



F. WAYNE MAC LEOD

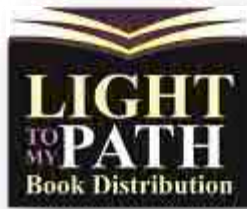
ROMANS

**A Devotional Commentary on
the Epistle of Paul to the Romans**

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Epistle of Paul to the Romans*

F. Wayne MacLeod



LIGHT TO MY PATH BOOK DISTRIBUTION
Sydney Mines, Nova Scotia, CANADA

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Revised January 2010

Second Revision January 2016

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Proof Reading: Diane Mac Leod

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PREFACE

The book of Romans is a powerful statement about the Christian life. The apostle Paul takes us on a spiritual journey. He begins with the plan of God in eternity past to reach a people and call them to Himself. He takes us through the valley of sin and legalism to the mountains of righteousness by faith. He shows us the hopelessness of our situation under sin and the law. He points us to God's plan of salvation from its roots in Judaism to its expansion to the ends of the earth.

Paul does not stop there. He moves on to the personal experience of that new life in Christ. We are taught how to distinguish between the works of the sinful flesh and the work of the Spirit in us. Paul reminds us that life in Christ may lead to suffering in this world but he points us ahead to the wonderful hope of forgiveness through Christ and eternity in His presence.

In the final section of the book, Paul exhorts us to surrender ourselves completely to the Lord God as His servants. He challenges us not to take this journey of faith alone, as there are many travellers who walk beside us with gifts and ministries of their own. He challenges us to live in harmony

with them and teaches us not only the benefits of travelling together but also how this is possible in a world of sin.

In this book, Paul beautifully sums up the Christian life with its struggles and blessings. We find in it key principles for growth and maturity in our walk with Christ. This commentary is not meant to be rushed through. Take the time to consider the teachings of the apostle. Be sure to read the Biblical passages given at the beginning of each chapter. Pray over the lessons learned. Ask the Holy Spirit to use this commentary as a tool to draw you closer to Christ.

While there are many writers more qualified than myself to tackle the depths of theology in this important Bible book, my sincere desire is that those who read it would be drawn closer to the Saviour. This is what Paul would have wanted. May God bless you as you study Paul's letter to the Romans.

F. Wayne MacLeod

1

INTRODUCTION

Read Romans 1:1-7

Paul originally wrote this letter to the church in Rome. It is not certain how or when faith in Christ first came to Rome, but when Paul heard of these believers and the work of the Holy Spirit in that region, he decided to write them. His purpose was to give them clear guidance and teaching on the basics of the Christian faith so that they could better handle their unique struggles in walking with the Lord.

Notice how Paul introduces himself to his readers. He says three things about himself in this opening verse. First, he calls himself a servant of Jesus Christ. The New American Standard Bible uses the word "*bondservant*," and the Greek word can also be used to speak of a slave. The idea is that Paul's life was no longer his own. It was dedicated to the purposes of his Master. He had been bought by the Lord Jesus and no longer belonged to himself. His heart and life were the Lord's to do with as He pleased. This is how he now saw himself. His whole identity was tied up in the purpose and plan of the Lord Jesus.

Second, notice how Paul describes the purpose of the Lord for his life. God, in His grace, had called him to be an apostle. As an apostle, it was God's purpose for him to establish the church and place it on a solid foundation of truth. For this to happen, it was necessary that Paul be gifted and equipped by the Holy Spirit in a very special way. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, God would use him to build his church and establish it on that foundation. Paul accepted God's purpose for his life and gave himself completely to it.

Finally, Paul told his readers that he had been set apart for the Gospel of God. The Gospel is the good news about the Lord Jesus and His work. This was the focus of Paul's message and ministry. His message was about Jesus. His ministry was to lead people to Jesus.

In verses 2-6, Paul takes the time to explain what this Gospel he preached was all about. Let's take a look at what the apostle tells us about the Gospel in these verses.

First, the Gospel was promised beforehand (verse 2). The focus of the entire Old Testament is to show us just how much we need a Saviour. As the pages of the Old Testament unfold, we see the failure of Adam and Eve to live in harmony with God and His purpose. They fell into sin and brought sin upon the whole human race. God gave His laws through Moses, but His people were unable to keep those laws. He sent judges and kings to lead them, but they rebelled and turned away. His prophets warned them of the consequences of disobedience, but Israel refused to listen.

God's people could not meet the standard God had set for them. Try as they may, they were unable to live in victory over their sinful natures. They were separated from a holy

God. Throughout the pages of the Old Testament God promised a Messiah who would set His people free and restore them to a right relationship with the Father. The Old Testament pointed God's people to the Lord Jesus who would one day come as our Saviour to rescue us from the terrible effects of sin and its consequences in our lives. The Gospel is not new. The Gospel that Paul preached was promised long before it was revealed to us in Christ.

The message of the Gospel begins with the truth that Jesus is the Son of God. This is vital to our understanding of the Gospel. As the Son of God, Jesus was sinless. Only a perfect sacrifice could pay for our sins. The fact that Jesus was the Son of God also demonstrates just how much God loved us. He was willing to let His own Son die for us to pay the price so that we could be restored to a right relationship with Him.

Paul goes on to say that Jesus took on human nature and became a descendant of David. He left the glory of heaven to become a humble servant. As a human being He identified with our weaknesses. He suffered what we suffer. He felt what we feel. He lived on this earth as a man and demonstrated to us the life God requires.

Paul also tells us that Jesus lived His life filled with the power of the Holy Spirit. Though He was crucified by man and died on a cruel cross, He was declared to be the Son of God by His resurrection from the dead. His resurrection proved that God accepted His sacrifice on our behalf. He overcame death by rising to life. Jesus took our sins to the cross. He could never have entered the presence of God with these sins. Jesus took them and destroyed them. He broke their power. After dealing with our sins, He returned to His Father in triumph.

The wonderful message of the Gospel is that we can share in Christ's victory over sin. Paul was called as a minister of this gospel message so that he could call the world out of darkness and despair to faith and victory over sin through the work of the Lord Jesus.

Because Jesus has conquered sin, we too can conquer. Sin no longer needs to separate us from a Holy God. We can know absolute victory over this deadly enemy. There is hope and life in the Lord Jesus.

Notice in verse 6 that those to whom Paul wrote were called and belong to Jesus. Like Paul they had been rescued from their cruel enemy. They now had a new Master and King. They were also Christ's servants.

Paul writes this letter to the saints in Rome. He has several things to say about these saints in verse 7. He tells us first that God loved them. What an encouraging way to begin his letter. The God of this universe sent His Son to die for these believers in Rome so that they could be freed from the consequences of sin and have eternal life in His presence.

Second, the apostle tells us that the Romans were called to be saints. A saint is someone who has been set apart for the Lord and His service. Not only had the Romans been forgiven of their sin, they were set apart for a special purpose in the kingdom of God.

As he concludes his introduction to the Romans, Paul blesses the saints in Rome with the grace (unmerited favour) and peace of God. It was God's grace that brought them into the Kingdom of God and made them His children. Paul wanted to see the believers in Rome continue to live and walk in that grace.

Because of the work of the Lord Jesus, the Romans now experienced wonderful peace with God. Paul wanted them to continue to live in that peace with God by walking in victory over their sin.

Have you experienced this wonderful peace that comes from knowing the forgiveness of sin? Have you been set apart like the Romans for the purpose of God? Are you walking daily in the victory Christ came to give? May we who have been rescued from our sin be devoted followers of our new Master and King.

For Consideration:

- In this passage Paul speaks about being a servant of the Lord Jesus. Can you say that you are a true servant of Christ? Is there anything you need to surrender to Him today?
- What comfort do you find in the fact that Jesus, as the Son of God, became a man and identified with you?
- Have you accepted what the Lord Jesus has done on your behalf? What difference has that made in your life?
- Paul had a very clear sense of his calling. What is God's call on your life?
- What does Paul tell us here about the key elements of the Gospel message?

For Prayer:

- Take a moment to surrender your life afresh to the Lord Jesus ask Him to show you if there is anything you have not surrendered to Him.
- Thank the Lord that He came as the Son of God to break the power of sin in your life.
- Ask God to make His calling for your life clear.
- Ask the Lord to open doors of opportunity to share the wonderful message of the Gospel with others.

2

THE IMPARTATION OF A GIFT

Read Romans 1:8-12

Having introduced himself to the church at Rome and shared with them his sense of calling, Paul now spends time thanking God and expressing his desire to visit the believers in Rome. Notice in verse 8 what Paul has to say about the believers in Rome.

He thanks God that their faith in Jesus Christ has been spoken of throughout the whole world. This says something very important about these believers. They had a wonderful faith in the Lord Jesus. Their faith was known throughout the world. People were so touched by their faith that they spoke about it to others. What a powerful testimony!

It is important for us to understand that this church was located in an area which was hostile to Christianity at this time. To be a follower of Jesus was not easy. Perhaps it

was their faith in the midst of these circumstances that set them apart. Paul praises them for their faith.

Paul reminded the Roman believers of his prayers for them (verse 9). He told them that he prayed for them constantly. How encouraging this would have been to these people, who, for the most part, had never met Paul.

It was the prayer and desire of the apostle Paul that God would open a door for him to visit Rome (verse 10). It is important to note that while it was his desire to visit them, he left this matter in the hands of God. He wanted to come to visit them *"by God's will."* He wanted to visit them in God's timing and according to God's purpose and only if God permitted. Paul submitted his will to the greater purpose of God. He did not try to force the door open but prayed about the desires God put on his heart.

Notice the reason why Paul wanted to see the Roman believers (verse 11). He wanted to impart a spiritual gift to them so that they would be strong.

We have already seen that the Roman church was known for its faith. People around the world were speaking about them. Paul, however, saw room for growth. His desire was that the believers grow more and more in their faith. The word "gift" here is the Greek word *charisma*. It is used in the New Testament to speak of the spiritual gifts of the Holy Spirit. It seems that Paul wanted the believers in Rome to be equipped with all the gifts necessary to persevere in their faith and to minister in power. He rejoiced in their faithfulness but cried out to God that they might be all that the Lord wanted them to be. How important it is for us to understand these two aspects of our walk with God. There are many who are faithful to the truth of the Gospel but experience little power for ministry. There are others

who seem to have the power to minister but fall to temptation. It is the desire of God that we be both faithful and fruitful.

Paul was thankful for the growth of the believers in Rome. He praised the Lord for the fact that their faith was known throughout the world but he was not content to let them stay where they were. What they had experienced was just a portion of what God wanted to do in and through them. He wanted to see them develop into mature believers. Paul challenged the Romans to strive to know the Lord and His power in an even greater way.

It is interesting also that Paul felt the need to be physically present with these believers in order to impart this spiritual gift to them. There are a few reasons for this. First, when Paul wrote to Timothy later in life, he reminded him to fan the flame of the gift that he had been given by the laying on of hands (see 2 Timothy 1:6).

In the New Testament context, believers understood that when their spiritual leaders laid hands on them, a spiritual transaction took place. When Jesus laid His hands on the sick, they were healed. When the apostles laid hands on individual believers, God answered their prayers, and His people were set free and empowered in a greater way. There was nothing magic about this, nor was it the only way that God could empower and heal His people. For Paul, however, the practice of laying on of hands was not an empty practice. There was an expectation that God would move through this means. Power was bestowed, healing came, and strongholds were broken when believers laid their hands on each other and prayed.

There was another reason why Paul wanted to be with the believers to impart a spiritual gift to them. Paul's desire

was to instruct these believers in the deeper truths of the faith. He wanted to be able to answer their questions and pray for their specific needs so that obstacles to God's blessing and empowering would be broken.

It was Paul's intention not only to pray personally for the Roman church but also to instruct them. Together they would share their mutual faith. Together they would grow. As important as it was that Paul pray for the Roman believers, those prayers could not replace being with them personally and sharing with them one-on-one. There would no doubt be many questions as the church developed the gifts that God would give to them. In our day we have seen many evangelists or travelling preachers minister and leave the believer to figure things out for themselves. Paul did not want to do this. He wanted to follow-up those who had been touched by his ministry.

For Consideration:

- The Roman believers were known for their faith. To what extent are you known for your walk with God and your faith in Him?
- What do we learn in this passage about the importance of faithfulness and empowerment in ministry? How do these two things differ?
- Take a moment to consider faithfulness and empowerment. Are you lacking in either of these?
- What spiritual gift has God given to you for service? How have you been using it?

- Have you been content with where you are in your spiritual walk? Does Paul want the Romans to be content with where they are spiritually?

For Prayer:

- Ask God to show you the spiritual gifts He has given you. Ask Him to make you not only faithful but also fruitful.
- Ask God to increase your boldness in witnessing to the community where you live.

3

RIGHTEOUSNESS BY FAITH

Read Romans 1:13-17

Paul's desire was to be with the Roman believers. In verse 13 he tells them that despite his efforts to see them, he had been hindered for one reason or another. He had not given up hope. He was praying that God would finally open an opportunity for him to visit Rome (verse 10).

Paul was making plans but God was changing those plans and hindering his visit to Rome. Despite this, Paul continued to pray that God would open a door for him to go. Deep in his heart there was a desire to see these believers, a desire that undoubtedly came from the Lord. It is similar to Moses, who, when he was forty years old, wanted to set the people of Israel free from their bondage in Egypt. Instead, God led him into the desert of Midian. It was not until Moses was 80 years old that God would allow him to see the fulfilment of his desire.

Paul did not grumble about the frustration of his plans, but he did not give up praying either. He continued to bring his request to God.

While it is important that we make plans, all our plans must be submitted to the Lord for His approval and timing. Our time is not the same as God's time. How easy it is to grumble and complain because God does not seem to allow us to see the fulfilment of our plans when we think He should. Paul surrendered his plans to God and trusted Him to open the door at the right time.

Just because God does not answer right away does not mean that He will not answer. If God has put a particular burden on our heart, we must continue to pray and seek His will even though obstacles seem to be thrown on our path. We must continue to pray and patiently wait on God.

Notice the reason Paul wanted to see the Roman believers. He wanted to have a harvest among them as he had among other Gentiles. Paul's plan to visit the Romans was not to fulfil any selfish purpose of his own. He wanted to see God moving in power in the church.

Notice that Paul felt an obligation before God to both the Greeks and the non-Greeks, the wise as well as the foolish. The word "obliged" in the New International Version means to be bound by duty or to be a debtor. Paul was obliged because of what God had done for him in saving and showing him the truth. He was obliged because of the call of God on his life to be an apostle to the Gentiles. With our gifts and calling comes an obligation. What gift has God given you as a believer? What has He called you to do? You too are obligated before God.

Paul took his calling and gifts seriously. His desire was to be fruitful. Paul was a man of passion, driven by love for God and a sense of duty and obligation. It was his desire to see a harvest for the sake of God's kingdom in Rome.

Paul was not ashamed of the Gospel that had been entrusted to him (verse 16). He wanted to spread the good news of Jesus the Saviour to all who would listen. How easy it is to shrink back into the shadows when the Gospel is rejected or we are mocked and considered fools for our belief.

Paul was not ashamed of the Gospel because it was the power of God for the salvation of both Jew and Gentile. Notice how Paul described the Gospel as the power of God for salvation. This simple message could break the strongholds of the enemy. Satan, the father of lies, is defeated by the power of this message. His prison of lies and deceit is broken open and his captives set free by its truth.

The good news about Jesus and His work is the truth our world needs to hear. The enemy hates the message of the Gospel. He does not want people to know that they can be freed from the power of sin and evil in their lives.

When a person turns from the lies of the enemy and accepts the truth of the Gospel, something wonderful happens. His or her life is changed. The Gospel is not just words. The Gospel is power: Power to change, power to heal, power to renew and give new life. Paul had seen lives changed by the power of the Gospel. How could he be ashamed of something that was so wonderful and powerful?

Listen to what Paul told the Romans about the Gospel in verse 17. The Gospel revealed righteousness from God that came by faith. We need to consider this important statement of Paul.

Throughout the history of the church there have been many who have tried to merit the favour of God by their

own efforts. Paul tells the Romans that the righteousness spoken of in the Gospel did not come through human effort. He says two things about the righteousness spoken of in the Gospel.

First, this righteousness is from God. This means that it is not of human origin or the result of human efforts to please God. The righteousness spoken of in the Gospel is God's righteousness.

The second point Paul makes is that this righteousness is received by faith. In other words, the righteousness of God is given to those who believe by faith. We could never be righteous in our own efforts. Isaiah describes our righteousness as "filthy rags" in Isaiah 64:6. If we are to be righteous before God it will only be because we have received it as a gift from God. The righteousness of the Gospel has nothing to do with how we live or serve God. It has nothing to do with us at all. It is a declaration from God that we are in a right standing with Him. It is a gift from God received by faith in the work of His Son

What begins by faith is also nurtured and matured in faith. Paul told the Romans that those who are declared righteous by God will continue to live by faith. In other words, from the moment we open our hearts to receive the gift of righteousness to the day we die, our lives must be lived by faith and trust in God and what He is doing.

All our confidence must be in Him. What began by faith must end by faith. We dare not trust our own efforts to get to heaven. We dare not trust our own efforts to live for the Lord. The righteousness Paul speaks about here is a gift freely given by God. The good life we now live is the work of the Holy Spirit in us. From start to finish it is all about God's work in us.

For Consideration:

- What does this passage teach us about submitting our plans to the Lord?
- What gift or calling has the Lord placed on your life? What obligation do you feel toward Him because of that calling and gifting?
- Have you ever felt ashamed of the Gospel? What does Paul tell us about this here?
- What is righteousness? How is it received?
- When Paul tells us that we are to live by faith from first to last what does he mean? How easy is it to accept Jesus by faith and try to live our Christian lives by our own efforts?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that He has provided a means for us to have a right standing with the Father.
- Ask God to give you the grace to submit all your plans to Him.
- Ask the Lord to make you more sensitive to the leading and direction of His Holy Spirit in your life.
- Thank the Lord for the power of the message of the Gospel to transform your life.
- Thank the Lord for the way He has given you the gift of righteousness.

4

THE REVELATION OF WRATH

Read Romans 1:18-32

Not everyone is willing to accept the wonderful truth of the Gospel. The Lord Jesus came to earth to open the door for us to enter the presence of His Father. Many people, however, choose to continue in the path of sin and reject the salvation of the Lord.

Since God is holy, sin grieves His heart. The evidence of how much the Father cannot tolerate sin is seen in how He was compelled to turn His back to His own Son when He took our sin to the cross. God will not accept sin. He will judge it and all who cling to it. Here in this passage Paul explains that God's wrath is being revealed from heaven against the godlessness and wickedness of those who reject the truth.

What is significant about this statement is that the apostle Paul tells us that the wrath of God is *already* being revealed against wickedness. While it is true that there will be a great, final judgment of sin and evil, God is already judging sin. Even as we can presently experience the joy

and peace of heaven in our hearts, so we can also experience the terror and darkness of hell as we continue in sin and rebellion. Many live each day in the reality of this darkness in their lives. Broken relationships, anger, bitterness, and other such things give us glimpses of hell. Our societies are broken and under the condemnation of God. The result of sin is evident in our hospitals and jails. Sickness, disease and crimes of all sorts are the result of the larger effects of sin in this world. We are already experiencing the wrath of God against sin. This ought to be a warning to us of the greater wrath to be revealed.

Paul is quick to remind us that no one is without excuse. God reveals Himself and His purpose in a general way through nature. The invisible qualities of God are evident in creation (verse 20). No one who has seen the fury of a great thunderstorm or the powerful winds of a tornado can doubt the power of God. No one who has taken a serious look at the natural order of the world in which we live can doubt the wisdom of its Creator. The beauty of the smallest flower shows us His delicate care. Nature reveals God's wrath, wisdom, and love. When we see the wrath of this awesome God in nature, should this not challenge us to respect Him and His power? When we see the beauty of nature around us and the way in which God colours even the smallest flower, should we not be driven to praise the Heavenly Artist who coloured it? Who in their right mind would willingly disrespect the God who demonstrates Himself in the wrath of the storm or the fury of the waves crashing against the shore?

Paul reminded the Romans, however, that there were many who, despite what they had seen in nature, still refused to glorify its Creator. Those who do this, according to Paul were foolish (verse 21).

Ironically, these individuals who ignore God and live in sin consider themselves to be wise. The secular, worldly mind does not understand the wisdom of God. Great universities all over the world are filled with "brilliant" minds that mock the idea of the existence of God. They look down on the teaching of the Scriptures. They consider the ways of God to be foolish. These people discard the glory of God in order to worship worthless human speculations (verse 23). They reject the God of the universe and create a god of their own. In Paul's day these gods came in the form of idols carved out to look like men, birds, or reptiles. People bowed down to these idols and worshipped them. Wisdom revealed that these objects were not worthy of worship. Wisdom showed that they were powerless. But Satan blinded the minds of these people just as he does today.

Today our created gods may be different. Men and women fall down to worship the gods of pleasure, wealth, and reason. These gods are as powerless as the gods of wood and stone worshipped in the days of Paul. They cannot provide a solution to the problem of sin.

Because these individuals turned their backs on God, God gave them over to their sinful desires (verse 24). In giving them over, God removed the restraints. We see evidences of this even in our day as men and women act out the evil desires of their heart. Murder, immorality, greed, and lust are the fruits of the sinful mind and heart. Our prisons are filled with those who have been given over to their evil desires. Where would we be if God did not protect us from our own sinful desires? We all know the evil thoughts and desires of our hearts. It is a terrifying thing to be handed over to our evil desires.

When people are handed over to their own evil desires, what is the result? What happens when God stops holding

us back? Paul tells us that in his day these people were given over to sexual impurity. They degraded and dishonoured their own bodies. They gave themselves over to their own lusts (verse 26). Homosexuality and other sexual perversions were the result. Men burned with passion for men and women for women. They committed indecent acts with each other.

Sexual immorality was only part of the horrible sin that resulted from God withdrawing His restraining presence. Men and women were filled with many other kinds of wickedness. Greed, envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice, gossip, and slander were also the result of the lifting of God's restraint.

Ultimately, when they were given over to their freedom, they became God-haters. They became insolent, arrogant, and boastful. Children disobeyed their parents and there was no respect for authority. A whole generation of senseless, faithless, heartless, and ruthless people was born. Paul tells us that they even invented new ways of doing evil.

The world Paul spoke of was a world of terrible evil. It was filled with immorality, murder and deceit. Its inhabitants were selfish, greedy, and bitter. They had turned their hearts from God and the result was devastating. Not only did they practice evil, they also encouraged and approved of those who did so. God's judgment was already on them and their society was suffering the consequences of their evil ways. They lived in a hell on earth and had only the terrible judgment of a holy God and a lake of fire to look forward to in the future.

We see the sinfulness of the people of Paul's day. There is plenty of evidence of that same heart in us as well. We

know the evil of which we too are capable. Were it not for the work of Christ in us, we too would be living under His judgement. How thankful we need to be that Jesus came give us a new way to live.

For Consideration:

- What evidence is there of God in the universe? What do we learn about Him through His creation?
- What evidence do you have that God has given your society over to their evil ways? What is the result?
- Do you see evidence of your sinful nature? What are those evidences? How has the Lord Jesus changed you?
- What does Paul teach us about the wrath of God? Why is it so difficult for men and women to accept a God of wrath?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord for what He reveals to you about Himself in nature.
- Ask God to open the hearts and minds of those around you to the reality of who He is. Ask Him to break their resistance to the truth.
- Thank the Lord that He will judge sin and evil.

- Do you know someone who has never accepted the Lord Jesus and His work? Ask the Lord to forgive them and open their heart to His salvation.
- Thank the Lord for the new heart He has given you.

5

JUDGING OTHERS

Read Romans 2:1-4

In the previous chapter Paul states that no one had an excuse for not honouring God in their lives. Nature spoke powerfully about God and His requirements so that everyone was without excuse.

Paul now shifts his attention to the "religious" person who claimed to honour God. It is quite easy for the "religious" person to judge those who were living a life of rebellion against God. The world in which we live does not see the need to honour God in their lifestyle. How often have we heard the ungodly boast of their immorality? How often in the business community is dishonesty accepted as normal? Our televisions, movies, and entertainment communicate and encourage an immoral lifestyle. The world not only boasts about its evil, it encourages it.

As a church we condemn these practices. From our pulpits we reject the evil of the world system and its mentality. It is to the "spiritual" that Paul now speaks. Those to whom Paul speaks were quick to pass judgment on those who

lived in open rebellion against God and His purposes. Paul reminds us, however, that at whatever point we judge someone else we ourselves will be judged. How easy it is to condemn our neighbour who is living with a woman out of marriage or the person caught in adultery, yet have we looked into our own hearts? Jesus taught that a man did not have to touch a woman to be guilty of immorality. He taught that it was possible to commit adultery in the hearts. You do not have to kill a man or woman to be guilty of murder; you could do so in your mind by wishing them dead.

I remember speaking some time ago with a friend of mine who was telling me about a dream he had one night. In that dream he found himself with another woman. He woke up and repented and cried out to God for forgiveness. I was struck by this. How easy it is to justify our thoughts and dreams. Jesus tells us that if we allow them into our hearts and minds we are guilty. We watch television and allow the immorality, greed, and revenge to well up within us. We feel angry and lustful but we justify it because we say it is not real. Jesus tells us that we need to cleanse our hearts and minds of these terrible thoughts. Our bodies and minds are the temples of the Holy Spirit. When we allow adultery into our minds, we defile the temple. When we allow murder and anger into our hearts and thoughts, we grieve the Holy Spirit.

How easy it is to judge others because they do what we only think of doing. Paul told the Romans that the moment they judged someone else they opened themselves to being judged by God in that same area. God sees the inconsistencies of our heart. If we judge others we had better be sure that we are not guilty of the same sin.

Jesus illustrated this when he told a story about a man who owed a king a large amount of money (see Matthew 18:23-35). The man who owed the money pleaded with the king to forgive his debt. The king had pity on him and pardoned his debt. This same man went out and found a servant who owed him just a little money. When the servant could not pay, he had him thrown into prison. When the king heard this, he threw the man he had forgiven in prison until he could repay the debt as well. When the one who had been forgiven his debt judged his servant, he opened himself to the judgement of the king.

We do not have a right to judge someone when we are guilty of the same sin in our heart. Jesus accused the Pharisees because they stood in judgment against their brothers and sisters when they themselves were no better. We who judge need to remember that we will also be judged. We must not sit in judgment against someone else unless we are ready to be judged by God. Remember that God looks deep into the heart.

In verse 2 Paul reminded the Romans that God's judgment was based on truth. He sees past all the hypocrisy and the masks we wear. We may be able to hide our sin from others but God is not deceived, He knows the truth. He will expose our true nature.

When we make ourselves the judge and accuser of our brother or sister, Paul reminds us that we show contempt for the kindness, tolerance, and patience of God. Were it not for these characteristics of God, where would we be today? Are we not all guilty before Him? Do we not all fall short of His standard? God demonstrates His kindness, patience, and tolerance toward us. When we step out and judge a brother or sister in an area where God is demonstrating patience and kindness to us, we take the place of

God. We show contempt for the patience of God. We question the tolerance of God and take it on ourselves to judge our brother. In reality, we are saying that God is wrong to show patience with these individuals. We become judge and accuser, positions that belong to God alone.

When we take the kindness offered us and repay others with bitterness and judgment we mock God's kindness. Imagine giving someone a gift and watching him or her use it against you. This is what we do when we judge others. The forgiven and pardoned sinner now condemns his brother and sister. He who has been shown mercy does not show mercy to his brother. This is a serious matter that will quickly bring the wrath of God on us.

There is an important lesson for us here. Instead of judging others in the body of Christ, we need to bless and encourage one another. Before condemning others, we need to look at our own hearts and lives. We who have been spared from God's judgment must learn to show patience, kindness, and mercy to those who have fallen just as we have.

For Consideration:

- Have you ever judged others? What does Paul teach us about this in this passage?
- What is the difference between judging others and warning them of the danger of the path they are taking?

- What does this passage teach us about the importance of looking deep into our own hearts before judging others?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to open your heart to the reality of His kindness to you?
- Thank God that He is willing to forgive you. Thank Him that He demonstrates great kindness and tolerance to you in your sin and rebellion.
- Ask God to give you patience and tolerance for your brother and sister who has fallen.

6

JUST REWARDS

Read Romans 2:5-10

In the last section Paul reminded the Romans that when they judged others they opened themselves up to be judged by God. Paul continues with this theme of judgment in this next section of chapter. A vital part of the Gospel that Paul preached had to do with judgement. It was vital that the Romans understood this message. Until they understood the judgement of God for sin and evil, they could never understand the grace and salvation of God.

