

THY KINGDOM COME

8. The Letters of Paul, Part 1 1 & 2 Thessalonians, Galatians, and Romans

Tim Attaway

**A Teaching Commentary
of the New Testament**

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1. First and Second Thessalonians

Thessalonica was a very important city in its time. It was a harbor town, a center of commerce, with a population of around 200,000. It was a seat of government in Macedonia and thus a very influential city. Paul viewed it as a very strategic location for a church. He visited it on his second missionary journey, described in Acts 17:1-10.

2. First Thessalonians

1 Thessalonians is addressed to the Thessalonian church and is from Paul, Silas, and Timothy (1 Thessalonians 1:1). The letter gives an indication of when it was written. 1 Thessalonians 3:1-2, 6 says:

So when we could stand it no longer, we thought it best to be left by ourselves in Athens. We sent Timothy, who is our brother and God's fellow worker in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, ...

But Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love.

We know from Acts 17-18 that:

- Paul, Silas, and Timothy went to Thessalonica. They preached there and won a number of converts. As usual, the Jews there stirred up opposition and made it unsafe for them to stay.
- They left Thessalonica and went to Berea. After a brief stay there, Paul left and went to Athens. Silas and Timothy did not accompany him there.
- After a time in Athens, Paul went to Corinth.
- Silas and Timothy joined him in Corinth, having come from Macedonia (Acts 18:5).

It would seem to be this event that is referred to in 1 Thessalonians 3:6, "But Timothy has just now come to us from you." Thus it is assumed that the letter was written from Corinth during Paul's initial visit to that city. We infer that Silas and Timothy (or at least Timothy) traveled through Thessalonica before returning to Paul. Reading the text of 1 Thessalonians, it appears that he brought back with him a number of questions that the young believers had for Paul. 1 Thessalonians seems to have been written primarily to address those questions.

It seems that they wanted clarification on the following issues:

- Certain morality issues.
- The requirement to love one another.
- The need to be gainfully employed.
- End-time events.

2.1 Greetings

1 Thessalonians 1

As is typical of the Pauline epistles, this one begins with an extended greeting. He tells the church that he prays constantly for their well being. He reminds them that God chose them and that he loves them, "because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power,

with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction” (1 Thessalonians 1:5). They now stand as a witness of the Gospel message to the rest of Macedonia and Achaia.

2.2 Remembering the Visit to Thessalonica

1 Thessalonians 2

In Chapter 2, Paul makes some historical references to the visit to Thessalonica which agree with the details found in Acts. In particular, he mentions:

- Before coming to Thessalonica, they encountered persecution in Philippi. (1 Thessalonians 2:2)
- When they left Thessalonica it was a result of being forced out. They had desired to return to visit the people there but had been prevented by Satan from doing so. (1 Thessalonians 2:17-18)

There is some interesting verbiage in 1 Thessalonians 2:5-7:

You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed – God is our witness. We were not looking for praise from men, not from you or anyone else.

As apostles of Christ we could have been a burden to you, but we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children.

One would infer from such a statement that Paul had been accused of taking advantage of the people in Thessalonica. We know that the opponents of Paul tried very hard to discredit him. Apparently they had accused Paul of coming to town, proselytizing the people into spiritual dependence upon him, and then taking advantage of them for his own financial gain. We have certainly seen this happen in our own times (remember David Koresh or Jonestown in Guyana). Apparently it was a tactic known in the first century as well.

Paul felt the necessity to defend himself against such charges. He reminded them that while he was there he had worked to support himself. Rather than feeding upon them like a bad shepherd feeds upon his sheep, he cared for them in the same way that a loving parent cares for a child.

Paul also encouraged the believers in Thessalonica to stand strong against the persecution that they would surely encounter. Just as Paul faced strong opposition to his activity there, he knew that the new Christians would face pressure to turn away from their faith. They needed his assurance and support. He gave them what he could. He would rather have done it in person, but encouraged them as best he could via a letter.

2.3 Timothy’s Return to Thessalonica

1 Thessalonians 3

In Chapter 3, Paul again states that they left Thessalonica because of persecution. When he left, he felt that issues were unclosed with the Thessalonians. He had concerns about how firm their faith would be after he left (and the persecution remained). Thus he sent Timothy to strengthen and encourage them. We assume from this that Paul was the main object of the persecution. He would not have sent Timothy back there if he had felt it would be unsafe.

1 Thessalonians 3:6 indicates that Timothy had just returned and had brought good news about the status of the church. Their faith was strong. Their attitude towards Paul had not been soured by the accusations that had been made against him since he left.

It was very natural that Paul would be concerned about the health of his children in the faith. As he discovered, however, their well being was preserved by the Holy Spirit. That should be an encouragement to us all. Although God uses men in the process of enlarging the Kingdom, the Holy Spirit is the agent of conviction and conversion. The Holy Spirit is faithful to seal and protect the work. Our only responsibility is to be faithful; we are not really responsible for the outcome of our work. The battle is the Lord's.

As a parent, Paul continues to pray for their safety, maturity, and protection. He also prays that God will allow him to visit them again.

2.4 Answering the Questions of the Thessalonians

1 Thessalonians 4:1-5:11

In Chapters 4 and 5, Paul addresses a series of issues that appear to have been brought back by Timothy. These new believers were in the process of becoming grounded in the faith. They required instruction. They had some specific questions for Paul. We do not have a record of the exact questions, but we have the responses that they brought.

- The first response deals with morality issues. We are unsure what prompted this. It is possible that the Thessalonians were confused about whether or not they were required to live under the Old Testament law.. One can infer that some of the people interpreted freedom in Christ to mean "anything goes."

Paul assured the people that it was incumbent upon them to live lives free from sexual immorality. They were to be people of control. God would hold them accountable for obedience in this.

- Paul encourages them to grow in brotherly love. It is hard to know what prompted this instruction.
- 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12 says:

Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody.

We know from the text which immediately follows that the Thessalonians believed in a very imminent return of Christ. Apparently some of them had given up their livelihoods and lived in idleness, waiting for the Lord's return. At this stage, Paul also seemed to expect an imminent return of Jesus, but he continued to work and support himself. He wanted his followers to do the same thing. An appearance of laziness would be poorly perceived by opponents, who were already looking for reasons to discredit the Church. Without giving up the hope and expectation of the return of Christ, he wanted them to live productive, peaceful, and orderly lives.

- The last issue dealt with by Paul in this letter is that of end-time events. As suggested above, the Thessalonians expected a very imminent return of Jesus. They were concerned about the fate of believers who died before Jesus came back. What would be their fate? In

responding to these questions, Paul gives us information about the event commonly known as the rapture. 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11 says:

Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage each other with these words.

Now, brothers, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, "Peace and safety," destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.

But you, brothers, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.

What do we learn from this?

- When the time comes, the Lord will come with a loud command and a trumpet call. (Many people believe that the rapture will occur at the Feast of Trumpets because of this.) God will announce the event in no uncertain terms.
- The dead in Christ will rise first. Those believers who have already died will experience bodily resurrection at this time.
- Believers who are still alive will then be caught up together with them in the air. The dead are resurrected to glorified bodies. The living are transformed into glorified bodies.
- This will happen at a time when people do not expect it – like a thief in the night. When people are saying "Peace and safety," they will suddenly encounter destruction. Compare this to Daniel 8:25 ("When they feel secure, he will destroy many ...")
- We should live in preparedness for the event.
- Knowledge of this should be a source of encouragement to us.

Note that in this passage Paul uses the metaphor, "faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet." He more fully explores this metaphor in Ephesians 6:10-17. The imagery originally comes from Isaiah 59:17:

He put on righteousness as his breastplate,
and the helmet of salvation on his head;
he put on the garments of vengeance
and wrapped himself in zeal as in a cloak.

2.5 Conclusion

1 Thessalonians 5:12-28

In the conclusion of the letter, Paul again tells them not to be idle (i.e. do not quit work just because Jesus will return one day.) Work is to be a respected ethic. He tell them to be people who love one another, exhibit joy, pray constantly, and thank God at all times. In 1 Thessalonians 5:19-21 he says:

Do not put out the Spirit's fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil.

The Holy Spirit had been a powerful presence among them. Paul desired that this would continue. His effectiveness among them would be proportional to their obedience, however.

He also admonished them to be open-minded to the prophetic utterances given to them. At the same time, they needed to test these prophecies and "hold on to the good." They should avoid those that were evil. Where the Holy Spirit operates, counterfeit spirits will operate as well. We need to be trained to hear the voice of God. We should not avoid the whole concept of prophecy just because some of it may be bogus.

Paul closed with a benediction in 1 Thessalonians 5:23-28:

May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it.

Brothers, pray for us. Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss. I charge you before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

3. Second Thessalonians

2 Thessalonians seems to have been written shortly after 1 Thessalonians. A likely scenario is that the first letter was taken to the Thessalonian church. They read it and spent a bit of time trying to understand it. They sent a request back to Paul for clarification on a few points. Paul wrote the second letter in response to their request. The two main issues that Paul addresses in 2 Thessalonians are end-time events and idleness, both of which were addressed in the first letter. It is generally believed that Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians from Corinth, as he did 1 Thessalonians.

3.1 Greetings

2 Thessalonians 1

Like the first letter, this one is to the Thessalonian church from Paul, Silas, and Timothy.

Paul praises the church because their faith is maturing and increasing. He is also pleased that their love for one another is increasing. Remember that mutual love was one of the issues addressed in his first letter. He says that the Thessalonian church is a model for other churches in the area of faith and perseverance. He says that they are steadfast in the face of trials. We assume from this that the Christians in Thessalonica are still experiencing the persecution that began when Paul initially visited the city. He says that God himself will bring down judgment upon those who are troubling the church. 2 Thessalonians 1:7-10 says:

This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed. This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you.

This is a glimpse of the drama of the Second Coming. Paul elaborates on this theme in the second chapter.

Paul assures the Thessalonians that they are constantly the object of his prayer. He cares about them and supports them this way. In 2 Thessalonians 1:11 he prays:

that our God may count you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may fulfill every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith.

3.2 Eschatological Concerns

2 Thessalonians 2:1-12

In Chapter 2, Paul addresses concerns of the church relative to end-time events. People today consume a great deal of energy hypothesizing about what will happen and when. It is nothing new. The Thessalonians did the same thing. We must realize that Christians since the first century have expected the imminent return of Jesus. They still do. I fully expect him to come in my lifetime because all of the signs seem to point in that direction, but they always have.

