



Romans 1–8

Prepared by Allen Browne

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**RIVERVIEW
CHURCH**

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1 God's people in Rome (Romans 1:1-17)

This term and next, we're meditating on Paul's letter to the Christians of Rome.

Before we begin, I'd like you to take a moment to write your answer to two questions. This is just for your benefit. At the end of the course, we'll ask the same questions again, and you'll have a record of how you answered at the start.

1. What is the gospel?

.....

2. How do we respond to the gospel?

.....

Okay, thank you.

To be honest, I'm a bit scared to teach Romans, because this book has divided the church for 500 years. That's tragic, because Romans is a call to unite us. God did not send his Son to divide us, but to put humanity back together in Christ. May God bring us together in Christ as we hear his heart in this letter.

1.1 Orientation to Romans

The Reformation

In the early 1500s, a Roman Catholic priest named Martin Luther was hard at work in Germany. He was doing what all priests did: hearing confessions, assigning penance that people should do for their absolution, and sacrificing Christ again in the Mass so he could offer them the body of Christ for their forgiveness.¹

But Luther didn't feel forgiven. The rituals highlighted everyone's guilt, and Luther struggled with a guilty conscience, a constant feeling of condemnation. Like others, Luther was using the Latin translation of the Bible (Vulgate). It said, "Do penance." He was doing that, but still felt guilty. Eventually he got a copy of the New Testament in its original language (Greek). It didn't say, "Do penance." It said, "Repent." *Metanoeō* means to reorient, change your mind, turn around and go the other way.

Reading Romans, Luther realized no one could be saved by doing the works assigned by the church. He realized that it's God who saves and not the church, that salvation comes by faith alone, and not by doing works. Martin Luther wrote:

Good works can make no one righteous, and as the man must be first righteous before he can do any good work, it is most manifest, that it is faith alone in the mere mercy of God through Christ in his word, that fully and gloriously justifies and saves the person; and that no work, no Christian law whatever, is necessary for a man unto salvation.²

¹ See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* IV, xviii, 14.

² Martin Luther, "Concerning Christian Liberty" in *Select Works of Martin Luther* translated by Henry Cole, vol. I (London: T. Bensley, 1826), 30–31.

In his commentary on Romans, Luther wrote:

Faith comes by the hearing of the Gospel, or word of God; by which Christ is preached as having died, having been buried and being risen again, for us; as he shews chapters 3, 4, and 10. Therefore the whole of justification is of God.³

Justification by faith, through God's grace, not works! The Reformers hoped this definition of the gospel would reform the church. But Catholicism treated the Reformers as a threat to its authority. They held inquisitions into the heretics, killing many who would not recant their views. The church was divided rather than reformed.

There have been attempts to bridge the gap. The Second Vatican Council (1964) launched a dialogue between Catholics and Lutherans. But the church today is divided into 45,000 denominations.

Can we reverse this damage to Christ's church? We can't if we start from entrenched positions. Our best chance is to re-read Romans for what it meant to the people who first received it. Ironically, the letter was calling them into one shared life in Christ.

Why this letter to these people?

Put yourself in their shoes if you want to understand what someone is thinking, feeling and saying. So, who were these people?



"The Lands of the Roman Empire" in *Understanding Biblical Kingdoms & Empires*, (Carta Jerusalem, 2010), 35.

³ Martin Luther, "Preface to the Epistle of Paul to the Romans" in *Select Works*, Vol 1, 205.

All these years later, we're reading their mail. If we know something of who they were and why they needed to hear these things, we'll make better sense of the letter.

Who was the author? (Romans 1:1)

Who was the letter to? (Romans 1:7)

Who was the scribe? (Romans 16:22)

Who delivered it to the recipients? (Romans 16:1-2)

We know a surprising amount about these people. We know many of them by name:

Romans 16:1-7 (NIV)

¹ I commend to you our sister **Phoebe**, a deacon of the church in Cenchreae. ² I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of his people and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been the benefactor of many people, including me.

³ Greet **Priscilla and Aquila**, my co-workers in Christ Jesus. ⁴ They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them. ⁵ Greet also **the church that meets at their house**. Greet my dear friend **Epenetus**, who was the first convert to Christ in the province of Asia.

⁶ Greet **Mary**, who worked very hard for you.

⁷ Greet **Andronicus and Junia**, my fellow Jews who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was.

The church in Rome met in people's homes. We can see five of these groups:

1. the church that met in Priscilla and Aquilla's house (verse 5)
2. the household of Aristobulus (verse 10)
3. the household of Narcissus (verse 11)
4. the brothers and sisters who met with the group named in verse 14.
5. the Lord's people who met with those named in verse 15.

A handful of house churches is not many in a city of a million people. Scot McKnight estimates:

We can guess there were fewer than two hundred and probably closer to one hundred Jesus followers in Rome at the time of this letter.⁴

The names tell us about the demographics of the church. **Women** played key roles:

- Phoebe delivered Paul's letter to each home-church, reading it out loud, and speaking for Paul when people asked questions or needed an explanation.
- Priscilla was Paul's *co-worker* (verse 3).
- Junia (a feminine name) was an *apostle*, an outstanding *apostle* (verse 7).
- Many other women are named, e.g. Mary, Tryphaena, Tryphosa, Persis, Rufus' mother, Julia, Nereus' sister, and the sisters in the household of Asyncritus.

⁴ Scot McKnight, *Reading Romans Backwards: A Gospel of Peace in the Midst of Empire* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019), 12.

There are Jewish names: Aquila, Junia, Andronicus, and Mary. There are Greek and Latin names. The church in Rome (like others in the first century) was a mix of **Jews** who recognized Jesus as Messiah and **gentiles** who had also come to faith in Christ.

But there was conflict between Jews and gentiles in Rome. We see it in Paul's other letters too (e.g. Galatians), but there was an additional factor in Rome. It's the reason Paul had already met Priscilla and Aquilla in Corinth:

Acts 18:1-3 (NIV)

¹ After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth.

² There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, **because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome**. Paul went to see them, ³ and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them.

Claudius was the Roman Emperor (AD 41–54). In AD 49, he issued an edict expelling Jews from Rome. Imagine the impact this had on the church. With their knowledge of the Torah, Jews had been key people in the churches. After they were expelled, gentiles took responsibility and ran the churches without them.

Eventually, the Jews were able to return to Rome, but gentiles were now running the churches in ways that did not match Jewish culture or tradition. The Jew/gentile conflict in the Roman society became an issue in the churches too.

It's probably around AD 56 when Paul wrote this letter from Corinth. It's just a few years since the death of Claudius when it was safe for Jews to return. **Paul wrote this letter to address the Jew/gentile conflict.**

Douglas Moo explains:

Jewish Christians are now coming back into the Christian community that they've founded to find themselves in the minority, to find themselves no longer in the positions of leadership perhaps. All of this explains why the Roman Christian community that Paul addresses in Romans is divided. In Romans 14–15 Paul, as we see, will be talking about the strong and the weak probably, basically a division between Jewish and Gentile Christians in Rome. ... It is no surprise to find Romans focusing quite a lot of attention on this question of the relationship of Jew and Gentile in the early Christian church.⁵

Romans is about the gospel, the good news of what God has done in Christ. But the gospel isn't merely an idea to be believed; it's a transformation to be lived.

Scot McKnight says:

Romans is about theology, but it isn't mere theology—it isn't abstract theology. If you will, the theology of Romans is about a way of life, about lived theology. Romans advocates for a *via vitae*.⁶

The gospel brings us all together as a reconciled community:

⁵ Douglas J. Moo, *NT331 Book Study: Paul's Letter to the Romans*, (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2014).

⁶ Scot McKnight, *Reading Romans Backwards* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019), xiv.

- Romans 1–11 explains how our faithful heavenly sovereign did right by his earthly realm, resolving our unfaithfulness compassionately in Christ.
- Romans 12–16 calls us to respond in faithfulness towards God, embodying the way of love towards each other, living the life his Spirit has recreated in us.

Everything in the first eleven chapters is in the “therefore” at the hinge of the book:

Romans 12:1 (NIV)

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.

What does this way of life look like? It's relational. We respond to God giving himself to us in Christ by giving ourselves to him. That restores not only our relationship with God but also our relationships with each other as humans under God. Together, we form Christ's body, the corporate expression of God's love on earth (Romans 12), even though we're still living under earthly authorities (Romans 13).

But what we must not do is divide into different factions of humanity, since God has brought us together as one people in the Messiah. The letter calls us to accept each other, to serve each other in the way Christ served us:

Romans 14:1-3 (NIV)

¹ Accept the one whose faith is **weak**, without quarrelling over disputable matters. ² One person's faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. ³ The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them.

Romans 15:1-3 (NIV)

¹ We who are **strong** ought to bear with the failings of the **weak** and not to please ourselves. ² Each of us should please our neighbours for their good, to build them up. ³ For even Christ did not please himself ...

The strong are those who know they can eat anything—the gentiles who were now in charge of the church as the Jewish people returned. *The weak* are those who believe they can eat only kosher food, so they'd prefer to be vegetarian rather than buy meat at the market where it might have been offered to Roman gods when killed.

The gentiles were in the stronger position according to Paul. But the kingdom of God is not like the kingdoms where the strong dominate the weak. The strong must serve the weak because that's what Christ did (15:3). Neither group can refuse table fellowship with people God accepts (14:3).

So, here's how the book of Romans fits together:

- A. The first half (Romans 1–8) explains God's faithfulness—God doing right for everyone (Jew and gentile).
- B. The next three chapters (Romans 9–11) explain God's faithfulness to the Jewish people who have not been faithful to him, even while the message goes out to the whole world.

