

CALLED TO BELONG TO JESUS CHRIST A STUDY OF ROMANS

Notes For Week One: God's Call Through the Gospel (Romans 1:1-15)

The epistle to the Romans is one of the most widely studied and widely taught books of the Bible, yet many of its teachings can still be difficult for us to understand and to apply. In the epistle, the apostle Paul discusses almost all of the most significant topics in Christianity, from grace and faith to sin and judgment. He also shows the connections between all of these topics.

God Is the Source & Foundation (Romans 1:1-7)

Even the greetings and introductions of Paul's epistles contain important ideas that should be read carefully. As he opens his letter to the Romans, he makes frequent mention of God's call: to himself, to the Romans, and to the world. He also makes it clear from the beginning that God himself is the source and foundation of grace, peace, truth, and all that is worth having.

The book of Romans is known for many different things, but most of all, it is known and studied for the doctrinal foundations that it provides, and for the spiritual insights that it offers. Romans not only summarizes most of the important doctrinal or theological aspects of the gospel, but also goes into great detail in explaining them. Paul wants us to understand that the gospel is not a set of arbitrary rules. Its teachings are based on important truths about God and his character.

Paul establishes some of the key ideas of the epistle right away, as he notes that he himself has been set apart for the gospel (1:1-4). The verbs in these verses stress God's leading role in our relationship with him. Paul says that he was called by God, that God promised the gospel, and that God declared (*i.e.* revealed) Jesus to be his Son. In the following verses he uses the words "call" or "called" three more times, emphasizing that our salvation begins with a call from God, not with our goodness, learning, or anything else. He also makes clear at once that Jesus, God's Son, is at the center of all that God has revealed to us and all that he has called us to become.

God's call to the Romans is the same as his call to the world (1:5-7). Paul first mentions his own role. Not only was he called to establish his own relationship with God, but he was also called to reveal the gospel of Jesus to others. Paul refers to God's call as "the obedience that comes from faith", introducing two ideas (faith and obedience) that are important in the epistle.

We are all called to belong to Jesus Christ. In particular, Paul's readers in Rome have been given this call. This is the foundation of many of the other things that Paul will discuss in the epistle. God has not only made the necessary arrangements for us to know him, but has also given us a call to respond. He has provided us with more than adequate reasons to seek him, and then has called us to find him. To those who do so, God will give the blessings that Paul mentions in verse 7, plus many additional blessings as well.

These opening verses mention or suggest many of the key themes in Romans, and other significant ideas are mentioned soon afterwards. The most prominent ideas in the book are the most basic and most important topics in Christianity. Topics such as grace and faith, law and works, sin and judgment, are discussed in almost every passage of Romans. Words like righteousness, justification, mercy, condemnation, and many other such terms are found over and over again in the book. All of these terms connect back to the same basic ideas.

Romans does even more than expound on these central topics. It teaches us how to put these teachings into practice, so that we can experience spiritual blessings and live spiritual lives. Spiritual principles have a dramatic influence on our thoughts and actions when we come to understand them from God's perspective, rather than using human logic. As Isaiah says, his ways are not our ways, and his thoughts are not our thoughts (see Isaiah 55:8). God's will and his plans are often confusing and sometimes even frustrating to us, because we so often look at things with fleshly logic and earthly values. Romans helps us see things from God's viewpoint.

Questions For Discussion or Study: What specific things does Paul say in these verses about his own ministry and his own relationship with God? Why are they relevant to his purpose in writing? What does he mean when he says that the Romans and others are "called" to belong to Jesus? What else can we see in these opening verses that point ahead towards the major themes of the book of Romans?

The Background & Setting to the Epistle (Romans 1:8-15)

When Paul wrote his letter to the Roman Christians, he hoped to visit Rome in the near future. He explains his plans and his motivation for them here and again in the fifteenth chapter. The background and setting of Romans can help us to understand some of the goals of the book. There is also an instructive irony in the way that Paul's plans actually worked out.

The apostle continues with an expression of his desire to visit the Romans (1:8-10). He mentions how much encouragement they have provided other believers, telling them that, "your faith is being reported all over the world." In fact, the church in Rome was an interesting congregation in several respects. It was composed of both Jews and Gentiles*, and probably had members from every walk of life, from the lower social classes to the highest levels of Roman society**.

* Some commentators try to demonstrate that the church was predominantly one or the other, but in the epistle itself there are frequent statements that would be applicable mainly to Gentiles, and others that would be applicable mainly to Jews. (As a study exercise, try to find some of these yourself.)

** This is suggested by external information, and also by some of the individuals mentioned in chapter 15.

Further, the church in Rome was not the result of a planned mission deliberately designed to start a church there*. Rather, it happened naturally, due to the gospel's own power and the prominent position of the city. The first Roman Christians were probably Jews and Jewish proselytes who were converted on the day of Pentecost**, while others became Christians in other cities, then returned or moved to Rome***. The church in Rome thus grew entirely by the power of God's Word and the wisdom of God's will, one more reason for Paul and others to be so encouraged.

* You will sometimes hear that Peter founded the church at Rome, but that is a medieval legend with no basis in Scripture or in history. Peter's ministry at Rome took place later on.

** See Acts 2:11, in the list of those who were there. While it is not certain that any residents of Rome became Christians, it is commonly accepted that there were converts to Christianity from most or all of the locations that Luke mentions in Acts 2:9-11.

*** As many commentators point out, most modern readers vastly underestimate the extent to which travel and trade took place across long distances during the era.

Paul also mentions his personal plans, which he later describes in detail (see Romans 15:23-29). These plans help provide the historical setting of the book. Paul's eagerness to visit Rome shows clearly, and it helps explain the enthusiasm that led him to write them in such great detail about the gospel. It is also instructive to remember how Paul actually did get to Rome - as a prisoner, after a lengthy ordeal of imprisonment and trials (see Acts 21-28). Even Paul did not always see the future clearly, and even Paul didn't have everything work out in the way he wanted it to.

The date and location of Romans can be established with some precision. It was written in approximately AD 56 or AD 57, while Paul was in Corinth, towards the end of his third missionary journey. It probably took place during the period mentioned in Acts 20:2-3, with Corinth being where he spent the three months (probably the winter months) mentioned in verse 3. (See the commentaries listed below for the details of how the date can be established.)

The apostle then explains his motivation for visiting Rome (1:11-15). First, he wants to impart to them a spiritual gift, which he then specifies. He expects his visit to be of mutual benefit, in that both he and the Roman believers will be encouraged by each other's faith. As simple as this idea is, it is worth remembering. Paul found great encouragement in the fact that in Rome, a great city many miles away, there was a community of faithful believers glorifying God.

Paul also hopes for a harvest in Rome. He is by no means implying that the believers in Rome are not already producing a harvest, but rather that he longs to be there to share in the ways that God is working. He describes his feeling of obligation to preach the gospel to everyone. By 'obligation', Paul does not mean that he feels a compulsion or a fear of punishment. Rather, he feels a debt of gratitude to God, and a compassion for the lost, giving him a sense of responsibility and a positive motivation.

He specifies that this 'obligation' is to Greeks and non-Greeks, to the wise and to the foolish, meaning that he wants to proclaim the truth of the gospel to all peoples everywhere. Not that he himself will be able to do the job, but rather, he realizes the universal nature of the call that God has made. Every human being is called to belong to Jesus Christ. The true gospel was not designed for any one nation or any one culture or any one time period or any one kind of person. The gospel meets the most important needs - and is the only way to meet those needs - of everyone in the world, then, now, and in all the years to come.

This is one of the most basic yet most important principles that we must understand if we hope ever to understand God's Word, God's will, and the ways that he guides us in our daily lives. We are all called to belong to Jesus Christ, and that means that no one is too good, and no one is too bad. No matter how many sins a person has committed, no matter how much the rest of the world may hate that person, God's offer of grace through faith in Jesus still stands. Then also, the world's most popular, most admired, and most respected persons stand in the same desperate need of God's grace, no less than do the world's most notorious villains.

This principle is very difficult for us to accept, and human, fleshly logic rejects the idea altogether. Yet the book of Romans, and the entire New Testament, asserts that no one will be justified by observing the law, there is no one righteous, all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God - and that all are called to belong to Jesus Christ, all are justified freely by faith in his blood, that Christ died for the ungodly to reconcile us with God, that in Christ we have been raised to live a new life.

Questions For Discussion or Study: What can we learn from Paul's desire to visit the Romans? What help might this be to us in studying the book? What lessons are there in the way that the church in Rome began? What does Paul mean by being "obligated"? Why is it hard for us to accept the universal need for the gospel? Browse through Romans, and locate verses that tell us of this universal need. How might we be able better to understand and accept it?

Sources & References For Studying Romans

There are a great many commentaries on Romans, so this bibliography will only list books that are both (a) fairly easy to find and (b) either generally reliable in their teachings, or else are worth reading for some other reason (e.g. providing technical detail or alternate perspectives).

These are some books written by writers from the Churches of Christ, and that are still in print:

Moses E. Lard, *Commentary on Romans* (Restoration Commentaries)
David Lipscomb & J.W. Shepherd (editor), *A Commentary on Romans* (Gospel Advocate)
J.W. McGarvey & Philip Pendleton, *Thessalonians, Corinthians, Galatians, & Romans*
Jim McGuiggan, *The Book of Romans*
K.C. Moser, *The Gist of Romans*

K.C. Moser's book is the most concise, and might be the easiest one to get through if you have never before done a complete study of Romans. Jim McGuiggan's commentary is the most recent of these, and it might be the easiest to use for those who want to do a more involved study.

These are some selected, easily located commentaries written from other perspectives:

Paul Achtemeier, *Romans* (Interpretation Commentary)
Gerald Bray (editor), *Romans* (Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture)
F.F. Bruce, *Romans* (Revised) (Tyndale New Testament Commentary)
Joseph Fitzmyer, *Romans* (Anchor Bible Commentary)
Frank E. Gaebelin, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 10: Romans - Galatians*
Martin Luther, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*
Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (New International Commentary)
John Stott, *The Message of Romans* (The Bible Speaks Today)

Of these, John Stott's book is the best and also the easiest to read. Gerald Bray's book is also highly recommended - it is part of a series that collects writings of early Christians, and all the books in that series make very useful supplements to a study of the books of the Bible that they cover. The commentaries by Fitzmyer and Moo are the most detailed of any of the books on either list, and are useful as references for many technical questions. The other books on this list are all well-presented studies of Romans from different theological perspectives. Martin Luther's commentaries are, of course, of significant historical importance as well.

Let me know if you would like any suggestions for books that may be particularly useful for your own study of Romans.

-Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, June 2005

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CALLED TO BELONG TO JESUS CHRIST A STUDY OF ROMANS

Notes For Week Two: Righteousness & Unrighteousness (Romans 1:1-17)

Having introduced some of the key ideas in epistle, and having told the Roman Christians of his plan to visit them, Paul now discusses the basic, critical disparity in our relationship with God: God's righteousness and our unrighteousness. Human beings commit sin after sin, even though God has provided us with all that we need in order to seek him and know him.

Review of Last Week's Class

The book opens by declaring that God is the source and foundation of all that is of spiritual value (1:1-7). Paul discusses God's call to him, to his readers in Rome, and to the world. The epistle goes on to lay the doctrinal foundations of Christianity, and to provide principles for spiritual living. Understanding these topics also helps us develop a better perspective on God's plans.

The background and setting to the epistle (1:8-15) come from Paul's desire to visit Rome, where the church of Christ had arisen without a planned mission, and where it was already a faithful, diverse group. Paul felt a responsibility to contribute his own efforts to their ministry. For the call of the gospel is universal, as there is no one who does not need God's grace.

Righteousness From God (Romans 1:1-17)

These verses form a transition from Paul's opening remarks to the main body of the letter, and express a principle at the heart of the gospel. Unlike human-made religions and philosophies, the gospel of Jesus teaches a righteousness that comes from God, not from ourselves. For our part, we are called to live by faith, which allows us to share in God's righteousness.

Paul now eases into his lengthy discussion of this gospel, which he calls the power of salvation (1:16). Skeptical commentators sometimes wonder why Paul would include, in a letter saying that he would visit soon, such a long 'digression', but Paul himself explains this in Romans 15:15. Acknowledging that he has written "quite boldly", he re-emphasizes his feeling of responsibility, his call to be an apostle to the Gentiles, and his awareness of the importance of this ministry.

Paul also is not ashamed of the gospel. As simple as this sounds, we know how easily the world can make us uncomfortable about our faith in Jesus. The world, in fact, does so whenever possible. So we must remember that everyone needs the gospel's power of salvation. We need it more than we need the approval of others, and unbelievers need the gospel more than they need us to please them. Paul keeps these things constantly in mind, and also reminds others of them.

The Old Testament quotation that, "the righteous will live by faith" (1:17) is also one of the central teachings of Romans. This quote from Habakkuk, and the thoughts that Paul adds to it, contain a number of ideas that are essential in understanding the gospel. Each of them will be developed further as the epistle proceeds.

Throughout the book of Romans, the words "righteous", "righteousness", "justification", and "justify" appear frequently. In Greek, and thus in Paul's use of them, they all come from the same root word, and they are all inter-related. While we could go into great detail on the exact meanings of the words in their various forms, their basic meaning is simply that of being

declared right* (as in, to be right with God). That is, for example, righteousness is the state of being declared right, and to justify someone is to declare that person to be right.

* The verb δικαιοω (dikaioo) means to declare right, or to acquit, or to make right. It is usually translated "justify" in English. The adjective δικαίος ("dikaios") is translated "righteous". The noun δικαιοσύνη ("dikaiosune") is translated "righteousness". Finally, the noun δικαίωμα ("dikaioma"), which literally means an acquittal, is usually translated "justification".

There is, of course, more than one possible standard of right and wrong. Thus Paul specifies that the righteousness that the gospel teaches is a righteousness that comes from God. God himself is righteous in all he does, he is our source and standard of right and wrong, and he offers us the opportunity to share in his righteousness. We shall see all of these ideas in the book of Romans.

This righteousness comes to us by faith alone, or "by faith from first to last". Note that here Paul is contrasting faith with works, not with grace. Faith and grace are partners, just as law and works are partners. The quotation from Habakkuk 2:4 is significant as a key idea in Romans, and as a general spiritual principle. Habakkuk was written* as God was about to discipline his people severely, and Habakkuk was troubled at the thought. God told him and all who were still faithful that they must live by faith, and stay close to God regardless of what happened around them. We can see in our own lives, and in the lives of others, how wise this advice is. There are times in our lives when God is the only thing of which we can be absolutely certain.

* Habakkuk was written just before God sent the Babylonians to discipline his people for their persistent sin and idolatry. This took place in three waves of attack, in 606 BC, 597 BC, and 586 BC. Habakkuk was troubled first by the continual sin he saw in God's own people, and then by God's declaration that he would use the pagan Babylonians to bring discipline. This is the context for the verse that Paul quotes.

At this point, a basic outline of Romans may be helpful: Paul has begun by proclaiming God's call through the gospel (1:1-17). He will next discuss the universal problem of sin (1:18-3:20), showing both Jews and Gentiles to be incapable of justification by law and works. The heart of Romans is of a lengthy discussion of the blessings of the gospel that come by grace through faith (3:21-8:39). This section also explains how we are justified by grace through faith, and it discusses our motivation to live godly lives. It climaxes with a statement of God's love for us.

Next comes a careful look at God's sovereignty and his plans (9:1-11:36), most of which centers on his relationship with the Israelites, his chosen people. The apostle anticipates several possible objections to God's plan, and shows that God is right and just in all his ways. Then there are some practical, challenging thoughts on living transformed lives (12:1-15:13), showing how spiritual principles are meant to affect daily living. Paul concludes with some thoughts on the ministry in Rome itself (15:14-16:27).

Naturally, we shall add much more detail to these topics as we proceed. The best way to study Romans is to strive to understand each of the major topics in turn. The whole book fits together very neatly, and as we study each of the basic topics, the overall pattern emerges. Once you grasp this overall pattern, then a lot of the less obvious details will also start to make more sense.

Questions For Discussion or Study: How is it possible to be 'ashamed' of the gospel? How can we prevent this from happening? Why are the ideas of righteousness and justification important in our relationship with God? What does Paul mean in saying that righteousness from God is by faith? Explain in your own words what it means that, "the righteous will live by faith."

□ *ithout E□cuse (Romans 1:18-□□)*

The apostle now begins a detailed explanation of why everyone needs God's grace. The first key point is that God, through his creation, has provided more than enough evidence of his existence and of his basic nature. If we do not see him, it is because we have chosen to ignore this evidence, and have instead chosen to view the world from a fleshly perspective.

Paul states it as a basic truth that it is plain, or obvious, that God lives and that he created the world (1:18-20). This is why God is justified in bringing his wrath against those who disobey him. Human wickedness is always a choice, and it is a choice made in conscious rejection of all the reasons God has provided for us to believe in him and seek him. God's creation has made it plain that our physical universe cannot be all of reality. The greatest scientific minds throughout the ages have tried to explain where it all comes from, yet even their most complicated theories fall short, particularly in explaining the very beginnings of life or of matter itself. This is, of course, a vast topic in its own right, which we cannot explore in detail in a study of Romans.

Furthermore, when we acknowledge that God has made it plain that he lives, we must take care not to use this idea solely to refute unbelievers. They are indeed without excuse for their unbelief, but so are we. We are without excuse when we begin to question the ways that God works in our lives, when we resist the teachings of the Scriptures, when we wish to rationalize away something difficult that God has told us, or when we make excuses for our sins.

As believers, we too, no less than unbelievers, ought to challenge ourselves to see the unseen. God's greatest qualities are indeed, as Paul says, invisible, but they are no less real for all that. As Jesus told Nicodemus, you cannot see the wind, but you can hear its sound and feel its effects. So too, God has given us what we need to have in order to understand what he is like. When we consider God's incredible creation, and marvel over its wonders, we ought not to use such observations solely as ammunition against atheists. We ourselves ought to allow the overwhelming power and wisdom of God to affect our own minds and hearts.

The worldly reveal their futile thinking and their foolish hearts (1:21-23) by choosing to reject God. It is a deliberate choice, for which they have no excuse. To be offered the glory of the immortal God, and to exchange it for worldly things, is both a blunder and a tragedy. Yet again, do not we ourselves sometimes give in to this same temptation? Even believers are sometimes lured away from a spiritual focus by worldly things. It is a basic challenge of the Christian life to see things for what they are, to learn the emptiness of sin and the futility of living for self. We can see the unseen, and be encouraged by it, if we listen to God.

Questions For Discussion or Study: In what ways has God made himself plain to us? Which ways are particularly helpful to you? How can we let these things affect our lives and not just our mental beliefs? What is God's 'wrath'? In this passage, at what is his wrath being directed? How can we learn to develop a more spiritual focus, in seeing the unseen and in seeing things for what they are?

Gi□en □□er To □nrightheousness (Romans 1:□□-□□)

This passage provides a vivid description of the bleak, depressing, sordid nature of worldly living. To God, sin is never glamorous or harmless or fun, but rather is a destructive force that takes control of our lives and our souls. Yet God will not force us to obey him, and if we insist upon indulging ourselves in sin, he will give us over to it, so that we may see sin for what it is.

This passage not only describes sin, but also helps explain why we sin. Paul says that, because humans rejected God, he thus has given them over to impurity and immorality (1:24-27)*. In giving us over to sin, God is simply allowing us to do as we wish. Naturally, if we repent, then he will help us to resist sin, but if we willfully pursue sin, there are times when he simply lets us indulge in it, so that we can find out what it is really like, in the hope that we will later come to our senses, following the example of the lost son in Luke 15.

* Note that, although 1:24-32 would apply primarily to Gentiles, it is not necessary to assume that Paul here refers only to them. The Scriptures contain examples of Israelites committing the same sins described in these verses. At this point, Paul is describing some general truths about God, humanity, and sin.

Immorality and impurity* are mentioned first, as they are particularly crude sins, which degrade our own bodies (see also 1 Corinthians 6:18). Not only do they exchange the truth of God for a lie from Satan, but they also turn the glorious things God has created into mere physical objects with which to gain temporary, fleshly pleasure. When we worship the flesh in this way, we deny God's glory and show him a lack of gratitude. Moreover, although the world relentlessly uses all possible means to persuade us that immorality is harmless, fun, and even glamorous, it takes little effort to see that in reality it leads invariably to personal and spiritual disaster.

* This is also one of the biblical passages that specifically addresses homosexuality. Contrary to popular belief, this was a widespread sin in ancient Rome and, especially, in ancient Greece. In Greek society, it was generally approved of, even more so than in secular society today. The Bible's condemnations of it are by no means a reflection of the culture of the era, but are in fact a direct rebuke to the prevailing culture.

In a more general way, the apostle says that God has given us over to a depraved mind (1:28-32). This too happens because of our own decision - in this case, the decision that it is not worthwhile to give God any importance in our minds and hearts. If God is not there, sin will naturally fill the void. Many specific sins are listed here, and it can be a good study to examine them one by one (see the questions below), but Paul sums them all up neatly as "things that ought not to be done." He also reminds us that to approve of those who sin is itself a sin.

In this world, we are faced with many choices, many opportunities, and many temptations. We must constantly choose whether to give in to the false promise of sin and self, or to seek God and his righteousness. We can give in to our fleshly desires, and enjoy them for a short time, but this is empty, and will soon lead to death. Or we can seek to glorify ourselves by earning fame, popularity, and acclaim, but no matter how good we look to the world, we will only look weak and foolish to God, for we are all undeserving by his standards. Or, finally, we can give ourselves to God, offering him all that we have in this world, in the knowledge that the spiritual blessings he gives us will be far greater and more lasting.

Questions For Discussion or Study: What does it mean that God "gave them over" to sin? Why is this appropriate? What result does he hope for in doing this? Look through the specific sins mentioned in these verses. How do Satan and the world lie to us about each of them? How can we see through these lies? What are these sins really like? How can we learn to see through the false promise and false allure of sin?

-Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, June 2005

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CALLED TO BELONG TO JESUS CHRIST: A STUDY OF ROMANS

Notes For Week Three: Sin & Judgment (Romans 1)

In this chapter of Romans, the apostle Paul continues to discuss sin and its consequences. Specifically, he discusses the importance of the judgment that God will one day render upon everyone who has ever lived. The inevitability of judgment has many implications in our lives. God alone will judge, and he will do so based on absolute truth, free of any form of favoritism.

Review & Preview

After proclaiming God's call through the gospel (1:1-15), Paul begins a discussion of righteousness and unrighteousness (1:16-32). The gospel provides a righteousness from God that is by faith and faith alone. Yet although the creation makes it clear that God lives, humanity nevertheless rejects God, and as a result he gives them over to their own unrighteousness.

It may be helpful here to summarize the main points in Romans 1:18-3:20, which discusses in detail the universal problem of sin. We have seen that sin comes from rejecting God and his truth (1:18-32). Next, Paul explains that everyone is subject to judgment by God and God alone, and that God will judge without favoritism (2:1-29, the subject of this week's study). After this, there comes a reminder that God's ways are not our ways, particularly when it comes to judgment (3:1-8). The section is capped off with a somber proclamation that no one is righteous, and thus that no one can be justified before God based on his or her own works (3:9-20).

Judgment Belongs To God (Romans 1:1-3)

The very first point that the apostle makes about judgment is that it belongs to God. Although as Christians we are to have a well-developed sense of right and wrong, we are not to use this to pass judgment on others. In our relationships with one another, we must extend one another the same grace that we ourselves will need when it is our own turn to face God's judgment.

So, even before discussing God's judgment, Paul admonishes us not to pass judgment* on anyone else (2:1-3). In fact, he says that we have no excuse for doing so, because we ourselves are guilty of sin. Even if we have not committed the identical sin for which we judge another person, our own sins involve the same rejection of God and the same lack of obedience to him, and thus Paul can say that we "do the same things".

* Note that "judge" and "pass judgment" are used in a variety of contexts, both in the Bible and in everyday conversation. Paul refers here to the practice of condemning someone else as being more sinful than oneself. Paul uses the phrase differently in, for example, 1 Corinthians 5, when he says to "pass judgment" on the believer who is hardened in his immoral behavior. There, he is calling the believers in Corinth to condemn what the man did, not the man himself. They are not to consider themselves better than him.

