of pleasantness covers over a spirit of backbiting, gossip and prejudice. There is an absence of “tough love”, in which people would love each other enough to confront problems and sins in themselves and their friends.

Second, we are told—both negatively (“hate”) and positively (“cling”)—that our love must be true to God’s will. Our love must operate on the basis of God’s moral order. We must “hate” (literally “be horrified” by) what God calls evil,

and we must “cling” (literally, glue ourselves inseparably) to what God calls good. Why is this so important? Because when we love someone, it often distorts our view of good and evil. Song lyrics capture the problem—they tell us things like: *If loving you is wrong, I don’t want to be right!* or: *It can’t be wrong, if it feels so right!* In other words, if you love someone, your heart is bound up with his or her heart.

Your beloved’s distress becomes yours, and his or her happiness becomes yours. Therein lies the temptation to give the loved one what creates emotional joy, rather than what is best (but which may create emotional sadness or anger). It is an extremely common problem in child rearing. Parents don’t punish children consistently because they cannot bear their tears and anger. But the result of a childhood without discipline is almost always disaster.

It may seem strange to tell someone to love and to hate in the same sentence, but that is what Paul does. We cannot love rightly without hating rightly! This is closely linked to being “sincere.” Real love loves the beloved enough to be “tough.” Rebecca Manley Pippert writes:

*“Think of how we feel when we see someone we love ravaged by unwise actions or relationships. Real love stands against the deception, the lie, the sin that destroys.”*

*(Hope Has Its Reasons, pages 93-94)*

God’s law reveals the way in which our world and our souls were designed. To disobey God’s law is always bad for the beloved. Therefore, real love is concerned about truth. Any love that is afraid to confront the beloved is not really love, but a selfish desire to be loved. This kind of selfish love is afraid to do what is right (toward God and the beloved) if it risks losing the beloved’s affection. It makes an idol out of the beloved. It says: *I’ll do anything to keep him or her loving me!* This is not loving the person. It is loving the love you get from the person. In other words, it is loving yourself more than the person. So any “love” that cuts corners morally, or fails to confront, is not really love at all.

True love, on the other hand, is willing to confront, even to “lose” the beloved in the short run if there is a chance of helping him or her.

## Love Those You Don't Love

How can we love unlovely people whom we do not like, and yet still be “sincere”? It is hypocritical to act lovingly when you despise someone in your heart. Yet it is unrealistic to insist that one's heart be warm and kindly disposed before we do actions of love. So what is the solution?

Here is the gospel way. A Christian goes about “doing love” while repenting, softening the heart through the recollection of Christ's sacrifice for us (12:1-2). How does this work? The gospel is this: we are not loved because we are intrinsically lovely or because we have made ourselves worthy of love. We are loved because Jesus died for us when we were unattractive in order to make us attractive. If Christians think of this as they are serving unattractive people, they will find a repentance growing. *Oh, Lord! I was so much more unattractive to you than this person is to me. Yet you were tortured and killed—you gave up your life for me! And all I need to do is to give up some time and effort for this person.* A person who does not understand the gospel cannot do this. A person who is just generally moral and nice cannot do this. They have to choose between the two inadequate alternatives: either phony love (niceness toward people you dislike), or sporadic love (kindness only toward people you like). But if you show love as you repent, your heart is softened as you serve. Your service is sincere toward God at that moment, and becomes more sincere toward the person as you go along.

## What Love Looks Like

Following the three exhortations in **verse 9**, Paul gives another twelve or thirteen (depending on exactly how you separate them out!) in **verses 10-16**. They all show us what love is. We can divide them into four categories which build up a biblical definition of love:

1. Real love is doggedly committed. “Be devoted to one another in brotherly

love” (**v 10a**). Both “devoted” (*philostorge*) and “brotherly love” (*philadelphia*) apply the normal relationships of blood-related family members to the Christian community. Paul is saying that we should love one another as if we were related. Family relationships are essential to us. Even if our brothers, sisters, children and parents develop radically different values and lifestyles from us, there is a tie that remains. “He’s still my brother” or “she’s still my daughter” are statements that convey this. Paul is saying that Christians, who share common values, are to be as doggedly devoted to one another as family members. “Devoted” is therefore a challenging description of Christian love for those of us who have been raised in individualistic cultures.

2. Real love is putting others first. In **verse 10b**, we are told to “honor one another above yourselves.” Paul says the same thing in Philippians 2:3: “In humility consider others better than yourselves.” The word “honor” means to treat someone or something as valuable and precious. There are deep theological roots here. Christianity and Judaism understand that every human being is created in the image of God. We were designed to bear a resemblance to God in our rationality, personality, creativity, our eternal soul, and so on. Therefore, each person we meet is infinitely precious and important, and should be treated as such. Honoring another above ourselves means to listen to the other person, to be most aware of his or her hopes, joys, needs and fears, and to be considerate. In addition, when Christians see other Christians, they see not just the image of the Creator, but Christ himself in residence. Now, to “honor” above yourself is not to try to convince yourself that you are inferior to other people; Romans 12:3-4 tells us to think of ourselves as equal to all others in Christ and made for special service in the world. Our “self-image” is solid and sober. Rather, Paul exhorts us to a simple discipline—to concentrate more on the needs of others than we do on our own. In **verse 16** we are essentially told the same thing. Real love is not self-centered: “Do not be proud ... do not be

conceited.” What does this mean in practice? “Be willing to associate with people of low position,” however we would naturally define “low position” (this will vary according to our background and character, and the attitude of those around us). The essence of love is not to concentrate on our own image, position and needs, but on the needs of others.

3. Real love is patient. **Verses 11-12** give us four imperatives that are really calls to patience. At first, these two verses only seem to be about our relationship to God, but we must notice that they stand in the middle of numerous directions about Christian relationships. Therefore, Paul is really exhorting us to use all our spiritual resources not to give up on our Christian brothers and sisters. We must keep our “hope,” be “patient” in all the troubles we meet, and address all this with “prayer.” How does this relate to Christian fellowship? Perhaps Paul just means that we are to be models to our brothers and sisters when we go through difficulties. But it may be that we are to meet the troubles of Christian relationships with patience and prayer! To be involved deeply in people’s lives is hard work. As C.S. Lewis once pointed out, the only way to be sure not to have your heart broken is never to give it to anyone. Since we will give our hearts to people, our “zeal” (v 11) and our “hope” (v 12) will flag. We are to remember our hope of triumph through Christ, and meet it with prayer (v 12). Then in **verse 14** we are told to “bless and do not curse.” We will look at this below, but this is another aspect of patience. We are to forgive each other—not only are we not to pay each other back, we are positively to put ourselves out to build up those who have hurt us.
4. Real love combines feeling with action. On the one hand, we are called to empathize with others. In a powerful verse, we are called to “rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn” (v 15). And in **verse 13**, Paul essentially says: *Put your money where your mouth is*. He calls us to “share with God’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality.” We are to share our homes, our money and our things with those who need them. This

needs to be seen in context with the rest of the exhortations, which press us to be truthful and devoted despite our feelings. So we see that real love is not sentimentality, but the activity of meeting needs. How can Paul *command* us to “rejoice” or “mourn”, when these are emotions? Actually, he is commanding us to do something within our power. Christians are called to a discipline (a very hard one) in which we stop and seek to understand the inner world of another person. That can be done by connecting it with our own joys and sorrows. It is hard and unpleasant to remember our own experiences of grief, and it is work just as hard (though different) to enter into the joy of someone who is not you. (If your friend gets a good thing which you don’t have, it is difficult to “rejoice with those who rejoice.”) Then, on the other hand, we are told to “practice” love. Paul is reminding us that love is primarily action.

Love is doing whatever it takes to give people whatever they need. “Whatever it takes” means you make sacrifices of emotion, action, and your rights. This kind of love means you give someone both the truth (which they may not want) and the help they need.

## **Questions** for reflection

1. Which aspects of real love does your love for others display?
2. Which aspects of real love most challenge you?
3. Think of a Christian you know who is in need. How can you do for them whatever it takes today?

## PART TWO

### How You Can Lose While You Win

In **verses 10-16**, Paul has been telling us how to love our Christian brothers and sisters. Now, in **verses 17-21**, he turns to loving our enemies. (We could see **verses 14-16** as a transitional section, since Paul begins talking about “those who persecute you” in **verse 14**—these verses could apply to how we love those who are hostile to us, as well as how we treat those who are friendly.)

The basic principle of all these exhortations is summarized at the beginning and end: “Do not repay anyone evil for evil” (v 17) and: “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (v 21). The word “overcome” is a military word that means to “overpower.” It is an extremely penetrating and radical insight. Paul says that to repay evil with evil is immediately to lose the battle to evil! The only way to defeat evil is by doing good to the one who has done harm. In other words, if you hate a person who has wronged you, that person has won! The only way to defeat the evil is to forgive and love the person. Another way to put it is that when we identify “evil” too closely with the “evildoer,” we believe we need to destroy the evildoer in order to destroy evil. So it seems good to do evil; and we unwittingly become a pawn of the evil force behind the evildoer.

J.R.R. Tolkien gives us a picture of this dynamic in *The Lord of the Rings*. Any good person who used the ring of the evil lord, Sauron, to put him down would become evil in the process. This meant that “victory,” if pursued (or even achieved) in the wrong way, would be utterly hollow—it would in fact be a defeat, because in becoming evil to beat evil, the ring-wearer would have allowed evil to win.

So the secret of overcoming evil is for us to see “evil” as something above and distinct from the evildoer. Our basic goal is to forgive, love and show kindness to the evildoer. When we do, there are two results. First, the spread of evil is checked toward us. Its hatred and pride do not infect us. Second, the spread of evil may be checked in the evildoer. He or she may be softened and helped by

our love. Paul says that our good deeds and words could “heap burning coals on [their] head” (v 20), which is a way of saying that repentance may possibly occur. The hostile person may be led to shame, alarm and remorse, rebuked by our kind life.

What does this mean practically? Three things:

1. Do not avoid the hostile person. “As far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone” (v 18). When people have wronged you, it is common simply to avoid them. You may say: *I am not paying them back; I just don’t want to see them*. But your avoidance could well be a form of payback. To avoid them does not overcome the evil (though see below for a qualification to this).
2. Express loving words and action. “If your enemy is hungry, feed him” (v 20—see also **verse 14**). This means simply that you are to speak and act courteously and kindly to those who are hostile. We must be careful here! Sometimes we may do kind things to hostile people simply as a way to shame them or “rub their nose” in it. That is not the motive in view here. We thoughtfully find ways to wish them well, do helpful things, and speak respectfully to them.
3. Forgive and forgo any repayment. “Never avenge yourselves” (v 19, ESV).

There are boundaries, though. Verse 9 still reminds us that we are not loving wisely or truly when we enable someone to sin or sin against us. There are many degrees of hostility. Enemies may be so dangerous that to have anything to do with them is to invite them to sin. In that case, the “good” you can do them is to stay away from them. We need to discern the motive behind our staying away—is it a form of payback, or a measured response aimed at blessing them in some way?

## The Gospel Makes This Possible

Paul is saying to us: *Have you been wronged by someone who is hostile to you? How will you respond—in vengeful cursing, paying them back whenever and however you can; or in undeserved love and blessing, doing what you can for them in whatever way is best for them?* Notice that there is no persecution so great that Paul makes an exception to his rule, no hurt so deep that Paul excuses us from living this way. But how can anyone really live this way toward their friends, and especially their enemies? Paul has already told us. We can only do it if we really do live “in view of God’s mercy” (v 1). The gospel alone makes each aspect of love in **verses 9-21** possible. How is this?

First, the gospel reminds us of how patient God was and is with us. He was patient with us before we came to faith, holding back his final judgment to lead us to repentance (2:4). He is patient with us now, having forgiven our ongoing flaws and failings in Christ.

Second, the gospel is the way we “think of [ourselves] with sober judgment” (12:3). We are to measure ourselves by the faith in Christ that God has given us. When we think of ourselves in the gospel, two things happen. We realize that we are lost sinners, as lost as anyone else on the face of the earth, and so whoever stands before us—whether the person is a Christian or not, or a “decent” person or not—is no “lower” in sin than we are. And, we know that, though we are sinners, we are wholly justified and loved by God himself. Therefore we have nothing to prove to anyone! Without the gospel, we need to convince ourselves and others of our value and worth by associating with the most admirable persons possible. But in the gospel, we find that the most admirable Person of all is already pleased to be our Father and dwell in us! And we do not need to seek out the company of those whom we get on well with—the One we love most, and most seek to be like, lives in us! We are freed to love the outsider, the difficult, and the awkward. We are able to honor all and come alongside those who are marginalized.

Thus, Christian love is the most unbiased thing possible. Both our knowledge of our sin and our knowledge of our acceptance destroy prejudice and pride of race, class and vocation.

Third, the gospel enables us sincerely and lovingly to share in others’ highs

and lows. On the one hand, only if Christ is our main joy will we be able to rejoice and mourn with others. For example, if you are single and wish to be married, how can you rejoice with your friend who is getting married? It will be hard in any case, but if marriage is an “idol”—if your marriageability is your “righteousness”—then it will be impossible to rejoice.

On the other hand, unless Christ is your righteousness and peace, it will be hard to enter into the griefs of others. One reason why you may not be able to mourn is that you may have trouble sympathizing with a person you despise or feel superior to. The gospel tells you that you are in no way superior—it brings you down to a right appraisal of yourself. And the gospel tells you that God loved you when you were his enemy (5:8)—when you grasp that, you find yourself loving those you would have despised. Or, you may not be able to mourn because you must convince yourself that life is good, so you only belittle someone else’s pain. (Often, this is why people try to put a bright gloss on a dark situation.) If you are not finding your satisfaction and confidence for the future (and your death) in Christ, you will look to the circumstances of life for comfort, and thus you need to deny how hard this life is.

On the other hand, the gospel enables us to do loving deeds even when we don’t feel loving. Why? When Jesus was hanging on the cross for us, it was pretty clear that his heart was not overflowing with feelings of warmth and affection for us. His love was a sheer act of the will at that moment. Here is what he felt: “Take this cup from me” (Luke 22:42). Here is what he decided: “Yet not my will, but yours be done.” Here is what he said: “Father, forgive them” (23:34).

Fourth, the gospel tells us that there is a judge, and he can be trusted to make all things right. We do not need to get even; there is One who cares for us, and for his world, and who will make sure that there is scrupulously fair justice. We are free to “leave room for God’s wrath” (Romans **12:19**) because we know he will repay—the cross shows how seriously God takes sin, and that he will punish it. Peter puts this very powerfully when he tells Christians who are suffering for doing good that they are following in Christ’s footsteps: “When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly” (1 Peter

2:23). The gospel promises us justice, and reminds us that we are not the ones who give it.

## Is Sacrificial Love Damaging?

Living like this is not easy: it is a “living sacrifice” (Romans 12:1)! So it is countercultural. In our day, there is a great emphasis in the psychology/therapy culture on “being good to yourself.” Why? Many counselors see people who are so needy for love (out of a deep conviction that they are unlovely) that they allow others to walk all over them and abuse them. As a result, the wisdom of our age says: *Find out what you want and go for it. Stay in a relationship if it is mutually beneficial. If you have to make lots of sacrifices, that is unhealthy. Have a better estimate of your own value! You don’t need this. Get out!*

The problem with this is that it is over-simplified. The world does not understand the gospel nor the many forms of sin and self-righteousness. Therefore it cannot tell the difference between someone who is trying to serve others as a means of finding justification and salvation from someone who is trying to serve others as a response to having justification and salvation. The classic “enabler” or “co-dependent” is someone who uses sacrifice as a way to feel valuable. If you don’t feel acceptable in Christ, you may get that feeling of acceptability from the love of another person. In that case, you make an idol of the beloved and cannot say: *No*. Or you make an idol of being needed. You happily allow yourself to be abused and your martyrdom makes you feel worthy. When this dynamic occurs, the problem is not primarily too little self-love, but too much! The abused person doesn’t love the abuser, but loves the love. The abused person is too selfish to tell the abuser the truth and risk his or her loss.

Therefore, **verse 9** serves as a boundary against any misinterpretation of **verses 10-21**. It is not loving to let the beloved sin against you. To allow or to promote sin is never the best thing for anyone. Also, to “cling to what is good” means we must not sin against ourselves. In other words, we must not love others in such a way as to disobey God and be poor stewards of our physical

and emotional health or of our families.