The apostle begins by speaking to those who were stubborn and unrepentant in heart. They were resisting God and His purpose. He reminds these individuals that they were storing up wrath against themselves. Though they were not presently seeing God's judgment, they were not to be fooled by this. The Day of Judgment was coming for them.

There are many people who live a life of rebellion and sin. Because God does not immediately judge them, they become bolder in rebellion. They think they have gotten away

with their sin. This is not the case. Judgment is accumulating in heaven against them. With each sin, they add to their guilt. The day will come when they will stand before a holy God to give an account of their lives.

Listen to what Jesus says about this in the Gospel of Matthew:

But I tell you that men will have to give account on the Day of Judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned (Matthew 12:36-37)

Every word we speak carelessly will have to be accounted for on the Day of Judgment. Paul reminds the stubborn and unrepentant that with each deed, word, or act of rebellion they stored up more wrath against themselves. Just as we can store up treasures in heaven (Matthew 6:19-20) so those who reject the truth can store up wrath and judgment.

Paul goes on in verse 6 to tell the Romans that God will reward each person according to what he or she has done (verse 6). There are rewards or punishments for faithfulness and disobedience. God is not blind to our rebellion. He is also aware of our efforts and sacrifices for His kingdom. Those who persist in doing good, who seek glory, honour, and immortality, will receive eternal life from God (verse 7). Those who are self-seeking reject the truth, and follow evil, however, will have to face His wrath and anger (verse 8). There are some important details we need to examine here.

Notice in verse 7 that it is those who persist in doing good and seek honour and immortality that will receive eternal

life. If we didn't take the Scripture in its greater context we might assume from this that it is possible to work our way to heaven by doing good. We should not see this here. Paul already told the Romans that the Gospel alone was the power of God for the salvation of all who believe (verse 16).

What does Paul mean when he tells us that those who persist in doing good will inherit eternal life? While salvation is through believing in the Lord Jesus Christ and trusting His work, the test of true belief comes in our actions. Those who truly believe will demonstrate this in their lives.

Jesus told His disciples that if they were to be His followers, they had to take up their cross and follow Him (Mark 8:34). The apostle James reminds us that faith without works is dead (James 2:20). These works are not to merit salvation but the fruit of salvation. To live in obedience for the glory and honour of God is the heart cry of those who believe. Their hearts have been changed. They prove by their good works and changed life that their faith is real.

Paul wanted to make it quite clear that those who are self-seeking and reject the truth would suffer God's anger. There would be trouble and distress for all who did evil (verse 9). This distress and judgment would fall first upon the Jew but also on the Gentile. The message came to the Jews first. They were the first to reject it. They would also be the first to answer for their rejection. The Gentiles, however, were no better. They too turned their backs on the Gospel. They had seen God's dealing with the Jewish nation and still rejected the Saviour. They too would have to answer for their actions.

The Gospel that Paul preached spoke of a coming judgment for sin and rebellion. Paul did not hide this aspect of

the Gospel. It is not a part of the Gospel that people want to hear today but one that must still be preached.

For Consideration:

- What change came about in your life since you accepted the Lord Jesus as your Saviour?
- True faith is evidenced by deeds, thoughts and attitudes. Do you agree with this statement?
- Why is it so important that we understand that God will judge sin? Why has this doctrine been de-emphasized in our day?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to help you to demonstrate, by your actions, the faith you have in your heart.
- Thank the Lord for the way He has given you a heart that seeks the honour and glory of the Lord.
- Thank the Lord that all the accumulated judgment piled up against you has been wiped out by the blood of Christ when you accepted His work on your behalf.
- Do you know someone who is still bound in sin? Ask God to reveal Himself to them today.

7

CIRCUMCISION OF THE HEART

Read Romans 2:11-29

Paul has been speaking in the first two chapters of Romans about the judgment that is to come. In Paul's day there was a big division between the Jew and the Gentile. The Jews were the chosen people of God. God showed His people, however, that He also had a heart for the Gentile.

There were those who believed that because they were of Jewish nationality they were exempt from much of the judgement of God. This may sound quite radical, but we need to understand that this same mentality exists in our day as well. Have you ever met people who were of the opinion that if they belonged to a good church and did a lot of good deeds they would somehow be spared in the day of God's judgment? These individuals believe that God will balance the good with the bad and as long as there is more good than bad in their lives, they will be safe. They depend

on their good deeds or their church to protect them on the Day of Judgment. Paul addresses this issue here.

He begins by telling the Romans that God does not show favouritism. In this context, he speaks of the Jew and the Gentile. Paul told the Romans in verse 12:

All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law.

It was the Jew who lived under the Law. The Gentiles lived apart from God's law. Both Jew and Gentile, however, would be judged. There is something very important we need to see here in this passage. You may not have been brought up in a Christian church, you may have never heard about the Lord Jesus, but you are still going to be judged just like the Gentiles, who had never heard the Law of God. Those who sin without the law will still perish according to Paul. Even those who have never heard of God's requirements will perish for we are all in need of a Saviour.

Paul told the Romans that creation itself testifies to the power, mercy, and grace of the Creator. It bears witness to the existence and character of God. There is far more in this universe than we have ever seen. Our telescopes and microscopes keep probing the depths of this wonderful creation. The complexity is so great that we have never been able to completely understand even the simplest elements. Anyone who carefully studies this creation must come to the conclusion that there is someone far greater than man who put it all in place. This Creator is worthy of our worship and praise. He is not found in the rocks, stones and idols of men. He is far greater than these. He is not found in the sun, the moon, or the stars—He is their

Creator. The beauty and the power of this creation testify to the character of this God. He is holy and all-powerful and yet very personal and gentle. These facts alone ought to keep us from idolatry and cause us to bow the knee to Him as our Creator God. Add to this that we are all created in His image—that He has given us a sense of His laws in our heart. It is plain that God can justly hold us accountable for the light we have been given. Even though we may have never heard the Scriptures we still have the testimony of our own hearts, creation and the witness of His Holy Spirit. This is enough to judge us. We are without excuse.

If, on the other hand, we have heard the good news and been taught the Scriptures, our responsibility is even greater. God will hold us accountable to live in obedience to what He has revealed to us in His Word.

Paul reminds us in verse 13 that it is not those who have heard the law who are considered righteous but those who put it into practice. This statement was a particular challenge to those who had the law. The Jews of Paul's day boasted that they were the chosen people of God. They lived under the teaching of the Law of Moses but they did not live as the people of God. Again it is important that we understand that this is also true of the church of our day. We do not always see things as God sees them. How easy it is to put on a good front and appear to be holy and righteous before men.

Immorality, dishonesty, and materialism all have been discovered below the surface of the church of our day. The truth is, we can boast of the fact that we are leaders or faithful members in the church but God knows the truth. Ultimately it is not what we think or call ourselves that matters but what God knows to be the truth.

In verse 14 Paul reminded the Romans that there were people, who had never been taught the Law of God who still lived in accordance with its principles. According to Paul these individuals showed that the law of God was written on their hearts. They knew what was right because they were created in the image of God.

God has not only proven that He exists in creation, He has also spoken to us in our inner being. He has created us with a soul that cries out for communion with Him. He has given us a conscience that understands something of His requirements. Paul reminds us in verse 15 that our very own thoughts sometimes accuse and sometimes defend us. In other words, when we do wrong there is something in our hearts that tells us that we have done wrong. When we hurt someone, deep inside we feel the accusation of our conscience. Police investigators understand this concept when they administer a lie detector test. When a person lies something physically happens within him. This is measured by the lie detector. It proves that even the ungodly have a conscience that is bothered when they do wrong. The same thing is true when we do something good. There is a joy and satisfaction that seems to rise up even within the unbeliever when he or she does an act of kindness or reaches out to help someone in need. What Paul is telling us is that God has shown His presence in our very being. He has placed a conscience within us. We can ignore that conscience, but we will live with guilt and shame for doing so.

The day is coming when God will judge each man according to the light He has been given. Those with the law will be judged for how they responded to the law. Those without the law will be judged for the evidence that God has put in creation and in their souls. All, however, will be judged.

In verses 17 to 23 Paul turns his attention to the Jews (but also to all of us who have the Scripture). He reminds us of how proud we can become. It is easy to brag about the fact that we know the Word of God and have a relationship with God. Maybe you have sat for a long time under the instruction of the Word and know the truth of God. You may even be able to teach others. You see yourself as one who is a guide to those who are blind to the Word of God. You are able to lead them into the light of truth by your teaching and preaching. While it is a good thing to teach others the truth, it is more important that we live out that truth in our daily lives.

It is easy to preach but much more difficult to live what we preach. There were those in Paul's day who spoke out against stealing and adultery who had themselves fallen into these sins. They preached and taught the Word of God correctly but they did not live its truth in their lives. God was not fooled by their words. He looked into their hearts and judged them for their hypocrisy.

These sins of hypocrisy are being exposed in our days as well. The sins of preachers and teachers of the Word of God are being revealed. Respected evangelists and church leaders fall into sin. They have preached wonderful messages and many have been touched by their words but they are not living out that truth in their own hearts. When these things are exposed, they bring great dishonour to the name of the Lord. God's name is blasphemed when those who teach do not live what they teach.

Speaking to the Jews of his day, who boasted that they were circumcised as Jews, Paul explained that their circumcision only had limited value. Circumcision was a sign that an individual belonged to the family of God. There is value and significance in belonging to the body of Christ

but God is not looking at these external signs. He is looking deep into our hearts and judges us according to what He sees.

The true believer, according to Paul is not one who has been circumcised or belongs to a certain church but one who lives in obedience to the principles of God's Word.

What was important, to Paul in verse 29, was not an outward sign but an inner sign. It is not the circumcision of the flesh that counts but the circumcision of the heart. When the heart is circumcised the old fleshly ways are cut off. The person whose heart is circumcised has dealt with his sin and walks in the light of truth.

Paul calls for sincerity. He calls for a radical circumcision of the heart. All the fleshly desires are to be cut off. All the angry and lustful thoughts are to be stripped away. The fact that God calls for a circumcision of the heart is important. When God speaks of the heart He speaks of the very core of who we are. It is the place of our passions and emotions and attitudes. We are to be pure in the very core of our being. When the heart is circumcised it is tender to the things of God. It is easy to be religious on the outside, but God is looking for those who will listen to Him and obey Him from the heart. The true believer is one who believes from his heart and who demonstrates the genuineness of his belief by faithful obedience to the Word of God.

For Consideration:

- What kind of things do people depend on in our day to keep them from the judgment of God? What do

we learn here about the foolishness of trusting these things?

- How does the way God looks at us differ from how we look at each other?
- Is it possible to deceive ourselves into thinking that everything is right between God and us when in reality it isn't?
- What do we learn in this section about how God has revealed Himself to us in the creation and through our conscience?
- What does it mean to circumcise our hearts? Has this taken place in your life?

For Praise:

- Thank the Lord that He has revealed Himself through nature, our conscience, and His Word. .
- Ask the Lord to open your heart to allow Him to search it and reveal any hidden sins or wicked attitudes.
- Take a moment to pray that God would help you to truly live what you believe.

8

THE VALUE OF BEING A JEW

Read Romans 3:1-8

Paul has been reminding the Romans that God does not judge on the basis of nationality. He told them in the last section that it was better to be a Gentile who did what is right than a Jew who rejected the truth.

Putting this in contemporary terms we could say: Church membership or baptism will not grant us any favour with God if we do not live according to His purpose in our hearts. Position, church membership or community status makes no difference to God. What He looks for is a heart that is right before Him.

This being the case, the question Paul asks in this next section is this: What advantage is there to being a Jew if it did not guarantee any special favour with God? If God saved those who did not follow the Law of Moses, then what advantage was there in being circumcised? Paul addresses these concerns in this next section.

For the apostle Paul, there were great advantages to being Jewish. First, he told his readers in verse 2 that the Jew had been entrusted with the words of God. It was through the Jewish nation that God revealed His purpose for creation. Through them He introduced Himself to the world. The Old Testament prophets spoke of a Messiah who would come to deliver His people. God used the Jewish believers in the New Testament to share the good news of the Gospel with the world of their day. How indebted we are to the Jewish nation for the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament. No other nation on earth has been so powerfully used to reveal God's purposes as the Jewish nation. What an honour to be given such responsibility and privilege. There could be no greater honour in the world than to be selected by the King of kings to serve Him and be His mouthpiece to the world.

Not every Jew appreciated the privilege and responsibility of being the servants of God. In fact, as a nation they were unfaithful to God and resisted His purpose. Instead of serving their God they rebelled against Him.

Paul reminds the Romans, however, in verse 3 and 4 that the unfaithfulness of the Jews did not keep God from accomplishing His purposes. He used these rebellious people to accomplish His plan for the salvation of the world.

As I examine my own life, I am shocked at how long it has taken me to learn the lessons God has wanted to teach me. How often has my pride gotten in the way? How slow I have been to obey. How is it possible that God could advance His kingdom and assure victory with soldiers like you and me in His army? Paul assures us in verse 4 that the kingdom of God is advanced only because of God's faithfulness. Even when we fail, God remains faithful to His promises. Despite our weaknesses and frailties, God's

purposes will be accomplished. He will not fail. He will use our weakness to accomplish His purpose. He will use our failures to bring glory to His name. He will use our frailties to break down the strongholds of the enemy. This is the incredible thing about the Kingdom of God. It advances despite our shortcomings and failures. The nation of Israel is a perfect example of this. The Old Testament is filled with example after example of Israel's failure yet through this nation the world has come to know the Saviour and the Kingdom of God was expanded.

This brings up another question for Paul and his readers. Paul raises this question in verse 5:

But if our unrighteousness brings out God's righteousness more clearly, what shall we say? That God is unjust in bringing his wrath on us?

Paul is asking what right a sovereign God, who can use our weaknesses to accomplish his glory and extend his kingdom, has to judge us when we fail. If everything turns out right in the end, shouldn't God be happy and not judge us?

To Paul, it was unimaginable that God would not judge humanity for their sin. In verse 6 he tells us that if God did not judge sin in His own people how could He judge it in the world. And if God did not judge sin in the world what kind of God would he be?

Paul knew that God would judge all sin and unfaithfulness. He also knew that God could use the evil purposes of man for good. Because He can use our failures does not mean that we should not be punished. Imagine your child acts irresponsibly and deliberately breaks something in your house. You may be able to fix that object, but does that

mean the child should not be punished for his or her actions? Doesn't the child still need to answer for what he or she has done?

God acts in mercy and kindness in fixing those things we break and healing those we hurt. He will however, call us to account for our actions. The fact that something is fixed does not take away the punishment the person who broke it deserves. God is willing to fix what we break. He is willing to heal what we have harmed but He will not show injustice by ignoring our sin and evil.

As we examine this section of Romans we are reminded that the Kingdom of God is advanced despite our weakness and unfaithfulness. It is advanced through weak and frail individuals, not so much because they are strong and faithful but because God is faithful to His purposes and plans. What a privilege it is for us to be instruments in the hands of such a compassionate, merciful and faithful God.

For Consideration:

- Consider for a moment the privilege you have to be the servant of God? Do you fully appreciate this privilege?
- What encouragement do you find from the fact that even when we are unfaithful God remains faithful?
- Has God ever used your failure to accomplish good? Explain.

- Have you ever found yourself trying to excuse your sinful actions by telling yourself that God will work it all out anyway? What do we learn from this passage about this kind of thinking?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to help you to understand the privilege you have in being His servant.
- Thank the Lord for the ways He uses you despite your shortcomings and failures.
- Ask the Lord to search your heart to show you where you have failed Him. Take a moment to confess these things to Him and ask for His forgiveness.
- Thank the Lord for His faithfulness in your life, even when you were not always faithful to Him.

9

RIGHTEOUSNESS

APART FROM THE LAW

Read Romans 3.9-31

In the last meditation Paul answered the question: "What value is there in being a Jew?" He reminded the Romans that the Jews had been entrusted with God's Word. God used them to communicate His purposes for the world.

In this next section of chapter 3 Paul moves to another important question: If the Jews were the ones entrusted with the Word of God, does that mean that they were better than anyone else? This was certainly the mentality of the Jews of the day. The Jews were God's chosen people. The Gentiles were not permitted in the temple. The Gentile was considered unworthy of salvation.

Paul reminds his readers that while being Jewish was a wonderful privilege, it did not make one better than a Gentile. In fact both the Jew and the Gentile were under sin and the judgment of God. In this regard both Jew and Gentile were on the same level.

To reinforce this Paul quotes a series of Old Testament passages. Remember here that his focus is to show the Jew that he was under sin just like the Gentile. Paul quotes from the Jewish Scriptures to prove his point. This gives weight to his argument since the Jews revered the Scriptures.

Paul begins with two passages, Psalm 14:1-3 and Psalm 53:1-3. Here the Psalmist tells us that there is no one righteous. In fact, no one understood God and His way or even sought after God.

This is our condition without God. Left to ourselves, we would not seek God. Without the Spirit of God we could not possibly understand the things of God or live in His ways. Not one of us is pure before God. Both Jew and Gentile alike are sinners separated from God.

Paul moves from this opening statement to a demonstration of this depravity in real life. He quotes from Psalm 5:9 and Psalm 140:3 regarding the evils of human nature. The sinfulness of the heart of man is revealed in our mouths by the words we speak. Paul reminds the Romans of the deceit, cursing and bitterness that comes out of the human mouth. The words we speak reflect the condition of our heart. As the Psalmist says in Psalm 10:7, "The mouth of the sinner is full of cursing and bitterness." We have all spoken things that have hurt others. We have all spoken bitter and angry words. These words come from within and show us the true condition of our heart.

Not only is there evidence of the sinful nature in the mouth but it is also seen in the feet. Paul quotes Isaiah 59:7, 8 where Isaiah reminds his people that their feet were swift to shed blood. Ruin and misery lined their path. They did not know the way of peace (verse 15). These prophetic

words were spoken to the Jews who claimed to be the children of God, but as Gentiles we understand that we have the same heart.

Paul concludes his series of Old Testament quotes in verse 18 with a quote from Psalm 36:1 where the psalmist reminded his readers that there was no fear of God in their midst. Do we have to look very far in our day to see this very same lack of respect and reverence for God?

Paul quotes these verses to show us something about human nature. I have often asked myself: "What kind of person would I be if I continually gave into the desires of my flesh? What kind of person would I be if I had no fear of God in my heart and did not concern myself with the consequences of my sinful actions?" The answer to that question is terrifying. My sinful nature is obvious. There is the potential within me to accomplish the most terrible of crimes. Apart from Christ I would have no hope.

Scripture makes it clear that our flesh is sinful. Jew or Gentile, pastor or drug addict, we all share this common nature of sin.

Not only is sin clearly demonstrated through our fleshly nature, it is also revealed to us by the Law of God. The Law of God teaches us His requirements. As we examine the requirements of God's Law we see how far short of His standard we have fallen. Our boasting mouths are silenced. The Law of God shows us our guilt. There is not a single person on this earth who can say that he or she has measured up to the standard God has set for us in His Word. Listen to what Paul told the Romans in verse 20:

Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.

Notice what Paul says here in this passage. No one can perfectly keep the law. This means that we are guilty before God. I have often compared our sinful nature to a glass of poisoned water. The poisoned water is not acceptable to God. You can put sugar in that water, or if you have flavour crystals or syrup you can make it taste good, but you cannot remove the poison. This is why no one can ever be declared righteous by the law.

What Paul is telling us here is that both Jew and Gentile suffer from a similar problem. Both are guilty of sin. The Jew had the law but the law could not make him right with God. Likewise, there are many Gentiles who trust in their good deeds to save them but they are only adding flavour crystals to poisoned water. Both Jew and Gentile are sinners and under the judgment of God.

This brings us to another very important question. If we are guilty before a holy God and cannot be saved by the law or by any effort of our own, how can we be saved? Paul answers this question in verse 21. Here he speaks about a righteousness that comes from God apart from the Law. He reminds us that this idea is not his, but something revealed in both the prophets and the Law. This right standing with God does not come to us by any effort on our part. It comes through faith in Jesus Christ and His work. It is a gift from God to all who believe whether they are Jews or Gentiles.

God the Father offered His Son as a sacrifice for us. Paul calls this sacrifice a sacrifice of atonement (verse 25).

Atonement is the means whereby a guilty sinner, incapable of approaching a holy God, is made one with the God he has offended. Paul tells us that this happens through faith in the blood of Christ (verse 25). The blood of Christ refers clearly to the work Christ on the cross.

We were all guilty before God. The Law of God showed the Jews that they could not attain the standard God had laid out for them. Our human nature also gave evidence of the fact that we are sinners separated from God.

Jesus died on the cross as a perfect sacrifice, meeting the legal requirements of justice. He paid our penalty satisfying the justice of God and opening the door for our complete forgiveness and right standing with God.

Paul concludes this section by reminding the Romans that when it came to the matter of salvation there was absolutely no room for boasting. Who can boast of having failed to meet God's standard? All boasting must be in Christ and what He has done for us.

You may have grown up in a Christian home and gone to Bible School or you may have lived a life of sin and evil. None of these things matter. There is only one way to God, namely Jesus Christ. Without Him there is no forgiveness of sin.

Paul concludes with a final question. If we are made right with God through the work of Jesus, then is the law useless? Paul answers this by telling the Romans that those who know the forgiveness of God will uphold the law of God. Those of us who know the forgiveness of the Lord Jesus experience a change in our lives. It is our joy to walk in obedience to God and His ways. It is our desire to please and honour Him in our lives.

When it comes to the question of salvation, we are all at the same level. Being a Jew was a wonderful privilege but it did not guarantee salvation. When it comes to salvation, all of us owe everything to the Lord Jesus. There is nothing we can boast of. God declares righteous those who come to His Son and trust in His work. He pardons their sin and restores them to a relationship with Himself.

For Consideration:

- What evidence is there of sin in your life? How does your sinful nature reveal itself in you?
- Paul presents a right standing with God here that is apart from the law. What does he mean by this?
- What is the righteousness that comes from God? How do we receive this right standing with God?
- What is the difference between being declared righteous on the basis of Christ's work and seeking to be righteous in our own merit?
- Why did Jesus need to die on the cross?

For Prayer:

- If you have never opened your heart to receive the forgiveness and new life that Christ wants to give you, take a moment right now to do so.
- Thank the Lord for the fact that He demonstrated His love to you by dying on the cross.

- Thank the Lord for a salvation that is given as a gift and has nothing to do with us.

10

ABRAHAM, DAVID AND SALVATION BY FAITH

Read Romans 4:1-12

In the last section Paul opened the pages of the Old Testament to show that both Jew and Gentile alike were under sin and in need of salvation. Paul told the Romans that there was a right standing with God that came by faith in the work of the Lord Jesus (Romans 3:22). For many of the Jews this was a strange idea. Paul wanted to show his readers, however, that this was not some strange new doctrine but rather one that was rooted in the faith of the Jewish nation from its beginning.

As we continue in this next section Paul instructs the Romans about Abraham, the father of the Jews. Paul reminds his readers about what Abraham discovered with regard to salvation. He shows them in verse 2 that if Abraham had been made right with God as a result of his works then he would have had something to boast about. In verse 3, however, Paul quotes from Genesis 15:6. Speaking of the righteousness of Abraham the passage says:

"Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness."

The passage is very clear. Abraham was not right before God on the basis of his good life or work but on the basis of his belief in God's promise.

In verse 4 Paul explains the difference between work and a gift. If a man works for something, his employer is obliged to give him his wages. A gift, however, is very different. A gift is not given out of obligation but out of a desire to bless the recipient. This is how it is with salvation. We do not work for salvation as if God was obliged to provide it to us. It is given to us because of God's great love. Our responsibility is simply to trust God (verse 5). Salvation is not about working and expending effort to please a perfect and holy God. It is not about trying to live a perfect life so that He will be obliged to reward us and give us entrance into heaven. What Paul is telling us is that salvation is a gift. And if salvation is a gift, then we cannot work for it or earn it in any way. Imagine offering a gift to a friend who insisted that he pay you for it. The moment he pays you, your gift is no longer a gift.

There are many people who try to pay for their salvation by good works or efforts of some kind, but Paul demonstrates that, even in the book of Genesis, Abraham was shown that righteousness was not given on the basis of what he did but rather by trusting and receiving what God was offering.

Abraham was not the only one to learn this lesson. David also spoke about a salvation that came apart from works. He spoke of a right relationship with God that was given as a gift to undeserving and sinful men. Paul quotes from Psalm 32:1-2:

Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him.

David is telling his readers that the Lord is willing to forgive their transgressions never to count their sin against them again. This is a wonderful promise. David paints a picture of a man who is stained by sin. He has fallen short of the standard God has laid out in His Holy Word. As we look at this man stained with sin and evil, we see the hand of God reach out to him and cover his sin. We hear the declaration of God that this man's sins will never be held against him. The guilty person is forgiven. This is a pure act of grace, mercy and compassion on God's part. The undeserving sinner is pardoned. David recognized that we all fall short of the standard of God but God was willing to forgive.

Paul speaks in verse 9 about this blessedness of being forgiven. He asks his readers: Is the blessing of forgiveness only for the circumcised Jew? Doesn't God also forgive the uncircumcised Gentile who has never lived in obedience to the law of God? To answer this, Paul reminds the Jews that when God told Abraham that his faith was credited to him as righteousness, he did so before Abraham was circumcised. This was very significant for Paul. What this said was that a man can be right before God without being circumcised.

If you find yourself trying to do things to be good enough to receive the salvation of the Lord, then you don't understand the nature of a gift. You can't earn a gift. You can't do anything to pay for it or to prepare yourself to receive it. You simply have to receive it. Don't insult the Lord by trying to pay for what He has already paid for in full. Don't turn

away His offer because you want to be good enough to pay for it.

Abraham received God's gift simply by believing. He didn't have to be circumcised or work for it at all. David speaks about a God who is willing to cover all our sins. Both men remind us that God wants to forgive and cover our sins. We just need to let Him do it.

Abraham, Paul tells us, is the father of the uncircumcised believers (verse 11). The Jews claimed that Abraham was their father, but he is also the father of the believing Gentiles because he received a right standing even before he was circumcised. He calls both Jew and Gentile to walk in his footsteps and seek a righteousness that comes as a gift through faith apart from the Jewish Law.

For Consideration:

- What do we learn about the Old Testament teaching of salvation by faith apart from the law?
- How did Abraham enter a right relationship with God?
- How do people try to merit their salvation today?
- What does David's teaching about the forgiveness of God teach us about salvation by faith apart from works?

- How is Abraham the father of the uncircumcised? Why is it important that Abraham was credited with righteousness before he was circumcised?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that He offers salvation as a gift that cannot be earned?
- Do you know someone who has a hard time accepting the fact that salvation is a free gift? Take a moment to pray for that person. Ask God to give you an opportunity to share these truths with them.

11

BY FAITH, ABRAHAM

Read Romans 4:13-25

Paul has been speaking about the fact that salvation is by faith and not by obedience to the law. In the last meditation we saw how he brought his readers back to the Old Testament to prove that both Abraham and David taught about a righteousness by faith apart from the law. He continues on the same theme in this section.

In verse 13 gives a reminder that it was not by means of the law but by faith that Abraham and his descendants received the promise to be "heir of the world."

God promised Abraham that He would make Him to be the father of many nations and that all nations on the earth would be blessed through him (see Genesis 17:3-8). This promise was something Abraham could not possibly have understood in its entirety. There was no human reasoning that could explain how this would happen. Abraham, in fact, did not even see the fulfilment of that promise before he died. Yet through this one man the nation of Israel was

born. The Lord Jesus as His descendant would bring salvation not only to the Jews but to the whole world. People from every nation have become part of the family of God's people. This all began as a promise believed by faith.

Paul goes on to remind us in verse 14 that if we could be saved by means of the law then this promise of a Saviour would be worthless. If we could be saved and made righteous by means of the law, then Jesus' death would not have been necessary. The law showed us our sin and our guilt before God. The law cannot give us life; it can only show us our need. The law can guide us but cannot enable us to keep its standards. As a result, all it can bring is condemnation. This is why there needed to be another way. That way is the way of faith.

The faith that Abraham demonstrated in the promise of God to give him a son and make him the father of many nations is the faith we need. The promise comes to us just like it did to Abraham. All you have to do is open your heart and believe what God says. Paul reminds us that because the promise comes by faith and not by our meriting it, it is a demonstration of God's grace and unmerited favour.