The Greek verb κρίνω (krino), to judge, has a very similar meaning to our English word. That is, it can be used in a formal or informal context. Likewise the noun κρίμα (krima) can mean a formal judgment or condemnation, but it can also simply mean a decision. A related noun, κρίσις (krisis), means a judgment in a more formal sense. Note that we get many English words, such as crime, criticize, crisis, criterion, and others, from these Greek words.

For this reason, being unmerciful to others is a form of self-condemnation, for as Jesus often said, with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. When Paul says that God's judgment is "based on truth", he means that God judges neither by appearances, nor by influence, nor by favoritism. No one should ever presume to have an 'insider' relationship with God, and no one can escape or hide from God's judgment. "Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account" (Hebrews 4:13).

Having a correct understanding of God's judgment also helps us to appreciate God's patience (2:4). It is always important to remember that God shows the same patience to others as he does to us, and vice versa. If we should find ourselves becoming impatient with someone else, we must remind ourselves that we too have taxed God's patience numerous times.

We all benefit from God's patience, and we should all strive to show patience towards one another. We shall often have to be patient with unbelievers who are slowly coming to know God, and we shall often have to be patient with our brothers and sisters in the Lord who are, like us, slowly becoming what God wants them to be. We all have different strengths and weaknesses, and only God fully understands any of us.

Questions For Discussion or Study: What does it mean to pass judgment on someone else? Why do we do it? In what ways are you tempted to do so? How can we help each other overcome sin without passing judgment on one another? Why do we stand in need of God's patience? How can we learn to appreciate this quality of God?

God's Righteous Judgment (Romans 2:5-11)

This passage explains several aspects of God's judgment, showing it to be both righteous and inevitable. It also teaches us that God's judgment has two possible results, salvation or condemnation, acceptance or rejection. Finally, it tells us that God will apply the same standard equally to all - there will be no favoritism.

This is one of many passages in Scripture that assure us that one day God's judgment is to be revealed (2:5-11). No earthly analogy could ever fully explain what the last judgment will be like, and so we should always be careful to interpret these passages in context. For example, when Paul writes that those who 'do good' will receive eternal life, he is not saying that they will earn eternal life by their good works. Rather, he is contrasting those who through grace have pleased God, by accepting his truth, with those who have rejected his truth by 'doing evil'.

One thing that all of the Bible's descriptions of the judgment have in common is that they allow for only two results. Here, Paul says that those who do good will receive glory, honor, and peace, while those who reject the truth will receive wrath, anger, and condemnation. The Scriptures make it clear that we are either saved or lost, bound for heaven or doomed to hell.

This goes against human logic, and yet it makes perfect sense in view of what we know about sin and grace. No one can be with God unless they have been cleansed of all sin. And if we have been cleansed of all sin, then we are equal with all others who have been so cleansed. God's judgment will not in any way be based on favoritism, and this is one of many ways in which his judgment differs from human standards.

It is also important to realize that possession of the law (here, he is referring specifically to the Jewish law) will not be a factor in God's judgment (2:12-16). Having been given the law will not provide anyone with a special status, nor will 'ignorance of the law' be accepted as an excuse. The standards are clear: those who sin apart from the law, will perish* apart from the law, while those who sin under the law will be judged and condemned by the law.

* This verse is sometimes misquoted as if it said that those who sin apart from the law will be judged (rather than perish) apart from the law, that is, that God will use a different standard for them. Based on human logic, this might seem appropriate. But no one can stand before God based on his or her works. If we are to be saved, it can only be by God's grace. Any legal standard can only result in condemnation.

Paul reminds us that, although the written law has a purpose, we also have the law in our hearts. He points out that Gentiles (that is, those who had never heard of God's law) nevertheless frequently do things required by the law, because they know in their hearts what is right. Every human has a conscience, and this conscience testifies against us when we sin, whether or not the sin involves the breaking of a specific rule. Our consciences can also defend us when we do what is right - but Paul's point here is that this too shows that we all have an innate sense of right and wrong. Once again, the conclusion is that works salvation is an impossibility.

Questions For Discussion or Study: Find other Scriptures that have either teachings or analogies about the final judgment. How can we be sure to interpret these various passages correctly? What features do they have in common? Why can there be only two possible basic results when a person receives final judgment from God? What does it mean that God does not show favoritism? Why doesn't Paul give more attention to 'special cases', such as those who seem to have no opportunity to know God's law?

□ *hat* □ *e* *Say* & □ *hat* □ *e* □ *o* (*Romans* □:17-□)

Although in these verses Paul specifically addresses the Jews among his readers, the principles he teaches here are important for us all. It is much easier to say the right things than to do the right things, and it is much easier to claim to believe in God than to show it through our lives. We can never fool God, neither by outward appearances nor by empty claims.

This passage starts with Paul's rather peremptory phrase, "now you ..." (2:17-24). He firmly addresses those who make claims to spiritual superiority, whether based on their culture, their upbringing, their education, or some other such factor. He asks them to consider whether they truly practice what they preach in every detail - knowing that the honest answer to this is no. Since the effect of a bad example multiplies the damage of the sin itself, to have extra knowledge or special authority or a godly family heritage is a responsibility, not a privilege.

The last few verses of the chapter contrast physical circumcision with what the apostle calls "circumcision of the heart" (2:25-29). Circumcision was considered by many Jews to be a particularly important sign of their special standing. But Paul tells them that in itself it counts for nothing if they do not obey the law. There are benefits of circumcision (see, for example, 3:1-2), but it does not in itself confer a special standing. He again mentions that there are Gentiles whose lives show high moral standards, and that this fact convicts of sin those who are circumcised but who do not live godly lives.

To God, the outward is, of course, of less importance than the inward. He even says that to be a true Jew, in God's eyes, depends on what is inside, not on circumcision or on knowledge of the law or on family background. This would have been a shock to many Israelites, and it contradicts some of our own preconceptions as well. For we, no less than they, value and seek praise from other humans.

In itself, it is not bad to receive praise from others in this world, as long as they are doing so for the right reasons, and in fact it is good for Christians to build each other up. But we must always remember that human praise will count for nothing at the last judgment. Only God's praise will mean anything then, and God's praise will be based on what he finds in our hearts, not on what others have said about us.

We must therefore live in the consciousness of God's judgment. As Paul told the Corinthians, "I care very little if I am judged by you, or by any human court—indeed, I do not even judge myself" (1 Corinthians 4:3). There will always be many, many distractions from those who live solely for this world. They will judge us on their own terms, and they will entice, intimidate, and manipulate us in their efforts to get us to accept their standards. We must learn to ignore such things, and to place full confidence in what God himself has taught us.

For we know that God's judgment is fair, and that for those who put their faith in him and in his Son, his judgment will be based on grace. We should be sobered by the inevitability of judgment, but we do not need to fear it.

Questions For Discussion or Study: Why is Paul so forceful in his reproaches to those who claim a superior position with respect to God? Are there ways in which we can fall into this same trap? What should we learn from these verses? How should the fact of God's judgment affect our daily lives? What are the positive implications of knowing that God will judge us one day?

-Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, July 2005

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CALLED TO BELONG TO JESUS CHRIST: A STUDY OF ROMANS

Notes For Week Four: Accountability to God (Romans 2:1-8)

In the previous chapter, Paul discussed several important aspects of God's judgment. He now follows this with some related points that help us further to understand it. As in so many other areas of our relationship with him, God's ways of judging do not accord with human ways. Then also, before God no one is sinless or righteous based on good works or on following the law.

Review

Building on the ideas of God's call and God's righteousness from the first chapter, in the second chapter of Romans the apostle Paul discusses God's judgment. He begins by emphasizing that judgment belongs to God alone, not to us (2:1-4). Thus we are not to pass judgment on one another, since in fact we implicitly condemn ourselves when we do. Instead, we are to appreciate God's patience and the salvation that it leads to.

God's righteous judgment (2:5-16) has only two possible results for each person, as each of us shall either be with him forever or be separated from him forever. There will be no favoritism in God's judgment, nor will possession of the law be a factor one way or another, since we all have in our hearts sufficient knowledge of right and wrong to be accountable for it. God is concerned with what we do, rather than what we claim to believe (2:17-29). Those who make spiritual claims should remember that God wants us to know and love him inwardly, not just outwardly.

Judgment: God's ways are not our ways (Romans 2:1-8)

It can be easy for us to assume that God's methods of rendering judgment are like our own, but when we read the Scriptures, we learn that this is not the case. Unlike human judges, God is accountable to no one but himself. He is not a mere interpreter or enforcer of right and wrong. Rather, God is the definition of right and wrong, and his judgments are always true and just.

In asking what value there may be in being Jewish or in circumcision (3:1-2), it may seem for a moment as if Paul is getting off track. But in fact, this is an important aspect of the overall discussion. Paul's answer is that there is great value to it, since in fact they were privileged to receive and preserve the Word of God itself. They have many other such spiritual blessings in this world as well, although this kind of blessing* can often be harder to appreciate. But the point is that this does not give them a privileged status* when it comes to God's judgment.

* This important distinction applies in other respects as well. God never promises that things in this world will be equal, and different human beings can be born into vastly different circumstances, in terms of family, culture, and the like. Whatever blessings a person has in this life come from God's grace. But earthly blessings or circumstances do not matter in terms of salvation. Earthly blessings - even 'religious' blessings - can be either a help or a hindrance to knowing God, depending on how we choose to use them.

The apostle then contrasts God's faithfulness with human faithlessness (3:3-4). Even if every human being on earth were to reject God and rebel against him, God would still be God. Human rebellion against God and his Word does not prove that God is wrong - rather, it proves him right. His Word clearly tells us that none of us can become righteous by observing the law. When we argue against his Word or doubt his love for us, we simply prove his wisdom correct. On the other hand, if we submit to his Word and will, and ask his forgiveness, we prove his love.

The apostle makes a brief mention of the kinds of faulty human logic that many persons apply to God's judgment (3:5-8). He could have given many more examples, but he prefers to emphasize God's truth rather than dwell on all of our errors. The charge that God is unjust in judging us is a common criticism of those who want to pass judgment on God. Many feel that God does not have the 'right' to judge them. But God sent his own Son to live as a human, so that through Jesus he could understand exactly what it is like to endure the limitations and temptations we face. And God's own perfect righteousness makes him thoroughly justified in judging us. Even in human judges, honesty, righteousness, and the like are valuable qualifications.

This passage also gives some brief examples of the ways that humans rationalize abuses of God's grace. These excuses have been around as long as the gospel has been preached. That grace can be abused is no reason not to proclaim it joyfully. Those who abuse it simply show that they have neither understood it nor appreciated it.

Questions For Discussion or Study: Why does Paul ask what benefit it brings to be Jewish? Is this question relevant to us now? If so, how? Why is God qualified to judge the world? Are there other reasons beyond those mentioned here? What rationalizations do humans use for abusing God's grace? How can these be refuted by the basic principles of the gospel? What lack of understanding do these rationalizations reveal?

□o *ne Is Righteous (Romans □:□□)*

This passage brings to a climax the first portion of Romans, which teaches us the basic principles of sin and of its consequences in our relationship with God. Here, the apostle drives home the point that no one is righteous by God's standards, and that we are all accountable to him for our sins. He also mentions the role of the law, which he will soon contrast with the role of grace.

In asking, "are we any better?" (3:9), Paul prepares to emphasize once and for all that no one is righteous by his or her own deeds. Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin, without respect to genealogy, status, knowledge, or any other such factor. Being Jewish brings spiritual blessings, but it does not confer a privileged status or sinless standing with God. Being a Gentile is no excuse either, because we all have a standard of right and wrong in our hearts. Even if we evaluate our actions solely in terms of standards clearly known to us, we shall still fall short.

For this reason, the apostle can claim boldly and without apology that all have turned away from God (3:10-18). It is interesting that, instead of further explanations or illustrations of his own, he instead pulls together quotations from several Old Testament sources* that make the same essential point in several different ways. These passages re-emphasize that sin comes from a refusal to know God, and from the attempt to suppress his truth. Saying that all have sinned and that no one seeks God are, in a sense, two aspects of the same problem.

* These quotations are excerpted from several different Psalms and from Isaiah. Although they are pulled from several places, it is a worthwhile study to consider their original contexts. For example, verses 10-12 come from the beginning of Psalm 14 and Psalm 53 (which are very similar). These are the Psalms whose theme is, "The fool says in his heart, 'there is no God'", an idea that relates closely to the discussion here in Romans. Verses 15-17 come from Isaiah 59:7-8. This is the chapter in which Isaiah teaches us that our sins have separated us from God (see 59:1-2) and that our redemption will come from God (v. 16-20).

In addition to re-emphasizing the key point, these quotations also present a grim but convincing description of how widespread sin is. It convicts us of sins of the heart, of the mouth, and of the

body, and in fact these are often inter-related. In the heart, we can decide to reject or to rebel against God, or we can decide simply not to make a real effort to seek him. Paul's statements about our speech bring to mind the warnings about the tongue in James 3:1-12. These ills are often accompanied by lives that show little concern for others or for God. Naturally, few human lives are completely filled with horrid sins at every moment. But we all stumble into such things from time to time, and we all have times when instead of having a godly fear (that is, a healthy respect) towards God, we instead pass judgment on his Word and on his will for our lives.

Amongst other things, this illustrates what the law does (3:19-20). Paul indicates that, since the law convicts us all of sin, it silences every mouth by refuting any claims we might have to being righteous by our own deeds. This is not the first time that the apostle has said that no one will be declared righteous by observing the law. That was never the purpose of the law, not in ancient Israel, not in Paul's lifetime, and not today. Nor was the law given primarily to provide grounds for discipline and punishment. These are the things that we humans see as the motivation for our laws, and we often make the mistake of assuming that God has the same motivation.

In fact, God gives us the law to make us conscious of our sin. We humans view crime, sin, and mistakes as things to be punished, corrected, or paid for. But when God looks at our sins, his dearest wish is to be able to forgive them. For this to happen, though, we must become conscious of our sin, and thus conscious of our need for God's forgiveness. Thus the law serves an important purpose, in laying the foundation for us to appreciate and respond to the grace that comes through the blood of Christ.

This first portion of Romans has taught some essential points about human nature, sin, and God. Sin is the barrier and obstacle that stands between us and God, so the better that we understand sin, the more appreciative we shall be of God's grace and salvation. God created each one of us so that we might seek him and find him, and he has put into each of our hearts an awareness of our need for him. Yet he gives us the choice of whether to seek him or to serve ourselves.

The soul of every human being who has chosen to reject God is a tragedy. Although the lives of such persons may look good on the outside, from a spiritual perspective a life spent in sin is a life wasted in squalor, using the blessings God has given us to pursue meaningless earthly goals. Humans have developed many tactics to cover up their sin, but sin's essential nature never changes. Sin and selfishness erode the soul and crush out the spirit.

By contrast, the regenerated life, the life of one whose sins have been forgiven, brings hope and even glory. It brings the hope of far better things in the future, and it brings the glory of experiencing God's hand at work. This is human life the way that God meant it to be, and it can be ours if we allow his will to reign in our lives.

Questions for Discussion or Study: Why do we sometimes feel that we are 'better' than someone else? What points in Romans so far can help us avoid this? Why is it important to accept the fact of our own sinfulness? Look up the contexts of the Old Testament verses that Paul quotes in this passage. What did they mean in their original settings?

-Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, July 2005

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CALLED TO BELONG TO JESUS CHRIST: A STUDY OF ROMANS

Notes For Week Five: Justified Free Will & Grace (Romans 8:1-11)

Thus far in Romans, Paul has contrasted God's righteousness and truth with humanity's sin. He now comes to the heart of his message, in discussing salvation by grace through faith. This passage contains a concise statement of God's basic design to save his people through the blood of his Son, and these verses lay an important foundation for much of what follows in the epistle.

Review

Last week, we completed the first major section of Romans. In it, the apostle Paul has discussed God's universal call through the gospel (1:1-15), God's righteousness and our unrighteousness (1:16-32), sin and judgment (2:1-29), and our accountability to God (3:1-20).

In the first part of chapter three, the apostle emphasized that God's ways are not our ways, as he anticipated and answered some common objections that humans raise to God's judgment. He then stressed once more that no one is righteous, and that we all have at some time turned away from God. The law, then, does not make anyone righteous before God, but is instead meant to make us conscious of our sin, so that we will stand before God in silence and humility.

The Sacrifice of Atonement (Romans 8:1-11)

The sacrifice of Jesus Christ is at the center of all else that is discussed in the book of Romans. Because Jesus' blood provided atonement for the sins of all humanity, through his blood we thus can receive God's grace. The crucifixion teaches us about God's righteousness, God's grace, God's wisdom, God's love, and much more as well.

After the lengthy discussion of humanity's rampant sin and its doomed condition before God, it comes as a welcome relief to read the words "but now ..." (3:21). Paul had earlier (1:16) announced the arrival of a righteousness from God, but he then proceeded to demonstrate the impossibility of righteousness through the law. Now that he has dispelled this false idea of righteousness, he can tell us about the true kind. And it is not a righteousness that contradicts the law, because the law and the prophets themselves testify to this new form of righteousness.

We come now to the key idea of redemption by grace through faith in Jesus (3:22-24). This redemption* is given to all who believe in Jesus, without regard to their background or to the specific sins that they have committed. Jews and Gentiles alike, men and women alike, liars and murderers alike, are all given the same offer from God. Because we have all sinned, the situation is the same for all of us, and grace is our only way of coming back to God. The concepts of justification, redemption, and salvation are all tied together in Jesus, because his redemptive sacrifice affords us the chance to be justified and saved in spite of ourselves.

* The Greek word that is translated as 'redemption', ἀπολυτρωσις (apolutrosis) literally means a setting free, a release, or a deliverance. Paul uses it primarily in this last sense, with the intention of connecting it with the Old Testament concept of redemption, which often involved a symbolic buying back.

Paul also points out what this tells us about God's justice (3:25-26), which is much different from any worldly concept of justice. "He saw that there was no one ... so his own arm worked salvation for him" (Isaiah 59:16). Jesus offered himself as a blood sacrifice to pay for the sins

committed by others - that is, to offer atonement*. Only Jesus could become such a sacrifice, because only he was sinless**. If any of us had been crucified, we would only have been getting what our sins deserve, and so it would merely be a punishment, not a source of redemption.

* The Greek word is *ἱλαστήριον* (hilasterion), and it is often translated 'propitiation'. The word was only used in relation to divine sacrifices, and it indicated something offered to appease a god or gods. It was also sometimes used to refer to the place where such sacrifices were offered.

** In Romans, Paul for the most part assumes that his readers accept this. The book of Hebrews includes a detailed discussion of the principle that "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness".

God thus demonstrates his justice. In his justice and his righteousness, he cannot have fellowship with sin, and he cannot establish a lasting relationship except with those whose sins have been forgiven. And yet he knows that we all will sin and fall short of his glory. Thus, again in his justice, he provided for a way back to him after all, by asking his own Son to provide the atonement and redemption that we ourselves are powerless to provide.

Questions For Discussion or Study: How does God's righteousness contrast with human ideas of righteousness? How do the law and prophets testify to the new covenant? How do we all fall short of God's glory? How can Jesus' sacrifice provide atonement? Where else in the Scriptures could we study about this? How does God demonstrate his justice?

Justification Through Faith (Romans 3:27-31)

Faith is another foundation of the teachings of Romans, and of God's design for our salvation. The phrase 'justification by faith' is so familiar to us that we often don't think about the extraordinary implications of the idea. Without understanding the proper role that faith plays in our salvation, we will also misunderstand much else in Christianity.

The question, "where is boasting?" (3:27), is a significant one. Boasting always causes problems in our relationship with God and in our relationships with each other. This is also an important principle distinguishing salvation by grace from salvation by works. Salvation by works, properly understood, has little to do with the works themselves. Rather, it means an imagined form of salvation that we can earn, and that we thus can boast about.

The principle of faith excludes boasting, because to believe in God and to trust him we must acknowledge his superiority to us in every way, and we must also accept his teaching that we are incapable of being justified before him by our works. Genuine faith inherently assumes that we must depend entirely on God. Likewise, boasting is excluded by the principle of grace. Anything that is received by grace is, by definition, not deserved.

Thus we should not ask whether as Christians we 'have to' do anything. If any form of 'faith' leads us to feel that we deserve to be saved, that we deserve to be rewarded, or that we are superior in some way to others who have not attained our standard, this is salvation by law and works, regardless of what specific actions or beliefs we claim as proof of our righteousness. Instead, true faith lead us to accept our absolute need to trust God and submit to him, to accept the good things we have as an underserved blessing, and the hardships we endure as necessary discipline. This is salvation by faith and grace.

Faith in itself is not a work, as it is not a meritorious achievement. Faith in God is simply an acceptance of the truth. Who deserves praise or reward for simply believing the truth? That

God's grace is conditioned on faith does not make faith a work, merely a condition*. This also reminds us not to consider ourselves superior to those who do not believe. If we believe the truth, it is by God's grace. And we need God's grace no less than unbelievers need it.

* This also applies to other conditions of salvation, such as repentance from sins, confession of Christ, and water baptism. None of these, correctly understood, are meritorious acts. They are expressions of faith that earn us nothing. God makes certain things conditions of receiving his grace, but they do not earn his grace.

Paul also addresses the paradox of justification by faith (3:28-31). We are justified by faith, entirely apart from our works. This would likely have perturbed many of Paul's Jewish readers, but it is no less provocative to today's believers. This does not mean that Christianity does not involve 'doing' many things. But the things we do - from attending worship assemblies to studying Scripture to teaching others about God - are not the grounds on which we are saved. Later in the epistle, Paul will discuss the real reasons why we 'have to' do such things.

Since God is the God of all. Jews and Gentiles alike, he judges by a fair and consistent standard. In giving salvation through grace alone, he eliminates any unfairness based on a person's family background, education, or other such factors. In conditioning it on faith alone, he asks us all to do the same thing, to seek him and respond in humble faith.

So, does faith nullify the law? Paul boldly claims that salvation by faith upholds the law. God's offer of justification by grace through faith, without respect to works, confirms the law's teaching that no one can be righteous in God's sight by observing the law. The paradox is that, since the law itself assumes that no one can observe the law flawlessly, to make observing the law the main condition of salvation would be to contradict the law, not to uphold it. And to make faith the condition of justification confirms the law's teaching about itself, and thus upholds the law. Paul will continue to examine all of these points and their implications in the chapters ahead.

Let us pause to take note of this hallmark of Christianity. The doctrine of salvation by grace through faith is an extraordinary teaching. It is in fact one of the fundamental features that distinguishes Christianity from human-made religions and human-made philosophies. It is deeply ingrained in our fleshly nature to seek to justify itself. Buddhists try to justify themselves by enlightenment, Moslems by following a code of rules, Jains and other ascetic religions through self-denial. Even atheists practice a form of salvation by works, in that they consider themselves superior to believers because of their more 'correct' beliefs. Only New Testament Christianity admits that it is absolutely impossible for us to justify ourselves, by any means.

But let us also take heed, and remain devoted to the truth. Christians are far from immune from the temptation of self-justification. Each of us must always remember that "by the grace of God I am what I am" (1 Corinthians 15:10). All that we have comes by grace, and we have all received far more blessings from God than we deserve. Our hope of heaven comes also by grace. If we think that our salvation depends on our works, we will always be insecure in our relationship with God. But if we understand by faith that we have been saved by God's grace, we can then face the perils of this life with greater confidence.

Questions For Discussion or Study: Why do we boast? What can Christians be tempted to boast about? How does understanding faith eliminate boasting? If we are justified by faith, does this mean that we can do as we please? How does faith uphold the law?

-Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, July 2005

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CALLED TO BELONG TO JESUS CHRIST: A STUDY OF ROMANS

Notes For Week 5: Faith Credited As Righteousness (Romans 1:1-11)

In the well-known passage at the end of chapter three, the apostle Paul set forth a basic statement of God's plan to offer salvation, justification, and righteousness by grace through faith. Over the next few chapters, he will discuss in detail several aspects of this basic idea. He begins by using Abraham as an example of justification by faith, rather than by works.

Review & Preview

After the first major section of Romans, which discusses God's relationship with humanity, and in particular the contrast between God's righteousness, and our unrighteousness (1:1-3:20), Paul sets forth the key theme of justification by grace through faith (3:21-31).

Jesus, as the sacrifice of atonement, is at the center of everything (3:21-26). His sacrifice allows us to be saved by grace through faith. Since we have all sinned, grace is the only means by which we can achieve righteousness. Since Jesus was the only one who could offer himself both by free will and without any sin of his own, Jesus is the only effective one-time sacrifice that could have been made. Atonement, justification, and redemption are all accomplished in Jesus.