In the first letter, the Thessalonians were concerned about the fate of believers who died before Jesus came for his church. Now it seems that some people had been circulating stories indicating that Jesus had already come for his church but that the Thessalonians had missed it. It is easy to see why they might be concerned.

2 Thessalonians 2:1-12 says:

Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers, not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy, report or letter supposed to have come from us, saying that the day of the Lord has already come. Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God.

Don't you remember that when I was with you I used to tell you these things? And now you know what is holding him back, so that he may be revealed at the proper time. For the secret power of lawlessness is already at work; but the one who now holds it back will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendor of his coming. The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders, and in every sort of evil that deceives those who are perishing. They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness.

This "man of lawlessness" is a figure in the book of Daniel. We see references to him in Daniel 7:8-12, 7:24-26, 8:9-14, 8:23-25, 9:26-27, and 11:21-45. This seems to equate to the antichrist, found in the book of Revelation. Paul told the Thessalonians that the "power of lawlessness" is already at work in the world, but the "man of lawlessness" has not yet come. This is true. Satan has already started his war. The spiritual forces that will back the antichrist are already at work in the world. The quarterback had not yet come, however. When he does, it will be obvious. He will work counterfeit miracles. He will have a "signs and wonders" ministry, but his teachings will be contrary to the teachings of Christ. He will set himself up as an object of worship and will pretend to be God. Many people will choose his lies over the truth of Christ, and God will give them over to their choices. They will perish as a result.

There are a few curious statements in this passage:

Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers, not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy, report or letter supposed to have come from us, saying that the day of the Lord has already come. Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. (2 Thessalonians 2:1-3)

And now you know what is holding him back, so that he may be revealed at the proper time. For the secret power of lawlessness is already at work; but the one who now holds it back will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way. (2 Thessalonians 2:6-7)

I will address these in reverse order. The second passage makes reference to something or someone who is currently holding back the power of lawlessness. At some point this restraint will be removed and only then can the man of lawlessness be free to begin his reign of terror. In the

Greek in verse 6, this restraint is referred to in the neuter – “what.” In verse 7, the reference is in the masculine – “the one.” The first reference is to an “it” and the second to a “he.”

There has been a great deal of speculation about the identity of this restraining force. It seems to have been something that Paul knew his readers would understand without a great deal of explanation. Unfortunately it leaves us a bit in the dark. Some have suggested that “it” is the Roman Empire and “he” is a particular emperor. This does not really make sense, however, for several reasons, including:

- the Roman Empire has been gone a very long time but the man of lawlessness still has not been unleashed.
- the Roman Empire did nothing to hinder unrighteousness. For that matter, human governments in general do very little to hinder unrighteousness.

An explanation that is a great deal more plausible is that the restraint is the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is both a “what” and a “who.” Furthermore the Holy Spirit is certainly an agent that could restrain a man of lawlessness. If the Holy Spirit were removed from the earth, the forces of evil would certainly take over. So is Paul referring to a time when the Holy Spirit is removed from the world, allowing the antichrist to be unleashed full-force? If so, this raises an implication and a question.

First of all, if the Holy Spirit is removed from the world before the man of lawlessness is revealed, an implication is that there must surely be a pretribulation rapture. The Holy Spirit indwells believers and if he is removed from the world, believers must be removed as well. This explanation has problems, however.

The Bible talks about believers on the earth who lived (or died) during the tribulation (Revelation 20:4, for instance). The pretribulationist viewpoint says that these are people who became believers after the rapture and during the tribulation. If the Holy Spirit was taken from the earth before the man of lawlessness was revealed, then how did these people become believers after that time, since the Holy Spirit is the agent of regeneration (John 3:5-6)?

Perhaps a refinement of this viewpoint could adequately answer the question. Perhaps the Holy Spirit is not removed completely, but the manifestation of the Holy Spirit in the form of the church is removed. The church itself could be the restraining force that holds back the man of lawlessness. If the church were removed (consistent with a pretribulationist viewpoint), then the world would have no moral compass. There would be no social, political, or moral restraints which would hold back a completely unrighteous man from coming to power. The world would be ripe for the antichrist. The Holy Spirit could still be at work, gathering last-minute believers into the Kingdom.

Unfortunately, we do not know for sure what restraint Paul mentioned in the verse. This explanation is plausible. Still, one needs to go back to 2 Thessalonians 2:1-3. 2 Thessalonians 2:3 says “that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed.” To what day does this refer? 2 Thessalonians 2:1-2 says “Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers, not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy, report or letter supposed to have come from us, saying that the day of the Lord has already come.”

If “the day” is the day of “the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him,” then the pretribulationist viewpoint falls apart. 2 Thessalonians 2:3 says that would not happen until the man of lawlessness has already been revealed. The tribulation would already be in progress before “our being gathered to him.”

“The day” in 2 Thessalonians 2:3, however, may refer to “the day of the Lord” mentioned in 2 Thessalonians 2:2. “The day of the Lord” is a term used commonly in Scripture to refer to the final judgment, which occurs at the end of the tribulation. If that is how Paul is using the term and if that is the day referred to by verse 3, then the explanation holds together. I am a bit uncomfortable with the number of if’s and then’s we had to jump through to reach this conclusion, but the fact is that we do not know for sure what Paul meant. Any direction that one goes with this passage will be supposition. The student would be unwise to build any doctrine solely upon a passage such as this that requires so much conjecture to interpret.

3.3 Prayer Support

2 Thessalonians 2:13-3:5

Paul reminds the Thessalonians that he prays for them constantly. He asks them to pray for him as well, that the work he is doing might bring about results for the Kingdom. He asks them to pray for his physical safety as well.

3.4 Warning Against Idleness

2 Thessalonians 3:6-13

Paul returns to the theme of idleness. He addressed this in the first letter. Apparently some had not taken his message to heart. It is hard to know if the problem was motivated out of laziness or out of a sincere belief that the end was imminent. If I really believed that Jesus was coming this afternoon, then I might skip work today. If that got to be habitual, however, it would be a problem.

Paul in no way gives permission to such behavior. In 2 Thessalonians 3:10 he says, “If a man will not work, he shall not eat.” His problem is not completely with their idleness; he is upset at how they are passing their time. In 2 Thessalonians 3:11 he says, “They are not busy; they are busybodies.”

Paul wants believers to live respectable lives. They need to be productive citizens of the present kingdom.

3.5 Conclusion

2 Thessalonians 3:14-18

Paul wants his instructions enforced. In 2 Thessalonians 3:14-15 he says:

If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed. Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.

In 2 Thessalonians 3:17 he writes something that warrants an explanation. It says:

I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand, which is the distinguishing mark in all my letters. This is how I write.

Paul had a scribe. Someone else penned his words. At the end, he signed the letter in his own handwriting so that people would know that it was from him.

He concludes the letter with a benediction.

4. Galatians

Galatia is a region which includes Pisidian Antioch, Lystra, Derbe, and Iconium, among other cities. Today it would be part of the nation of Turkey. Paul's letter to the Galatian churches is one of his earliest letters, perhaps even predating the Thessalonian correspondence, but probably written around the same time. Galatians may have been written from Corinth, as were 1 and 2 Thessalonians.

The letter has one central theme. Paul is dealing with the problem of the Judaizers. The Judaizers were a sect within Christianity that taught that any Christian must first be a Jew. According to them, Christians must live under Mosaic Law. In particular, they taught that Gentile men coming into the faith must undergo circumcision.

Paul opposed the Judaizers with a passion. They were setting up artificial barriers which made it difficult for Gentiles to come to Jesus. His work was hard enough without their interference. Furthermore Paul believed that the Gospel was in no way compromised by failure to observe these parts of the law. As we have discussed before, much of the law was given to deal with the sin problem. Jesus had already fulfilled that part of the law by defeating the sin problem. Therefore followers of Jesus could walk in victory rather than under these constraints. He would not have the Judaizers telling his children in the faith anything different.

In Galatians, we see Paul as a man, full of emotion, passion, and even anger. We see him as a man of high principles, unafraid to challenge Peter publicly to stand up against the Judaizers. As for the Judaizers, Paul says in Galatians 5:12, "As for those agitators, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves!" This is the only place in Scripture where one person gets agitated enough at another person to wish castration upon him.

The message of Galatians is as vital today as it was when Paul wrote it. Salvation is by faith, provided by the grace of God. It is not through works or by conforming to the law. That may seem like a fairly elementary principle of Christianity, but how often have people strayed from it? There is a strange tendency in man to try to change the plan of salvation so that it is earned rather than given. They would rather receive it through effort than through relationship. Why is that? It is probably an issue of control. We like to believe that we are in control. An earned salvation is one that we control. Unfortunately it is not available.

There was a time when Martin Luther finally came to understand that. He was bothered by the "works" component that had crept into Roman Catholicism. Tradition says that it was the book of Galatians that helped him to understand the error. Particularly Galatians 3:11, "The righteous will live by faith," (which is actually a quote of Habakkuk 2:4) ringing through his head seems to have triggered the Protestant Reformation.

Galatians is a great book. Christianity is a great gift and we should be every bit as upset about people cluttering it up with false requirements as was Paul.

4.1 Greetings

Galatians 1:1-5

Paul opens with a greeting. In Galatians 1:1, he identifies himself as:

Paul, an apostle – sent not from men nor by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead

The letter is addressed to the churches in Galatia. He blesses them and wishes the grace and peace of God upon them.

4.2 Another Gospel

Galatians 1:6-2:5

After a short blessing, Paul gets right to the point. Galatians 1:6-9 says:

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!

Paul goes right for the Judaizer throat. Those who are telling the Gentiles in Galatia (or anywhere else) that they must come under Mosaic Law in order to follow Jesus are preaching a different, perverted gospel. Paul will not stand for it. His intention is to rally the Galatians to stand up against such teaching.

He defends the purity of his Gospel. In Galatians 1:12 he reminds them that he received his message directly from Jesus. He goes on to recall how he once persecuted the church, but now preaches boldly for Jesus because God called him to preach to the Gentiles. Although he did not seek the permission of men to preach the Gospel that God had commissioned him to preach, he also did not hide what he was teaching. He had gone to the apostles in Jerusalem to make sure they understood his work among the Gentiles. When he went, he took Titus, an uncircumcised Greek with him. They did not require Titus to undergo circumcision. In like manner, nobody should require the Galatians to be circumcised.