Because the promise of a Saviour and the salvation He offers does not come by means of obeying the law, it is offered not only to those who have lived under the law but also to those who have never heard the law at all. In other words, this righteousness is available to the religious as well as the pagan. It is available to those who have tried their best to honour God as well as those who have lived a life of rebellion.

Abraham is pictured as the father of all nations. He is the father of the Jews who were under the law, but because he was a man of faith and God credited this faith to him as

righteousness before he even lived under the law, he is also the father of all other nations as well.

Notice in verse 17 that Paul describes God as the "God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were." In the context of this chapter, Paul is referring to Abraham, Sarah, and their child Isaac. Sarah was an old woman when she gave birth to Isaac. Her years of child bearing were past. When the angel told Sarah that she would bear a child again, she laughed in disbelief. She failed to understand that God was a God who gives life to the dead. God put life in her dead womb and gave her a son.

God also "calls the things that are not as though they are" (verse 17). This is exactly what happened in the life of Abraham and Sarah. Sarah said she could not possibly have a child. Science and medicine agreed with Sarah. God proved Sarah, science, and medicine wrong. He gave her a son when it was impossible for her to have one. God called what was impossible, possible.

This is the God we serve. He is a God who gives life to what is dead and makes the impossible happen. Is your marriage dead? God can bring it back to life again. Do you feel that a child has wandered so far away from God that it is impossible for him or her to come back? God can restore that child. God is able to make the impossible happen. Are you dead to the things of God—He can give you life even when it seems impossible to you.

Abraham understood by faith that God could bring life out of death. He understood that God was a God of the impossible. While things did not make sense to him, Abraham believed. Notice in verse 18 that Abraham believed against all hope. In other words, everything in him told him that it

was impossible yet he believed that God could do it. Verse 19 tells us that Abraham had to face the fact that his body and that of his wife were as good as dead, yet without weakening in his faith he believed that God would do the impossible. He believed that if God promised him a son then nothing could stop that from happening. Nothing made sense but he knew God would be faithful to His word. Abraham was fully persuaded that God had the power to do as He promised (verse 21). His faith was not in himself or his ability but in the God who brought life from death and did what was impossible. God credited Abraham's faith as righteousness (verse 22).

Paul highlights the phrase "it was credited to him" (verse 23). He tells us clearly that these words were not for Abraham alone. When God credited righteousness to Abraham by faith he did so to demonstrate to all of us that this is how He wants to move in our lives as well. Paul makes it clear that God will credit righteousness in the same way to us who believe in His Son Jesus (verse 24).

Abraham was credited with righteousness because he believed the promise that God would bring life from his wife's dead womb. God will credit that same righteousness to those who believe in His Son who rose from the dead for their salvation. He will give life to our dead souls just as he gave life to Sarah's dead womb.

What Paul is telling us is that this offer of salvation and righteousness is received by believing that Jesus took our sins, died on the cross, and rose victorious after paying the penalty. There is no more work to be done. All Abraham could do was believe. He and his wife no longer had the potential to have children. He couldn't make it happen. If the promise of God was to be fulfilled it would have to be God that did it from start to finish. When it comes to our

salvation, all we can do is believe in what the Lord has done and promised. He has done the work of securing our pardon from His Father. All that remains now is for us to believe and receive from Him what He has done. Salvation is not merited by observance of the law. It is received as a gift by faith in a God who has done it all. This, according to Paul, was one of the great lessons the life of Abraham taught.

For Consideration:

- What do we learn in this passage about the faith of Abraham?
- Are there any "impossible" things in your life today? What are they? What does this chapter say to you about those impossible situations?
- How was a righteous standing credited to Abraham? Could observing the law have given him this standing?
- If there was no salvation by means of the observance of the law, why was the law given?
- How is the life of Abraham an example of salvation by faith?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord for the fact that He has done everything for our salvation.

- Thank God that He is willing to declare righteous all who will come by faith to Him through the finished work of His Son
- Place those impossible situations you face in the hands of the Lord. Trust Him to do what is right.
- Do you know people who are still trying to merit their salvation? Take a moment to pray that God would show them the truth that salvation is a gift received by faith.

12

HOPE OF THE GLORY OF GOD

Read Romans 5:1-5

The emphasis of the first few chapters of the book of Romans is on the gift of righteousness by faith in Jesus Christ. What is the result of this righteousness in the life of the believer?

Paul tells us in verse 1 that since we have been justified through faith, we now have peace with God through the Lord Jesus. Justification is a legal declaration of right standing with God. The work of the Lord Jesus removes all barriers between God and the believer. My sin is cast from me and will never be held against me again. No matter how terrible and sinful my past has been or how many times I have failed, if I'm justified, I am treated just as if I had never sinned.

This justification comes through faith and not by anything we have done. Paul has already gone to great lengths to show us that our salvation is not by works but is a gift from God. Being justified has nothing to do with how hard we try to serve and obey the Lord. It is the gift of God to all who

will receive His pardon and favour by faith in the work of the Lord Jesus. The result of this is peace with God.

Paul reminds us in verse 2 that through faith in Jesus we have now gained access to the grace of God. Prior to the work of the Lord Jesus we were under God's divine wrath. The work of Jesus on the cross, however, unlocked the treasure house of God's grace for us. Sin no longer separates those who trust in Christ from that wonderful blessing. The moment we accepted the Lord Jesus, the storehouse of forgiveness, intimacy, and peace was opened wide for us to enjoy. This is our inheritance as children of the King.

Notice in verse 2 that we do not have to wait until we get to heaven to receive grace and blessing. Paul reminds the believers in Rome that they were already standing in that grace. We can now experience the blessings of God. His peace, forgiveness, provision, and guidance are all ours right now.

Because of this justification by faith we can also rejoice in the hope of the glory of God (verse 2). We know that the day will come when Christ will finally overcome sin's effects, death, and the devil. Those who know forgiveness and the righteousness of Christ will enter His presence and live in His glory forever. What a wonderful hope we have. This hope comes because God has declared us to be His through the work of His Son.

Being declared just and in a right standing before God does not mean that we will not have to suffer in this life. Suffering and trials are normal for the believer. Paul tells us in verse 3, however, that the one who has been justified and is now at peace with God can rejoice in his trials and sufferings. He can do this because he knows that suffering

produces perseverance, which is the ability to remain under pressure without losing hope.

Perseverance is necessary to produce character in us. It would be wonderful if we could develop character without ever having to face trials and suffering, but this is not how things work in the Kingdom of God. It is the heart of God to develop our character and make us more like the Lord Jesus. Sometimes the way God develops our character is through the trials and sufferings we face. Moses had to spend forty years in the desert of Midian in order to be humbled so God could use him. Job had to lose everything he had – his family, his property, his health – in order to be transformed into the man God wanted him to be. It takes time for metal to be refined in the fire. It takes time for bread to be cooked in an oven. It takes time for fruit to ripen on the tree and for vegetables to be ready to pick in the garden. The same principles are true in our spiritual life. God produces perseverance in us so that through this perseverance our character can be developed.

Struggles and trials, if they continue, can diminish our hope and cause us to doubt. Sometimes, as the suffering is prolonged, we begin to lose hope of ever seeing the light at the end of the tunnel. Paul tells us here, however, that while perseverance develops character, character develops hope. As we persevere under the discipline of the Lord we are developed more and more into His image. As the character of Jesus is developed in us so is our hope. As our character is transformed we learn to trust in what the Father is doing. As we are shaped into His image, the more confident we are in His Word and His promises. We understand more the depths of His love for us. We know that no matter what happens we are secure in Him.

Paul reassures us that the hope we have will not disappoint us (verse 5). God pours out His love into the hearts of those He makes right with Him. Those who know this love in their heart face their trials and suffering with assurance and confidence in God.

What is the result of the justifying work of God in our lives? We have peace with God. All barriers have been removed. We have access to His wonderful grace and a hope that will never disappoint. God pours out His love into our hearts through His Holy Spirit whom He also gives to all who believe. These gifts are too wonderful for us to understand but they are all the result of the work of Christ and God's declaration of our right standing before Him through the work of His Son.

For Consideration:

- What does it mean to be justified?
- What are the benefits given to those who are justified by faith in Jesus Christ?
- Why is it necessary to persevere under the discipline of God in our lives? What does this perseverance produce in us?
- How has God poured out His love into your heart? What evidences are there of this love?

For Prayer

- Thank the Lord that we can presently experience some of the blessings of heaven.
- Ask God to give you grace to persevere so that He can produce the character of Christ in you.
- Ask God to forgive you for the times you have grumbled and complained as He was producing the character of Jesus in you.
- Thank the Lord for the wonderful hope you now have as a result of His work in your life.

13

WHEN WE WERE POWERLESS

Read Romans 5:6-11

In Romans 5:6-11 Paul makes yet another powerful argument for a salvation that comes as a gift through God's unmerited favour. He reminds us that it was when we were powerless and enemies of God that Jesus came to save us. It is important that we consider this in greater detail.

Paul reminds us in verse 6 that Jesus came at just the right time. He came when we were powerless. It is important that we see the point Paul is making here. He is telling us that we were powerless when it came to saving ourselves. The law had been in place for many years, but no one could be saved by observing that law. If anything, the law proved that we could never measure up to the standard God had set for us. The law condemned us. We were guilty before God and deserving of death. We were drowning in a great sea of sin when the Lord Jesus reached out to us to offer us His salvation. He came to take our penalty on Himself.

It is also important for us to see that Christ died for us when we were sinners. He died because we were in need. He did not die for people who could save themselves. His work was an act of mercy and grace toward those who were enemies of God and all He stood for.

In the history of mankind there have been those who willingly died for a friend or a loved one. This, however, is rare in our world. But who would die for an enemy or a hardened criminal? Imagine someone dying for the man who murdered his own child? Imagine a woman choosing to die in place of the man who raped her? This is essentially what Jesus did. He died for us when we were His enemies. We resisted the things of God. Our fleshly nature was totally incompatible with the nature of the Spirit. Deep down in that fleshly nature were the seeds of every kind of evil and sin. It was not for good people that Jesus died but for the sinful.

The greatest expression of the love of God was demonstrated to those who were His enemies. God reached out, not to the righteous, but to sinners in order to bring them to Himself. By dying for us when we were sinners, Christ showed us we did not have to merit the salvation He offered. He showed us that even as rebellious sinners He loved us enough to die for us and make us right before His Father.

Jesus' blood secured our right standing with God. We deserved to pay the penalty for our sin but God, out of His rich mercy through His Son, paid it for us.

Paul reminds us in verse 9 that the one who paid the penalty for us will also save and keep us from the wrath that will be revealed. If, as His enemies, we were reconciled to God by Jesus' death, can we not have the assurance that

He will keep us now that we are His children? If He rescued us as enemies and rebels, will He not care for us now that we are part of His family? We have no reason to doubt Him. In this we can rejoice and have great confidence.

There are several important lessons that we need to learn from this truth. The first is that none of us can merit our salvation. Jesus came to die for sinners who could not reach the standard God had set. He died because there was no way we could merit our salvation. He died for us in our unworthiness. He did so because He loved us even as sinners. We can come to Him just as we are. He has proven that He loves us by taking our penalty. We will never be good enough. We must simply come, confessing that we can't measure up, recognizing that unless He forgives and reconciles us with God we are lost without hope.

The second thing we need to learn is that those who know this forgiveness can live in confidence. If He loved us when we were rebels living in sin, He will certainly not forsake us now that we have been adopted as children? We have all failed in our Christian walk. We all wrestle with the flesh. We all stumble and fall. The enemy often comes to tell us that if we have failed and that we are unworthy of God's love. He tries to get us to believe that God will turn His back on us if we aren't living perfectly. The truth of the matter is that we didn't have to be perfect for the Lord Jesus to die for us and we don't have to be perfect for Him to love us as His children. We should be confident in His care and provision. He will not abandon us now that we are His. In this we can have great assurance and cause for rejoicing.

For Consideration:

- How does Christ's death on the cross prove that salvation is a gift and not merited?
- What confidence does our justification give us to stand before God?
- What confidence should we have as believers knowing that Jesus was willing to die for us when we were sinners? Will He keep us now that we are His children?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that He loved us even as rebellious sinners.
- Thank Jesus that He loves us even when we fail as believers.
- If you have never experienced the Lord's forgiveness, come to Him right now and confess your sin. Ask Him to forgive you and give you a right standing before the Father.

14

ONE MAN

Read Romans 5:12-21

In this section Paul shows us how sin entered the world and became a major problem for us as human beings. He also shows us how the Lord Jesus came to earth to solve this problem and offer us eternal life.

Paul begins with the reminder that sin entered the world through one man. Way back at the dawn of time, God created man and woman and placed them in the Garden of Eden to keep it. God placed a tree in the Garden and forbade Adam and Eve to eat its fruit. He told them that if they ate its fruit they would die.

God placed a test before Adam and Eve. In doing so He granted them free will and the ability to choose to love Him or to disobey. God wanted that decision to be a willing choice from their hearts.

Adam and Eve chose to eat from the forbidden tree. The effect of that first sin was evident immediately. Adam and

Eve's intimacy with God and with each other was broken. There were, however, other implications to this sin.

In verse 12 we read that death came as a consequence of sin. The death we speak of here is both physical and spiritual. Adam would return to the dust from which he was created. Worse than this, however, his sin now separated him from God.

It is important to note in this verse that Adam and Eve's sin did not affect them alone. Verse 12 tells us that death came to all of humanity because all sinned. Notice here that even before their descendants were born they were declared to be sinners. Every human being in the line of Adam would be born in sin.

Paul reminds his readers in verse 13 that sin was in the world even before the Law of God was given. While sin existed before the law was given to Moses, people didn't really understand the extent of their sin without it. The law, revealed what God had expected all along. People now had a standard to compare themselves to. The result was not favourable. The law became a mirror revealing the great distance humanity had fallen from God and His purposes.

Even those who lived before the Law of God was given were under the condemnation of death (verse 14). This death and separation from God was in effect even though there was no written law to break. Though we may never have heard about the requirements of God, we are still guilty. Sin separates us all from God and places us under His judgment. Imagine a man or woman saying: "I can't have cancer because I never heard of such a thing." So it is with sin and death. We may not understand our situation

or we may be ignorant of it, but that doesn't mean it isn't going to destroy us.

The people who lived from the time of Adam to Moses did not have the knowledge that came through the Law but they were still under the curse of sin. There are men and women all over this world who do not understand what God has to say about sin but they are still separated from God and under His judgement.

Paul told the Romans in verse 14 that Adam was a pattern of the one who was to come. He explains what he means by this by contrasting what happened to humanity through Adam's sin with what happens through the Lord Jesus. In verse 15 he told the Romans that the Lord Jesus came to deal with the sin that came through Adam. All died as a result of the sin that came through Adam. The grace of the Lord Jesus, however, overflows to many. Adam brought death, Jesus brought grace. Because of Adam's sin, the whole world was placed under the judgment of God. On the other hand, through the death of the Lord Jesus we can be declared right with God (verse 16).

While Adam brought death to all of us, those who receive God's provision through the Lord Jesus will receive the gift of righteousness (verse 17). Adam's sin resulted in the condemnation of the whole world, but the work of Christ brings justification and life to all who will come to Him. Through the disobedience of one many were made sinners; through the obedience of Jesus many can be made right with God.

There is a remedy for sin and separation from God. The Lord Jesus came to pay the penalty so that those who believe in Him can be declared righteous. The sad reality is that all too many people do not understand that they are

under sin and judgement. I have met individuals who remind me that they don't lie, cheat, steal, or commit adultery. They love their neighbours, go to church and are fine citizens of their country. These individuals don't think they are sinners. This is why the Lord gave His law through Moses. In verse 20 Paul reminds us that the law was given so that trespasses would increase. What he means by this is that God gave the law to show us just how far we are from His standard. The law acts like a mirror and shows us who we really are. It gives evidence of a sinful nature.

Paul concludes in verses 20 and 21 by telling us that where sin increased so does the grace of God. Jesus offers His grace and forgiveness to all who will come to Him recognizing their sin. Adam opened the door and sin came flooding through. Sin ravaged the entire planet. There was no one who was not affected by it. Sin was going to take us all into death and eternal separation from God. But there is hope. The Lord Jesus died for our forgiveness. Sin came through one man but through Jesus we can be free from its evil effects.

For Consideration:

- What was the result of Adam opening the door to sin? What evidence is there of our sin nature in the world today?
- Have you ever met individuals who did not believe they were sinners? What does this passage have to say about this?
- What role did the law have?

- How does Jesus resolve the problem of sin?

For Prayer:

- Take a moment to thank the Lord for coming to offer us a solution to the sin problem.
- Thank the Lord that you have been set free from the condemnation of sin.
- Take a moment to pray for a friend who does not yet understand that he or she is under the condemnation of God.

15

SHALL WE SIN?

PART 1

Read Romans 6:1-14

Paul has been showing that salvation was by grace through faith in the work of the Lord Jesus Christ and not the result of obedience to the law. He also reminds the reader that the Lord is greater than their sin. He demonstrated this in chapter 3 by showing how God used the sinful nation of Israel to accomplish His purposes.

This teaching brings up two sets of questions which Paul addresses in this passage. The first set relates to our behaviour. If we are no longer under the law, do we have an excuse to sin? If the forgiveness of our sin demonstrates how loving and gracious God is, then why don't we sin even more so that the world can see how forgiving and loving a God we have?

The second set of questions relates to our responsibility to the law. If we are no longer under the law, does that mean

we no longer have to keep it? Can we do whatever we want because we are not under the law anymore?

Paul addresses the first question in verse 1, "What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?" Let's consider this question in some detail. God demonstrated His love to us when we were sinners. He reached out to us and forgave our sins. He sent His only Son to die on the cross to prove His wonderful grace and forgiveness. If God's grace is seen in the forgiveness of our sin, would it not make sense, then, to keep sinning and let God demonstrate just how much grace He really has for us?

Paul answers this question in verse 2 with a very definite "No!" He told the Romans that as believers they died to sin and they could no longer live to it any more. He reminded them that all who were baptized into Christ were baptized into His death. They were buried with Him through baptism so that just as Jesus rose from the dead they too could be raised.

There are two things we need to consider in these verses. First, Paul tells us as believers that we have died to sin. When the Lord Jesus went to the cross He took our sin on Himself. By accepting the work of the Lord Jesus on our behalf we accepted the death of our sin on the cross with Him. Those sins and the old way of life are now dead to those who accept the work of Christ.

The second thing we need to see is that our baptism is a symbol of this death to sin. Paul told the Roman believers that they were baptized into Christ's death. Believers of various persuasions practice different forms of baptism. For those who practice immersion, the symbolism is clear.

The candidate is taken to the water and immersed or buried under the water. This is a reminder that the individual being baptised identifies with the death of Christ on his or her behalf. The person being baptised, however, does not remain buried under the water. He or she is brought up again as a symbol of the new life they receive in Christ.

In baptism, we identify with Christ in His death and with the new position he has given us before the Father. In the Old Testament when a man divorced his wife he had no right to return to her. This is how it is with sin. Those who pledge their allegiance to Christ have divorced or died to sin and have no more right to return to it.

Consider a second example. Imagine a couple who decide to sell their house. The day comes when they find a buyer and the legal transaction is made. From that day on, they have no more right to the house. The house is still standing but it does not belong to them anymore. To enter that house without invitation would be trespassing.

This is how it is in our relationship with Christ now. We have signed over our allegiance to the Lord Jesus. We no longer have any right to return to our old ways.

Paul reminds us that our old self was crucified with Christ, (verse 6), so that we would no longer be slaves to it. Our contract with sin and the old self has been annulled. Just as death brings an end to a marriage so our death with Christ brings an end to our contract with sin and obligates us to Christ as our new Master. The commitment of the believer now is to his or her Lord.

In verses 8-10 Paul reminded the Romans that if they died with Christ they would also be raised with Him to life. When Christ died and was raised from the dead He proved to all

that He had overcome the power of death. He proved that He was its master. If He has conquered the power of death, then death has no power over Him. Because Jesus conquered death, we who belong to Him will also conquer it in His name. As believers and children of God, we too have victory over death and hope of resurrection to be forever with our Lord.

Notice that Paul tells us that Christ died for sin "once for all." In other words, He died once for all sin, and all who would come to Him. His death conquered the power of all sin forever. This brings up an important question. If Jesus died to conquer sin, why do we still see evidence of sin in our day?

It is true that Jesus died to defeat sin. It is also true that we still see sin all around us in our day. How do we reconcile these two seemingly contradictory statements? When the Lord Jesus died, all legal hold sin had on us was broken. We were set free from its condemnation. While we still sin in this world, the cross of Christ covers those sins so that they will no longer keep us from God.

There are many diseases that were at one time fatal. Today we have come to discover cures for those diseases so that people no longer have to die from them. A simple needle or pill can remedy what used to be fatal. While we have conquered many fatal diseases over the course of history people still suffer from those diseases. The difference is that while we may still get sick there is a cure. The power of these illnesses has been broken.

This is how it is with sin. The Lord Jesus gave us the cure for sin. His death has conquered the power of sin. No longer do we have to face an eternity without God because

of our sin. Sin is still all around us but its power has been broken at the cross.

If there is a cure for sin, why would anyone continue to live in it? Why would the person who has received life want to go back to death? If we have seen the light why would we want to return to the darkness? If we are healthy why would we want to become sick again? Not only do we no longer have the right to return to sin but it would be foolish for us to even consider it.

Paul challenges us to no longer let sin reign in our bodies. We don't have to let it reign in us because Jesus has brought us the cure. We don't have to listen to the evil desires of the old fleshly nature. We are no longer slaves to sin. Notice however, that there is a choice we need to make. We need to choose the life of Christ and turn from sinful ways. We are to make a choice not let sin reign in our bodies. When sin comes we are to conquer it and cast it out. We are no longer to let our bodies be used as instruments to sin and wickedness. Instead, we are to offer ourselves completely and fully to the Lord Jesus.

Those have accepted the work of Christ must turn their backs on sin. Just as a husband commits himself to be faithful to his wife so the believer must now understand his or her commitment to God. There will be temptations on the path, but those temptations must be resisted. We must consider ourselves dead to sin but alive to God. Those who say, "Let's sin so that grace will be more evident," only prove that they do not understand what God's grace has accomplished.

For Consideration:

- What does it mean to die to sin? Does this mean that we no longer sin?
- How is baptism a symbol of what happens when we come to the Lord Jesus?
- If Christ came to defeat sin, why do we still see evidence of it in our day?
- What is our obligation to Christ now that we have "died with Him?"
- Are you living as one who has an allegiance to the Lord Jesus?

For Prayer:

- Thank God for the way He has provided a cure for sin.
- Ask the Lord to help you to be faithful to Him and His purposes.
- Ask God to show you any area of your life that needs to be more fully surrendered to Him.

16

SHALL WE SIN?

PART 2

Read Romans 6:15-23

Paul has been dealing with some objections to his teaching on salvation by grace through faith in the Lord Jesus. In the last meditation we looked at the first of these objections, namely, that if our sin demonstrates the grace and forgiveness of God then wouldn't we have an excuse to sin so that the world might see the grace of God even more?

The second objection to Paul's teaching comes in verse 15 and will be the focus of this chapter. Paul has been teaching that we are no longer under the law but under grace. There were those who objected to Paul's teaching saying that if we do away the Law of God then people could live however they pleased.

Paul answers this objection in verse 16 by telling his readers that when they offered themselves to be slaves to someone they were required to obey that master. Paul reminded them that they used to be slaves to sin and were

separated from God. Now, however, they had "wholeheartedly" chosen to embrace a new way of life based on the teaching they had received (verse 17). That teaching was what Paul had been explaining to them about the way of righteousness by faith.

Notice in verse 18 that this teaching set them free from the power of sin. When they understood why Jesus came and the offer He was making to them, they wholeheartedly accepted this teaching. They reached out to Jesus and offered themselves to him to be servants of righteousness.

Paul illustrates this in "human terms" by reminding his audience of how they used to offer their bodies as slaves to impurity, and ever increasing wickedness. Having lived in immorality and great wickedness, they understood what Paul was talking about. Their bodies had been dedicated to pleasure and sinful desires. Paul tells them that just as they had offered their bodies to such sin and wickedness, now they were to offer them to God and righteousness. As slaves of sin they knew nothing about the righteousness of Christ. They were not governed by the Word of God or by the leading of the Holy Spirit (verse 20). Jesus, however, legally purchased them from their old master of sin at the cost of His life. He bought them for Himself. They were now His slaves.

Paul asked the Romans to consider the benefit they had derived from living as slaves to sin (verse 21). They would have been ashamed as they looked back on their lives under the cruel taskmaster of sin. They filled their lives with pleasure and immorality but they were left empty, dry, and ashamed of their lives. There was no hope in this life of sin and evil.

What a difference they were now experiencing as servants to Christ! The benefits of living in Christ and under His Lordship could not be compared to what they had experienced under the bondage and slavery of sin. They now had a guarantee of eternal life in the presence of Christ. Day by day they were becoming more like the Lord Jesus in their actions and thoughts. There was meaning and purpose in life. Why would they ever desire to return to their former master?

Those who have come to the Lord and become His servants have seen the difference between living as slaves to sin and living for Christ. They have understood the bondage of living in sin. They have also seen the joy of being a servant of Christ. There is no comparison.

Paul concludes his argument in verse 23 with a very compelling final reason for turning from sin and evil:

For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The argument here is this: If we are not under the law does this mean we can sin? Paul makes it very clear that sin only leads to death. The way of the Lord Jesus, however, leads to eternal life. Why would those who have been set free from the bondage of sin and evil want to return to this cruel taskmaster whose only reward was death and eternal separation from God.

When we come to the Lord Jesus we are set free from the slavery of sin and became children of righteousness. We are Christ's servants. To return to sin would be to deny our commitment to Christ who has set us free. To place ourselves under the lordship of sin would be to misunderstand what we have in the Lord Jesus. Given the great work He

has done on our behalf, it should be our delight to obey Christ and rejoice in the wonderful blessings of obedience to Him. Those who say that the doctrine of salvation by grace will lead to sin have never truly experienced the wonderful joy of salvation by grace.

For Consideration:

- In what way could it be said that you were a slave to sin?
- Do you remember the day when you accepted the Lord Jesus as your Saviour? Did you offer yourself to Him that day? What does this imply in everyday living?
- What difference did you see in your life when you became a servant of Christ?
- If you are no longer under the law does that mean you can do as you please? Explain.
- What are the rewards of obedience to Christ?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that He set you free from slavery to sin.
- Ask Christ to open your heart to understand the implications of being now a slave to righteousness.

- Thank Jesus that He is a good and faithful master unlike our former one.
- Ask the Lord to make you a more willing servant of righteousness.
- Ask God to forgive you for the times you have failed to serve Him faithfully.

DEAD TO THE LAW

Read Romans 7:1-6

In this next section of his letter to the Romans, Paul speaks about how those who are alive to Christ have been set free from the Law. To emphasise his point, Paul reminded the Romans that the law only had authority over a living person. Paul illustrates this by using the example of marriage.

The Jewish law bound a woman to her husband for as long as he lived. If the husband died, she was released from him and free to marry another man. Death released the partners from their obligations to each other.

Paul explains in verse 3 that if a woman married another man while her husband was still alive, she was considered to be an adulteress. If her husband died, however, this woman was free to marry another man without any further obligation to her first husband. She did not sin by marrying another man if her first husband was dead.

The point Paul is making here is this: When the Lord Jesus died on the cross, we died with Him to the way of the

law. Those who have died with Christ have no more obligation to the law. Jesus paid the penalty for our sin and set us free from our obligation and debt to the law. We are now free to follow another way, the way of righteousness by faith in Christ apart from the law.

Paul reminded the Romans that they used to be controlled by their sinful nature. All kinds of evil passions sprung from that evil nature. We are constantly at war with them. The old nature flared up in anger, lust, greed, and envy resulting in both spiritual and physical death.

Notice in verse 5 that Paul told the Romans that their sinful passions were aroused by the law. In other words, the Law of God showed God's people what was sinful and exposed the evil that controlled their hearts, but it could not tame that evil.

Paul told the Romans in verse 6 that by dying to the way of the law they were set free to follow a new way, the way of the Spirit. Paul will describe this new way later in his letter.

What is important for us to understand from this passage is that something happened when the Lord Jesus died. The penalty for our sin was death. Jesus died on our behalf. This means that legally I died with him. With my death I was set free from my obligations to the way of the law. I am no longer legally bound to the law but to a new way. The way Paul describes as "the new way of the Spirit" (Romans 7:6). We will examine this "new way of the Spirit" in more detail later in this commentary.