The principle of justification by faith excludes boasting (3:27-31). Being justified by grace through faith stands in complete contrast to any attempt to be justified by law through works. Those who truly trust in being declared righteous by faith will not boast, and will not consider themselves to have earned, merited, or deserved anything from God.

That salvation and redemption come by grace through faith is both a paradox and a hallmark of Christianity. It is a paradox in that a completely righteous God, through the sacrifice of his Son, declares the sinful to be righteous, if they believe. It is a hallmark of Christianity in that it distinguishes genuine New Testament Christianity from human-made religions and philosophies.

Here is an overview of Romans 4-8, which discusses the truths and blessings of the gospel:

Romans 4:1-25	Abraham's Example: Faith Credited As Righteousness
Romans 5:1-11	Peace & Reconciliation
Romans 5:12-21	Sin & Death, Grace & Life
Romans 6:1-10	The Spiritual Rebirth
Romans 6:11-7:6	Implications of the Spiritual Rebirth
Romans 7:7-25	The Ineffectiveness of Law
Romans 8:1-39	Life Through the Spirit

The Example of Abraham (Romans 4:1-11)

Many of Paul's readers and listeners, in Rome and elsewhere, considered Abraham a spiritual father, and so his relationship with God was a model and an example to follow. Abraham is also an important example in teaching us that the same spiritual principles brought to completion through Jesus were also part of the old covenant, so that God's plan has always been the same.

To head off any confusion or skepticism about the principle of justification by faith, Paul now asks his readers to consider how the example of Abraham might fit in with these ideas (4:1-3).

As a spiritual ancestor, Abraham still holds considerable significance for us. His relationship with God illustrates several of the important foundations that remain in place even now.

Abraham was justified by his faith, not by his works. Indeed, the many admirable things that he did were done as a direct result of his faith. And, as the apostle points out, whatever reputation Abraham may have among humans, he has nothing to boast about before God. He had his faults and flaws, just like any other human being. It was not his acts of righteousness that distinguished him from the rest of humanity, but his faith.

Paul here quotes Genesis 15:6*, which makes a point that is essential to understanding the role that faith plays in our redemption and salvation: "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness". In Genesis 15, God had just promised the aging, childless Abraham that he would not only have a son and heir of his own, but also would have descendants too numerous to count. It is this extraordinary promise that Abraham believed, and it was his belief in this promise that "was credited to him as righteousness".

* The series of promises that God made to Abraham make very good study material in themselves, starting with Genesis 12:1-9, Genesis 15:1-21, and Genesis 18:1-15. Note that until Genesis 17, Abraham was still called Abram. The name change is significant in connection with the promises.

Questions For Discussion or Study: How was Abraham's example important to Paul's original readers? Why is it still important now? How do the promises that God made to Abraham apply to us? How is the context of the verse Paul quotes significant?

☐ *credited* ☐s ☐ *Gift (Romans 4:16)*

Although faith is the crucial condition under which we are able to access grace, it is not in itself a work or a meritorious achievement. Paul thus intends to emphasize at length that, to those who believe, God will credit their faith as righteousness - and this credit will be given as a gift, not as an obligation on God's part. In this respect, Abraham is a particularly illuminating example.

The difference between a gift and an obligation is an essential part of understanding justification by faith (4:4-5). Paul expresses it simply: when we work, we get wages, which are owed to us and thus must be paid. So, in the context of salvation, to attempt to be justified by works* means that we are trying to do enough that God will owe us salvation☐it means to make the claim that our works are so good that God must let us be saved.

* "Work" is used in many different senses, in the Bible and in everyday speech. Other passages call us to do "good works", but not in the sense that we thereby earn our salvation. Skeptics often make lists of verses that they think 'contradict' the principle of justification by faith, but most examples can be resolved easily by remembering that justification by works means to earn something or to make God obligated to us. A few passages, such as James 2:14-26, may require a little study to see this (see also below).

But justification by faith means believing in God and trusting God. Our confidence then lies not in a supposed obligation to us on God's part, but in God's own love and righteousness, that he must and will remain true to his promises. Our faith must not be in our own faith (that is, in how strong or how correct it is), but in God. Grace, salvation, and redemption are gifts from God - he did not have to give them to us, nor did he owe it to us. Even if we sacrifice every moment of our time, every penny of our money, and every drop of our own blood, God owes us nothing.

The person who thinks that he or she is justified by works thinks, "I know I'm saved because I've done so many good things", or "I know I'm saved because I believe all the right things", or "I know I'm saved because I'm doing better than most others are". But those hoping to be justified

by faith do not say, "I know I'm saved because I have great faith", but rather, "I'm sure I'm saved because I know that God will remain true to the promises he made to me, of his own free will. I didn't deserve these promises, but God made them anyway, because of his perfect love".

The paradox of God's righteousness is expressed strikingly by Paul's provocative statement that we "trust God who justifies the wicked". If we do not realize and accept the depth of our own sin, we may be disturbed or displeased by this idea. God's righteousness is seen in his inability to have fellowship with the sinful, but it is also seen in that he himself, through his Son, offered the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the people he created. He created us with free will, which leads inevitably to sin. But he is righteous in giving us a second, undeserved chance, as a gift.

To illustrate the blessedness of living under grace (4:6-8), Paul uses the example of David, whose relationship with God is often used as a positive example, despite the serious sins that he committed at certain times in his life. Psalm 32, from which Paul quotes, is a wonderfully encouraging celebration of grace, not connected to any specific incident or period in David's life, and is worth reading in its entirety. As David expresses in that Psalm, to know that our transgressions are forgiven, and our sins not counted against us, brings a joy and contentment that cannot be equaled. David could have such a certainty about God's mercy not because David himself was so righteous, but because he knew how good, loving, and merciful God was.

Paul's next asks who can qualify for this blessed state (4:9-12). Here again, Abraham's example is revealing. For Abraham's faith was credited to him as righteousness not after he was circumcised (and thus had a formal covenant with God), but beforehand. Abraham's circumcision (Genesis 17) thus came as a seal of his righteousness by faith. Circumcision itself is not a meritorious act, although many of the ancient Israelites considered it to be so. It was another gift from God, given by his grace, as a seal of his ownership of his people.

Abraham is thus a spiritual father of all the faithful, not merely those who are his physical descendants. He is the father of the uncircumcised who live by faith, and he is the father of the circumcised who live by faith (but not of the circumcised who live by law and works). He is our father so that righteousness might also be credited to us who believe in Jesus.

If we follow in Abraham's footsteps, we shall not consider our faith to be an achievement that earns us anything. Rather, we simply trust God when he says that he will credit our faith as righteousness, even though we ourselves are unrighteous in the flesh. In lieu of the flawless good works that God knows we cannot give him, he chooses to accept our faith, and he "credits" it to us as a gift. If we could follow the law perfectly, we could offer our righteousness to God, who would then have no choice but to acknowledge it. But he does not have to accept our faith; rather, he chooses to do so out of love and compassion. This he is able to do because the blood of Jesus really did pay the price for our sins, a price we ourselves could not afford.

Questions For Discussion or Study: Explain the connection between works (as it is used here) and earning. How is faith different? What does it mean that God "credits" our faith as righteousness? Why doesn't faith automatically equal righteousness? Read James 2:14-26 - why doesn't it contradict what Paul says here? Read Psalm 32 - what are some benefits of being forgiven of sin? Why is it significant that the statement in Genesis 15:6 came before Abraham was circumcised? What does his example still mean to us?

-Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, July 2005

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CALLED TO BELONG TO JESUS CHRIST: A STUDY OF ROMANS

Notes for Week Seven: The Nature of Faith (Romans 1:1-5)

Continuing to use Abraham as an example of justification by faith, Paul now elaborates on some important points concerning the nature of faith. Just as Abraham received God's promises and blessings because of his faith, not because of what he did, so also in Christ it is by faith, not by law, that we receive God's promises, God's blessings, and God's Spirit.

Review

The last portion of chapter three, in which Paul introduces the idea of justification by grace through faith (3:21-31), makes a transition into the next major section of the book of Romans. Jesus, the sacrifice of atonement, provides justification by faith to those who believe in him. Over the next few chapters, Paul will discuss the truths and the blessings involved in this idea.

The apostle then turns to a discussion of Abraham, as our spiritual example and spiritual ancestor. In particular, Abraham's own relationship with God illustrates the way that faith is credited to us as righteousness by God (4:1-12). This was said to be the case with Abraham, in Genesis 15:6, when Abraham believed God's amazing promise to him. Although Abraham, just like everyone else, was not able to offer God his perfect works or a perfect life, he did offer his faith to God, and he trusted in God. God thus credited Abraham's faith as righteousness, as a gift (not as an obligation). Paul will now continue to show Abraham's significance as an example.

Not Through Law But By Faith (Romans 1:1-17)

The apostle now recalls the many promises made to Abraham, and he asks his readers to consider the basis on which they were given, and on which Abraham received them. There is a great deal of difference between a promise based on law and a promise based on faith and grace. In this way also, Abraham is a significant example for us to follow and to learn from.

God's promises were an important part of Abraham's relationship with God (4:13-15). Several times (see Genesis chapters 12, 15, and 18)*, he was given some important promises, and those promises were also meant to be passed on to his descendants*. In setting up the promises in this way, God by no means meant the promises to be passed on by law. That is, God never acknowledged an obligation to fulfill those promises for those who had only a mere genetic relationship with Abraham.

* God's many promises to Abraham are significant, both as a practical example to us, and as one of the foundations of God's covenants with his people. It can thus be quite useful to study these passages in Genesis in conjunction with a study of Romans. See also last week's notes, and the questions below.

Instead, the condition on which the promises are inherited is that of faith. To those who have faith in him, God credits righteousness, and to those whom he declares righteous, he gives the same promises that he gave to Abraham. As Paul indicates here, the standard cannot be both law and faith—it must be one or the other. A law standard would cancel the value of faith. Likewise, by making faith the standard, God eliminates the need for a law standard.

Thus the promises could be guaranteed to all of Abraham's offspring (4:16-17) - that is, as long as we understand correctly who his offspring are considered to be*. God always intended the

promises to come by grace, not by works or law. Though faith is the condition, faith does not earn God's promises—they are always by grace. God accepts our faith in lieu of the righteousness by works that is unattainable for us, and he credits us, by his grace, with righteousness. God thus makes sure that the promise will always be by grace. This was even true in the Old Testament.

* This is an important distinction that comes into play several times in Romans. We have already seen it in Romans 2:25-29, and it will be even more important when Paul discusses Israel in Romans 9-11.

By doing it in this way, God also makes a guarantee that is reliable. If the guarantee and the promises were conditioned on law and works, they could never be firm or reliable, since they would depend on us. But since they instead come by faith and grace, they are founded not on our own actions or character, or even on how strong our own faith is, but on God's nature and on God's character. Abraham became the father of many nations because he believed God and because he knew God to be capable of fulfilling his promises. Even Abraham's faith was not always perfect, but God is always faithful. Our faith is fragile, but God's faithfulness is perfect.

We have the same God Abraham had, "the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were." Here again, we see the paradoxical qualities of God. What the world considers dead, God can make alive. And God sees things the way they really are, not the way the world sees them. When the apostle says that God "calls things that are not as though they were", he is simply saying that God sees the true realities, and that he then tells us about them. He neither considers nor values the apparent realities that the world sees and values.

The seemingly paradoxical relationship between faith and works confuses many, but Paul resolves it for us both here and elsewhere*. Genuine faith leads to good works, but those good works are never the source of our salvation. Works in themselves are neither the basis nor the condition. So, for example, when James says that faith without deeds is dead (James 2:14-26), he is not saying that we must perform a certain amount of good works in order to be saved. Rather, he is making the valid point that our lives will always reflect what we truly believe in.

* Note also that Paul will discuss in Romans 6:11-23 and 8:5-17 some of the reasons why Christians should make every effort to avoid sin.

There is no quota for how much we must 'do', and indeed any such quota would be unfair, since we all have widely different abilities to do good works. Therefore God sets no standard for what works we must do to be saved. God does ask all of us to have faith in him, yet he also does not compare us with each other as to the 'amount' of faith that we have. What he asks is for us to put our faith, however much of it we have, in him instead of in this world or in ourselves.

Questions for Discussion or Study: Look at the promises God made to Abraham in Genesis 12, 15, and 18. In what sense do we inherit these promises? If those promises had been conditioned on law, what difference would it have made for Abraham? What difference would it make for us? How does the condition of faith allow God's promises to be more certain?

□□*raham* □ *Faith (Romans □:18-□5)*

Abraham's faith also teaches us about the nature of faith itself. God promised Abraham many things that were improbable, or even impossible, from a worldly perspective. The examples that Paul gives here, as well as other examples in Genesis, help us to realize that Abraham's faith was based on an appreciation of God's unique qualities, not on Abraham's own knowledge or actions.

In his relationship with God, Abraham often believed in things against all earthly forms of hope (4:18-21). He could do that, because his faith gave him a hope that transcended earthly logic and knowledge. By faith, he knew that God's ability to fulfill his promises depended on God's qualities, not on Abraham's qualities.

The promises that God made to Abraham were truly improbable in human terms. Specifically, the promise that Paul discusses here, that Abraham and Sarah would have their own child and become the ancestors of many nations, was contradicted by all worldly facts. Abraham's example is significant in that, as Paul says, he did not deny or ignore the facts of the situation. Instead, he knew that God had the power to act in spite of the facts, and he believed that if God made the promises, God knew a way to bring them about. He saw the situation as an opportunity for God to demonstrate his power. Nor did Abraham make up his own promises. He allowed God to decide what promises to make, and he trusted God in that way as well.

Numerous other examples in Abraham's life show this same principle at work. For example, when he traveled to the Promised Land at God's command (see Genesis 12), he had no earthly reasons to do so. He was leaving not only his own homeland, but also a place where all that he needed was provided, in order to go to a distant land with much less to offer on the surface. But he knew that God would not send him there without some very good reasons.

His obedience in being ready to offer Isaac as a sacrifice (Genesis 22) is another example. Hebrews 11:17-19 gives us an important insight into Abraham's thinking at that time - he accepted God's command literally, but he believed that God could always raise the dead. As it turns out, this is not how God resolved the situation, but that is not the real point. Abraham knew that God had promised him that "it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned", and so he knew that, one way or another, God would not let Isaac be destroyed forever. In faith, he knew that God does not and cannot contradict himself.

The idea of faith being credited as righteousness (4:22-25) applies to us as well as to Abraham. Paul has discussed the specific example of Abraham's belief in God's promise that he would have many descendants, in order to illustrate the kind of faith that Abraham had, and that God credited to him as righteousness. The apostle confirms that this crediting of righteousness is also for all who believe in God and in his Son Jesus, whom God raised from the dead.

In concluding the chapter, Paul hints at the intimate connection between Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection, and our own relationship with God. Through Jesus, God offers each of us the chance to have the same kind of close relationship with him that Abraham was blessed with. Not that any of us has the 'amount' of faith that Abraham had, but that each of us, like Abraham, looks to God in hope, trusting in him (as much as we are able to) instead of trusting in ourselves.

Questions For Discussion or Study: From an earthly perspective, how would one view the promises God made to Abraham? Why did Abraham believe them? What elements of his faith can we emulate? What other examples in Abraham's life show this faith at work? On what basis can we hope for our faith to be credited to us as righteousness?

-Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, July 2005

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CALLED TO BELONG TO JESUS CHRIST: A STUDY OF ROMANS

Notes For Week Eight: A Matter of Life & Death (Romans 5)

Though several significant topics are discussed in this chapter, Paul repeatedly returns to the ideas of life and death, particularly the latter. He discusses several kinds of death: Jesus' sacrificial death, physical death, spiritual death, and death as an abstract personification or force. If we understand the power of death, we can better appreciate the life we have in Christ.

Relevance

After saying that we are justified by grace through faith (3:21-31), Paul spends several chapters discussing the truths and blessings of the gospel. He uses Abraham as an example of how God credits faith as righteousness (4:1-12), and then as an example of the nature of faith (4:13-25).

God's promises to Abraham came by faith, not law. Though God declared Abraham righteous, Abraham did not earn the promises—they came by grace. The same promises are made to Abraham's descendants, and are guaranteed to all who believe. Abraham showed his faith by hoping and trusting in God despite appearances, accepting facts without weakening in his faith.

Peace & Reconciliation (Romans 5:1-11)

The apostle has already explained how atonement, justification, and redemption come to us through the blood of Jesus. But those blessings by no means exhaust the gifts that Jesus brought us, nor are they the only changes that he brings in our relationship with God. In this passage, Paul adds peace and reconciliation to the list of blessings that come to us through the cross.

Having peace with God (5:1-5) is another of the great blessings that come through Jesus. Once we properly understand what Jesus has done for us, we realize that his sacrifice paid the penalty for our sins, so that we no longer have to be anxious about whether God accepts us or whether he is angry with us. Our faith, which God credits to us as righteousness, brings us access to God's grace, so that henceforth we stand before him by grace, not by our works.

We can thus rejoice in God. Most humans, even many believers, feel guilt, fear, resistance, doubt, or uncertainty towards God. The more we appreciate Jesus' sacrifice of atonement, the less of these there will be in our minds and hearts, so that thinking about God brings joy and peace, rather than fear, confusion, or doubt. We can then rejoice even in our sufferings, since we know that God will work through them to bring us perseverance, character, and hope. And since this hope is in God, it is a certain hope that will not disappoint us.

We could have none of these blessings apart from Jesus' death on the cross. This death came "at just the right time" (5:6-8). This means not so much a date on the calendar, as the right time for each of us, fully and truly to meet our spiritual needs. He died for us when we were powerless, controlled by our flesh and our sin. And he died for us while we were sinners, not when we were righteous. As the apostle points out, it is rare for a human being to risk death even for the sake of a good or righteous person*. How much more extraordinary is it that God's own Son, pure and perfect, suffered death for the sake of sinners who had rebelled against his Father.

* Note that Paul is not making a fine distinction between a 'righteous' man and a 'good' man - he simply makes the same point twice. There is a slight difference between them, but it is not the point of the verse.

Since Jesus' death reconciled us to God, it is worth considering how much more Jesus does for us once we have been reconciled (5:9-11). If, through one of the glorious paradoxes of God, the death of his Son atoned for our sins, justified us in his sight, and redeemed us from our lost condition, how much more will God do for us, now that we have this relationship with him? If God was willing to let his Son die for us when we were still rebellious sinners and enemies, so that he could take his wrath away from us, how much more are we now saved from God's wrath, now that we can stand in his presence by grace through faith.

Jesus' death brought us life, and saved us from the fate of spiritual death. And Jesus' life brings us true life, life to the full, life as it was meant to be. He does not bring us the kind of life idealized by the world, a life of sensual indulgence and selfishness, for such a life brings very little of anything good in the long run. Instead, Jesus brings us a life full of hope, peace, and other spiritual blessings. We can live at peace with God, we can live without being controlled by selfish desires as the worldly are, and we can live in hope of eternal life. All this is possible because Jesus reconciled us to his Father, so that once we are reconciled to God, he can pour out his blessings on us.

Questions For Discussion or Study: What does it mean to be at peace with God? Why is it such a blessing? How do we obtain it? How did Jesus die "at just the right time"? What does this mean for us? Why is it important that he died for us while we were still powerless sinners? In verses 9-11, what implications does Paul draw from this?

Sin & Death Grace & Life (Romans 5:1-11)

God wants us all to experience his grace and love personally, and to know him as individuals, yet he also wants each of us to see how we fit into the 'big picture' of God's plans. So, in these verses, Paul gives us a small glimpse of how God's plans have unfolded, and specifically, how Jesus' gracious sacrifice overthrew death's reign and brought new life to the world.

Without intending to cover all of the details, Paul reminds his readers of how sin and death first entered the world (5:12-14). There was a time when the very first humans lived without sin in God's presence, but inevitably the first sin was committed, with consequences that have been felt for the rest of human history. As soon as one man* sinned, sin and death both entered the world through that one sin. And every human being ever born has known that he or she will die. Note that Paul makes no real distinction at this point between physical death and spiritual death, not because there is no difference, but because he wants us to see how closely they are related**.

* Literally, of course, the first sin was not committed by a man, but by a woman. This is one of the indications that Paul does not mean this discussion to be taken as a legal-style statement about sin and death, to be interpreted on a strict literal level. Rather, he is speaking spiritually and symbolically, setting up a contrast between Adam and Jesus (see also below).

** Note that this is true in some other New Testament passages as well. Commentators and readers often analyze passages such as this with the hope of determining exactly which kind of death that Paul means. Sometimes it is reasonably obvious from the context that a verse refers to one kind of death or the other, but there are other times when it is unnecessary or even inadvisable to try to make a distinction. The tie between spiritual death and physical death is often a very close one, as Paul implies here.

Death - both spiritual and physical - has reigned on our earth ever since. It is a foe that neither humans nor anything else in this world can overcome. Death reigned before there ever was a law, either from God or from human rulers. As Paul already demonstrated in Romans 2, the knowledge of right and wrong in each of our hearts makes us responsible for our sins even if

they do not break any written rule. Since the coming of the law, of course, the sinfulness of humanity is even more unmistakable, for the law makes us all much more conscious of our sins.

God's gift of Jesus is not at all like human sins or trespasses (5:15-17). Naturally, this is quite obvious in itself, but what the apostle is doing is setting up a parallel and a contrast between Adam, who brought sin and death into the world, and Jesus, who brought grace and life. Paul makes some important contrasts. Death and judgment came into the world after only one sin, but the gift of Jesus followed many, many sins. Adam's sin brought sin and death to all, but Jesus' gift brought life and grace to all.

Jesus has thus overthrown death's reign. This is true not only in our individual lives, but for the world as a whole. Death no longer reigns unchallenged over this world, for we all have the opportunity to overcome the world and to overcome death itself through Jesus. Though it took only one sin to bring death into the world, since Jesus' gift followed many sins, he showed that his grace is sufficient to atone for any number of sins. And the gifts he brings - from justification and redemption to peace and reconciliation, and much more besides - more than outweigh the ills that Adam's sin unleashed.

There are a good number of implications to all this. For the time being, Paul is content to point out only some of the most significant of them (5:18-21). Our own spiritual lives follow a course that is in many ways parallel to what Paul says about Adam and Jesus. Each of us has at some point fallen into sin for the first time, with results similar to those that Adam experienced. But when we come to know Christ, condemnation is replaced by justification. Instead of being sinners, we are made (or declared) righteous.

Although humanity was already responsible to God and accountable to God before the law came, he sent the law to make us aware of sin, and in order "that the trespass might increase." For the law itself can even provoke the desire to sin, and more than that, it makes the volume of our sin abundantly clear. But God has more than enough grace to cover any amount of sin. So "where sin increased, grace increased all the more." Death has thus been thoroughly defeated, and now life can reign through anyone who has turned to God through faith in Jesus.

Life and death thus mean something much different to Christians than they do to unbelievers. We have the hope of eternal life, so that our hope and security are not in this world. We have been freed from sin, so that now we can live as God calls us to, and so that later we can live with God forever. As Paul himself said, "to live is Christ and to die is gain".

Questions For Discussion or Study: In what sense did death come into the world after the first sin? Why does Paul say that Adam was the first to sin? How are spiritual death and physical death related? When would it be important to make a distinction? How does death "reign"? In what sense did Jesus overthrow its reign? Summarize the contrasts that Paul makes between Adam and Jesus. How is each of these important in our own lives and relationships with God?

-Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, August 2005

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CALLED TO BELONG TO JESUS CHRIST: A STUDY OF ROMANS

Notes for Week Nine: The Spiritual Rebirth (Romans 6:1-11)

In the last two chapters, Paul has discussed many of the changes that take place in our lives through the blood of Jesus. He has also drawn a contrast between Adam, who brought sin and death into the world, and Jesus, who brought grace and life. Now he discusses the spiritual rebirth that each of us undergoes when we respond to God's call through the gospel.

Review of Recent Classes

After explaining that we are justified freely by God's grace through our faith (3:21-31), Paul used Abraham as an example of how God credits our faith as righteousness (4:1-12) and as an example of the nature of faith (4:13-25).

He then discussed several ideas related to life and death (Romans 5). The blessings of peace and reconciliation, along with the others Paul mentioned earlier, come to us because of Jesus' death. And his death occurred at just the right time for us, since it happened when we were powerless sinners who could not possibly save ourselves. If Jesus' death reconciled us to God, we can also know that God will bless us even more abundantly now that we have been reconciled to him.