- C. Since God in his faithfulness has not rejected Israel or the nations, Israel and nations cannot reject each other. They must learn to do life together as the kingdom of Messiah Jesus (Romans 12–16).

At the most basic practical daily level, this comes down to who you eat with:

The instructions to the Weak and the Strong are the core of Paul's lived theology, and the aim of the entire letter. ...

Paul's biggest and best question for the Strong as well as for the Weak is this one: With whom did you dine last night? He'll press it further: Are you the Strong dining with the Weak or not? Yes or no? That's the question, and *the whole book rides on that question as the heart of lived theology*.⁷

That's where this letter is going. Knowing the destination helps us understand the road that takes us there.

Any questions about the people involved before we start reading their letter?

1.2 Opening the letter (1:1-17)

Letters in the first century began by identifying the writer, and then greeting the recipients. That was often followed by a prayer or a wish for their well-being. Then came the reason for the letter.⁸

Paul follows that pattern as he starts the letter:

- The writer's identity: verses 1-6
- Greeting the recipients: verse 7
- The prayer/wish for them: verses 8-15
- The message of the letter: verses 16-17.

Ready to start the letter?

a) The writer (1:1-6)

Romans 1:1 (NIV)

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God ...

Who was **Paul**? He was born with a Jewish name (Saul), but he uses his Greco-Roman name (Paul) because that's who God has called him to.



Fragment of an ancient papyrus letter in Greek.
<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/251788>

⁷ Scot McKnight, *Reading Romans Backwards: A Gospel of Peace in the Midst of Empire* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019), 15, 41.

⁸ For a full analysis of how this letter uses the rhetoric of Greco-Roman society, see Ben Witherington III, *Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004).

He's **an employee** (literally “slave”) of **Christ Jesus**. *Christos* in Greek (like *Messiah* in Hebrew), meant “anointed.” Paul writes to Rome as the agent of another government: one that God established by raising up a descendant of King David and putting him in power (verses 4-5). That's a controversial claim, especially in a letter addressed to the heart of Caesar's Empire. You could be arrested for that.

Apostle means someone sent on a mission. Jesus was an apostle sent by his Father (Hebrews 3:1), and he sent twelve ambassadors to proclaim and enact the kingdom of God that was being restored to earth in him. He realized he was sending them out like sheep among wolves because governors and kings view his message a threat to their power (Matthew 10:16-20). That's the calling Paul received too:

Acts 9:15-16 (NIV)

¹⁵ The Lord said ..., “This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel.

¹⁶ I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.”

Regardless of the danger, Paul writes to Rome because he has been *set apart for God's gospel*. So, ... what is “God's gospel”?

A “gospel” (*euangelion*) was a good-news proclamation of a significant event such as a victory in battle or the reign of a new leader. Several cities had inscriptions that described Caesar Augustus' arrival as *good news* for the people under his reign:

The so-called Priene Inscription, now housed in the Berlin Museum, is one of several versions of a bilingual (Greek and Latin) calendar inscription promulgated in Asia Minor in celebration of the birthday of Augustus in 9 B.C. ...

The inscription says ... that it seemed good to the Greeks of Asia to give thanks for providence sending Augustus as a saviour (*sōtēr*) and that his appearance (*epiphanein*) surpassed expectations, since the birthday of the god (*tou theou*) was the beginning of the good news (*euangelia*) for the world. ...

Resonance with the wording at the beginning of Mark's Gospel and the opening section of Romans cannot be missed.⁹

As Romans, Paul's audience was familiar with Caesar's claim to be “good news.” He was their *saviour*—saving the world from pirates on the sea, bandits on the roads, and invading barbarians. He was *the son of a god* because the Senate deified his father.

But what was *God's gospel*? Its roots are Jewish, not Roman:

Romans 1:2-3 (NIV)

² the gospel he [God] promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures ³ regarding his Son, who as to his earthly life was a descendant of David ...

The Jewish Scriptures tell the story of God's kingship over the earth. The nations went away from the LORD, so God promised Abraham a nation under God's reign (Genesis).

⁹ Stanley E. Porter, “Inscriptions and Papyri: Greco-Roman,” in *Dictionary of New Testament Background* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 533.

That nation was born when God rescued Jacob's family from slavery to Pharaoh, establishing them under the LORD's reign through the Sinai covenant (Exodus).

The LORD anointed David's descendants to reign on earth with the authority of their Father in the heavens (2 Samuel 7:14-16; Psalm 2:7). But David's dynasty fell (2 Kings 25), leaving God's people under the reign of brute force like the rest of the world.

That's when God proclaimed the gospel ahead of time through his prophets:

Isaiah 40:9-10; 52:7 (NIV)

40 ⁹ You who bring **good news** to Zion, go up on a high mountain.
You who bring **good news** to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout
... say to the towns of Judah, "Here is your God!" ¹⁰ See, the Sovereign
LORD comes with power, and he rules with a mighty arm.

52 ⁷ How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring
good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings,
who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, "Your God reigns!"

God's *gospel* was his promise to reign again through his anointed, a son of David:

Jeremiah 23:5 (NIV)

"The days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will raise up for
David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely ..."

Ezekiel 37:24 (NIV)

"My servant David will be king over them, and they will all have one
shepherd."

Amos 9:11 (NIV)

"In that day I will restore David's fallen shelter—I will repair its broken
walls and restore its ruins— and will rebuild it as it used to be."

God's gospel is his good-news proclamation that Jesus is his anointed king (Christ). As a physical descendant of King David, Jesus is the Son with the authority of his Father in the heavens to reign on earth (verse 3).

But how did Jesus become king when "the king of the Jews" was put to death by Caesar's leader in Jerusalem (Pontius Pilate)? This is astounding:

Romans 1:4 (NIV)

... and who through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God
in power by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord.

God's gospel proclamation made his anointed (*Jesus Christ*) our ruler (*our Lord*). That proclamation was enacted when his Father in the heavens raised up his Son out of the brutality and death that human rulers gave him. The breath (Spirit) of God entered his dead body and he became a living being—the firstborn from the dead, the head over all of creation.

Are there echoes of Genesis 2:7 in this verse? Humanity began when *the LORD God formed a man out of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life*. But that man delivered death to humanity, a reign of death that Christ undoes (Romans 5:12-19). The cleansing Spirit of God breathed in Christ's deceased body the

breath of life, raising him out of the dust of the ground. The Spirit of holiness imparts life to all who are raised to life in him, thereby cleansing creation (Romans 8:11-21).

The scope of God's gospel proclamation extends beyond what the Jewish prophets declared. God's proclamation that his Christ is our Lord covers the nations (*gentiles*):

Romans 1:5 (NIV)

Through him we received grace and apostleship to call all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith for his name's sake.

To this point, we've heard what God has done. God's gospel proclaimed his Anointed as our Lord; God's Holy Spirit raised God's Son from tomb to throne. Now we learn that God's generosity (grace) sent Paul and the other apostles to echo God's gospel proclamation to all the nations of the earth.

God's gospel calls for a response. It calls all nations to obedience to the heavenly throne. Obedience is the consequence of trusting his leadership. Faith is allegiance to a person, not merely believing some points of doctrine. The faith that brings obedience is a loyalty that honours his name.¹⁰

Romans 1:6 (NIV)

And you also are among those Gentiles who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.

And this brings us back to Paul's relationship with his audience. While Paul knows some of these people, he's never been to Rome. He's introduced himself to them with the longest introduction in any of his letters: a single sentence of 93 Greek words, at a time when the average papyrus letter was only 87 words long.¹¹

Paul's entire identity is as a messenger of the God of Israel who has proclaimed his Anointed as Lord of all peoples, even the city Caesar claims to rule. And miraculously, the cleansing Spirit of God has already begun to bring the people of Rome under the leadership of King Jesus.

The recipients (1:7)

Having identified the writer, the letter tells us who it's addressed to:

Romans 1:7 (NIV)

To **all** in Rome who are **loved by God** and **called to be his holy people**:
Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

Some of these Christians in Rome were Jewish. Through *the Holy Scriptures* (verse 2) they understood themselves to be:

- *loved by God* as his chosen people (Deuteronomy 4:37; 7:6; 14:2; 33:12 etc).
- *called to be his holy people* (Exodus 19:5-6; Leviticus 11:44-45; 19:2, 26 etc).

Paul redefined those terms by applying them to **all in Rome**. Gentiles too are *called to belong to Jesus Christ* (verse 6). Gentiles too are *loved by God*, incorporated into

¹⁰ Matthew W. Bates, *Salvation by Allegiance Alone: Rethinking Faith, Works, and the Gospel of Jesus the King* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017)

¹¹ Craig S. Keener, *Romans*, New Covenant Commentary Series (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009), 1.

God's holy people by God's gospel—his proclamation that his Messiah is Lord (*the Lord Jesus Christ*). Gentiles too are *called to be his holy people*, the kingdom obedient to the king through loyalty (faith[fulness]) to him (verse 5).

Grace and *peace* are not idle greetings.

Grace is the generosity of God to a world where Israel and the nations ceased to live as his kingdom. God's generosity to us all in Christ faithfully fulfils God's promises to Israel and expands the kingdom to incorporate the nations.

Peace is the result of God's gospel proclamation. The war is over. In a world that *did not know the way of peace* (Romans 3:17), God *made peace through our Lord Jesus Christ* (5:1). That's why we're called to *live at peace with everyone, as far as it depends on us* (12:18). The kingdom under God's leadership lives with *righteousness, peace and joy through the Holy Spirit* (14:17). As we embody the gospel God decreed for us, *the God of peace will crush the enemy under our feet* (16:20).