But we are to love others at cost to ourselves; not to earn someone else's love, or God's love, but "in view of" the love that he has already lavished on us. The Bible makes much of Jesus' sacrificial love for us. He was stripped and killed in order to love us. In view of that, we are to live as he did, and love as he did. If the way we love another comes at a cost to ourselves, we have started to know what Christ-like love is.

## **Questions** for reflection

1. Is there someone in your past or present who has done you evil? What wrong responses are you tempted to?
2. What would it look like for you to overcome evil with good in that specific situation (see the three practical steps in this chapter)?
3. Do you need to seek counseling from a wise Christian about how to deal with an issue or a wrong done to you?

## ROMANS CHAPTER 13 VERSES 1 TO 14

### 9. NEW RELATIONSHIPS: As Citizens of the State

In chapter 13, Paul turns from the Christian's relationship to other Christians, and to other individuals, to the wider question of how to view the state in which we live, and how to think of ourselves as citizens within a state. He is moving on to how our view of God's mercies transforms our attitude toward "the governing authorities" (13:1).

It is important to recognize that Paul is not giving us a discussion of church-state relations in this section. Rather, he is giving instruction to individual Christians about their personal citizenship. He is not addressing **civil magistrate** or even Christian civil magistrates (there weren't any at the time!) So Paul is not laying out specific answers to the thorny problems of church and state that have troubled us for centuries.

Nevertheless, there are some interesting **inferences** we can draw. John Stott identifies four main models of relationship between church and state that have been tried (he acknowledges that these models are simplifications!):

1. *Erastianism*: The state controls the church.
2. *Theocracy*: The church controls the state.
3. *Constantinianism*: A compromise in which the state favors the church, and the church makes some accommodations with the state in order to preserve its favored status.
4. *Partnership*: Church and state recognize each other, and they each have distinct God-given responsibilities, and encourage and collaborate with each other in fulfilling these roles.

Stott comments that:

*“The fourth [ie: Partnership] seems to accord best with Paul’s teaching in Romans 13.” (The Message of Romans, page 339)*

These reflections aside, the focus of this chapter (because it is Paul’s focus in chapter 13) is how the Christian believer is to live as a citizen of his or her country. Paul shows us how the Christian is to view the state, both positively and negatively; and therefore he also shows us the Christian’s responsibility to the state; the state’s responsibility to its citizens; and then (in **verses 11-14**), how the Christian is to live as a member of his or her society.

## The Christian And The State

Paul says, very simply, that every Christian is to submit to the authority of civil government (**v 1**). He gives three reasons.

First, because it is right. God invented the state in which we live—“the authorities that exist have been established by God” (**v 1**). This means that civil governments in general are instituted by God, therefore deserving respect and submission. And Paul may also mean that the individuals who are exercising authority are in their positions by God’s “**providential**” control of history. Daniel 4:17 says that God rules over all human governments and “gives them to anyone he wishes.” Thus Christians are to submit “because of conscience” (Romans **13:5**)—in other words, in recognition of the role God has given the state.

Second, Paul says to submit because it is wise. He says that God designed human society in this fashion. “Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right ... For he is God’s servant to do you good” (**v 3-4**). Paul is saying that governments are needed to hold people accountable to live in a way that makes it possible to live together. Without the threat of punishment, human self-interest would make society impossible. So the very system of human government is a wise one.

One way in which we see the practicality of government is in **verse 4**: “He does not bear the sword for nothing.” “The sword” is clearly the power to

punish those who do wrong with civil sanctions (fines, imprisonment, death, etc.). Imagine how chaotic it would be if every citizen “bore the sword”! We know of places and times in which that was the case, and no one wants to live under such conditions. God’s plan is that only *some* people bear the sword—we cannot all do it. In summary, we submit so that government can work. If we don’t submit, there is no possibility for social order.

**Verses 6-7** suggest a third reason: that we are to submit because it is fair. Paul seems to be indicating that governing is hard work. “This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God’s servants, who give their full time to governing. Give everyone what you owe him.” We are obliged to give them what we owe them. Since they do their part—ruling, we must do ours—submitting.

## Submit In Everything?

At first glance, Paul seems to put the requirements of submission in absolute terms. This becomes starker when he puts the command in negative terms, ie: what the Christian is *not* to do: “He who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted,” and to do so is to “bring judgment” (v 2).

The strength of this statement intensifies when we realize that Paul was talking of a very non-Christian government—the pagan Roman empire. The “authorities” Paul has in view were at best unfriendly, and at worst actively hostile, toward the church. The increasingly secular west is only just beginning to experience the level of hostility that first-century believers faced; the 21st-century persecuted church experiences it every day. It is this type of “state” which Paul tells the Christian to submit himself to. The default position of the Christian (every Christian) to the state (any state) is to submit.

However, within this passage there are some hints that this authority is not absolute. By “hints” we mean that there are some statements with implications that can be drawn out, though they are not explicitly stated in this chapter.

Hint One comes in **verse 7**: “Give everyone what you owe him,” including “taxes ... revenue ... respect ... honor.” This is a clear echo of Jesus’ famous saying: “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s” (Matthew 22:21). Paul surely has in mind this teaching of Jesus, who is clearly saying that the civil magistrate has a limited sphere of authority. Jesus was undercutting a common conception of the state in his era; namely, that the king or emperor was a deity in the **pantheon**, or so closely allied with the god of the region that the state had a divine authority. Jesus, however, says “yes” to paying Caesar taxes but “no” to paying Caesar worship; that is, “no” to unqualified obedience.

Jesus’ statement went very deeply into the consciousness of the early church. Not only does Paul echo it here in Romans **13:7**, but Peter does the same in 1 Peter 2:17. Christians got into a great deal of trouble in the Roman Empire when people realized that they had an authority higher than the emperor, by which they could judge both him and the civic authorities. Christians have got into trouble in most eras for the same reason. When the 17th-century Stuart kings of England and Scotland claimed the “**divine right of kings**,” the Protestant minister Samuel Rutherford wrote a treatise against the idea called *Lex, Rex*; that is, *Law is King*. That is the biblical teaching: the king is not the law, but law (God’s law) is king!

Hint Two is in Romans **13:3-4**: “For rulers hold no terror for those who do right” (v 3). “He is God’s servant to do you good” (v 4). Since the civil magistrate is “God’s servant,” that clearly implies a responsibility to operate under God’s moral order. A servant is not free to do whatever he or she wishes. In *The Lion King*, the young cub and son of the king, Simba, says: “I thought being a king meant you can do whatever you want!” His father, King Mufasa, replies: “There’s more to being a king than that!” Also, if rulers are to support the doing of “right,” that implies that they must not require the doing of “wrong”—that which is disobedient to God’s moral order.

But these are only hints implicit in Paul’s statement. These hints are made explicit elsewhere in the Scriptures. In Acts 5:29, Peter makes the principle clear when told by the Jewish authorities to stop preaching about Christ and his resurrection: “We must obey God rather than men!” Peter and the rest of the apostles were announcing to the **Sanhedrin** that they would disobey the

command to cease their preaching of the gospel. So the Bible gives a very clear basis for civil disobedience; namely, if the state commands what God forbids, or if the state forbids what God commands, then civil disobedience is a Christian duty.

The biblical teaching on the state is (as usual) penetrating and unique. On the one hand, you have examples of believers submitting to and supporting civil authorities that disobeyed God's word and often punished the good. Two examples are Joseph (who was a kind of prime minister of Egypt) and Jeremiah (who counseled Judah to surrender and cede power to a cruel, pagan Babylonian civil power—Jeremiah 21:9). Christians are not to undermine or show disrespect for the authority even of a government that is foolish and that supports behavior disobedient to God. (The Roman government of which Paul is speaking certainly did that.)

On the other hand, you also have examples of believers who courageously disobey and oppose civil authority when it requires behavior of its citizens that is disobedient to God. The classic biblical example of this is Daniel and his associates. In pagan Babylon, Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were actively involved in civic affairs, even in a pagan society. But when citizens were commanded to do what was forbidden (idol worship in Daniel 3:4-6), or forbidden to do what was commanded (prayer to the LORD in Daniel 6:7), then the believers disobeyed the state and submitted to the punishment, with an attitude of fearless respect (Daniel 3:16-18).

Another example, when Israel was in slavery in Egypt, is the civil disobedience of the Hebrew midwives, who did not kill the infant boys as Pharaoh decreed (Exodus 1:17), reminding us of those who hid Jews in defiance of the Nazi government during World War II.

## **The Christian's Responsibility To The State**

We can therefore identify three ways in which Christians are to live with regard to their state:

*Submitting* (Romans **13:1, 5a**). This of course means that we must obey the state. Under this heading are included taxes (**v 6-7**), a very practical and perhaps obvious thing to say. But it would be easy for a Christian to read that we are citizens of heaven (Philippians 3:20) and infer that we should not vote, pay taxes, serve in office, etc. Paul is clearly saying here that this is not the case.

*Submitting according to conscience* (Romans **13:5c**). This means we must evaluate the state. Others may obey only for fear of punishment (**v 5b**). This is very significant! To obey only out of a fear of punishment is obedience out of self-interest, and that will lead you astray. On the one hand, self-interest can lead to too little submission to the state, because you will probably disobey when there is no prospect of punishment. On the other hand, fear of punishment could very easily lead you to too much submission to the state, because you will do immoral things “because I was just taking orders.” Paul’s radical principle is: we obey our government out of our Christian conscience, out of our obedience to God alone. This is radical, for it cuts two ways. On the one hand, we will obey the state even when there are no civil consequences, because our motivation is obedience to the God who established the state. On the other hand, we can never submit uncritically to what the state tells us. If it requires us to violate our conscience, we must disobey. The commentator Leon Morris writes:

*“Conscience is a powerful reinforcement of the outward directions to submit to the state. But once conscience is brought in, there is a limit: what is against conscience cannot be done ... Conscience at one and the same time obliges us to be obedient and sets a limit to that obedience.”*

*(The Epistle to the Romans, page 465)*

*Submitting in a respectful, honoring manner* (**v 7**). This simply means that we are not only to comply with civil authorities, but to do so in a way that shows them respect, honor, and courtesy. This is the same issue we face in the family and the church. We are to treat parents, ministers, and civil magistrates with deference. Even when the individuals in these positions are not worthy of much respect, we show respect to the authority structure that stands under and behind them.

## Questions for reflection

1. How similar is your attitude toward the authorities to the one Paul commands here?
2. Do you tend to have too high a view, or too low a view, of the authorities God has established over you?
3. Are there any ways in which you are being called courageously to disobey an authority in order to obey God?

## PART TWO

### The State's Job Description

We have seen the Christian's responsibility to the state—Paul also outlines the state's responsibility to its citizens, its purposes and its functions. We could call it the “job description” of the state.

First, the negative function of the state is to punish wrongdoing. “He [the ruler] does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant ... to bring punishment“ (v 4). There is a complete consensus among all Christians (and most everyone else) that there can be no civil order unless the state punishes wrongdoing. Murder, theft, various forms of lying and fraud, etc, are universally seen as undermining a peaceful, harmonious society. There is, though, some difference of opinion about what Paul is saying about the nature of those punishments. The “sword” probably means the power to inflict penalties up to and including death (in war and capital punishment). That is the fairest way to read Paul's words, for when he previously used the word “sword” (8:35) it meant “death,” and that was the normal meaning of the word in the usage of the time (Acts 12:2; Revelation 13:10).

But this is not a passage which gives us much to go on when it comes to the issue of capital punishment, and its merits and problems. It is wrong and unhelpful to ask a text to answer a question it does not have in view. The word “sword” at least means the right to use force and arms, but we cannot prove from this particular text the validity of capital punishment.

Second, the positive function of the state is “for the good.” The NIV1984 translation says: “to do you good,” but the word “do” is not in Paul's original Greek text. Literally, he says that the state is God's servant “to you for the good.” What does Paul mean? Of course he says the state is to be “for” the good! But he doesn't say exactly what “the good” is (good behavior? good conditions?), nor does he say how the state is to function toward it (to reward it? to promote it?)

Some interpreters think that Paul is not talking about a second function of the state at all. Rather, he is simply saying the same thing in two different ways in Romans **13:4a** and in **verse 4b**. This view says that the state promotes the good by punishing evil behavior. Thus “the good” is merely the good behavior of citizens, and Paul means: *The state serves you by causing you to behave rightly through the **deterrence** of its punishment.* That interpretation accords with a view that government should be extremely limited, providing only law enforcement and national defense. That is a possible rendering, because the next clause says: “If you do wrong...” So maybe the “good” is simply the citizens’ behavior.

However, it is not likely that each clause is talking about the exact same function. **Verse 4b** begins with “but”; it does not start with “namely” or “in other words.” Surely normal usage of such grammar means that two different and opposite activities are being discussed. So even if “the good” only means good citizen behavior, it must mean that the state rewards and promotes that behavior with some activity besides the penalizing and punishing of **verse 4b**. This would mean that the state should at least find ways to praise right behavior and relationships, to encourage and foster service. In addition, some believe that Paul is saying that the state promotes “the good”—not just of the individual, but *for* the individual. That may mean promoting the general economic, social, cultural, and physical welfare of people by a variety of means. Such an interpretation, of course, increases the scope of government.

Since Paul left “the good” undefined, maybe he meant for us to think of it broadly. Perhaps the most natural rendering is this: *The state both promotes and rewards “the good”—right behavior and relationships—and restrains and punishes “the evil”—wrong behavior and relationships.* So Romans 13 rules out the extremes of either an extremely limited government or a very powerful one, of either **totalitarianism** or **libertarianism**.

## Calm, Qualified Respect

Understanding the state’s role and responsibility again helps us to see how the

Christian is to understand and relate to their government. Here are a few principles, which we see also in Jeremiah's prophecy.

Christians need to give even non-Christian governors calm, **qualified** respect. First, we should *respect* those in authority, whether they represent our views or not. For example, God through Jeremiah tells the Israelites that "my servant Nebuchadnezzar" (Jeremiah 27:6), a pagan king, will be in charge of that part of the world, and "if ... any nation or kingdom will not serve Nebuchadnezzar ... I [the LORD] will punish that nation" (v 8). Second, *calm* respect means that Christians don't get anxious and fearful over the actions of civil magistrates who don't represent our views. Why? Because when God allows those who don't worship him to be in power, he does not forget justice: "All nations will serve him and his son and his grandson until the time for his land comes; then many nations and great kings will **subjugate** him" (27:7). There is not to be the angry hostility that comes from anxiety. There is no: *He's got to be stopped!* After all, he is "God's servant," (Romans **13:4**) albeit unwittingly. He cannot thwart God's plan. Even his unbelief and violence play into God's hand. But third, this means that the calm respect is *qualified*. Since God is judge, we know that the king and his city are also under judgment. They will be judged if there is no repentance (Jeremiah 27:7). So our respect is not lavish and fawning.

Christians need to be wary of extreme ideological views on the role of government. On the one hand, it is hard to find biblical support for the very conservative view that government should do nothing but basic law enforcement. On the other hand, the Bible cannot support the very liberal/socialist view of the "government-as-savior."

Christians should be more willing to participate fully in civic life. Overall, Romans 13 gives a very positive view of the role of government. When Paul talks in **verse 7** of paying taxes and providing "revenue," he is inviting Christians to full participation in the public life of the citizenry. This leads us into **verses 8-10**...

## Living As Part Of Society

It is easy to interpret **verses 8-10** very individualistically, as simply teaching each of us to love our “fellow-man” (v 8), our “neighbor” (v 9-10). The section on the state (v 1-7) is wedged between the commands to love our enemy (12:17-21) and to love our neighbor (**13:8-10**). So is this just a random assembling of subjects? Did Paul just stick his talk on the state between these two sections, or is there a connection?

First, look at the connection between 12:17-21 and **13:1-7**. When Paul commands us to “overcome evil with good” (12:21) and then goes on to talk about our involvement in society, he is saying that Christians are to overcome the evil of our society by doing good (deeds of compassion and generosity) and by “living good,” in full view of the citizenry. Now look at the connection between **13:1-7** and v 8-10. In **verse 7** he says: “Give everyone what you owe,” and he is talking of the state specifically (he refers to taxes). **Verse 8** also speaks of paying what we owe everyone, yet now Paul has shifted to the whole body of our neighbors—all the citizens we live with. Thus Paul is calling us not simply to participate in the state, but in public and civic life in general. In our neighborhoods, communities and cities, Christians are to become great doers of “good.”