As long as sin has been in the world, death (both spiritual and physical) has reigned over the world. But just as Adam brought sin and death into the world, Jesus brought grace and life. Jesus' righteous sacrifice can cleanse much more than Adam's sin. His blood is powerful enough to wash away any number of sins committed by any number of sinners.

Baptized Into His Death (Romans 6:1-11)

Paul realizes that his teachings about the greatness of God's grace could lead some less careful readers to draw the wrong conclusions about sin. Therefore he now turns to a discussion of the spiritual rebirth that we experience when we are baptized into Christ. He begins by reviewing exactly what happens, and what it means, when a believer is baptized into Christ.

Paul knows that he must head off a possible misconception about what he has been teaching the Romans (6:1-2). The erroneous idea that, since God is so full of grace, our sins then cause no harm, is a common error. But this idea does not at all follow logically from what Paul has said. Rather, it is solely a product of the kind of flawed worldly logic that jumps to conclusions when those conclusions seem convenient.

As Paul will soon discuss at length, all Christians have died to sin, and thus live in it no longer. When we are redeemed through the blood of Christ, many changes take place, both in our relationships with God and within our own selves. One life has ended, and another has begun. Our motivation to avoid sin is not simply to avoid punishment. The best motivation comes rather from an understanding of who we are in Jesus.

Every young children are often motivated solely by punishments or rewards, and make decisions solely on this basis. Only as they grow a little older do they begin to value right and wrong for their own sake, and to value their parents as important relationships rather than as mere givers of

blessings. In the same way, our spiritual rebirth should help us start out on the road to spiritual maturity, so that we set aside fleshly motivations and instead follow spiritual motivations.

To those who may not understand how this can be, Paul reminds them exactly when their old lives ended and their new lives began (6:3-4). Just as Jesus died as the atoning sacrifice for sin, then was buried, and then was raised to live again, so we also follow the same process through baptism into Jesus, which is actually a burial into Jesus' death*. Through baptism, then, we undergo death (to self and to sin) and burial, in order to live a new life, devoted to God, once we are raised out of the water.

* As is commonly known, the word baptism (in Greek βαπτισμος, "baptismos" □ the verb is βαπτίζω, "baptizo"), means immersion. This of course fits the symbolic, as well as the literal, meaning of baptism.

Baptism is thus no empty ritual, nor, though it is a physical action, is it meant to be only a mere symbol. The symbolism itself is there, of course, since baptism symbolizes in an obvious way the process of death, burial, and rebirth. But the commitment we make at baptism, the understanding that we are preparing to begin a new life, is the more important realization of which Paul now reminds the Romans*. It is when we have the faith to make this kind of change that God credits our faith as righteousness.

* Note that this by no means implies that we must have 'perfect' knowledge at baptism, or be ready to make a 'perfect' commitment at baptism. The effectiveness of baptism to bring salvation depends on God's grace, not on our goodness or on our knowledge. The condition that we must meet is that of faith. There is no 'amount' of faith that we must have, but rather we must give God whatever faith we do have, and we do this by showing him that we believe his promise. Then he will credit our faith as righteousness, and this in turn enables him to pour out his grace on us.

Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection proclaimed him once for all first to be the Savior, the Son of Man, the Messiah, who offered himself for the sins of the world, and second of all the Lord, the Son of God, who was raised from the dead to declare an end to death's reign. This is the foundation of our faith in Jesus - not that we believe in him in the abstract, not that we believe that he was a good man, not that we believe that he will take care of us in this world. The basis of our faith is the awareness that he is both Lord and Christ, both Master and Savior, and this in turn is based on our belief in his death, burial, and resurrection.

What, then, could be more natural for someone who believes this than to desire to join him in his death, his burial, and his resurrection? We join him in his death when we renounce sin's mastery and determine to live for it no longer □ in other words, we join him in death when we repent, when we die to our selves. We join him in burial as we are immersed in water in his name, and we join him in his resurrection when we come up to begin a new life in him and for him. Repentance and baptism are not meritorious works, nor are they legal requirements. Rather, they are the way that we respond in faith to Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection. As God promised first through Peter, if we believe and respond in this way, our sins are then forgiven, and we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Questions For Discussion or Study: Why does Paul think it necessary to disprove the idea that we can "go on sinning so that grace may increase"? What significance does baptism into Christ have in connection with this? What broader significance of baptism do these verses bring out? Could God have designated some other means of responding to Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection? Can we choose to respond to it in some other way?

United In Death United in Resurrection (Romans 6:5-11)

Just as Paul had previously set forth a contrast between Adam and Jesus, so now he sets up a close parallel between Jesus and all those who respond to him. Those who have faith in Jesus will willingly become one with him, and will thus be united with him in both his death and his resurrection. Our old selves must die on the cross with Jesus, and we then begin to live anew.

The crucifixion of the old self is an essential part of spiritual rebirth (6:5-7). Just as Abraham revealed his faith both by believing God's promises and by living as God called him to, so also if we believe in Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection, we will be willing to have our old selves crucified. Since a resurrection must follow a death, how can we begin a new life if we do not die first*? Now, just as crucifixion involved excruciating pain, so also the death of the old self is not expected to be easy. But it has the immeasurable benefit of rendering sin powerless over us.

* It is therefore absolutely necessary to have the old self crucified and buried before we can be raised to live a new life. As Paul has said above, this takes place through repentance and baptism into Christ. For this reason, repentance and baptism are not merely part of a growth process. They are the crucial point at which the old life ends and the new begins. It is true, of course, that developing spiritual knowledge and a godly lifestyle is a continuing process, which in most cases starts before we are baptized and then continues afterwards. But we are not saved by our knowledge or by our righteous lives. We are saved when through faith we die and are raised again. A careful understanding of this can put to rest a large number of the misunderstandings about baptism that arise.

If we are truly born again, then we are no longer slaves to sin. This does not mean that we never sin (far from it) but it means that now we are not helpless against sin. It also means (or at least, as Paul is telling the Romans, it should mean) that we have renounced our 'right' to sin—we no longer view sin as an opportunity or a pleasure, but as an ill that both we and God want nothing to do with. A dead person does not sin, and if we have allowed God to crucify our old selves, we also are free from sin's control over us. Its reign, like death's, has been overthrown.

For us, there is then no more need to worry about death (6:8-10). When we die to sin and are buried with Jesus in baptism, we have put spiritual death behind us, so that we live with Christ. And even when physical death finally comes, though it may well be painful for a time, it also holds no lasting terror, for we can be assured of a home forever with God. Once Jesus was raised from the dead, he did not and could not die again, but instead he ascended directly to his father. And in this way too, death has lost its mastery over him and over us.

Jesus died to sin once for all. One sacrifice by one righteous Savior brought atonement, redemption, and justification for all who believe. But if we do believe, then we too must die. The old self must be crucified with Jesus, and we must renounce sinfulness and selfishness. Jesus came to a world that he could easily have ruled or exploited, and he instead poured out his life for its wayward inhabitants, even to the point of dying on a cross. He has called us also to live new lives, and to use our time in this world not to live for ourselves, but to live for him.

Questions For Discussion or Study: Why must we die as part of the spiritual rebirth? What does it mean to die to self? In what sense is the old self crucified? In what sense are we raised from the dead? In what way(s) does death lose its mastery over us?

-Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, August 2005

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CALLED TO BELONG TO JESUS CHRIST: A STUDY OF ROMANS

Notes For Week Ten: Implications of the Spiritual Rebirth (Romans 6:11-18)

Paul has now discussed the spiritual rebirth that each of us undergoes when we respond to God's call through the gospel. When we are baptized into Christ, one life ends and another begins. The old self dies, and we are raised to live a new life. Being reborn has many implications for our lives, and Paul now turns to a discussion of some of the most significant of these.

Review of Recent Classes

We are justified freely by God's grace (3:21-31), through our faith, which God credits to us as righteousness, in lieu of the perfect good works we are unable to give him (4:1-12). Abraham showed us the nature of faith by his belief in God's ability to fulfill his promises (4:13-25). Although Adam brought sin and death into the world, Jesus brought life and grace (5:1-21).

We thus are able to be spiritually reborn (6:1-10). When we are baptized (immersed) into Jesus' death, the old self dies and is buried, and we are then raised to live a new life. To be united with Jesus in resurrection, we must naturally be united with him first in death. Thus it is a natural expression of our faith in God's promises to repent and be baptized into Jesus, so that our old selves may be crucified with him, and so that death will no longer reign over us.

Set Free From Sin (Romans 6:11-18)

With our old selves crucified, we are dead to sin, and sin no longer has mastery over us. But in practical terms, this can be difficult to put into practice. Relying solely on rules has at best a limited effect in avoiding sin. We must learn to see sin for what it is, and then we can understand how incompatible sin is with the new life in Christ.

The most basic implication of the spiritual rebirth is that we are now dead to sin and alive to God (6:11-14). Paul here is urging his readers to make the new life a reality. He thus appeals to them not to let sin reign in their bodies, since this would be a return to an old way of life that has now ended. We always have the choice whether to offer our bodies (and our minds, our talents, and our time) either to sin or to God. If we offer them to sin, they become instruments of wickedness. If we offer them to God, they become instruments of righteousness.

What Paul tells us is that sin is no longer our master, because we are not under law, but under grace. This is another apparent paradox about God, for at first it would seem that we are more likely, not less likely, to sin if we are under grace. But this will not happen if in fact we have really grasped what grace and the spiritual rebirth mean. As Paul told Titus, "the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions" (Titus 2:11-12). Grace is actually a better motivator to do right than law is.

Each of us must choose whom to obey, sin or God (6:15-18). We are not strong enough to stand independent of both, and we shall always be controlled by one or the other. Most humans choose to be slaves to sin, because it gives them the illusion of being in control of their lives. But 'freedom' to sin is in fact slavery - slavery to our flesh, to the parts of our body, and to our own desires that come from within us, not from God. Fleshly freedom is a myth that the world promotes, much to Satan's delight.

Sin, the world, and Satan all entice us to sin with the promise of freedom, of pleasure, and of self-satisfaction. They pretend to do this solely for our own good and for our own enjoyment. But in fact this promise is entirely false, for following the ways of the world will enslave us, and the pleasures that sin brings soon diminish. They are trying to lure us to our own destruction.

Becoming slaves to righteousness does not sound like fun, but as Jesus said, "my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:30). God is a loving master. He does not make false promises, and he does not give us everything that we desire. He does give us what we need, even if we become angry with him for doing so. Nor does he appeal to the baser aspects of our nature, by offering cheap, quick rewards, but rather he makes clear that we must wait patiently for the best things that he plans to give us.

Each of us must choose whom to serve. We must give ourselves over either to God or to the world. Spiritual independence is a myth. To be sure, every seeker of God goes through a period of learning, thinking, praying, and more, in order to come to God, and God is never impatient with those who are seeking him. But he desires each of us eventually to undergo spiritual rebirth. After being immersed into Christ, we shall still stumble often, and from time to time we shall even fall. But we need never again be slaves to sin—we need never look back longingly at the world we have left behind, and we no longer let the world deceive us with its false promises.

Questions For Discussion or Study: What does it mean to be dead to sin? Can we make it a reality in our lives? How does grace motivate us not to sin? Why must we choose between sin and God, not the 'middle ground'? How is God a better master than sin is?

The Benefit of Reap (Romans 1:1-11)

When we choose, as we must, whether to obey sin or to obey God, our choice will have significant consequences. Moreover, we usually really know what 'benefits' sin will bring, and what benefits righteousness will bring. The challenge is to value these benefits accurately, based on what fruits they will yield in the long run, rather than by the satisfaction they bring right now.

The fruit of sin is not hard to see, though the flesh may prefer to pretend otherwise (6:19-21). Slavery to sin and self is slavery to impurity and wickedness. The world dislikes words that bring out sin's true nature, but we ought to realize that sin pleases the devil and makes us more like him. None of us would want to please Hitler or Genghis Khan or some other notorious sinner, so why would we want to do something that pleases Satan and brings us closer to him?

The false allure of sin comes from the fact that those in slavery to sin are, indeed, free from the control of righteousness, which is exactly what so many worldly persons want. But they do not realize that this very choice makes them slaves to every whim and desire of their own flesh. We are spiritual beings, housed temporarily in a tent of flesh. Our true nature is spiritual, and if we suppress the spiritual nature in order to please the temporary fleshly nature, we fight against our own true selves. That is why "those things result in death!" We should please the Spirit instead.

The fruit of righteousness is neither as immediate nor as 'fun' as the fruit of sin, but it is far more valuable and more certain (6:22-23). Holiness is only a vague concept to the worldly - indeed, before we are given God's Spirit we can only dimly understand what holiness truly means - and eternal life is meaningless to those engrossed in the things of this earth. But to those with even a basic awareness of their true, spiritual natures, these are immense blessings that are more than worth whatever earthly sacrifices we must make.

Paul deliberately uses the term 'wages'* to describe what sin brings, and 'gift'* to describe what righteousness brings. Those who serve sin truly earn death, so it is indeed a wage that they have fully earned. But even the righteous do not earn or deserve eternal life. It is a gift that God gives to those who value it properly, though even they cannot earn it. For God does not give us what we deserve, or even what we desire. He loves us enough to give us what we truly need.

* The word Paul uses for 'wages' is *οψωνιον* ("opsonion"), which was used both for monetary pay or for any other payment or compensation owed to someone for work done or for services rendered. The word used here for 'gift' is *χαρισμα* ("charisma"), which refers specifically to a gift given entirely by grace (as opposed to, for example, one given on a particular occasion, or as an expression of honor).

Questions for Discussion or Study: What are the fruits of sin? How do its short-term fruits differ from those that come in the long run? Why do those who serve sin feel free for a time? How can we avoid deluding ourselves in this way? What are the fruits of righteousness? How can we learn to value and appreciate them more?

□ *ead to the* □ *a* □ (Romans 7:1-□)

Not only were our sins and our old selves nailed to the cross, but the law itself (that is, as a means of salvation) was also crucified along with them. We are free from the necessity of justifying ourselves by the law, and we have been freed from it in order to serve God in a better and freer way. This too is one of the blessings of the gospel of grace.

The fact that law's authority ends at death (7:1-3) is obvious, but Paul applies this further. As a simple example, he points out that the marriage vow is for a lifetime, and it is fulfilled once either spouse passes away. His analogy is to the law, to which we were 'married', or committed, before knowing Christ. Before the spiritual rebirth, we had to rely on law for any hope of salvation. Once we realize that no such hope exists, we turn to Jesus, and our old self's death also cancels our obligation to the law, so that we no longer need to seek justification from it.

We can thus serve God and others in the new way of the Spirit (7:4-6). We died to the law through Christ in that it is no longer the standard of our justification—it is no longer our hope of salvation. Being free from the law does not mean that we can disregard God's commands. But since we belong to Christ, we are under grace, and we do not need to earn anything. The blessings we are given are far greater than we deserve. Once we understand this, we are freed to serve from the heart, rather than out of guilt, fear, or compulsion. Although this freedom takes some getting used to, in the long run it is a much better motivation to do what is right.

God releases us from the law so that we can serve in this way. For the law arouses sinful passions, ranging from rebellion against its requirements, to resentment at its demands, to envy of those who follow it better than we do, to doubt, guilt, and many other negative emotions when we fall short. Such fruit is not what God is looking for. He wants us to bear good fruit, fruit that will last, not bitter fruit or fruit that will perish quickly. Law is always an uncertain foundation, but God's grace is a solid rock on which we can build our lives and ministries.

Questions For Discussion or Study: What is the point of Paul's example of marriage? What is his intended analogy? How can being freed from law enable us to serve in a better way? What fruits come from serving by law? How do they compare with the fruits of serving by grace?

-Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, August 2005

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CALLED TO BELONG TO JESUS CHRIST: A STUDY OF ROMANS

Notes For Week Eleven: The Inefficiency of Law For Salvation (Romans 6:1-5)

Paul has reminded the Roman Christians about their spiritual rebirth, and about the new life that began when they were baptized into Christ. He has also discussed some of the important implications of being spiritually reborn. One of those implications is that we are no longer under law as a standard or system of justification. He now explains why this is such a blessing.

Review

God credited Abraham's faith to him as righteousness, and Abraham showed us the nature of faith by believing in God's promises (Romans 4). Adam brought sin and death into the world, but Jesus brought grace and life (Romans 5). We undergo a spiritual rebirth through baptism into Christ, when we likewise believe God's promise and become one with Jesus in his death, so that we can also become one with him in his resurrection (Romans 6:1-10).

This rebirth has many implications (Romans 6:11-7:6). It frees us from the control of sin, so that we can (and must) choose whether to obey sin or to obey God. If we choose sin, we become slaves to our desires, and death will be our wages (what we earn). If we choose to obey God, we enjoy the fruit of righteousness, and receive the gift (which we do not earn or deserve) of eternal life. Once we are spiritually reborn, we are also free from the law as a system of justification.

Is The Law Sinful? (Romans 7:7-11)

Several times already, the apostle Paul has described the law and its limitations in negative terms, and he will soon do so again. Therefore he wishes to make clear that the law itself is not sinful. Law has a purpose, but it also has limitations. When these limitations combine with our lack of understanding and with our fleshly desires, it can lead to unfortunate results.

Paul again returns to the concept that we learn to recognize what sin is through the law (7:7-12). This indeed is law's purpose, to teach us what sin is, and to help us to understand that we cannot overcome the burden of sin on our own. All of this is meant to point us to God, but sin and Satan are not idle while God teaches us these lessons. Despite law's important purpose, it provides an opportunity for sin, which sin inevitably seizes.

Paul says that, "apart from law, sin is dead", because law is what gives sin its opportunity to put us to death. Note that he has already told us (5:12-14) that sin and death were able to reign even before there was a law of Moses, and so here also he means law in a general sense, not limited to the Mosaic law, but including the innate understanding of right and wrong within each of us.

Law, as a standard of right and wrong, has a necessary purpose, but once we become aware* of the law (or of any law) we are at once responsible for obeying it. We then also have to contend with our own reactions to the law, such as our pride, our resentment at being commanded, and other such feelings. All of this creates opportunity for sin, which then 'springs to life' and soon condemns us, through our actions, through our guilt, and through our own consciences.

* Note that again this is not limited to being informed of a law, but includes any point at which we become aware of various standards of right and wrong, whether through reading it, being informed verbally, or simply realizing it in our hearts. Paul himself, of course, learned about the Jewish Law of Moses, and

much of his personal experience would be based on his attempts to fulfill that law. But in this chapter he uses himself only as an example, to illustrate some general principles that apply even to those whose first acquaintance with law may have come in a different form entirely. His own life is not the main focus here.

Sin, therefore, used the commandments of God to put Paul to death. But that does not mean that the commandments are bad or sinful - the law itself is holy, since it came from God. God not only literally wrote the laws of Moses that Paul struggled to fulfill, but God also planted in each of our hearts the awareness of right and wrong that makes all of humanity accountable to him.

Law is necessary because it teaches us to recognize sin as sin (7:13). Even if we do not agree on every issue of right and wrong, we all know that there are such standards, and there are many specific sins that reasonable persons agree upon. Besides the spiritual dimension, it is easy to see what a nightmare human society would be without standards of right and wrong. Even those who rebel against constraints on their fleshly freedom still have inside them the knowledge that such constraints are needed on others, even if they refuse to admit their own need.

When it comes to sin, God does not want us to have hazy, unclear notions about right and wrong. He knows, of course, that there will be some matters on which right and wrong are not clear-cut or easy to discern. But there are many, many issues on which God has declared - through his Word and through our own consciences - what the truth is, once and for all. He wants us to see sin as "utterly sinful", to acknowledge sin for the destructive force that it is, and to see our own sins for what they are. Law is part of accomplishing this important spiritual end.

Questions For Discussion or Study: Why is it important to recognize sin as sin? How is sin dead apart from law? Why does Paul use himself as an example? How closely does he expect our experience to parallel his? How can we learn to see sin as 'utterly sinful'?

Sold as Slaves to Sin (Romans 7:14-15)

Without God, we are in slavery to sin, and our struggle against it is not an equal one. Our inability to defeat sin through our own power and wisdom is not a fault of the law, but is rather a result of our own weakness. The better that we understand how incapable we are of overcoming sin by ourselves, the more that we can appreciate God's grace and the atoning sacrifice of Jesus.

Most of us can sympathize completely with Paul's feeling that sometimes he cannot do what he wants to do, but instead does what he hates (7:14-20). Sometimes it is baffling to try to determine why it is so hard for us to avoid sin and to practice righteousness. Our own desires can conflict with what we ourselves believe to be true and right. Paul says that, when he finds himself in the condition of doing what he does not want to do, he then realizes that the law* is good (that is, that it has an important purpose). Our fleshly desires could become even more unrestrained and destructive without law* to restrain them,

* Once more, he is referring to law in a general sense, including our inner awareness of right and wrong.

The apostle now makes an interesting distinction. If he does what he himself does not want to do, it is no longer really 'him' who is doing it, but rather "sin living in me" that is committing these acts. He does not, of course, mean this as any kind of excuse for his actions, for which he accepts full responsibility. Rather, this point can help us to understand why we sin, and how we can better resist it. For he knows that he has, as do all of us, two sides to his own nature. And as he says, in his fleshly nature (or 'sinful nature') there is nothing good, only desire and weakness.

He, like all of us, has an ongoing struggle* against his own desires, which often contradict the things that he knows in his own heart and mind to be right and important.

* Commentaries often contain lengthy discussions or debates over whether Paul is talking about himself only before he became a Christian (when he was 'unregenerate'), or whether this struggle also applies after he became a Christian. Some writers prefer to believe that such struggles do not happen if one is 'really' a Christian. Others just don't like the idea that a person's own nature can have two conflicting aspects to it at the same time. But even as believers, of course, we know that we struggle against sin and weakness, and will always do so whenever we take our eyes off of Jesus. Note also that Paul uses himself as an example only. It is a mistake to study the passage as if Paul's exact circumstances were of primary importance.

Since Paul here refers to the 'flesh' or the 'sinful nature' (depending on the translation), we must make a slight digression concerning this word* and how it is translated. The Greek word here is σαρκῆ ("sarx"), and it is also used in many other places in the New Testament (for example, it is used several times in Romans 8). Its literal meaning is 'flesh', but there is no exact English equivalent for it*. For it does not mean 'flesh' in a strictly physical sense, but in a more comprehensive sense that refers to every part of our being that is temporary or of this world, versus that part of us that is not limited to our earthly form.

* Other possible approximate translations of σαρκῆ might be 'human nature' or 'earthly nature'. As the Greeks generally used it, the contrast was not with 'mind' but with 'spirit' or 'soul'. (But note Paul's contrast in verse 25.) The Greek philosophers tended to value the mental or the emotional above the physical, and so it was common to view the 'flesh' (the "sarx") as inferior, or even bad. That is why the word is sometimes translated as 'sinful nature'. Although this translation is an attempt to make the term more meaningful, it can also attach a shade of meaning to the word that it did not necessarily have in all contexts.

There is thus an internal struggle (7:21-25) that, while it may be painful and discouraging, can teach us some important lessons in our relationship with God. As believers, we have the Holy Spirit within us, but we also still have our fleshly desires that are waiting for their chance. Thus both good and evil are present within us. Our 'inner being'* delights in God's law, but the flesh often fights against God's Word and will. Thus Paul refers metaphorically to "the law of sin", that is, to the inevitable presence of sin and temptation, against which only God can defend us.

* Literally, 'the inner man'—the intended meaning is something like, 'the inmost self', that is, there is a part deep inside him that always rejoices in God's law, in spite of any and all misdeeds by the flesh.

If the law has done its work, there comes a point when we cry out to be rescued (verse 24) from our own desires and sins. It is then that we can begin to appreciate the great importance of Jesus' atoning sacrifice, and how blessed we are that God pours out his grace upon us. It is easy to lose sight of our enormous need for God's grace. Yet even then, somewhere in our minds* we know that we belong to God, even if our flesh persists in pursuing its own desires and in leading us astray. What a blessing it is to know that we are justified by our faith in God's promise of grace through Jesus' blood, not by how well follow the law - even the law of our own minds*.

* The word for 'mind' is νους ("nous"). It includes our thoughts, attitudes, and perspectives, not just purely logical thinking. Note that he contrasts it here with σαρκῆ ("sarx"—see above), which can include our desires and other things that in English usage we would assign to the 'mind'.