The whole letter expands the theme of how all people (Jew and gentile) live together as the kingdom of Messiah Jesus:

- What God has done in Christ restores creation (Romans 1–8).
- God's faithfulness ultimately overcomes the unfaithfulness of his people (Romans 9–11).
- Living under Christ's leadership means we cannot turn away from each other even when we disagree (Romans 12–16).

In other words, God's gospel shapes the recipients of this letter into a single multi-national community in the leadership of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Prayer/wish (1:8-15)

Paul rejoices that God has people in Rome who place their *trust* in Jesus as God's *Christ*, his anointed ruler:

Romans 1:8 (NIV)

First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you,
because your faith is being reported all over the world.

Their *faith* is their allegiance to Christ as king. People at the heart of Caesar's empire are giving their loyalty to Messiah Jesus. That's remarkable, so remarkable that everywhere Paul goes as he travels through the empire (the known world), he hears people remarking on it.

This is how God makes himself known. God is invisible; humans are the visible image of God. Paul's gratitude is that God is making himself known across the empire in their reliance on the leadership of God's Christ.

Faith is a keyword in Romans. We heard it in verse 5. We hear it again in verse 13, and three more times in verse 17. We'll hear it 40 times in Romans, and nearly half of those references are in Chapters 3–4. Let's talk about what it means.

For us, *faith* can be about what we believe—whether we believe in the creeds or the dogma of the Church. Some people speak of “justification by faith” as if it means that God will treat us as right if we believe in the right doctrines.

But when Paul wrote about *your faith*, the object of their faith was not a doctrine but a person. Faith is trust in Jesus as God's Christ. Faith is loyalty to God's Christ as our Lord. There's an *obedience that comes from faith* (verse 5) because faith means giving him our allegiance. When we place our faith in Jesus' leadership, we live as his kingdom, a people who are faithful to him.

The word Paul uses (*pistis*) can mean "faith" and "faithfulness." For example:

Romans 3:3 (NIV)

What if some were unfaithful? [*apistia*]? Will their unfaithfulness nullify God's faithfulness [*pistis*]?

The question of God's *pistis* is not about what doctrines God believes. It's about whether God remains **faithful** to his commitment when his people violate the covenant with their unfaithfulness. In the face of human unfaithfulness, God remains faithful.

Since *pistis* means both faith and faithfulness, I like to retain the ambiguity by translating it as "faith[fulness]."

Astoundingly, these Romans have given their allegiance to Jesus Christ. The whole world was talking about his name as a result:

Romans 1:9-12 (NIV)

⁹ God, whom I serve in my spirit in preaching **the gospel of his Son**, is my witness how constantly I remember you ¹⁰ in my prayers at all times; and I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you.

¹¹ I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong—¹² that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith. ¹³ I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that I planned many times to come to you (but have been prevented from doing so until now) in order that I might have a harvest among you, just as I have had among the other Gentiles.

The *gospel* defines what Paul does every day. In verse 1, it was *the gospel of God*, God's good news proclamation that his Son is now in power because God raised him from the dead. *The gospel of his Son* (verse 9) is the same message: the good news that the Son of the heavenly sovereign has been raised up to reign over all the peoples of the earth.

Paul was sent (an apostle) to announce the good news of the authority of God's Son. In line with his call to proclaim Jesus' name to *the gentiles and their kings* (Acts 9:15), he especially wanted to proclaim this in Rome, the seat of power over the whole world as they knew it (Acts 19:21). Eventually Paul got there by appealing to Caesar's court (Acts 25:8-12; 28:14-16). He wanted to call Caesar to recognize King Jesus as God's anointed ruler over the world (Acts 28:14-31).

That hasn't happened yet as Paul writes this letter. That's why this *slave of Messiah Jesus* (verse 1) keeps asking his Master to *open the way*. He'd love to *impart a spiritual empowerment* to help them make this gospel proclamation too (verse 11). The outcome he hopes for is *mutually encouragement in each other's faith*, where *faith* means their mutual allegiance to the Messiah (verse 12).

Romans 1:13 (KJV)

¹³ Now I would not have you ignorant, brethren, that oftentimes I purposed to come unto you, (but was *let* hitherto,) that I might have some fruit among you also, even as among other Gentiles.

I grew up reading the King James Version. This verse is an example of why I use more recent translations. In 1611 when the KJV was translated, the word *let* meant prevented. If someone *let* me do something as a child, I was permitted to do it. The English word reversed its meaning in 500 years. There's nothing magical about the KJV. Paul did not use KJV English; he wrote in Greek. Use a translation that makes the meaning clear for you. I find "prevented from doing so" (NIV) to be much clearer than "let hitherto" (KJV).

Gentiles is the final word of verse 13. It's the Greek word for nations: *ethnos*. For Jews, Israel was God's nation, and everyone else was the nations. In the Greco-Roman world it was Romans versus barbarians, or Greeks versus non-Greeks (verse 14). In the 2002 movie *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, the father of the bride says, "There are two kinds of people in the world: Greeks, and those who wish they were Greeks." It's not just the Jewish people who divide the world up into them and us.

Paul's view of Rome is that it's made up of people of *the nations*—people who worship other gods and don't recognize God's anointed as ruler of the world. That's why he wants to announce God's gospel there, God's good news concerning his Son.

Romans 1:14-15 (NIV)

¹⁴ I am obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish. ¹⁵ That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are in Rome.

With philosophers like Aristotle and Plato, Greeks viewed themselves as *wise* and people outside their culture as *foolish*. They treated Paul as *a babbler* promoting something incomprehensible (Acts 17:18). But as the servant sent by the King of all people, Paul felt an obligation to proclaim the gospel of Jesus' kingship to all people.

This is why the Jew/gentile distinction cannot divide the church. This is why Paul's letter to the Romans insists that the Messiah's people represent a world united under Jesus' leadership by sitting at table together: the Jews who'd been God's nation in Old Testament times, and the nations who had dominated them. The weak and the strong must sit at table together and share their lives because God's gospel has made his Son Lord of all. That's the point of this letter.

Message

Verses 16 and 17 are the message of the letter:

Romans 1:16-17 (NIV)

¹⁶ For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. ¹⁷ For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith." [Habakkuk 2:4]

The keywords of the letter are all here: gospel, salvation, righteousness (justification) and faith[fulness], and what all of this means for the Jew/gentile relationship. This is the essence of the letter.

But why does Paul say he's *not ashamed of the gospel*? He alluded to the Greek's view that this message is foolish (verse 14, compare 1 Corinthians 1:18-25). It's also a crazy message to try to promote in Rome: "You're trying to tell me that a dead man—someone Caesar put to death through his agents in Jerusalem—is the true ruler of the world that Caesar rules?"

Caesar's wars were legendary. There was no question that Caesar was in power; he killed anyone mad enough to fight him. The whole city of Rome was testament to Caesar's power. Paul identifies with how God's people were made to feel in Caesar's city as they promoted their "shameful" message of a crucified king.

So Paul sets the example. He's *not ashamed of the good news* that God's man is ruling the world because *the power of God* is not exercised like the power of Caesar.

Caesar's power was brutal, subjugating nations by force like the beasts who ruled the empires before him (Daniel 7:1-7). That's not how God uses his power. God's goal is not to enslave the world but to save it. God saves all who give him their allegiance, their trust. That's what verse 16 says.

The good news of Messiah Jesus rescues the Jewish people, those who'd been God's people for centuries, though crushed by the nations. The good news rescues the people of other nations who are also being called to give their allegiance to Messiah Jesus. The war is over: the conflicts of nations fighting each other for power and fighting for control of God's nation cease as Christ receives their loyalty (faith).

The gospel *calls all the nations into the obedience that comes from allegiance to the Messiah's name* (verse 5). The nations are also called to belong to Messiah Jesus (verse 6). God has extended the boundaries of his chosen and holy people to *all who are loved by God and called his holy people* (verse 7).

That's why the Jewish and gentile believers in Rome must together offer themselves to God as living sacrifices, the community expressing God's love (Romans 12), even while they live under Caesar's government (Romans 13). They're called to live together as a community where the weak and the strong love each other as the expression of the Messiah's love (Romans 14-15). They're to embody God's rescue of all peoples through the gospel, his proclamation of Jesus Christ as Lord of all.

1.3 So what?

We've provided some background on who the recipients were and why Paul said these things to these people. After we digest what it meant to them in their setting, we're in the position to discuss what it means to us in our setting.

We also live in a world where rulers fight wars for power. We've seen Israel fighting neighbours to the north (Syria) and the south (Gaza) in response to attacks on its people. We've seen Ukraine at war with Russia and wars in other places. We've heard the United States president siding with Israel against the Palestinians, blaming

Ukraine for its war with Russia, threatening to take Greenland, Panama and Canada into his realm.

Should Christians support Russia's aggression, as the Russian Orthodox Church does? Or should we support the war efforts of Ukraine as the Orthodox Church of Ukraine does? Should we support Netanyahu's killing of an estimated 50,000 Palestinians in response to the aggression against Israel? Should we support the Republican Party in the United States as many Evangelicals do? Should we oppose the Communist Party that makes life difficult for Christians and other minorities in China? Should the church in Australia support one of the big political parties or create a "Christian" party? What is it that God has called us to do in our time?