4.3 Apostolic Opposition

Galatians 2:6-14

Paul's words in Galatians 2:6-14 are pointed and angry:

As for those who seemed to be important – whatever they were makes no difference to me; God does not judge by external appearance – those men added nothing to my message. On the contrary, they saw that I had been entrusted with the task of preaching the gospel to the Gentiles, just as Peter had been to the Jews. For God, who was at work in the ministry of Peter as an apostle to the Jews, was also at work in my ministry as an apostle to the Gentiles. James, Peter and John, those reputed to be pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the Jews. All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.

When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong. Before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was

afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray.

When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter in front of them all, "You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?"

"Those who seemed to be important" is a reference to the Judaizers. After Paul planted wheat in Galatia, they followed behind and planted tares. Apparently Peter, James, and John had given into pressure from the Judaizers and were going along with their demands. Paul sarcastically refers to them as "James, Peter, and John, those reputed to be pillars." In his mind, they are pillars without strength. We gather from the text that Peter had once freely associated with the Gentiles, eating with them, not in kosher fashion. When certain Judaizers arrived in Galatia, however, he withdrew from this practice because he was afraid of what people might say. It was hypocrisy. Other Jewish believers, even Barnabus, were drawn into it, influenced by Peter's poor example. Since Peter so publicly failed in this matter, Paul publicly rebuked him for it.

4.4 Justified by Faith

Galatians 2:15-3:18

Nobody (with the exception of Jesus) has ever been able to completely fulfill the requirements of the law. Therefore the law never made anybody righteous. The real purpose of the law is to get us to realize that we fall short of God's standards and that we need redemption. Understanding the law should draw us to Christ – to be freed from the law. It is only when we come out from under the requirements of the law and into the freedom of redemption provided by Christ that we can really begin to live as citizens of the Kingdom. Galatians 2:19-21 says:

For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!

Our sin nature, which is subject to the law, must be nailed to the cross of Jesus and put to death. Once that happens, Jesus can indwell us and we can live beyond the confines of our sin nature. We have no business falling back into a mode where we seek righteousness under the law. If we truly believe that it can be found there then we believe that Christ died in vain.

Again, with a tone of severe frustration, Paul continues in Galatians 3:1-5:

You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort? Have you suffered so much for nothing – if it really was for nothing? Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard?

Spirit-filled believers do not get to be that way by observing the law. The Holy Spirit was poured out on man only after Jesus had conquered the sin nature.

To illustrate his point, Paul turns to Abraham, the ancestral father of the Judaizers. He quotes Genesis 15:6, "He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." Abraham lived

over 400 years before the giving of the law, yet the Bible says that God credited righteousness to him. It came not through observance of the law, but by faith.

Paul turns to Habakkuk, another Old Testament prophet. Habakkuk 2:4 says, "The righteous will live by faith." It does not say "The righteous will live by observing the law."

Paul's point in this section is that the Old Testament – the source of the law – does not point to the law as a means of righteousness. The same Old Testament that gave us the law points to faith as the road to a righteous relationship with God.

4.5 The Purpose of the Law

Galatians 3:19-25

If the law was unable to make us righteous, then why did God give it to us? Galatians 3:24-25 answers that question:

So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law.

In Greek, the phrase "put in charge" comes from the word from which we get "pedagogue." In the Greco-Roman culture, a pedagogue was a slave with the responsibility of supervising young children. While the children were little, the pedagogue would do a certain amount of teaching, but when they got to be school age his primary responsibility was to see that they got safely to and from the schoolmaster.

Thus it is with the law. In spiritual infancy, we need to know the standards, but we reach a point when we need to mature and come under the tutelage of the schoolmaster. The law was designed to safely lead us to Jesus, where our real instruction begins. Having understood our need for justification (thanks to the instruction of the law pedagogue) we move into justification by faith (as a result of the instruction of Jesus, the schoolmaster). Once we are under his authority, we no longer live under the authority of the law.

4.6 Children of Abraham

Galatians 3:26-4:31

Galatians 3:26-4:7 says:

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

What I am saying is that as long as the heir is a child, he is no different from a slave, although he owns the whole estate. He is subject to guardians and trustees until the time set by his father. So also, when we were children, we were in slavery under the basic principles of the world. But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father." So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir.

By faith, we are all changed from being man or woman, slave or free, Jew or Gentile into children of Abraham. There is unity in the body of Christ. We are all one family. We become heirs to the promise that God gave to Abraham.

Paul then turns to a familiar example. When even a wealthy family has children, those children are not really free. They live under the authority of parents and guardians until they are grown. In like manner, the Jews lived under the guardianship of the law until “the time had fully come” (or in “the fulness of time,” as the KJV says). What son, when he reached manhood and had his freedom, would want to go back under the authority of a guardian? In like manner, why would an heir to the promise of Abraham, freed by faith in Jesus, want to go back under the authority of the law?

Paul turns to another example in the life of Abraham. Abraham had a son, Ishmael, by the slave woman, Hagar. His other son, Isaac, was the child of promise, born by the free woman, Sarah. Ishmael & Isaac (or Hagar and Sarah) represent life under the law vs. life under the freedom of Christ. Those who cling to the law are spiritual Ishmaels. Those who cling to Jesus are spiritual Isaacs. Then Paul quotes the words of Sarah to Abraham, found in Genesis 21:10, “Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for the slave woman’s son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman’s son.”

There is some incredibly important doctrine in this section. The promise given to Abraham, which would be passed down to his seed, belongs to the spiritual descendants of Abraham, not the natural. Taking the body of Paul’s teachings as a whole, we understand that God is not finished with the Jews. They still have a part in his plan. But we also see that those who benefit from the covenant are those who submit to the Lordship of Jesus, regardless of their natural ancestry. Jesus himself, in his conversation with Nicodemus in John 3 said “You must be born again,” signifying that his natural ancestry bought him nothing.

The point of all of this to the Galatians is that it is ludicrous for them to resubmit themselves to the requirements of the law, believing that it will bring them any benefit before God. They had already found righteousness and reconciliation under Jesus. If they continue looking for it somewhere else then it indicates that they do not believe the provisions of Jesus to be sufficient.

There is a bit of interesting biographical information in this section. Galatians 4:12-16 says:

I plead with you, brothers, become like me, for I became like you. You have done me no wrong. As you know, it was because of an illness that I first preached the gospel to you. Even though my illness was a trial to you, you did not treat me with contempt or scorn. Instead, you welcomed me as if I were an angel of God, as if I were Christ Jesus himself. What has happened to all your joy? I can testify that, if you could have done so, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me. Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth?

Paul is talking about the time that he first visited the Galatians and the joy and tenderness that existed between them. He is dismayed that the joy and the relationship are being disrupted by the Judaizers. In recalling this, he informs us that he had been ill while he was in Galatia. The Galatian people cared for him and nurtured him through whatever illness it was. There is an interesting phrase in Galatians 4:15: “if you could have done so, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me.” This may indicate that Paul suffered from some eye problem while he was there. If so, it could be a lingering byproduct of his Damascus road experience, when he was blinded. Some people piece things together to conclude that a chronic eye problem is Paul’s “thorn in the flesh,” mentioned in 2 Corinthians 12:7.

4.7 Freedom in Christ

Galatians 5

The Galatians have freedom in Christ. They have no business going back under the law. He admonishes the men not to submit to circumcision, as required by the Judaizers. In Galatians 5:4, he indicates that seeking justification under the law after having tasted freedom in Christ is the same thing as falling away from grace. As I have indicated before, I do not hold to a "once saved, always saved" philosophy. According to Paul, it is possible to walk away from grace after it has been received. God does not withdraw it, but it can be our choice to reject it.

Paul is angry at those who pervert the purity of the Gospel. He tells the Galatians that God will judge these Judaizers who are causing them trouble. In Galatians 5:12 he says of those who are forcing others to undergo circumcision, "As for those agitators, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves!"

We have freedom in Christ. Freedom to do what? Does this mean that we can sin as much as we want and get away with it? The remainder of chapter 5 addresses this question. Galatians 5:12-26 says:

You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.

So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law.

The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.

What a wonderful gift our freedom is! Before being empowered by the Holy Spirit, we were in bondage to:

- sexual immorality
- idolatry
- discord
- selfish ambition
- drunkenness
- impurity
- witchcraft
- jealousy
- dissensions
- orgies
- debauchery
- hatred
- fits of rage
- factions and envy
- etc.

Freedom in Christ is freedom FROM these things. We are freed to experience:

- love
- patience
- joy
- kindness
- peace
- goodness

- faithfulness
- gentleness
- self-control

Unfortunately, most of still live in a state of transition from the old ways to the new ways. As we submit to Jesus and put to death the sin nature, we are more fully empowered by the Holy Spirit to experience the fruits of the Spirit. It takes time. If you are not there, keep trying, but do not be too hard on yourself. Read Romans 7:21-24 and you will discover that Paul continued to struggle with this same problem. It will be there until we are taken home to be with the Lord.

4.8 *Miscellaneous Instructions*

Galatians 6:1-10

In Galatians 6:1-10, Paul gives some miscellaneous last-minute instructions to the Galatian believers:

- Believers should lovingly discipline brothers who are in sin. The purpose of the discipline is restoration.
- He tells them to “carry each other’s burdens.” We need to be attuned to issues and problems in each other’s lives so that we can minister to those needs.
- Humility should be the norm in the church. Seek to be a servant. Do not seek exaltation or adoration of men.
- Teaching in the body of Christ is a high office. Those who are taught should take care of those who teach.
- Do not try to fool God. Galatians 6:7-10 says:

Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

4.9 *Conclusion*

Galatians 6:11-18

As was true with 2 Thessalonians, Paul concludes the letter in his own handwriting. Galatians 6:11 says:

See what large letters I use as I write to you with my own hand!

(The way that this is stated might also imply that Paul had an eye problem.) A scribe wrote the letter, but Paul concluded it in his own handwriting so that the Galatians would know it was from him.

In his conclusion he makes one more statement about the Judaizers. He says that the only reason that they do the things that they do is to try to escape any persecution for the sake of the cross. He says that his hope and his boast will never be in anything of the flesh, but in the cross of Jesus Christ. In Galatians 6:15 he echoes the idea that Jesus conveyed when he said “You must be born again.”

Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation.

The letter concludes with a benediction.

5. Romans

Romans is presumed to have been written around the same time as 2 Corinthians, probably after 2 Corinthians. It differs from the books that we have already considered – 1 & 2 Thessalonians and Galatians – in several ways.

The Thessalonian and the Galatian epistles were written to people whom Paul knew quite well. Paul had never visited Rome. He knew a number of individuals there, but he did not know the church as a whole. Romans was not written to a church that he founded. Thus in the opening remarks he spends more time than normal introducing himself and stating his credentials.

The Thessalonian and Galatian letters were written to address specific problems or issues. Romans does not seem to be structured this way. Romans is more of a theological treatise. It appears that Paul, unable to visit the church personally thus far, wrote a letter telling them all of the things that he really would have liked to tell them personally. If that is the case, then the fact that he was unable to go to Rome is of great benefit to us. The product of that is perhaps the richest doctrinal treatise ever written. The letter to the Romans is a well that never runs dry. It always has more to nourish, refresh, instruct, and challenge us than we could ever consume.

5.1 Introduction and Greeting

Romans 1:1-17

From the opening verse, Paul jumps right into the teaching mode. Romans 1:1-7 says:

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God – the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures regarding his Son, who as to his human nature was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord. Through him and for his name's sake, we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith. And you also are among those who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.

To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints:

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

In the opening few verses, he establishes that:

- He is a servant of Jesus.
- He was called to be an apostle.
- Jesus was a descendant of David and thus heir to the promises made to David.
- Jesus was resurrected from the dead.
- Paul is called to a special ministry among the Gentiles.
- The members of the Roman church are called into relationship with Jesus.

As mentioned in the introduction, Paul had never visited these people. If he had spent time among them, it would not have been necessary to clarify all of this up front and the letter probably would have had a more personal greeting.

Paul continues by commending them for their faith. He prays for them constantly and longs to come visit them. He would like to have the opportunity to encourage them personally and to build up that church. This section concludes with two very well-known verses of Scripture, Romans 1:16-17:

I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."

There are some powerful words in that passage. The Gospel is "the power of God for salvation of everyone who believes." The Gospel is for Jew and Gentile alike. In the Gospel we find righteousness that comes by faith. As he did in Galatians 3, Paul quotes Habakkuk 2:4, "The righteous will live by faith."

5.2 The Fallen Condition

Romans 1:18-32

In the next section, Paul addresses man's need for salvation. The offer of salvation does not seem to make sense unless one understands that he needs to be saved from something. What is it about man that needs to be fixed? What is the problem here?

Romans 1:18-32 contains one of the best descriptions of the depravity of the human condition found in Scripture:

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.

Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator – who is forever praised. Amen.

Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion.

Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done. They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do

such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.

Wow! Are we really that bad? Yes, we are!

Without the salvation offered to us in Jesus, we are objects of God's WRATH, and that is not good. What did we do to deserve that?

Since creation began, God has revealed himself to man. He has done this in various ways. Creation itself is a portrait of the creator. The completeness, perfection, and beauty in nature speak volumes of its author. Psalm 19:1-4 says:

The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.

Day after day they pour forth speech;
night after night they display knowledge.

There is no speech or language
where their voice is not heard.

Their voice goes out into all the earth,
their words to the ends of the world.

Every man everywhere has a revelation of God. God has revealed himself in other ways – through prophets, through Scripture, through the Incarnation, through the still, small voice of the Holy Spirit.

When presented with the Gospel message, one of the classic “let’s change the subject so I don’t have to think about my sin problem” questions that people ask is, “But what about the people in the deep, dark jungles of Africa that have never heard the Gospel? Is God going to send them to hell just because they never heard about Jesus?” When people ask such questions, what they are really saying is, “Aha! Here’s a loophole! Surely God is not going to condemn those people for their ignorance. If they can go to heaven without being Christians, then I can, too!”

The reality is that the people in the deep, dark jungles of Africa have a revelation of the character of God. God will hold them accountable for how they deal with that revelation. The person asking the avoidance question has a fuller revelation of the nature of God, since he has been presented with the Gospel message. God will hold him accountable for how he deals with the revelation that he has. And what has man typically done with that revelation?

Look at the passage above. Each of us has done some or all of the following:

- We have failed to glorify God.
- We have failed to give thanks to God.
- We have darkened our hearts, shutting out the light of God.
- We have put our own foolish wisdom ahead of the wisdom of God.
- We have refused to worship God and instead have worshipped images made by man.
- We have degraded our bodies in sexual impurity.
- We have worshipped creation rather than creator.
- We have exchanged the truth of God for the lies of man.
- We have engaged in homosexual behavior – which Paul calls a perversion deserving of punishment.

It is a grim, but accurate picture of the choices most of us have made at some point. Because we have chosen this, God has given us over to our choices. What has this produced in us? We saw the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians. Now we have the fruit of depravity:

- depraved minds
- greed
- strife
- gossip
- insolence
- inventing evil ways
- faithlessness
- wickedness
- envy
- deceit
- slander
- arrogance
- disobedience to parents
- heartlessness
- evil
- murder
- malice
- hatred for God
- boastfulness
- senselessness
- ruthlessness

Paul says that we not only do such things deserve death, but also approve of those who practice them.

Hopefully Paul has put to rest the question, “Why do we deserve God’s wrath?” The fall of man has taken a serious toll on who we were created to be. We need help. We need salvation.

5.3 Judgment

Romans 2:1-16

The next section of Romans turns to the theme of judgment. Judgment is a result of the fallen condition described above. The section makes several points.

First of all, we are not the judges. Be careful not to set yourself up as judge of another person. It does not work. If you look at the unrighteousness of another person and pronounce him worthy of punishment, then you pronounce that same sentence upon yourself. We are all unrighteous. If we say that unrighteousness deserves punishment then we are saying that we deserve punishment. The only one who is in a position to judge is the one who is righteous – God himself. Fortunately for us, God is a more patient judge than we tend to be. He is patient, hoping that we will be drawn to repentance. He really does not want to lose any of us.

The day will come, however, when the judgment will happen. The time for repentance will run out and we will face punishment or reward. Romans 2:6-10 says:

God “will give to each person according to what he has done.” To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life. But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger. There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile; but glory, honor and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.

In Romans 2:6 Paul quotes Psalm 62:12, which speaks of God rewarding men according to their deeds. Those who have been faithful will reap eternal life, glory, honor, and peace. Those who have rejected God will reap wrath, anger, trouble, and distress. The rules are the same for Jew and Gentile. Heritage will not be an issue at the time of judgment.

Romans 2:12-16 readdresses the question of “the people in the deep dark jungles of Africa who never heard of Jesus.” The section says:

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. For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God’s

sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous. (Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.) This will take place on the day when God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares.

The point of this is that God is not going to hold us accountable for how much revelation we received. We have no control over that. He will hold us accountable for what we did with the revelation that we have. Many who have never heard the Old Testament, much less the New, are more obedient to the revelation that they have of God than some people who are well-versed in theological matters. One could memorize the entire Bible but still have no relationship with God. Knowing about God is not the same as knowing God. Jesus did not die to bring us a body of knowledge or a topic for debate. Before you spend time arguing over the meaning of baptism or the existence of purgatory, take time to master "Love the Lord your God with all your heart."

5.4 The Advantages of Being A Jew

Romans 2:17-3:31

Thus far we have seen several times that Paul emphasized that Jew and Gentile are judged equally before God. One might infer that this was a question in the Roman church. It is likely that there were some Jews in the church who felt that they had a special status because they were Jews. Whether or not the church was harassed by Judaizers we do not know, but there seems to have been some sentiment that Jewish Christians had an advantage over Gentile Christians. Thus in the next section Paul addresses that issue.

He begins by pointing out that the Jews had failed in their mission of carrying the message and revelation of God to the Gentile world. They were the "guardians of the law," but they failed to keep the law. Thus they came across as hypocrites to the Gentiles. God was dishonored because of them.

Paul makes a rather radical statement and says that being Jewish is a matter of the heart and not a matter of the flesh. Physical circumcision has no value unless one lives in perfect submission to all of the law – and nobody does. God is looking for people whose hearts have been circumcised by the Holy Spirit – that is, people who have yielded their wills and their lives in submission to the will and leading of God. Circumcision is a matter of yielding the flesh in obedience to God – being forever changed in the process. He wants people who will yield their spirits to him, being forever changed in the process.

In spite of all of the above, Paul is not willing to write off Judaism as being worthless altogether. He acknowledges that God chose the Jews for a special purpose and a special relationship. They have the distinct honor of being the people who were entrusted with the word of God. It is a great honor and a great responsibility. The fact that some of these keepers of the law have no faith in the law does not reflect upon God, but upon those individuals. The truth of God's word will ultimately be revealed when he comes in judgment.

Romans 3:5-8 says:

But if our unrighteousness brings out God's righteousness more clearly, what shall we say? That God is unjust in bringing his wrath on us? (I am using a human argument.) Certainly not! If that were so, how could God judge the world? Someone might argue, "If my falsehood enhances God's truthfulness and so increases his glory, why am I still condemned

as a sinner?" Why not say – as we are being slanderously reported as saying and as some claim that we say – "Let us do evil that good may result"? Their condemnation is deserved.

We can only guess what prompted this paragraph. Apparently there were some Jews trying to rationalize their failure to observe the law by saying, "If my sin gives God an opportunity to show his righteousness, then my sin must be a good thing, right?" Rationalizing sin does not change the fact that it is sin. God is not honored and his righteousness is not enhanced. It will bring condemnation.

Even though the Jews have been honored by God, Jew and Gentile stand alike under the judgment of sin. In Romans 3:10-18, Paul quotes or paraphrases several passages from the Old Testament (mostly from Psalms). There are some important truths in these verses, particularly in Romans 3:10:

There is no one righteous, not even one;

We all stand together in the human condition. Every one of us has failed to live up to God's righteous standards. Universally we deserve condemnation. Universally we need salvation. Romans 3:19-20 says:

Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.