Again, Jeremiah is the great biblical example of overcoming evil with good in this **corporate** way. He calls the Jewish exiles in Babylon to overcome evil by seeking the prosperity of their city. When Jeremiah wrote a letter to the Babylonian exiles, they were staying in an **enclave** by themselves, refusing to participate in the “unclean” pagan city. Jeremiah does say that there will be a judgment (27:7) if the city does not repent, and thus the Israelites should not close their eyes to its wickedness. Yet the Israelites are to become involved with the city and seek its peace and prosperity. They are not to compromise with pagan values, but they are to be gloriously positive toward the city. He tells them to build homes and settle down (29:5), to invest in the community; to marry and have sons and daughters (v 6a) and to increase in number, not decrease (v 6b), to keep their identity; to seek the “peace,” the *shalom*, of the city (v 7), to pursue its overall harmony and prosperity; and to pray to the LORD for it (v 7). So Jeremiah is telling believers to “overcome evil with good” by bringing their love and faith to bear on the public good of the city in which they live. This is the setting for Paul’s directions in Romans **13:8-10**.

## The Love-Debt

So in **verse 8**, Paul is moving from his thought in **verse 7**—not letting our taxes go unpaid or the honor we owe the authorities go unbestowed—to all our debts, which must not be left outstanding, and then on to the ongoing debt God’s people owe their society: “the continuing debt to love one another” (**v 8**). And he ties this “love-debt” to our duty to keep God’s law, because “he who loves his fellow-man has fulfilled the law.” Why is this? Because the law—the “commandments” not to commit adultery, murder, steal, covet and so on—“[is] summed up in this one rule: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’” (**v 9**). In other words, God’s law is God’s guideline on how to love others, how to do good for those around us. Paul is saying: *The laws are more than simply guidelines; they are “love-lines.”*

But then he reverses things and says also that love *is* fulfilling the law (**v 10**). He defines love as scrupulously obeying God’s law in one’s relationship with one’s neighbor. So Paul is also saying: *Love is really just following the law*. In other words, Paul refuses to pit love and law against each other. The obedient thing is the loving thing; the loving thing is the obedient thing! If we want to love others, we will obey God’s commands.

Modern people don’t see it this way. In the short run, it often seems that the loving thing to do is to break the law. For example, often we know that the truth will hurt someone, so we lie. But Paul is warning us not to think we are wiser than God in determining what will hurt or help someone. Usually, when we talk about the “loving thing,” we mean the “comfortable thing”; that which will give the person the least disturbance or distress. After all, the point of love is to do no harm (**v 10**)! But only God knows what we and our neighbors need ultimately. He built our souls and hearts and he knows what we need. The law, therefore, is God’s way of saying: *You want to do your neighbor no harm? Well, here’s how! Follow these guidelines, not your instincts or wisdom*. Thus, disobeying God’s law is never simple disobedience! Every sin is also an assault on God’s wisdom and a failure of love.

So in serving his “city,” the Christian must avoid two extremes, as Jeremiah understood. First, there is the temptation to live in a ghetto of believers, holding non-Christian society at arm’s length and failing to love it by serving it and working for its good. But second, Jeremiah told the exiles to maintain their identity as God’s people, and (as we have seen) exiles such as Daniel served the state while refusing to cease living as God’s obedient servants. We do not love the society in which we live by compromising on obeying God’s standards; rather, we love it *by* obeying God’s commands. The Christian neither shuts himself off from society, nor conforms to it.

## Keep Your Perspective

In order to live like this, Christians need to understand “the present time” (v 11). We need to know and remember that we are citizens both of the state in this world that God has established over us, and of the eternal kingdom, which is breaking in. We must keep our perspective.

What is the nature of the present time? “The night is nearly over; the day is almost here” (v 12a). Paul is saying that this world will not go on much longer; the eternal world will break in any time now. Many people think Paul was simply mistaken, that judgment day did not come as soon as he expected! But that is to miss the point, which is that we are to realize the brief nature of this life; the passing, **ephemeral** nature of this world. We are to build our lives on eternal things, the things that last—truth, God, love, righteousness. Actually, you don’t even have to be a Christian to get a vision of the fleeting nature of this world. Many non-Christians who have nearly died suddenly find that their priorities get a profound re-arrangement! Christians are always to live with this perspective. The wonderful truth is that each day of our lives, “our salvation is nearer ... than when we first believed” (v 11).

Knowing this leads us to “put on the armor of light” (v 12b). We will “behave decently, as in the daytime” (v 13). This takes imagination and reflection. We are to imagine that the day has dawned and that Jesus is right before us, and then ask: *Now, how would I behave? What is really eternally important? What*

*will last forever?*

In **verse 14**, Paul switches the metaphor of what we must “put on” as we live as heavenly citizens in this world: “Clothe yourself with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature.” There is one sense, of course, in which we have already “put on Christ” (Galatians 3:27; see Romans 6:3), in that we are legally righteous before God. We are legally “in him,” “covered with him.” We’ve seen this throughout the book of Romans. But the context indicates that this means we have to live as if we are clothed in him. For example, if a man is in a tuxedo and a woman is in a long gown and heels, it has an effect on their behavior. You look in the mirror and you see yourself dressed for an occasion of dignity and formality, so you behave accordingly. If you forget and move about as if you are in jogging clothes, you will look silly (and you will probably damage your clothes!) Work the illustration out for Christian living. We are supposed to remember “who we are wearing,” what he did for us, what he wanted for us, and what it cost him. This is much like Romans 6, in which we are told: *You are dead to sin* and then told: *Now act dead to sin!* In other words, Paul says: *In everything you do, in all your attitudes to the state in which you live and the society of which you are a part, remember where you are heading, and remember who you are!*

## Questions for reflection

1. How are you giving the authorities your calm, qualified respect?
2. How can you and your church be a blessing to your city or area? (Put another way: if you or your church disappeared tonight, would the community around you notice?)
3. What would change in your day today if you imagined that Jesus was right before you, and you clothed yourself with Christ?

## ROMANS CHAPTER 14 VERSES 1 TO 23

### 10. NEW RELATIONSHIPS: Between the Weak and the Strong

In chapters 1 – 11, Paul has explained the gospel: that we are justified in God’s sight by grace alone through faith alone because of Christ alone. Therefore we are simultaneously sinful yet completely righteous and perfect in his sight. If we fully understand the gospel (chapters 1 – 5) and experience the gospel (chapters 6 – 8), the result will be a life of grateful, joyous love.

Starting in chapter 12, Paul begins to describe this life of love, which transforms our relationships with ourselves, other Christians, and the world, both with friends and enemies. Now, in chapter 14, he has an opportunity to apply all he has been saying to a very specific case, a problem within the Roman congregation. He is saying: *OK, now let me show you how all this applies to this problem you are having.*

### Disputable Matters

What is the problem? It is that Christians are failing to “stop passing judgment” on fellow Christians when it comes to “disputable matters” (**v 1**)—there is a spirit of rejection instead of acceptance within the church. The basic issue is that some of the church members cannot distinguish between matters of basic principle and of individual preference. The weak do not know when they are in the area of what Paul calls “disputable” issues and when they are in the area of “indisputable” issues. The Greek word used in **verse 1b** is *dialogismoi*. Traditionally, these have been called “matters of conscience.” A matter of conscience is a practice about which God has not specifically spoken in his word. He has not clearly forbidden it nor clearly commanded it. So it is possible

to move to one of two wrong “extremes” when it comes to “disputable matters.” We must guard against thinking that almost every area is a disputable matter of conscience, *and* against the view that hardly any area is a disputable matter of conscience.

In Rome, the dispute mainly had to do with eating; some would “eat everything, but another man ... eats only vegetables” (v 2). Some felt that, as Christians, they could not eat meat.

But there were other differences of opinion, too. **Verse 5** indicates that some felt they had to observe certain days as holy. In Colossians 2:16 Paul speaks of Christians who still held to Jewish/Old Testament feast days. That could very well be what is in view here. Further, Romans **14:14** and **20** indicate that some believed certain foods were “unclean.” This is a clear reference to Old Testament ceremonial laws about “clean” and “unclean” foods (see, for example, Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14). These were part of the Old Testament regulations that qualified or disqualified you for worship in the tabernacle or temple. Some of the people still followed the Old Testament dietary **kosher** laws, etc. And then Romans **14:21** indicates that the drinking of wine may also have been an issue, too. Some Christians evidently felt that believers should not drink at all.

## The Weak And The Strong

Next, Paul shows us what it means to be “weak” or “strong.” In **verse 3** he says: “The man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him.” Here Paul shows that the “weak” person loses the focus of the gospel—we are not accepted by God because of dos and don’ts. We are accepted in Christ. So why does Paul refer to such people as “weak”? Leon Morris puts it well:

*“As the discussion shows, he does not mean a person who trusts Christ but little, the man of feeble faith (see 4:19). Rather, the person he has in mind is the one who does not understand the conduct implied by faith ...*

*He does not understand that when the meaning of justification by faith is grasped, questions like the use of meat and wine and special days become irrelevant.”*

*(The Epistle to the Romans, page 477)*

Paul is not saying that “weak” Christians aren’t saved, or even that they don’t trust Christ. In fact, the “weak” are generally the most fervent and diligent in trying to please Christ. Where they are “weak” is in the remnants of a legalistic spirit that still clings to them. They have not worked out the implications of the gospel. If you are saved by grace alone, there is no need to feel you can or must somehow keep God’s favor through rules and regulations.

On the other hand, a strong Christian (Paul doesn’t call the non-weak Christians “strong” until 15:1, but the description is useful all the way through chapter 14) is someone who knows they are saved by the gospel, and therefore understands that there are areas in which they are free—for instance, in eating meat. So here, a weak Christian was saying: *We must not eat meat—it is wrong*, even though Christ had said that his people are free to eat any food (Mark 7:14-23; see Paul’s words in Romans **14:14a**). A strong Christian was saying: *We’re free to eat meat!*

It is interesting to compare this dispute with the one described in 1 Corinthians 8. That was a conflict between ex-idol worshipers and other believers over whether Christians could buy and eat meat left over after pagan temple services. In that situation, the “strong” would have been Christians who said: *There’s nothing wrong with eating it—idols aren’t real*. Thus the “strong” were probably mainly Jewish Christians, who had no background in idol worship. The “weak” would have been former idolaters (mainly Gentiles), who had once been entrapped in the pagan cults and now felt polluted when they had anything to do with them.

But here in Romans it appears that the roles are reversed. The “weak” are those who are following the Old Testament “clean/unclean” laws (**14:2, 3, 14, 20**), and who feel polluted when unclean meats are eaten or other Old Testament regulations are broken. The “weak” here seem to be Jewish Christians.

Some ask: *Are these the “Judaizers” of Galatians, who insisted that it was still*

*necessary to obey the Old Testament law in order to be saved?* The answer must be: *No*. Paul refused to consider such people Christians at all (Galatians 1:8). He did not merely call them “weak in faith.” Therefore we have something different here. These are Christians accustomed to certain practices of eating and observance based on the Old Testament, and they have begun to look down on Christians who don’t join them in such customs. Now Paul rather carefully avoids saying that all Jewish Christians are weak! Why? Many Gentiles, called “God-fearers,” had also been part of synagogues before converting to Christianity. They too could have been “weak” in this sense.

Setting 1 Corinthians 8 and Romans 14 alongside each other shows us that, with regard to a particular issue, one ethnic or social grouping could fall into being “weak” (like the Greeks in Corinth) while another group could be strong. But with regard to another issue, the roles could be reversed (as with the Jews here).

This helps us see the broader principle beneath the cases. The “weak” are any Christians who tend to promote and regard non-essential cultural and ceremonial customs as being critical for Christian maturity and effectiveness. For example, the older generation in a particular church might feel very superior to the younger folk who like contemporary music in their worship. They do not deny that the younger people are Christians, but they could claim that their music displeases and offends the Lord simply because it displeases and offends *them*. Thus they have taken an issue of taste, custom, or culture and elevated it to an abiding, **trans-cultural** mark of spiritual maturity.

## Attitude

**Verse 3** also shows us the natural attitudes of the strong and the weak toward each other. “The man who eats everything”—the “strong” Christian—“must not look down on him who does not”—the “weak” Christian. Here Paul tells the strong not to feel superior to the weak. This means that the likely view of the strong is to feel much more mature, advanced, wise, and spiritually sophisticated. You look down on the weak as being rather simple and narrow-

minded. The likely attitude of the strong to the weak is to say: *That's your problem!* and go on with the practice or attitude that the weak believe is displeasing and offensive to God.

On the other side, “the man who does not eat everything”—the “weak” Christian—will naturally “condemn the man who does” eat everything. Notice that **verse 3** tells us that the strong will tend to feel superior and indifferent to the weak, but the weak will tend to condemn the strong. They will not shrug their shoulders at the strong (as the strong do to them), but will denounce and warn the strong that they are in grave spiritual danger, that they are displeasing God and an affront to him.

So, the strong tend to take the weak too lightly, to not give them enough weight because they see them as being legalistic. The weak tend to take the strong too seriously, and will be deeply troubled and upset by what they see as their **licentiousness**.

## What The Weak Have Forgotten

Paul says that both the strong and the weak “must not” follow their natural inclinations when it comes to each other. **Verses 3b-12** are mainly a criticism of the attitude of the weak, while **verses 13b-21** are mainly addressing the strong. Paul says to the “weak”: *When you condemn the Christian who does what you consider forbidden, here is what you are forgetting...*

First, that *we are all justified by faith*. Why must a fellow Christian not be condemned? Because “God has accepted him” (**v 3b**). This word “accepted” is the same word used in the initial exhortation to “accept” one another. In other words, Paul is saying: *You should welcome one another because God has welcomed and accepted you*. This is powerful! Paul says we must remember that, whatever a Christian’s strength or weakness in behavior or views, he or she is completely loved and accepted by the Father through Christ. That is what the whole book of Romans is about! Now Paul applies the gospel to such disputes and tells his readers that they need to be controlled by the knowledge that God

accepts the other person and finds him righteous in Christ. John Stott writes:

*“How dare we reject a person whom God has accepted? Indeed, the best way to determine what our attitude to other people should be is to determine what God’s attitude to them is. This principle is better even than the golden rule [to treat others as we would treat ourselves]. It is safe to treat others as we would like them to treat us, but it is safer still to treat them as God does.” (The Message to the Romans, page 361)*

Second, they have forgotten that *God is the only judge*. **Verse 4** is a strong warning against denouncing a Christian who differs from you in a matter of conscience. The word “judge” here does not mean a simple evaluation but a condemnation and denunciation. For example, Paul says here that eating meat is not sinful in itself. But a Christian may decide (perhaps for very good reasons) to abstain. In that case, it is very wrong to judge and condemn others for drinking. Why? “Who are you to judge someone else’s servant?” That person is not your servant. Let the Master, Jesus Christ, do the judging as to whether the other person is serving him properly. We are not qualified to judge.

Third, they have forgotten to think through their own position. We each need to consider and get convinced about the rightness or wrongness of any practice. The weak need to remember that they might be wrong! **Verse 5** is quite interesting and important: “Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.” In other words, Paul says that we need to think out our behavior. First, we need to see whether the Bible really commands or forbids some practice, or whether it leaves the conscience free. Second, even if the Bible leaves us free, we may decide to abstain from the practice because it leads us as individuals to sin, or it leads others to sin. Determining all this takes thought and prayer! Paul is especially telling the weak to do this, since many people with a tendency to legalism are full of **scruples** because they haven’t studied the Bible or thought things out. We are to seek to educate our conscience, and have the humility to acknowledge where we have been wrong.

But equally, and fourth, we need to act according to our conscience. A Christian should not engage in a specific practice unless they have thought it out and are firmly convinced that it is right. In **verse 6**, Paul gives an idea of how to think out whether a practice can be done or not. “He who eats meat, eats to the

Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God.” The Christian must look at any practice and say: *Can I do this before Christ? Can I do it with an eye upon him? Can I do it in his name, thanking him for it?* We do not live for (or “to”) ourselves, but as people who have a Lord, whom we are to aim to please. We “belong to the Lord” (v 7-8)—so, while our consciences should be informed, they must not be injured.

## The Challenge To The Weak

Paul draws these challenges to the weak together in **verses 9-13a**. Here is his point, based on what he has already said: *Jesus lived and died and rose (v 9) so that you could be his brothers—so how can you shun or sneer at a brother he died for (v 10a)? How can you stand in God’s place of judgment—when you yourself will stand before him and be judged (v 10b-11)? You should focus on your own conduct, and on how you will answer for it when you meet God (v 12), rather than focusing on everyone else’s (v 13)*. Or, to put it a different way: we are to accept anyone the Lord has accepted in the gospel; we are not to condemn anyone for whom there is now no condemnation in the gospel; we must ensure our consciences are in line with the freedom of the gospel; and we should make sure we are then living in line with the gospel.