Questions For Discussion or Study: What does Paul want us to learn from his description of his own struggle against sin? Why do we still struggle against sin even after we become Christians? What lessons can we learn from the struggle within us? In practical terms, how might we distinguish the 'flesh' from the 'mind'?

-Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, August 2005

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CALLED TO BELONG TO JESUS CHRIST: A STUDY OF ROMANS

Notes for Week Twelve: Living Before the Spirit (Romans 8:1-10)

The first several chapters of Romans have discussed many of the most significant topics in Christianity, from sin, judgment, law, and works to faith, grace, the cross, and eternal life. In the eighth chapter, Paul turns to another especially important topic, the Holy Spirit. He first contrasts the life lived according to the flesh with the life lived according to the Spirit.

Review of Recent Classes

We are nearing the conclusion of a long exposition on salvation by grace through faith, which Paul began with the example of Abraham, whose faith was credited as righteousness, and who illustrates the nature of faith (Romans 4). Each of us follows in the path of Adam, who brought sin and death into the world, but we are called to belong to Jesus, who brought grace and life (Romans 5). We can thus be spiritually reborn through baptism, which unites us with Jesus in his death, so that we can also be united with him in his resurrection (Romans 6:1-10).

The spiritual rebirth has important implications. We are now dead to sin (Romans 6:11-7:6). We are also dead to law as a basis for salvation, for which purpose law is ineffective (Romans 7:7-25). The law itself is not sinful or flawed, and indeed it serves a crucial purpose, in helping us to know and to recognize sin for what it is. In the flesh (or sinful nature), we are slaves to sin, so that we do not even do what we want to do. But the blood of Jesus has saved us from all that.

No Condemnation (Romans 8:1-10)

The first verse expresses one of the many encouraging thoughts to be found in this chapter. There is no longer any condemnation for those who are in Jesus, because we have died not only to sin but also to the law. Paul emphasizes once again that it God himself who saw our need and who made possible our salvation. The law of the Spirit has replaced the law of sin and death.

Through Jesus' blood, we have been set free (8:1-2), though not in the way that the world desires to be free. To know that in Jesus there is now no condemnation gives us hope and peace. It gives us security to pursue a life of spiritual growth and ministry, without the pressure of needing to live up to a legal code. This is what Paul means by his expression, "the law of the Spirit of life", or, as he said earlier (7:6), we have now been freed from the burden of the law and its requirements so that we can serve in the new way of the Spirit. Now, when we serve, when we give, when we sacrifice, we are no longer doing it in a vain attempt to fulfill the law's requirements, but instead are sincerely expressing our faith and our love.

On our own, we could not do this, so God did it by sending his own Son (8:3-4). The law is powerless to bring salvation, though not because it is sinful or unclean. It is powerless because it depends on our flesh* (or sinful nature*, or earthly nature*) to fulfill its requirements. No matter how perfectly the law (any law) has been written, it cannot save anyone by itself. By its nature, it requires our perfect efforts to bring justification, so it cannot give life of its own accord.

* This is again the word σαρκί ("sarx"), which is translated 'sinful nature' in the NIV and 'flesh' in the King James and the NASB. It is a difficult word to translate, with the closest equivalent being something like 'human nature' or 'earthly nature'. For a more complete discussion of the word, see the Notes to Week Eleven (in the section on Romans 7:14-25). The word is used several times here in Romans 8

God knew there was no one who could save the people he had created, and so his own arm worked salvation (see Isaiah 59:15-16). Once again, this is a key difference between Christianity and human-made religions. Because God is righteous, he condemns sin, but because he loves us, he wanted to find a way to bring us back to him. The law's requirements are righteous - indeed, they come from the all-righteous living God - and thus must be fully met.

Because God credits our faith as righteousness, allowing those who are baptized into Christ to be united with him in his death, and thus in his resurrection as well, God can thus declare that the law's requirements have been fulfilled in Christ. For Jesus paid the penalty for all sins, being uniquely qualified to offer himself both sinless and of his own free will. And therefore all who live in him can also live by the Spirit of God, and no longer need to live by the flesh.

Questions For Discussion or Study: In what sense is there no condemnation for those who are in Jesus? What is 'the law of the Spirit of life'? How can the righteous requirements of the law be fulfilled in us if we are unable to meet them? How do the ideas in the previous chapters of Romans help us to understand this?

The Mind Set on the Flesh (Romans 8:5-8)

Just as the apostle has reminded us earlier that we must decide whether to become slaves to sin or slaves to God, so now he tells us that we must either live by the flesh or live by the Spirit. Once again, there is no real middle ground. To clarify the issue, he indicates some of the key characteristics of the mind that is led by the flesh, the mind that pursues the things of the flesh.

With this in mind, Paul again reminds us of the basic choice that each of us must make (8:5). Those who choose to live by the flesh (sinful nature) will then have their minds set on what the flesh desires. They will apply their time, abilities, and efforts to a vain attempt to please and satisfy the flesh. But those who choose to live by the Spirit, while still imperfect and prone to sin, will no longer have their minds and hearts set on fulfilling the flesh's desires. They will instead focus their time, abilities, and efforts on the things of the Spirit, things that please God.

The minds and hearts of those controlled by the flesh hide some ugly truths (8:6-8). The fleshly mind concentrates on pleasures, possessions and distinctions that have temporary value only, and for that reason the fleshly mind is death. It leads those who have chosen it down a dead end, to an ultimately unfulfilling way of life. The fleshly mind is also hostile to God, because the things God values are of no interest to the flesh. It is thus impossible for those controlled by the flesh to please God. Even if they do 'good' things, they will be doing them for the wrong reasons.

Questions For Discussion or Study: Compare this passage with Romans 6:11-23. Why must we choose between these two ways of living? What things does the flesh desire? What does the Spirit desire? Can we tell if we are living by the flesh or by the Spirit?

If Christ Is In You (Romans 8:9-17)

On the other hand, if we are led by the Spirit and set our minds on the things of the Spirit, the implications are much different. Paul reminds his readers of this because he knows how hard it is in practice to live up to our spiritual calling. He knows that we can only experience the kind of life that God wants us to have if we truly allow ourselves to be led by God, not by our flesh.

If the Spirit of Christ is in us, there are several simple but powerful implications (8:9-11). Naturally, it means that we belong to Christ. He claims us as his, he intercedes for us, and he acknowledges us as his brothers and sisters. It also means that our bodies are dead to sin. Not that we never sin again, but we no longer devote our bodies to self-gratification and to the pursuit of fleshly pleasures. Our spirit within us is alive to God, and we nurture the things of the Spirit.

Life is also given to our mortal bodies, not in a physical sense (since we were already alive physically), but in the sense that the things we do in the body are no longer mere fleshly acts with no greater purpose than to gain short-term pleasures. Even our mortal, weak, perishable bodies can now be devoted to a greater and important purpose, to building up the body of Jesus.

As children of God, our lives are now different (8:12-17). Before we were united with Jesus in his death, our flesh made us feel an obligation to it, to fulfill its desires. When we passed up a chance to please it, it complained, so that we often found ourselves with little defense against its cravings. But now we are no longer obligated to the flesh. We are obligated to God, who has already overlooked so much for the sake of calling us his sons and daughters.

Although we are obligated to God, the fact that we are justified by grace through faith, not by law through works, means that we need no longer live in constant fear of punishment. Far from it - we are now able to have a relationship with God that is so close that we are able to address him with the same term, 'Abba'*, that Jesus himself used in addressing his Father (Mark 14:36).

* This word is Aramaic for 'father', and it is a word that expresses familiarity, more like 'pop' or 'papa' or 'daddy' than the often more formal word 'father'. Its precise meaning was probably somewhere in between these English words, but in any case it is an expression of closeness.

The Spirit of God, who now lives in us, testifies for us (along with our own spirit within us, according to Paul) that we are children of God, that we now have not only a relationship with him, but a family relationship. This is, in a sense, the original relationship that each of us once had with God before we fell into sin. Through Jesus, God has wiped out our sins and has wiped out the law that held us accountable for them with our own blood, and he has brought us back as his children and, because of that, as his heirs.

Yet if we wish to be God's children and God's heirs, we must then share in Jesus' sufferings, if we wish also to share in his glory. Just as we must die with Jesus in order to be raised to live a new life (recall Romans 6:3-10), so too, if we wish to share in his glorious inheritance, and to share in his eternal reign, we must first be ready to share in his earthly trials, persecutions, and sacrifices. We must desire to identify ourselves completely with Jesus, to become as much like him as we can in this life. We must desire "to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead" (Philippians 3:10-11).

Questions For Discussion or Study: In this and other passages, Paul mentions a number of implications of having the Spirit within us. Identify as many as you can. How does the Spirit free us from fear? What effect does the Spirit have on our relationship with God? What does it mean to be God's heir? Why must we share in Jesus' sufferings first?

-Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, September 2005

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**CALLED TO BELONG TO JESUS CHRIST:
A STUDY OF ROMANS**

Notes For Week Thirteen: Our Unseen Hope (Romans 8:18-39)

This passage climaxes Paul's lengthy discourse on justification by grace through faith, and it provides further insights on the topics he has discussed earlier. These verses also introduce another new topic, the hope that we have in Jesus. In him, we have the hope of living forever with God and the hope of being freed once for all from the limitations and fears of this world.

Review of Recent Classes

Paul began this section of Romans by discussing Abraham, as an example of faith; Adam, as an example of sin and death; and Jesus, the bringer of grace and life (Romans 4 & 5). We can leave the path of Adam by trusting in God's promises, and can be spiritually reborn in Jesus. In so doing we die to sin, to self, and to the law (Romans 6:1-7:6). The law is flawless in itself, but yet it has always been ineffective for salvation (Romans 7:7-25).

So God calls us to live by the Spirit (Romans 8:1-17). There is no condemnation, for we depend on God, who himself works our salvation, rather than on the law, which is fatally weakened by our flesh. We must choose whether to live by the flesh or by the Spirit, that is, which one we shall focus our minds on. If the Spirit of God lives in us, then we are children of God, and we no longer have an obligation to our flesh. We are free from fear of condemnation, and we call God our Father. We are also his heirs, who may suffer now, but who shall one day share in his glory.

Future Glory (Romans 8:18-25)

Along with faith and love, hope is one of the greatest spiritual blessings that we are given in Jesus. The sufferings, trials, and disappointments of this life will one day disappear entirely, and will be replaced by a glorious future. This whole physical universe was created for the purpose of preparing God's people for their eternal home with him.

Paul speaks figuratively about God's creation, describing it as waiting in eager expectation (8:18-21). Just as we have been created to share in God's glory in eternity, the physical universe itself was created as part of this plan. Everything that happens in this universe, from its natural processes to the affairs of humanity, has in the long run the purpose of preparing God's children for eternity.

In this sense, then, the whole creation has been waiting for the sons and daughters of God to be revealed as such, for the whole creation to see. All else that happens in this world is of mere temporary significance. In this sense, also, everything in this world and in this universe has been "subjected to frustration"; for everything in this universe is temporary, just as we are, and can never achieve fullness or completeness in the physical universe. Like us, this entire universe exists under the constraint of mortality, the bondage to eventual decay and death.

So it is appropriate for Paul to liken this to the pains of childbirth (8:22-25). As a mother giving birth groans in physical agony, hoping that the birth of her child will make it worthwhile, so also everything in this physical world groans spiritually, knowing that only through death and spiritual rebirth is there a real hope. As Christians, we do have such a hope in our groaning. We have what Paul calls "the firstfruits of the Spirit", in that we are blessed to experience the fruits

of the Spirit now as a foretaste of eternal life in Jesus. This is what we hope for, and this is why we were saved, not simply to experience earthly benefits, but to have eternal peace and security.

Paul also points out that whatever we hope for, by the nature of hope, is in the future, not the present. God has called us to live our entire lives in this world with hope, and we shall only experience the full blessings of Jesus when we meet him in his eternal kingdom. In the meantime, he has given us many smaller blessings to show us his love and compassion, and to remind us that our hope in him is real and certain.

Questions For Discussion or Study: In what sense does the entire creation of God wait and groan? What does this tell us about our role in God's creation? How can this help us? What are the firstfruits of the Spirit? Why does Paul use this term? Why is hope important? How can we develop hope?

God's Hand At Work (Romans 8:26-30)

In these verses, Paul reminds us of a number of the ways in which God's hand is at work. God's Holy Spirit lives within us, and God himself knows our deepest needs, so that he can always provide for them. God also foreknew his entire design of salvation, and he himself made it possible for us to have an ideal and lasting relationship with him.

One of the roles of the Holy Spirit, who is so often described as a counselor or comforter, is to help us in our weaknesses (8:26-27). Paul gives the specific example of prayer. So often in prayer we know that we have many needs, and we know that we have much for which to praise God, yet we find it hard to put these things into words. Because the Spirit is able to intercede, we do not necessarily have to express ourselves precisely. God would, in fact, prefer us to express ourselves with sincerity and honesty, rather than waiting until we know exactly what to say. For God knows and searches our hearts, and he also knows the Spirit* who lives in us.

* Note that the Spirit intercedes "in accordance with God's will", not on his own. Jesus said much the same thing, in a different context (namely, how the Spirit teaches us), in John 16:12-15.

We gain hope from this, and also from knowing that God works for the good of those who love him (8:28-30). Indeed, God does innumerable things for us each day that we barely notice, if at all. We can become more aware of these things if we remind ourselves that God always works in ways that are truly good for us, not necessarily in the ways that we wish him to work. He wants to make us more like Jesus, and to build us up spiritually, and this sometimes means that he will do things that displease our flesh but that strengthen our spirits.

Hope also comes from knowing that God long ago prepared for our redemption and salvation. Even before he made the first humans, he anticipated our need for forgiveness of sin, and he had already planned to bring this and many more blessings through his Son. It is in this sense that we were predestined* to be like Jesus, for God determined long ago that he would offer salvation to everyone through his Son. We are all called, and all who respond in faith are justified. Finally, if we know that we have been justified, we know also that one day we shall be glorified.

* Note that the Scripture does not speak of 'predestination' in the sense of God already knowing who will be saved and who will be lost. Such doctrines come from those who misunderstand God's nature, and who thus misinterpret Scriptures such as this passage and Ephesians 1:4-12. These passages are telling us that God predestined long ago that salvation would be through his Son, not by any other means. In other words, it is the gospel of Jesus that was predestined, not everyone's responses to the gospel.

Questions For Discussion or Study: How does the Spirit intercede for us? How can this help us in our relationship with God? What are some of the ways in which God works for our good? How can we become more aware of these? In what sense were we 'predestined'? How can an understanding of this help us in our relationship with God?

If God Is For Us (Romans 8:31-39)

Once we realize how much God has done to redeem us from sin, we can also develop a deeper confidence in his love for us. If he loved us enough to take such extraordinary steps to bring us back to him, surely he will also be there whenever we need spiritual protection and guidance. We can have a sure hope, because nothing can ever overcome God's love for us.

Paul knows that he has been discussing some rather weighty subjects, and he no doubt knows that many of his readers will have to ponder them for a while before grasping them fully. He thus asks us to consider what response to "all this" might be appropriate from us (8:31-36). Paul would like his readers to consider some of the ideas he has been discussing, but more importantly, he wants us to realize the most basic and most important lesson from all of this, namely, that it demonstrates God's love and spiritual concern for all of us.

God not only foresaw and arranged all this (whether we understand it or not!), but also offered his own Son as a sacrifice to fulfill it all. This last point, which is much easier for us to grasp, is a final and decisive assurance that God will not withhold anything at all that we need. (Recall also Romans 5:6-11.) Further, it gives us assurance that no one (in particular, Satan) can successfully bring a charge against those who have responded to God's call. Jesus is ever with us, and is ever at his Father's side, interceding constantly.

So Paul asks, "what shall separate us from the love of Christ?" Certainly, no earthly problems can. Whatever hardships, disappointments, or persecutions we endure do not and cannot deny God's love. The passage that Paul quotes here (from Psalm 44) seems at first sight somewhat paradoxical, as it says that, "for your sake we face death all day long" and, "we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." What this expresses, though, is the certainty that, because we know how much God did to bring us to him, we thus can also know that even the worst earthly sufferings are never a sign that he does not love us. Such sufferings will never be pleasant, but we do not have to add to our physical suffering the fear that God does not love us.

We are thus, in all of our trials and sufferings, "more than conquerors" (8:37-39). That is, the victory we have won in Jesus is far greater than any mere earthly victory. The greatest earthly victories will someday fade away, but victory in Jesus will last forever. Therefore we know that nothing in all creation can ever separate us from Jesus. God's love for us remains constant, even when ours for him does not. Unlike human love, God's love is unconquerable - and it is his love on which our salvation depends.

Questions For Discussion or Study: Do we need to understand everything that God has done in order to realize how much he loves us? What is (are) the most essential reminder(s) of his love for us? How can we keep our sufferings here from making us doubt God's love? In what sense are we "more than conquerors" through Jesus?

-Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, September 2005

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CALLED TO BELONG TO JESUS CHRIST: A STUDY OF ROMANS

Notes For Week Fourteen: The Children of the Promise (Romans 9:1-10)

The first half of Romans started by explaining and emphasizing our need for the forgiveness of sin, and then continued with a careful exposition of how we are saved by grace through faith. The apostle Paul now turns to a different matter, as he considers the spiritual condition of the Israelites, the original recipients of God's promises. This topic is significant for several reasons.

Summary of Romans 1-8

The epistle opens by proclaiming God's call through the gospel (Romans 1:1-17), which is necessary because of the universal problem of sin (Romans 1:18-3:20). After these foundations comes a lengthy discussion of justification and redemption by grace through faith (3:21-8:39).

Paul contrasted Adam, who brought sin and death into the world, with Jesus, who brought grace and life. Abraham is an example of the faith that allows us to leave the path of Adam and be joined with Jesus (Romans 4 & 5). The spiritual rebirth is the end of the old life and the beginning of a new life (Romans 6:1-7:25). We thus can live by the Spirit (Romans 8:1-17), and we can embrace our unseen hope (Romans 8:18-39). Since nothing in the universe can separate us from the love of God that is in Jesus, we have a hope that is glorious and certain indeed.

Abraham's Children (Romans 9:1-10)

In these verses, Paul first expresses the depth of his personal concern for the spiritual well-being of the Israelites. He then explains a key principle that can help us to understand some otherwise troubling questions about God's promises. Paul would like very much for the people of Israel to be saved, but he knows that it is even more important for us to trust in God and in his promises.

Paul's sorrow and concern for the Israelites (9:1-5) comes as a sudden shift of emphasis from the stirring, encouraging thoughts at the end of the previous chapter. Moreover, Paul's expressions of sincerity and deep emotion show us a side of him that rarely comes out. His feelings only deepen when he considers the spiritual blessings and the closeness with God that Israel has had in the past. The opportunities that they have rejected strengthen the depth of his sorrow.

But God's Word has not failed (9:6-9). Paul now takes up the question of Israel's spiritual status, here and in the next two chapters, despite the stark contrast with the previous material. There are several reasons for this. Justification by grace through faith is founded on promises given first to ancient Israel, and thus the question of whether the promises to them have been fulfilled is of considerable significance, both as a historical example and as a theological matter.

We want to know whether God remained true to the original recipients of these promises, as this tells us whether we can confidently expect him to fulfill his promises to us. Then also, the principles involved teach us about our own relationship with God. Finally, on a practical level, Paul helps his readers maintain an outward focus by mentioning the spiritual needs around them. Jesus sacrificed himself for us, for those around us, and even for those we have never met.

The key point in the whole discussion is that God does not consider all those who are descended physically from Israel to be Israel. Paul said something similar in 2:28-29, but he now explains

the idea in more detail. Mere birth or physical descent counts for nothing in terms of salvation, even though much of our earthly identity may depend on it. God looks for the children of the promise, those who, like Abraham, believe the promises of God. The world often attaches value to arbitrary distinctions, but God looks for faith, and he justifies his true people by faith.

Questions For Discussion or Study: Why does Paul have such deep feelings about Israel? Why does he express them at this point in the epistle? Why is it necessary to demonstrate that God's Word has not failed? What does "not all who are descended from Israel are Israel" mean? Does this apply to us in any way? Who are the children of the promise?

God *as* *mercy* *not* *hom* *e* *ants* *to* *a* *mercy* (Romans 9:1-18)

Paul now tackles some thorny questions that arise in discussing God's sovereign will. We know that we can always have confidence in God's will, since we know that his knowledge and his wisdom are far greater than our own. At the same time, it helps us to know that God's will and his promises are consistent, that we can trust his promises, and that he is just in all things.

Jacob and Esau illustrate the principle, "not by works but by him who calls" (9:10-13). Knowing that twins would be born to Rebekah, God chose Jacob by grace to inherit the promises given to Abraham and Isaac. This was determined before they were born or had done anything, although both their father and mother were the same*. Paul points out all this to emphasize that the choice of Jacob** as the heir of the promises was entirely by grace, as part of his future plans.

* Unlike Isaac and Ishmael, who had the same father but different mothers.

** In fact, Jacob did develop more faith in God than Esau did, but Paul does not mention this as a reason for the choice of Jacob. The promises were passed from Abraham to Isaac to Jacob to the nation of Israel to the church of Jesus Christ. The true heirs were always those who received them by grace through faith.

The promise that the older would serve the younger (Genesis 25:23) was fulfilled not in the two brothers themselves but in the nations that descended from them*. God chose by grace the line through which he would work his promises, and in so doing he in no way deprived either brother of his personal free will—he still allowed each of them to choose for himself whether to seek God. The other passage that Paul quotes, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated" (Malachi 1:2-3) also refers not to the brothers as individuals but to the nations that descended from them*.

* Esau's descendants became the nation of Edom (another name for Esau). The small nation of Edom existed for many centuries, but for much of that time it was in the shadow of Israel. The Edomites were for the most part unfaithful to God. The book of Obadiah is a final prophecy against Edom for its sins.

But this does not make God unjust (9:14-18). As God said to Moses (Exodus 33:19), God can have grace and compassion on anyone he chooses. When God chose the nation of Israel to be the means by which he would prepare the way for the Messiah, he did so by grace, not because of anything they did, and not even because of their faith (which, in the nation as a whole, was often woefully lacking). Every blessing from God is given by grace, whether we know it or not.

Pharaoh is another well-known example. God allowed Pharaoh to have great earthly power and influence, in order to show that God's own power was far greater. Yet God did not deny Pharaoh the chance to choose to obey God. Before God hardened Pharaoh's heart, Pharaoh already chose to harden himself and to reject God (Exodus 7:13, 8:15, 9:34-35). Once Pharaoh had refused these opportunities, God indeed did harden him and used him to further his plans.

Questions For Discussion or Study: Why does Paul bring up Esau and Jacob? What is the point of the illustration? Does it have any significance for us now? What does Pharaoh's example teach us? Did God take away free will in any of these cases?

The Potter & The Clay (Romans 9:1-5)

Another question that arises in discussing God's will is that of responsibility or accountability. Although all things are subject to God's will, we are still fully accountable to him, and we are responsible for our words, our thoughts, and our actions. The principles that Paul explains here can help us to see why God's sovereignty does not negate our responsibility.

Since God does not call us by works, Paul asks if it is still just for God to hold us accountable for our actions (9:19-24). While acknowledging that this as a reasonable question from a logical viewpoint, Paul refers to it as 'talking back' to God. This does not mean that God will not answer any legitimate question. Rather, what Paul criticizes is the attitude of those who use God's grace as a license for sin and selfishness, since they are challenging God's authority and sovereignty.

A potter has the right and the ability to use his clay for both beautiful and plain-looking objects, and so God makes things for different purposes. In particular, God has created many millions of human souls, knowing that some will seek him and others will reject him. Those who reject him become objects of his wrath, yet he bears them with patience, giving them the chance to repent. Those who seek him receive his mercy and grace, whether they were born Jews or Gentiles.

God predetermines the overall design, not the individual decisions. He knows in advance that many will reject him, but does not know which ones they will be. He knows that some will seek him, but not necessarily which ones they will be. To his people Israel, he gave many blessings that other nations did not receive, as part of preparing the way for Jesus. Yet he did not give them special status with regard to salvation, but left them to make their own individual decisions.

Several quotes from the prophets Hosea and Isaiah follow (9:25-29). God used Hosea's family life* as a parallel to the troubled relationship between God and Israel. The verses quoted here refer to God's acceptance of those who were once rejected, a parallel to God's ultimate plan to call believers from both Jews and Gentiles. Israel's status in the Old Testament era was not a reward for them, but only a stepping-stone towards the final fulfillment of God's plan.