This is the same concept that we saw in Galatians 3:19-25. The law's purpose was merely to make us aware of our need for salvation. It is not a way of salvation. Nobody will be saved by following the law. That is not the path to righteousness. Romans 3:21-26 shows us the path:

But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished – he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

This is a very full statement. We all fall short of righteousness – Jew and Gentile alike. We are all justified by the grace of God through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus. Prior to the sacrifice of Jesus, God had held back the punishment due for sins committed so that all could benefit from the justice provided in Jesus. The Law and the Prophets looked forward to this time. Thus we may infer that those who held the teachings of the Law and the Prophets in faith ultimately benefited from the sacrifice of Jesus. The sacrifices under the law merely pointed to the sacrifice of Jesus. The ultimate atonement came when he was sacrificed. All of this was God's plan. He is both the one who is just and the one who justifies.

Knowing all of this, does it make sense for some in the church to boast that they have a special standing because of their Jewish heritage? No. The only thing of value is faith. Romans 3:28 says, "For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law."

Does this new righteousness apart from the law do away with the law? No. The law still reflects God's standards for us. It is only with the righteousness that we receive in Christ that we can begin to uphold the law. Jesus does not tell us to discard the law. He empowers us to live it.

5.5 Justified by Righteousness

Romans 4

This part of Romans parallels Galatians 3. Paul turns to Abraham as an example. He quotes Genesis 15:6, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." Abraham lived hundreds of years before the giving of the law and yet the Scripture says that God credited to him righteousness. It could not have been through following the law – which had not yet been given. It was a result of his faith. Righteousness comes by faith, not by observance of the law. If our justification was a result of works, then it would be something that God owed us. Instead we receive it as a gift by his grace.

In Genesis 15, God credited righteousness to Abraham because of his faith. In Genesis 17 the covenant of circumcision was introduced. When Abraham was declared righteous, he was uncircumcised. Righteousness is not something reserved for those who are circumcised. It is reserved for those who follow in Abraham's footsteps of faith.

Romans 4:18-25 says:

Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, "So shall your offspring be." Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead – since he was about a hundred years old – and that Sarah's womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. This is why "it was credited to him as righteousness." The words "it was credited to him" were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness – for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.

We are justified the same way that Abraham was – by faith. By faith we become children of Abraham and beneficiaries of the promises made to him

5.6 The Results of Our Justification

Romans 5

Romans 5:1-5 says:

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.

This is great news! The results of justification are peace and hope. The path to achieving these may not be as smooth as we would like, however.

Paul says that we should rejoice in our sufferings. If anyone ever tries to tell you that your life gets easy after becoming a Christian, run from any other advice that person might offer. Life does not necessary become easy. It becomes bearable. Paul makes it clear that we will still

have sufferings. If, however, we face those with the hope of the glory of God, then our sufferings will bring about perseverance. Perseverance builds character in us. The character results in hope beyond the sufferings. We emerge from such experiences matured rather than defeated. As God sustains us we learn to hope beyond the sufferings. The hope that we gain will never disappoint us, "because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit." We have not been left to struggle alone. We are people of sustenance! This is great news!

Paul continues in Romans 5:6-11:

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

This is more great news. You do not have to be "good enough" to come to Jesus. Fortunately he was good enough to come to you. Jesus died for sinners – not for people who had already cleaned up their acts and achieved righteousness on their own. Receiving his gift of salvation will spare us from the wrath of God which we deserve, as Paul described in Romans 1-2. It was the death of Jesus that brought about our justification. It is the life of Jesus that brings about reconciliation. When we accept him, he indwells us and begins to live through us. That indwelling brings about reconciliation with the Father. Galatians 2:20 says "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me." That is what this is all about.

Romans 5:12-19 says:

Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned – for before the law was given, sin was in the world. But sin is not taken into account when there is no law. Nevertheless, death reigned from the time of Adam to the time of Moses, even over those who did not sin by breaking a command, as did Adam, who was a pattern of the one to come.

But the gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many! Again, the gift of God is not like the result of the one man's sin: The judgment followed one sin and brought condemnation, but the gift followed many trespasses and brought justification. For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.

Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men. For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.

When Adam sinned, he blazed a trail into rebellion that all of us have followed. (Actually to avoid any appearance of sexism, I should point out that it was Eve that led mankind into sin and not Adam.) Are we responsible for the sin of Adam? No. We are responsible for following the

example of Adam. We do suffer consequences of the sin of Adam. He brought death into the world. He disrupted the relationship with God. We were all impacted by that.

Just as Adam blazed the trail into rebellion that affected all men, Jesus blazed the trail of reconciliation back to the Father. All men are free to walk that path back into a right relationship with God. Just as the rebellion of Adam brought death to all men, the justification available through Jesus makes life available to all who will receive it.

5.7 Living Under Grace

Romans 6:1-7:6

Now that we have received salvation, what difference should it make in our lives? In particular, what should be our attitude towards sin? Romans 6:2-4 says:

We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

Baptism is a dramatic portrayal of the death (going into the water) and resurrection (coming back out) of Jesus. One who is baptized is identifying with the death and resurrection of Jesus. When we become his followers, we should crucify – put to death – our sin nature, our former lives. We should rise from that death to walk with him in the victory of his resurrection. In this we find freedom from our bondage to sin. Romans 6:12-14 continues:

Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness. For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace.

The Emancipation Proclamation gave legal freedom to the slaves in the United States of America. Unfortunately many of them had no idea what to do with that freedom. They had spent their entire lives living on a plantation, working night and day. They were mistreated and enslaved, but fed. It was an existence that they understood. They did not understand freedom. If they left the plantation, how would they eat? Many were never willing to take the risk to find out what freedom meant. They stayed on the plantations and lived out their freedom in the same conditions they endured in their slavery.

Freedom from sin is a similar thing. Having victory over sin does not mean that we no longer make choices. We still have to choose a master. It can be a scary thing to leave a comfortable, familiar life of sin. Paul knew that. Walking in freedom is a daily choice and at times a difficult one. Daily we must crucify the sin nature and rise to new life in Jesus. Paul summarizes this in Romans 6:20-23:

When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness. What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death! But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

In Romans 7:1-6, Paul turns to another analogy. When a woman is married, she is legally bound to her husband. If she entered into a relationship with another man, she would be an adulteress.

If, however, her husband died, she would be free to marry again. In like manner, we were once bound to our sin nature, defined by the law. That bond has now been put to death. We are free to operate in grace. It would be imprudent to continue living under the former bondage to law and death. We must now enter into a new relationship with the grace of God.

5.8 The Purpose of the Law

Romans 7:7-25

If the law is so intricately tied to the sin nature, then why do we have it? Romans 7:7-10 addresses this question:

What shall we say, then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! Indeed I would not have known what sin was except through the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, "Do not covet." But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire. For apart from law, sin is dead. Once I was alive apart from law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died. I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death.

Suppose that I were a compulsive fingernail biter. Whenever I got stressed or bored, I would chew my fingernails without really thinking about it. No big deal. Then one day the government passes a law against fingernail biting. They deploy fingernail-inspecting police everywhere to enforce this law. I say, "OK. I now understand that fingernail biting is something that I should not do. I will try to stop." Unfortunately the stress of this gets to me and increases my biting. I realize that I am biting more than I used to do and I feel guilty. The guilt causes me to bite my fingernails. It is a viscous circle.

This is similar to the picture that Paul is drawing. The law is good in that it communicates God's standards to us. We would not know right from wrong without it. We would not know his standards for our behavior. Thus the law teaches us about sin – our own sin. Unfortunately, just as passing a law against fingernail biting would not actually help anyone stop biting his nails, the law which taught us about sin did not actually empower us to rise above sin. Instead it brought us under conviction, guilt, and penalty. "The very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death."

How difficult this is! In the example above, I want to stop biting my fingernails, but the more I think about it the more I compulsively bite my nails! I need help! Paul is no stranger to this feeling. If you ever needed to identify with someone in Scripture, then Romans 7:14-25 should be your constant companion:

We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing. 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.

So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord!

There really is a war being waged inside each of us. Sinful desires struggle against the revelation that we have of God's standards. At times we feel out of control. Paul had the same problem. It is not fun. It often leaves us feeling less like victors and more like condemned prisoners. Where is the victory?

5.9 Living In The Spirit

Romans 8:1-27

Romans 8 tells how to obtain the victory. Romans 8:1-17 says:

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit.

Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God.

You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ. But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you.

Therefore, brothers, we have an obligation – but it is not to the sinful nature, to live according to it. For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live, because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, “Abba, Father.” The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.

There is an extremely significant transition from the “What a wretched man I am – who will rescue me” at the end of chapter 7 to “there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” in chapter 8. Although Paul feels wretched from his continuing struggle with sin, he knows that he is not under any sort of condemnation because he belongs to Jesus. There is the victory! The struggles may still be present, but the victory has already been won. Jesus came in the “likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering.” Because Jesus offered himself in this way, “the righteous requirements of the law” were fully met.

In the law, sin required a blood sacrifice. An animal without defect was sacrificed to atone for sin. Jesus, being sinless – without defect – was able to satisfy that requirement of the law once and for all. Sin had brought death to mankind, but Jesus put to death the power of sin. How do we reap the benefit of this?

The key to all of this seems to be the way we submit our minds. Those who focus on satisfying the desires of the flesh – the objects of the sinful nature – will find death. Those who submit their minds to the Spirit of God will find life and peace. They find harmony with God. “Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God.”

There are a number of things about life which we cannot control, but each of us controls the manner in which we invest our minds. If you submit to your sinful nature, you will reap death. If you submit to the Spirit, the Spirit will enable you to “put to death the misdeeds of the body” and you will reap life. The Holy Spirit is the key to life in us. He empowers us to overcome the passions of the flesh. He is not a spirit of fear; he is a Spirit of sonship. “The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.”

Those who live in the Spirit are adopted as sons of God – brothers and sisters of Jesus and co-heirs of his glory. We inherit not only his glory, however, but we share in his suffering. The struggles do not necessarily stop when we submit to the Spirit. Life still has pain, struggles, hard choices, and even failures. We still live in a world that suffers the effects of sin. The fall of man brought consequences to all of creation. The world is not the Garden of Eden as God intended it to be. Romans 8:20 says that “creation was subjected to frustration” as a result of the fall. Romans 8:22 says that “the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth up to the present time,” waiting for sin and decay to be vanished once and for all. In like manner according to Romans 8:23, “we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.” This is the hope that we have.