## Questions for reflection

1. Is your character one that tends to want to rule all matters as being disputable, or no matter as being disputable?
2. Can you see any area in which you may be a weaker believer (to do so takes great self-awareness!)?
3. If you can, how do these verses challenge you and change you?

## PART TWO

### Strong? Don't Cause Stumbling

The beginning of **verse 13** looks both back, to conclude Paul's words to the "weak" Christian, and forwards, to introduce Paul's teaching to the "strong." The strong Christian must "stop passing judgment" and "instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling-block or obstacle in your brother's way." Paul uses the same word—stumble, or *proskomma*—in **verse 20**. So **verse 21** explains that to stumble is "to fall." Paul is saying that, when the strong are insensitive to the weak, looking down on them (v 3), they can lead the weak to sin.

How? At the very least, it tempts the weak to harshness, a condemning spirit, a breaking of fellowship, and an unkind, ungracious spirit—the kind of judgmental attitude that Paul has warned them about in **verses 3-13a**. But possibly, the action of the strong could lead the weak to begin doing things that are against their consciences. Notice that Paul is quite clear that meat is clean (**v 14**). The weak are simply wrong about food and drink! Paul may be referring to Jesus' words here in Mark 7:14-15—God also gave a word to Peter about this (Acts 10:15, 28). What was unclean is now clean. God did not create any material thing as evil; it is only our own sinful hearts that use material things in a way that produces evil. We should enjoy material things such as meat with thanksgiving (see 1 Timothy 4:1-5). The reason for having the food laws in the Old Testament was probably that they were one of the ways in which God taught the Israelites that they could not just come into his presence as they were; there needed to be purity. Now, in Christ, we are brought to God's presence holy and without blemish (Colossians 1:22). And therefore, to maintain a squeamishness about the use of any material thing is a failure to realize the full implications of the doctrines of creation and of redemption.

Yet despite Paul's blunt statement that the position of the weak is not biblical, he says: "If anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean" (Romans **14:14**). He fills out his meaning in **verse 23**. If someone acts against their conscience, then even if the act is not wrong, it is wrong for them because

they are not acting in accord with what they hold to be right behavior for a Christian. Their faith has not informed their behavior, even though it is not wrong; and “everything that does not come from faith is sin” (v 23).

## Freedom Causing Stumbling

This means that though the strong are right, biblically, they are not simply to shrug their shoulders at their weaker brothers and continue to enjoy their freedom. Paul tells them in **verse 15** that, in this specific case, eating meat as they are free to means two things are happening.

First, they are not being loving. The “continuing debt to love one another” (13:8) applies no less to those inside the church than to those outside it. When you deliberately do something you know is grievous to a Christian brother or sister, you are not being loving. (We are not talking about activities we are commanded to do, like giving, telling people about Jesus, etc. We are talking about things we are allowed to do.) When we deliberately do what grieves another, we are being unloving.

Second, the work of God is being destroyed. Paul tells the strong that they can “destroy” the weak brother (**14:15**). What does it mean to “destroy”? Some have thought this means that the weak brother might be totally ruined and go to hell, but that is very unlikely. Most of Romans 8 was about how nothing can separate us from the love of Christ. Are we to believe that the insensitivity of the strong toward the weak is really enough to send a Christian to hell? So we cannot conclude that the strong have the power to destroy someone’s Christianity. It gets clearer in **14:20**, where we are told that the insensitivity of the strong can “destroy the work of God.” This is the work God is doing in every believer (the “good work” he began “in you,” Philippians 1:6), to bring him or her into the fullness of the likeness of Christ (Ephesians 4:13). In other words, the strong can slow or thwart the maturing of the weak into Christ-like wisdom and character. It is also possible that “the work of God” could mean the church, and thus the strong are harming the relationships that God has built within the church.

How does this look? Let's say the weak person is convinced that all drinking of alcohol is a sin. When he sees another believer doing it, he could easily say: *Well, I guess it is okay*, because the peer pressure of the strong may lead him to drink. If he does so without being truly convinced that it is not contrary to God's will, that will hurt his conscience—he will feel guilty. Yet now that he is ignoring that guilt, he may become open to doing other things that are truly wrong.

Here's a real-life example. I once knew a high-school girl from a strict church background that taught it was sinful for women to wear makeup. But the peer pressure at school (from other Christian girls raised in other churches) led her to begin putting on makeup after leaving home in the morning (and wiping it off before coming home). Now, though the Bible nowhere forbids makeup, the girl was **violating** her conscience as she did this. She was not "convinced." Spiritually, within herself, she was choosing popularity over faithfulness to God. As a result, she soon found herself much more open to real violations of God's will in the area of sexuality. She had "stumbled" because her Christian friends had mocked her principles, misguided though they were.

## What The Strong Have Forgotten

So, Paul says to the strong, *when you look down on a weaker believer and don't change your (permitted) behavior, here is what you are forgetting...*

First, *who you are harming*—"your brother for whom Christ died" (Romans **14:15**). Paul is reminding the strong that Jesus paid with his life for every Christian—an enormous price. If Jesus died for a weak brother or sister, then we must treat them with utmost care and sensitivity, no matter how weak they are. We must value them. If Jesus gave up his life for them, we can give up our freedom. Further, that freedom, which we know to be good, will be seen as "evil" by weaker brothers if the strong simply carry on indulging it (**v 16**). Take eating meat—if a strong believer eats meat in front of a weaker believer without gently seeking to educate their conscience and refraining if there is disagreement, the weaker believer will end up looking at what is good—eating

meat—and thinking of it as wrong, or evil.

Second, they are forgetting *what really matters in the life of the Christian*. Being members of the kingdom of God “is not a matter of eating and drinking” (v 17)—we are not to see our lives as being about enjoying our freedoms, especially the freedoms that justification by faith alone brings. Rather, it is about “righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.” Our behavior is to be guided by what brings these things about, for our brothers and sisters in faith as well as for ourselves. The strong must remember to be “living sacrifices” (12:1), serving Christ in a way that is “pleasing to God” (14:18). (Of course, Paul is also teaching the weak here—they need to see that rules and regulations about material things miss the point of the kingdom; that it is, rather, about transformed character and mutual service.) And so the principle which guides the behavior of the strong is not to be: *How can I enjoy my freedom in the gospel here?* but rather: *What will lead to peace with my brother, and the encouragement and holiness of my brother?* (v 19).

This is how the strong “accept” the weaker Christians. The word “accept,” *proslambano*, means more than simply to bear with. A better translation would be to “welcome,” for the word means to receive someone into one’s circle and into one’s love. This is very important, because the tendency of the strong is to become more distant from the weak who disapprove of their practices. Paul insists that there be an effort to keep up the relationship, and to not let the difference come between them. To accept means to “make every effort” (v 19). In short, Paul says that the strong must not avoid or write off the weaker brothers, but seek to stay close to them.

After all, if we are “stronger” in some area, then as long as we have our weaker brother’s spiritual good as our priority, we will know that: “It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall” (v 21). We must be careful here. “Stumble” and “fall” mean more than just bothering the weaker brother. A grumpy Christian could blackmail a whole church in that case. Some churches have Christians who are very weak and have an enormous number of scruples. They are constantly getting irritated and upset by other church members who are offending their standards of proper Christian behavior. The strong do not have to refrain from everything that upsets anyone

else. But if the weak have a very deep and settled conviction—if they are “convinced”—and if they are clearly being tempted to bitterness or spiritual confusion, then the strong should refrain out of love. A good example of this is worship forms. If a strong person can enjoy and use a variety of music/worship forms, but a weaker person can only utilize one, then the strong should defer to the weak.

## How Weak And Strong Can Live Together

In **verses 22-23**, Paul is once more addressing both the strong and the weak. In **verse 22**, he is saying: *Keep your views to yourself!* We need to recognize when some practice is in a “disputable” area, when it is among the *dialogismoi*. When something is not clearly forbidden or commanded in Scripture, don’t press or loudly display your views and practices on the subject. Keep them to yourself. We must not press this to an extreme—Paul is not saying you cannot give your opinion if you are asked! Nor is he saying that you can never make an evaluation. After all, Jesus tells us to watch out for false prophets (Matthew 7:15), and 1 John tells us to “test the spirits” (1 John 4:1). Rather, Paul means that, once we recognize that this is a “disputable” area, we should mind our own business instead of insisting that this dispute becomes the whole church’s business.

Nevertheless, while not making too much of an issue, Christians must still live according to their conscience. If a believer doubts that a particular act is allowed by God, then to do it anyway is to act in rejection of what they consider is being faithful—to sin (Romans **14:23**). Weaker believers need to remember not to violate their consciences; stronger believers need to remember not to encourage their brothers to do so.

This is what it means not to pass judgment in disputable areas. Throughout the chapter, I have used some modern examples and shown a few ways in which the principles can be applied; but, of course, the matters we face will vary according to our church and our culture. But in all of them, the first and most important principle is this: determine if the issue is in the “disputable” area. The

way to do that is to look at Scripture. If there is a broad disagreement among mature Bible-honoring Christians on some issue (like baptism), we must be willing to concede that it is “disputable.” Anyone who wants to put everything into the disputable area needs to be warned about the dangers of that tendency, and anyone who wants to put little or nothing in the disputable area must be warned of the dangers of that perspective.

After a group of Christians agree to put an issue in the disputable area, then we need to follow Paul’s advice. The weaker must be willing to really review the biblical data, rethink their position, and refuse to condemn those who disagree. Instead, they must allow others to follow their own consciences in that area. At the same time, the stronger must also be willing to review the biblical data, rethink their position, and be willing to curb their freedom to avoid discouraging or harming fellow believers, especially if their convictions in the area are very strong. This will then be a Christian community that is able to exhibit the righteousness, peace and joy that the Holy Spirit gives to members of God’s kingdom, and for which the Lord Jesus died to bring all believers —“weak” and “strong”—into.

## Questions for reflection

1. Over what disputable matters in your church are there “stronger” and “weaker” believers?
2. If you consider yourself a “stronger” believer over one of those matters, what is your priority: enjoying your freedom, or giving it up to serve another Christian?
3. How can you pursue peace within your church community more actively?

## ROMANS CHAPTER 15 VERSES 1 TO 33

### 11. Unity and Mission

Gospel unity within the church and gospel mission to the world: these are two of the great themes of Romans, and two of the great passions of Paul's ministry. And they are the focus of this chapter, as he begins to draw his letter to the Roman church to a close.

#### Not Pleasing Ourselves

Paul begins by giving us a sweeping principle for Christian **ethics**: “We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves” (Romans **15:1**). The people with power (economic, cultural, social) must be stewards of their power to build up and please those who are “weak” in that area—they are not to use their power to build up themselves and make themselves feel comfortable.

Clearly, this statement builds on the discussion in chapter 14, where Paul was teaching about relationships within the church; but when he uses the word “neighbor” in **15:2**, he is extending the teaching. Only Christians are my brothers and sisters, but any and every human being is my “neighbor” (see Luke 10:25-37).

So the principle of Romans **15:1** is sweeping because it applies in every area of life, to everyone that we meet:

- *Finances*: Christians with money are to look at their money as given to them by God to enrich and lift up those without it (see Paul's discussion of his raising of a financial gift for the poor Christians in Jerusalem, **v 25-28**).
- *Church leadership*: Christians in church leadership are not to arrange the

ministry simply to make themselves happy and comfortable, but with the outsider and the skeptic in mind.

- *Relationships*: We are not simply to relate to “our own kind” or to people who give to us and build us up emotionally. We must be willing to love and relate to people who are draining. A Christian does not walk into a room and immediately ask: *Are these people I want to be seen with? Are these people I will enjoy?* but rather: *How can I help and build up these people? Who might I be able to serve in some way?*
- *Choice of residence*: Instead of asking: *Where would I be most comfortable living?* we should ask: *Where could I be most useful to God and others?* That is why many Christians stay in the city. “Community development” is a ministry in which Christians who have the economic strength to live elsewhere choose to move into an economically devastated neighborhood and give their lives to rebuild it. It is based on the principle in this text.
- *Relationships in the church*: Paul applied this principle in chapter 14 to one particular case. In the church, we are not to seek to win arguments with Christians who differ, but respect them, reconsider our own positions and, if differences persist, seek to accommodate ourselves to the sensitivities of others.

As ever in Paul’s ministry and in the book of Romans, Paul reminds us that Jesus Christ is both our example and our motivation. “Even Christ”—the eternal Son of God, who is deserving of the world’s praise and worship—“did not please himself” (15:3). He came not to be served, but to serve (Mark 10:45). To demonstrate this, Paul quotes from Psalm 69, which is quoted several times in the New Testament as a “messianic psalm,” pointing to the life and ministry of the Christ. In that psalm, a good and righteous man endures undeserved suffering and persecution: “The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me,” he says to God (Romans 15:3).

In applying this to Jesus, Paul is saying that Jesus was willing to be mocked, tortured and killed by those who are God’s enemies. He did that to serve those

around him, and we are to have the same attitude toward everyone around us—to live sacrificially to build them up.

## What The Scriptures Are

As soon as Paul quotes Scripture, he briefly comments in an aside: “Everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (v 4). Here are three implications of this single sentence:

1. *The Scriptures are entirely applicable to today:* “The past was written to teach us.” In other words, anything preserved in Scripture is preserved to teach us something. When Paul says “everything,” he is teaching what is known as the “plenary” inspiration of the Bible. Every bit of it is designed by God for us, and every bit has lessons and applications.
2. *The Scriptures are centered on Christ.* Paul’s ability to quote Psalm 69 and apply it to Christ reminds us that, basically, all of Scripture is about Jesus. Jesus told the disciples on the road to Emmaus that “all the Scriptures” were about him (Luke 24:27).
3. *If used properly, the Scriptures will increase “hope” in us.* The two ways in which Scripture does this are through endurance (which means the Bible calls us to hard work and discipline) and through encouragement (which means the Bible makes incredible and precious promises). If we are willing to listen both to its commands and its promises, it increases hope—joyful persistence in life.

## A Spirit Of Unity

Now Paul returns to consider the relationships within the church, “among

yourselves” (Romans 15:5). **Verses 5-6** are a prayer—a prayer for the unity that will be established and preserved as the strong and the weak live out Paul’s teaching of chapter 14 and 15:1-3. This unity is, ultimately, *a supernatural gift*. It is a spirit that God must “give you” (v 5). No method can create it; it is from him. And it comes from *a common following of Christ*. God gives it “as you follow Christ Jesus.” This real unity does not come when we seek it directly. Rather, it is a by-product of seeking something other than unity; namely, seeking to follow Christ. Passive Christians will not experience much unity. Only believers who are following hard—setting priorities for Christian growth and ministry—will experience deep unity.

And so unity is associated with, and expressed and enlarged by, *our worshiping together*: “so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father” (v 6). The reference to “mouth” probably means corporate worship. There is no way to glorify God with “one mouth” unless you are singing and praying together! The “so that” here shows that God gives spiritual unity *in order that* we can worship together; our seeking to do so will enhance unity.

In **verse 7**, Paul adds that Christian unity is *based on our justification in Christ*: “Accept one another, then, *just as Christ accepted you*.” It is only as we understand that we are accepted by Christ and live in response to that, rather than living in order to be accepted by him, that we will accept others. Why? First, because legalists—those who think they need to earn or keep God’s favor through their own character or behavior—need to constantly justify themselves. There is an underlying anxiety, of course, for they know deep down that God wants perfection and no one can manage it! People who are trying to earn their salvation try to quiet their own consciences by comparing themselves to others and finding fault with others, in order to feel that God must favor them. They need desperately to convince themselves that they are the ones in the right. As a result, there is a deep insecurity and a critical spirit that lead to disputes. Second, if we are living as legalists, we feel the need to tell others how to justify themselves! We impose our legalism on others and insist that they tread the same road we tread.

Thus, for a person without a grasp of the gospel, differences of opinion and

practice are huge and insurmountable. But if we grasp justification, that we are accepted in spite of our deficiencies and flaws, we will be enabled to accept others despite their deficiencies and flaws. In fact, the way you can tell how much you understand the gospel is to look at how much you love people despite their flaws. Do you say: *If God overlooks my sins through Christ, how can I fail to do so with this person? Do I think I am more righteous than God?* (“Accepting,” of course, does not mean a refusal to confront someone about sin patterns—we need to remember Romans 12:9.)