* God called Hosea to marry an immoral woman, and gave his children names that made spiritual points.

For, as the quotes from Isaiah indicate, most of physical Israel turned away from God, not just in Jesus' time, but at many times in their history. God often had to use a small remnant of the faithful to rebuild the nation. So too, in the time of Jesus he used the faithful remnant of Israel as the starting point to call believers from among all the Gentiles. In fact, in every era God has endured seeing most of humanity turn away from him, for the sake of the remnant of those who do seek him and love him. Numerically, those who love God have never been in the majority. But this shows us how precious the faithful remnant is to him, that he gives so much to so few.

Questions for Discussion or Study: What does it mean to 'talk back' to God? How does it differ from asking legitimate questions? How is God like the potter with his clay? What does he know in advance about those he creates? What points do the quotes from Hosea and Isaiah make? (If you have time, study these verses in context.)

-Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, September 2005

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**CALLED TO BELONG TO JESUS CHRIST:
A STUDY OF ROMANS**

Notes For Week Fifteen: The Stumbling Stone (Romans 9:1-11:1)

In Romans chapters 9-11, the apostle Paul discusses the spiritual condition of the Israelites, the original recipients of God's promises. God chose Israel by grace to be his people, but to God the true Israel is defined by faith, not by birth. The true children of Abraham, both then and now, are the children of the promise. The others have faced what Paul now calls the stumbling stone.

Review & Preview

The first half of Romans covered God's call through the gospel (Romans 1:1-17), the universal problem of sin (Romans 1:18-3:20), and justification and redemption by grace through faith (Romans 3:21-8:39). At the beginning of the ninth chapter, Paul's focus and tone shifts abruptly, as he talks about the children of the promise (Romans 9:1-18).

In that passage, Paul expressed deep sorrow over the rejection of Jesus by most of the Israelites. But it is not God or his Word that has failed. For both Israel and Abraham's descendants are not reckoned by God through physical descent, but through his promises. He also uses the examples of Jacob and Esau, and of Pharaoh, to show that God is not unjust in his call and his purposes.

This passage also begins the next major section of the epistle, in which Paul discusses God's sovereignty and his plans, as illustrated in his people Israel (9:1-11:36). Although the entire discussion is significant for what it says about the spiritual condition of Israel, it is even more important now for the broader principles that it teaches, which are important for all believers to grasp. This part of Romans can be outlined roughly as follows:

- The Children of the Promise (9:1-18)
- The Stumbling Stone (9:19-10:13)
- The Good News & The Remnant (10:14-11:10)
- Israel & The Gentiles (11:11-36)

The Potter & The Clay (Romans 9:1-29)

Another question that arises in discussing God's will is that of responsibility or accountability. Although all things are subject to God's will, we are still fully accountable to him, and we are responsible for our words, our thoughts, and our actions. The principles that Paul explains here can help us to see why God's sovereignty does not negate our responsibility.

(This passage was left uncompleted in last week's study. For the rest of the notes and the discussion questions, see "Notes For Week Fourteen".)

The Stone In Question (Romans 9:30-33)

In explaining why most of physical Israel turned away from Jesus, Paul reminds us of the necessity of approaching God through his grace, not through our works. The stone in question is Jesus, through whom grace came. But for this very reason, Jesus can also be a stumbling stone to those who persist in seeking to justify themselves through their own works.

To obtain righteousness in God's sight, we must seek it by faith (9:30-32). The Gentiles did not pursue righteousness*, nor did they seek the living God*, and yet many of them, even in Paul's day, had obtained righteousness through faith in Jesus. God credited their faith as righteousness, just as he did for Abraham. On the other hand, the ancient nation of Israel zealously pursued righteousness based on their own works, but for that reason they did not, and could not, attain what they sought. It is not that their righteous deeds were wrong in themselves, but that they thought that through such works they could attain righteousness all on their own**.

* Paul is speaking in generalities here, of course. A small number of Gentiles did seek the God of Israel, and became Jews who worshiped the true, living God. Some Gentile religions and philosophies also bore some resemblance with ancient Judaism, in striving for perfect moral and/or ethical behavior. The Greek Stoics and the Roman philosopher Seneca are two such examples. In general, though, the majority of Gentiles had only a superficial awareness of, or interest in, such matters.

** This again is a generalization, since many Jews in the first century did respond to the gospel, and thus obtained righteousness by faith. Also, besides those who tried to rely on their own righteousness, many other Jews relied mainly on their birth and their genealogy to make them righteous. This is a slightly different problem, but in its essentials it runs into the same 'stumbling stone' that Paul describes here.

All this was foretold by the prophet Isaiah (9:33). Paul quotes here from Isaiah 8:14 and 28:16, describing God how laid the cornerstone of salvation in the person of his own Son Jesus. The nature of Jesus causes many persons to stumble, because he stands for grace, and it is ingrained in our fleshly nature to seek to justify ourselves on our own. Those who believe in their own fleshly ability to save themselves (whether by good deeds, by learning and knowledge, or by self-denial) will not appreciate the cross or the gospel, and they may even be offended when the gospel is proclaimed in all its truth.

Only those who can openly admit and acknowledge their own complete inability to justify themselves by works can rejoice in accepting God's grace through the blood of Jesus. But those who can do so, those who trust in Jesus to save them instead of trusting in themselves, will never be disappointed. They will never be put to shame, and will always be able to stand joyfully in God's presence, because they have been cleansed of sin once for all.

Questions For Discussion or Study: In what sense did the Gentiles not pursue righteousness? Why then did God give it to them? Why were Israel's efforts in vain? And if they were in vain, why then did God give them the law and choose them as his people? How can Jesus be a stumbling stone? Does this indicate a flaw in the gospel?

Christ Is The End of the Law (Romans 10:1-10)

Paul now contrasts the righteousness that is by law with the righteousness that comes by faith. He goes into such detail because he knows that it is not only his brothers among the Israelites who can fall into the law-oriented approach to God. These same principles are vital to any Christian's understanding of our relationship with God.

Many of Israel's spiritual problems came from having zeal without knowledge (10:1-4). Paul himself was at one time an example of this, as he describes in passages such as Galatians 1:13-14 and Philippians 3:4-6. No doubt there were many others much like Paul in their attitudes and perspective towards God. Beyond this, the Pharisees and other sects sought to formulate rules

and methods to amplify the things taught in the law if Moses itself. This inevitably led to comparisons with each other, and to rivalries over whose rules and criteria would be accepted.

By thus seeking to establish their own standards of righteousness, they made it impossible for themselves (and for anyone who followed their teachings) to submit to the righteousness that comes from God, since it demands that we put all of our faith in God, not in ourselves. The sacrifice of Jesus forever did away with the law as a standard of salvation, so that now righteousness can be made available to everyone who believes in Jesus.

The gospel thus leads us to turn to Jesus, and to call on his name* as our source of help, justification, and salvation (10:5-13). Paul contrasts this with the alternative of calling on the law for justification and salvation. Quoting from Leviticus, Paul points out that, "the man who does these things will live by them" (Leviticus 18:5)□in other words, those who live by the law look to their own actions as their source of life and assurance.

* It is important to note that in this passage Paul is contrasting righteousness by law with righteousness by faith. He is not explaining how to become a Christian, but rather is making a distinction between two ways of trying to come to God. Therefore, when he talks about confessing the name of Jesus, in this particular passage he is referring to our basis for confidence and assurance in our relationship with God, which is that we call on Jesus instead of calling on the law. He does not mention repentance or baptism because here he is not discussing how or when someone becomes a Christian.

Paul uses Moses' own words to show what righteousness by faith involves. He first quotes from Deuteronomy 30:12-13 to show what it is not. Righteousness by faith does not try to ascend into heaven to bring Christ down, nor does it descend beneath the earth in an effort to raise Jesus. Those are things that only God can do - in other words, righteousness by faith means that we do not presume to be capable of doing things that only God can do. We still strive to do the things in our ministries that God has called and enabled us to do. But we renounce control over all things, even over our own lives, since we know that such control properly belongs only to God.

Righteousness by faith understands that, "the word is near you□it is in your mouth and in your heart" (Deuteronomy 30:14). With this in mind, it becomes much clearer what he is saying here. Confessing Jesus as Lord and believing in him in our hearts is not limited to our initial conversion experience, but rather they remain as a basis of our relationship with God even after baptism (which we need experience only once, if it is done with faith in God's promise). While we are in this physical world, this will ever form the basis of our relationship with God: that we are always willing to acknowledge Jesus as our Lord, and we always believe in him in our hearts.

It is quite true that, "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." When we call on him as we are immersed into his death, we are purified from our sins. Then, as long as we continue to call on him - rather than regressing and calling on the law - we remain in him, protected by his grace through his blood, not by our own works or wisdom.

Questions For Discussion or Study: Why is zeal without knowledge dangerous? How can we avoid it? What distinction does Paul make between righteousness through law and righteousness by faith? Look up the Scriptures he quotes in their original contexts. Does this further explain what he means in quoting them? What does it mean to 'call on the name of the Lord'? Can it mean more than one thing? What does it mean here?

-Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, October 2005

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CALLED TO BELONG TO JESUS CHRIST: A STUDY OF ROMANS

Notes For Week Seventeen: The Good News & The Remnant (Romans 9:1-11:1)

As he discusses the spiritual condition of Israel, Paul repeatedly shares his sorrow over their rejection of Jesus, and his fervent desire to see some of them return to God by accepting the good news about Jesus. He also explains that, even when it seems as if everyone has rejected God, there is always a faithful remnant chosen by grace.

Review of Recent Classes

Romans 9:1-11:36 focuses on God's sovereignty and God's plans, as illustrated through his people Israel. Although most of physical Israel rejected their Messiah, Paul explains that the true Israel does not consist of all those descended from Abraham and Jacob, but rather it consists of the children of the promise (9:1-18), those who believe in God's promises and thus live by them.

Unfortunately, most of the Israelites stumbled over the 'stumbling stone' (9:19-10:13). As a potter uses his clay to make different kinds of vessels, so also God knew that some of his creations would reject him and face his wrath, while others would accept him and receive his mercy. Jesus is the cornerstone in Zion foretold by the prophets, but we must seek him in faith, not by law, in order to obtain the righteousness he offers. Jesus is the end of the law, so that true believers now confess Jesus, not the law, as their Lord.

Hearing the Message (Romans 10:1-1)

These verses combine an exhortation to proclaim the good news with an explanation of Israel's responsibility upon hearing the message. Paul's discussion of Israel's response to Jesus brings out the irony of such a devoted, loyal Jew being chosen as the apostle to the Gentiles. He deeply loves the people of Israel, yet he does not hold back in discussing their errors.

Faith indeed comes through hearing the message of the gospel, the good news (10:14-17). And as Paul points out, we can only call on Jesus if we have first heard (or at least read) the good news. This in turn almost always means that someone made a particular effort to proclaim the good news in our presence. Those who bring the good news ought thus to be considered welcome and blessed, for they indeed offer their listeners a blessing far greater than any material help or earthly benefit could be.

Paul, of course, was one of many who devoted himself to teaching the good news wherever and whenever possible. The message of Christ spread quickly, and when Paul wrote Romans there could have been few faithful Jews anywhere who had not at some point heard about Jesus. Yet not all of them accepted the good news, for God will not force the truth upon anyone. The message that brings faith is heard through Jesus and through Jesus alone, for "there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). Jesus is the Savior for those who believe, but he becomes the stumbling stone for those who insist upon relying on their own works or knowledge.

To emphasize his point, Paul asks a rhetorical question, wondering whether Israel perhaps did not hear God's Word (10:18-21). But of course they have, as the quote from Psalm 19* emphasizes. Not only the Israelites, but also everyone on earth can see God's testimony in his works, and the Israelites (whether in Judea or elsewhere) also had all of the prophecies and many centuries of spiritual history to instruct them, in addition to the efforts of missionaries like Paul.

* In context, Psalm 19:4 (the verse that Paul quotes) describes the witness offered by the heavens and the skies, that is, the creation. They are described figuratively as if speaking and proclaiming loudly their testimony about their Creator. Psalm 19:1-4 makes essentially the same basic point found in Romans 1:20.

So Paul again asks whether they understood what they heard from God. He answers this question by quoting from Deuteronomy and Isaiah, with passages that echo what he had said earlier in Romans 9:30-32. Because of Israel's stubborn insistence upon relying on law and genealogy for their justification, God revealed himself to the formerly unbelieving, lawless Gentiles. Once again, the apostle emphasizes that Israel had every opportunity. Indeed, Jesus was sent to them first of all. Only their own resistance to the gospel of faith and grace kept them from responding to Jesus.

Questions For Discussion or Study: What is the good news (the gospel)? How do we hear it? How can others hear it? Why did Israel not respond to it when they heard it? What lessons are taught by the Old Testament Scriptures that Paul quotes here?

□ **Remnant** □ **Chosen By Grace (Romans 11:1-1)** □

Although most of Israel had rejected Jesus, this does not mean that God rejected Israel, as Paul's own example proves. □ Using the example of Elijah, Paul reminds his readers that God has often preserved and used a remnant in times of spiritual crisis or upheaval. In Paul's own time, there was a faithful remnant of Israel that God saved and used to begin the church of Jesus Christ.

Paul reminds the Romans that there is indeed a remnant of Israel, as indeed there has always been (11:1-6). God never at any time rejected his people in their entirety. Every time that he disciplined them, no matter how severely, he always left a remnant, whether it was Noah and his family, or Joshua and Caleb, or the families that were exiled to Babylon, or the Jews who became Christians in the first century AD. Paul himself is part of this latter remnant, and his own experience shows that God can save even the most ardent follower of law.

In this context, Paul quotes Elijah's appeal* for God to help him and judge his foes. Elijah constantly faced persecution, loneliness, and threats from the ungodly*, and he longed for God to work powerfully. But God's answer revealed that he was working in ways more important than what Elijah had conceived of. There was a remnant of seven thousand believers, who had rejected the false gods that the rest of the nation was pursuing. In fact, God had already prepared a new ministry for Elijah, who was directed to raise up new kings and prophets, most particularly his great successor Elisha (1 Kings 19:15-18).

* This quote comes from 1 Kings 19. At the time, Ahab and Jezebel, the wicked royal couple of the Northern Kingdom (Israel, or Samaria) were worshiping Baal and other idols, and were brutally persecuting Elijah and anyone else who remained faithful to the living God of Israel.

So too, Paul says, there is (and always shall be) a remnant chosen by grace. If it depended on human goodness and wisdom to preserve a remnant, then indeed there would be times when an

Elijah would be left all alone. But since the remnant is preserved by God's grace and by his own hand, there will always be a remnant ready to build for the future in accordance with God's will.

Once again, it is Israel's own hardness, not any defect of the gospel, that caused them to turn away (11:7-10). They all sought righteousness in one form or another, but most of them did so by works and by law. Only the elect*, those who sought righteousness by faith, were able to obtain it. Notice that for both Jew and Gentile the gospel contained both an opportunity and a stumbling block. The Jews had the centuries of prophecy and spiritual guidance, but they had to give up their lifelong attachment to justification by law. The Gentiles came to Jesus with a 'clean slate', with no preconceptions or biases, but they had to adjust themselves to an entirely new way of life, in which they had to give up things that they had done all their lives.

* The 'elect' simply means those who are chosen. Although they are also those who have chosen to follow God, it really refers first of all to God choosing (or calling) them through the gospel.

It was hardly the Jews only who were hardened, since many Gentiles would also fall under the same description that Paul gives here. The verses that he quotes from the Old Testament liken spiritual hardness to having unseeing eyes and unhearing ears. In other words, it does not matter how much encouragement or evidence or knowledge God gives us, if we simply do not want to believe in the truth. That is why David, in the verse Paul quotes here from Psalm 69, calls for their very blessings (their 'table') to render them accountable for rejecting God's truth.

In all of these ideas, we can see examples for today. Spiritual hardness is still a common stumbling block that prevents many persons from coming to Jesus. Many, like the ancient Jews, refuse to accept their need for grace, and persist in trying to justify themselves by law. Others, like many ancient Gentiles, refuse to give up their sensual pleasures, greed, and other sins.

But no matter how bad things in the world seem to be, there is always a remnant. There are always other faithful believers who have made the choice to resist the world, to risk rejection, loneliness, and persecution for the sake of the gospel. Let us then be grateful for the remnant, for our brothers and sisters in Christ. Let us build each other up in the faith, let us re-assure one another that we have made the right choice, and let us remind each other that we are heaven bound by God's grace.

Questions For Discussion or Study: What does Paul's own conversion demonstrate about God's relationship with the Israelites? What does Elijah's experience show? What is a remnant? How many other times has God preserved a remnant? What significance or application does the concept have today? How can we avoid falling into the hardness that Paul describes here?

-Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, October 2005

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CALLED TO BELONG TO JESUS CHRIST: A STUDY OF ROMANS

Notes For Week Seventeen: Israel & The Gentiles (Romans 11:11-32)

Now that Paul has explained the spiritual problems that caused most of the Israelites to reject Jesus as their Messiah, he proceeds to discuss how this fits in with God's larger plan. Because the Messiah did not come for Israel alone, the Gentiles have been grafted into natural Israel. Paul hopes that the Israelites will see this, and that as a result they too will turn back to God.

Review

Paul has been discussing God's sovereignty and plans, specifically as they apply to God's people (Romans 9:1-11:36). His comments on Israel's spiritual condition also reveal the depth of Paul's desire for his fellow Jews to turn to Jesus. For the true Israel does not consist of those physically descended from Abraham and Jacob, but rather it is the children of the promise (9:1-18). These are the ones who have not fallen over the stumbling stone of Jesus (9:19-10:13).

The good news of salvation has been proclaimed to all Israel, but only a remnant has accepted it (10:14-11:10). They have all heard, and thus know the implications of the message, but many of them resisted the gospel. The remnant of believers was chosen by God's grace to be the seed for the church of Jesus Christ. God did not reject his people, but rather he chose them.

Hope For Israel (Romans 11:11-18)

Most of physical Israel rejected Jesus, but this is not necessarily the end of the story. Nor were Israel's spiritual struggles meaningless. The Israelites' status as God's people did not give them a special exemption in terms of salvation, but it did mean that their spiritual state was of special concern to God. Those Israelites who did or do return to him are a cause for special rejoicing.

Israel stumbled, but did not fall beyond all possible recovery (11:11-12). Israel's fall was not total, because it left a remnant. Nor, Paul now says, is their stumble final. It has even had a positive side effect, since their stubbornness led to the gospel being preached to the Gentiles. The Gentiles eventually would have been given their opportunity anyway, but Paul is well aware of numerous times in his own experience when Jewish opposition led to Gentile conversions*.

* See, for example, Acts 13:45-48, 18:5-8, and 28:23-28. This effect was also foretold in a number of Old Testament Scriptures, some of which are quoted in Romans and in these passages in Acts.

Gentile conversions can have the effect of making Israel envious. So Paul now discusses Israel's rejection of God, and the reconciliation God offers in return (11:13-16). As the apostle to the Gentiles, Paul realizes that God has called him to concentrate his efforts in Gentile areas. But as a Jew who cared deeply for his own people, he hoped to use this envy to some positive effect.

Paul hopes that some of the Jews will be intrigued by seeing so many Gentiles turning to 'their' God, and will realize that it is Jesus who has brought this about. If this renews their interest in Jesus, then perhaps more of them can be saved through him. This would be a spiritual event worthy of great rejoicing. Their choice to reject Jesus gave the Gentiles the opportunity for reconciliation. If they would now choose to accept Christ, it would be almost like life from the dead. Paul himself, of course, exemplifies the glory brought to God when a fanatical follower of the law turns and accepts God's grace, as a holy and pleasing offering to him.

Questions For Discussion or Study: In what positive way did God use Israel's stumble over the stumbling stone? Does this excuse their unbelief? Why would Israel become envious because of Paul's Gentile ministry? Why would the return of more Israelites be a cause for special rejoicing? What do the images about dough and branches mean?

Grafted In (Romans 11:17-□□)

While Paul wants his Jewish readers to see that Jesus is the Messiah who fulfills their law and their history, he also wants his Gentile readers to understand that their opportunity for salvation rests on the foundations laid by Israel. The Gentiles are like wild olive shoots that were grafted into a cultivated olive tree. God's plans thus call both Jew and Gentile to be humble before him.

In calling the Gentiles wild olive shoots (11:17-21), Paul is indicating that by natural considerations they were not part of God's people, they were excluded from his protection, and they were not brought up in the knowledge of him. But now they have been grafted into the same plant as those who are his by natural descent. They share in the 'nourishing sap', that is, God's Word, God's wisdom, and God's love.

This cautions the Gentiles not to boast about their newfound salvation, for they did nothing to earn it. They do not support the root of the plant, nor indeed do they bring anything necessary for the plant to survive, since they have been grafted in by grace alone. They cannot boast about their decision to seek out God, for he revealed himself to them through his grace, after the majority of his own people rejected him. Those hard-hearted 'branches' were indeed broken off to allow space for the wild olive shoots, but this condition is not necessarily final. Since all of the branches stand by faith, any pride and boastfulness could place their position in jeopardy.

All of this reveals both God's kindness and his sternness (11:22-24). His kindness is shown to all those who have faith, and his sternness is shown not necessarily to those who sin (for all sin, even those to whom he shows kindness), but to those who harden themselves to faith and grace, choosing instead to seek him by law. To continue in his kindness, then, is to continue to walk in faith, to continue to walk in the light, to continue to walk in the truth.

Indeed, this works both ways. Those branches that were broken off due to unbelief can always be grafted in again, if they turn back to God in faith. If God went to such lengths to allow wild olive shoots to be grafted into a cultivated plant, then he will find it much easier to bring the natural branches back where they belong. Paul uses this imagery to indicate how joyfully and eagerly God would accept back any of the hardened Israelites who will repent of their devotion to law, and who will come to him through faith in the blood of Jesus.

Questions For Discussion or Study: What does the image of an olive tree and its branches represent? Is there any connection between this analogy and the things Jesus says in John 15? Why are the Gentiles 'wild' olive shoots? What should this teach them? What does it teach to an Israelite? Would these lessons (to both Gentile and Jew) be different today?

□ *uman* □ *iso* □ *edience & God* □ *ercy*

All of this is in accordance with God's plans, and it brings out all the more the contrast between human disobedience and God's mercy. Israel's disobedience gave the Gentiles the opportunity to

receive God's mercy, and in turn, mercy awaits every Israelite who repents. Both Jews and Gentiles can only be saved by grace and by God's mercy through Jesus—there is no other way.

We can now understand what Paul means in saying that "all Israel will be saved" (11:25-27). The term 'Israel' can be used in a number of different ways*, and indeed Paul himself sometimes uses it to mean different things. But keeping it in the context of the epistle as a whole, we know that there is a true, spiritual Israel that matters much more than the physical nation of Israel, and it is this 'nation' that is foremost in Paul's mind as he writes.

* In this passage, various commentators have interpreted "all Israel" in many different ways, the most common of which are probably the following: (i) the entire physical nation of Israel at some specific, future point in time—(ii) everyone physically descended from Israel, past, present, and future—(iii) all believers in Jesus, whether Jew or Gentile—(iv) all Jewish believers in Jesus—(v) all Israelites who have genuine faith in God. Note that (i) and (ii) are inconsistent both with the context and with many other teachings in Romans. Definition (iii) may fit other contexts of 'Israel', but here, in verse 25 Paul refers separately to the Gentiles.

Even the Israel to which Paul refers here has experienced a "hardening in part", in that they initially rejected Jesus. Note that Paul himself is a perfect example of this. He initially rejected Jesus even to the point of violently persecuting Christians, and only later was enlightened. He now says that this same process will play out on a larger scale, in that many Jews who belong to true Israel will remain hardened for a time until the gospel has been fully proclaimed to the Gentile world. Eventually, all Israel (but not all physical Israel*, or all Israelites*) will be saved, in keeping with God's covenant. Whether in the Old Testament or the New, God's covenant and call have always been conditioned on faith, and have been given through grace.

* It is, of course, possible that at some future time every living Israelite could become a Christian, but that is not what this passage teaches. The possibility of that occurring is similar to the possibility that all of China or all of France will become Christians. All are possible, but all are unlikely, since they would only happen by the free will of all involved. None of them are prophesied or promised in the Scriptures.