To help answer that question, count the number of times Paul mentions Caesar in Romans 1. We've talked about Caesar because that was the reality of life for everyone in Rome, including the church. But Paul never directly mentions Caesar: he spends zero effort opposing Caesar's government, because that won't change the world. The only thing that changes the world is people—whether Jewish or gentile—placing their trust in the leadership of God's Anointed.

Claudius is never named, and his title (Caesar) is never mentioned. Jesus is named, and his title (Messiah) is mentioned five times (verses 1, 4, 6, 7, 8). We're not called to fight against Caesar, for there's no future in that. We're called to promote *Jesus* as God's *Anointed*, calling everyone to recognize him as *Lord*, for he alone is the salvation of the world.

The gospel of Messiah Jesus as God's anointed leader for the world is the only path that leads to peace on earth. Giving him our allegiance (faith) is the only path that leads to people doing right (righteousness).

What does it look like for us to live as the people of the Messiah today?

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In preparation for next week, read the rest of Romans 1 and Chapter 2. We'll speak further about how righteousness comes from faith[fulness] to God's Messiah.

2 Human unfaithfulness (Romans 1:17–2:29)

Last time we met the Christians in Rome and considered why Paul sent this letter to them. We read the opening section where Paul identified himself as *a servant of King Jesus*, commissioned to deliver *God's gospel*—the good news that God raised up his Son, enthroning him in power over all people (verses 1-4). This good news calls the nations to obey King Jesus out of allegiance to him. Whether our family background is Jewish or gentile, we're all God's chosen and holy people in the Messiah (verses 5-7).

Any questions on last week before we continue?

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2.1 Faithfulness and righteousness (Romans 1:16-17)

After discussing his relationship with his audience (verses 8-15), Paul gives them the essence of the whole letter:

Romans 1:16-17 (NIV)

¹⁶ For I am not ashamed of the **gospel**, because it is the power of God that brings **salvation** to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. ¹⁷ For in the **gospel** the **righteousness** of God is revealed—a **righteousness** that is by **faith** from first to last, just as it is written: "The **righteous** will live by **faith**."

The keywords of the letter are all here: **gospel**, **salvation**, **faith**, and **righteous**.

Reading these verses feels a bit like seeing a container ship sail into Fremantle harbour. Each word holds an entire container load of freight—freight Paul unpacks in the coming chapters.

But the words are not isolated containers. When unpacked, the freight these words carry fits together to build something bigger than any of them. The relationship between *gospel*, *salvation*, *faith* and *righteousness* is what matters, because we live in that relationship.



We discussed the meaning of *gospel* and *salvation*:

- **Gospel:** God's good news decree that enthroned his Son as our Lord by raising him from the dead.
- **Salvation:** the rescue of a world dominated by sin and death, into God's reign in Christ.

The other two words have a range of meanings:

- **Faith** (*pistis*) is more than **having** faith; it's **keeping** faith as well. It's *faith and faithfulness*: our *faith* in Christ and our *faithfulness* to Christ. That's important because Paul uses this word for God's *faithfulness* to us too (Romans 3:3).
- **Righteous** (*dikaios*) is also a relational word. It can mean **being** right or **doing** right. Being in right relationship, you do right by the other. It's also translated *just*, since doing what's right is acting justly (doing justice).

The relationship between *faith* and *righteousness* was at the heart of the Reformation. For Catholics, if people of the *Faith* had not *done right*, they must make amends. They must **confess** to a priest, who'd prescribe **penance**. Doing penance showed contrition (sorrow for your sin) and helped to make up for the wrong you'd done. The church gave you **absolution**, declaring you were no longer guilty of that offence.

Martin Luther said no! Forgiveness does not come from any works we do, including penance. We don't make up for being bad by doing good. A righteous status cannot be earned. It's a gift from God on the basis of faith, not works. We're justified (declared righteous) by faith alone.

For some Catholics today, it's obvious that God justifies by faith, that we never earn our standing with God. Others still talk about merit: Mary and the saints have a surplus of good over bad, so we can draw on their righteousness to make up for our deficit.

When Paul wrote Romans, he was not in that bunfight. Paul was not fighting against the church's abuse of power in the Middle Ages as Luther was. Yes, Scripture applies to the struggles of all generations, but this wasn't what Paul was addressing.

So what was Paul saying about the relationship between faith[fulness] (*pistis*) and righteousness/justification (*dikaios*)? In verse 17 Paul quotes a text that uses these words. It provides the background for how Paul was thinking.

Habakkuk complained that God needed to confront the unfaithfulness of his people since the wicked were overpowering the righteous (Habakkuk 1:4). The LORD agreed: he said he'd hand his people over to Babylon (1:6). Habakkuk complained that having Babylon in charge didn't solve anything: they were even worse (1:12-17).

Habakkuk 2:2-5 (ESV)

² And the LORD answered me: "Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so he may run who reads it. ...

⁴ "Behold, his [Babylon's] soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him, but **the righteous shall live by his faith**.

⁵ ... His greed is as wide as Sheol; like death he has never enough. He gathers for himself all nations and collects as his own all peoples."

Yes, Babylon was full of twisted pride (verse 4a), driven by the power of death to take all nations into its grasp (verse 5). That's why the LORD told Habakkuk to issue a very plain warning, so anyone who read it could escape (verse 2). Anyone who *believed* it would do the *right* thing: *run*!

Habakkuk 2:4 is all about the connection between faith[fulness] and right[eousness]. As a Jewish translation says, *The righteous man is rewarded with life for his fidelity*.¹² They'd save their **life** by doing the **right** thing **out of faith[fulness] to God**, while those who were doing the wrong thing (not faithful to God) would lose their lives.

There are two sides to our relationship with God, a mirror between heaven and earth. Out of faith[fulness] toward us, God did right in providing Christ to rescue us. Out of faith[fulness] to God, we're called to do right by him as we come to life in Christ.

What God has done in Christ is good news for us all, the Jewish people and the nations (Romans 1:1-15). The gospel is the reign of God (the power of God) restored to the earth in the resurrected Christ. It rescues all who respond with faith[fulness] to God's authority. It saves the world, for out of *faith[fulness]* to God we are enabled to do *right*.

What God has done for us in Christ is how he calls us to respond:

- Out of *faith[fulness]* to us, God does *right*.
- Out of *faith[fulness]* to God, we do *right*.

The point of Romans 1–3 is that, even though humans have done wrong by God, God does right by us. God-doing-right (the righteousness of God) is demonstrated in providing Christ to reconcile us to himself. This gospel calls us to faith[fulness] to God. Out of faith[fulness] to God, we then do right because we're set right. As we'll see next week, that's the joyful culmination of this entire section (Romans 3:21-26).

So, here's an expanded interpretation of the summary statement of the letter:

Romans 1:17 (expanded)

For in the gospel [the good news that God has raised up his Son as our Lord],
the righteousness of God [God doing right by a world that did not do right by him]
is revealed [so we now see in Christ how God uses his power to rescue us],
from faith to faith [starting with of God's faithfulness to us, leading to our faithfulness to God],
as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith" [God always intended to set things right through a relationship of faithfulness, as Scripture says].

What are your thoughts on the relationship between *faith[fulness]* and *right[eousness]*?

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¹² Jewish Publication Society, *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1985), Hab 2:4.

2.2 The unfaithfulness of the nations (Romans 1:18-32)

Paul affirmed the righteousness of God revealed in Christ (i.e. God doing right out of his faithfulness to humanity). Now Paul turns to our side of the relationship: humanity's unfaithfulness means we have not done right by God. That's true of both the nations (1:18-32) and also the nation to whom God revealed his Law (2:1–3:20).

Even before God called Abraham (Genesis 12), kingdoms were trying to take God's power into human hands (Genesis 11) because the nations had gone their own way (Genesis 10). That's the reason there's so much war and injustice in the world:

Romans 1:18-20 (NIV)

¹⁸ The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, ¹⁹ since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. ²⁰ 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 people are without excuse.

The problem is *godlessness*, a lack of respect for God's authority. Without faithful commitment to God, people don't do right. *Adikia* (translated *wickedness* in verse 18) literally means "not right" (the opposite of *dikaïos*). When people don't do right, they're not being true to God (verse 18).

The suppressed truth is that **God is known in human beings**. That's who we are: creatures who image God. In the likeness of his divine nature God created us, entrusting to us his enduring dominion over the earth (Genesis 1:26-28). In suppressing this glorious display of God's majesty (Psalm 8), humanity falls short of the glory of God we were destined to carry (Romans 3:23).

God is angry that we're preventing creation from experiencing his management as he intends. Our relationships with each other and with creation are marred with conflict and death, preoccupied with our own might instead of partnering with God (Genesis 3–6). We reflect a failure of divine management, for which there's no excuse.

And once people don't recognize God's image in themselves, they create images of imagined gods from things that are not the Creator but merely part of the creation:

Romans 1:21-23 (NIV)

²¹ 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. ²² Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools ²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.

For the Jewish believers at Rome, these were the primary commandments of their heritage: no other gods, no images of created things (Exodus 20:1-4).

Greek believers were just as proud of their heritage, the wisdom of philosophers like Aristotle and Plato. But they've missed the whole point of being human if they don't recognize our vocation to image God to creation instead of creating futile images. It's foolish to worship images that are not God.



Household gods of the Roman world

What gods do Australians bow to when we don't recognize God?

God's gospel—the good news that he raised his Son from tomb to throne—undoes the wisdom of the powerful who worship themselves or other gods. That's the point Paul made when he wrote to Corinth in southern Greece (1 Corinthians 1:18-25).