## Christ For Jews and Christ For Gentiles

Again, Paul points to Christ as the great example of this kind of service. This time, he focuses on the purpose of his serving mission, which was two-fold. First, he “has become a servant of the Jews ... to confirm the promises made to the patriarchs” (15:8). He is the One who brings blessing to Abraham’s descendants; he is the One in whom the Jews find access to heaven, in fulfilment of the promise to Jacob (Genesis 12:1-3; 28:10-17). Second, Jesus became a servant “so that the Gentiles may glorify God for his mercy” (Romans 15:9). Christ came so that God would accept both Jew and Gentile, and so the gospel is able to break down the “dividing wall of hostility” (Ephesians 2:14); Jew and Gentile, strong and weak, rich and poor must reflect this in their relationships in the church.

In fact, God’s purpose was always to have a people made up of all nations, Jew and Gentile. Paul shows this in his four Old Testament quotations in Romans 15:9-12. There is a progression through them. First, God’s name is to be praised among the Gentiles by his people (v 9); the Gentiles are to be invited in to praise “with his people” (v 10), so that “all you peoples” (Jew and Gentile) will praise the Lord (v 11); and all this will be accomplished by “the Root of Jesse”—the great Ruler to come from the line of David, Jesse’s son—as the nations come under his rule and find “hope in him” (v 12). God’s plan has always been for his people to proclaim to the nations that God is to be praised, and to draw the nations into his people under the rule and hope of his chosen King. Douglas Moo points out:

*“Paul cites every part of the Old Testament—the writings (v 9b and 11), the law (v 10) and the prophets (v 12)—to show that inclusion of Gentiles with Jews in the praise of God has always been part of God’s purposes.”*

*(The Epistle to the Romans, page 878)*

Gospel unity across every divide and disagreement is what God has always been working toward. As the Roman Christians—Jew and Gentile, weak and strong, rich and poor, and so on—meet together to praise the Root of Jesse, Christ Jesus, they are expressing their “spirit of unity among [themselves] as [they] follow Christ Jesus” (v 5); and so they are embodying God’s plan, and bringing him glory (v 6). But again, only God can give this kind of unity—so Paul prays that he would do just that, through his Spirit (v 13).

## **Authoritative Encouragement**

Paul knows that he has “written to [them] quite boldly on some points” (v 15), and so he follows up his prayer and appeal for unity in this church with an encouragement to them, and a reminder of his authority to teach them. He has not met them, but he is “convinced ... that you yourselves are full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to instruct one another” (v 14). He is confident that they will be able to work out the implications of his letter—the implications of the gospel—more and more in their congregations. And he reminds them that it is right that they do so, because he is not self-appointed, but, rather, is “a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles” (v 16), “because of the grace God gave me” (v 15). He was “called to be an apostle” (1:1). His words are not mere advice; they come with the authority of Jesus. The encouragement and challenge to both his first readers and his 21st-century ones are to recognize this God-given authority, and joyfully, humbly and corporately to work out the implications of the gospel that Paul has laid out in Romans.

## Questions for reflection

1. In what ways are you already serving others rather than pleasing yourself?  
In what ways do you need to begin, motivated by Christ's example?
2. How do the three truths about Scripture in 15:4 excite you about reading, and shape the way you approach, the Bible?
3. How committed are you to praying for and pursuing unity among your church membership?

## PART TWO

### The Motive For Sharing The Message

Christianity is a missional faith—it contains within its own message the motive for sharing it. Paul was the greatest missionary in the history of the Christian church. In **15:16-23**, we discover much about Paul’s ministry of evangelism, of spreading the gospel; and find that he has much to teach us.

First, we see the *motive* for Paul’s evangelism. It is not merely a duty but a passion for him. He describes his work as “to the Gentiles ... proclaiming the gospel of God” (v 16), and then says that “I glory ... in my service” (v 17). Why? For Paul, evangelism is a priestly ministry: “The priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God” (v 16). As we saw in our consideration of 12:1, the job of an Old Testament worshiper was to bring two basic kinds of sacrifices or offerings to God: first, sin offerings (for atonement for sin, asking forgiveness from him); and second, burnt and thanksgiving offerings (out of gratitude, giving service and honor to God). The priest’s job was to offer these sacrifices on behalf of individuals or the people as a whole. In the New Testament, Christians understand that Jesus has made the final and complete sin offering, but all people must still bring themselves and all they have as “offerings” of gratitude to God—must, in response to Christ’s sacrifices for sins, offer themselves as “living sacrifices” (12:1).

Here Paul sees Gentile converts as his offerings to God! He sees evangelism as a way of giving God praise and thanks. Just as in Romans 12:1 Paul said: *Give yourselves totally to God, in light of all Jesus has given you*, so now Paul says his evangelism is an offering to God in response to all Jesus has given him. Our evangelism is no less part of the way we make an offering of ourselves to Christ. Witnessing is not an add-on to the Christian life; it is a central part of it.

Second, Paul tells us what the *object* of his endeavors is. All that matters to him is “what Christ has accomplished through me in leading the Gentiles to obey God by what I have said and done” (**15:18**). Paul mentioned in 1:5 that he

calls the Gentiles to the “obedience that comes from faith.” This obedience arises as a response to, and a consequence of the reception of, the gospel and God’s gift of righteousness. But the point is that Paul’s goal in evangelism is not merely some kind of “conversion experience,” but completely changed lives. He wants people who are obedient and holy toward God. In other words, the object of our evangelism is not to be reduced to someone going forward at an altar call, or praying a prayer of response, and so on; it must be to make disciples of Christ (Matthew 28:19-20). The goal of evangelism is complete life change. People have not been “evangelized” until they have ceased to be their own masters and become joyful servants of the Lord.

Third, Paul shows us how central evangelism is to him. Paul says: “I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me in leading the Gentiles to obey God” (Romans **15:18**). This is a strong statement! Paul accomplished many things— consider the fact that he was probably the greatest theologian in the history of the church. But his work as a theologian was not what made him “glory” (v 17). The thing he was most excited about was the people he had seen pass from death to life through his ministry.

Should we all feel like this? Clearly, the first two points mentioned above (the motive and object) can serve as ideals for all Christians. But we do need to realize that Paul had some special gifts of evangelism that we do not all share, and a calling as apostle to the Gentiles that none of us share. So when Paul says he felt that nothing he did in his life was as important or fulfilling as his evangelism, I think that probably reflects his specific calling to be a church-planting evangelist. However, his example should make the church as a whole recognize the tremendous importance of evangelism as a whole; and perhaps it might also challenge us individually. We may not have Paul’s calling or all his gifts, but we are called to “make disciples of all nations” and to “be prepared to give an answer ... for the hope that [we] have” so that we can “make the most of every opportunity” (Matthew 28:19; 1 Peter 3:15; Colossians 4:5). Evangelism may not be everything in our lives and ministries, as it was to Paul; but perhaps it should be far more than it is.

Next, Paul mentions the *means* of evangelism. He says he has won people to

Christ “by what I have said and done” (Romans **15:18**). Literally, he says he has won people by “word and deed.” This means he did not only get the message of the gospel across by speaking, but by his life and actions. He immediately mentions some of his deeds: “by the power of signs and miracles” (v **19**). We must not think that this was the only kind of “visual” or “deed” evangelism that Paul did. As we will see, Paul encouraged the church to care for the poor. And in 1 Thessalonians, Paul writes to his converts: “You know how we lived among you for your sake ... As apostles of Christ we could have been a burden to you, but we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children. We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well ... You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed” (1:5; 2:6-8,10).

This shows that Paul saw evangelism as “incarnational.” We are not only to tell people the gospel, but to embody it in our attitudes and relationships. We are to invite (in a sense, “dare”) people to look into us deeply and see what a human life rearranged by the gospel looks like.

In Romans **15:19**, Paul mentions “the power of signs and miracles.” What should we make of this today? Miracles can happen today but, again, the number of miracles in Paul’s ministry was specific to his being an apostle (just as the number of miracles in Jesus’ ministry is not something we should expect or demand to see replicated in ours). This is a large subject, and it is not the main focus of Paul’s teaching in Romans 15, so I will let a quote from John Stott on **verses 18-19** here suffice:

*“This combination of words and works, the verbal and the visual, is a recognition that human beings often learn more through their eyes than through their ears. Words explain works, but works dramatize words. The public ministry of Jesus is the best example of this, and after his ascension into heaven he continued ‘to do and to teach’ through his apostles (Acts 1:1). It would be wrong to conclude, however, that ‘works’ means only miracles. One of Jesus’ most powerful visual aids was to take a child into his arms, and one of the early church’s was their common life and their care for the needy ... Paul’s only other use of these three words [‘power,’ ‘signs ’and ‘wonders’] is in relation to his ministry in 2*

*Corinthians 12:12, where he calls them ‘the things that mark an apostle’ ... This is not to deny that God can perform miracles today ... It is rather to acknowledge that their chief purpose was to authenticate the unique ministry of the apostles (see, eg: Hebrews 2:4).”*

*(The Message of Romans, pages 380-381)*

## **Paul’s Strategy For Evangelism**

Lastly, Paul lays out his *strategy* for evangelism. First, it was pioneering. He says: “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” (Romans 15:20)—to witness to those who had never heard of Christ (v 21). This means that, even in this early stage of the Christian church, many preachers preferred to build up people who had already been evangelized and disciplined by someone else, or to reach those who had already heard but had not yet trusted the gospel. Paul’s passion was to go into places where no one had heard the gospel at all. He wanted the “hardest ground” to plow in, the people who were the farthest from the faith. This is why he had “often been hindered from coming to” visit the Roman church (v 22), because a church was already established there, and he was a pioneer.

Second, his strategy was urban. “Now ... there is no more place for me to work in these regions” (v 23), Paul says of “Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum” (the modern-day Balkan region in south-east Europe), where: “I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ” (v 19). This seems like a great overstatement, since the phrase literally means: “I have completed the preaching of Christ.” How can Paul say this, when clearly there were hundreds of towns and villages and thousands upon thousands of people who had not been exposed to his Christian message? But here is the key to the statement: Paul’s missionary strategy was highly urban. He ignored the towns and villages, but went instead into every large and influential city and evangelized until a vital, growing movement of house churches was developing. Once he had done that, his pioneering, urban work was done in a whole region—that is how central cities were to his thinking. If he had planted a church in the region’s biggest city, he

was “done” in that area. John Stott comments further:

*“This does not of course mean that Paul had [literally] ‘saturated’ the whole area with the gospel, as we might say today. His strategy was to evangelize the populous and influential cities, and plant churches there, and then leave to others the radiation of the gospel into the surrounding villages.”*

*(The Message of Romans, page 382)*

Again, we are not all called to be pioneering, urban planters as Paul was. But again, Paul’s example should make churches recognize the importance of urban evangelism, and reflect upon whether they are playing their part in it, be it through active involvement, financial support and/or prayer.

## **A Contribution For The Poor**

It is to financial support that Paul now turns. He has focused on spiritual needs—on evangelism; now he turns to social needs. He is hoping to go to Spain to evangelize that unreached area, and aims to pass through Rome on his way (v 24). But first, he is concerned for what we might call the “social needs” of the church in Jerusalem. He is on the way to serve the saints there (v 25) by delivering “a contribution for the poor” among those churches (v 26). Notice the importance of this ministry—Paul, the great evangelist, has interrupted his preaching plans for it.

Paul does not explain what has caused the poverty in the Jerusalem church. In Acts we are told that there was a famine (Acts 11:27-28), but there may have been other reasons. Strikingly, Paul does not try to motivate the Roman Christians by explaining the circumstances of the poverty. Instead, he says that the believers in Achaia and Macedonia had made a contribution to the poor (Romans 15:26) and that they were pleased to do it. Then he adds: “Indeed they owe it to them” (v 27). This means that helping the poor is not simply an option we can get to if possible. It is an obligation, a debt to be honored.

But crucially, Paul shows that this “duty” of giving is to be something that

Christians will be “pleased to do” (v 27). It is to be something that wells up out of our hearts and gives us joy and fulfilment as we do it. In other words, our help to the needy, while a requirement, must not simply be a response to a requirement. It must be the overflow of a full heart.

But what makes our hearts “pleased” to pour ourselves out for those in need? Paul says that the Gentile Christians “owe” help to the poor Jewish Christians. Why? Because the gospel of grace came to the Gentiles through the Old Testament and the Jewish people. “If the Gentiles have shared in the Jews’ spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings” (v 27). Thus, grace makes us “debtors” to those in need.

We must be careful not to confuse this with some kind of “racial compensation.” Paul is not saying that all Gentiles owe all Jews on the basis of race. However, Paul says, the Gentiles have received “spiritual blessings” through the gospel, and this should make us generous to those in need. Paul here shows that Gentiles should have a special interest in helping poor Jewish believers, but the principle is not one of race but of grace. That is clear in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9, where Paul appeals to the Corinthians to give to the Jerusalem poor. He reminds them that they owe the poor because they owe *Christ*: they will give because they know how Christ gave to them, and will give generously because they know they can rely on God to keep giving to them (2 Corinthians 8:9; 9:7-8). In Romans 15, Paul is using the fact of Gentile gratitude to the Jews as an addition to the basic issue, which is Christian gratitude to Christ for all he gave, showing itself in generous giving. Our finances, Paul says, must be used “in view of God’s mercy” (12:1); when they are, we’ll use them sacrificially and in a way that pleases God. Our bank statements are perhaps the greatest evidence of having minds that have truly been transformed by the grace of God (v 2).

## Struggling By Praying

And so, Paul says, it will only be after Paul has made sure the collection has reached those it is for (15:28) that he will come to Rome on the way to Spain,

bringing the blessing of mutual encouragement (v 28-29; see 1:11-12).

In the meantime, Paul asks the Roman church to pray for him. This is how they can “join me in my struggle” (15:30). Paul would like prayer, specifically, for safety from his enemies, for a successful social ministry in Jerusalem, and for his plans—to visit Rome and be encouraged by the church there—to come to fruition (v 31-32). In other words, he is saying: *Here are my struggles—join with me in them, by praying for me and about them.*

Paul is doing the same for the Roman Christians in **verse 33**. Chapters 14 and 15 have shown us that one of their difficulties is to be at peace and in unity with each other—and so Paul is joining them in that struggle by praying for them: “The God of peace be with you all. Amen” (15:33).

Christians can always help a struggling brother or sister by praying. Christians can always come alongside those whom they have never met, by praying for them. We can give up our time for those who are giving up their lives, in prayer. We may not be on the mission field, but we are always to be on mission by being on our knees.

Our prayers are part of our service to our fellow Christians. As the great Reformation pastor and theologian John Calvin put it:

*“The godly ought to pray for their brethren ... they are to assume their person, as though they were placed in the same difficulties.”*  
(Commentary on Romans, chapter 38)

## Questions for reflection

1. How has Paul's example encouraged and challenged you in your own gospel witness?
2. How has his example encouraged and challenged you in your own gospel giving?
3. Whose struggle could you enter into by praying for them now, and then continuing to do so daily?

## ROMANS CHAPTER 16 VERSES 1 TO 27

### 12. To God be the Glory

Now Paul turns, as he does at the end of most of his letters to churches, to personal greetings. He sends messages to those in Rome whom he knows (**16:1-16**) and then, after some final teaching (**v 17-20**), he sends greetings from those he is with (**v 21-23**), before finishing by praising God (**v 25-27**).

The details of almost all of these lives are unknown, and it is unwise to push the fragments that we can see here too far; so this final chapter of *Romans 8 – 16 For You* is a one-part chapter, shorter than the others. Nevertheless, this list of names is a great reminder that Paul is a real man, writing to real people. And it also gives us a precious, albeit small, window into the life of the early church.

### Women In Ministry

First, Paul mentions Phoebe (**v 1**). Who is Phoebe? First, she is commended to the church, which probably means she was the one who brought Paul's letter to the church in Rome. Paul commends her as his sister and a servant; thus she seems to be a woman of importance and usefulness in the church. What had she accomplished? She had been "a great help to many people." This translates a single Greek word, *prostotes*, which means "benefactress." Evidently she was a woman of business or independent means who had been using her skills and wealth to support the church and help many people. She very likely was traveling to Rome on other business.

Second, Phoebe is called a "servant," but the NIV note says "or deaconess." This is because, in the Greek, Phoebe is called a *diakonos*. That word can be translated in two different ways in the New Testament. Sometimes *diakonia* means "ministry" or "service" in the broadest sense. Any kind of service

provided in Jesus' name, from the humblest service to the apostolic ministry of Peter and Paul, can be called *diakonos*. The NIV translators opt for this general sense. We don't know what ministry Phoebe had, but she had one, and so she is called a servant.