For Consideration:

- What does it mean to die to the way of the law?
- How does Paul use the illustration of marriage to show that we are free from the old way of the law?
- How did we die with Jesus on the cross? What is the implication of our death with Christ?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that He took our penalty on Himself when He died on the cross.
- Thank the Lord we died with Him on the cross.
- Ask the Lord to help you to understand what it means now to live in the "new way of the Spirit."

IS THE LAW SINFUL?

Read Romans 7:7-13

In the last meditation we saw that we have died to the old way of the law. Through that law no one is declared righteous. Through Christ there is a new way. His death paved the way for the forgiveness of sin and the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Those who accept the Lord Jesus as their Saviour and receive the Holy Spirit know this new nature in them. We no longer live under the law but under the direction and ministry of the Spirit of Christ who is recreating us in the image of Christ. We can only imagine the difficulty of this teaching for the Jews of that day. They lived for the law and by the law. Any teaching that seemed to do away with the law would have been very difficult for the Jewish mind to accept.

This teaching of Paul has the potential of leading some to assume that the law was sinful. That is to say, that the law was contrary to the purpose of God in salvation and holiness. Paul deals with this issue beginning in verse 7.

The question of whether the law is sinful is answered with a very definite "No!" In verse 7 Paul reminds us that the law had its purpose. It taught us about sin. If it were not for the law we would never have known what sin was. Paul uses an example of covetousness to explain this. We have all wanted what others have to the point of not being happy with what we do have. Many people believe that it is only natural for us to feel this way. When the law tells us, however, that we are not to covet, we come to realize that this desire to have what others have is in reality contrary to the will and purpose of God. It is sin. How would we have known that this was sin if the law didn't tell us?

Paul went on to tell us in verse 8 that apart from the law sin is dead. This merits some consideration. Where there is no law for coveting how can anyone be held legally accountable? If there were no law against murder, how could we condemn the murderer? If there are no laws to be broken, how can we hold people accountable and punish them for their actions? If there is no law there can be no punishment.

Paul tells us that sin took advantage of the opportunity provided by the law to produce in us every kind of covetous desire. What we need to understand from this is that sin feeds on rebellion and pride. When sin sees the law it rebels. Sin does not want to be restricted by the law of God or His purposes. It boldly steps out to do its own thing. Sin will not be told what to do. It will not submit to authority. When sin saw the law it rebelled and produced every kind of evil desire imaginable in the flesh. It started in the Garden of Eden. There, sin confronted the law of God. God warned against eating from the tree in the centre of the garden, but sin stirred up Adam and Eve to rebel against this law and they surrendered to its impulse. The result was death. As for us, sin continues to tempt and pull us

against the purposes of a sovereign and holy God. We all feel the pressure to rebel.

Paul goes on to tell us that we were once alive apart from the law (verse 9). The best way to understand this statement is to see it in light of how most people see themselves. Most believe they are good people, not vile sinners. They do as they please without any restrictions. In their ignorance of the law, they live in a distorted freedom. Then one day the Spirit of God gets a hold of them and shows them His requirements through His Word. When they see themselves in the mirror of the Word they realize that they have fallen short of the standard God has set. When faced with the Word of God and the reality of His requirements they come to realize just how enslaved they are. They suddenly realize that they are separated from God, under His judgment without hope. This is why Paul tells us that the commandments, which were intended to bring life, actually brought death. The law of God illuminated our deplorable state.

Sin, says Paul, seizes the opportunities provided by the law to destroy us. As it reveals our sin, it demonstrates our depravity. It seems, here, that Paul came to realize the power of sin in his own heart. Sin seemed to control him. He could not stop himself from sinning. The commandments were clear but prior to his conversion he did not have the ability to obey them. Sin had control of him and led him into disobedience and rebellion. Without Christ he had no possible hope of keeping the law.

I have found the same to be true in my own life. The law is certainly holy and good, however, it produced death in me. It produced death in the sense that it made me realize that I was incapable of reaching God's standard. It left me totally helpless. It forced me to realize that if I were going to

be saved from my sin there would have to be another way. The law took my attention away from myself and my own efforts because it showed me that I would never get to heaven if it depended on me. The law brought me face to face with my shortcomings in order that I might turn to Christ as my only hope.

The reality of the matter is that if it were not for the law I would never have known that I was a sinner in need of a Saviour. The law showed me who I really was. It acted like a mirror to show me my dirt and filth. But that is all it was, just a mirror. We all know that a mirror can show us the dirt on our face but it cannot clean the dirt. Cleaning requires soap and water. This is what Christ provides. The law showed us our filth, Christ came to be the soap that would cleanse us of that filth. If we stop at the mirror of the law we stop short of being cleansed. Only Jesus is able to cleanse our filthy souls.

All too often we preach a message of salvation that omits sin. The problem with this is that unless we see our need for a Saviour, we will not fully appreciate salvation. There are many people who want what the Lord Jesus offers but are unwilling to accept the fact that they are sinners. The only way we can come to the Saviour is by recognizing our sin and need. Praise God that the law shows us our sin so that we might be drawn to the Saviour.

For Consideration:

- What was the purpose of the law according to Paul?

- Why can't the law save us?
- Why do we need the Lord Jesus to be saved?
- Why is it important that we understand our sin before coming to Christ?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord for showing you that, despite the fact that you are a sinner, He has offered you a way of escape through the Lord Jesus.
- Ask the Lord to open your mind more and more to the impossibility of living the Christian life in your own strength.
- Thank the Lord that He has put his Holy Spirit in you to enable you to live the life He requires of you.

19

THE FIGHT WITHIN

Read Romans 7:14-25

The law was given to show us our need of a Saviour. It was like a mirror that showed us who we really were but it was unable to cleanse the dirt of sin from us. For that we needed a Saviour.

Paul states that the law was good. It accomplished what it was designed to accomplish. It revealed sin. Through the law Paul understood himself. He saw himself as the sinner he really was. In fact in verse 14 he told the Romans that his flesh was sold over to sin—that is to say, his flesh was controlled by sin. He was its slave.

It is hard to imagine the great apostle Paul wrestling with fleshly sin but he is very honest with us here. He tells us that he did not do the things he wanted to do and found himself doing the things he did not want to do. For Paul, there seemed to be two conflicting things happening in his life. He had a desire to do what is right but found himself doing the opposite. There were two natures at war in him.

The flesh was incapable of pleasing God but the Spirit delighted in God and sought to honour God in everything.

Who among us has not found themselves in the same struggle as Paul? We speak those things we know we should not speak. We react to displeasing situations in ways that are not appropriate. We know that these things are wrong but find ourselves doing them anyway. At the same time, there is a part of us that hates sin and desires to please the Lord.

Paul reminded the Romans in verse 16 that their desire to do what was right was evidence that the law was good. In other words, they recognized in themselves that God's standard (as set out by the law) was right and holy. It grieved them in their hearts that they were not able to keep that standard because they knew it was right.

There is a side of us that loves God and wants to obey His law. On the other hand, there is something in us that seems to rebel and wants only to please the flesh. This is the struggle the apostle Paul felt in his life.

Paul explains this conflict in verse 17. He tells us that it was not he who indulged the flesh, but sin living in him. It is important that we take a moment to consider what Paul is telling us here.

When Jesus died on the cross He not only forgave us, He also changed us and gave us a new heart. Writing to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 5:17 Paul put it this way:

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!

Jesus not only came to forgive us but He also planted a new life in us. Those who belong to the Lord Jesus have experienced this life with its new desires and purpose. Coming to Christ and experiencing this new life, however, does not mean that we will never sin again. In fact, the new nature brings a conflict in the life of the believer. The flesh still cries out for satisfaction but the new life desires to live for Christ and walk in His purposes. This is the tension Paul felt in his life. It is a tension that every believer will also feel. Notice what Paul tells us in this passage.

First, he recognized the two natures that battled within. If we want to experience victory in our spiritual walk we, too, will have to be able to distinguish the lusts of the flesh from the leading of the Spirit. I have heard believers justify their sinful actions on the basis that it felt good or it seemed natural to their flesh. Paul is telling us here that the flesh and the Spirit are at war within us. If we are to follow Christ and walk in victory, we need to distinguish what is from the flesh and what is from the Spirit.

Second, notice in verse 18 that Paul told the Romans that there was nothing good in his sinful nature. In saying this Paul shows us what he thinks of the fleshly nature. More than this however, he is renouncing that sinful nature as evil. If we are going to walk in victory we too need to recognize the evil impulses of our old nature. We need to turn from it and refuse to surrender to its desires.

Notice also in verse 20 that Paul makes a clear distinction between his fleshly nature and the new person he was in Christ.

Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it (Romans 7:20)

Paul saw himself as a new person with a new allegiance. He no longer lived as a slave to the impulses and desires of his sinful nature. He identified now with what Christ was doing in him by the Holy Spirit. His true identity was no longer with the old sinful nature but with the person of Christ and what He was doing in him.

Paul's old nature was still alive but he was no longer subject to it. Now that the Lord Jesus had forgiven and changed him, he identified with this new nature and chose to walk in it.

In his flesh, Paul found himself doing the things he did not want to do. His flesh hindered him from doing the things he knew he needed to do. He learned that he could not trust his flesh. He could not count on it to honour God. It was corrupt. It could not be repaired, rewired, upgraded, or redeemed. It had to be crucified, and it had to die.

Paul was aware of the evil within him. Though he wanted to do what was right, the sinful, fleshly nature waged war with him and his desire to please God. Have we not all felt this internal struggle? We wrestle with our thoughts and attitudes. We wrestle with doing what is right. For all of us, the battle Paul describes is very real. We can identify with his struggle.

In verse 24 we see that Paul often felt overwhelmed by this battle within. He cries, "Who will rescue me from this body of death?" He saw his old nature as a cancer growing within him, stripping him of life. His heart longed for victory. He wanted to see the flesh perish. He wanted to see the victory of the Lord over these sinful impulses but how was this victory possible?

Paul answers this question by reminding us that his hope was in the Lord Jesus (verse 25). The Lord who forgave him and put His Spirit in him was also able to give him victory over the sinful flesh.

The day is coming when we will be completely set free from sin and the sinful nature. One day the sinful nature will be destroyed and the battle will be over. What we need to understand, however, is that there is also the possibility of present victory through the Lord Jesus. It is possible for us to overcome in His strength. While the battle continues to rage there is support and strength in the Lord Jesus. Writing to the believers in Corinth in 1 Corinthians 10:13 Paul said:

No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.

As believers we experience a conflict within. The flesh wages war with the Spirit and the new heart God has given. If we are to experience victory in our spiritual walk, we must learn to distinguish between the flesh and the Spirit. We must renounce the flesh and trust in the enabling power of the Lord to help us to walk in victory.

For Consideration:

- Have you felt the battle within that Paul describes in this section? Give an example of a time when this battle was evident in your life.

- How can we distinguish between what comes from the flesh and what comes from the Spirit?
- What are the characteristics of the sinful nature?
- Why does the believer still struggle with sin and temptations?
- What does it mean to die to the sinful nature?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to help you distinguish between the flesh and the Spirit.
- Ask the Lord to give you grace to overcome the particular sins of the flesh that you struggle with today.
- Ask the Lord to show you more and more what it means to die to the sinful nature.
- Thank the Lord for the new heart He has given you to follow and honour Him.

NO CONDEMNATION

Read Romans 8:1-4

We saw in chapter 7 that the Law was given to show us our need of a Saviour. We also learned about the battle in the life of every believer, how the flesh battles against the Spirit and what God wants to accomplish in us. Paul was very much aware of this battle in his life. He cried out at the end of chapter 7, "Who will rescue me from this body of death?" He answers his own question by telling us that the Lord Jesus alone could rescue him and give him victory.

Paul begins chapter 8 with the declaration that there is now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus. Notice that this freedom from condemnation is only for those who are "in" Christ Jesus. It is important that we understand what Paul means here.

Sin is the one thing that separates us from a holy God. The Lord Jesus came to this earth to forgive and to cleanse us so that we could be in a right standing with the Father. To

be in Christ Jesus is to be in a right relationship with the Father through the forgiveness of our sin.

To be in Christ, however, is more than being forgiven. To be in Christ also has to do with the fact that His Spirit lives in us. We have His heart and His life flowing in us. We are not the people we used to be. It is our desire now to walk in step with Him. Our desires are His desires. His heart is our heart. In reality we have become one with Him through the ministry of His Spirit. This is something that Christ does for us but it is also something that the Holy Spirit gives us a desire to maintain.

Paul is telling us that there is no condemnation for those who are "in" Christ. There is no condemnation because the barrier of sin has been removed and we have been changed. What a marvellous thought this is. Those who are in Christ are set free from the reality of hell and eternal separation from God. All condemnation is gone.

Now through the Lord Jesus, the law of the Spirit has set us free from the law of sin and death. Notice that Paul speaks about two laws in this verse. The first law is the law of sin and death. This is the law that was given to Moses. It is described as a law of sin and death because it showed us who we really were. It acted as a mirror to reveal our condition but it could not change our lives or cleanse us of our sin. This law condemned us. None of us could keep its requirements and as a result we were left guilty before God and under His condemnation.

The second law Paul speaks about in this passage is the law of the Spirit. This is the first time this term is used in the book of Romans. This law refers to the work of the Holy Spirit in conforming us to the image of Christ. This law is very different from the law of sin and death because the

Spirit changes our attitudes and habits and leads us into victory.

When you opened your heart to the Lord Jesus something radical happened in your life. There was a new desire for the Word of God. The old sinful habits of the flesh lost their attraction. The Spirit of God changed you on the inside. Prior to this you had attempted to change those sinful habits but found yourself waging a losing battle.

Paul makes it clear in verse 3 that the law was powerless to change us because of our sinful nature (verse 3). The law showed us what to do but we could not obey it. We were placed before an impossible standard so that we would see the need for another solution.

What was impossible for the law to accomplish, the Lord Jesus did by His death on the cross. Through that death, sins were forgiven and the Holy Spirit given access to the lives of those who received Christ's gift of pardon. The old nature was condemned and a new life given through the Holy Spirit dwelling in the believer.

Through this work of Christ all the legal requirements of the law of sin and death have been met. Our penalty has been paid. The believer has now no more obligation to this old law. We have been set free from the old law of sin and death. Instead we have been placed under a new law, "the law of the Spirit of life." This is the law the believer is now under.

The law of the Spirit of life is different from the old law. Paul speaks of this law in verse 4 as "living according to the Spirit." The Spirit of God was given to be our guide and enabler. As believers we are to learn how to surrender to the work and ministry of the Holy Spirit in us. He will lead

us into the truth of the Word of God. He will lead us into victory over the sins of our flesh. He will empower us in service. He will make us more like Christ.

Does being set free from the law of sin and death mean that I no longer have to obey the teaching of the Scripture? Certainly not! Those who know the ministry of the Holy Spirit in their lives will quickly find that He will lead them into a deeper understanding of and obedience to the truth of God's Word.

The believer has been set free from the law of sin and death which only lead to condemnation. Instead he has been given a new way of life, the way of the Spirit of life. As believers surrender to the work of the Spirit of God they are led into a life of deeper obedience and appreciation of the truth and the purposes of God.

For Consideration:

- What does it mean to be "in" Christ Jesus?
- How can you tell if you are "in" Christ Jesus?
- What is the difference between the law of sin and death and the law of the Spirit of life?
- How did the Lord Jesus set us free from the obligation of the law of sin and death?
- What does it mean to follow the law of the Spirit of life?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that there is no more condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.
- Thank the Lord that He has placed you under a new law. Thank Him that there is victory now under the law of the Spirit of life.
- Ask the Lord to help you to be more in tune with the ministry of the Holy Spirit in your life.

21

THE MIND CONTROLLED BY THE SPIRIT

Read Romans 8:5-15

Paul has been emphasizing that the believer has two natures. We were born with a fleshly nature of sin. When we accept the forgiveness of the Lord Jesus and open our hearts to Him He gives us a new nature. Paul takes time in this next section to show us the difference between these two natures.

He begins by reminding us that those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires, while those who live in the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit of God desires (verse 5).

What we need to see here is that we can live according to the sinful desires of the flesh or we can choose to live according to the leading and direction of the Spirit. Everything we do in the course of a day is either flowing from the flesh or from the Spirit. As we make decisions about what

we do, we need to ask ourselves the question: Which nature am I following? As believers our allegiance is now to the Spirit. In John 4:34 Jesus told His disciples:

My food...is to do the will of Him who sent me and to finish his work.

Jesus gives us as believers an example to follow. He made it his purpose in life to do the will of the Father and accomplish what He had called Him to accomplish.

God has put that same heart within His children. Those who belong to the Lord Jesus now have a desire placed in them to honour Him with their lives. As Paul said in verse 5, "their minds are set on what the Spirit desires."

Paul explains in verse 6 that the mind of the sinful man is death but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace. In other words, the sinful mind with its impulses and desires will only lead to separation from God. When we are controlled by the Spirit, however, we are led into fullness of life and peace. We have peace in our minds because we know that we are right with God. We have fullness of life because we are living under His blessing.

In verse 7 Paul further explains that the sinful mind is hostile to God and His purposes. The sinful mind cannot possibly submit to the will and purpose of God. It is contrary to God. In fact, Paul uses a strong word here to speak of the relationship of the sinful mind to the things of God. He uses the word "hostile" to show us that the sinful mind is clearly an enemy to the purposes of God.

Notice in verse 7 that the sinful mind does not, nor cannot submit to God's law. This tells us something important

about the sinful nature. It does not submit to God because it cannot submit to Him. In other words, the sinful nature is incapable of surrendering to God. It is completely evil and an enemy to God and His purposes. It is impossible for the flesh to lovingly bow the knee to the Lord Jesus. All that comes out of that nature is evil. If we want to honour the Lord, we must learn to live by the Spirit. Only as we surrender to the ministry of the Holy Spirit can we worship and honour the Lord as He desires. Paul tells us clearly in verse 8 that those who are controlled by the sinful nature cannot possibly please God.

As believers we are not to be controlled by the sinful nature but by the Spirit. Every believer has been given the Spirit of God. Paul makes it clear that if the Spirit of God does not live in us we do not even belong to the Lord Jesus (verse 9). We may not always live according to the Spirit, but He must be a part of our lives if we are to call ourselves Christians. It is the life of the Spirit of Christ in us that distinguishes us from the unbeliever.

Notice in verse 10 the implications of having the life of the Lord Jesus in us. Paul told the Romans that if the life of Christ is in us, our bodies are dead because of sin but our spirits are alive because of righteousness. There are several things we need to understand here.

First, according to Paul, believers should no longer be controlled by the flesh but by the Spirit. This does not mean that all Christians are controlled by the Spirit all the time. It is possible for a Christian to still be controlled by elements of the sinful nature. Listen to what Paul told the Corinthians:

Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly—mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not

solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men? (1 Corinthians 3:1-3).

Notice that while Paul addressed these Corinthians as brothers, he told them that they were still worldly. Though they were believers, they had never learned to live in the Spirit. They were still living like unbelievers. They were infants in the faith. They needed to mature, and a sure sign of maturity was that a person was walking more and more in the Spirit of Christ.

The Spirit of God lives in all believers but not all believers have come to a place in their lives where their minds and hearts are being controlled by Him. According to Paul in verse 10 the believer needs to learn to count his body and sinful nature dead. That is to say, they are to live as though their old nature were dead. They are to no longer listen to the desires and impulses of the flesh and the sinful mind. They were no longer to feed the sinful impulses of the old nature. Instead, they are to listen to the Spirit of God and give their complete allegiance to Him.

The goal of the believer is that he or she be filled with the Spirit of Christ in every area of life. This means inviting Him into every decision and every action, holding nothing back from His control and guidance. None of us have fully arrived at this place, but we all need to be heading in this direction.

Consider what Paul is telling us here. The sinful old nature with its thoughts and desires leads only to death and separation from God. On the other hand, the mind controlled by the Spirit leads to life and peace. How should we invest

our effort and time? Should we invest in something that is going to perish or should we invest in life and peace? How foolish it would be to spend all our effort trying to please the flesh when we know that it will only perish and leave us empty. Instead, Paul challenges the believer to consider this flesh already dead and instead, live according to the leading and direction of the Holy Spirit.

In verse 11 we see the great hope we have as we crucify the flesh and live more and more in submission to the Spirit. Paul tells the Romans that the Spirit who raised Jesus to life will also give new life to our mortal bodies. We have no obligation to the fleshly nature because the day is coming when the Lord Jesus will give us a new body, one that will please and honour Him. This body with all its desires will perish but we have a promise from God that He will give us an even greater one. In that new body, free from sin and evil, we will live with God and delight in His presence forever. We will have a new spirit and a new body, both uncorrupted by the flesh.

Paul told the Romans in verse 14 that those who are led by the Spirit are sons of God. The sign of our being children of God is that we are being led by His Spirit in all we do. If we are God's children we will find ourselves dying to the fleshly nature and living according to the Spirit. If the Holy Spirit lives in us there will be a noticeable difference in our lives. We will have a whole new set of desires and impulses. We will know that we are children of God because we are taking on the characteristics of our heavenly Father. It is true that there are believers who live like unbelievers and are led by their fleshly nature, but how can they be assured of their relationship with God if they live in disobedience to Him? Paul is telling us that our assurance of salvation comes from the presence of the Holy Spirit and the new life He has put in us.

The apostle Paul concludes in verse 15 by saying that we did not receive a spirit that made us a slave to fear but a spirit of sonship. As sons and daughters we cry out "Abba" Father. There is intimacy in these words. The word "Abba" is a term that a child would use speaking of his or her "daddy." When the Spirit of God comes to live in our hearts He breaks down all barriers between God and us, we now stand before God as children. We stand before God without condemnation. All fear of approaching Him is gone. We come to Him as favoured children. We have a new assurance in our relationship with Him through the ministry of the Holy Spirit in us. We can trust the leading of our loving heavenly Father. We can trust that He desires our good.

There are two natures at war within us. Paul challenges the believer to live according to the Spirit and die to the fleshly nature. The secret of maturity in the Christian life has to do with surrendering to the Spirit of God and dying to the flesh.

For Consideration:

- How can we recognize the difference between the flesh and the Spirit in our lives?
- What does it mean to follow the Spirit?
- What evidence is there of the presence of the Spirit of Christ in your life? What difference has He made?
- How does this evidence of the Spirit of God reassure us that we are children of God?

- Is it possible for a believer to live according to the desires of the sinful nature? Are there areas of your life that are being controlled by the sinful nature?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord for the way He has placed His Holy Spirit in your life to lead and make you more like Christ.
- Ask the Lord to help you to distinguish more clearly between what comes from the flesh and what comes from the Spirit.
- Thank the Lord that you can come to Him as your loving heavenly Father.
- Are there areas of your life where you are being controlled by the flesh? Confess this to the Lord and ask the Spirit of God to give you victory in these areas.

THE SUFFERINGS OF THE PRESENT AGE

Read Romans 8:16-25

As believers, we are called to live in the Spirit and no longer feed the fleshly nature. The reality of the matter is that as we do so we will not always be accepted. Living under the guidance of the Spirit does not guarantee a problem free life. In fact, we can expect to face suffering and trials. No soldier joins the army expecting that everything will be easy. Neither should we expect that we will have an easy life if we are serious about our walk with God. In this section, Paul speaks to the Romans about the sufferings they could expect in their walk with the Lord Jesus.

He begins in verse 16 by reminding the Romans that the Spirit of God testifies to our spirit that we are the children of God. There are times when it is difficult to explain how we know that we are in a right relationship with the Lord Jesus. The Lord communicates His love to us in order to reassure us of our secure relationship with Him. It is not something others can hear for there is a unique connection

between the Lord Jesus and His children. He speaks to our hearts in a way that only those in a close relationship can understand. It is important to Him that we are assured of our relationship with Him. This is especially true if we are going to suffer for our faith.

Paul moves on to remind us that if we are children of God then we are also co-heirs with Christ. God blesses us with an abundance of spiritual blessings simply because we belong to Him. As His children we know the forgiveness of our sin, the fellowship of His Spirit, His provision and devotion. We also have the hope of eternity in heaven and the present reality of His enabling power.

This rich inheritance comes with a price. While we inherit the wealth of our Lord, we also inherit His suffering. We will also share in His sorrows. Those who live a Spirit-led life on this earth will suffer even as their Lord suffered. They will be rejected at times. They will face persecution and misunderstanding. These sufferings are unavoidable in a sinful world. If we choose to live as Christ lived we will also have to prepare ourselves to suffer as He suffered.

Paul reminds us, however, in verse 18 that the present sufferings are nothing compared to the glory that will be revealed in the age to come. The believer will be rejected. Some of us will suffer abuse and persecution. Others will lay down their lives for the cause of their Lord. Before us, however, lies our glorious inheritance. They can take our life but they can never take our inheritance. They can destroy our body but they cannot destroy our soul. We will enter the presence of the Lord Jesus who awaits us with open arms. There we will be safe and secure. There, in His presence, nothing will harm us; we will know His joy and peace forever. What are the sufferings of this world compared to the joy and blessing we have in Christ? What are

the trials we face now compared to the joys of the world to come?

Notice in verse 19 that Paul told the Romans that a day was coming when the children of God will be revealed to the whole world. Paul told them that all creation looks forward to this day. It is on this day that God's children will be raised from the dead and go to be with their Lord. The world will see them. The world will know that they are the Lord's, because He will honour them before the world.

In verse 20 Paul reminded the Romans that all of creation was affected by sin and its effects. All creation was subjected to frustration because of sin. When Adam and Eve opened the door to sin in the Garden of Eden, creation was plunged into the curse of sin. The process of aging began. Things began to decay and deteriorate. Sickness and disease entered. Earthquakes and physical tragedies became commonplace. Death entered the world.

The day is coming, however, when creation will be liberated from this bondage to decay (verse 21). It will one day be given the freedom that we have as God's children. On that day, the power of sin will be broken and creation set free to be everything it was designed to be.

Paul compares what is happening in the creation with the pains of childbirth. Creation groans with pain and suffering, waiting the day when it will give birth to new life. We have never seen a world where sin is no longer present, but in that world there will be no suffering or disease. All sorrow and death will be forgotten. Harmony, joy, peace, and praise will reign as the creation finds itself free from the curse. What a glorious world that will be.

We, the children of God, groan in the same way. We have received the Holy Spirit as a seal of God's approval, but in our bodies we groan and struggle. We wrestle with the sin that surrounds us and wells up in our flesh. We suffer the effects of sickness and disease. We feel fatigue and weariness. Our bodies are limited, weak, and frail. We find it hard to honour the Lord in these frail bodies. Deep down we long for the day when all this will be over. We long for the day when our adoption as children of God will be final and we will be given our redeemed bodies free from sin and its affects. We long for the day when all suffering will be gone. In that day and in our new bodies we will worship and serve our Lord unhindered.

This is the hope we have as believers. We have the assurance that one day all of creation will be redeemed and set free from the effects of sin and evil. Our enemy, Satan, will be defeated. The power of sin and death will be conquered. We too will experience this wonderful redemption in our physical bodies. We patiently wait for this promise to be fulfilled.

The point that Paul is making is that we need to realize that as children of God living in this present world, we will have to face the reality of sin. We will not be immune to suffering. Jesus had to suffer for us and we in turn will have to suffer for Him. Our hope, however, is in the promise of God that one day sin will be conquered. We know that if we share in His suffering here below, we can also share in His glory. This body is temporary. The suffering we face in this body is only for a time. Don't lose hope. Trust His promise. When we pass through this fire we will be with Him in glory.

For Consideration:

- What evidence is there of the effects of sin on this earth?
- What evidence of the effects of sin do you see in your own body?
- What is the hope that Paul gives us in this passage?
- How have you had to suffer in this world?
- How does what Paul tells us here give us courage to persevere through our trials?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that the day is coming when He will finally overcome sin and all its effects.
- Ask the Lord to give you courage to persevere to the end.
- Thank the Lord that, as believers, we have a hope that is greater than all the pain and suffering we see here in this life.

23

IN ALL THESE THINGS

Read Romans 8:26-39

In the first part of chapter 8 the apostle Paul reminded the Romans that even the children of God will have to suffer in this life. All of creation groans and longs for the day when the Lord will return to set it free from the oppression of sin. We too, as children of the Lord, also long for the day when our earthly bodies will be exchanged for redeemed, heavenly bodies. In the meantime, we all have to face the consequences of sin and evil in the world.

While we will have to face many trials and sufferings in this life, we are given some very powerful encouragement in this final section of chapter 8. Let's consider the encouragement that Paul offers to Spirit-led believers who suffer just as their Master.