This design, as hard as it may be to comprehend by human standards, is such that God may have mercy on those who believe in him (11:28-32). Israel is still loved, and God's promises to Israel still hold, as long as they are properly understood (in particular, they are still conditioned on faith, as they always were). But God does not want his relationship even with them to be on any basis other than faith and grace. Thus he gave them over to disobedience, and offered his mercy to the grateful Gentiles. In turn, he offers his mercy in unlimited amounts to any of his own people who are ready to give up their hardness of heart and to accept a relationship with him on the basis of grace and faith, not on the basis of law, works, or genealogy. Thus God is fair and just to everyone, since we are all disobedient, and yet we are all able to experience his mercy.

All this is so contrary to our human, fleshly way of doing things that Paul is compelled to offer praises for God's wisdom (1:33-36). Not only are God's ways far above our own, but we also know that God owes nothing to anyone, as the gospel itself proves. When we consider or study God's plans, we must never forget that he is not obligated to do things in accordance with human philosophies or earthly perspectives. The world is accountable to him, not the other way around.

Questions For Discussion or Study: How was Israel 'hardened'? How did this lead to salvation for the Gentiles? In what sense will 'all Israel' be saved? Explain in your own words what you think Paul means here by 'all Israel'. Why does he use the term Israel to refer to different things? How can we tell the difference?

-Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, October 2005

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CALLED TO BELONG TO JESUS CHRIST: A STUDY OF ROMANS

Notes For Week Eighteen: Living Sacrifices (Romans 12)

With the doxology celebrating God's wisdom in Romans 11:33-36, another major portion of the epistle comes to an end. The focus now becomes more straightforward, aiming to show how to put into practice the principles that Paul has so carefully explained. The twelfth chapter teaches us how to respond to Jesus' sacrifice of atonement by making our own lives 'living sacrifices'.

Review

Paul has now completed his discussion of God's sovereignty and plans, as illustrated in his people Israel (Romans 9:1-11:36). True Israel consists of the children of the promise (9:1-18). But most of Israel stumbled over the stumbling stone (9:19-10:13), and did not trust in Jesus or believe the good news. So God has, once again, preserved a remnant of Israel (10:14-11:10).

Israel and the Gentiles have been joined together in the body of Christ (11:11-36). There is still hope for Israel, since even those who are now disobedient can still turn back to God. Just as God grafted the Gentiles into the 'olive tree' of Israel, so he can graft back in any of his own people who return to him. So all of true Israel will be saved. God gave us all over to disobedience, so that he could show us all mercy. Therefore, whether we are Jew, Gentile, or whatever else we may be in human terms, we can stand before God only by faith, and that only through his grace.

Spiritual Transformation (Romans 12:1-8)

Keeping in mind that everyone in Christ, whether Jew or Gentile, has been redeemed by God's grace and mercy, Paul now urges his readers to offer themselves as living sacrifices, and to be transformed in their attitudes and actions. When we learn humbly to accept salvation as an undeserved gift, we are then much better able to minister in the way that God desires us to do.

Paul thus exhorts us to renew our minds and be transformed (12:1-2). This follows naturally* from all that he has taught previously. It is in view of God's mercy, upon which we all rely, that we offer ourselves as living sacrifices. We owe him everything, so we ought to offer it all to him, to use as he pleases. Even Paul himself did not attain this ideal, but the more we appreciate our new life in Jesus, the better we are able to make ourselves 'living sacrifices' by giving God as much of ourselves as we can. With all such sacrifices, large or small, God is pleased. It is a holy offering to him whenever we freely give of ourselves to him and to his people.

* In fact, the phrase that the NIV renders "your spiritual act of worship" more literally means, "your logical act of worship". That is, to offer ourselves as living sacrifices is truly a natural, or logical, consequence of appreciating that we are saved by God's grace, not by our works.

We should also strive not to be conformed to the perspectives and attitudes of this world, or of those who live for this world. The entire philosophy of the world is contrary to some of the most important teachings of Christianity. Likewise, the idea that we receive by grace what we can never earn is an alien concept to the worldly, who believe that they deserve everything good that they get, and that they do not deserve anything bad. To understand the gospel, we truly must allow our minds to be renewed, and our perspectives and attitudes to be transformed.

Once we have done this, we can then serve in humility (12:3-8). We no longer serve reluctantly or resentfully, nor do we serve in the hope of justifying ourselves by our service. Moreover, we can value serving others more than we value being served. The gospel of grace teaches us not to think more highly of ourselves than we ought, and thus teaches us not to expect to be served, but to expect to be called to serve. Jesus told even the apostles that their position did not entitle them to be served and honored, but rather it called them to serve and sacrifice*. We all must learn to see ourselves with sober judgment, as erring sheep that a loving shepherd has sought and rescued, at considerable cost to himself.

* See, for example, Matthew 20:20-28, Mark 10:35-45, and John 13:2-17.

In this context, we can better appreciate Paul's analogy between the body of Christ and the human body with its various members. He calls his readers to use what has been given them in proportion to their faith. It is faith, not the ability itself, that will determine how much God will be able to use someone's abilities, talents, or gifts. Many have ability or talent, but faith is a much rarer quality. Further, the most important ways in which we serve will often be those that bring us little earthly acclaim or reward*. The worldly think that they deserve to be rewarded for their talent, but Christians understand that ability or talent confers responsibility, not privilege.

* For an interesting study, compare the ideas here with 1 Corinthians 1:18-31.

Paul then gives numerous examples of ministry. These are, of course, by no means the only forms of ministry, but rather are examples to illustrate his general point. Those to whom God has given ability and opportunity are called to use them faithfully. Note also that not every talent is something that the world would see as such. We greatly limit ourselves when we look only at the abilities and qualities that are valued in the world. Some of the most important ministries in the church call for qualities that are overlooked or ignored by the world.

Questions for Discussion or Study: What is a 'living sacrifice'? How do God's grace and mercy encourage and enable us to become living sacrifices? Why must we allow our minds and hearts to be renewed and transformed? How do we bring this about? What does it mean to serve in proportion to our faith? Study the examples of ministry that Paul gives. How do they illustrate his basic points? What other examples could we add?

10e Must Be Sincere (Romans 12:9-11)

These verses provide many practical teachings on Christian relationships. Many of them are very difficult for the flesh to fulfill, and Paul does not expect his readers to attempt to do these things on their own power. All of these principles are built on the foundation of redemption by grace through faith. Thus, only by grace through faith can we truly put them into practice.

This passage contains many brief but important principles regarding Christian ideals for our relationships. The first set of principles (12:9-13) teaches us to love one another sincerely, by rejecting what is evil or unclean, and choosing and embracing what is good and pure. In our relationships with others, we should practice devotion, honor, sharing, and other qualities that flow from a faithful acceptance of God's grace. In our relationship with God, we should serve sincerely, and we should allow him to change our perspective, not just our actions.

The second set of Christian ideals for relationships (12:14-16) focuses on some deeper attitudes that we can develop if we live by the gospel of justification by grace and faith. The more we live

by grace and faith, rather than by law and works, the easier it is to practice forgiveness, empathy, and humility. When we build our relationship with God on the firm foundation of grace, then grace can also have its effect on our human relationships.

We can learn to forgive because we appreciate how much God has forgiven of us. We can practice empathy (rejoicing with those who rejoice, and mourning with those who mourn) because grace teaches us not to compare ourselves with others, not to envy others, and not to compete with others for God's favor. Finally, we can be humble and accepting of one another, because we realize that we all stand in equal need of God's forgiveness.

These principles also enable us to live at peace (12:17-21). Paul knows very well, of course, that there will be others from time to time who make it impossible to avoid conflict. But if we learn to do what is right simply because it is right, this will make many of our relationships more peaceful and harmonious, and will often save us from unnecessary trouble.

In particular, we should resist the desire to take revenge. Being wronged is a basic aspect of life, and no one can go very long without being wronged, cheated, mistreated, lied to, lied about, or one of the many other ways that humans have devised of hurting one another. The flesh responds to all such things with the desire to retaliate in some way, and even the godliest among us usually cannot help having this initial impulse. But Paul's advice is invaluable in preventing bad situations from getting worse, and in getting some good out of our conflicts with others.

If we are kind to those who harm us, we win a victory either way. If kindness wins them over, this is the best of all possible outcomes. If they remain hardened, then we have eliminated any genuine grounds for their negative actions, and have indeed 'heaped burning coals on their head'. Contrast this with what happens when we are quick to take offense and take revenge. If the other person has harmed us deliberately, our revenge will merely inflame the situation, and will lead to future conflict. If the person harmed us unintentionally, our own cruelty could ruin a relationship that could easily have been repaired with a small amount of kindness and patience.

Notice that Paul is not saying that we should always allow others to hurt us, nor is he saying that we should always trust everyone. He is making a different point altogether. There is no reason why we cannot be kind, polite, and even giving to everyone, even those who wrong us. And when we do see the necessity for correction or rebuke, it might be that much more effective if it has been preceded by kindness and thoughtfulness. Do not let Satan and the world cause you to be reduced to their level. Do not let their evil cause you to do evil yourself, but rather overcome the evil around us by doing good.

Questions for Discussion or Study: Why should our love for one another be sincere? Is there a way that we can tell when it is sincere? For each of the teachings in verses 9-16, explain how it comes naturally from the teachings of the gospel. What does it mean to live at peace with everyone? Does this mean that we can never disagree with anyone or tell anyone that they are wrong? How does the teaching to avoid revenge fit in with this?

-Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, October 2005

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CALLED TO BELONG TO JESUS CHRIST: A STUDY OF ROMANS

Notes For Week Nineteen: Living in This World (Romans 12)

After calling us to respond to Jesus' blood sacrifice by making our own lives 'living sacrifices', Paul continues with further exhortations on how to put this into practice. As Christians, we are citizens of heaven, and this world is not our home. Let it be God's will that we remain for a time in a world that does not recognize his authority. How, then, should we live in this situation?

Review & Preview

Last week, we started the last major section of Romans, in which the apostle Paul teaches us how we can live by the gospel of justification and redemption by grace through faith. These final five chapters can be roughly outlined as follows:

- Living Sacrifices (Romans 12 - last week)
- Living In This World (Romans 13 - this week)
- Differences, Unity, & Love (Romans 14:1-15:13)
- A Life of Ministry (Romans 15:14-16:27)

The section began (chapter 12) with a discussion of spiritual transformation. We are to turn away from the values and viewpoints of the world, and to renew our minds by adopting God's values and perspectives. This allows us to serve in humility, so that we use the abilities and opportunities that God has given us in proportion to our faith. Our love for one another and for God must be sincere, not self-serving or opportunistic. Paul illustrates this with numerous ideals for our relationships, and with several principles for living in peace with one another.

Giving What Is Due (Romans 13:1-7)

We live in a world that has replaced God's authority and Word with human authority and human-made laws. And yet, it is God's wish that there be human authorities, rather than have no order at all in this world. Paul thus explains how and why, in general, we are to give what is due in this world to those persons who have been granted power and authority for the time being.

Paul gives particular emphasis to the submission due to earthly authorities (13:1-5). He explicitly tells us that "the authorities that exist have been established by God", even though many or most of them are not believers in God or his Word. Since we are often only too well aware of the ways that earthly leaders fall far short of being godly examples, it can be helpful to bear in mind the kinds of leaders and ruler that Paul knew of when he wrote this. The Roman emperors* were hardly friendly to Christian teachings, and the various Roman governors and local officials in Greece and even in Judea were very often corrupt, brutal, or incompetent.

* Jesus' ministry and the beginning of Acts took place during the reign of Tiberius (emperor from AD 14-37), a paranoid, delusional tyrant who was obsessed with the thought that others were plotting against him. Much of Acts took place in the reigns of the infamous Caligula (AD 37-41), an insane egomaniac, and of Claudius (AD 41-54), a naive, distant man who was largely out of touch with his empire. During the book of Acts, the notorious monster Nero (reigned AD 54-68) took the throne. None of these individuals, of course, was any kind of good example for believers. Romans was written early in Nero's reign, when he was still relatively popular, since most of his worst traits were not yet obvious to the general populace.

The point is that the weaknesses, flaws, and sinfulness that we see in our present-day leaders are also to be found in the secular leaders and rulers of the New Testament era. And yet Paul told the Romans that rebellion against their leaders constituted rebellion against what God had established, and thus would bring judgment on those who did it. He helps us to see the reasons for this when he refers to the authorities as God's servants, who are to punish wrongdoers and help responsible citizens. He thus encourages us to do what is right in this world.

What Paul describes is of course the ideal, and he knew full well that governing authorities themselves often commit crimes and outrages, some of which Paul himself had experienced. God has not appointed each individual leader because of these persons' peerless qualifications or outstanding righteousness. Instead, God has willed simply that there be authorities, in order that he can use them to carry out his will. Those leaders who do seek to do right, he can use in positive ways. Those who resist him and who seek to serve themselves, he can always use as bad examples, or as a means of discipline. We thus can trust God to work in any situation.

So we should never think that God has chosen every individual leader. Instead, we simply need to accept that God desires earthly human societies to be peaceful and orderly, and because of this he wishes us not to rebel or fight against human authorities, except when they pursue policies that would force us as individuals* to disobey God. For our consciences, not only the fear of punishment, ought to remind us to be submissive in general to the laws of this world.

* It can be an interesting study topic to consider if or when it is necessary to oppose human authorities. Roman and other secular leaders followed many policies that were violent, sinful, and ungodly, but the early Christians usually only resisted or opposed them if they as individuals were asked to do something that would be an act of disobedience to God (for example, when ordered to sacrifice to pagan gods). Even then, there might be different opinions within the church as to what might be disobedient to God. But when they themselves were not forced to participate in a sin, they usually simply looked for constructive ways to set an example. One well-known example is the early Christian practice of rescuing 'exposed' babies.

Paul then reminds us to give whatever we owe in this world (13:6-7). He specifically mentions the necessity of paying taxes. This is again interesting, in that the taxes paid to the Romans were used mostly for ungodly purposes, and yet Paul clearly does not support any refusal to pay. He also reminds his readers that there are other non-monetary 'debts' that we will have to pay from time to time. Besides the taxes or revenues* that we might owe, at times we shall also owe honor and respect. The responsible believer is called also to pay these 'debts'.

* The original words refer to direct taxes (such as income taxes), compared with other government fees such as customs duties or service charges, which Paul lumps together as 'revenue'.

Questions For Discussion or Study: Why might it be important to God that we not rebel against governmental authorities? Are we exempted from this if our leaders are corrupt or sinful? In what cases might we need to put obedience to God ahead of this principle? Why does Paul tell the Romans to pay taxes? What is the role of conscience in all this?

Living Under God's Law (Romans 1:8-1)

Although we live on this earth under human law, we also live under God's law, which is more important, more comprehensive, and more trustworthy. Paul here teaches us some basic principles that are at the root of God's laws. If we are able to put these basic ideas into practice, they have the power to transform many other areas of our lives as well.

The apostle makes a transition between earthly debts, monetary or otherwise, to the more abstract 'debt of love' that we owe to one another (13:8-10). By phrasing it in this manner, Paul reminds us that God's call for us to love one another is more fundamental and important than any human-made law. Indeed, love fulfills God's law. If we obey the two greatest commandments as taught by Jesus, we shall indeed find that the rest of God's teachings come naturally.

Here it is specifically the 'second greatest commandment' that is under discussion. If we love one another in a godly way, rather than in a false worldly way, we shall then never harm one another or wish ill upon one another. Indeed, if we truly love others, we shall actively look for ways to encourage and serve them. The same is true, in an even deeper sense, in our relationship with God, which is governed by the 'greatest commandment': to love God with our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Jesus is our great example of loving both God and others, and as Christians we are called to follow in his steps.

Loving God and loving others involves more than mere positive feelings. For we are also called to reject evil and put on "the armor of light" (13:11-14). In fact, the apostle makes a rather stirring call for us to do this, calling us to understand that the present world is passing away, and that eternal salvation is closer to us each day. We should awake from the spiritual sluggishness that pervades this world, with its deliberate disregard for anything spiritual or eternal.

Using a common biblical metaphor, Paul calls us to put aside the deeds of darkness or nighttime, in order to come into the light and live in the light. It is a vital part of our daily lives and ministries that we actively decide to clothe ourselves with Jesus, since we otherwise would fall into the worldly habit of thinking about how to please our flesh. The worldly do many foolish and harmful things simply because they do not think about spiritual matters, and so their flesh grabs their thoughts and attention. But we do not have to live like this. If we allow ourselves to be clothed and filled with Jesus, God's power can overcome the weakness of our flesh.

Questions For Discussion or Study: Why is it a 'debt' to love one another? Does love literally fulfill every law, or is this just a figure of speech? What kind of love is Paul talking about here? Do these ideas have any connection with the call to 'put on the armor of light'? Why does he say that we need to 'wake up'? In what practical ways can we be clothed with Christ? How does this help us not to think about pleasing the flesh?

-Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, October 2005

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CALLED TO BELONG TO JESUS CHRIST: A STUDY OF ROMANS

Notes For Week Ten: Accepting the 'Weak' (Romans 14:1-15)

Though we are reborn believers in Jesus, we still retain many aspects of our earthly nature as long as we live in this world. Among these is the human tendency to form opinions and attitudes that differ from those of others. Rather than forcing us to adopt an identical set of beliefs about every subject, God here provides us with his wisdom on dealing with these differences.

Review

In the last several chapters of the epistle (Romans 12-16), the apostle Paul teaches us how to live according to the principle of justification and redemption by grace through faith. Because we understand that Jesus' blood sacrifice is our only means of being justified before God, we are to offer our bodies as living sacrifices (Romans 12). We are to use whatever we have to serve God, and are to practice sincere love in our relationships.

We must for a time live in a world in which God's authority and truth has largely been rejected, and in which human beings have assumed authority and leadership (Romans 13). But God calls us to submit ourselves, in general, to the human authorities, since they are his servants. In fact, we are to give whatever is due in this world, whether taxes or respect. Most important is our 'debt' of love to one another, since love fulfills the law. Finally, in this world we are to clothe ourselves with Christ, and to resist sinful desires, refusing even to think about them.

Understanding our Differences (Romans 14:1-8)

In order to deal with the differences among us in a godly way, it will help if we understand the nature of these differences, and put them in a proper perspective. There are many subjects on which it is all but impossible for a group of believers to have exactly the same viewpoint. On debatable matters*, our attitude towards one another is usually more important than our beliefs.

* Perhaps it is obvious, but it is essential in applying this passage to remember that it deals strictly with 'disputable matters', that is, matters on which there is no direct command or teaching from God. In the early church, this included some subjects mentioned in the Scriptures, such as food issues and 'religious' holidays, as well as issues not mentioned in the New Testament, such as military service, certain questions involving obedience to civil authorities, and the like.

Accepting one another (14:1-4) is an important part of our relationships in the body of Jesus. Paul here distinguishes between the 'weak' and the 'strong', but not necessarily in the way that we would do it. Here, the 'weak' believer is the one with a strong opinion about what a Christian may or may not eat. It should be noted that Paul, of course, understands that all of us are very weak in comparison with God, so that we should never think of ourselves as 'strong' in any absolute sense. Rather, each of us will from time to time be 'strong' in a limited and relative sense, compared with someone else who is 'weak' in some particular way.

Paul gives the specific example of eating meat or eating vegetables, because this was a common difference of opinion even in the early church. Beyond the basic issue of eating meat, much of the meat sold in marketplaces was associated with pagan gods, to whom it had once been

devoted as a 'sacrifice'*. It is essential to note that Paul is less concerned about which viewpoint is right than he is about how believers treat each other when they do not have the same opinion. Paul tells the 'strong' believer (who eats meat) not to look down on the 'weak' believer (who eats only vegetables), but he tells the 'weak' believer not to condemn the 'strong' one.

* See also the discussion of this issue in 1 Corinthians 8:1-13, 10:14-33. Worship of pagan idols often involved bringing meat or food to pagan temples to offer as a 'sacrifice'. The priests and priestesses would usually eat it themselves or sell it in the marketplace. This cynical practice was well known, and as a result many Christians were reluctant to buy meat that may have once been a pagan 'sacrifice'.

These two different commands address the same basic problems that arise in the many kinds of 'disputable matters' in which believers disagree over whether something is permissible for a Christian, or whether something is required of a Christian. The tendency of the more permissive believer is to look down on, or sneer at, the more restrictive brother, considering him or her 'unsophisticated' or 'legalistic'. Likewise, the more restrictive believer is prone to condemn the more permissive believer, and in extreme cases may even withdraw fellowship.

But Paul reminds us that we all stand or fall before our own master, God, who will be the one to judge us. Now it is not always easy for us to distinguish which matters are disputable and which God has given us a final determination. In fact, it can become a disputed (and perhaps disputable) matter as to which subjects God has addressed definitively and which God has left as 'disputable'. Paul thus continues by providing additional perspective as well as some practical guidelines. While he wants us to be ready to deal in a godly way with any differences that may arise, by no means does he attempt to enumerate exactly what is disputable and what is not.

He first reminds us that we live to the Lord, not to ourselves or even to other humans (14:5-8). He also adds another example, the observance of certain days on the calendar as special or as holidays. He points out that one's views on these subjects are not as important as it is to give thanks to God. Whether we eat meat or abstain, whether we celebrate a holiday or go about our normal daily routine, we should do so in the awareness of God, and with thankfulness to God. We are not alone—we are always under God's care, and we belong to God no matter what we are doing. We are all saved by grace through faith. If we do happen to be 'right' or 'strong', it is purely by God's grace, not by our merit. So let us extend that same grace to others.

Questions For Discussion or Study: Why does Paul refer to the 'weak' and the 'strong' here? How does his use of these terms differ from the way that we usually use them? Why is it a tendency of 'strong' believers to look down on the 'weak'? Why is it a tendency of weak believers to condemn the strong? What kinds of present issues might be covered by the teachings in this passage? What principles does Paul give us to help us avoid developing the wrong attitudes?

ea e Judgment to God (Romans 1:17-18)

Much earlier in Romans, Paul taught us that our own burden of sin should keep us from passing judgment on others. He now reminds us of the certainty that someday God will judge us all. Nor does he merely ask us to have a forgiving attitude towards one another. He also calls us to refrain from doing things that might lead others astray and endanger their relationship with God.

The certainty that every knee will bow before God is a humbling thought (14:9-12). God is Lord of the dead and the living, and even of those not yet born. We mortals surely have little excuse for passing judgment as if we were God. Our perspective is too narrow, our experience too limited, and our understanding too rudimentary to know what is really going in someone else's mind or heart. In disputable matters, even if we are absolutely certain that we are right, it makes little sense and does no good to force our views on others.

Every one of us will have more than enough to answer for in our own lives, without claiming the right to judge others. It is a humbling thought to know that we shall have to give an account of ourselves to a God who knows everything we have ever done, said, or thought. Just a brief meditation on the implications of this should persuade us to be more gracious in accepting others, even when we are convinced in our hearts that they are wrong.

In fact, far from having the right to force others into our mold, we are called to remove stumbling blocks in the paths of others (14:13-18), even if it means making personal sacrifices. In the case of eating meat, Paul says that if there are those who, even after careful teaching, remain concerned about meat connected with idols, then others must not cause them to stumble by indulging in the practice in their presence.

Paul points out (as Jesus also taught) that no food is unclean in itself, and those with a good understanding of the matter can be confident of this. But if someone believes that an item of food is unclean, then for that person it is indeed unclean, and they must not eat it. Therefore, to lord our 'knowledge' over that person by eating meat in front of them, while looking down on their lack of understanding or sophistication, is an act of pride and contempt. We must instead love each other by not making things difficult for one another, even when we are convinced that it is the other person who is 'weak'.

Likewise, the believer with a strong belief against eating meat from the marketplace must not expect that everyone else will see things the same way. He or she must be content if other believers refrain from creating a stumbling block. There is no call to interrogate or investigate others on a matter of this kind, simply for the sake of forcing others into our own viewpoint.

Paul adds that by following this policy, we avoid bringing into disrepute the things and beliefs we consider to be good. We gain nothing if we provoke quarrels or arguments over such issues. Those who willfully cause controversy do so for the fleeting reward of feeling superior to others. Such a fleshly, pathetic goal is hardly worthy of a believer in Jesus our Savior. It also shows a misunderstanding of the nature of the kingdom of God. God did not save us, redeem us, and call us into his kingdom so that we could indulge our flesh or exalt ourselves. He called us into the body of Christ so that we can share the spiritual blessings of righteousness, joy, and peace.