In the meantime, we are not left alone. Jesus promised to send us a comforter, which is the Holy Spirit. He is present with us in every one of our struggles. He knows the cries of our heart and pleads with the Father on our behalf. Romans 8:26-27 says:

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God’s will.

5.10 More Than Conquerors

Romans 8:28-39

Thus the “wretched man” of chapter 7, coupled with the Holy Spirit emerges as a victor. Romans 8:28 lets us know that God is able to take the circumstances of our lives – which may not seem very positive at times – and turn them into good and edifying events. In the midst of pain and struggles, we have the assurance that God is in control and that he has our best interests at heart.

The truth is that we often have more control over our own hardships than we would like to admit. Often when we struggle it is a result of our own sin. God lets us taste the consequences because we need to learn to make better choices. When the children of Israel wandered in the desert for forty years, they probably considered that as suffering. They never would have had to do it if they had been faithful, however. They needed forty years of tutoring. In spite of the fact that God subjected them to the consequences of their sin, he was with them the whole way. He provided for them and protected them through the process. At the end, they emerged as victors and took the Promised Land. The same is true with us. Through our struggles, God is with us.

We emerge as more than conquerors. Romans 8:28-39 contain a marvelous declaration of victory:

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.

What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died – more than that, who was raised to life – is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written:

“For your sake we face death all day long;
we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.”¹

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

We may have struggles and we may still fall into sin from time to time, but we have the Holy Spirit interceding for us (Romans 8:26), we have Jesus interceding for us (Romans 8:34), we have the Spirit of sonship and have been adopted as joint heirs with Jesus. Who can take that victory from us? If God gave up his own son for us, then what would he withhold from us? We will never be separated from his love. We are truly more than conquerors! This is really good news!

5.11 The Fate of Israel

Romans 9-11

As we saw in chapters 2 and 3, there seems to have been an issue in the Roman church surrounding the status of the Jews versus the Gentiles. Did the Jews still have a special status before God now that the Gentiles were being added to the church? In chapters 9-11 Paul turns his attention back to this question. In this new era of God’s dealing with man, what does it mean to be a Jew?

In Romans 9:2, Paul says that he has “great sorrow and unceasing anguish” over the fate of his Jewish brothers. In spite of the fact that they were chosen by God, they were the recipients of the covenants, the law, and the temple, and they provided the human ancestry of Jesus, they have failed to come into a proper relationship with God. In Romans 9:6-8 he says:

It is not as though God’s word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham’s children. On the contrary, “It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.” In other words, it is not the natural children who are God’s children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham’s offspring.

¹ Psalm 44:22

Paul is saying that God never intended for us to interpret the descendants of Abraham to be strictly those descended from him in a natural sense. It is significant that Isaac – the child of promise – was not Abraham’s firstborn son – the one that people would have naturally reckoned to be the heir to the promise. Furthermore, Jacob was not Isaac’s firstborn son – again the one the people would have normally assumed to be the heir. To God, the children of promise are those who by faith are willing to inherit the promises made to Abraham. This might include some of the natural descendants of Abraham, but it does not include all of them. Furthermore it includes many who are not natural descendants of Abraham.

All of this runs contrary to many people’s (particularly Jewish people’s) expectations. They expected to have a special standing with God simply for being Jewish. To them, what Paul is saying probably sounded quite unfair. Paul addressed this question in Romans 9:14-33:

What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all! For he says to Moses,

“I will have mercy on whom I have mercy,
and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.”²

It does not, therefore, depend on man’s desire or effort, but on God’s mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh: “I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.” Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden.

One of you will say to me: “Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?” But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? “Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, ‘Why did you make me like this?’”³ Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?

What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath – prepared for destruction? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory – even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles? As he says in Hosea:

“I will call them ‘my people’ who are not my people;
and I will call her ‘my loved one’ who is not my loved one,”⁴

and,

“It will happen that in the very place where it was said to them,
‘You are not my people,’
they will be called ‘sons of the living God.’”⁵

Isaiah cries out concerning Israel:

“Though the number of the Israelites be like the sand by the sea,
only the remnant will be saved.

² Exodus 33:19

³ Isaiah 29:16

⁴ Hosea 2:23

⁵ Hosea 1:10

For the Lord will carry out
his sentence on earth with speed and finality.”⁶

It is just as Isaiah said previously:

“Unless the Lord Almighty
had left us descendants,
we would have become like Sodom,
we would have been like Gomorrah.”⁷

What then shall we say? That the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith; but Israel, who pursued a law of righteousness, has not attained it. Why not? Because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works. They stumbled over the “stumbling stone.” As it is written:

“See, I lay in Zion a stone that causes men to stumble
and a rock that makes them fall,
and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.”⁸

Paul quotes the Old Testament very heavily in this section and he does so to make several points:

- The creation does not have the right to question the creator’s motives. God had a reason for doing what he did and he was not required to get our permission. Some of the vessels that he created will become objects of wrath and others objects of mercy. The ones who become the objects of mercy should appreciate the glory of God even more because they see what happens to those who become the objects of wrath.
- Through the prophet Hosea, God had already told the Jews that the day would come when those who were “not his people” would be called his people and those who were not loved would be called his loved ones. It had been God’s intent all along to bring the Gentiles into the Kingdom.
- Through Isaiah God had warned that only a remnant of Israel would be saved and that the rest would be objects of wrath and destruction.
- Again through Isaiah God had said that he would lay a cornerstone in Zion. Anyone who built on this foundation – who trusted in him – would never be put to shame. This same stone, however, would be a stumbling block for many in Israel.

The fact that the Gentiles were being brought into the Kingdom should not be a surprise. It is not a new concept. It is the fulfillment of ancient promises. In like manner, the fact that Jews found Jesus to be a stumbling block rather than a cornerstone was no surprise either. Although it had been promised, it was still a source of grief to Paul.

His heart’s desire is that the Israelites would be saved, but their path to salvation was the same as it was for the Gentiles – they had to come to Jesus. His heart goes out to them because they are zealous for the things of God. They are serving God in ignorance, however. They are submitted to a law that cannot bring righteousness. They have refused to give up that servitude so that they can find freedom and salvation in Jesus.

⁶ Isaiah 10:22-23

⁷ Isaiah 1:9

⁸ Isaiah 8:14, 28:16

Paul gets very specific about the path to salvation. Romans 10:8-13 says:

But what does it say? "The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart," that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming: That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. As the Scripture says, "Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame." For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile – the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

Salvation comes by belief in the heart – faith – and by confession. There is power in spoken word. God did not think the universe into existence. He said, "Let there be light," and there was. There is a power in spoken words that we do not really understand. It is a transaction whereby we take the private thoughts of our hearts and minds and commit to them publicly. Following Jesus requires more than an intellectual belief in who he is and what he said. It requires a commitment. If you cannot confess Jesus before men then he will not confess you before the Father. In Matthew 10:32-33 Jesus says:

Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven.

In Romans 11:1, Paul asks, "Did God reject his people?" The answer is "no." Paul points out that he himself is a Jew and God has not rejected him. God, through his grace, has preserved a remnant of the Jews to be part of the Kingdom. In Romans 11:11-24 he says:

Again I ask: Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all! Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious. But if their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their fullness bring!

I am talking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I make much of my ministry in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them. For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead? If the part of the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy; if the root is holy, so are the branches.

If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, do not boast over those branches. If you do, consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you. You will say then, "Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in." Granted. But they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but be afraid. For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either.

Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off. And if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. After all, if you were cut out of an olive tree that is wild by nature, and contrary to nature were grafted into a cultivated olive tree, how much more readily will these, the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree!

The rejection of Jesus by the Jews was a tragedy, but remember that God is able to make all things work together for good. The rejection by the Jews opened a door for the Gentiles. In Exodus 19:6, God had called the Jews to be a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” They were chosen for the purpose of reconciling the rest of the world to God. They were to be his ambassadors to the Gentiles. They had stubbornly failed to achieve that purpose. Thus God chose one from among them – Jesus – to fulfill that purpose. They rejected even him. Their rejection of him brought about the fulfillment of their purpose as a nation. It opened a floodgate for the Gentiles to enter the kingdom. God was able to take their stubbornness and use it for his purpose.

There is yet another “twist to this plot.” The fact that the Gentiles are coming into the Kingdom will have the effect of making the Jews envious. Their envy will eventually turn their hearts back to the one that they rejected. Ultimately many of them have found or will find salvation because they want to get back what has been taken from them and given to the Gentiles. This should not be a matter of concern to the Gentiles; they are not being displaced. If the transgression of the Jews brought benefit to the Gentiles, how much more benefit will their salvation bring! There is room at the banquet table for all!

Paul admonishes the Gentiles to remember their place. They are wild branches who have grafted into the natural root. They must not despise the root. The Gentiles must look upon the Jewish nation as the root which brings them nourishment. It is true that many of the natural branches were broken off to make room for them, but the branches were not broken off because the Gentiles were better. They were broken off because they were unfaithful. If they become faithful again they will be grafted back in (i.e. Jews who return to Jesus in faith will be incorporated into the Kingdom). On the other side, if the Jews – the natural branches – were broken off because of unfaithfulness, how much more will the Gentiles – the unnatural branches – be broken off if they become unfaithful. The Gentiles are sustained by their faithfulness and should not get cocky because God has brought them into the Kingdom. It is to people in the church that Paul says “Otherwise, you also will be cut off.” This is another passage that is difficult to reconcile with the doctrine of “once saved, always saved.”

Thus far Paul has established:

- Individual Jews have been cut out of the Kingdom because of unfaithfulness – because of their unwillingness to “confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead”
- Individual Gentiles have been incorporated into the Kingdom because of their faithfulness – their confession of and faith in Jesus.
- God has not rejected the entire nation of Jews nor has he “grafted in” the entire set of Gentiles. It is done on an individual basis.
- Jews and Gentiles in the church have a symbiotic relationship. To the Gentile, the Jew is the root, providing nourishment. To the Jew, the Gentile is the branch, bearing fruit. They need each other. When they live in harmony they please God and fulfill his purpose.
- Whether Jew or Gentile, our inclusion in the Kingdom is a product of our confession of and faith in Jesus.

Then, in Romans 11:25-27, Paul drops a minor bombshell that has generated debate in the church for twenty centuries:

I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written:

“The deliverer will come from Zion;
he will turn godlessness away from Jacob.

And this is my covenant with them
when I take away their sins.”