However, sometimes in the New Testament, the word denoted a specific office in the church—a “deacon” (Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:8, 12). These officers worked alongside the elders and usually focused on meeting material and physical needs, and providing comfort and support for the distressed and broken (see Acts 6:1-7). There is no way to be certain about which sense of the word should be used here. Regardless, it shows Phoebe, a woman, prominent and recognized for her work in the church.

## Diversity And Families

We do not know about all 26 individuals that Paul names in Romans **16:1-16**, but it is clear that the Roman church was a diverse body. Notice:

1. *Race*. We have both Jewish (eg: Aquila and Priscilla in **verse 3** and Paul's relatives—ie: fellow Jews—in **verses 7 and 11**), and Gentile Christians.
2. *Class*. Some of the names in this list were probably of royal or high rank: Aristobulus (**v 10**) and Narcissus (**v 11**). Notice that both are said to have been the head of a “household” or estate.
3. *Gender*. Eight or nine of the 26 people named are women. Paul singles out many of them as having “worked very hard” (**v 12**). This (along with the comments on Phoebe) shows that women were active and influential in the ongoing ministry and mission of the church.

It is striking that, in **verse 7**, Andronicus and Junias are described as being “outstanding among the *apostles*.” Since they were not members of the twelve disciples chosen by Jesus, nor one of those who had seen the risen Jesus and were specifically and specially added subsequently (ie: Matthias in Acts 1:20-

26 and Paul in Acts 9:1-19), does this mean that there are apostles who can speak with Jesus' authority today, as Paul did in his time (see Romans 1:1; 15:15-16)? No—in the early church, others were called “apostles of the churches” (2 Corinthians 8:23, ESV footnote). The word *apostolos* simply means “sent”—so in the sense that (for example) Barnabas was “sent” to Antioch, he was an “apostle” (Acts 11:22, see also Acts 14:14). But Barnabas (and Andronicus and Junias) never met the risen Christ; and were never taught and tutored in the gospel by the bodily-present Christ, and sent out with his authority, as Paul and the Twelve were. So we can call people who have been sent as missionaries, or who have unusual leadership gifts, “small-a” apostles—but not “capital-A” apostles, who had, and have through the words of Scripture, absolute authority.

The greetings in these verses also give us some clues about the structure of the Roman church. It was essentially a series of house churches or small groups. Paul greets “the church that meets at their [Priscilla and Aquila’s] house” (Romans **16:5**). Also, in **verses 14 and 15**, some people are greeted “and all the saints with them,” probably referring to the rest of the people who met in their house church. This was the normal form of the church in the earliest times (see 1 Corinthians 16:19; Colossians 4:15; Philemon 2). It means that Christians met in family-size groups to carry out the ministries described in Romans 15: Bible study (v 4), worship (v 6), fellowship (v 5-7), evangelism (v 14-23), and deed ministry (v 25-29).

## A Coming Danger

In **16:17**, Paul again urges his “brothers” about “divisions and ... obstacles.” But now (unlike in chapters 14 and 15), he is warning about those who would actively “cause” division; those who “are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites” (**16:18**). It seems that these people are not already teaching in the Roman church; but Paul knows it is a dangerous possibility that they will start to appear (as they had in the Galatian churches, see Galatians 4:17; 5:7-10). And so he warns his readers to “keep away from them” (Romans **16:17**).

How can they be recognized? Paul gives us two ways here. First, what they do is “contrary to the teaching you have learned” (v 17). *People may be eloquent and flattering*, Paul says (v 18), *but measure what they say against the gospel*. And second, what they aim to do is to serve themselves, not Christ (v 18). Paul is saying: *However fine-sounding a teacher is, seek to discern whether they are in it for themselves, or to give themselves to Christ*.

How can they be stopped? Paul tells the Roman Christians to “be wise about what is good, and innocent about what is evil” (v 19). They are a church who wish to be obedient, but they must not be naive. They need to keep learning more about how to do “good,” to love and obey God; and they need resolutely to refuse to have anything to do with “evil,” with anything that is not in accord with the gospel. There must be no complacency, and no compromise.

But Paul finishes this short section with a great encouragement. “The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet” (v 20). Satan is the great liar, and one of his weapons is divisive, self-absorbed teaching. But he has been, is being and will be defeated. Paul’s use of the word “crush” takes us back to God’s promise after Adam and Eve had sinned in Eden and were judged by being cast out of it. God said to the serpent, to Satan, that a man would be born who “will crush your head” (Genesis 3:15). Jesus is the serpent-crusher, at the cross and on his return; but his people are part of the victory. Satan suffers defeat each time someone puts their faith in Christ, receives his righteousness and escapes hell; each time a Christian obeys their Father joyfully; and each time God’s people worship together in faith and unity. The “grace of our Lord Jesus” (Romans 16:20) is to be with us, working through us to defeat our great enemy.

## **To God Be The Glory**

Paul now briefly sends greetings from those he is with, most likely in Corinth. There is Timothy, “my fellow-worker” (v 21) in his mission team; Paul’s “relatives”; his scribe, Tertius (v 22); and Gaius, in whose house Paul is staying (v 23). Again, there is a reminder that God calls people from all backgrounds and classes by Paul’s mention of “Erastus, who is the city’s director of public

works” (v 23).

But Paul’s final words are reserved for God. In **verses 25-27**, Paul is looking once more back to chapter 1. His aim in these last words is to move his readers (including us) to give glory to God (**16:27**). How does he do this? By reminding us of the gospel—what it does, and what it is.

*What the gospel does.* It is the way in which God “is able to establish you” (v 25). “Is able to” translates *dynameo*—“is powerful to.” “The gospel ... is the power of God” (1:16). The gospel is how God changes people and futures. Notice that in **16:25** Paul does not say “is able to save you”; rather, he says God is powerful to “establish” us through the gospel. This reminds us that the gospel is not only the entry point into the Christian life; it is also the way we continue in, grow in and enjoy life with Christ. Paul has shown in Romans how the gospel not only saves us (chapters 1 – 5), but also how it then changes us (chapters 6 – 8; 12 – 15). If we believe the gospel, God is working powerfully through it, in us. We need never move away from it.

*What the gospel is.* Paul talks of “my gospel” and then describes the same message in a different way: “the proclamation of Jesus Christ” (**16:25**). The gospel is “regarding his Son ... Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 1:3-4). The center of the gospel is Jesus, the divine man who died and rose to rule as the Christ over all creation and for all eternity; the gospel is Jesus. No other “gospel” can save or change us. Jesus is the One who was promised in the Old Testament, yet was “hidden for long ages past, but [is] now revealed” (**16:25-26**; see 1:2 and 3:21). He is the One who is now being made known as his people declare him to be the fulfillment of “the prophetic writings.” The gospel is Jesus Christ—the Rescuer and Ruler—and he was predicted, has been revealed, and is now being proclaimed.

*More on what the gospel does.* Paul returns to one of the great themes of Romans—that anyone, anywhere can now believe in the gospel and obey God, with both heart and hands. Christ is proclaimed “so that all nations might believe and obey him” (**16:26**; see 1:5). When we consider this gospel of the Lord Jesus—predicted, revealed, proclaimed, and calling us to faith and obedience-through-faith—we join Paul in giving “the only wise God ... glory”

(16:27); and we know that, clothed in Christ's righteousness, and made like him by the work of the Spirit, we will do so "for ever through Jesus Christ!" This old hymn puts it wonderfully well:

*To God be the glory, great things he has done,  
So loved he the world that he gave us his Son,  
Who yielded his life an atonement for sin,  
And opened the life-gate that all may go in.*

*Praise the Lord, Praise the Lord, let the earth hear his voice,  
Praise the Lord, Praise the Lord, let the people rejoice.  
O come to the Father through Jesus the Son,  
And give him the glory, great things he has done!*

"Amen."

## Questions for reflection

1. Which description of ordinary church members in verses 1-15 particularly strikes you?
2. Spend time meditating on verses 25-27 and let them move you to praise God.
3. How has the second half of the book of Romans led you to:
  - love God more?
  - enjoy your identity as God's child more?
  - offer yourself as a living sacrifice in new ways?

# Glossary

**Alienated:** to become enemies of and hostile to someone, eg: God.

**Analogy:** a comparison between two things, usually using one of them to explain or clarify the other.

**Anointed utterance:** a statement about what God's word says that the Holy Spirit brings home with special power.

**Antinomy:** an *apparent* contradiction between two beliefs or conclusions that are both reasonable and true.

**Aramaic:** the everyday language of Israel when Jesus was on earth.

**Blessing:** to be blessed is to be in right relationship with God, enjoying his love and favor.

**Bondage:** slavery.

**Civil magistrate:** someone who is responsible for administering the law.

**Conceited:** hungry for honor and glory; aiming to have others notice us.

**Condemnation:** sentenced to a punishment; in Romans, Paul is speaking of God's just punishment of sinful people.

**Corporate:** large-group; collective.

**Crescendo:** a progressive increase in force or intensity.

**Debilitating:** seriously weakening.

**Deity:** divine status.

**Depravity:** natural corruptness and sinfulness.

**Determinism:** the theory that all events, including our choices, are caused by factors outside our will. Everything is already decided.

**Deterrence:** a discouraging effect.

**Divine right of kings:** the theory that monarchs are given their right to rule directly by God (and not by the people), and so they are not subject to any earthly authority. Any attempt to restrict a monarch's powers is therefore against God's will.

**Doctrinally:** doctrines are statements of what is true about God.

**Dynamic:** process.

**Egocentricity:** the view that you are the most important thing in the world, so that you think only or primarily of yourself, without regard for the feelings of others.

**Enclave:** distinct area.

**Ennobles:** gives dignity to.

**Ephemeral:** short-term, not long-lasting.

**Ethics:** a set of moral principles.

**Free will:** the ability to choose and act freely, regardless of external factors.

**Grace:** unmerited favor. In the Bible, "grace" is usually used to describe how God treats his people. Because God is full of grace, he gives believers eternal life (Ephesians 2:4-8); he also gives them gifts to use to serve his people (Ephesians 4:7, 11-13).

**Gospel:** an announcement, often translated "good news." When the Roman Emperor sent a proclamation around the empire declaring a victory or achievement, this was called a "gospel." The gospel is good news to be believed, not good advice to be followed.

**Holy:** totally pure; set apart.

**Idiom:** an expression which has a different meaning to that of the individual words. Eg: "It's raining cats and dogs."

**Imperatives:** commands, or orders.

**Incarnation:** the coming of the divine Son of God as a human, in the person of Jesus Christ.

**Inferences:** conclusions drawn from a source or fact, which is based on reason but cannot be proved.

**Inimical:** harmful, obstructive.

**Intercedes:** speaks on someone else's behalf.

**Kosher:** food that satisfied the requirements of the Old Testament food laws.

**Justification:** the declaration that someone is not guilty, not condemned, completely innocent.

**Legalistic:** an approach to behavior that views godly living as obeying a set of rules.

**Libertarianism:** a political theory that promotes very limited state interference in people's lives—in almost every way, people should be left to get on with their lives themselves without state involvement.

**Licentiousness:** living according to feeling, rather than principles, particularly with regard to sex.

**Literary device:** a recognized method of communication in writing (eg: hyperbole, flashback).

**Lot:** describes any means of making a decision based on a seemingly random outcome, such as rolling a dice or tossing a coin.

**Manifestation:** sign or event that makes visible.

**Meditate:** focus on and reflect upon God's word.

**Metaphors:** images which are used to explain something, but that are not to be taken literally (eg: "The news was a dagger to his heart").

**Negate:** make nothing.

**Non sequitur:** a conclusion that doesn't flow from the argument made in

support of it.

**Obtuse:** unable or unwilling to understand.

**Pantheon:** group of gods believed in by a people or nation.

**Parallelism:** close similarity, connection.

**Perseverance:** continuing to do or believe something in the face of difficulty.

**Professing:** someone who claims to be something (eg: a professing Christian is anyone who says they are a Christian).

**Providential:** the truth that God is overseeing all events.

**Qualified:** in this context, limited, not unquestioning or unconditional.

**Redeemed:** freed, released, bought back for a price.

**Remnant:** a small remaining quantity of something. In the Bible, it refers to the small number of Jews who returned from the exile from the land in Babylon.

**Sanctity:** purity, Christ-likeness. **Sanctification** is the process of someone growing in sanctity.

**Sanhedrin:** the highest court in Israel in Jesus' and Paul's time.

**Scruples:** a feeling of doubt or hesitation about the rightness of a particular course of action.

**Sin:** describes both the power or impulse that rejects loving and obeying God; and the actions, words and thoughts that arise following that impulse.

**Subjugate:** defeat and establish domination over.

**Subversive:** undermining an established system.

**Temerity:** boldness, confidence.

**Theology:** the study of the truth about God.

**Totalitarianism:** a system of government that requires complete submission to

the state in every area of life.

**Trans-cultural:** something that is not specific to a culture, but applies across all societies (eg: all humans are made in God's image).

**Veneer:** used to describe an appearance that disguises the truth.

**Vincible:** able to be overcome.

**Violating:** disrespecting, assaulting.

**Worldview:** the beliefs we hold in an attempt to make sense of the world as we experience it, and which direct how we live in it. Everyone has a worldview.

## **APPENDIX: A Summary of Romans 8 – 16**

### **8:1-4 Salvation—total victory over sin**

- v 1 First aspect: no condemnation for sin
- v 2 Second aspect: no bondage to sin
- v 3 First aspect comes through Christ's work
- v 4 Second aspect comes through the Spirit's work

### **8:5-13 Overcoming sin with the Spirit**

#### *Setting the mind on the Spirit*

- v 5 Whatever preoccupies the mind controls the life...
- v 6 ... leading to either death or peace

#### *The inability of our minds to deal with sin*

- v 7 Our minds are naturally hostile to God and so...
- v 8 ... make us incapable of a life pleasing to God

#### *The ability of the Spirit to deal with sin*

- v 9 Without the Spirit you are not a Christian
- v 10 If we have the Spirit, we have spiritual life now...
- v 11 ... and new, immortal bodies later

#### *Killing sin with the Spirit*

- v 12 Our motive: we are in debt!
- v 13b Our power: by the Spirit
- v 13b Our aim: the killing of our sinful nature
- v 13c Our reward: spiritual life

### **8:14 The requirement for being a child of God**

- v 14 Not everyone is a child of God; only those who have the Holy Spirit

### **8:15-17 The benefits of being a child of God**

- v 15 Intimacy. We have access to the Father
- v 16 Confidence. We have security in the Father
- v 17 Inheritance. We have riches with the Father, but not ease and comfort

**8:18-25    The hope of being a child of God**

- v 18    Future glory and inheritance overshadow our present suffering
- v 19-22 Nature is flawed and weakened until we are freed from sin
- v 23    We are flawed and weakened until we are freed from sin
- v 24-25 This hope gives us patience in suffering

**8:26-27    The help for being a child of God**

- v 26-27 When we are too weak to act like children of God, the Spirit helps us

**8:28-30    Christian confidence**

- v 28    What it is: the sovereignty of God in history. His purpose in all circumstances is for our best. No opposition will harm us
- v 29-30 How it comes: the certainty of God's salvation. He saves us in stages. No flaw or evil will remain in us

**8:31-39    Why we have this confidence**

*The adequacy of God. Nothing inside or outside will separate us from him. Five unanswerable questions:*

- v 31    God's power: "If God is for us, who can be against us?"
- v 32    God's generosity: "He who did not spare his own Son ... how will he not also ... give us all things?"
- v 33    God's pardon: "Who will bring any charge? ... It is God who justifies"
- v 34    Christ's work: "Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died ... was raised ... is also interceding"
- v 35    Christ's love: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?"
- v 36-39 The answer to each question: No one and nothing!