Questions For Discussion or Study: Why does Paul mention judgment here? In what way should we be affected by knowing that we shall be judged someday by God? What does Paul mean by a stumbling block? How far should we have to go to avoid causing someone to stumble? Doesn't Paul's teaching make it easy for an opinionated person to get his or her way all the time? Give some practical examples of how we might put these principles into practice.

-Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, November 2005

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CALLED TO BELONG TO JESUS CHRIST: A STUDY OF ROMANS

Notes For Week Tentative One: Peace & Unity (Romans 12:1-15:1)

Each of us has different strengths and weaknesses, and any two of us will find disputable matters on which we have differing viewpoints. Yet in Christ we who are many and different nevertheless form one body. So it is important to preserve peace and unity in the body. Therefore the apostle now shares some principles in these verses that can help us to do this.

Review

The last several chapters of the epistle (Romans 12-16) teach us how to live by faith and grace, by showing us how to apply the principles discussed earlier in the book. Jesus' grace to us in offering himself as a sin offering teaches us to make ourselves living sacrifices (Romans 12), and it teaches us to live in this world in humility, love, and purity (Romans 13)

We are also to accept the 'weak' (Romans 14:1-18) and to see the differences among us from a spiritual viewpoint. We are 'weak' and 'strong' only in a limited and relative sense. We are all weak compared with God, and no one person is stronger than another in every area of life. We live to the Lord, not to ourselves, and should thus leave judgment to God. We also should not put stumbling blocks in the path of the weak. As to food, Paul assures us that no food is unclean in itself, but if someone regards something as unclean, we ought to be sensitive to this weakness.

Peace & Mutual Edification (Romans 12:1-15:1)

Besides resolving not to put stumbling blocks in the paths of others, we should also make positive efforts to edify and encourage one another. The more that we focus our thoughts on the grace that saves us, the more we are then able to extend grace to others. The more that we live by faith, the less difficult it becomes to make earthly sacrifices for the sake of peace and unity.

We are called not only to value peace and mutual edification, but also to make every effort to preserve them (14:19-21). This then becomes a case of priorities, for there will often be times when we must choose between what pleases us and what will build up someone else. Continuing with the example of eating meat, Paul points out how unfortunate it would be to harm a believer spiritually just so that we could enjoy eating something that troubles them.

Each of us has many weaknesses, and we all stumble often. When we realize this and accept it in humility, we then begin to see that those around us have the same kinds of struggles. Since we know how easy it is to fall, we ought to avoid making it easy for others to fall. We cannot always avoid this, of course, but we can avoid it to the extent that we know others' weaknesses.

The same action by different persons may have different implications (14:22-23), depending on whether it is done in faith or in doubt. In the interests of spiritual welfare, Paul encourages us to keep our opinions on disputable matters between ourselves and God. By no means are we always forbidden from expressing our thoughts on such matters. Indeed, there are occasions on which it is constructive to discuss them with one another. But there are many times when it is apparent that discussion of such matters will not change anyone's mind, and when it can lead only to controversy and division. In such cases, what good reason is there to air our opinions?

Paul urges us instead not to condemn ourselves by what we approve. This means that we should not simply be universally accepting of everything, but that we must use care to distinguish a truly disputable matter from a mere fleshly desire. The same principle also reminds us to act consistently with what we believe to be right. For if we do something that we ourselves believe to be wrong, we cannot help but damage our relationship with God by doing it.

The apostle thus warns us that those with weaknesses or doubts, whether regarding food or special days or anything of the kind, should always err on the side of caution. Even if what we are doing is indeed acceptable to God, if we ourselves believe it to be wrong, we then act against our own consciences, condemning ourselves in our own eyes and doing more harm than good. As Paul says, "everything that does not come from faith is sin". If we live in the awareness that God is always with us, then we can learn to do nothing that we would not mind him seeing.

The discussion concludes with another exhortation to bear with the failings of the weak (15:1-4). Rather than making them feel guilty or inferior, we should look to build them up - always remembering that those who are weak in one way could well be strong in another, and vice versa. When each of us is sensitive only to our own weaknesses and not to the weaknesses of others, then none of us can encourage or strengthen each other. But if we are each looking to make things easier for one another in our weaknesses, then this goes a long way towards nurturing and preserving peace and unity among us.

It is always good to remember that Jesus did not live to please himself, but instead lived to give to others and to sacrifice for others. We are hardly as sinless and perfect as Jesus was, and thus we should be humble, and should serve the interests of others as we have opportunity. It is interesting that Paul here quotes Psalm 69* and then comments on how valuable the Old Testament Scriptures** can be in providing endurance and encouragement. He has continually quoted from the Old Testament throughout the epistle, showing the many things that it foretold about the ministry of Jesus, and the many parallels there are between the two covenants.

* Psalm 69 is quoted several times in the New Testament. Other references are found in John 2:17, John 15:25, Acts 1:20, and Romans 11:9-10. It can be a worthwhile study topic to go through Psalm 69 as a whole, and to consider these verses in their original contexts and then in their New Testament settings.

** That is what Paul means by, "everything that was written in the past".

Questions For Discussion or Study: Why are peace and mutual edification important? How do the teachings here help bring them about? How can we make things easier for the 'weak'? Why is it that the one "who has doubts is condemned if he eats"? How can the same action be right for one person and wrong for another? How do we 'bear with' the weak?

□nity & □ope (Romans 15:5-1□)

Once we learn to bear with one another and to accept one another, we can then go on to develop unity and to experience the blessings that come from it. Paul's here assures us that we can be unified despite being so different from one another. As we grow in unity, we also grow in hope, for the more that we focus on godly things, the more that they point us forward and upward.

Paul prayerfully hopes that the Roman Christians will share a spirit of unity (15:5-7), since this would indeed be a blessing from God. Even the worldly know the value of unity, and often strive for it. But genuine unity can only come about through God, and only by his grace and by our awareness of it. Jesus' sacrificial ministry provides us a solid ground for unity.

It is significant to note that Paul makes this comment after he has gone to such lengths to teach the Romans that they should not disturb one another about disputable matters. Thus, when he calls them to worship God with one heart and mouth, he hardly means that they must agree on every conceivable subject. Rather, to remain unified we must share a common perspective on the central matters of the faith, and must then accept one another through grace and faith.

By being of one mind in the ways that matter, we glorify God, and at the same time we allow God to give us hope (15:8-13). Paul illustrates this by once again returning to the way that Jews and Gentiles* alike have been joined together through Jesus. Jesus' sacrificial ministry served both Jews and Gentiles, and indeed, as far back as the patriarchs it was promised that both Jews and Gentiles would be blessed through Abraham's seed, the Messiah.

* While Paul no doubt consciously hoped to persuade his Jewish countrymen to accept Jesus, he often uses this theme of Jew and Gentile for a broader and more important purpose, as an example of the barriers that can be broken down in Jesus. If Jews and Gentiles, who were separated by so many historical, cultural, and political differences, could come together in Jesus, then any other barrier known to his readers could also be overcome by grace and faith.

Paul joins together the ideas of praise and hope in the Scriptures that he now quotes from Psalms, Deuteronomy, and Isaiah. These show first of all that both Jews and Gentiles seek, know, and praise the same God. The one living God has sought all of humanity, and he has called them all to belong to Jesus Christ, so that he might forgive them all of their sins. Second, these Scriptures remind us that praising God brings hope to our souls. Whenever we give praise to God, we are reminding ourselves that there is a higher power and a greater wisdom than anything in our physical world. We thus refresh our souls and our spirits, by taking our minds off of selfish and fleshly things, so that we focus for a time on the eternal living God.

In the blessing that closes this section, Paul prays for the Roman Christians to be filled with spiritual blessings, so that their lives may overflow with hope. He wants them to live constantly in the hope of better things in the next life. He calls them and us to trust God in all things, so that God in turn can fill us with blessings that outweigh even the greatest of worldly pleasures.

Questions For Discussion or Study: Why is unity important? Does it differ from peace? Why do worldly attempts to build unity usually fail? What does God mean by being one in heart and mouth? How does this kind of unity differ from the world's view of unity? What significance does the example of Jews and Gentiles have for us now? How does praising God lead to hope? Why is hope important? How can we be more hopeful?

-Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, November 2005

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CALLED TO BELONG TO JESUS CHRIST: A STUDY OF ROMANS

Notes For Week Ten: A World Full Of Opportunities (Romans 15:1-14)

As the epistle draws to a close, Paul becomes more personal in the remaining passages. In this week's verses, he provides some insights into his motivation to serve and teach others, and he also gives some details about his future plans. These help to show us just a few of the numerous potential opportunities for ministry in the world around us.

Review

In the last few chapters of Romans, Paul discusses some important ways in which the principles of grace and faith can affect our lives. We are to make ourselves living sacrifices (Romans 12) by offering all that we have to God with sincere love. In this physical world, we are to accept the human-made authorities, to pay taxes and whatever other debts we owe, and to live in love and purity (Romans 13). We are to accept the 'weak' (Romans 14), remembering always that 'weak' is a relative and limited term, not an absolute label.

We are to use this as a foundation for living in peace and unity (14:19-15:13). We should edify one another, rather than causing one another to stumble. Each of us is strong in faith in some areas, and weak in others. We should not condemn ourselves by what we approve, and should not cause others to do so. Unity brings hope, and we can have unity without forcing everyone into the same mold. Likewise, when we praise and glorify God, it brings hope to our souls.

Paul's Ministry To The Gentiles (Romans 15:1-14)

In these verses, Paul shares his purpose in writing as he has to the Roman believers, and he also talks about his ministry to the Gentiles in general. It is clear that the apostle was never able to do nearly as many things or to go nearly as many places as he wanted to. Yet he knew that wherever God led him, he would find ways to serve and glorify God.

Paul uses an interesting image, referring to Gentile converts as an offering acceptable to God (15:14-16). He assures the Roman believers, after all that he has explained to them, that he has confidence in their goodness, their knowledge, and their ability to help one another. He knows that he is reminding them of things that they already know. Indeed, many teachings of Scripture explain or illustrate familiar principles, or call us to do what we already know we should do.

Such teachings serve a valuable function for us all. There is no such thing as a Christian who has 'mastered' the 'basics' of Christianity, for the gospel will always be a constant challenge to our earthly minds and bodies. Consequently, we ought constantly to teach and encourage one another with the important truths of the faith. There will never be a time when we can ignore the kinds of 'basic' topics discussed in Romans, thinking ourselves to be above them.

In viewing the Gentiles as an offering to God, Paul realized that they too, like the ancient Israelites, could be given to God and devoted to God once they were sanctified. The blood of Jesus cleanses Gentile believers just as effectively as it cleanses Jewish believers, and the Holy Spirit sanctifies Gentiles just as much as he sanctifies Jews. Once cleansed and sanctified, a repentant Gentile is as acceptable to God as any devout follower of the Law of Moses.

Paul also shares with the Romans some thoughts on proclaiming the gospel (15:17-22). He is convinced that his service to God is worth all that he has given to it, and he rejoices in seeing God's hand at work more than he does over any earthly development. Paul did not merely put God first in his life—he saw everything in terms of God's will and God's Word.

Paul also provides the interesting detail that his ministry ranged from Jerusalem to Illyricum*. This means that Paul had traveled to at least some locations that are not specifically mentioned in the New Testament. He also indicates that his priority has been primarily to travel to places where Jesus was not yet known. This may have been partially due to his own personal perspective and motivation, but it is also true that beginning a brand new ministry is a different matter than strengthening and nurturing a congregation that has been there for some time.

* Illyricum referred to a large region to the east of the Adriatic Sea and to the north and west of Greece, roughly where Yugoslavia used to be before it broke up into several smaller nations. Paul could have reached there by traveling west or northwest from Macedonia on one of his visits there.

All this had hindered Paul from visiting Rome. The encouraging news about the church in Rome may have persuaded him that he was needed more urgently elsewhere. Yet he understandably wanted very much to visit Rome. He now hoped that the time to go to Rome was finally near, but he always felt called to go where he was needed, rather than where he wanted to go.

Questions For Discussion or Study: Why does Paul write at such length about the topics in Romans if he was only 'reminding' them? What does this teach us? In what sense are the Gentiles an 'offering' to God? Are we also 'offerings'? Should this make a difference in our relationship with God? Why did Paul want to proclaim the gospel where it was not yet known? How might we be able to learn from Paul's perspective on his ministry?

Plans For the Future (Romans 15:14-22)

While writing to the Roman Christians, Paul already had in mind the next several places where he wanted to go. Here he explains in some detail his plan to go first to Jerusalem, and then to Spain, with a stop in Rome along the way. There are several points of interest in his plans, but also a great irony: things did not develop at all as Paul planned and hoped that they would.

Paul is still looking for and planning new ministries (15:23-29). No matter how much he has already done, the world remains full of opportunities, and there are still many places where Jesus has not yet been proclaimed. Paul thus plans to travel next to Spain, at the western extreme of the Roman Empire. This would have involved quite a lengthy journey, and as a result it seemed to Paul to be an excellent occasion for him finally to stop in Rome along the way.

Yet all this was in the relatively distant future, because there was an entirely different ministry that Paul wanted to complete first. The churches in Greece had put together a considerable amount of money to be sent to Jerusalem*, where there were many poor Christians and few local sources of help. Paul makes the significant observation that, in a sense, the believers in Greece were fulfilling an obligation, in that the Jews' spiritual riches, through Jesus, had been given to the Greeks, who in turn were now sharing their material blessings with the Jews.

* On at least one previous occasion (Acts 11:29-30), the Gentile Christians in Antioch had made a similar contribution, which at that time was delivered by Paul and Barnabas. The contribution mentioned here is also referenced in 1 Corinthians 16:1-4 and 2 Corinthians 8:1-7, 9:1-5. It also may have been a more or less regular practice, as the reference in Galatians 2:10 seems to imply.

Paul has thus made plans for a considerable extent into the future, and accordingly he asks his readers to join him in prayer for these ministries (15:30-33). He asks them to "join me in my struggle", assuming that they will pray for him sincerely, and will be genuinely concerned about him. Both they and Paul would have been aware of the potential dangers that he would face in Jerusalem. Throughout the Gentile world, fanatical followers of the Mosaic Law had plagued Paul and had disrupted his ministry numerous times. In Jerusalem, this was even more likely.

Paul prays for his own deliverance and for his ministry in Jerusalem to be pleasing to the believers there. He expects opposition from unbelieving Jews, but he hopes also that those who believe in Jesus will accept the generous gift he is bringing without harboring reservations about his ministry to the Gentiles. In anticipation of his trip to Rome, he thus asks for prayers that this first ministry will receive God's blessing, so that his arrival in Rome may be a joyful one.

Paul's careful plans, concern about opposition, and his request for prayers all make what actually happened a source of irony and an instructive example. For, in fact, things did not develop at all as Paul had hoped and planned. Not even apostles can see very far into the future, and not even apostles can count on their plans working out simply because they have made them in faith. Paul did arrive in Jerusalem as planned, but a series of tumultuous events then followed.

As he had feared, in Jerusalem the enemies of the gospel provoked a disturbance and succeeded in getting Paul arrested. This began an extended period of imprisonment in Jerusalem and then in the provincial capital of Caesarea, as described in Acts 21-26. When Paul chose to exercise his right as a Roman citizen to appeal to the emperor, he was taken to Rome by ship across the Mediterranean Sea, stopping first at Crete, getting shipwrecked on Malta, and finally being taken to Rome after a lengthy and harrowing journey (Acts 27-28). He spent some time in Rome before being released (some time after the end of Acts) to resume his ministry, only to be re-arrested and executed several years later. Whether or not he ever made it to Spain is unknown.

These events can be a convicting reminder to us as we consider our own lives and ministries. James's warning not to 'boast about tomorrow' (James 4:13-17) applies just as much to ministry as it does to secular plans. Paul was in no way wrong to make all of these plans, and he surely did so in faith, but God had something different in mind (Paul did visit Rome, but not in the way he had planned). Nor is this the only occasion on which even Paul had difficulty discerning where God really wanted him to go (see, for example, Acts 16:6-10).

If things were not always clear to Paul, then we should be cautious about assuming we know God's will for the future. All that Paul planned was 'good', but it didn't happen. We should be careful not to follow our own plans too rigidly, for if we do, we may find ourselves resisting what God really wants. This realization can bring peace and security, as it relieves us of the fleshly tendency to seize control of events through constant action. How blessed it can be simply to seek God's wisdom and guidance each day, trusting him to lead us where we need to go.

Questions For Discussion or Study: What reasons or goals might Paul have had for making these plans? What concerns did he have? Why might God have not allowed things to happen as Paul planned? Did God not hear Paul's prayers? What should we learn from this? Should we make no plans at all, or does it teach us something else instead?

-Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, November 2005

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CALLED TO BELONG TO JESUS CHRIST: A STUDY OF ROMANS

Notes For Week Ten-Three: A Community of Servants (Romans 1)

In concluding his closing greetings and final words, Paul re-emphasizes some key ideas that have appeared throughout Romans. We shall never know anything further about most of the persons whom he mentions here, yet his overall view of the Roman church comes across clearly. This is a community of serving believers, who give the best of themselves to the ministry of the gospel.

Review

In this final section of Romans (Romans 12-16), Paul discusses several ways in which the principles of grace and faith affect our daily lives. He calls us to be living sacrifices (Romans 12) and to live our lives in this world in humility, love, and purity (Romans 13). We are also called to accept the 'weak' (Romans 14:1-18) and to live in peace and unity (14:19-15:13).

To Paul, the world is full of opportunities for ministry (15:14-33). As a minister to the Gentiles, he is writing to the Roman Christians to give them some important reminders, just as all of us need constantly to be reminded of the important foundations of the faith. He wants them, and all the Gentiles, to be an offering acceptable to God. Paul plans to visit Rome on the way to Spain, after a trip to Jerusalem. But his arrest in Jerusalem would require him to change these plans.

Personal Commendations & Greetings (Romans 1:1-1)

Far from being merely a dry list of names that are difficult to pronounce, these verses both illustrate some of Paul's priorities and provide us with a miniature portrait of the church at Rome. Paul knows or knows of many persons in the congregation, and in greeting them he helps us to see how many different Roman Christians were devoting themselves to the ministry of grace.

Paul begins the section by commending his messenger Phoebe to the Romans (16:1-2). He refers to her as a servant of the church at Cenchrea, a Greek city not far from Corinth, where Paul was staying. That Phoebe undertook the journey from Corinth to Rome in Paul's behalf is apparently only one of many things that she has done to provide help for Paul and other believers in Greece.

Two verses in Romans 16 sometimes cause unnecessary distraction. Paul here calls Phoebe a servant, using the same word that is translated 'deacon'* , and in verse 7 he refers to Andronicus and Junias as messengers or missionaries, using the word that is translated 'apostle'**. Indeed, some English language versions translate these verses so as to designate Phoebe as a deacon (or 'deaconess') and Andronicus and Junias as 'apostles', but these are translators' interpretations. It is better not to impose our fleshly interest in titles, 'offices', and authority onto the biblical text.

* The Greek word *διακονος* ("diakonos") was the common everyday word for 'servant' or 'helper'. The early church designated certain persons as 'servants' of the church, as discussed in, for example, 1 Timothy 3:8-13. This is not an 'office' in the sense that we use the word now, nor is there an indication that it comes with any particular authority. Instead, it was an important responsibility assigned to selected persons.

** The Greek word *αποστολος* ("apostolos", literally 'one sent'), was the everyday word for 'messenger'. The early Christians used it to refer both to messengers and missionaries. Jesus designated the Twelve as

'apostles' in this sense, not as being placed in positions of special authority. The word is used very flexibly in the New Testament. For example, it is used of Epaphroditus in Philippians 2:25.

The numerous other greetings sent by Paul (16:5b-15) preserve for us a portrait of a church filled with servants and workers. Note the number of references to those who have worked hard, those who have been persecuted and tried, and those who have devoted themselves to others. Like so many of the earliest congregations of believers in Jesus, the Roman church did not ask a small number of persons to take care of everything, but rather involved everyone in ministry.

The details in these verses also help us to get a better idea of some of the characteristics of the Roman Christians. The list contains Jewish names, Roman names, and Greek names, so we can tell that there is a broad mix of Jews and Gentiles. There are also numerous women who are greeted, indicating that there were many useful roles for them in the Roman church. The church also seems to have contained members from all classes of Roman society, including slaves, freedmen (former slaves, who made up a noticeable portion of Roman society), and others*.

* For example, some of those greeted have households, indicating that they were of the upper or upper middle classes ('household' does not mean family or children—it refers to employees, servants, or slaves). On the other hand, Tryphena and Tryphosa (verse 12a) are known to history as a pair of servants in the imperial household. And Persis (verse 12b) was a name commonly given to female slaves or servants who had come from Persia. For more detail on some of the facts that can be drawn from the names and the ways that Paul uses them, see some of the more detailed commentaries.

Paul also mentions a number of his own relatives, in addition to those who are simply friends through Jesus. Just as an American today might know many residents of New York City or Los Angeles without ever having been there, Paul is acquainted with a wide variety of persons who have settled in Rome and who are members of the church there.

Paul also adds a general greeting (16:16), since there are many other believers in Rome who are not known to him personally. His reference to greeting one another with a kiss refers simply to a cultural practice common in many areas of the ancient world, among both Jews and Gentiles, so this was never assumed to be a command that must be followed literally.

Questions For Discussion or Study: What purpose is served by these personal greetings and commendations? How can we apply the principles involved? What preconceptions might we have to set aside in order to understand the message(s) involved? Of what significance are the few details that we can deduce about some of these persons?

Closing Exhortations (Romans 16:17-17)

Paul's closing remarks combine exhortations, greetings from his associates in Corinth, and an offering of praise to God. He leaves the Roman believers with some final thoughts that focus their attention on working together in the Lord and, above all, on the extraordinary God in whose name we teach, serve, and sacrifice.

He gives them the kind of warning against divisions that appear a number of times in his epistles (16:17-19). Divisions happen when a person or group of persons chooses to serve his, her, or their own interests ahead of the interests of others. Paul uses the appropriate expression of 'serving their own appetites', for indeed such individuals are indulging their selfish, short-sighted urges at the expense of others.

Ideally, a believer should indeed be wise about what is good, that is, the things of God, and should be innocent about evil, worldly things. This kind of wisdom has more to do with judgment than with factual knowledge. When we know what is important, it will not trouble us if there are worldly affairs, popular celebrities, or trendy theories that remain unknown to us. For we realize that there is nothing in the world that we should worry about 'missing out on'.

Indeed, too much worldly knowledge and experience can cause us to develop a worldly perspective, and this in turn leads to divisions. Christians should never allow the world to distract them from a deeper understanding of God, in order to pursue earthly knowledge or achievements. For God will be with us always, and his power is greater than any power in this world. It is far greater than even Satan's power, and one day this will be clear for all to see.

Paul next complements his earlier sending of greetings by passing along greetings from some of his present associates in ministry (16:21-24). Paul is writing from Corinth, and as he writes, he has been working together with Timothy and with three of his personal relations. Besides sending greetings from these fellow workers, he also mentions his scribe Tertius and several others, who all appear to have been residents of Corinth*. Gaius, in particular, is mentioned as Paul's host and as a source of hospitality for many believers in Corinth.

* Archeology has confirmed the historical existence of Erastus, one of those whom Paul mentions here. Paul describes him as the director of public works (or treasurer) in Corinth, and indeed secular inscriptions have been discovered that confirm Erastus as the holder of the office of 'aedile' in Corinth.

The lengthy epistle closes appropriately with an offering of praise to God (16:25-27). Paul offers his doxology 'to him who is able to establish you', and in so doing he gives us one final reminder that the basis on which God establishes us is the gospel of grace, not anything in our own righteousness or wisdom. Indeed, the gospel involves the revealing of a 'mystery' (in the Greek sense, referring to an important truth that was previously unknown) that was disclosed through Jesus after many long years of preparation and waiting.

Therefore it is appropriate that all glory be given to the only wise God, the only living God, who is also our Savior. The same grace that cleanses us and redeems us also enables us to offer our praises to him, and to give him the complete glory that is rightfully his forever.

Questions for Discussion Or Study: Why does Paul warn the Romans about divisions at this point in the letter? What lessons does he teach them about preventing divisions? Is there anything of significance in Paul's greetings from his companions in Corinth? What points should we emulate in his closing offering of praise?

-Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, November 2005

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