“All Israel will be saved.” What does that mean? Many have taken this to mean that there is no point in evangelizing Jews because God intends to save all of them, anyway. They do not need to come to Jesus and will be saved under the old covenant. If you read Romans 11:26 in complete isolation, it might be possible to reach that conclusion, but it runs contrary to everything that Paul has said in the book thus far.

Paul has gone to great lengths in the book to show that salvation is received through Jesus only. There is no special deal for the Jews. So what does it mean to say that “all Israel will be saved?” Note that Paul says “Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in.” This has eschatological overtones. Reconciling this with the message of the rest of the book of Romans (and indeed of the entire Bible), it seems to suggest that there will be a massive conversion of Jews in the last days. It will occur after “the full number of the Gentiles has come in.”

My belief is that “until the full number of the Gentiles has come in” is a reference to the rapture of the church. If the church were taken from the earth, it would trigger a number of events among those left behind. One of those events would be a tremendous number of Jews turning to Jesus. Many Jews today – particularly those living in Israel – are familiar with the words of the New Testament. Many of them make their livings taking Christian tourists to locations significant in the New Testament. They can tell their visitors what the New Testament says about these places – the events that happened and the words that were spoken there. They know these things intellectually. They have not put their faith in Jesus, however. When the rapture occurs, they will rethink that strategy quickly. They will become a catalyst for massive revival and regeneration among the Jewish people. This is what it means for all Israel to be saved. When they finally put their trust in the savior, then “The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob.”

Through God’s grace, the Gentiles have been included into the Kingdom, but only because they have trusted Jesus in faith and sought the righteousness that he provides. Through God’s grace, Jews who have been cut off may be brought back into the Kingdom the same way. Those who refuse the righteousness provided by Jesus will incur the wrath that is due the unrighteous.

5.12 Living Sacrifices

Romans 12

Having established the need to walk in submission to Jesus, Paul devotes chapter 12 of Romans to explain how to do that. He begins with Romans 12:1-2:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.

A “living sacrifice” is a radical idea. To the Jews, a sacrifice was something that was killed. Its blood was drained and consecrated to God. Its flesh was burned or consumed. If that is what a sacrifice is, then how could there be such a thing as a living sacrifice?

The fact is that a living sacrifice is more pleasing and acceptable to God than a dead one. Since time began, he has wanted fellowship with his creation. Being a living sacrifice has the same idea as Galatians 2:20, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.” A living sacrifice dies to self and lets Christ live through him. He does not conform to this world. He is “transformed by the renewing of your mind.” When we cease to soak our minds in the things of the flesh (and the squalor of the fallen world) and fix our minds on God then we are transformed. This means spending time in the Word and in conversation with the Author. Only when our minds are attuned to his mind will we know and be able to experience his will.

There are two predominant themes pulsing throughout Scripture:

- God cares how we relate to him.
- God cares how we relate to each other.

Paul has just addressed the former. He now turns to the latter. The rest of the chapter tells the other side of being living sacrifices and being submitted completely through God. Being submitted to God means being submitted to one another. Romans 12:3-8 says:

For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you. Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man’s gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully.

God knitted the Body of Christ together just like he does human bodies. The body has many parts with many different functions. The body works correctly only when each part performs its created function. If one day your eyes decided that hearing was a much more important function than seeing and started trying to be ears, then you may or may not end up with better hearing but you would be blind. Eyes were meant to be eyes and the body is better off if they eyes will keep on seeing. In like manner, God gave us different functions in the church. We were not all created to be prophets. We were not all created to be pastors. Who would want to be part of a church where everyone was trying to be pastor and nobody would confess to having the gift of helps?

In this passage, Paul gives the first list of spiritual gifts that we find in the New Testament. This topic will be discussed more fully in the discussion of 1 Corinthians 12.

Finding your niche in the body and fulfilling it to the best of your ability is a way of submitting to the common good. None of us should feel inferior because we may have been called to a “subordinate role.” Furthermore none of us should “think of ourselves more highly” because we have been given a more visible position.

In Romans 12:9-13, Paul continues the theme of relating to those in the church:

Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

Then in Romans 12:14-21 he talks about how we should relate to those who may not be in the church:

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. On the contrary:

"If your enemy is hungry, feed him;
if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.
In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

We are to be people living in harmony with the world. We are to model Kingdom behavior for the world. We are not to be people of vengeance. Paul quotes Deuteronomy 32:35 which reminds us that vengeance belongs to God and not to us. Then he quotes Proverbs 25:21-22, which tells to feed our enemies in their hunger and to give them drink when they are thirsty. These are Old Testament ideas, but had been forgotten by the Jews.

Our natural tendency is to respond to evil with evil. It feels good to get even. The problem is that we create a cycle of evil. If evil is repaid with evil then it never stops. We are to overcome evil with good. Good is the only thing that can triumph over evil. It is the only thing that can stop the cycle.

So what do we know thus far?

- The fall of man has left the world in a depraved condition. (Romans 1:18-32)
- Every one of us has sinned and joined in the depravity. (Romans 3:23)
- Because of the choices we have made, we fall under the wrath and judgment of God. (Romans 2:1-16). The price of sin is death. (Romans 6:23)
- The Law was given to help us understand God's requirements and to make us understand that we fall short. The Law was unable to bring us into righteousness, however. (Romans 7:7-25)
- The Jews were the recipients of the Law, but they stand condemned by it along with the Gentiles. Jews and Gentiles alike need a righteousness that they cannot achieve on their own. (Romans 9-11)
- Salvation and justification begins by believing in our hearts that God raised Jesus from the dead and by confessing him with our mouths. (Romans 10:9-10).

- Making that initial step does not stop the spiritual struggles. A spiritual battle will rage within us. Romans 7:21-24 says: “So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God’s law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?”
- Victory in the spiritual battle is achieved by becoming a “living sacrifice.” We must submit our minds and our wills to God and to one another. As best we can we are to live at harmony and in service to the church and to the world around us. (Romans 12)

5.13 Submission to Government

Romans 13

Part of living in submission to one another involves being submitted to human government. Paul addresses this issue in Romans 13. Remember that he was writing this book to people who were citizens or subjects of Rome. The Caesars and their governments were anything but godly in the way that they administered. It may have been natural for the Christians in the Roman church to question the necessity of submitting to such a government.

Paul reminds the people, however, that there are no governments in place other than those which God has established. Whether or not the government recognizes the authority of God, God is still in control over them and they serve his purpose. Rebellion against government is rebellion against a God-established authority.

Governments serve the purpose of keeping peace. Peace is desirable to believers. Therefore we should serve as examples of doing right, earning the respect of government rather than challenging it and earning its wrath.

For these reasons, it is also proper to pay taxes. Taxes support the government, which again is a God-ordained institution.

Paul’s teaching in this matter is identical to that of Jesus. Jesus was submitted to the government of his time. Jesus paid taxes and encouraged other people to pay their taxes to Rome. Still, Jesus and Paul both ended up on the wrong side of government. Both were arrested and imprisoned (and eventually executed) by an unrighteous government for no good reason. Their only crime was being sold out to God.

Submission to government can be a very hard issue. Does this mean quiet submission? Does it mean blind obedience? How do we submit to a government that engages in practices that we perceive to be contrary to the teachings of Jesus? It is a question as fresh as today’s headlines.

I grew up during the Vietnam era. Many of my peers would not register for the draft because of opposition to the war. Although many of them were simply caught up in the rebellious spirit of the 1960s, some of them also opposed the war on religious grounds. They genuinely believed that participation in this war was contrary to God’s will. Still, how did they reconcile their unwillingness to submit to government with Romans 13?

Today similar questions rage, but on a different front. There is widespread concern in the Christian community over the government not only permitting but subsidizing such things as abortions, pornographic “art,” etc. By paying our taxes we are supporting these activities. Are we to submit to the government in this matter, perhaps violating our consciences in the process?

There are more extreme examples in other cultures. In some countries, churches are illegal. Christianity is forbidden by law. Where do we draw the line on submission to government?

Remember that Romans 12:18 says, "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." Translating that into chapter 13, we understand "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, submit to government." As a general rule we are to submit to government. There are times when this is not possible. We see an example of this in the life of Daniel.

Daniel was submitted to government, so much so in fact that he became a high-ranking government official. He lived a blameless life. Other officials in the government were jealous of him and tried to find some reason to accuse him of wrongdoing. He did nothing wrong. He was completely submitted to a government that was by no means righteous. He submitted because it pleased God for him to do so. His rivals were determined to get him in trouble. The only way that they could do so was to pass a law forbidding his worship of God. There he drew the line. To this Daniel would not submit, even when faced with the penalty of the lion's den.

The point of all of this is that the norm for us should be submission to government. There can reach a point, however, when we must violate that. That point may be different for different ones of us. If we live first in submission to the Holy Spirit and second in submission to government, then there will be no confusion.

Jesus gave us a method that will equip us to deal with unrighteous governments the vast majority of the time. Be the salt of the earth. Flavor your world. Government will never be the key to stopping pornography. That will only go away when the hearts of men are changed. Bombing abortion clinics will never put an end to abortion. Changing people's hearts is the only key to change. Many more of us will be called to be salt and light than will ever be called to be martyrs. All of us are called to change the world. We are to change the world by loving the people that God created. Romans 13:8-10 says:

Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law. The commandments, "Do not commit adultery," "Do not murder," "Do not steal," "Do not covet," and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: "Love your neighbor as yourself."⁹ Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.

In the last part of chapter 13, Paul turns his thoughts a bit. He admonishes the people to focus on the task of being salt and light because the end is near. We may look back on this and question Paul's perception. This was written over 1900 years ago. Paul was wrong about the end being near, right? Yes and no. Yes, the end did not come soon after the letter was written. Still, Paul was right. The end is always near. We are to live in a state of imminent expectation. What he wrote in Romans 13:11-14 is as pertinent to us as it was to the Roman church.

And do this, understanding the present time. The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature.

⁹ Leviticus 19:18

5.14 Unity and Support in the Church

Romans 14:1-15:12

This section has a great deal in common with 1 Corinthians 8. Paul seems to have had the same problem in the Roman and in the Corinthian church. There were certain issues dividing the church membership.

A problem for many Christians at this time was whether or not it was permissible to eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols. One might wonder why this was such a big deal. When they went to the supermarket, why couldn't they just go over to the "Non-Sacrificial" counter and buy their beef and poultry there?