Have you ever come to a place in your life where you have a hard time praying? Personally, I have had to face these times. I have had times in my life when my emotions were flat, times when I felt nothing. When my walk with the Lord and my prayer life suffers, I find great encouragement in

verse 26. In my weakness the Spirit helps me and intercedes for me. When I can't seem to pray because the burden is overwhelming, the Holy Spirit comes to my aid and prays for me. When I come to God not even understanding my own needs, God's Spirit prays for me. What a comfort it is to know that in those times when the burdens weigh so heavily on us that we cannot even pray, the Spirit of God cries out to the Father for us. We are not without prayer support in the moments of trial and confusion.

Notice in particular that the Spirit prays for us with groans that words cannot express. Some people interpret this as the gift of tongues. Notice, however, that Paul tells us that the Spirit is groaning and not speaking. When sorrow is heavy on our souls, we express the pain by groaning. I believe that the groaning of the Spirit is closely related to the pain we are feeling. The Spirit knows our pain and groans with us. God is not an unfeeling God. The Spirit of God feels the confusion and the grief of our hearts. He knows the rejection and abandonment we suffer. He groans with us under our heavy load. He expresses that grief to the Father on our behalf. When the Spirit prays, it is not an unfeeling prayer. He prays with our pain and suffering.

Paul tells us in verse 27 that the one who searches the heart knows the mind of the Spirit when He intercedes for us. This too should be of great comfort to us. We often do not know how to pray. Sometimes the words just don't come. Sometimes all that we can do is groan and cry before the Lord out of the pain we feel. The Spirit of God meets us in our situation. He prays for us, and God the Father listens to the cry of the Spirit on our behalf and understands perfectly what our words cannot express. We have the assurance that when the Spirit of God prays for

us He does so as an intercessor who knows perfectly what we are feeling and also what the purpose of God is for us.

Not only do we have the prayers of the Holy Spirit to back us up in our suffering and trials but we also have the promise of the Father that He will "work out all things for good for those who love God and who are called according to His purpose" (Rom. 8:28). The phrase "all things" is significant. In the context of this chapter Paul has been speaking about the sufferings that we have to endure. It is important that we take verse 28 in this context. Part of the "all things" Paul refers to here is suffering and pain. If you love the Lord God and are His child, He promises that even the trials you go through will be used for good in your life. There is no cause for despair. You may not see it right now but God will use what you are facing to accomplish good in your life. Sometimes the greatest good comes out of the most trying circumstances. Again, this is a great comfort for us in our pain.

In verse 29, Paul shifts to the theological basis for what he has been telling us in this section. He reminds us that those whom God foreknew He "predestined to be conformed into the likeness of his Son." Long before we were even born, God knew us. He knew the plans He had for us as His children and He orchestrated the circumstances of our life and the situations we faced to shape us into the image of His Son, Jesus Christ.

Notice in verse 30 that God called those He predestined. When the time is right God reveals His purpose to us. He will speak to our heart through the ministry of his Spirit. He will bring circumstances into our lives that will show us clearly His purpose for our lives.

Paul moves on to say that when God calls a person he also justifies him or her. To be justified means to be given a right standing and relationship with God. The God who calls also gives us a right standing with the Father. He forgives my sins, adopts me as His own child declares me to be His child in a right standing before Him

Verse 30 then reminds us that those God justifies he also glorifies. Though we are in a right relationship with God through the justifying work of Christ, we still have to wrestle with the sinful nature. The day is coming, however, when all this will be over. The day is coming when we will shed this old nature completely and enter the presence of the Lord Jesus in heaven. He will give us a new and glorious body free from sin and evil.

What Paul is telling us is that the God who has a purpose for our lives will see that purpose through to the end. He chooses us, calls us, makes us right with the father, and ultimately frees us completely from the bondage of the sinful flesh. He will complete what He has been doing in us. He will not leave the job half done. He will refine us and shape us into the people He has called us to be. This is His promise to us. All the trials, problems, and struggles we face have a role to play in helping us become more like Christ.

Paul reminds the Romans in verse 31 that if God was for them nobody could stand against them and conquer. Many people may stand against us but ultimately they cannot defeat us. They may cause us pain. They may even take our life from us, but they will not be able to destroy what God is doing or the hope we have in Him.

Who can accuse and condemn me if God has accepted me (verse 33). There is no higher court that can overrule

the decision of Almighty God. If I am declared innocent before Him, no one can possibly condemn me. The only human who even has the right to condemn is the Lord Jesus (verse 34). He alone has been given the power to judge. Notice, however, that Jesus has chosen not to condemn. Right now He stands at the right hand of the Father interceding for us and pleading our case. If the only one who can condemn us stands before the Father pleading for us then we have no reason to fear condemnation. We can be assured that since Jesus is on our side we have no reason to worry.

Paul reminded the Romans in verse 32 that the Father loved them so much that he did not even spare His own Son to free them from His wrath. He allowed His Son to suffer and die a terrible death on a cross so that they would not be condemned to eternal punishment. If He willingly did this, will He not care for us in our trials? If He loved us enough to let His Son die for us will He not provide for our needs now that we are His children?

There is nothing that can ever separate us from the love of Christ (verse 35). Hardships, troubles, persecutions, and famines can never separate us from God's love. We may face danger, and sorrow. We may even have to die (verse 36) but even in that death we will be more than conquerors. Death for us is but a passage to something greater. There is no demon in hell that can strip us of our citizenship in heaven or our hope of eternal life. There is no power that ever existed or ever will exist that can separate us from the love of the Lord Jesus. We can be absolutely assured, as His children, of His constant and faithful love. We can be sure of this because He has demonstrated His great love for us through the death of His Son.

While we may face much persecution and struggle in this life, we have the promise of God's Word that the Spirit of God will pray for us when we cannot pray for ourselves. The Father will work out all things for our good. The Lord Jesus will complete the work He has begun in us and plead our case before the Father. The triune God stands firmly behind His children. If the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, stand firmly behind us then we can be assured that nothing the enemy does will ever succeed. We may have struggles and trials but we will overcome in Christ.

For Consideration:

- Have you ever found yourself in a situation where the trouble you felt was so severe that you could not even pray? What comfort do you find in this passage?
- What particular trials are you facing today? What does this passage have to say to you in your suffering?
- In light of these verses can you be sure of a place in heaven in the presence of God. Can the enemy take away your salvation?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord for the incredible promises we find in this passage.
- Thank the Lord that He will not abandon us in our struggle.

- Ask the Lord to forgive you for the times when you have doubted His promises.
- Ask the Lord to give you grace to step out boldly in His name to accomplish the purposes He has for your life.

THE TRUE ISRAEL

Read Romans 9:1-13

In this next section of the book of Romans, the apostle Paul speaks to us about his love for the people of Israel. Paul is often considered to be the apostle to the Gentiles, but this did not diminish his love for his own people. Notice what he tells his readers in his introductory statement.

Verses 1 and 2 speak of his great anguish for the people of Israel. It seems that there were those who doubted his love for the Jews. Paul's teaching on a righteousness that comes by faith and freedom from the law was likely one of the reasons why people questioned his commitment and love for his own people. Notice how Paul expresses himself in verses 1 and 2.

I speak the truth in Christ—I am not lying, my conscience confirms it in the Holy Spirit—I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart.

It seems quite clear from this statement that Paul understood what people were saying about him. While others

may have doubted his commitment to the Jewish nation, Paul knew in his heart the "unceasing anguish" he felt for them. We will not always be understood. People may even think ill of us in this life. Paul found comfort in the fact that the Lord knew the truth.

Notice the extent of Paul's anguish for the Jews. He told the Romans that he wished that he could be cut off from salvation for the sake of his people. In other words, he was willing to suffer eternal damnation if by doing so his people could be saved from their sin and rebellion.

Paul recognized that the Jewish nation was a very special nation. They were the children of God. He had chosen to reveal His glory to them and through them to the world. The Lord God entered a special covenant relationship with the Jews. He gave them His law and His promises. Through their race, one could trace the great fathers of the faith, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The Lord Jesus was also born as one of them. No other people had such honour bestowed on them. The Jews had a special place in the heart of God.

The Jews were the instruments through which the purpose and plan of God was revealed to the world but, they had not accepted that purpose. Jesus came to the Jewish nation but the nation rejected Him. They wandered from the purpose of God and rejected the salvation He came to offer. This is why Paul's heart was broken for them. He would have been willing to give up his own life if this would bring salvation to his people. Though giving up his salvation was impossible, it shows us the depth of his feelings for his own people.

Paul's burden was very real. What burden has the Lord put on your heart? You may not share the same burden as the

apostle Paul, but surely there is a burden the Lord has given you. Where there is no burden God's people are weak in service. Paul's burden pushed him to do and to endure things that others would never have endured. His burden helped him persevere when others around him gave up. The greatest acts of service come from hearts that have been burdened by God. God has gifted us in different ways. For some, God has given a burden to build up the body through encouragement or teaching. Others have a burden for the lost and to see them enter the Kingdom of God. Maybe you don't sense a burden in your heart today. Maybe it is time to seek the Lord and ask Him what His purpose is for your life and ministry.

Paul's opening statement brings up an important question. Why would God choose a nation that would reject Him? How could a nation see the power of God demonstrated so openly through them and still reject the Lord God? How could a nation receive the Word of God and not be affected by it? Did God's purposes for His people fail?

To answer this question Paul reminded the Romans that not all who descended from Abraham were the true Israel (verse 7). To prove this statement Paul shows his readers how God promised that it would only be through Isaac that He would raise up a people.

Abraham had many sons. In Genesis 16:15-16 we see that he had a son through Hagar by the name of Ishmael. In Genesis 25:1-2 we read about his sons through his wife Keturah:

Abraham took another wife, whose name was Keturah. She bore him Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak and Shuah."

Though Abraham had many sons, God chose to bring the blessing only through one of them. Not all of Abraham's sons were part of the true Israel. Only Isaac would have that honour. It was possible to trace one's lineage back to Abraham and yet not share in his blessing.

Isaac was a child born through a promise made to his parents. He was born in a miraculous way to Abraham and Sarah when they were well past the time of being able to become parents. God chose to bless him even before he was born.

This point was very important for Paul. It showed him that the true people of God were not those who were the natural descendants of Abraham but those who had been chosen by God. Only one of Abraham's children was chosen of God to be His instrument. Ishmael's descendants would grow up apart from God and His blessings. Isaac was a child of God not because he was born to Abraham but because God had specifically chosen him for His purpose.

We find evidence of this same principle in the lives of Isaac's descendants. Through his wife Rebecca, Isaac had twin sons, Jacob and Esau. Paul tells us in verse 11 that even before these twins were born and had opportunity to do good or evil God had a purpose for them. He told Rebecca that the older child, Esau would serve the younger child. In other words, the blessing of God would fall on the younger child Jacob. He would be the one to father God's chosen people.

Notice in verse 11 and 12 that Paul makes it clear that the blessing and choice of God had nothing to do with Jacob and Esau's lifestyle. God's choice was made before these children could even prove whether they would serve Him or not. To Paul, this proved that God's choice of whom He

would bless had nothing to do with people's choices or lifestyle. It had nothing to do with how well a person would serve Him or how useful that person would be for His kingdom. It had everything to do with God's grace and free choice to bless and use that individual.

Verse 13 tells us that God loved Jacob but he hated Esau. In other words, God chose to open His heart and blessings to Jacob and not to Esau. By saying that he hated Esau, God is telling us that He chose to pour out His favour on Jacob instead.

When you chose a husband or wife you chose to leave all others behind. It is not that you hate every other man or woman but rather that you intend to establish a special relationship with your partner. You set that one person aside in your heart. You committed yourself to them and poured out your favour and blessing on them. No one would consider you unfair because you chose to commit yourself to that one person alone. This is similar to what God did with Jacob. He chose to enter a covenant relationship with him and his children.

We see from this passage that God is raising up a people. Paul makes it very clear that God's choice of individuals was not based on their merits or standing. One child was chosen and another was not. One child was blessed and the other was not. God blesses those He chooses to bless.

We also need to understand that God's decision to bless was not based on whether a person served Him well or not. Jacob was chosen to be blessed even before he was born—before he was able to demonstrate his faith or obedience. Even the apostle Paul lived in rebellion until God touched his life. God certainly did not choose the apostle because Paul loved Him and served Him well. Paul hated

the Lord Jesus and sought to persecute the church, but God chose him and changed his heart.

You can be born in a Christian home and still perish in your sin. Our salvation depends entirely on the favour of God, who reaches out to us even when we are sinners living in rebellion. Why does God choose one person over another? I don't think any one of us can really answer this question. We can be assured of one thing, however. His choice is made in love. Why He should especially love me and choose to pour out His favour on me will always be a mystery, but I choose to rejoice in His favour and delight in His blessings.

For Consideration:

- What burden has the Lord placed on your heart for the Kingdom of God?
- Was everyone born of Jewish parents part of the "true Israel"? Explain. Who is the true Israel?
- Does God's choice of one person over another depend on our ability or lifestyle? Why does God chose one person over another?
- What does this passage teach us about salvation by works? Are we saved because we are good or merit His salvation or is it an act of grace on His part?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to increase your burden for the Kingdom of God. Ask Him to show you what His particular purpose is for you.
- Thank the Lord for the fact that He has particularly chosen you and forgiven you for your sins.
- Thank Him that while you did not deserve His forgiveness and blessing He touched you anyway.

25

OBJECTIONS TO PAUL'S DOCTRINES

Read Romans 9:14-33

In the last meditation we found that not all those who were descended from Abraham were children of God. Paul demonstrated that while Abraham had many children, God only chose one of them to be the child of promise. The same was true for Isaac. God chose his son Jacob to father His people and rejected Esau even before the children were born. He chose Jacob before he could demonstrate any faith or works to merit his blessing. This, according to Paul, was clear evidence that being a child of God was based solely on God's choice and not on any personal merits.

This doctrine was not well received. There were several objections to Paul's teaching. We will consider three of these objections in this chapter.

Is God unjust?

The first objection was from those who said that Paul's teaching made God appear to be unjust (verse 14). Let's consider this for a moment. Why would God choose Isaac and not Abraham's other children? Why would God choose Jacob and not Esau? Is it fair that God should give His blessing to one person and withhold it from another?

Paul reminds us that when Moses asked the Lord to show him His glory, the Lord responded by saying that He had mercy and compassion on whom He pleased (Ex. 33:19). God was not obligated to demonstrate mercy and compassion to anyone. None of us deserve His favour. If God did what was just we would all perish for we have all fallen short of His standard. God is not being unjust if He forgives the sins of some and not others. He is being compassionate.

When I visited Haiti some time ago I saw all kinds of physical needs. As I walked down the street, people would ask for money or something to eat. Imagine that out of the goodness of my heart I chose to give one of these individuals food. Am I being unjust because I did not give everyone the same amount of food? By no means. I don't have to give something to everyone in order for my action to be considered compassionate and merciful. If I choose to help one person and not another I am being merciful to that one person. When I choose to be merciful to one, it is an act of kindness not injustice. We cannot accuse God of being unjust because He chooses to show compassion to certain people.

Paul goes on to remind the Romans in verse 16 that salvation and blessing from God do not depend on man's desire or effort but on God's mercy. If our salvation depended

on our personal efforts, than it might be possible to accuse God of injustice if He did not give us what we merited by those works. Justice would demand that we all die for our sins. God's choice to forgive some through the work of his son is not unjust, it is compassionate.

Does God Punish Us For Doing His Will?

In verse 17 Paul uses an example from the history of his people to show that God chooses some people to be objects of His blessing and others to be objects of His wrath. Pharaoh was God's chosen instrument for displaying His power to the Israelite nation. God allowed Pharaoh's heart to be hardened in order to fulfil His promise to the Jews and reveal His glory to them. In the days when Israel was in Egypt, Pharaoh refused to let them go. God sent Moses to speak to him but the king continued to resist. Through Moses, God began to destroy the nation of Egypt. In doing so, God revealed His power over the nation of Egypt. He humbled Pharaoh and judged his nation, releasing Israel people from slavery. Ultimately the nation was destroyed and would never again rise to its former glory. God chose Pharaoh and his nation for a purpose. He chose them to be the objects of His wrath so that His people could see His glory and power in a fresh way. This leads to another objection to Paul's doctrine.

If God raised up a man like Pharaoh to be an object of His wrath then how could he be justly punished if he was simply doing God's will? If he could not resist the will of God, then how could he be guilty of sin?

To answer this Paul tells us in verse 20 that God, as the Creator and Lord, has the right to do as He pleases with His creation. He uses the illustration of a potter creating a piece of pottery on his wheel. The potter may shape the

lump of clay on his wheel for whatever he desires. He can choose to make a piece of pottery for an important and noble use and another for common use. Out of the same lump of clay the potter has the right to make a vessel that will hold garbage and another that will be displayed in an art museum. The lump of clay has no say in how it is formed. The artist has the right to do as he pleases.

God often shows patience with the objects He has shaped for wrath so that through them He can reveal His glory. We see this in Pharaoh. God would use him as an instrument of wrath. God allowed Pharaoh's heart to be hardened. He allowed him to oppress His people. God could have destroyed him sooner, but He chose not to. Why did He show patience with Pharaoh and not judge Him sooner? Paul tells us that he did so to demonstrate to the children of Israel the riches of His glory. Pharaoh, as an instrument of wrath, had a purpose.

Hosea told the Israelites that God would call out a people who were not currently His people (verse 25). God would reach out to undeserving sinners and make them vessels of honour.

On the other hand, Paul reminded the Romans that Isaiah taught that only some of the nation of Israel would be saved.

Though the number of the Israelites be like the sand by the sea, only the remnant will be saved (verse 27).

Isaiah tells us that unless the Lord touched Israel she would have been destroyed like Sodom and Gomorrah.

What is Paul trying to say here? He is telling the Romans that God does as He pleases. He chooses Gentiles and makes them his instruments of blessing. He makes Israelites instruments of wrath. He chooses to bless whom He wishes.

Getting back to the original question, Paul asks: How can God blame us? The answer is quite simply that He blames us because we are in our sin. He blamed the Israelites through Isaiah because they had rejected their Lord. He judged Pharaoh because he oppressed the people of God and resisted His will. Jews and Gentiles alike are guilty before God and deserving of His wrath.

We cannot fault God for judging sin. Man brought evil into this world. God may take an evil man use Him to accomplish His greater purpose but he still judges the sin.

Imagine that a husband falls into the sin of adultery. After a period of time he realizes what he is doing to his wife and family. He repents and learns a very powerful lesson. He changes his lifestyle and becomes a loving husband. In the end his marriage is stronger. Should this man's sin be excused because he became a better husband through it? Isn't he still guilty of his sin even though God used it to teach him a lesson? God can change the evil we do into good but He will still hold us accountable for our actions. God may use sin to demonstrate His glory or teach us lessons but justice demands that sin still be punished.

Don't Works Count For Something?

Paul addresses this question in this final section of chapter 9. Paul had told the Romans that only a remnant of Israel would be saved even though all observed the Law of Moses. The faithful practice of these rituals did not guarantee

salvation. This was very difficult for the Jews to understand. How could the Gentiles, who did not pursue God, be saved when the Jews, who observed the law, were guilty? Didn't their works count for something?

Paul makes it clear that the Jews would not be saved because, while they observed their laws and celebrations, they did not do so by faith. All these traditions and laws pointed to the Lord Jesus but the Jews failed to see Him as the fulfilment of the Law. Jesus was a stumbling stone for them. He came to Jerusalem (Zion, verse 33) and lived among them but they did not put their trust in Him. The Jews would be lost despite all their good works because they did not look to Christ for their salvation. Their good deeds would count for nothing as far as their salvation was concerned.

Don't be fooled into believing that just because God is using you, you are His child. God used Pharaoh but Pharaoh resisted God to the end. God used his evil actions for good but also judged him because he was evil. What is important is not whether you are being used of God but whether you have been forgiven of your sin. This was something the Jews failed to understand. They observed the law God gave them but rejected the Lord Jesus. Observance of the law was not enough. Only Jesus could save. This is why the Gentile who did not have the Law of Moses could be saved.

By choosing some people to receive His blessing God was demonstrating compassion and mercy. If He gave us what justice demanded, we would all be judged and condemned. In mercy He reaches out and rescues some and demonstrates His great love to them.

God may use those who have never come to Him. He may allow them to practice their evil for a time and use it to teach His people but he will still judge their sin.

Our salvation depends entirely on God and His favour. Paul makes it quite clear that our human efforts count for nothing. Many in Israel who observed the Law of God perished while the Gentiles who made no effort to please God received His favour. If there is one thing this chapter teaches us it is our absolute need of God and His favour for our salvation.

For Consideration:

- Is God unjust because he shows mercy on some and not others?
- What do we learn about God's right over us as His creation?
- What does Paul tell us about why God allows sin to continue for a time?
- What is the difference between being used of God and being saved from your sin? Can you be used without being saved from your sin?
- What does Paul teach us here about the role of "works" when it comes to salvation? On what does our salvation depend?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to forgive you for the times you have complained about the things He has been doing in your life.
- If the Spirit of God has opened your eyes to the truth, take a moment to thank Him for the favour He has shown you.
- Thank the Lord that while we do not always understand His purpose, He does what is right.
- Thank the Lord that He has chosen to reveal Himself to you.

RIGHTEOUSNESS BY FAITH

Read Romans 10:1-11

Paul had a real passion for the children of Israel. Here in chapter 10 he reminds us that his greatest desire was that they be saved from the condemnation of their sin. Though they were the chosen people of God, not all of them were destined for eternal life. Most had rejected the Lord Jesus as the Messiah, the Promised One who had come to save them from their sins. While they were very zealous for God, their zeal was not based on knowledge of the truth.

The Jews were very zealous about the practice of their faith. They observed the sacrifices and festivals God gave through Moses. They were faithful in tithing and the traditions of their fathers. None of these things, however, could guarantee their salvation. Their religious activity brought them no closer to God. In John's Gospel, we meet Nicodemus a Pharisee who lived a very good life and practiced the law of God but was told by Jesus that unless he was born again he would not even see the kingdom of heaven. Of all the people in the New Testament, the Pharisees were the most religious and faithful observers of the Law

of Moses. Despite their careful observance of the law, however, Jesus spoke more harshly to them than any other group in His time on this earth.

Paul tells us that while the Jews were very zealous for their faith, their zeal was not based on knowledge. What knowledge did they lack that kept them from the salvation of God? Paul tells us in verse 3 that the Jews did not know the righteousness that came from God through Christ, and instead they sought to establish their own righteousness. In doing so they did not submit to God and the righteousness He wanted to give them.

This is a very important statement. The Jews failed because they turned their back on God's promise of salvation. They believed that if they held on to their traditions and rituals God would accept them. Though I have used this illustration in another meditation, let me use it again. Imagine that before you is a cup of poisoned water. If you knew it was poisoned, would you drink this water? Of course not. Imagine that you watch someone put some sugar in the water. Now would you drink it? Of course you wouldn't. While the water may taste better it still has poison in it. The sugar didn't remove the poison from the water. This is what the Jews failed to see. Their lives, like ours, were poisoned with sin. They did good works and were very religious but they could not take away the fact that they were sinners before God. The sugar of religious rituals cannot take away the sinful nature that condemns us before God.

What the Jews of Paul's day needed were forgiveness and a right standing before God. This is what they did not understand. Paul told the Romans in verse 3 that the Jews did not know "the righteousness that comes from God" and were instead trying to establish their own righteousness.

They were very zealous about the practice of their faith but their zeal did not bring them any closer to God.

Paul made it quite clear to his readers in verse 4 that Christ is the end of the law for all who will believe. The law could never save anyone. Only Jesus could. This is why the Gentiles shared in the inheritance of Abraham's promise with the believing Jews. Many of the Jews who trusted in the Law of Moses to get them to heaven never made it because the law was never intended to get anyone to heaven. It was intended to point them to their need of a Saviour.

In verses 5 to 8 Paul compares the righteousness that is by the Law with the righteousness that comes by faith. Moses described the righteousness of the Law by saying that the man who did these things would live by them (Leviticus 18:5). In other words, those who are under the law are required to live according to its standard. To fail in any point is to be guilty of sin. The penalty for sin was death (see Romans 6:23). Who could meet this standard?

Unlike the righteousness that comes by the law, the righteousness that comes by faith says:

Who will ascend into heaven? (that is, to bring Christ down) or who will descend into the deep (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead," (Romans 10:7).

The law placed the Jews under an impossible standard. The picture Paul paints in this verse is of someone crying out for help in their lost condition. Notice the cry: "Who can ascend to heaven to bring Christ down to us?" This is the cry of a soul recognizing its need. This is the cry of a condemned soul realizing that it falls short of God's standard

and needs someone to save them. Who can bring Christ to us it cries, for he is our only help. While those under the law looked to their own ability, those under the law of faith looked up to Christ for His intervention. They placed all their hope in Him and cried out to Him for their salvation.

Paul reminds his readers in verse that Christ is not far away or impossible to reach. He was, in fact, very near them, longing to come to their aid. According to Paul, the righteousness that is by faith says, "The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart," (Rom. 10:8). It says that the Lord Jesus is very close. He knocks at the door of our heart. We don't have to reach up to heaven to find Him because He has come down to earth to find us.

In verse 9 Paul tells the Romans that all they needed to do was recognize and confess Jesus is Lord and believe in their heart that He was raised from the dead and they would be saved.

Paul tells the Romans two things here. First he tells them that salvation requires confessing Jesus as Lord. This means a change of allegiance. If Jesus is Lord, then we must be ready to submit to His lordship in our lives. This will require seeking Him alone and resisting all other gods in our life.

Second, salvation requires believing in our hearts that Jesus was raised from the dead. To understand what Paul is saying here we need to understand why the Lord Jesus died. He died for our sins. He died so that the penalty for our sins could be paid in full. He died so that we could be forgiven. He did not remain in the grave. The Lord Jesus rose in victory over our sin. This means that He alone is our hope and confidence.

Paul summarizes what he has been teaching in verse 10. It is through belief from our heart that we are justified or declared to be in a right standing with God. This belief is a belief in what the Lord has done for us. His work alone gives us a right standing with the Father. Those who come to Christ must believe that he died for their sins and rose in victory over them. Those who come to Christ for salvation, however, must also confess with their mouth that He is Lord. This confession is a declaration of their submission to Him and His purposes.

The righteousness that comes by the law demanded perfect obedience. All who fell short are guilty and deserving of death and eternal separation from God. The righteousness that comes by faith demands belief in a perfect Saviour and confession of Him as Lord.

For Consideration:

- What does this passage teach us about the possibility of meriting salvation by human effort?
- What is the salvation that comes by faith?
- How do we receive the salvation that comes by faith?
- Is it possible for us to be very zealous for the Lord and still not be saved?

For Prayer:

- Do you know someone who is trying to merit their salvation by works? Take a moment to pray that they might realize that salvation is a free gift.
- Ask the Lord to give you boldness in proclaiming Him as your Lord and Saviour.
- Ask the Lord to help you to surrender to His Lordship in your life.

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NO DIFFERENCE

Read Romans 10:12-21

To the Jews of Paul's day, the Gentiles were unworthy of salvation. The Jews saw themselves as the chosen people of God because He had given them the Law and the prophets. This made it very difficult for them to believe that a Gentile could be in a right relationship with God.

Paul tells his readers in this section of Romans that there was no difference between the Jew and the Gentile when it came to salvation. The Lord God was willing to receive anyone who came to Him by faith, regardless of race, culture, or social standing. Everyone who called on the name of the Lord could be saved (verse 13).

There are many people who use the name of the Lord. Churches are filled with people who "call on" the Lord in one way or another. Lots of people call on Him when they are in trouble and forget Him the rest of the time. It is important that we understand what Paul means when he uses the words, "call on."

In the context, Paul has been speaking about salvation. Calling on the Lord, therefore, has to do with seeking His salvation. If we are going to truly call on the Lord in this sense we first of all have to understand our need for Him. We don't call on someone we do not need anything. Paul is speaking here about individuals who understand that they are sinners with no hope of salvation apart from the work of the Lord Jesus. This is why they call on Him. They call out to Him because they realize that He is the only hope they have. Those who call out to the Lord understand their need and are ready to open their hearts to receive the answer the Lord wants to give. The Lord hears that kind of cry. He will reach out, says Paul, and save.

It is also important to realize that before a person can call out to the Lord they need to believe in Him (verse 14). This calling out is a cry of faith. To truly call out, a person needs to believe in the work of the Lord Jesus and why He came. He came because there was no other way for us to be saved. He came because we were sinners separated from a holy God. If we are going to call out to God for this salvation, we need to believe that He is the only one who can meet our need. Why would anyone call out if they did not believe He was able to help?