Unfaithfulness to God is not a private religious error. It's a failure to be human, a misuse of the bodies God gave us:

Romans 1:24-27 (NIV)

²⁴ Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another.

²⁵ They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.

²⁶ Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. ²⁷ In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error.

Our society teaches, "Your body belongs to you." If we own ourselves, non-consensual sex is wrong, but anything consenting adults do is okay. But if you believe that everything in creation—including your body—belongs to God, that's not okay.

Our bodies are temples where God lives. Your body does not belong to you; God decides what you can do with it. As Paul told the Greeks at Corinth:

1 Corinthians 6:19-20 (NIV)

¹⁹ Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own;

²⁰ you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your bodies.

But if you see yourself as a god who owns your own body, you can do whatever you like with it—using as many sex partners as you want. Faithfulness to one partner means nothing. And while you're at it, why limit yourself to only half the people in the world? Faithfulness to God as the Creator who made us male and female means nothing to those who see themselves as self-owned.

And that's the point. It's out of faithfulness (*pistis*) to God that we do right (*dikaios*), and it's out of unfaithfulness (*apistia*) to God that humanity does wrong (*adikia*).

The problem begins with discarding the knowledge of God:

Romans 1:28-32 (NIV)

²⁸ Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done. ²⁹ 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, ³⁰ slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; ³¹ they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy. ³² 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.

In discarding God, we make ourselves the source of truth and justice. We will then do whatever it takes to get what we want. "Whatever it takes" includes things God outlaws, so we end up *filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, and malice* (verse 29 ESV).

Remember Cain? By rejecting the one who has the knowledge of good and evil, Cain opened himself up to being ruled by another power:

Genesis 4:6-7 (NIV)

⁶ Then the LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? ⁷ If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it."

Cain became Exhibit A of someone *full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness*. (verse 29). He was the first to go out from the presence of God, to build a city that relied on violence and murder to get justice (Genesis 4:16-24). All the evils named in verses 30-32 spring from rejecting God's authority and therefore ceasing to reflect God's heart.

Your thoughts on what Romans 1:18-32 says about the nations?

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2.3 The unfaithfulness of God's nation (Romans 2)

Who is Paul addressing?

The judge (2:1-11)

Remember, the pastoral issue of this letter is the conflict between the Jewish Christians who started the house churches in Rome and the gentile Christians who had been running the churches since Emperor Claudius expelled the Jews.

Now Jews were returning to Rome, and the Jewish Christians were not happy with how gentiles had been running the church—without the proper respect for and compliance with Torah. They were thrilled to hear Paul denouncing the gentiles in the same way we read in other Jewish literature such as [Wisdom of Solomon 14:22-26](#).

But Paul has not been speaking **to** gentiles; he's been speaking **about** them. Everything he said was in the third person: *they, them*. Now in Romans 2:1, Paul switches to the second person (*you*), and we realize who he's speaking to:

Romans 2:1 (NIV)

You, therefore, have no excuse, **you** who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point **you** judge another, **you** are condemning **yourself**, because **you** who pass judgment do the same things.

Ouch! The whole diatribe against gentiles was a setup! He's addressing Jewish Christians who do not see gentiles as *loved by God and called his holy people* (1:7). They sit in judgement of gentiles. In doing so, they are also dethroning God, for judgement belongs to God alone:

Romans 2:2-3 (NIV)

² Now we know that God's judgment against those who do such things is based on truth. ³ So when you, a mere human being, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God's judgment?

Paul is calling the Jewish Christians to climb off their own thrones and leave judgement to God. The fact that we do not judge as God does is evidence that we do not have God's heart. In setting ourselves up as judges, we're showing contempt for the true judge and his purposes:

Romans 2:4 (NIV)

Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?

God's judgement is unlike human judgement. When Cain killed Abel, the family wanted Cain to get what he had given, but God—the true judge—would not give them satisfaction. He protected Cain from their vengeance (Genesis 4:15). Cain did not repent, but God gave him another chance, just as he did before the crime (4:6-7).

When the nations went their way, God did not force them into submission the way human rulers do (Genesis 10). God initiated a project to rescue them (Genesis 12:1-3).

The way God rules does not satisfy human judgement. God's heart is to turn us around and lead us home.

But let's not set ourselves up as judges of the Jewish people. For 2000 years, the church has been just as judgemental. Our judgementalism—our determination to take over and rule others out when they don't agree with our view—is the problem God has to deal with.

Romans 2:5-6 (NIV)

⁵ But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed.

⁶ God "will repay each person according to what they have done."

The quotation comes from Psalm 62 where God's Anointed faced people who *intended to topple God from his lofty place* (verse 4). David concluded:

Psalm 62:11-12 (NIV)

¹¹ One thing God has spoken, two things I have heard:

"Power belongs to you, God, ¹² and with you, Lord, is unfailing love"; and, "You reward everyone according to what they have done."

God reigns with the perfect combination of justice and faithful covenant love (*hě·sěd*). In the end, everyone is evaluated on the basis of whether they have done what God called them to do. And God calls for *the obedience that comes from faith[fulness]* (1:5). God does right out of his faithfulness to us, and God rewards with life those who do right out of faith[fulness] to him (1:17).

Romans 2:7-8 (NIV)

⁷ To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honour and immortality, he will give eternal life. ⁸ But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger.

God is pleased with those who live for his honour, leaving judgement to his majestic throne. God is angry with those who reject the truth of God's authority, following the path of evil that has tried to take God's power into our hands since the beginning.

Paul's rant against gentiles began by declaring God's anger against them (1:18). Old Testament prophets sometimes denounced the nations (e.g. Isaiah 14–23), but their message primarily revealed God's displeasure with his own nation. God's judgement has always started with the people called to represent his authority:

Romans 2:9-11 (NIV)

⁹ There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile; ¹⁰ but glory, honour and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.

¹¹ For God does not show favouritism.

It would be foolish for Jewish Christians at Rome to set themselves up as judges of the gentiles. If they want to be first, God will judge them first, just like the Messiah said (Matthew 7:1-2).

It's not that God will judge Jews more harshly than gentiles, or vice versa. God does not show favour to one group over another (verse 11). All—Jewish and gentile—are *loved by God and called to be his holy people* (1:7). All are priests, called to offer their bodies to God as a living sacrifice (12:1). The goal of this letter is that the gentiles—along with the Jewish people who had the prophetic writings before them—might come into *the obedience that comes from faith[fulness]* to the only wise ruler of all peoples through Messiah Jesus (Romans 16:25-27). God gave his revelation to Israel first, but God does not show favouritism for Jews over gentiles.

Returning judgement to God (2:12-16)

Paul reinforces the point that judgement belongs in God's hands (not ours) and God's judgement is not based on partiality to either group:

Romans 2:12-13 (NIV)

¹² All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law.

¹³ 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.

Israel received the Torah (Law) that revealed God's will for them. Although people of the other nations did not have the Torah, they still had some awareness of right and wrong, so God judges them on what they did know.

Romans 2:14-15 (NIV)

¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts sometimes accusing them and at other times even defending them.

The concept of *righteous* gentiles is foreign to Christian theology. Haven't we all sinned (as Paul says in the next chapter)? Don't we all need God's salvation through Christ? Yes, but when we leave judgement to God we're not in the business of condemning people in order to get them saved. That's what the church has often done, but it's not the gospel according to Jesus and it's not Paul's message.

Pharaoh's daughter might be an example of a gentile *doing right*. Her father ordered the death of the Hebrew boys, but she rescued baby Moses when she found him hidden in a basket in the reeds of the Nile (Exodus 2:5-10). While conscience is an imperfect guide, she knew what was right, and she did it.

In the grounds of the World Holocaust Remembrance Centre today there's a garden to honour



"Garden of the Righteous" at World Holocaust Remembrance Centre (Yad Vashem) in Jerusalem. Photo by Allen Browne, 2017.

people of other nations who did right by Jews when Hitler made that a crime. The “Garden of the Righteous” is a Jewish tribute to righteous gentiles.

In the end, only God knows who is righteous:

Romans 2:16 (NIV)

¹⁶ This will take place on the day when God judges people's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares.

When we judge each other, we don't know people's motives, and we don't know if they'll change their mind later. God waits until it's all clear. The only human to whom he entrusts judgement is Messiah Jesus. But even as the human judges condemned him, he prayed, “Father, forgive them” (Luke 23:34). *You therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgement on someone else* (verse 1).

Jewish unfaithfulness (2:17-28)

Paul identifies the “you” he's speaking to. It's a Jewish Christian who views themselves as part of the privileged people to whom God gave the Torah, and who feels justified in condemning gentile Christians for not living by the Torah's regulations:

Romans 2:17-24 (NIV)

¹⁷ Now you [singular], if you call yourself a Jew; if you rely on the law and boast in God; ¹⁸ if you know his will and approve of what is superior because you are instructed by the law; ¹⁹ if you are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, ²⁰ an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of little children, because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth—
²¹ you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself?
You who preach against stealing, do you steal? ²² You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? ²³ You who boast in the law, do you dishonour God by breaking the law? ²⁴ As it is written: “God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you [plural].”

The quotation in verse 24 is from Isaiah 52:5. The whole of Isaiah 40–55 makes the point Paul is making here: God called Israel to be his people, to represent him to the nations. Israel was unfaithful to God and his calling, but God remained faithful to them—saving them and reaching the nations through them. For example:

Isaiah 42:6-7, 17-19 (NIV)

⁶ “I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, ⁷ to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.
... ¹⁷ “But those who trust in idols, who say to images, ‘You are our gods,’ will be turned back in utter shame. ¹⁸ “Hear, you deaf; look, you blind, and see! ¹⁹ Who is blind but my servant, and deaf like the messenger I send? Who is blind like the one in covenant with me, blind like the servant of the LORD?”