**9:1-5    Why doesn't all Israel believe when the message should be clearest to them?**

- v 1-3    Paul's anguish over his people, Israel
- v 4-5    Israel's eight great privileges

**9:6-13    Answer One: NOT because God's promises have failed**

- v 6    Not all racial Israel is true Israel
- v 7-9    The example of Isaac and Ishmael

v 10-13 The example of Jacob and Esau

**9:14-18      Answer Two: NOT because God is unfair in his granting mercy**

v 14-16 God only has mercy on some, and that is not inconsistent (example: Moses)

v 17-18 God sends judgment on some, and that is not inconsistent (example: Pharaoh)

**9:19-29      Answer Three: NOT because God is unfair in holding us accountable**

v 19      Why does God blame us?

v 20-21 Remember who you are: God has rights of ownership over us

v 22-23 God could reject all, but he doesn't

v 24-29 The Old Testament predicted all this

**9:30-33      ... BUT because Israel rejected the way of salvation by faith alone**

v 30      The Gentiles, who did not seek righteousness, have obtained it!

v 31      The Jews, who did seek righteousness, have not obtained it!

v 32a      Why not? Because they pursued an impossible goal: righteousness by works

v 32b-33      They were "scandalized"; their pride was offended by Christ and his salvation

**10:1-4      Israel was ignorant of salvation by God's righteousness instead of our own**

v 1-2      The Jews have a zeal for God, but their zeal is misplaced and mistaken

v 3      They recognized their need for righteousness, but tried to create their own

v 4      Once we grasp the radical nature of Christ's work, it is the end of legalism

**10:5-8      The two ways of righteousness in the Bible**

v 5      Moses (in Leviticus 18:5) tells us we must obey the entire law to be saved

v 6-8      But Moses (in Deuteronomy 30:14) tells us we can get a new life through simple belief

**10:9-15      How to become righteous in God's way**

- v 9a First need: to confess the work of Christ in history
- v 9b Second need: to trust in that work from the heart
- v 10 Recapitulation of verse 9: justification and salvation are essentially the same thing
- v 11-13 This is accessible to anyone and everyone
- v 14-15 The message of the good news is communicated through human beings

**10:16-21 Return to the question: Why did Israel reject God's way of righteousness? They were victoriously ignorant.**

- v 16-17 Not all Israel has believed, as Isaiah foretold
- v 18 Did they not hear the message? Of course they did
- v 19-20 Did they not understand the message? The Jews knew about the need for righteousness but the Gentiles did not
- v 21 The reason is stubbornness of heart

**11:1 Question One: Did God reject Israel? NO!**

**11:1b-10 Israel's unbelief is not total**

*God has not rejected Israel, but most are hard toward the gospel*

- v 1b Paul is a believer and a Jew
- v 2a God foreknew a people from eternity
- v 2b-3 Elijah also mistakenly thought there were no believers left in Israel...
- v 4 ... but there were many!
- v 5 So today there are many Jewish believers...
- v 6 ... who are chosen by sheer grace
- v 7 Though Israel as a totality did not find the righteousness of God, the elect did
- v 8-10 The Old Testament describes the hardness God gave to those who had rejected him

**11:11a Question Two: Did they fall beyond recovery? NO!**

**11:11b-32 Israel's unbelief is not final**

*The hardening of the majority is temporary; in the future this will change*

- v 11-14 Three stages of blessing:
  - Stage A (v 11): Israel's difficulties with the gospel led to the salvation of Gentiles

Stage C (v 12): eventually, Israel's full belief will bring greater blessing to the world

Stage B (v 13-14): through the gospel's success with Gentiles, Israel will be won

v 15 If Israel's unbelief has had this benefit, imagine the benefit of their belief

v 16 Since God has brought in some of Israel, we can look to him to bring in the whole

v 17 Gentiles are like a wild branch that has been grafted into a tree. They benefit from the biblical religion of Israel

v 18-22 So (Gentiles) don't be arrogant! The Jews who disbelieved were broken off, and so will you be if you disbelieve

v 22-24 And (Jews) don't be discouraged! Anyone who believes can be grafted back

v 25-27 Recap of the three stages of blessing

v 28-29 Currently most of Israel rejects the gospel and is under God's judgment, but God remembers his promises to their forefathers

v 30-31 Recap of the three stages of blessing

v 32 Though both Jews and Gentiles deserve damnation, both Jews and Gentiles will receive mercy

### **11:33-36 Doxology!**

v 33 God's wisdom (seen in the doctrines of free justification and election) is an infinite depth of richness

v 34-35 It puts us in a state of complete dependence upon him for both knowledge and grace

v 36 God is Creator, Sustainer, and Heir of all things

### **12:1-2 How to relate to God**

v 1 Offer yourselves

v 1a How: remember who he is (his mercies)

v 1b What: your entire life as sacrifice

v 1c Why: it is your logical service

v 2a Don't: be conformed to this world

v 2b Do: be transformed by mind renewal

v 2c Result: discernment of the will of God

**12:3-4 How to relate to ourselves**

v 3a Assess yourselves with humility and accuracy

v 3b You are the same in your standing in the gospel (the standard of faith)

v 4 You are different in your abilities to minister (not the same function)

**12:5-8 How to relate to others in the church**

v 5 We are all one, not separate

v 6a We are all distinct, not absorbed

v 6b Some prophesy

v 7a Some serve people's material needs

v 7b Some teach

v 8a Some counsel

v 8b Some give generously

v 8c Some lead

v 8d Some work with the poor and sick

**12:9-16 Love toward Christians**

v 9a Love without hypocrisy

v 9b Love with truth

v 10a Love with affection

v 10b Love with respect

v 11 Love with zeal

v 12 Love with patience

v 13 Love with practical generosity

v 14 Love without bitterness

v 15 Love with empathy

v 16a Love with unity of mind

v 16b Love with humility

**12:17-21 Love toward enemies**

v 17a What to avoid: repayment

v 17b What to do: the right thing

v 18 What to do: seek peaceful relations

- v 19 Why do it: only God is judge
- v 20 What to do: good to those who do wrong
- v 21 Summary

### **13:1-7 Relationship to the state**

- v 1-4 *The responsibilities of the state*
- v 1-2 Its authority: from God
- v 3-4 Its ministry: to promote good and to restrain evil
- v 5-7 *The responsibilities of Christian citizens*
- v 5 Submission
- v 6-7a Paying dues
- v 7b Respect and honor

### **13:8-14 Relationship to the world**

- v 8-10 *Love for the people of the world*
- v 8 The obligation of neighbor-love
- v 9-10 The guidelines for neighbor-love
- v 11-14 *Hatred for the spirit of the world*
- v 11-12a The overlap of the ages
- v 12b-14 Living in the age to come

### **14:1-3 Accept one another: the basic principle**

- v 1a Welcome those with whom you differ
- v 1b Don't condemn others over matters that God has not clearly forbidden...
- v 2-3 ... because God has accepted you all

### **14:4-13a Criticism of the weak**

- v 4 Don't judge; you are not the judge
- v 5 Be convinced in your own mind
- v 6-8 We are responsible ultimately to our Lord in these matters
- v 9-13a Jesus alone has a right to be Lord of our consciences, so stop judging those who do what you don't

### **14:13-**

## **23 Criticism of the strong**

- v 13a Stop judging those who won't do what you know you're free to do
- v 13b Don't lead someone else to stumble...
- v 14 ... even though your position is right
- v 15 Live in love
- v 16 Don't let your liberty do evil...
- v 17-18 ... for the kingdom of God is not about these issues
- v 19 So your priority should be to build up other Christians
- v 20 Don't hinder God's work in another just so you can eat meat
- v 21 It's better not to do something than to do something that encourages another Christian to go against their conscience
- v 22-23 Don't violate the conscience but educate it

### **15:1 – 16:16 Ministry in unity and in mission**

- 15:1-3 The servant heart: basis for ministry
- v 4 The Scriptures: guidance for ministry
- v 5-13 The unified body: channel for ministry
- v 14-23 The world: field for ministry
- v 24-29 The poor: special concern for ministry
- v 30-32 Prayer: power for ministry
- 16:1-16 Gifts and groups: organizing for ministry

### **16:17- 23 Warning and greetings**

- v 17 Keep away from those who deliberately cause division
- v 18a Their motive: serving themselves, not Christ
- v 18b Their means: flattering believers
- v 19 So keep obeying, and keep away from evil...
- v 20 ... because God is defeating, and will defeat, Satan
- v 21-23 Paul's companions send greetings

### **16:25- 27 Final doxology**

- v 25a The gospel is God's power to save and keep his people
- v 25b The gospel is all about Jesus Christ

- v 26a The gospel was predicted by the prophets, revealed in Christ, and is now proclaimed...
- v 26b ... so that all peoples might trust and obey God
- v 27 Praise God! Amen

# **APPENDIX: The Doctrines of God's Sovereignty and Election**

In Romans 8 – 11, Paul teaches about the sovereignty of God over all the affairs of human history. Here, we take time to consider in more detail than in the earlier chapters in this book both what the Bible teaches about God's sovereignty and his election, and some objections to and questions about these doctrines. This is not everything that can be said about these truths, and they are often unsettling for believers as they wrestle with them. As with all doctrine, these things are best discussed and thought about with other Christians, so it is well worth using this appendix as the basis for a discussion with others at your church.

## **What the Bible Teaches**

The Bible holds together two truths:

### **A. Everything that happens is under God's direction**

“We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him” (Romans 8:28). Though this verse only makes reference to the way in which God controls the circumstances of believers' lives, Ephesians 1:11 tells us that he also does this for everyone: God “works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will.” In both Ephesians 1:11 and Romans 8:28, the Greek words are the same. God “performs” (*ergon*) “all things” (*panta*) that happen. In Romans 8:28, we are told he directs all things to “work together” (*sunergei*), meaning that God not only brings his power to bear on every circumstance, but he conforms all events to be part of his master plan. If we take the word “all” seriously, it means that:

1. His plan includes “little things.” Ultimately, there are no accidents.

Proverbs 16:33 says: “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD.” Even the flip of a coin is part of his plan.

2. His plan includes “bad things.” The evil of the world was not God’s original design. Death, disease, sin and decay are a temporary result of sin (Romans 8:18-23). God is distressed by our distress (Isaiah 63:9) and grieved by our pain (Psalm 56:8). Therefore, he is weaving into his plan even those troubles, sorrows and pain, because his plan in the end will result in glory for him and “good” for his people (Romans 8:28). “Not one [sparrow] will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father” (Matthew 10:29). “When disaster comes to a city, has not the LORD caused it?” (Amos 3:6). “I am the LORD, and there is no other ... I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the LORD, do all these things” (Isaiah 45:6-7).
3. His plan includes sins. This must be the case, for our sins and the sins of others are a very major part of “all things.” (If our sins were left out of the plan of God, there wouldn’t be much left!) Psalm 76:10 says of God: “Surely the wrath of man shall praise you” (ESV), meaning that God will overrule and control things so that even wicked and violent events come out for the good of his people and his glory. In Genesis 50:20 Joseph says to his brothers: “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.” His point is that his brothers’ evil action of selling him into slavery was used by God to do great good.

## **B. All choices are free acts for which we are responsible**

Romans 9:16 says: “It does not, therefore, depend on man’s desire or effort, but on God’s mercy.” Then in verses 31-32 Paul states that: “Israel, who pursued a law of righteousness, has not attained it. Why not? Because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works.”

Many readers find Romans 9 contradictory. In the early part of the chapter, Paul says that many Jews do not believe the gospel because they are not chosen, and God chooses his people regardless of their deeds or works (v 10-18). But at

the end of the chapter, he says that they don't believe because of their stubborn refusal to accept grace (9:30-33). It may seem like a contradiction, but everywhere in the Bible this same balance is maintained.

Put another way: God's plan works through our choices, not around or in spite of them. For example, God sets his plan by rendering our choices certain and yet doing so without destroying our responsibility. The Greek notion of "fate" or the Islamic notion of "kismet" are quite different from the Christian doctrine of God's sovereignty. The Greek myth of Oedipus reveals "fatalism." Oedipus is fated to kill his father and marry his mother. Though he and all around him do all they can to avoid this fate, he ends up accomplishing it. He and his parents make every effort to avoid it, but it occurs despite his choices. The Christian concept is quite different. Our choices have consequences and we are never forced by God to do anything other than what we want. Yet God works out his will perfectly through our willing actions. It is a marvel!

Martyn Lloyd-Jones expands on this:

*"Why does man act as he does? ... Well, there are only three ultimate explanations. One is called contingency—that there is no rhyme or reason in anything; it is accidental and haphazard. The second is the doctrine of [determinism] ... 'you cannot help it ... you are like that.' Everything is determined and [you are] not free at all ... There is ... the biological view ... They say that what a man is, is determined by various glands in his body ... There is ... psychoanalysis. [One Freudian said,] 'Psychoanalysis has undermined our confidence in the reality of free will ... by showing how often our apparently deliberate actions are in fact determined by motives of which we are unaware.'*

*"So there it is. [Those are] the alternatives to the teaching of the Apostle Paul. [Either we are determined by natural forces, or things happen randomly by chance] but the third explanation is the biblical doctrine of certainty [that we make responsible choices but all under the sovereignty of God]."*

*(Romans Chapter 9, pages 204-205)*

Here are some biblical examples of how God works in people's lives:

1. *Judas*. Acts 2:23 tells us that Jesus was crucified according to God's plan, yet by "wicked men." The actions of the people who killed Jesus were wicked and they were liable for them, yet God used their wicked intentions to carry out the crucifixion exactly how and when he wanted it. So Peter says that: "The Scripture had to be fulfilled which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through the mouth of David concerning Judas, who served as guide for those who arrested Jesus" (Acts 1:16).
2. *Jacob*. Jacob deceived his father and robbed his brother. As a result he had to flee his homeland and experience suffering and injustice in a foreign land (Genesis 27:1 – 28:5). Yet there he met the love of his life and had the children through whom Jesus was descended (Genesis 29:16 – 30:24— plenty of sinful motives and actions are involved here, too!). Now it is clear that his sin did not put him into a "Plan B" for his life. It was all part of God's perfect plan for him. Ultimately God worked his sin out for good. Was he therefore not responsible for his sin? Yes, he was. Did he suffer the consequences of his foolish behavior? Yes, he did. But God was infallibly in control, even as Jacob was completely responsible.
3. *Paul in the storm*. In Acts 27, when Paul was in the storm-wracked boat, he prophesied to the passengers: "Not one of you will be lost; only the ship will be destroyed" (v 22). By revelation he revealed God's plan. Their preservation was certain. Yet in verse 31, Paul warned that the sailors must not get into the lifeboat. "Unless these men stay with the ship, you cannot be saved!" Despite the certainty of God's plan, it was equally true that the men were responsible to act and choose wisely. Paul did not say: *Well, God predestined you all to survive this storm, so it doesn't matter what you do*. When God appoints a result, he also appoints the means—our choices and efforts. Paul did not have the Greek notion of fate—such statements make no sense in the fatalistic framework!

As J. Gresham Machen writes:

*“[God] brings to pass the actions of personal beings in a way that preserves their freedom and their responsibility to the full. [Is that] inconceivable? We persuade our fellow men, yet their freedom is preserved when they do what we persuade them to do of their free will. Shall not then God be able to do with certainty what we with our little power do with uncertainty? Does not God who made the soul know how to move it in accordance with its own nature so that its freedom shall not be destroyed?”*

*(The Christian View of Man, page 100)*

The answers to his last two questions must surely be: *Yes, God will* and *Yes, God does!*

Therefore, when it comes to salvation, the Bible teaches that:

**C. People who choose God do so strictly because God has opened their hearts; people who fail to do so strictly because they closed their hearts.**

Let us take each part of that statement in turn.

*Only God is responsible for our salvation.* Romans 3:11 says: “There is no one ... who seeks God.” (For comment on what this means, see *Romans 1 – 7 For You*, pages 69-71.) Romans 8:7 says: “The sinful [natural] mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so”. Romans 9:11-16 states: “Yet, before the twins [ie: Esau and Jacob] were born or had done anything good or bad—in order that God’s purpose in election might stand: not by works but by him who calls ... as it is written: ‘Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.’ ... It does not, therefore, depend on man’s desire or effort, but on God’s mercy”.

Paul teaches that, through sin, we have lost the ability to see the truth and the desire to serve God. “No one ... seeks God.” Paul is not saying that the human will is not free to do what we want. We are free in that sense. *But*, he is saying, *we cannot ever want God. We aren’t free to choose him.* Our mind does not submit; indeed it cannot. To put it a different way, our human will will never freely choose God.

We will never want God; we are incapable of choosing God, unless God breaks in. And that is what he does. “It does not, therefore, depend on man’s desire or effort, but on God’s mercy.” We don’t initiate our salvation—we don’t even want it. God wakes us up from a helpless sleep; he unlocks us from a helpless state. As this prayer from the collection of Puritan prayers *Valley of Vision* puts it:

*I was dead in iniquities, having no eyes to see thee,  
no ears to hear thee,  
no taste to relish thy joys,  
no intelligence to know thee;  
But thy Spirit has quickened me,  
has brought me into a new world as a new creature ...  
thou hast drawn me with cords of love.*

*Only we are responsible for our condemnation.* In Romans 9:21-24, Paul asks: “Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for [honor] and some for [dishonor]? What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath—prepared for destruction? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory—even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles?”