Paul reminded the Romans in verse 14 that the kind of belief required to call out to the Lord came through the preaching of the Word. No one can believe in something they have never heard about. If people are going to call out to God for salvation they first need to hear the message of the Gospel from His servants. Only when people hear the word can they respond in belief and call out to the Lord.

The apostle went on to remind the Romans in verse 15 only those who were sent could preach. We need to understand several things about this statement of Paul.

Those who preach the message of salvation need to be God's instruments, gifted and sent by Him for this purpose. There are many who stand behind pulpits or go door to door who are not sent by God. Even in Paul's day there were many false prophets who preached another gospel. Those who preach need to be His people who know the truth and go under God's anointing, leading and calling.

Paul quotes Isaiah, in verse 15, saying, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" There is something very beautiful about someone who has enough compassion and love in his or her heart to leave everything behind to share the love of the Lord Jesus with those who have never heard. Those who step out in this way are precious in the eyes of the Lord. They also need to be precious in our eyes. This means that His people be willing to invest time and resources in them and their calling.

Sharing the Word of God is not always an easy task. Isaiah understood the difficulty of this ministry. The message of the prophets was not always well received. Many prophets were murdered because those to whom they were sent rejected them and their message. At one point in his ministry Isaiah cried out, "Lord, who has believed our message?" He understood rejection. We need to remember that people may react unfavourably to the Word of God. Sometimes we will be persecuted because of the message we speak. The reality of the matter, however, is that "faith comes from hearing the message" (verse 17). A person cannot believe in something they have never heard about. The only way people can hear the message is for someone to take it to them.

Paul reminds us in verse 18 that when the word of God went out to Israel, it was not accepted. Their rejection of this message did not mean that God was finished with His people. Paul tells us that even Moses knew that God would make Israel envious of a nation that had no understanding (verse 19). The day would come when Israel would long for the blessings God was pouring out on the Gentiles.

God revealed Himself to those who did not even seek Him (verse 20). God poured out His Spirit on the Gentiles. He reached out to them and blessed them and brought them into His kingdom. While the Gentiles opened their heart to the things of God, His very own people rejected Him. God held out his hands to them but they have refused to accept the good news of the Gospel. God, however, has not completely rejected His people.

Salvation is not limited to any one people. God will bless all who truly call out to Him in faith. If people are to believe, they first need to hear. If people are going to hear, we need to leave the comforts of our own homes and go. Not everyone will accept the message we bring, but those who receive it, believe and call out to the Lord Jesus will be saved.

For Consideration:

- What does it mean to call on the Lord?
- What do we learn here about the importance of sharing the Word of God?

- What does this passage tell us about the needs of those who have never heard the Gospel?
- What do we learn in this passage about the difficulties associated with sharing the Gospel?
- What role do you have in sharing this message?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord for how He reached out to you with His salvation.
- Ask the Lord to show you more clearly how He wants you to reach out with the word to those who have never heard.
- Ask the Lord for open doors to share the gospel with someone today.
- Ask the Lord to give you strength to face the trials and rejection that will inevitably come when you share His Word.

DID GOD REJECT HIS PEOPLE?

Read Romans 11:1-12

Paul has been reminding his readers that in Christ there is no difference between the Jew and the Gentile. All who call on the name of the Lord can be saved. In the final section of chapter 10 he told us that while the offer of salvation was given first to the Jews, they had turned their back on it. The rejection of the Messiah brought up some very important questions. Was God now finished with His people? Had He turned His attention completely to the Gentile nations now?

Paul answers this question with a very definitive "No!" He uses his own situation to illustrate his point. Paul was a Jew, a descendant of Abraham from the tribe of Benjamin. As an Israelite, he had experienced the richness of his Jewish heritage, but God had also saved him from his sin through the Lord Jesus. He was living proof that God had not completely rejected His people.

Though Israel had killed His prophets, God never rejected them. Paul reminds his readers of the prophet Elijah in verse 3. At one point in his ministry, the prophet cried out to God, "Lord these people have killed the prophets and torn down your altar. I alone am left and they want to kill me too."

The Lord comforted Elijah by telling him that He had preserved seven thousand people who had never bowed the knee to the pagan gods. God had set apart seven thousand Jews and protected them in a desperate and wicked time. He kept them from the evil that surrounded them. Again this was proof to Paul that God had His hand on a number of His people. God still had a remnant of Jews chosen and preserved by grace (verse 5)

Paul tells us in verse 7 that what Israel earnestly sought they did not obtain (verse 7). They sought the Messiah, but only a few found Him. Notice that Israel "earnestly" sought the Messiah. They looked for Him, but did not recognize Him when He came. They expected Him to come in a very different way. They expected Him to look different.

Paul tells us that the Israelites were hardened and given a spirit of stupor so they could not see. David cries out to God against his own people saying:

May their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a retribution for them. May their eyes be darkened so they cannot see, and their backs be bent forever" (verses 9-10).

These are difficult words, but they should be a warning to us. The Jews prided themselves in being the people of God but they rejected the Messiah. They stumbled over their very own salvation. They refused and rejected the

prophets and so God gave them up to their own sinful hearts.

Did they stumble beyond recovery? Paul again emphatically says "No!" He tells us instead that there is still hope for the people of God. In fact, because of their sin and rejection, salvation came to the Gentiles. If their sin and rejection meant that God turned His attention to the world and brought countless individuals into His salvation, imagine what will happen when the Lord brings them to Himself. If God can use the Jewish nation, as sinful as it was, to bring His salvation to the world, imagine what He can do if they turn to Him. God has not rejected His people. He still has a plan for them.

God does not abandon His own. He puts His hands on us and keeps us. Were it not for Him, where would we be today? We owe everything to Him. If God had abandoned the Jewish nation, what hope would we have? We should be confident, then, that God will not abandon us because He has not abandoned the Jews.

For Consideration:

- What does this passage teach us about the plan of the Lord for the Jewish nation?
- What do we learn here about how God keeps us from sin and evil?
- Have you seen the Lord keep you from sin? Explain.

- What comfort do you receive from the fact that God has not abandoned the Jews? What assurance does this give you?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord for the way He has kept you from sin and evil.
- Thank Him that despite the fact that you have not always been faithful He has still used you.
- Ask the Lord to open your heart to Him and His purposes. Ask Him to use you in a greater way.

NO ROOM FOR BOASTING

Read Romans 11:13-24

Paul has been speaking about the fact that there is no difference between Jews and Gentiles as far as salvation is concerned. While the Jews had, for the most part, rejected Jesus as Saviour, God had not rejected them.

The Jews of Paul's day had a very difficult time accepting the fact that the Gentile could be received by God on the same level as the Jew. The fact that the Gentiles accepted the salvation the Jews rejected lead some to believe that they were better than the Jews. This mentality has been passed on through the generations. The history of the Jewish nation demonstrates that they have suffered tremendously at the hands of many Christian nations.

Paul, though he held strongly to his Jewish roots, was called to be a missionary to the Gentiles. He was proud of the ministry the Lord had given him. This did not come without personal cost. His own Jewish brothers and sisters did not feel that he should have been preaching to the Gentiles. They felt he had defiled himself by associating

with them. On occasion he was rejected and beaten because of his willingness to accept the Gentiles as equal partners in the Gospel. Despite this rejection, Paul tells us in verse 13 that he saw great fruit in his ministry. He was not ashamed of his call to the Gentiles. He willingly suffered the rejection and abuse of Jewish brothers and sisters for the sake of the Gentiles.

One of the reasons why Paul was so willing to accept the persecution of his brothers for ministering to the Gentiles was that he wanted the Jews to envy what God was doing among them. Though he was an apostle to the Gentiles he never forgot his own people. He wanted the Jews to see what God could do in the Gentiles so that they would be stirred up in their own hearts to accept Him as well (verse 14).

The result of Paul's ministry was that the Spirit of God was poured out on people from different nations and many accepted the salvation of God. It was because the Jews rejected the gospel that God's Spirit began to move among the nations. Paul challenges his readers to consider that if the Jewish rejection of the Gospel brought so many Gentiles into the Kingdom of God, what would God do through them when they accepted Jesus and His salvation? Notice in verse 15 that Paul says "what will their acceptance be." He uses the word "will" here. Paul had a very clear sense that God was going to do a powerful work in the life of the Jewish nation. He believed that the day would come when there would be a great turning to the Lord Jesus, and he expected great and powerful things to happen through the Jews when they finally turned to Christ.

Paul addressed the Gentiles who believed that because they had accepted the Lord they were better than the Jews

(verse 16). He uses two illustrations to show them the foolishness of their belief.

He illustrates this first with an illustration of bread. He reminds them that if the dough that is used to make bread is good then the bread will also be good. If, on the other hand, the dough is not good then the bread will not be any good either.

The second illustration Paul used was about a tree. If a tree does not have a good root structure the branches will be poor and the tree will not bear good fruit.

What is Paul saying in these illustrations? He is telling the Gentiles that their roots were in the Jewish faith. The God of the Jews was their God as well. The Lord God chose to give them the Messiah through the Jewish nation. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the fathers of the Jewish nation, were their spiritual fathers as well. The Scriptures of the Old Testament were both the Scriptures of the Jew and the Christian. The roots of Christianity are firmly anchored in the roots of Judaism. Were it not for the Jewish nation, the salvation of the Gentiles would never have happened. The Gentiles owed everything to their Jewish roots.

Paul further illustrates this by reminding the Gentiles that they had been grafted onto a Jewish tree. They were wild branches being sustained and given life by Jewish roots. The Scriptures of Judaism gave them hope. The prophets of the Jewish nation gave them warnings and blessings. The God of Judaism accepted them and made them His children. How could these wild branches, sustained by Jewish roots even think that they were better than the root itself? It was unthinkable for Paul that the Gentile treat the Jew as inferior in any way.

Paul recognized that many Jewish branches were broken off so that Gentile branches could be put in their place. He knew that God had turned His back on His people for a time because of their rejection of His Son. This, however, did not give the Gentiles any reason to boast over the Jews. If anything, it gave them great cause to be afraid.

Paul warns the Gentiles that if God would cut off His own people whom He loved and blessed above all others, then He certainly would not hesitate to do the same with foreigners. Instead of boasting, they needed to learn the lesson that God was teaching them through His people. They needed to fear God and live in obedience lest He turn from them as well.

In verse 22, Paul challenged the Gentiles to consider the kindness and the sternness of God. He had judged those who rejected Him. He had punished sin and evil. At the same time, however, He is also a God of great kindness and compassion to those who persevere in faith. God's Spirit was moving powerfully among the Gentiles, bringing them into His kingdom. We have the impression, however, that if they turned their backs on Him like the Jews had done and grieved his Spirit, He would also turn His Spirit from them leaving them in their sin and evil.

In verse 23 Paul told His readers that if the Jews did not persist in unbelief, God would receive them again. If we were accepted as foreigners into the family of God how much more will God delight in receiving His own people?

What Paul is telling us here is that there is no room for boasting over our Jewish brothers and sisters. We owe much to them. They brought to us a Saviour. They gave us the Scriptures. We also need to learn the lesson God is teaching us through them. We need to learn that as wild

branches we can so grieve the Spirit that He turns from us as well. Paul is speaking here about the work of the Spirit in the life of a nation. He is not implying that we could lose our salvation. What he is saying, however, is that we can so grieve the Spirit that He removes His presence. What a terrible thing it is when the Spirit of God is grieved in a nation and the Lord cuts off His grace and blessing. The nation is plunged into the darkness of their sin. Crimes and violence increase. Materialism and immorality dominate the culture. Corruption, dishonesty, and pride take control. Salvation is rare. Hearts become hard. The Word of God does not seem to take root in the hearts and lives of people. How important it is for us as a nation to keep our hearts open to what the Spirit of God is saying lest we too be cut off from His ministry in our land.

For Consideration:

- What do we see here in this passage about the heart of Paul for the Jews?
- What have we received from our Jewish brothers and sisters?
- What lesson do we need to learn from the Jews about being cut off from the ministry of God's Holy Spirit in their midst?
- How can we grieve the Holy Spirit as a nation today? What would you expect to see in a nation that is grieving the Holy Spirit?
- How can we grieve the Holy Spirit in our personal lives? What is the result?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to forgive you for the times you have grieved the Holy Spirit in your life.
- Ask the Lord to be patient with your nation and to continue His work in its midst.
- Ask the Lord to move among the Jewish nation, to bring them to Himself.
- Ask the Lord to show you any way you have been grieving the Holy Spirit in your life. Ask Him to give you grace to repent.

ISRAEL'S HOPE

Read Romans 11:25-36

Paul has been reminding the Gentiles of the debt they owed the Jews. Through them God brought the Saviour of the world. Through them He gave the Scriptures. Because of their rejection, the Spirit of the Lord turned to them.

In verse 25 Paul went on to say that the Jewish nation had actually experienced a partial hardening until the full number of Gentiles had come in. This leads us to believe that, in the plan and purpose of God, there is yet a great work to be accomplished in the life of the Jewish nation. God has not forgotten those whom He originally called out to be His people. For the moment, the Spirit of God is moving among the Gentile nations but the day will come when that same Spirit will return and move among the Jews. When those whom God has called from the Gentiles have reached their number, then the Lord will restore His own people to Himself. It is understood that this will not be done apart from the Lord Jesus. There is only one way to God and that is through the Lord Jesus. When God moves among the Jews there will finally be recognition of Christ Jesus as their Messiah. What a wonderful day that will be.

Notice that Paul told the Romans in verse 26 that all Israel will be saved. We need to examine this phrase in more detail. Quoting from Isaiah Paul reminded his readers that from Jerusalem would come a Deliverer who would turn the people from their sin and make a special covenant with them. The prophets of the Old Testament grieved over the sin and rebellion of the people of God so this news brought hope in the midst of great darkness.

What is significant about this passage is that Paul tells us that "all" Israel will be saved. What does he mean by this small word "all?" Does this mean that every single Jew will be saved? This cannot possibly be the case because many Jews have already rejected the Lord Jesus. To understand this passage it is important that we see it in the context of what Paul tells us earlier in his letter.

Remember that in Romans 9:6 Paul said that not all who were the descendants Abraham were true Israelites. The true Israel consisted of those who loved the Lord and worshiped Him in spirit and in truth. No matter the circumstances, God always had a remnant of Israel that truly belonged to Him. God accepted Jacob but rejected Esau. God accepted Isaac but rejected Ishmael. When Paul tells us that all Israel will be saved he is not referring to every man, woman and child born of Jewish parents. He is referring to those who belong to the "true Israel," God's chosen people.

At this present time God has been grafting in the Gentiles to the Jewish root (see Romans 11:17). These Gentiles are now part of the true Israel. The number will not be complete, however, until those God has chosen from the nation of Israel are also included. Paul is telling us that God will do a final work among the Jewish nation to complete the

number of people who will form part of his body. Then "all" of God's chosen people will be saved.

Paul told the Romans in verse 28 that, as far as the Gospel was concerned, the Jews were presently their enemies but they are still loved by God. God still had a plan for them. In Paul's day many of the Jews rejected the message of the Gospel. Some, including Paul, had been openly hostile to Christians. Many Christians were killed and persecuted by Jews in the early days of the church. In spite of this, however, God has not forgotten them as a people. He still has a plan for their salvation. He still loves them.

Part of the reason for this is that the call of God cannot be taken back (verse 29). God had called the Jewish nation to be His people. He had made promises to their fathers and He would not go back on those promises. The Jews provoked Him to anger many times, but God demonstrated great patience with them and continued to love them. He will not abandon them forever. He will be true to His word and His promise to them as a nation.

Just as the Gentiles were at one time living in darkness and disobedience to the Lord, so now the Jews are living in that same disobedience and darkness. Since the coming of the Lord Jesus the Jewish nation has been cast into darkness by their rejection of the Messiah. Paul reminds us that just as God opened the door for the Gentiles so He will again open the door for the Jews to receive mercy and salvation.

In God's overall purpose He sometimes allows us to be bound in darkness for a time so that He can show us His mercy and compassion. In fact we would never fully understand the mercy and forgiveness of God if it were not for our sin and rebellion. Jesus reminds us in the Gospel

of Luke that those who love Him the most are those who have been forgiven the most (Luke 7:47).

Paul also tells us that God must sometimes reveal to us the extent of our sin and rebellion before showing us the depth of His love, mercy, and compassion (verse 32). There have been times in my life when I have been overwhelmed by my sin and shortcomings. There have been prolonged times when God seemed far away. It seemed that I was plunged into darkness and I felt that God was no longer moving in or through me. The fact of the matter is that we never really appreciate the Promised Land until we have to face the wilderness.

The ways of God are beyond us (verse 33). We will never be able to fully grasp His purpose and plan. Some time ago I met an individual who began to speak to me about the doctrine of the trinity. He could not understand how God could be one God and yet Father, Son, and Holy Spirit at the same time. He felt that because he could not understand this doctrine it could not be true. I responded to him saying: "I am so glad that there are things about God I cannot understand, because if I could understand God and fit Him into my small brain He would not be very big." There will always be things about God we will not understand. Sometimes we simply have to trust God despite our confusion.

There are times when we think we need to tell God what to do. We get angry with Him when He doesn't do things the way we would like Him to. We think that maybe He is the one who doesn't understand us rather than the other way around. Paul reminds us that none of us can counsel God. Again we need to trust Him when we don't see the full picture.

Paul reminds us that the Lord God is the source of all things. We owe every breath we take to Him. Without Him nothing could exist. He put it all in place and sustains it all. There is nothing we can give God that He has not first given us. He is an awesome God deserving of our praise and worship. We may never understand His purposes but we can trust them completely.

God will work out His purposes in the history of the world no matter what may come. His ways may be beyond us but they are perfect and we can place our full confidence in what He is doing. Maybe you feel like you are living in darkness like the Jewish nation. Be encouraged, God has not abandoned you. He will use the trials and darkness you are facing to bring you closer. He will not forsake you. Though you do not understand His ways, you can trust Him.

For Consideration:

- What does Paul teach us here about the purpose and plan of God for the Jewish nation?
- How has God revealed to you your own sinfulness? How has this helped you to understand His grace more fully?
- Do you have to understand God to accept Him? Do you have to understand His purpose before trusting in it?
- What does this passage teach us about the times of trials and spiritual darkness we sometimes face?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to forgive you for the many times you have failed to trust Him because you did not understand His purpose.
- Thank the Lord for allowing you to be born in a time when the Spirit of God was moving among Gentile nations like your own. Thank Him for the privilege He has given you to know Him personally.
- Ask the Lord to renew your sense of awe at who He is and what He is doing in this world.
- Thank the Lord that He will always be faithful to His promises and that He is completely trustworthy.
- Thank God that He does not forget His own. Take a moment to pray for someone close to you who is wandering right now from the Lord.

31

SURRENDERED AND TRANSFORMED

Read Romans 12:1, 2

Paul has spent most of his time in this letter describing the work of the Lord Jesus for our salvation. Though we were foreigners and enemies of the Lord, Jesus reached out to us and saved us from our sin. He set us free from condemnation by offering His own life on the cross. He placed His Spirit in us to be our guide and counsellor. Paul brings two challenges to all who have experienced this work of Christ in their lives in Romans 12:1-2.

Present Your Bodies as Living Sacrifices

The first challenge is to present our bodies as living sacrifices to God. What does it mean to present our bodies as sacrifices? If we are going to offer our bodies as living sacrifices to God, we will have to die to the ideas and desires we have for ourselves. The moment we offer ourselves to the Lord we give Him the right to our lives. We are now His to do with as He pleases. He may send us to the mission

field. He may allow us to pass through a time of sickness that will test and refine us. When we sacrifice our bodies to the Lord they no longer belong to us. We surrender all rights to the Lord. He is now Lord of our lives and we are under His Lordship.

According to the apostle Paul, it is only reasonable for us to do this. To do any less would be to dishonour the Lord Jesus who gave Himself for us. Notice in verse 1 how Paul tells us that offering ourselves in this way is an act of worship. Every time we choose to die to our own interests and do what God requires, we honour Him. When we turn our backs on immorality because it would dishonour the Lord, we have offered Him our worship. As caretakers of these bodies we glorify the Lord by keeping our bodies pure and holy.

Do Not Be Conformed to the World

The second challenge that Paul brings in verse 2 is to no longer be conformed to the pattern of this world but be "transformed by the renewing of our minds." The first challenge has to do with the body; the second has to do with our mind. We are to offer our bodies to the Lord and keep them pure and holy. We are to do a similar thing with our mind.

Here in verse 2 Paul challenges us not to be conformed any longer to the pattern of this world. By this he means the philosophy of this world. In other words, we are not to allow ourselves to think like the unbelievers around us. Take a moment to consider how this world thinks. While writing this commentary, I often found myself in a coffee shop nearby. The coffee shops where I live are places where people come to talk and share their ideas. It doesn't take long to see what is important to the people who gather

there. They speak about their parties and how much alcohol they drink. They talk of their immoral relationships and broken families. They speak of getting back at those who have offended them. They delight in the things of this world and want nothing to do with the Lord Jesus. I remember on one occasion an angry man coming into the coffee shop upset because a pastor had approached him and talked to him about the Lord Jesus. He told everyone there that he almost punched the pastor for sharing Christ with him. This is how the world thinks.

Paul tells us that the thinking of the world is contrary to the thinking of God. We are not to allow the world to guide our thinking. We are to realize that our minds belong to the Lord Jesus and we are to protect them from the evil that is all around us. We are not to allow the filth of this world to come into the minds that have been consecrated to God. Our minds are just as much the temple of God as our bodies.

It is much easier to hide the sins of the mind. You can be angry with a brother or sister and not show it. You can lust after someone in your church and not let anyone see it. You can have evil thoughts and no one knows. But you must realize that God knows. If you are serious about being a caretaker of the body and mind you have offered to God, you will take precautions so that nothing impure enters to defile your mind and body.

How is it possible for us to keep our mind from being influenced and corrupted by the things around us? While it is true that we need to keep ourselves from those places and things where our minds can be tempted, this is only a partial solution. We don't need to see pornography to imagine it in our hearts. The sinful flesh is quite capable of imagining evil things on its own.

Paul tells us that if we want to keep our minds from being conformed to this world we need more than discipline. We need to be transformed by the renewing of our minds.

How are our minds transformed? They are transformed in two ways. First, they are transformed by dying to our own ideas and surrendering to the leading and working of the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who gives us the mind of Christ. He has come to transform us and renew us. We must surrender to His work in us. We must learn to hear His voice and listen to His prompting. We must turn from those things He convicts us about. He will train us in righteousness. He will show us what is holy. To be transformed by the renewing of your mind is to surrender to the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit.

The second thing we need to do in order to transform our minds is to saturate ourselves in the Word of God. If we want our minds to be transformed we need to understand what God requires, and this is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament.

If you have taken the time to work through this commentary you are on your way to having your mind transformed. As you continue to read the Word of God, believe it and surrender to it. As you do this and put this Word to the test by obeying it, you will find it to be true. You will begin to see how shallow and meaningless the way of the world really is. You will begin to appreciate the purposes of God in a new way.

The challenge to those who have experienced the salvation of the Lord is to offer both body and mind to the Lord. Keep yourself pure for the Lord's use, and allow the Holy Spirit to transform your mind and bring it into submission to His purposes. While the Lord has forgiven our sin and

given us a right standing with the Father, there is still a great work to be done in us. As we surrender ourselves to Him, body and mind, He will transform and renew us and bring us closer to Himself.

For Consideration:

- What is our reasonable sacrifice in light of God's mercy toward us?
- What does it mean to offer our bodies to God? Have you been doing this?
- How can our minds be transformed?
- What sin do you struggle with? What is the challenge of this passage for you today?
- Is your mind being renewed by the Lord Jesus? Are there still elements of worldliness in your thinking?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to help you to be a good caretaker of the body and mind He has given you.
- Have you completely surrendered your body and mind to the Lord? If not, take a moment right now to offer yourself to Him for His use.
- Ask the Lord to renew your mind completely. Ask Him to remove any thoughts and attitudes that do not bring glory to His name.

ONE BODY, MANY GIFTS

Read Romans 12:3-8

God accepts both Jew and Gentile. No matter what race or culture we belong to, in Christ, we are all part of the same body. Having made this clear, Paul then proceeds to tell his readers that they should never think too highly of themselves. He encouraged them instead, to think of themselves with "sober judgment." The idea here is that they were to be honest with themselves about who they really were. Notice particularly in verse 3 that we are to do this according to the measure of faith God has given us. Let's take a moment to examine Paul's meaning.

Paul is telling us here that we are not to think more highly of ourselves than we ought. This means we need to understand that we are all sinners in need of a Saviour. We must realize that God did not choose us because we were worthy of His attention. Even the great apostle Paul saw himself as being among the worst of sinners (1 Timothy 1:15).

Jesus, as the perfect Son of God, willingly stooped down to wash the feet of His disciples (John 13:5). He laid down His life for those who were His enemies.

Since so many problems in the Christian life come from wanting to exalt ourselves above our brothers and sisters, it is important that we understand what Paul is telling us in this passage. We are unworthy servants of a God who loves us and sent His Son to die for us. This truth should impact not only how we see ourselves but how we treat our brothers and sisters in Christ.

While it is important that we not see ourselves as being more important than we really are, it is also important not to go to the other extreme. There are some who are so caught up in their unworthiness that they fail to see how the Lord could use them at all. These individuals never step out in faith because they feel so unworthy. They live their lives without ever impacting those around them or receiving the love of the Father. Notice that Paul tells us that we are to think of ourselves according to the measure of faith God has given us. Paul is telling us in this that we need to understand who God has made us to be and what He has called us to do.

What is God's calling on your life? What spiritual gifts has He given you? What burden has He placed on your heart? How much faith has God given you to step out to do something about that burden? While we should never think that we are better than we really are, we should also never think that we are less than God has made us to be.

False humility refuses to accept the role God has given, while he who is truly humble sees himself just as God sees him, no less and no more. Those who are truly humble accept their calling and will let nothing stop them from being

obedient or becoming everything God intends them to be. They think of themselves according to the measure of faith that God has given them. They see themselves as God see them, beloved children who are chosen instruments of the Master, called and equipped for a special purpose in this world.

Paul continues in verse 4 with the reminder that, just as the body has many different parts, so does the church. Each member is vital to the purpose of God. The hand does not have the same function as the foot or the leg. The eye does one thing and the ear does another. Each part of the body has a different role to play but every part is important. This is how it is in the body of Christ. We do not all have the same role to play. Our gifts and personalities are very different.

The thing about our gifts is that they must all work together in harmony if they are to accomplish what God intends. The foot belongs to the body and its purpose is to help the body to function as it should. The foot does not belong to itself but to the body. Imagine if each foot decided to go in a different direction from the rest of the body. What would be the result? This may be funny to imagine but how often do the members of the body of Christ seek to move in opposite directions? The result is chaos in the church.

We need to realize that God has given each of us a specific function. Each of us can minister to different needs in body. Our gifts are not to be used for our own selfish motives but for the good of the whole body. Our gifts belong to the Lord Jesus and, as such, must be used for the harmony and benefit of the whole body.

Paul reminds us in verse 6 that the Lord God calls us to use our gifts according to the proportion of our faith. For

instance, if a person has the gift of prophecy, he is to use that gift according to the measure of faith God has given him. What is God calling you to do? Can you trust Him to do what He has called you to do? Are you willing to step out trusting that the one who called you is able to equip and provide all you need to accomplish this purpose?

Paul uses the example of a prophet in verse 6. God may put a particular message on the heart of His servant but that message will serve no purpose unless the prophet steps out by faith to speak that word.

The same principle applies to other gifts. If God has put a burden on your heart to serve the practical needs of the body in a particular way, be faithful. Don't let discouragement or what others say keep you from doing what God has put on your heart to do. Trust His leading by faith and persevere. If God has called you to be an encourager, let Him lead and step out in faith to bless His people. If you are called to teach, study and teach as God opens your mind. If God wants you to give, trust Him to provide so that you can give generously to the needs of the body of Christ. If you are a leader, do your work diligently, trusting Him for the wisdom and direction you need. If you have gifts of mercy, minister with a cheerful heart as He reveals the needs. Commit yourself to do what God has gifted you to do. Trust His leading and watch what God does.

Here in this section Paul tells us that we are not to think more highly of ourselves than we ought. We must learn to be content with the gifts that God has given us. If you are not a gifted preacher, don't worry about it. Learn what your gift is and do that with all your heart. Don't think that because you are gifted in mercy that you are less than the one who teaches. Accept yourself for who God made you to be and excel in it.