Isaiah was speaking of the exile, when God's people were so disobedient that he handed them over to Babylon. A *blind* and *deaf* witness offers no evidence of God's sovereign authority (Isaiah 43), leaving Babylon to believe its idols were more powerful (Isaiah 46). That's how they had brought blasphemy on God's name.

Now in the first century, Jews in Rome had also dishonoured God's name. Caesar's decree to expel the Jews from Rome was politically motivated, but God's name was being blasphemed among the gentiles because of them.

Paul's point is that even though the Jewish people had all the advantages of the covenant relationship (verses 17-20), their unfaithfulness to the covenant dishonoured God's name (verses 21-24). Out of unfaithfulness to God they did wrong by God.

So, who are God's covenant people? Four boundary markers distinguished Jews from others: circumcision, observing the sabbath and priestly laws, kosher food laws, and ethnicity.¹³ For Paul, the marker of God's people is faith[fulness] to Christ which leads us to do right by God:

- a) Ethnicity no longer marks the covenant people, for in Christ *all* (Jews and gentiles) *are loved by God and called to be his holy people* (1:7).
- b) Kosher food laws cannot divide those who are in Christ (Romans 14–15).
- c) Jews and gentiles together are priests offering sacrifices to God (12:1).
- d) Circumcision is no longer the identifying mark of God's people:

Romans 2:25-29 (NIV)

²⁵ Circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you break the law, you have become as though you had not been circumcised. ²⁶ So then, if those who are not circumcised keep the law's requirements, will they not be regarded as though they were circumcised? ²⁷ The one who is not circumcised physically and yet obeys the law will condemn you who, even though you have the written code and circumcision, are a lawbreaker.

²⁸ A person is not a Jew who is one only outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. ²⁹ No, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a person's praise is not from other people, but from God.

The point of circumcision for Israel was covenant commitment. But if they were unfaithful to the covenant, circumcision was meaningless. The prophets spoke of those who were uncircumcised in heart (Jeremiah 9:26; Ezekiel 44:9).

The sign of the covenant people is no longer whether someone is physically circumcised or not. Verse 29 states what Paul will spell out in Romans 8, that the sign of the covenant people is now the Holy Spirit bringing people into God's family as sons because they share in the sonship of the Messiah. The regenerative work of the Spirit is the marker of those who are the people of God, the kingdom of the Messiah.

¹³ N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, (London: SPCK, 1992), 237-241.

2.4 So what?

That's why it was so damaging for Jewish Christians at Rome to set themselves up as judges of their gentile brothers and sisters. They were trying to overrule God. They were judging by wrong standards—the standards of the Torah covenant, rather than the standards of the new covenant established in Christ and the Spirit.

Looking back at Chapter 1, we can see how Paul's diatribe about the nations was setting up for his warning against judging in Chapter 2. Some of the phrases he used to condemn gentiles were phrases the Old Testament applied to Israel.

For example, the nations *exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images* (1:23). Israel did that too, even before they left Mount Sinai: *At Horeb they made a calf and worshiped an idol cast from metal. They exchanged their glorious God for an image of a bull, which eats grass* (Psalm 106:19-20).

Because the nations were unfaithful to God, God *handed them over* to their own desires (1:24). And that's why Israel went into exile: *Because they were unfaithful to me, I ... handed them over to their enemies* (Ezekiel 39:23).

Paul's point is judgement belongs in God's hands. Consequently, a Jew who sets himself up as the judge of gentiles is doing exactly what the gentiles have done—taking into his own hands authority that belongs to God.

So what are the implications of Romans 2 for today?

In what ways do we set ourselves up as judges of other Christians or of people we judge as “non-Christians”? What do we need to change in order to return the throne to God instead of setting ourselves as judges in his place?

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For next time, **read Romans 3**. See how faith[fulness] is the foundation for right[eousness], both in how God rescues us from our unfaithfulness and in how we respond to God:

- a) Out of unfaithfulness to God, humanity did wrong by God.
- b) Out of faithfulness to us, God did right by us in providing the Messiah.
- c) Out of faithfulness to the Messiah, humanity is set right and does right (righteousness) by God.

That's good news.

3 God's faithfulness (Romans 3)

Have you heard the phrase *justification by faith*? For some, *justification by faith* is the gospel of salvation. Justification means to be declared righteous.

But what is the connection between *faith* and *righteousness*?

And how do these words relate to *gospel* and *salvation*?

These are the keywords in Romans 3, so that's our theme this session.

But first, any questions from Romans 1–2, where Paul drew out the conflict between Jews and gentiles. Gentiles rejected God's decrees, but Jews did too. The animosity between them was damaging the church. It undermines the credibility of the gospel, since the gospel says God is bringing all people together in the Messiah's leadership.

3.1 Humanity doing wrong by God (3:1-18)

Jews or gentiles: who does God prefer? Do Jews have the advantage? Is it better to belong to the community of the circumcised? Jacob's descendants had been God's chosen people for more than 1000 years.

Do Jews have a right to feel more privileged? Paul gives two answers that disagree:

Romans 3:1-2, 9 (NIV)

¹ What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision? ² **Much in every way!** ...

⁹ What shall we conclude then? Do we have any advantage? **Not at all!**

There are many advantages to having God leading your nation.

There's no advantage if God's people don't follow his leading.

Advantages of being Jewish (3:1-8)

Romans 3:2 (NIV)

Much in every way! First of all, the Jews have been entrusted with the very words of God.

Israel became God's nation when Moses led the Hebrews out of Egypt. At Mount Sinai they heard the LORD's voice as he gave the Ten Commandments. It was terrifying:

Exodus 20:1, 18b-19 (NIV)

¹ And God spoke all these words: ... ¹⁸ They trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance ¹⁹ and said to Moses, "Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die."

It was intended to stop them turning away from God (Exodus 20:20). But what if Israel was no different to the nations? What if they formed their own god (a golden calf)? What if they refused to enter the Promised Land, to live as a nation under God?

Does their unfaithfulness make the covenant not worth the stone it was written on?

Romans 3:3 (NIV)

What if some were **unfaithful**?

Will their **unfaithfulness** nullify God's **faithfulness**?

The crucial question is: Can the covenant relationship work if one side is unfaithful?

Romans 3:3b-4 (ESV)

³ Does their **faithlessness** nullify the **faithfulness** of God?

⁴ By no means! Let God be true though every one were a liar, as it is written, "That you may be justified in your words, and prevail when you are judged." [Psalm 51:4]

Astoundingly, God's covenant faithfulness stands true even when everyone is untrue. God's faithfulness remains when every person on the human side of the relationship is unfaithful to the covenant.

So here's the connection between *faith* and *righteousness*:

- Out of his **faithful** character, God **does right** by us.
- That remains true even if every human is **unfaithful** to God, and therefore **does wrong** by God.



God remains faithful even when human unfaithfulness goes all the way to the top. King David took Uriah's wife, and arranged to have Uriah killed so he could keep her. He set the tone of unfaithfulness for the nation.

Yet God remained faithful to Israel. God sent his spokesman (Nathan) to confront the king—a dangerous task! That story is the background for the quotation in Romans 3:4:

Psalm 51:title, 4 (ESV)

A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet went to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.

⁴ Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment.

Confronted by God, David bowed to God's throne. David said God was **right** (*justified*) to call him out for what he'd done *wrong*.

So, this is how Paul connects *faith[fulness]* and *right[eousness]*:

- out of **unfaithfulness** to God, David (leader of Israel) **did wrong**, and yet,
- out of **faithfulness** to David (and Israel) God **did right** by David (and Israel).

God was justified (doing **right**) in confronting David (about doing wrong).

Why? Because God remained **faithful** when David was **unfaithful**.

This is the answer to Paul's question in verse 3: *Will their unfaithfulness nullify God's faithfulness?* The answer is no: God remains **faithful** to his people and does **right** by them, even when they are **unfaithful** to God and do **wrong** by him.

This connection between *faith[fulness]* and *right[eousness]* is foundational for where this chapter is headed (3:21-26). Out of *faith[fulness]*, God does *right[eousness]*; and out of *unfaith[fulness]*, humans do *unright[eousness]*.

This has huge implications for Israel's history. The northern tribes were **unfaithful** to God, so in his **faithfulness** God sent Elijah to confront them: "*You have abandoned the commandments of the LORD and followed the Baals*" (1 Kings 18:18).

Eventually God handed Israel over to Assyria (2 Kings 17). Why? "*Because they were unfaithful to me*" (Ezekiel 39:23). That left only Judah.

Eventually God handed Judah over to Babylon. Why? "*The people of Israel and the people of Judah have been unfaithful to me,*" declares the LORD (Jeremiah 5:11). Each time God sent a prophet to address their unfaithfulness, the prophet bore witness to God's *faithfulness* to them.

From the time of the exile (587 BC), Israel—the nation that previously had every advantage over the nations—ended up serving the nations because they'd refused to serve the LORD. Which nation they served depended on who was in power: Babylon, Persia, Greece, the Ptolemies and Seleucids, and then Rome. Instead of living as a nation under God, God's people were back where they were before the Sinai covenant, ruled by tyrants like Pharaoh instead of the LORD.

That's the question Paul asked: ***What advantage is there in being a Jew?*** (verse 1) The covenant with God gave them every advantage over the nations, but they lost that advantage and ended up serving the nations because of their unfaithfulness.