In these three verses in Romans 9, we have the important and crucial “asymmetry” of the biblical gospel, namely this: God alone prepares any person for spiritual glory, but we alone prepare ourselves for spiritual destruction. There are two basic, competing views. (They correspond somewhat, but not completely, to “determinism” and “contingency.”)

1. “Hyper-Calvinism.” Fatalism is found in Greek thought, Islam, and Eastern religions, but some Christians over the years have adopted it as well. In this view, God equally and symmetrically prepares all people for their fate. God in his sovereign will has determined to have some people lost and some saved, and he goes about directing each group down each path in the same way. In other words, God prepares us for glory *or* God prepares us for

destruction.

2. “Pelagianism.” (The name is taken from Pelagius, a fifth-century monk.)

This view is also found in ancient and modern thought, though it has been very prevalent in the west in the last two centuries. In this view, every person has the ability to choose good or evil, to serve God or self. This ability is equal in every individual. Thus every person who is saved is saved in the very same way that every person who is lost is lost—by his or her exercise of the ability to choose. We prepare ourselves for glory *or* we prepare ourselves for destruction.

In Romans 9:22-24, Paul very carefully refuses to take either view. Paul says “he” (God) prepared some vessels for glory, but he does not say that God prepared vessels for destruction. Paul says they were “prepared” for condemnation, but that God chose to endure them with great patience. It therefore appears that their preparation is not his doing; meaning that all human beings have freely chosen sin and deserve condemnation. God could allow us all to perish as we have chosen, and he does allow some to go to the destruction they have prepared for themselves. But he breaks in and opens the eyes of some, whom he prepares for glory.

This is the only way to understand Paul. If you take a fatalistic view, you cannot explain Paul’s reticence to say that God prepared the vessels for destruction. But if one adopts the view that every individual is equally capable of choosing God, that leads to the conclusion that God does nothing more for saved people than for lost people, and thus salvation is not by grace. The vessels prepare themselves for glory!

Here are two commentators on Romans 9:21-24, explaining how Paul’s view “threads the needle” between these two mistaken views:

*“Paul’s picture is that of a potter making various utensils and implements for household use and so on ... Now ... ‘creation’ ... means ‘creating out of nothing’ ... [but] the potter does not create the clay ... It is there in front of him on the bench and he is now going to do something with it ... [So] the Apostle is not dealing here at all with God’s purpose in*

*the original creation of humanity. [This] is an account of what God does with fallen humanity.*

*“[Many think] God deliberately made some people that they might go to hell. That is a lie! It is not taught anywhere in the Scripture ... God created all things good. No one has ever been forced to sin. [Humanity] rebelled against God and sinned ... And what the Apostle is dealing with here is what God does with humanity in the light of that, and he says he has an absolute right to do as he wills in his own sovereign will and Lordship. With such a hopeless mass, which could be all consigned to perdition, he has nevertheless, because of his grace and glory and his purpose, chosen and elected and formed some out of that mass unto glory and honor ...*

*“What we all want to ask at this point is: ... Why [and] how does God decide to make one unto honor and one unto dishonor? There is only one answer to that—I do not know! Nobody else does ... I cannot go beyond the Scripture, and all the Scripture tells me is that God does that and that he has a right to do it, and that if I raise the question ... I am trying to contend with my Maker ...*

*“So let me put the teaching to you like this: If anyone is saved it is entirely because of the mercy and choice of God ... but I add this: if people are lost, it is entirely their own responsibility.”*

*(Lloyd-Jones, Romans Chapter 9, pages 199-203)*

*“If ... anybody is lost, the blame is theirs, but if anybody is saved, the credit is God’s. This antinomy contains a mystery which our present knowledge cannot solve; but it is consistent with Scripture, history and experience.”*

*(Stott, The Message of Romans, page 270)*

## **Objections and Questions**

## **1. Isn't "election" just a Pauline doctrine?**

No. Though Paul does teach it in Romans and elsewhere (see also Ephesians 1:3-5; 1 Thessalonians 1:4-5; 2 Thessalonians 2:13-14; 2 Timothy 1:9), the doctrine permeates the rest of Scripture. Here are three examples:

### *Jesus' teaching in John*

John 6:36-39: "But as I told you, you have seen me and still you do not believe. All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away. For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day."

John 6:44: "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day."

John 10:25: "Jesus answered, 'I did tell you, but you do not believe. The miracles I do in my Father's name speak for me, but you do not believe because you are not my sheep. My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand.'"

Here Jesus twice says, first, that if someone doesn't believe, it is because God has not "given" them to him; and second, that everyone who is given to him will come to him and will never be lost. Why can Jesus make these two statements? Because of a third principle that is a premise for the first two: no one is capable of coming to God unless God is drawing him. (This accords with Paul in Romans 3:11, that no one seeks God.) Therefore, if anyone is seeking, it is because God is drawing. If God is drawing, they will be saved and kept.

### *Peter's teaching*

1 Peter 1:1-2: "To God's elect ... who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood."

### *Luke's teaching*

Acts 13:48: “When the Gentiles heard this [gospel preaching from Paul and Barnabas], they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed.”

Acts 16:13-14: “On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul’s message.”

Notice that Luke does not say: “All who believed were appointed to eternal life” but rather: “All who were appointed for eternal life believed.” Thus the belief is a result of the appointment; the appointment is not the result of the belief.

## **2. But election just complicates the simple gospel! I wish it hadn’t been brought up!**

No, election establishes the simple gospel. The main reason (the strongest argument) for the doctrine is that rejecting it creates far more problems than it solves. Why? Unless you embrace the doctrine of election, you are forced to hold that salvation is not by grace alone and God alone, but is due ultimately to something better in those who believe.

Here is a penetrating line of reasoning from Martyn Lloyd-Jones:

*“There is one final argument. People seem to think that if you reject this doctrine [of election] you are in a happy position. [But] let me show you where you are if you reject this doctrine of Paul as taught here. Take Acts 28:24 ... ‘Some believed the things which were spoken and some believed not.’ [Now] why do some believe and some not? Those people were ... all of them the same: same background, same everything, but some believed and some did not ... What decides it?*

*“‘Ah,’ says somebody, ‘it is quite simple. Free will!’ Very well, one chooses to believe, the other chooses not to believe. [But] why? What is*

*it that makes some want to believe and others not? ‘Oh well,’ you say, ‘one saw things in one way, and the other . . . in a different way. ‘Yes, but . . . why does one see it like this, the other one like that? . . . Let us go further back...”*

*(Romans Chapter 9, pages 207-208)*

If we keep asking why one believes and the other doesn't and reject the idea of election, we are forced eventually to say that one person was humbler, more open to the truth, or more virtuous than the other in some way. In other words, the real differentiating factor, and the critical cause of one person's salvation over others, is *something better in them*. In other words, you are back into justification by works!

Paul makes this point: that the doctrine of election is necessary to preserve the doctrine of justification. God chose Jacob “before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad—in order that God's purpose in election might stand: not by works but by him who calls” (Romans 9:11-12).

Therefore, the final case for the doctrine of election is that it reminds us of what we already know—that we are saved by sheer grace alone, not on the basis of anything in us. Yes, “election” causes many difficulties. But, aside from the fact that Scripture teaches it, the best reason for accepting the doctrine is that every alternative creates even more problems and difficulties. Without “election” you compromise the central teaching of the Bible, that we are saved by grace alone, not our works. If the difference between the unbeliever and the believer is ultimately in us (a greater humility, a greater openness, etc.), then we are the real authors of our salvation.

### **3. If you believe in election, doesn't that leave you with the problem of why God doesn't choose to save everyone?**

Yes, but the same is true for Christians who don't believe in election. Election doesn't create the problem, it only leads us to think about it. To deny the doctrine of election does not help you escape the issue. All Christians have this problem, and so we cannot object to election by appealing to it. The person who

does not believe in election has the same problem:

1. God wants everybody saved.
2. God could save everyone.
3. God does not.

The question still remains, therefore: *Why not?* That is the ultimate mystery, but abandoning the doctrine of election does not answer it.

Someone says: *But I believe that though God doesn't want us to be lost, some are lost because they choose wrong and God will not violate their freedom of choice.* But why is freedom of choice sacrosanct? I try to honor my child's freedom of will, but not if I see he is about to be killed by it! Why can't God "insult" our freedom of will for a moment and save us for eternity?

No, regardless of whether you think we are saved by our choice or by God's election, you still have the same question: *Why wouldn't God save us all if he has the power and desire to do so?* It is a hard question, but it cannot be used as an argument against the doctrine of election.

We can go further. Suppose election is not true. Suppose that aeons ago, God set up salvation on this system: Every person will have an equal ability to accept or reject Christ, who will die and be raised and be presented through the gospel message. The moment God determined to set up salvation on that system (assuming for the moment that he did), he would have immediately known exactly which persons would be saved and which would be condemned on that basis. So the minute he "set it up," he was *de facto* electing some and passing over others. We come out to the same place. God could save all, but he doesn't.

So why doesn't he? We can only know two things. First, the answer must have something to do with his perfect nature. He is perfectly loving and perfectly righteous and neither can be preferred over the other or he would not be God. Somehow the answer has to do with his being consistent with himself. Second, we cannot see the whole picture. Why? If we can conceive of a more merciful system of salvation than God has, we must not see it rightly, for God is more merciful than we can even imagine. When we finally see the whole plan and

answer, we will not be able to find fault with it.

#### **4. But it isn't fair for God to elect some and not others.**

It is one thing for a doctor to see five patients and only choose to treat two. That would be unjust, because as a doctor he owes care to all, and all have a right to be treated. But if a judge condemns a number of criminals and pardons some, it is merciful, for he owes nothing to any of them. (Of course, this would raise questions about the justice of that judge's decision; Paul takes care to explain how God is both just and merciful in Romans 3:21-26—see *Romans 1 – 7 For You*, pages 82-84.)

The real question is not why God doesn't take all, but why he takes *any*. It is well worth quoting D. James Kennedy's illustration again:

*“Here are five people who are planning to hold up a bank. They are friends of mine. I find out about it and I plead with them. I beg them not to do it. Finally they push me out of the way and they start out. I tackle one of the men and wrestle him to the ground. The others go ahead, rob the bank, a guard is killed, they are captured, convicted, sentenced ... The one man who was not involved in the robbery goes free. Now I ask you this question: Whose fault was it that the other men died? ... Now this other man who is walking around free—can he say, ‘Because my heart is so good, I am a free man’? The only reason that he is free is because of me; because I restrained him. So those who go to hell have no one to blame but themselves. Those who go to heaven have no one to praise but Jesus Christ. Thus we see that salvation is all of grace from its beginning to its end.”*

*(Truths That Transform, pages 39-40)*

#### **5. But it makes God seem arbitrary.**

No, it makes God gracious. The Bible doesn't say that God's election has no reasons for it. We know that God always does what is right (Genesis 18:25) and

wise (Romans 11:33). There is no indication that God chooses us at (what we would call) “random”—eeny, meeny, miney, moe! He has reasons, but all we know is that the reasons are not in us. 1 Corinthians 4:7 says: “Who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive?” To say that we don’t know on what basis God chooses is not the same as saying that his choice is arbitrary.

There is one hint as to why God seems to choose some over others, but it is not flattering! 1 Corinthians 1:27-29 says: “God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly ... and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him.” It is possible that God chose you and me because we are foolish or weak or despised!

Again, as mentioned above, the only alternative is to believe that we are saved by something in us that makes us better than those who are lost. That is a complete contradiction of the biblical gospel.

## **6. But if everything is fixed and certain, why pray, evangelize or do anything at all?**

This objection is short-sighted. First, if everything were not planned by a holy and loving God, we would be absolutely terrified by the prospect of even getting up in the morning. Our actions (always done with very little understanding) could have horrible consequences. Everything would depend on us! If everything were not planned by a holy and loving God, there would be enormous pressure on Christians when we evangelize. We would know that our inarticulateness could result in a person missing his or her one “chance” for salvation. It would be a horrible prospect.

Second, we evangelize and pray because of the privilege of sharing in God’s work with him. For example, a father might be able to chop wood for the stove himself, but he asks his children to learn to chop the wood and stoke the fire as well. What if the children say: *We have no incentive to chop the wood. We know*

*that if we don't cut it, our father will do it anyway—he won't let us freeze! But the father would say: Of course I could do it myself, but I want you to share the work with me.* The authority and the privilege of working with our heavenly Father is surely plenty of incentive! He wants to work with us and for us.

Also, we are not supposed to second-guess God. We are never to try to guess who is “elect”—ever! God calls all to repentance and so should we. In fact, the doctrine of election should give us far more hope about working with people. Why? Because no one is a hopeless case! From a human point of view, many people look totally hard and lost, but since salvation is by God's election, we should treat everyone and anyone with hope, since God calls the dead to life through us.

Therefore, God's sovereignty is a motivation to evangelize, not a discouragement. In Acts 18, Paul is in Corinth and the gospel has been rejected by the Jews there. How does God encourage Paul not to be afraid, to “keep on speaking [and] not be silent” (18:9)? “I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city” (v 10). God assures Paul of his presence, his protection, and his *election*. And Paul responds by staying “for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God” (v 11). The teaching is this: the next person you pray for and/or share the gospel with may be one of God's elect, and you may be part of the way God has ordained to bring them to faith.

## **7. Doesn't this lead to a superior attitude—to think that you are “elect”?**

With all due respect, such a question would show that the asker really doesn't understand the doctrine of election! The doctrine has the completely opposite effect. As we said in response to Objection Two, it is the denial of election that will lead you logically to feel superior to those who don't believe. If we deny election, believers will be strongly tempted to say to unbelievers: *Why can't you see this as I can? You must be more stupid or proud than I was!* The doctrine of election says that believers are chosen people, not choice people. We are not chosen for our superior qualities. The reasons we are chosen are not in us. There is no superiority of believers over unbelievers.

## **8. I believe the Bible and I see all the teaching about election, but why do I still dislike it so?**

My theory is that the biblical gospel is so supernatural that it always combines qualities that by natural reason and culture we cannot keep together. The doctrine of justification is one way of looking at the gospel. It combines both law and love in ways that no one could have thought up. We are saved apart from the law so that now we can obey the law. All other philosophies are either law-ism (legalistic) or law-less (antinomian). Now, the doctrine of election is just the gospel looked at from another perspective. It combines the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of human beings. Here too, we find that human cultures and philosophies cannot combine these things.

So, whoever you are, you come from a culture that has saturated you in some view that is so unbalanced that you will see the doctrine of election as something more simple and extreme than it really is. Eastern philosophies and religions have always been more fatalistic. They believe individual autonomy to be an illusion. When people from that background come to the gospel, they may see it as being “just individualism.” On the other hand, western secularism believes strongly in the right and power of individuals to determine their own course and destiny. When people from that background come to the gospel, they see it as being “just fatalism.”

Thus, no matter which “side” we come from, no matter what our culture or temperament, we must make an effort to discern the carefully nuanced balances of the gospel of free justification and election. We must remember the prejudices we bring with us to the Scripture. We must be willing to learn to balance out our own views.

## **Practical Applications**

In the end, the Christian concept of God’s sovereignty is a marvelous, practical principle. It is mysterious but not confusing. It brings security and confidence

in...

1. *The difficulties of life.* It means we have great incentive to use our wisdom and our will to the best effect, knowing God holds us to it and knowing we will suffer consequences from foolishness and wickedness. At the same time, there is an absolute promise that we cannot ultimately mess up our lives. Even our failures and troubles will be used for God's glory and our benefit. How profoundly comforting!

"God ... fulfills his purpose for me!" cries the psalmist (Psalm 57:2). We develop a sweet inward spirit, a quiet delight in every disposal of God's will. Even wickedness and tragedy, which we know come from the evil of this world and the human heart—evil, which God did not design or create—are nonetheless woven into a wise plan.

But the promise of Romans 8:28, that "God works for the good of those who love him," is a promise to believers. It is a guarantee to those who are adopted into God's family through faith in Jesus as Savior. If you are not in the family, even good things in your life may not work to your benefit.

They may harden you to make you proud and blind to your need and dependence. But for God's children, his sovereignty is always exercised in a way of love and mercy.

2. *The intimacy of praise and worship.* Electing love is ultimate love. If God loved us because he found something better in us, we'd always be afraid of losing his love. And we'd never find his love a total miracle. But God does not say: *I love you because you are serviceable to me* or: *I love you because you are more humble than others*. He says: *I love you simply because I love you*. That is perfect love. This understanding is a fountain of endless praise, gratitude and thanksgiving.

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# Footnotes

1. Words in **gray** are defined in the Glossary. [Return](#)
2. All Romans verse references being looked at in each chapter are in **bold**.  
[Return](#)



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