For Consideration:

- What does it mean to not think more highly of ourselves than we should?
- Have you ever found yourself believing that God could not use you? What does Paul teach us here about that attitude?
- What spiritual gift has God given you? How are you using it?
- Have you ever found yourself using the gifts that God has given you for your own purposes? What do we learn here about the purpose of the gifts? To whom do these gifts belong?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to increase your faith in the area of your gifts.
- Ask the Lord to show you new ways to use the gifts He has given you.
- Thank the Lord for the way He wants to use us in the service of the kingdom.
- Ask the Lord to increase your faith so that you can be more useful for Him and the body.

LIVING IN HARMONY WITH THE BODY

Read Romans 12:9-21

In the last section Paul reminded us that we are all part of the body of Christ. As such, our gifts must be put to use for the benefit of the church. We no longer belong to ourselves alone. We are now part of a great family of brothers and sisters in Christ. As in any family, there can often be difficulties getting along. Each of us is different. We come to the body with different gifts, burdens, and personalities. When these work together in harmony, great things can be accomplished for the Kingdom of God. The reality of the matter, however, is that we do not always work well together. Paul recognized this problem and in this next section offers a series of challenges to the body of Christ to help them work in greater harmony.

Paul's first challenge to the church is that our love for each other be sincere (verse 9). There is a world of difference between what we do on the outside and what we think on

the inside. It is possible to act as though we love our brothers and sisters and still have bitterness toward them in our heart. Paul challenges us to search our hearts to be sure that our love for others is genuine. We have all seen churches where everything seems to be fine on the outside. These churches are filled with activities and people seem to be getting along. When the day is done, however, they criticize each other or complain about the pastor. Their love is not sincere. Paul challenges us to examine ourselves to be sure that what we demonstrate on the outside is also from our heart. It is quite easy to act lovingly toward a brother or sister but be bitter toward them deep down. We can act kindly toward someone and still need to forgive them. Paul challenges us to love with sincerity and all honesty from the heart.

There is a connection between sincere love and Paul's second challenge in verse 9. He tells us that we are to hate what is evil. If our love for each other is genuine we will not be criticizing people behind their backs. We will be the same person behind their backs as we are in front of them. Gossip, dishonesty, and immorality will disappear because we love each other with genuine love. We will cling to those things in others that are good and holy. We will bless and encourage each other because of our sincere love. We will hate evil and seek the good of each member of the body.

This sincere love for each other also causes us to be devoted to one another. We treat fellow believers as part of our own family. To be devoted to them means that we stick with them even in the difficult moments. We commit ourselves to them and minister to them as if they are our very own flesh and blood. When they are in pain we reach out in love to ease that pain. When they are struggling, we

bless and encourage them. We do not leave or abandon them.

Paul moves on in verse 10 to tell the Romans that they were to honour one another above themselves. To honour is to place a high value on someone, it is to respect, or treasure that person. In other words, they were to place more value on each other than on themselves. They were to willingly sacrifice themselves for the needs of their brother or sister. This is the example we have in the Lord Jesus when He laid down His life for us.

Paul went on in verse 11 to encourage the Romans never to lack zeal in serving the Lord. How easy it is, in light of difficulties to lack in spiritual zeal. There will be many trials and struggles as we seek to minister to each other and extend the Kingdom of God. Not everyone will accept us. We will experience criticism and rejection at times. Paul challenges us, in light of these difficulties, to be joyful in hope. In other words, we are to set our hearts on the great promises that God has given us. In the midst of fiery trials we are to remind ourselves that God has promised us victory in His presence forever. He promises to reward us for our faithful service. We will be with Him forever. These promises should fill us with great joy. We should never let our present trials steal the joyful hope we have in Christ and His promises. In our trials, we need to remember Christ and His wonderful purposes.

Paul encouraged the Romans, to be patient in the midst of their trials. To be patient is to remain hopeful under the weight of affliction. The apostle challenges the Romans to keep pressing on. They were to bring their pain and trials to the Lord in prayer (verse 12). Here they would find direction and strength. Through prayer we unlock the storehouse of God's blessing in their trial.

Paul reminded the Romans in Verse 13 that they were to share with God's people who were in need and offer hospitality. We have a wonderful example of this in the book of Acts (Acts 2:42-47). The Christian community shared its belongings with one another. They were devoted to each other because they belonged to the same family. When one member suffered they all suffered. They did not always have much but they shared what they had. Paul reminds us here that we are to stand with each other in times of need by providing what a brother or sister needs and by showing hospitality.

Serving Christ will not always be easy. There will be times when we are rejected and persecuted. Paul's challenge is to bless those who persecute or curse you. It is easy to speak out against those who persecute us. Paul challenges us to resist this temptation and to bless these individuals instead.

When we love sincerely we are able to rejoice with each other. When a brother or sister is blessed by God we do not become jealous, instead we genuinely share in their joy. Paul challenges us to put aside our pride and jealousy and rejoice with our brothers and sisters when they receive God's blessings.

Notice that he also tells us to mourn with those who mourn (verse 15). Have you ever rejoiced when those who have persecuted you or made your life difficult went through a trial of their own? How easy it is for us to secretly rejoice in our heart because we feel they deserved what they got. We should never be happy to see a brother, sister or enemy in pain. We should feel their pain with them.

In the body of Christ there should never be any division on the basis of social standing. We must be willing to associate with believers of low position in society. These people may not come from the same background but they are still part of the body of Christ. God has put them in the church for a reason. They have a role to play and we need to learn how to work in harmony with them and the gifts God has given them. Every believer is to be treated as a person of value. If we don't, the whole body will suffer.

We will not always be treated with respect and honour in the body of Christ. There are times when people, acting out of the flesh, will say false things about us or do things that hurt. Paul tells us, however, that we are not to return evil for evil. Instead, we are to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. In other words, we should return good for evil. When someone hurts you, do what is right. Respond to those who hurt you with the love of Christ. Forgive and bless those who seek to do you evil.

We have to admit that there are some people in the church who are very difficult to live with. They may not persecute us but they can cause a great deal of frustration. Sometimes these people do not live according to the Spirit. Sometimes they refuse to change their ways and sinful attitudes. Sometimes reconciliation is impossible due to the hardness of the heart or differences of opinion. Paul tells us that if it is possible we are to strive for peace with everyone. Notice that he says, "if it is possible" in verse 18. The apostle recognizes the difficulties in relationships at times. While it may not always be possible to find peace, we should always strive to that end.

Paul cautions us, in verse 19 against seeking revenge. Instead we are to love and bless each other and leave justice to God. God will judge and repay as He sees fit (verse 19).

We may want instant justice. We may want to see people pay for what they have done to us. Paul, however, tells us that it is our responsibility to bless each other. God will take care of the judging. If our enemy is hungry we are to feed him. If he is thirsty we are to give him something to drink. Our responsibility is to love. We are not to seek revenge.

Paul tells us in verse 20 that by doing this we are heaping burning coals on the head of our enemy. Some people interpret this to mean that if we love, forgive, and choose not to take revenge, we will make our enemy ashamed of what he has done. This could be part of what Paul is speaking about here. Remember, however, that in Bible times when the fire went out in a home it was necessary to go to the neighbour to get hot coals to restart the fire. Let's say, then, that a neighbour who has been very unkind to you comes to your door in need of coals for his fire. It would be very easy to turn him away because of the times he has made your life difficult. Paul tells us that instead of turning him away we are to heap coals on his head. Heavy objects, in Bible times, were carried on the head. Paul uses the idea of heaping coals on the head of our enemy as a symbol of blessing. Don't just give him a single coal. Bless him abundantly. Heap blessing on him. Send him away with all the coals he can carry as a symbol of your devotion and love for him in his need.

Paul concludes his statement about heaping coals on the head of our enemy by reminding the Romans that they were not to be overcome by evil but instead to overcome evil with good. In other words, don't let the evil things your neighbours do to you influence how you reach out in blessing them. When they do evil to you, respond with good. When they speak evil of you, speak well of them.

Living in community is not always easy. Paul gives us some basic guidelines here to live in harmony in the body of Christ. The challenge is for us to learn how to put these principles into practice in our lives.

For Consideration:

- Have you ever had to deal with a difficult person in the body of Christ? What was your response?
- What does Paul teach us here about giving value to each other? Are there people that you find it hard to value?
- What do we learn from this chapter about how much we need each other?
- Where do we find strength to respond in love to those who persecute us?
- Is there a brother or sister in need around you? What can you do to help them?

For Prayer:

- Take a moment to examine what Paul tells us in this passage about how we are to live in the body of Christ. Ask the Lord to show you areas of weakness in your own life.
- Ask the Lord to help you to bless those who hurt you. Ask Him to help you to forgive.

- Ask the Lord to open your eyes to the needs of the body and to make you willing to reach out to those needs.
- Are there people who have made things difficult for you? Ask the Lord to bless them and to show you if there is any way He can use you to encourage them.

SUBMITTING TO AUTHORITY

Read Romans 13:1-7

In this next section of his letter, the apostle Paul shifts his attention from the body of Christ to the relationship of the believer to government authorities. We should remember that, at this time in the history of the church, the government did not sanction the Christian faith. Christians were being persecuted all around the Roman Empire for refusing the worship the Roman gods. The Roman authorities were often quite cruel. Submitting to such authority would have been extremely difficult for the believer.

Paul begins by telling his readers that every believer should submit to the governing authorities. He explains that the reason for this is because no political power exists except for that which God has established. This would have been hard for some to understand. The reality of the matter is, however, that it is only by God's permission that any power or authority exists. God can certainly remove any authority He chooses. This was often the case in the history of Israel. God often removed political and spiritual leaders from their position when they rejected Him and His

purpose. The fact that God had not removed them was an indication that He still had a purpose for them.

The other truth we need to understand is that no matter how evil or cruel these authorities are, God can use them to accomplish His purposes on earth. We see this in the life of many of the kings in the Old Testament. Pharaoh was raised up as the enemy of God's people. God then defeated him to demonstrate His power and compassion for Israel.

In the days of Daniel, God raised Nebuchadnezzar to power. Despite the fact that he was a cruel leader, God used him to teach His people a lesson. He was God's instrument to punish the Jews, taking them away from the land, and teaching them about their sin.

God can defeat any power that stands in the way of His purposes. He can also use whatever power He chooses to accomplish His greater glory. We need to be very careful in opposing government authority. Paul commands us to respect them as the instruments that God has put in place to accomplish His overall purposes.

In verse 2 Paul goes so far as to say that he who rebels against the authority God has established rebels against God. God stands behind the authorities He puts in place. To disobey them is to disobey the Lord who gave them their authority. When we disobey the authorities that God has placed over us, we bring judgment on ourselves from both the authorities God has placed over us and from God Himself.

God has given rulers the authority to punish those who disobey the law of the land (verse 3). If we live according to

the laws of the land, we have nothing to fear. On the contrary, if we do not respect them we live in fear of punishment. If we want to be free from this fear we need to respect and obey the authorities that exist. By so doing, we will be commended and honoured as good citizens.

The rulers that God places over us are His servants. They have been put in place by God to provide harmony and justice for society. Paul tells us that the ruler is God's servant and an agent of His wrath to punish the wrongdoer. If we disobey them, we will suffer the effects of their sword. God gives the authorities of our land this right and privilege.

It is important for us to understand that the authorities Paul is speaking about are not necessarily believers. God is able to use whomever He desires to accomplish His purpose. He does not limit Himself to believers. It is for this reason that we need to be careful that we honour those in authority over us even though they do not love the Lord God. To dishonour them is to reject the people God has chosen to accomplish His purpose in our land.

Paul tells us that we need to submit to the authorities God has placed over us for two reasons (verse 5). The first is because of the punishment we will receive if we do not submit. The Lord has given the rulers of our land the authority to punish anyone who does not obey and respect them. Our God stands firmly behind those He places in authority. When they punish, they do so with the authority of God.

The second reason we need to submit is because of conscience. What Paul is telling us here is that if we truly belong to the Lord Jesus and His Holy Spirit is living in us, we will know the conviction of the Holy Spirit in our hearts

when we do not submit to the will and purpose of God. Our conscience will bother us because no believer can truly live in disobedience to the Lord God and be happy in his or her heart.

Practically, this means we must also willingly pay our taxes. If God has given these rulers authority to govern the land, He also expects that their needs be provided to accomplish that purpose. We are to respect the rulers of the land by paying our taxes (verse 6). Paul challenges believers to be faithful to pay whatever they owe. If we owe taxes we must pay those taxes. If we owe respect we must offer respect to whom it is due.

It is true that there are times when we wonder if those who are in power are really deserving of our respect and honour. There are rulers who misuse the authority God has given them, but this does not change the commands of Paul in this passage. We may not understand what God is doing. We may not understand how He will bring glory to Himself and accomplish His purposes through these individuals but we must still honour them as the ones God has allowed to rule.

We see a powerful example of this in the life of David in the Old Testament. David had been anointed king at an early age but was patiently waiting for God to establish His throne. Saul, jealous of God's purpose for David and fearful of his own throne, however, chased David to capture and kill him. Despite this, David chose to honour Saul. Often he referred to him as the anointed of God. Even though what Saul was doing did not demonstrate that he was in tune with God, David refused to speak against him or take up his sword against him. He trusted God to deal with the matter. This is the challenge Paul gives to the Romans.

This is the challenge Paul gives to us. We must be respectful and honest citizens, honouring God by respecting those He places in authority over us.

For Consideration:

- What do we learn in this passage about the type of people God can use?
- Have you ever found yourself speaking against the rulers of your land or your church? What does this passage teach us about this?
- Take a moment to examine your attitude toward those in authority over you. Do you have the attitude that God wants you to have?
- How can disobedience to the authorities of our land damage our witness as believers?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to forgive you for the times you have not honoured those He has placed in authority over you.
- Take a moment to pray that God would reveal to you any wrong attitudes or negative words directed toward those in authority.
- Pray for those God has put in authority over you. Ask God to give them wisdom and integrity of heart.

NO DEBT BUT LOVE

Read Romans 13:8-10

In the last section of chapter 13 Paul gives a challenge concerning the importance of paying what is owed to the governing authorities. No debt is to remain outstanding except that of loving one another. If we owe something to someone we are to be sure to pay it. In some societies it is almost impossible to live without borrowing money from the bank. Paul is not telling us that we should never borrow money but rather that we should meet our obligations. When we are required to borrow from someone in our time of need, we need to pay them back at the agreed time. We must be true to our agreements and faithful in business with our fellow man.

The one exception to this rule is love. In the matter of love we are always in debt to each other. In other words, we must always demonstrate love to each other. We must be constantly seeking new ways to reach out in love. The Lord Jesus touched us in love so we must do the same for our brother and sister. We should never see our debt of love as being fully paid. In fact, how could we ever repay the Lord for the love He has shown us?

Paul reminds us in verse 8 that if we love our fellow man, we fulfil the law. When we love our neighbours we will be honest with them. We will seek their good, and place their needs over our own. We will do whatever the law requires naturally. We will not need the law to tell us what to do because we will automatically do it out of love.

Paul gives us an example in verse 9. He tells us of the commandments regarding adultery, murder, stealing, and coveting. All of these commandments can be summed up by the one commandment, "Love your neighbour as yourself." If you truly love your partner you will not commit adultery. Your heart will be devoted to her alone. If you love someone you will not steal from them or covet what they have. Instead you will be happy for them. By loving, you fulfil the law of God.

The one debt we will always have outstanding is the debt of love for our God and our brothers and sisters. May God give us grace to love as we ought.

For Consideration:

- Why is love the fulfilment of the law?
- If you say you love someone but do not demonstrate it in your actions can you truly say you love them?
- Take a moment to examine your relationships with those around you. Do you really love your brothers and sisters in Christ? How is this evident in your actions?

- Ask God to teach you how to be more loving.

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to give you grace to love those you have a hard time loving.
- Thank the Lord that He showed us what true love is by dying for us on the cross.
- Ask the Lord to help you to have more love in your heart for those around you.

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WAKE UP!

Read Romans 13:11-14

In the days of Paul there were obvious signs of a great spiritual battle raging. Sin and evil abounded as Satan ravaged the land. All this pointed to the fact that the day was approaching when the Lord Jesus would return to judge the earth and restore His kingdom. Satan's efforts were intensifying and the Lord's return was drawing nearer each day. Knowing this, there was reason to be alert.

As believers today, we need to understand that we, too, are at war, we cannot afford to let down our guard. We must pay close attention to what is happening around us. The enemy is very real. His efforts are evident. God is looking for people who will stand firm and resist this enemy. We need to be ready to fight the good fight for the sake of the kingdom and the glory of the Lord our God. Paul gives us some clear instruction on how we should be living in light of our great battle.

Paul begins by telling his readers that it is time to wake from sleep. The fact that Paul calls believers to wake up is

an indication that they had fallen asleep. In an effort to stir them to action, he reminds them that each day they live is one day closer to the return of the Lord.

When we are asleep we are no longer aware of the danger around us. We allow things to slip spiritually. We begin to slip into the ways of the world. Our prayer life begins to suffer. We don't spend the time in the Word of God we should. We find ourselves becoming spiritually lazy. The needs of the world around us don't seem to affect us anymore. We stop reaching out and ministering to others. We need to heed Paul's warning. We need to awake, put on our armour, and prepare for Christ's return.

Paul goes on to remind the Romans in verse 12 that the night is nearly over and the day is close at hand. The night seems to refer to the darkness of this present age. At present, sin and evil abound. Darkness and evil surround us. Soon, however, the light of day will come. Jesus will return to set us free from this darkness. The day of our salvation is drawing closer every day. We do not know when the Lord Jesus will come but we need to awake and be ready for Him.

In light of this truth, Paul challenges us to put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armour of light. The Lord is going to return at any moment. The evil deeds of the flesh need to be cast aside. Our broken relationships need to be mended. Our hearts need to be surrendered to God's will. Paul told the Romans that they were to behave decently as in the daytime (verse 13). In other words, we are to live as people who have nothing to be ashamed of.

In particular, this means that we are to live moral and pure lives. We are not to get caught up in the sexual sins of this

world (orgies and drunkenness, immorality and perversions). We are not to get caught up in sins that divide and destroy (dissension and jealousy). This is the way of the world. The believer, however, ought to be different. He should respect and honour his or her fellow citizen. Believers should be governed by love. They should live in such a way that if the Lord were to come they would not be ashamed.

Finally, in verse 14 Paul challenges his readers to be clothed with the Lord Jesus instead of thinking about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature. We all understand the desires of the sinful nature, how the sinful nature is attracted to the things of the world. We know that a battle rages within us. The flesh longs for and lusts after the things of the world, while the Spirit seeks the things of God. We dare not sleep. We must constantly battle the flesh and the temptations of the world.

The day is coming when this battle will be over, but until then, we dare not sleep. We must understand our times. We must understand the deceptive tactics of our enemy. We must not forget that the Lord is returning. When He returns may He find us alert, waging war against the flesh and resisting the enemies of the cross.

For Consideration:

- What kinds of darkness do you see around you today?
- What are the temptations you struggle with in your life?

- What does it mean to be spiritually alert?
- Is there any area of your life that has been sleeping spiritually? Explain.
- How does knowing that the Lord will return at any moment change how you live?
- Would you have anything to be ashamed of if the Lord Jesus were to return today?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to reveal to you any way in which you have been spiritually asleep.
- Thank the Lord that He has wonderful plans for you as His child and that one day He will come and take you to be with Him forever.
- Ask the Lord to open your eyes to the needs of others around you.
- Ask the Lord to give you victory over the areas of temptation in your life. Surrender yourself afresh to Him in these areas.

PASSING JUDGEMENT

Read Romans 14:1-12

In the course of this study we have examined Paul's teaching concerning the body of Christ and the different gifts that exist in the body. Those who have been believers for any length of time have also learned that there are many different personalities among the people of God. What one person has the freedom to do another may find offensive. We do not always have the same worship practices or viewpoints on doctrinal issues. There is quite a variety in the body of Christ, and these differences often cause problems. This can be harmful to the expansion of the Kingdom of God. In this next section Paul offers some practical suggestions for dealing with differences in the body of Christ.

Accept the Weaker Brother without Passing Judgement

The apostle begins by reminding us that we need to accept the person whose faith is weak without passing judgment on disputable matters. There are several important things we need to see in this statement.

First, we are to accept those whose faith is weak. What does a person with weak faith look like? He may still be living in sin. He may not have solid doctrine. His language may still be offensive to older believers. He may have problems with members of the body of Christ. He may have lots of zeal but lack enough knowledge to realize that he is causing more harm than good.

We need to understand that there is a difference between someone who has weak faith and someone who is living in rebellion. He who is living in rebellion knows better but does not want to change. No matter what is said to him, he refuses to listen and change. The person with weak faith is quite different. He does not fully understand the truth. He has not yet learned how to rely on the Spirit of God but is willing to listen and learn.

A quick look at the word "accept" in the Greek language shows us that to accept someone is to take them in. It is to take someone as a companion and to demonstrate kindness toward them. Those who are weak in the faith need a friend who will patiently work with them and encourage them in their walk with the Lord. It is our duty to minister to them and to help them on to maturity. What would happen to those who are weak in the faith if everyone abandoned them? The challenge here is to come along side those who are weak. It is to befriend them and encourage them to persevere and grow in their walk with the Lord. No matter where we are in our walk with the Lord we need others to come alongside to encourage and bless us in our walk.

There is another matter we need to examine from verse 1. Paul tells us that we are to accept these weaker brothers *without passing judgement on disputable matters*. There are some believers who think that everyone needs to see things their way. They can't see that there are matters that

may be acceptable for one person but, because of conscience, not acceptable for another. They believe that we should all believe the same thing and practice the same things and worship in the same way. They do not have room for differences in the body of Christ. Paul tells us that we are to accept each other without passing judgment. We are to accept the differences that exist in the body of Christ.

Notice in verse 1 that these differences are in "disputable matters." There are certainly some very important issues that on which we cannot compromise. Paul is not talking about these issues. Paul explains what he means by "disputable matters" in verse 2.

First, he gives an example of how the faith of one man will allow him to eat everything. Another man, however, can only eat vegetables. Paul tells us that the one who has the freedom to eat everything must not look down on the man who only eats vegetables. The opposite is also true. The one who only eats vegetables must not look down on the one who eats everything. The reason for this is because God has accepted both of these men and their decisions. If God has accepted their decision about what they eat, who are we to overrule the decision of God?

Paul goes on to tell the Romans that they could not judge another person's servant. Imagine that your neighbour came over one day and beat your servant because he did not like him doing what you had told him to do. Would you not be legitimately upset with your neighbour? The reality of the matter is that the servant only answers to his own master. He will stand proud or fall in shame before him alone. What Paul appears to be telling the Romans is that they were all servants of God and responsible only to Him.

If my brother is a servant of God, who am I to condemn him for doing what the Lord has put on his heart to do?

It is often difficult for us to accept the fact that there are differences in the body of Christ. We like to think that everyone needs to act like us or believe the same things we believe. The reality is quite different. Paul reminds us in verse 5 that one man may consider a specific day as being sacred while another man considers all days to be the same. It is not important that we all agree on this. What is important is that we be fully convinced in our own mind and be willing to answer to God alone.

We may differ on minor issues, but we must learn to accept these differences and not judge each other. We must recognize that the body of Christ is very diverse. We have different personalities and different methods, but we worship the same Lord. I have seen God bless both charismatic and non-charismatic churches. I have seen God bless legalistic churches and well as those who allow more freedom. Do we really think that God does not accept our brother or sister simply because they do not do things exactly like us?

Instead of judging each other we need to focus on becoming more mature in our own lives. Paul tells us very clearly that none of us should live for ourselves alone. We need to live our lives not to please ourselves but to serve the Lord. In life and death our desire ought to be to seek the Lord and to please Him in all we do.

We will not have to give an account for our brother's actions, but each of us will have to stand before the Lord on the Day of Judgment (verse 10). It is not our responsibility to judge our brother or sister. In fact when we judge our brother or sister we attempt to take the place of God. It is

very important, then, that we learn to accept each other with all our differences.

What a different place the church would be if we recognized these differences and accepted each other in spite of them. We have all too often taken the place of God and judged our brothers and sisters. In our pride we have believed that we have the answers. We have failed to see that God has accepted our brother's offering even though it is different from ours. We have resented the fact that God has chosen to bless those whose belief in some matter is different from ours. We have condemned those God has blessed and honoured.

This passage is a real challenge to us as believers. It condemns our pride and jealousy. It calls us to search deeply within our hearts to see if we have taken the place of God and judged our brothers or sisters. It calls us to open our hearts to those who are different and accept them as brothers and sisters in the body of Christ. It also calls us to be patient with the weaker brother or sister in the faith.

For Consideration:

- Have you met "weaker" brothers or sisters? What has been your response to them?
- What differences exist among believers in your church?
- How do we distinguish between a difference that is "disputable" and a matter that we cannot sacrifice?

- Can God accept two individuals whose practice is quite different? Explain.
- What does it mean for us to accept each other in the body of Christ?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to give you a greater acceptance for sincere brothers and sisters who differ from you.
- Ask the Lord to bring a greater unity in the body of Christ in your town.
- Take a moment to pray for a brother or sister you presently have difficulty with. Ask God to open your heart to receive them in love.

STUMBLING BLOCKS

Read Romans 14:13-23

Paul has been speaking in this part of his letter about the body of Christ and how we are to respect and love each other. He has reminded us of the different gifts we have as believers. He has shown us that we need each other and must learn to live with the differences that will inevitably come when we work together for the sake of the kingdom. Now Paul reminds us of the importance of respecting differences by not putting a stumbling block in front of a brother or sister.

Paul begins by telling the believers that they needed to stop passing judgment on each other. It was not their role or responsibility to judge the motives and intentions of their fellow believers. Imagine that your little child comes home from school with a drawing he has created for you. The drawing is not perfect but it is made with love. As a parent you accept this imperfect gift because of the attitude behind it. Imagine that someone else began to criticize the gift in front of your child, making him feel that the gift he had just given you in love was not acceptable. How would this make you feel as a parent? As a heavenly Father, God

does not appreciate it when we judge what our brother or sister gives Him in love.

Paul goes on in verse 13 to say that instead of judging, we need to make up our mind not put stumbling blocks in front of fellow believers. A stumbling block is anything that can cause our brother or sister to be offended or discouraged in their walk with God. Our words can be stumbling blocks when they discourage. Our actions can be stumbling blocks if they cause a brother or sister to question the faith.

Notice how Paul tells us that we are to make up our mind never to do anything that would cause a brother or sister to stumble in their walk with God. Everything we do ought to be with the intention of encouraging our brother or sister in their faith.

Paul takes a moment to give us some examples. It was Paul's belief that no food that was unclean in itself. This was difficult to accept for the Jews who followed the dietary laws of the Old Testament. Paul felt that since the coming of Christ these dietary laws no longer applied but he was careful in how he dealt with those who disagreed.

While Paul had the freedom to eat any food he desired, he said in verse 14 that if a believer considered a certain food to be unclean, then it was wrong for him or her to eat it. There are clear undisputed principles that apply to all men and women of faith. It is always wrong to commit adultery, to murder and to steal. There are other matters in the Christian walk, however, that are not so clear. One believer has the freedom to eat a certain food while another does not. It is neither right nor wrong to eat this food. It all depends on the attitude of the heart.

What is important to remember is that if our brother is distressed because we are eating certain type of foods then we are not acting in love if we eat these foods in front of him (verse 15). Are we not placing a stumbling block in front of him? Would this not distress our brother and cause a problem between us? It is far better to give up our freedom than to distress a brother or sister in Christ.

Paul makes it clear in verse 17 that the Kingdom of God is not about eating and drinking but about righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. Let's consider this statement in greater detail.

There are many believers who live as though the Kingdom of God was about rules and regulations. They believe that if you are a Christian you need to follow a prescribed set of rules. You may need to go to church every week and tithe ten percent of your income. They may believe that you shouldn't go to a theatre or enjoy some forms of music. For these believers, faith is a set of rules and regulations. They feel they are pleasing God when they obey all these rules. Paul tells us, however, that this is not primarily what the Kingdom of God is about.

According to Paul, the Kingdom of God is first about righteousness. This means having a right standing with God through the work of the Lord Jesus. This is what the Lord Jesus came to accomplish. Paul has spoken at great length about this in his letter.