That was the tragedy of Israel's experience. "Where is your **faithfulness** to David?" they asked God (Psalm 89:49). "Have you utterly rejected us and are you angry with us beyond measure?" (Lamentations 5:22)

Paul affirms God's **faithfulness** by using David's own declaration that God did **right** by him when he did wrong by God (Psalm 51:4). The opening statement of Paul's letter affirms God's **faithfulness** to his people: God's good news, promised beforehand through the prophets, is that God has placed his Son—a physical descendant of King David—in power (Romans 1:1-5). That's the **faithfulness** of God: God doing **right** by his people, even as they in their **unfaithfulness** were doing **wrong** by God.

The answer to the question in verse 3 is a resounding, No! Israel's *unfaithfulness* does not nullify God's *faithfulness*. Now, a twisted person might calculate, "Well then, I can get away with anything. The worse I am, the more I show up how good God is."

Romans 3:5-8 (NIV)

⁵ But if our unrighteousness brings out God's righteousness more clearly, what shall we say? That God is unjust in bringing his wrath on us? (I am using a human argument.)

⁶ Certainly not! If that were so, how could God judge the world?

⁷ Someone might argue, "If my falsehood enhances God's truthfulness and so increases his glory, why am I still condemned as a sinner?"

⁸ Why not say—as some slanderously claim that we say—"Let us do evil that good may result"? Their condemnation is just!

Some people fear that preaching grace will encourage people to keep doing wrong. Presumably the person Paul had in mind is the one he addressed in the previous chapter, the one who preached condemnation as the path to overturn sin (2:1).

Paul's gospel does not promote doing wrong by God. It calls us to *faith[fulness]* to God, so it results in *doing right* by God, through the power of the Holy Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead and gives life to our mortal bodies as he lives in us (8:11).

No advantage at all (3:9-19)

If Israel had been unfaithful to God before Christ, they were unfaithful when God sent his Messiah. Handing him over to Rome, they declared, “*We have no king but Caesar*” (John 19:15). They chose to continue under the nations rather than under the king God sent them. They were under the same power that ruled the nations:

Romans 3:9 (NIV)

What shall we conclude then? Do we have any **advantage**? Not at all!
For we have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are
all under the power of sin.

The advantage they were meant to have as a people under God's reign became *no advantage* as they lived under the power of the nations who were *under the power of sin*.

We tend to think of *sin* as something I do wrong. It's more than that. Sin is a power calling us to claim *the knowledge of good and evil* for ourselves (Genesis 2:17). By rejecting God's authority, we end up ruled by Sin instead of ruled by God. Sin is more than a bad action: **Sin is a power that wants to rule God's world.**

The first time the word *sin* appears in the Bible, God was warning Cain not to let this power rule him:

“*Sin is crouching at the door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it*” (Genesis 4:7). By choosing to follow Sin rather than God, Cain left the presence of the LORD and built a city where violence ruled (Genesis 4:16-24).

After the flood, the nations went their own ways, making war to form kingdoms that were designed to bring the power of God down into human hands (Genesis 10:10; 11:4). In rejecting God's reign, the nations gave themselves to the power of Sin that was bent on taking control of God's world. The tyrant named Sin reigned through the rulers of the nations—the kings of Babylon and Tyre for example (Isaiah 14:4-14; Ezekiel 28:10-10).

Now that God has raised up his Son in power, all of us (Jew and gentile) are called to recognize God's Messiah. He is the one God sent to set the world free from the ruling power called Sin (6:12-14).

But if Jews reject God's Messiah, how are they different from gentiles? They have *no advantage at all*: like the other nations, they remain *under the power of Sin* (verse 9).

Paul refers to the Jewish Scriptures to make the point that Sin dominates all people, Jew and gentile. The reason Sin rules is that all people—Jew and gentile—turned from God's authority:



Romans 3:10-18 (NIV)¹⁰ As it is written:

“There is no one righteous,
not even one;

¹¹ there is no one who
understands; there is no one
who seeks God.

¹² All have turned away, they have
together become worthless;
there is no one who does good,
not even one.”

¹³ “Their throats are open graves;
their tongues practice deceit.”

“The poison of vipers
is on their lips.”

¹⁴ “Their mouths are full of cursing
and bitterness.”

¹⁵ “Their feet are swift to shed
blood;

¹⁶ ruin and misery mark their ways,
¹⁷ and the way of peace they do
not know.”

¹⁸ “There is no fear of God
before their eyes.”

Old Testament**Psalms 14:1b-3 || 53:1-3 (NIV)**

¹ There is no one who does good.

² The LORD looks down from
heaven on all mankind to see if
there are any who understand,
any who seek God.

³ All have turned away,
all have become corrupt;
there is no one who does good,
not even one.

Psalms 5:9b (NIV)

⁹ Their throat is an open grave;
with their tongues they tell lies.

Psalms 140:3b (NIV)

³ The poison of vipers
is on their lips.

Psalms 9:28 (Septuagint)

²⁸ Him whose curse and bitterness
and guile fill his mouth, under his
tongue are trouble and distress.

Proverbs 1:16 (NIV)

¹⁶ for their feet rush into evil,
they are swift to shed blood.

Isaiah 59:8 (NIV)

⁸ The way of peace they do not
know; ... no one who walks along
with them will know peace.

Psalms 36:1b (NIV)

¹ There is no fear of God
before their eyes.

Most of those quotations are from the Davidic king. Most of David's psalms are about his enemies, the powers that wanted to take God's people under their control. And because God's nation rejected his leadership, they did eventually fall to the nations, so that all people—Jew and gentile—were ruled by Sin.

That's why the Jewish people who had *much advantage in every way* under God's reign ended up with *no advantage at all* as Sin ruled the nations and them.

Any questions on the first half of Romans 3?

3.2 God doing right by humanity (3:19-31)

So here's God's problem. God chose Abraham to create a people that would be all he created humans to be (Genesis 12:1-3). God established his nation at Sinai, giving them the Law (Torah) that called them to be faithful to him.

But the Torah did not have the power to make Israel or the nations right with God. God never gave the Torah to the nations (though they are accountable to God), and Israel's unfaithfulness to God resulted in them doing wrong by God. What the Torah did was reveal how Israel, like the nations, served sin instead of serving God:

Romans 3:19-20 (NIV)

¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin.

The next statement is as tightly packed as a rosebud. This rosebud opens into full bloom over the next five chapters (Romans 4–8). Everything Paul said about *faith[fulness]* and *right[eousness]* has been preparing us for this:

Romans 3:21-26 (NIV)

²¹ But now apart from the law **the righteousness of God** has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. ²² **This righteousness** is given through **faith** in **Jesus Christ** to all who **believe**.

There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by **Christ Jesus**.

²⁵ God presented **Christ** as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by **faith**. He did this to demonstrate **his righteousness**, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—²⁶ he did it to demonstrate **his righteousness** at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have **faith** in **Jesus**.



Before we pick our favourite words (like *sacrifice* and *atonement*), look for the key phrases, the ones that repeat. The message is the relationship between these phrases.

What are the outer leaves of the rosebud? ***The righteousness of God*** occurs twice at the top (verses 21 and 22) and twice at the bottom (verses 25 and 26). The same root word (*dikaiois*) forms the conclusion: God ***is right*** (just) and ***makes right*** (justifies).

Within *the righteousness of God* is ***faith[fulness]***. Twice in verse 22 and again in verse 25 we find the root word (*pistis*). It's also the goal in verse 26: ***faith[fulness]***.

And at the heart of the rosebud—wrapped in *right[eousness]* and *faith[fulness]*—is the person who restores the people of earth to their heavenly sovereign.

If Sin was personified as the power trying to take over God's world, *the righteousness of God* is also presented (made visible) in a person, namely *Messiah Jesus*. He is *the righteousness of God* made known. He is *the faithfulness of God* in human form. His arrival calls us to *faith[fulness]* to him. That's how the world is *set right*.

In him, God restores the relationship between heaven and earth. Our heavenly sovereign *does right* by all the people of the earth (*Jew and gentile*) by providing his anointed leader (*Christ Jesus*) to lead us. Giving us his Christ is *God-doing-right*, the visible expression of God's *faithfulness* on earth.

Messiah Jesus is *faithful* to the heavenly throne, so he *does right* by God. He fulfils what we were designed to do but fell short of: imaging the glory of our heavenly sovereign in his earthly creation (so doing right out of faithfulness).

So it's in him that we see the faithfulness of God in visible form, the righteousness of God made manifest, *God-doing-right* for all to see.

That's literally what this text is saying:

Romans 3:19-26 (my translation)

¹⁹ We know that as much as the Torah says it says to those constituted by the Torah, so that every mouth is silenced and the whole world becomes accountable in relation to God. ²⁰ It follows that no flesh will be *made right* before him from doing Torah, for through Torah comes awareness of sin.

²¹ Now, separate from Torah, *God's righteousness* has become manifest, having received the witness of the Torah and the Prophets,

²² *God's righteousness* [made visible] through the *faithfulness* of **Messiah Jesus** into all the *faithful*. For there is no distinction, ²³ for all who offended and lack God's splendour ²⁴ are being *set right* as a gift by his generosity, through the emancipation in **Messiah Jesus**,

²⁵ whom God presented as atonement through [his] *faithfulness* in his blood, in demonstration of *his righteousness* in disregarding the offences that happened previously ²⁶ by God's clemency as a demonstration of *his righteousness* [God doing right] at the present time, showing him to be the one who *does right* and *sets right* out of **Jesus' faithfulness**.