The problem is that there were no supermarkets. There was not a great deal of selection available. Quite often the only meat that could be bought was meat that had come from a sacrifice to an idol. Not eating meat sacrificed to an idol meant not eating meat.

To some who came into Christianity from pagan religions (who used to worship these idols) it would be unthinkable to eat this meat. They were trying to distance themselves from any association with the idols and eating this meat would have been a problem for them.

To others in the church, this was nothing more than perfectly good meat. The idols meant nothing to them and never had. The fact that the meat had been involved in a sacrifice was irrelevant. They saw no reason to forego eating meat and didn't care one way or another what was going on at the local pagan temple.

This might not have been an issue if these people had not been involved in each other's lives. The church was a community, however. The members spent a great deal of time together. They were in conflict over this and other issues.

In this chapter we see references to conflict over which day should be set aside for worship. We know that at some point in the first century the church transitioned from worshipping on Saturday to worshipping on Sunday. We gather from the text that this was not entirely a peaceful transition. Some felt convicted that they should continue to observe the Jewish Sabbath and others wanted to observe Sunday – the day of the resurrection and the day of Pentecost.

What is Paul's feeling about these conflicts?

He calls the church to maturity. In a nutshell he is telling them, "Grow up!" He makes several points:

- First of all, Paul says that he sees nothing wrong with eating meat that has been sacrificed to idols.
- He says that each man's duty is to follow his own conscience. If eating meat that has been sacrificed to idols makes you feel like you are doing something wrong, then that feeling is probably coming from the Holy Spirit. When the Holy Spirit moves in, he begins remodeling his new home. Over time he cleans out the dirty corners. Each of our lives is in a different stage of remodeling. Right now, he may be working on me to free me of influences of former idol worship in my life. If that is the case, he really might be telling me to avoid meat sacrificed to idols. He may not be working on that issue in you. Furthermore, a year from now this may no longer be an issue with me. My responsibility is to follow the leading that I have right now.

- Do not assume that the Holy Spirit is telling everyone else what he is telling you. If you feel it is wrong to eat meat, then don't eat it. Don't try to impose it on others. Each one should follow his own conscience and not impose that on others.

Obviously this does not apply to every situation in life. There are many issues that are black and white for believers. Adultery is wrong. Period. Murder is wrong. Period. Stealing is wrong. Period. Paul is talking about the "gray issues," issues where we have no clear-cut right/wrong instruction in Scripture. If we see our brother in clear-cut sin such as stealing, then the church has a responsibility to discipline.

In the gray areas we are called to maturity. Part of that maturity, however, is to deal in love with those who are not yet mature. Romans 14:15 says:

If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died.

We have freedom in Christ to follow our own leadings. Your freedom, however, does not take precedence over someone else's salvation. In the case of the meat, for instance, if there is someone in the church who (because of his or her immaturity in Christ) is so bothered by your eating of meat that he might leave the church, then you have no business eating meat. Love is the overriding concern and the loving thing to do is to defer to the weakness of your brother.

So what does any of this have to do with us? How often do we go to the grocery store and find meat which has been sacrificed to idols? Probably never. These divisions have merely taken a different form for us. Consider these questions:

- Is it OK for Christians to drink alcoholic beverages?
- Should Christians take their children "trick or treating" on Halloween?
- Should Christians tell their children the truth about Santa Claus?
- Is it OK for a church to host an Easter egg hunt?

The list continues. Even the question of whether we should worship on Saturday or Sunday still divides some in the church (hence the existence of the Seventh-Day Whatever churches). Romans 14 speaks to all of these questions.

I was one of those bah-humbug parents who did not take the kids out to "trick or treat" and who did not do the Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny thing. Like many Christians, there was a time when it never occurred to me that there might be an issue with any of these things. In my early "zeal for Christ" days, when my time and my mind were saturated by Christian TV and radio and whatever was new at the Christian bookstore, I became convinced that I had no business participating in these observances. So I didn't. That was right. If my conscience at that time told me not to do it then I needed to avoid it. In my immaturity, however, I assumed that God wanted me to convince everyone else in the world that they should not observe these, either. I bought Gospel tracts to hand out to people who came to our door at Halloween (which is not really a bad idea). I made sure that everyone at church knew of my recent enlightenment and urged them to join me in my exalted spiritual position. Ironically, as Paul points out, my zeal to bring everyone up to my superior level was actually motivated out of immaturity rather than superiority.

I still do not observe these. For me they are still not right. I do it quietly these days, however. I do not do Santa Claus. I have no issue with people who do. If the Bible said "Thou Shalt Not Do Santa Claus" then I would try to convince other people not to do it. But it doesn't.

The concepts in this section have had more serious ramifications on the church than Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny, however. Consider the issue of baptism. Church splits have occurred over this issue. Some feel that baptism is for believers only; others baptize infants. In days gone by, the proponents of believer's baptism believed it so strongly that (under considerable persecution) they split off and formed a new church so that they could practice baptism according to the dictates of their conscience. If the church had been mature enough to let them follow the leading of their conscience, then the split may not have occurred. Baptism is just one example, however. The church has suffered many schisms over similar issues. It is important for us to realize, however, that the things that we have in common are more important than those which divide us. We should be free to follow our individual leadings of the Holy Spirit but still be unified as the Body of Christ.

The point of all of this is that we should be united in diversity. Love and concern should be our uniting theme. Each of us should put the welfare of others ahead of our own. Romans 15:5-6 says:

May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

When we accept and care for one another, it will be apparent to the world around us. It is a testimony to the God who unites us and it will bring him praise and glory. When the church is a body that cares for its own, then people will be drawn to it. We will not have to go around knocking on doors to bring people into the church. They will come knocking on ours.

5.15 Paul's Intentions to Visit Rome

Romans 15:13-33

In this section, Paul begins to bring the letter to a close. In Romans 15:18-22 he says:

I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me in leading the Gentiles to obey God by what I have said and done – by the power of signs and miracles, through the power of the Spirit. So from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ. It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else's foundation. Rather, as it is written:

“Those who were not told about him will see,
and those who have not heard will understand.”¹⁰

This is why I have often been hindered from coming to you.

There are several interesting points in this passage. First of all, Paul's method of teaching people about the Kingdom of God is the same as that of Jesus – proclamation accompanied by demonstration. Paul told people about the Kingdom of God and then demonstrated its power through signs and miracles, empowered by the Holy Spirit. This is how we were meant to do it – still.

This passage also reveals a bit of personal information about Paul. His desire was to plant where nobody else had already gone. He liked being a pioneer for Jesus. He preferred to break

¹⁰ Isaiah 52:15

new ground rather than build on someone else's foundation. He felt that he was called to fulfill Isaiah 52:15, which he quotes in the passage.

He also indicates that this call on his life had prevented him from visiting Rome on prior occasions. Obviously a church already existed in Rome (or he would not be writing a letter to it). Although he wanted to go and visit them because of their strategic importance, he felt that a higher priority for him was to go to new areas.

In the following verses, he indicates that there are no new areas to which he is being called with any urgency. He now feels free to come to Rome. He tells them that he is planning to visit them on his way to Spain (another new area, no doubt). Before making that trip, however, he plans to go to Jerusalem. He has collected contributions from the churches in Macedonia and Achaia for the care of the church in Jerusalem. This is in response to the prophecy of Agabus in Acts 11. We know from the history in Acts that he did go to Jerusalem, was arrested, and did eventually come to Rome – in chains. He says in Romans 15:29,

I know that when I come to you, I will come in the full measure of the blessing of Christ.

Even though he arrived in chains, this was still true.

5.16 Conclusion, Greetings, and Benediction

Romans 16

Chapter 16 of Romans is a conclusion. In it Paul greets many people by name – twenty-seven to be precise. In no other letter does he include a personal greeting to so many people. It is ironic that this is being sent to a church that he never visited.

We know almost nothing about these people. Other than Aquila and Priscilla, only one is (probably) mentioned once elsewhere in Scripture. Mark 15:21 says:

A certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus, was passing by on his way in from the country, and they forced him to carry the cross.

Simon of Cyrene, who carried the cross of Jesus to the crucifixion, seems to have the father of Rufus, who is greeted in the letter. Although they might be two different people with the same name, it is likely a reference to the same person. Apparently Simon's short involvement with Jesus was enough to make a difference in him and in his family.

In the NIV, Romans 16:1 refers to Phoebe, "a servant of the church." The Greek would probably be better translated as "deaconess." In reality a deacon or deaconess is a servant of the church, but if it is a title that we give to men then we probably ought to let Phoebe keep her title as well. The passage commends her to the church at Rome, which indicates that she is not part of the Roman church. It may well be that she was the messenger who carried the letter to Rome.

Romans 16:3 indicates that Priscilla and Aquila are living in Rome and that a church is meeting in their home.

Andronicus and Junias are identified as relatives of Paul who have been imprisoned with him. Herodion is identified as another relative of Paul

After greeting all of these individuals, Paul urges the people to hold true to the teachings they have received, avoid divisions in the church, and avoid those who would deceive them and lead

them into falsehood. He wants them to be “wise about what is good and innocent about what is evil” (Romans 16:19). It still sounds like good counsel.

Several of Paul’s companions join in signing the letter. Timothy is the first. Lucius, Jason, and Sospater are identified as his relatives. Tertius seems to be the scribe, but he also includes his greeting. Three other men, Gaius, Erastus, and Quartus sign the letter as well. The New Testament in other places does mention men named Lucius (Acts 13:1), Jason (Acts 17:6-9), Erastus (Acts 19:22, 2 Timothy 4:20), and Gaius (Acts 19:29, Acts 20:4, 1 Corinthians 1:17, 3 John 1), but it is difficult to tell for sure whether these are the same as the men who signed this letter.

Paul concludes with a benediction in Romans 16:25-27:

Now to him who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey him – to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen.

With this Paul closes what may be the most important document ever written. The book of Romans has inspired thousands upon thousands of pages of commentary. It has given birth to sermons, shaped doctrines, brought people to salvation, reshaped torn lives, renewed strength, given hope, resolved conflict, righted wrongs, challenged, inspired, and uplifted. I could spend the rest of my life trying to become the things it challenges me to be. When I fail, I find a tremendous ally in Paul, the “wretched man” who struggles just like me, and stands beside me encouraging me to focus on the future glory. And I join him in saying “to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ!” Thank you, God for Romans.

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