The Kingdom of God is not just about Christ's righteousness in us, it is also about peace. The peace referred to is first a peace with God because of the forgiveness that Jesus brought. It is about having peace in our own hearts because we now have God as our heavenly Father. It is also about peace with our brothers and sisters. The Spirit

of God, living in us, enables us to live in peace and harmony with others. Relationships are important in the Kingdom of God. Without peace with God and peace with our fellow man we cannot advance the Kingdom of God as it needs to be advanced.

Notice also that the Kingdom of God is about joy in the Holy Spirit. Joy is an important element in our Christian walk. There is much to be joyful about. Jesus told us that He came to bring us abundant life (John 10:10) and that the Holy Spirit would spring forth and overflow within us (I John 4:14). He came to put his joy in our heart and to give us complete satisfaction in Him. This joy should be seen in our worship, in our relationships with others, and in how we deal with the trials that come our way.

Paul reminds us in verse 18 that the one who serves Christ out of righteousness, peace and joy is not only pleasing to God but is also approved by men. God delights to see believers with righteousness, peace and with joy in their hearts. Not only is God pleased, the world around us admires our righteousness, joy, and peace. They may not accept our beliefs, but they cannot help but notice and speak favourably about our lives.

In verse 19 Paul challenges believers to make every effort to do whatever leads to peace and edification. This means considering our brother and sister in everything we do. Our lives are not lived in isolation. This will require effort on our part. Our goal and purpose ought to be to live at peace with our brother and sister in Christ and to do all we can to encourage them in the faith.

We must be careful not to destroy the work of God for the sake of our freedom. While, according to Paul, all food was clean, if what he ate caused a brother or sister trouble, he

sinned by eating this food in front of them because he was not sensitive to their belief.

There are times when it is wise to keep what we believe about secondary matters to ourselves. Why boast about our freedom to do or to eat something if by doing so we will cause a problem for another believer? This is not being hypocritical; it is being sensitive to others needs. To be hypocritical is to want a person to think something about us that is not true. To be sensitive is to be willing to put aside our freedoms for the sake of the kingdom.

Paul concludes this section by reminding us that faith must be the guiding principle in all matters. If you doubt and question whether what you do is right, then don't do it. Practice only what you have a conviction in your heart to do. Practice only what leads to the building up of the Kingdom of God.

For Consideration:

- What kind of things can be a stumbling block for believers in your culture?
- What is the difference between being sensitive to each other and being hypocritical?
- What freedoms do you have that your brother or sister does not have? What freedom does your brother have that you do not have?
- What does Paul tell us are the guiding principles for all we do?

- Can you truly say that all you do is done in faith?
- Is there anything you do that could be a stumbling block for a brother or sister in Christ? Explain.

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord for the freedom He has given us, and the differences that exist in the body of Christ.
- Ask the Lord to give you a greater tolerance for the differences that exist in the body of Christ.
- Ask the Lord to help you to be more sensitive to those around you who do not see things the way you do.
- Ask the Lord to show you if there is anything in your life that causes a problem for someone else. Ask Him to give you wisdom to know how to deal with this.

PERSEVERING IN UNITY

Read Romans 15:1-7

The first part of Paul's letter to the Romans spoke about the salvation that brought us into the body of Christ. Much of the latter part of the book is devoted to the idea of living within that body. As children of God we have been given different gifts to use for the encouragement of one another. We also have disagreements about how these gifts are used and the freedoms that we enjoy in Christ. In spite of this, Paul tells us that we are to strive to be one.

Unity does not mean that we all have the same beliefs, nor does it mean that we have the freedom to practice the same things. Our ministries differ. How we live out our Christian life differs. This does not mean that we just believe what we want and live how we please, for there are some basic principles that all of us must adhere to. We all must believe in the Lord Jesus and His work on our behalf. We all must accept His offer of salvation and be born again into the family of God. We all must submit to his Lordship and the authority of His Word. Though we have differences as individuals in Christ, we have a common relationship with Christ and a common desire to honour and glorify Him

in all that we do. Our unity is in Christ and what He has done for us. In the verses that follow, Paul speaks to us about how we can keep this unity in the body of Christ.

Bear With the Failures of the Weak (verse 1)

First, Paul encourages the strong in verse 1 to bear with the failures of the weak. The new or weak believer often has a lot of details to work through. He may not have a clear understanding of truth. His enthusiasm may outweigh his maturity. He may still have sinful habits to overcome. Sometimes we expect everything to change overnight and are quick to judge instead of demonstrating compassion and patience. Even more mature believers have areas of weakness. Some people need years to overcome their struggles. Rather than being quick to judge, we should encourage each other in love. Judging and accusing accomplishes nothing. It only makes matters worse. God calls us to bear with each other's failures just as He bears with ours.

The word "bear" in the Greek language means to "support, tolerate, or to carry." The idea is that we should give room for others to fail. We should recognize that no Christian is perfect and that while we strive for perfection, we accept each other in our failures. All too often we are looking for perfection when we need to accept people as they are and encourage them in their growth.

Maybe you have visited churches that do not tolerate imperfection. These churches are quick to judge, they have rigid guidelines for belief and practice, and they are quick to discipline when they perceive that things are not as they should be. The result is often a discouraged body of believers. The same is true in our families. If we are always finding fault with our wife or children, we will soon break

their spirit and discourage them. They may even give up trying because they can never reach the standard of perfection we are pushing them to attain. Instead of judging these imperfections, Paul tells us that we are to be patient and bear with them, always gently encouraging each other toward greater maturity.

We need to understand that the "weakness" and "failings" Paul speaks about in verse 1 are not the same as rebellion and disobedience. We all fall short of the standard God has set for us. We all have times when we fall. When we do so, we get up, confess our sin, and seek the strength of the Lord to overcome. There are, however, those who love their sin, and who are not willing to deal with the weaknesses in their lives. This is wilful disobedience and rebellion.

It is not always easy to distinguish between wilful disobedience and the failings Paul speaks about here. Part of the difference, however, is visible in a person's attitude. Does the person demonstrate true repentance when he realizes he has fallen short? Does the person make the changes necessary to see that this will not happen again? If we are to persevere in unity, we must learn to bear with the failures of the weak.

Stop Trying to Please Yourself Alone (verses 1-5)

Paul brings a second principle to our attention in verse 1. Here he tells us that if we want to experience unity in the body of Christ we have to stop seeking to please ourselves alone. Instead, we must commit ourselves to pleasing each other. How easy it is to live with only our own interests in mind; to think only of ourselves. We believe that our

doctrinal position is the right position and expect that everyone agree with us. We believe that people should live just like us and see things our way.

Paul calls us to follow the example of the Lord Jesus and willingly sacrifice our own interests for the interests of our fellow believers. Paul shows us in verse 3 that the Lord Jesus did not come to please Himself. He spent His life ministering to those around Him, not seeking His own comfort. He lived in obedience to the Father. He lived for others. He denied Himself for us and our needs. He often had no sleep, no home, no privacy, no money, no friends, and no comforts. He used everything He was given to minister and bless others.

Jesus gave us a ministry example to follow. He endured the insults and suffering so that we would see His example and follow Him. It is not easy to live our lives always considering others. It is not easy to deny ourselves, but Paul encourages us to persevere because this is what Christ did for us.

Living this life of sacrifice for others will not be easy. Paul reminds us, however, that we have hope in the Scriptures and the examples of men and women who have gone before us.

God Will Give Endurance and Encouragement (verse 5)

If we stop trying to please ourselves alone how will our own needs be cared for? If we give sacrificially all the time who will care for us? How can we continue in this lifestyle without burning out? Paul answers this question in verse 5. He tells us that God will give us endurance and encouragement. When you need strength to reach out, God will provide it. When you need someone to comfort you as you

sacrifice for others, God will bring you the encouragement you need. Because God is taking care of us, we can focus on others.

If we want unity in the body of Christ, we should not only be patient and bear with each other in our weaknesses, we should also seek to live our lives in service of others. We must see the needs of others as being more important than our own. God promises to give us the strength and encouragement necessary to carry on if we trust Him. Imagine what a difference this teaching would make in the church of Christ today? These simple principles can transform a church, a marriage, and a nation.

Seek to Glorify God (verse 6)

Ultimately, the goal of the body of Christ is to have one heart and mouth to praise and glorify the Lord Jesus (verse 6). How can we glorify the Lord Jesus as one body if we are busy judging and condemning each other instead of bearing with each other? How can we praise and glorify the Lord as one body if we are busy living for ourselves and ignoring the needs of His children? There is a direct connection between our relationship with each other in the body of Christ and the way that body brings glory to the Lord Jesus. A body that is not unified does not bring honour to the Lord Jesus. We blaspheme His name before the world when we fight and judge each other instead of loving one another in the name of the Lord.

Accept One Another (verse 7)

Finally, Paul concludes this section with a powerful statement: "Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God," (verse 7). Notice the connection between bringing praise to God and accepting

one another. We are called to accept each other in order that God may be praised. When we love our brothers and sisters in Christ, we bring glory to the Father. Notice that we are to accept one another just as the Lord Jesus accepts us. He accepted us when we were in our sin (Romans 5:8). He laid down His life for us when we were His enemies. This is how the Lord Jesus treated us. He accepted us with all our imperfections and failures. How can we who have been accepted in this way refuse to accept our brother in Christ?

For Consideration:

- What is the difference between wilful sin and falling because of a weakness in our flesh? How can we distinguish between these two sins?
- Have you ever found yourselves being impatient with a brother or sister in Christ? What is the difference between bearing patiently with a brother and judging him?
- What are some practical ways you can bear with the weakness of a brother? Does bearing with a brother mean overlooking his sin?
- To what extent have you lived for yourself? How can you minister more to others?
- What are the promises of God for those who persevere in serving others (verse 5)? How do these promises set us free to minister sacrificially?

- How did the Lord Jesus accept you? What does this teach us about how we need to accept each other?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to give you more patience with your brother or sister in Christ.
- Thank the Lord that He lived His life with us on His mind and heart.
- Thank the Lord for the promise of encouragement and enablement as we live sacrificially for Him.
- Ask the Lord to show you if there is someone you are not bearing with today. Ask Him to give you strength to bear with their weaknesses and to bless them.
- Ask for forgiveness for the times you have failed the Lord in the areas we have discussed in this chapter.

PAUL'S MINISTRY TO THE GENTILES

Read Romans 15:8-21

In this section of the book of Romans, Paul takes the time to speak about his particular vision of ministry. This is a very personal passage. In it he shares his burden and calling to the Gentiles. This often brought Paul into conflict with the Jewish world and was the source of a great deal of his suffering.

Paul's great strength and motivation originated in Christ. He reminds us that the Lord Jesus became a servant of the Jews in order to fulfil the promises God had given through the prophets. Notice, however, in verse 9 that Jesus came through the Jews so that the Gentiles might also glorify God. Paul was convinced that Jesus came not only for the Jews but also for the Gentiles. He was the Saviour of both races. He came so that all nations of the earth could know the truth of God and be saved.

This was not just Paul's opinion—he backs up this idea from the Jewish Scriptures. He quotes an Old Testament passage from 2 Samuel 22 where David, after being set free from his enemies, writes:

Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles; I will sing hymns to your name.

Why would David, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, feel compelled to praise God among the pagan Gentiles? He does so because he knew that the Gentiles would also hear of the wonderful grace of the Lord God of Israel. It was the heart of God that the Gentiles come to understand God's grace and mercy.

Paul also quotes from Deuteronomy 32:43:

Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people.

Again, inspired by the Spirit of God, the writer of this Old Testament passage invites the Gentile nations to come and praise the Lord along with Jews. It is clear that God intended His grace and mercy to extend to the Gentiles and not just to the Jewish nation alone.

Paul continues to support his idea that God wanted to reach the Gentile nations by quoting even more Old Testament passages. In verse 11 he quotes from Psalm 117:1:

Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and sing praises to him, all you peoples.

In verse 12, he quotes Isaiah 11:10:

The Root of Jesse will spring up, one who will arise to rule over the nations; the Gentiles will hope in him.

This last verse needs some explanation. Isaiah makes it quite clear that a "root of Jesse" would rise up and rule over the nations. Jesse was the father of David who was God's chosen king and forefather of the Messiah, Jesus. The Jews looked forward to the coming of the Messiah for centuries. Notice in particular, however, what Isaiah tells us about the Messiah. He tells us that the Messiah would not only reign over Israel but the whole world. In particular, Isaiah tells us that the Gentiles would hope in Him. This is a wonderful example of the heart of God for the Gentiles. God intended His salvation to extend to the whole world. He desired that both the Jews and the Gentiles come to Him and be saved.

What is very clear from this is that Paul had searched the Scriptures in regard to the ministry that God had given him. He knew that this ministry was from the Lord and he knew it was the heart of God to reach out to the Gentiles. He had the support of the Scriptures for his ministry. He could step out boldly and confidently in his call.

In verse 13 we find that Paul's prayer for his readers is that the God of hope would fill them with joy and peace as they trusted in Him. He wanted them to overflow with hope just as he overflowed with hope for the salvation of the Gentiles. Notice that it is Paul's prayer that his readers overflow. Only when a person is filled to overflowing can they minister successfully. For much of my life I ministered without this overflowing. I felt broken and empty. I gave what I had and then ran out. I ran out because I was not seeking God's constant filling in my life. Only as we are filled to overflowing with the Holy Spirit, His love, His strength, and

the hope He gives, can we truly minister in power. This is Paul's prayer for his readers. He is praying that they would not only be filled with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit but that they would overflow with hope. It was out of the overflow that they would be able to minister to others.

From verse 14 we note that Paul is convinced that his readers were full of goodness and complete enough in knowledge to instruct one another. They lacked nothing to effectively minister the Gospel of Christ. In this letter Paul speaks very boldly to them on several issues. He reminded them of their salvation apart from the law. He challenged them in the use of their gifts. He encouraged them to maintain the unity of the body. He taught them that salvation was not just for the Jew but also for the Gentile. Now he commands them to overflow in the Spirit's power as they minister in Christ's name to both Jew and Gentile.

In verse 16 Paul told the Romans that he felt obligated to the Gentiles. He had been called by God to be their apostle. His heart was to see the Gentiles become an acceptable offering to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. Paul was thankful to God for this call (verse 17). Though the idea that salvation was for the Gentiles was opposed strongly by the Jews, Paul was not ashamed of what he had been called to do. He loved the Gentiles and was willing to sacrifice his life for them. He praises God in verse 18 for what He had done through him in his ministry to the Gentiles. Notice how he takes no credit for the success of his ministry. He was led of God to minister to the Gentile world. He was filled with the Spirit to accomplish that ministry. God demonstrated His power through great signs and miracles (verse 19). God strengthened, and provided the resources necessary so that he was able to travel and preach in Jerusalem, Illyricum, and many other places where the Gentiles lived. God allowed him to bring the Gospel to new

territories in order to reach those who had never heard (verse 21). God was pleased to give him success. God deserved all of the glory.

There is something wonderful about knowing the call of God for our lives. While Paul often had difficulties and struggles in his calling, his heart overflowed with praise to God for it. From his birth, Paul had been shaped and gifted for this particular ministry. For many years he resisted God. Now that he was living in obedience, peace and joy filled his heart. Troubles increased and his life was often in danger but he was where God intended him to be and he was satisfied. Are you where God wants you to be? Do you know this wonderful peace and joy of service in the place of God's calling for you?

In this passage, we see the heart of God for the whole world. He is not the God of the Jew alone but the God of all nations and peoples. We also see how Paul had a deep conviction in his heart about the ministry to which God had called him. He knew his calling. He was filled to overflowing with the Spirit of God and gave out of the overflow to everyone God sent his way. His ministry was not always appreciated but he did not give up hope. He stepped out boldly and watched the Spirit of God work in power. When he reflected on his life and ministry, Paul stood amazed at what God had done through him. His heart overflowed with joy at the fact that God had made him His servant.

The exciting reality is that we, too, are instruments through which the Spirit of God works. When we step out in obedience to the call God has placed on our lives we can expect His Spirit to move through us. Seek to know your calling and boldly step out in it. Don't be discouraged by those who do not accept your ministry. Allow the Spirit of God to overflow from you. Stand back in awe and let the Spirit use

you. Be content to be an instrument. Watch what He does and glorify Him for it.

For Consideration:

- What is the call of God for your life?
- Have you ever found yourself doubting the call of God? What causes you to doubt your calling?
- Have you ever found yourself ministering in your own human strength? What do we learn here about how Paul ministered?
- How real is the temptation to take the glory for ourselves when God blesses? What do we learn from Paul in this passage?
- Do you have peace in your heart in the work you are doing now? Is this where God wants you to be?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to give you a deep assurance of your calling.
- Ask the Lord to forgive you for the times you have doubted your call and not stepped out in faith.
- Thank the Lord that all you have accomplished in ministry has been because of His work in your life.

- Ask the Lord to fill you to overflowing so that you can minister to those He puts in your path

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PRAY FOR ME

Read Romans 15:23-33

As Paul comes to the end of his epistle he shares his plans for the future. He does this so that the believers in Rome would be aware of his love for them and of his plans to visit them as soon as the Lord opened the door. He also asks them to pray for him as he travels.

Paul tells his readers in verse 23 that he had completed his work in the regions where he had been working. While there would still have been work to do in these regions, God was moving Paul on to other things. We see in verse 20 that part of Paul's reason for moving on is his desire to preach where Christ had not yet been known.

Paul would preach the Gospel in a region and then leave the task of spreading the gospel to those who had come to know the Lord under his ministry. He established a core group of believers and then encouraged them to continue the work of the Gospel. This was his ministry vision. He would preach where Christ was not known, establish a small community of believers, and then move on, leaving

then to continue the work. Paul knew his calling and was faithful to it. Paul could have stayed where he was and ministered to the new believers there, but that was not what God had called him to do.

Seeing that he had accomplished what God had called him to do, Paul now decided to move on. It had been his desire to visit Rome for many years (verse 23), but the opportunity had never presented itself. Now, however, that opportunity was before him. He planned to visit them when he went to Spain. His desire was to have them assist him on his journey. We are not told what kind of assistance Paul was wanting from the Romans. Notice, however, that it was the desire of Paul to spend time with them and enjoy their company. As I have travelled in the ministry the Lord has given me, I have been blessed by many believers I have met on my journeys. These believers from different countries have been a rich source of encouragement and blessing to me. Paul, I am sure, would have looked forward to the blessing he would receive from these Roman believers.

While it was the intention of the apostle to visit the church in Rome, his immediate plan was to go to Jerusalem. His task was to deliver a contribution to the saints in that city. We read about this contribution in Acts 24:17. The saints in Macedonia and Achaia had given money for the poor saints in Jerusalem. Paul had the privilege of delivering this money to the poor on behalf of the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. It is wonderful to see how the believers in this region were concerned not only for their own needs but also for the needs of believers they had never met. This is a sign of maturity and godliness and should serve as an example to us as well.

Paul tells us in verse 27 that while the money he brought to Jerusalem was given with a pure heart, the Gentiles owed it to the Jewish believers in Jerusalem. These Gentile believers had received the greatest benefit of all from the Jerusalem Christians. Through them they had received the message of the Gospel. Now in their time of need, the Gentiles could minister to the Jews by helping them in their physical needs. Paul planned to visit Rome after he had made sure that the believers in Jerusalem had received this gift (verse 28).

We can only imagine what this gift would have said to the Jewish believers in Jerusalem. They were being ministered to by Gentile believers. These Gentiles loved them. In Christ the division between Jew and Gentile had been broken down.

Paul told the Roman believers that when he came to them he would come in the "full measure of the blessing of Christ" (verse 29). What we need to understand here is that Paul had it on his heart for many years to go to visit the believers in Rome, but the door had not opened for him. Paul was confident, though, that the day was coming when God would fully open that door and grant His full blessing on this journey to see the believers in Rome. What Paul did not realize was that while God would indeed grant His blessing it would not be in the way he thought. Paul would go to Rome as a prisoner. There in Rome, Paul would have the opportunity to share the Gospel with many Roman officials. He would have the opportunity to write letters to the various churches, letters that would eventually be contained in the pages of the Bible we read today. Countless souls have been touched by the writings of Paul from his prison cell in Rome. While it may not have been what he expected, it was certainly done in the full measure of blessing of Christ.

Paul asked the believers in Rome to join him in prayer. He asked them to pray that he would be rescued from the unbelievers in the region of Judea. Already, God was showing Paul that things would not go well for him there because there were individuals who did not approve of his ministry. Paul asked the Romans to pray that he would be kept safe in this time. He also asked that they would pray that his ministry in Jerusalem would be a blessing to the believers there.

Paul's final request in this section was that the Romans pray that he would be able to visit them by the will of God and that it might be a refreshing time. Notice in particular that he wanted to visit them by the will of God. He wanted to go in God's timing. He wanted to go under the leading and direction of God. He wanted to be spiritually refreshed by these believers and he wanted to refresh them. Notice that Paul needed to be refreshed by others in his ministry. Believers from different regions stood behind him, prayed for him, listened to him, encouraged him, and strengthened him in his ministry. We who are in ministry also need to recognize our need for others not only to pray with us but also to refresh us in our times of need. We are not designed to minister alone.

We learn many things about Paul from this passage. He knew the call of God on his life and refused to be distracted from it. He also wanted to go to Rome to minister there but waited years for the Lord's full blessing. He did not open the door before its time. He recognized his need for prayer. He did not lean on his experience and gifts but shared his requests with his prayer supporters. His ministry was successful not because of his experience but because it was bathed in prayer and empowered by the Spirit of God. Paul made plans but submitted them to the Lord. Things did not always turn out as he expected. He went to Rome as a

prisoner not a free missionary. He trusted God in this, knowing that his ways were perfect. Finally, Paul took the time to be refreshed by visiting those who stood behind him in ministry. Paul was an important man in the early church but he never lost sight of how much he needed others. May God give us insight into how we need to apply these principles to our own lives and ministries.

For Consideration:

- What is the particular call of God on your life? Have you been distracted from that call?
- How have you been refreshed by others in your ministry or Christian walk? Who do you have in your life that you can go to for refreshing and encouragement?
- Do you have people who stand behind you in prayer for your ministry and spiritual walk? Who are they?
- What do we learn in this passage about how the purpose of God is sometimes different from ours?
- How easy is it to wait for God's timing? Why is it important?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord for the way He wants to use us in ministry.

- Thank the Lord for those who have refreshed you in your spiritual walk and ministry.
- Ask the Lord to keep you focused on His purpose. Ask Him to keep you from getting distracted.
- Ask the Lord to enable you to be an encouragement and refreshment to others in ministry.

FINAL GREETINGS

Read Romans 16:1-27

In this final section of the book of Romans, Paul takes the time to send his personal greetings to various individuals he knew in the church. In doing this Paul demonstrates to us his love and concern not only for the church as a whole but also for individual believers.

He begins by commending Phoebe from the church of Cenchrea. Cenchrea was located in the eastern region of Corinth. Paul had ministered in Corinth for some time and probably knew her during his ministry there. Phoebe was a servant or deaconess of the church of Cenchrea. It appears that she was on her way to Rome. Paul speaks highly of her and asks the church to accept her as they would any servant of the Lord. He asks them to give her all the help she needed to do the work the Lord had called her to do. Paul is asking the Roman church to take care of her because she had been a tremendous help to him personally (verse 2). He expected that she, in return, would be a real blessing to the church in Rome.

Next, Paul sends his greetings to Priscilla and Aquila who were his fellow workers in the Lord. We first read about this husband and wife team in Acts 18:18. Paul was particularly grateful to them because they had risked their lives for him. Aquila and Priscilla were now ministering in Rome and the church was meeting in their home (verse 5).

Paul greets many other believers with whom he had contact over the course of his ministry. He greets Epenetus who was the first convert to the Lord Jesus in the province of Asia. He greets Mary who was working very hard for the Roman church (verse 6). He sends his greetings to Andronicus and Junias who were not only his relatives but had also been in prison with him. According to Paul, Andronicus and Junias were outstanding in the eyes of all the apostles. They had accepted the Lord even before Paul (verse 7).

Greetings also go to Ampliatus whom Paul loved in the Lord, and to Urbanus, Paul's fellow worker. Paul remembers Stachys who was a dear friend (verse 9) and Apelles, who, according to Paul, was approved in Christ. Paul asked the church to greet the household of Aristobulus as well as Herodion who were Paul's relatives. Greetings also go to the household of Narcissus and to Tryphena, Tryphose, and Persis who were hard-working women of the Lord. Paul sends greetings to Rufus and his mother whom he considered to be a mother to him as well. Others are greeted in verses 14 and 15, and all of these individuals are listed by name. This gives a personal quality to the letter as Paul shows us his concern for his companions.

Paul encouraged the believers in Rome to greet each other with a holy kiss. When I lived on the island of Reunion in the Indian Ocean, it was customary to shake the hand of a foreigner or stranger. On the other hand, if we

greeted a family member or close friend the custom was to kiss them on both cheeks. Christians adopted this practice of kissing each other on both cheeks because they belonged to the same spiritual family. The greeting reminded them of their bond in Christ. This is the type of greeting Paul is speaking of here. It represented their unity in the family of God.

In verse 16, Paul sends greetings from all the churches of Christ. He speaks on their behalf and shares their love for the church in Rome. Though they had never met, the love of Christ drew them all together. Maybe you have sensed this unity with believers that you have never met. Often, there are times when I meet a believer and immediately sense the kinship that comes from our bond in Christ.

In verse 17 Paul urges the church to watch out for those who would cause division among them. The enemy knows the power of unity in the body of Christ. He spares no effort to destroy that unity because a church divided is a church that is unable to minister. These divisions come in the form of personality conflicts, doctrinal differences, and worship preferences. Paul challenges the believers in Rome to keep away from individuals who cause such division in the body. These individuals not only destroy the unity of the body but also keep the church from becoming all it needs to become.

Paul teaches us that divisive people are not open to what the Lord is doing. They want things done their way. They present their views as the only way. When Jesus healed individuals He did so in different ways. He wanted us to trust in Him and not in methods or traditions. Divisive people, on the other hand, serve themselves and their own interests. They are more concerned about their traditions than they are about the leading of the Lord and the unity

of the body of Christ. Paul challenged the church in Rome to watch out for such people.

Paul was aware of the good things that were being said about the Roman church (verse 19). While the church was obedient to the truth, Paul wanted them to learn to be wise about what was good. It is certainly possible to be obedient without being wise in doing good, but it is often difficult to distinguish between the two. The apostles were often tempted to get involved in ministries that they were not specifically called to. Not all opportunities are in the will of God for us so we must use real wisdom to discern the specific purpose and will of God for our lives each day.

Paul also challenges the believers in Rome to be innocent with regard to evil. In other words, when it came to sin, they were to turn from it to seek the Lord and his ways. They were to flee from evil in all its forms.

Paul told the Romans that the God of peace would crush Satan under their feet. Rome was the centre of government and religious activity for an empire that did not approve of Christianity. In the power of Satan, it oppressed and cruelly persecuted believers. Paul prophesies that the day was coming when this enemy would be crushed (verse 20).

Paul sends greetings from Timothy, who was a fellow worker with him. He also sends greetings from Lucius, Jason, and Sosipater his relatives.

In verse 22 we discover that Paul did not write this letter in his own hand. It was Tertius who wrote the letter as Paul dictated. Tertius takes a moment in verse 22 to send his personal greetings to the church. Further greetings come

in verse 23 from Gaius whose hospitality Paul had enjoyed. Erastus, the city's director of public works and a brother by the name of Quartus also greets the Roman church.

Paul concludes his letter with a final blessing. He commits the church to the Lord Jesus Christ who alone could keep them and build them up in the faith. Notice that they would be built up in their faith by the Gospel which had been hidden for many years. The good news of the Gospel, though formerly hidden, was now revealed to them. Paul wanted the church in Rome to be built up in this Gospel. He wanted them to understand and live in the reality of its truth so that their light would shine brightly for the glory of God. He wanted them to persevere in the truth of the Gospel so that they would stand before God on judgment day as a holy people. He wanted them to share the Gospel with all the nations of the earth so that many would come to the knowledge of Christ. This challenge is still true for us today.

For Consideration:

- What does this chapter reveal to us about the heart of the apostle Paul for individual believers?
- What do we learn about how Paul worked with others in ministry? What does this teach us about trying to minister alone?
- What does this passage teach us about the importance of unity in the body of Christ?

For Prayer:

- Do you have individuals you have trouble loving in the body of Christ? Ask the Lord to open your heart to them.
- Take a moment to pray for those who tend to be divisive in the body of Christ. Pray that God would give them a heart for their brothers and sisters.
- Ask the Lord to help you live more and more in the truth of the Gospel. Ask Him to give you an opportunity to share it with those around you.

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