Unfortunately, language is ambiguous. Does the phrase *pistis Yesou Christou* in verse 22 mean *faith in Jesus Christ* (NIV) or the *faithfulness of Jesus Christ* (my translation)? The same issue occurs in verses 24 and 26. Is Paul discussing our faith or his faithfulness?

Ultimately it's both, but the sequence matters. We're not made right with God by our own faith[fulness]. It's a bit late for that: humanity had turned against God (sinned) long before you were born. Humanity went wrong, and ended up enslaved to sin instead of reflecting God's glory over creation as he intended (verse 23).

So it's not about us doing right out of our faith[fulness] towards God. It's about God rescuing us, God *doing right* out of his *faithfulness* to us. The manifestation of *God-doing-right* out of his *faithfulness* arrived as a person: his anointed ruler, Messiah Jesus.

The leader God gave us *did right* out of *faithfulness* to his Father. He did this for all of us. So God's gospel (the good news that his Christ is our Lord) calls us to respond by trusting our God-appointed leader with our loyalty, that is, responding with faith[fulness] to him. God sets humanity right as we give our **trusting loyalty** to Jesus the Messiah. Our response mirrors what heaven has done for us. The sequence is:

- a) Out of his faithfulness, God did right by us (providing Messiah Jesus).
- b) Out of his faithfulness, Messiah Jesus did right for his people, setting us right.
- c) Out faithfulness to the Messiah, humanity is set right by God.

That's verse 22: *God's righteousness [was made visible] through the faithfulness of Messiah Jesus into all the faithful.*

Within the framework of these repeated phrases, so we can now understand this:

Romans 3:24-25a

We are being set right [*dikaioō*] as a gift by his generosity [*charis*], through the redemption [*apolytrōsis*] in Messiah Jesus whom God presented as atonement [*hilastērion*] through his faithfulness [*pistis*] in his blood.



Justification is acquittal, a judgement that we're in the right. Some have regarded what God does in justifying us as "legal fiction," as if his heavenly court makes a judgement about us that has no basis in reality. That's not what Paul is saying. Given our previous track record of rebellion against God that culminated in assassinating his Son, an acquittal is an unearned gift based on our heavenly sovereign's generosity (grace). But it's not just a fiction: in Messiah Jesus God is transforming us. It's a real *redemption*—returning creation to heaven's management. The earth is emancipated from the reign of sin and death, into divine governance, as the world recognizes the anointed king God gave us (Messiah Jesus).

So what does it mean to say, *God presented Messiah Jesus as atonement*?

The temple had a room devoted solely to God (the Holy of Holies). It contained a throne for God (the ark of the covenant). The lid of the ark was called the **atonement cover**. It represented the interface between God and his people. The ark contained the Law that defined the covenant people, and God sat over them, symbolically *enthroned between the cherubim* (1 Samuel 4:4; 2 Samuel 6:2; 2 Kings 19:15; 1 Chronicles 13:6; Psalms 80:1; 99:1; Isaiah 37:16). Once a year on the Day of Atonement, the high priest approached the throne to maintain the relationship between the heavenly sovereign and his people on earth (Leviticus 16).

That's what happened in the first temple anyway. When Babylon destroyed the temple, the ark of the covenant of the LORD was lost (Jeremiah 3:16). The high priests still held the Day of Atonement ceremonies, but it's not clear exactly how it worked.

In Christ, it's God who takes the initiative to restore relationship. Instead of a priest approaching God, God approaches us. Instead of a priest presenting the blood of an animal as a gift to God, God presents us with the *faithfulness* of his Messiah—God's faithfulness when the rebellion against God led to the bloodshed of the Messiah.

His *blood* is his death. Since the life was understood to be in the blood, giving his blood is giving his life. God's Messiah remained faithful—even unto death! That is who God presented to make “at-one-ment” between heaven and earth.

(The NIV introduces the word “sacrifice” in verse 25, but it's not there. *Hilastērion* is not a sacrifice; it's the lid of the ark, the atonement cover, sometimes called the mercy seat.)

The point of verse 21-26 is God's *righteousness* as the expression of his *faithfulness* to a world in rebellion. Out of faithfulness, God did right by us, setting us right in the Messiah (the faithful one). So out of faithfulness to him we do right by him. That's the gospel of God transforming the world.



3.3 So what?

Is this approach reframing how you think about the gospel of salvation?

Have you understood sin as a power seeking to rule God's world, so we fall short of the glory of God?

Have you viewed Messiah Jesus as the opposite of sin: *the righteousness of God* revealed?

Is the gospel the good proclamation that God's anointed has been raised up to reign, i.e. the expression of our heavenly sovereign's faithfulness doing right by us?

Does the gospel call us to mirror that relationship with God, i.e. out of faithfulness to him, doing right by him?

Is that what justification by faith looks like: giving our loyalty (faithfulness) to Christ, so the world is set right and does right by God?

That's not how Romans 1–3 has always been understood. Sometimes the church has taken the role of judge, as if it is our role to make people feel guilty so we can get them saved.

In the Middle Ages, Catholicism traded on making people feel sinful. Luther realized that God justifies by his grace through faith in Christ. But Luther never questioned why the church's message had become proclaiming guilt rather than gospel, i.e. God's call for people to turn and give their loyalty (faith) to the Messiah who came to power when God raised him from the dead.

At times we've reduced God's glorious gospel—his proclamation that Sin is dethroned and he has installed his Christ as our Lord—to something we can sell individuals:

- a) You are guilty, so admit you're a sinner (Romans 3:23).
- b) You deserve death for your sins, but Jesus died to forgive you (Romans 6:23).
- c) Now, pray the prayer admitting your guilt, and you will be saved (Romans 10:9).

This selective use of verses from Romans (the so-called "Roman road") is nothing more than a marketing technique. To sell anything, you:

- a) demonstrate the client's need,
- b) present your product as the solution, and
- c) close the deal.

So, what is the gospel? And how do we present it to the world? Your thoughts?

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For next time, read Romans 4–5.

4 Undoing unfaithfulness (Romans 4–5)

In the first three chapters of Romans, Paul explained how the nations went their own way, failing to recognize and live under God's authority (Romans 1). Even the nation that entered into covenant relationship with the LORD was unfaithful (Romans 2). Israel ended up under the nations—ruled by sin and death instead of the LORD.

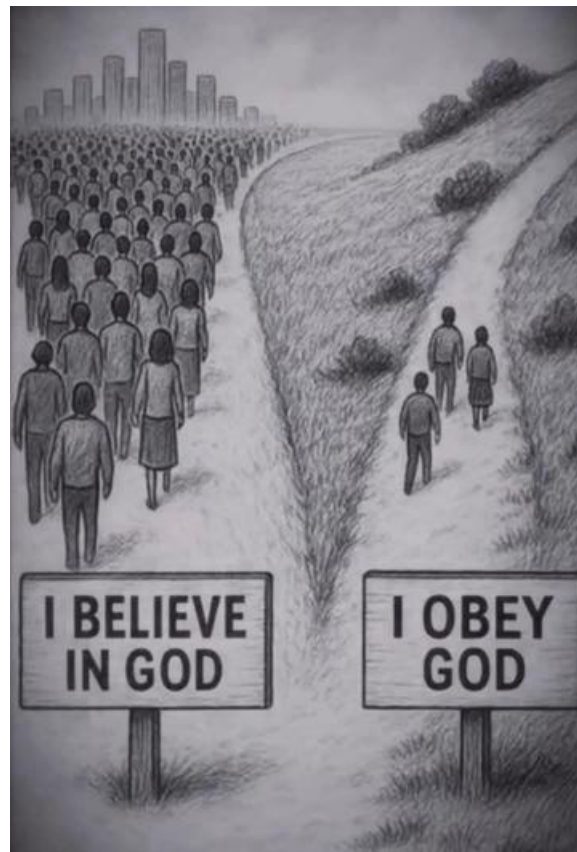
But human *unfaithfulness* did not nullify God's *faithfulness*. In Christ we saw *God-doing-right* by a world that did not do right by God. In the *faithfulness* of Jesus Christ, God is setting the world *right*. Everyone (Jew or gentile) who gives him their *faith[fulness]* is set *right* by God, empowered to do *right[eousness]*.

The gospel in Romans 3 asks us to respond to God as he responded to us:

- Out of *faith[fulness]* to his earthly realm, God did *right* by us (providing Christ),
- Out of *faith[fulness]* to him we are set *right* and do *right*.

Is that how you understand the gospel, the good news of how God saves the world in Christ? Traditionally this is called “justification by faith.” We’re emphasizing that faith is the focus, with justification following: it’s out of *faith[fulness]* that we are set *right* (justified) and consequently do right. That’s how God saves the world.

Questions or comments?



This is not what Paul means by faith. He expects “obedience from faith[fulness]” (Romans 1:5; 16:26).

Now we need to speed up, covering two chapters tonight. Romans 4–5 present the case that this is what God had always planned for his nation and the nations:

- The Jewish story started with God calling Abraham, and out of *faith[fulness]* to God, Abraham was declared *right* and did *right* (Romans 4).
- The nations come from a man who, out of *unfaithfulness* to God brought death on us all. The new Human (Jesus) undoes what Adam did: out of *faith[fulness]* to God he was raised out of death (vindicated, justified), doing *right* by the world in sharing his resurrection life with us (Romans 5).

Ready to begin Romans 4?

4.1 Abraham was faithful, so he did right (Romans 4)

Abraham's faith[fulness] is remarkable. While nations were going their own way and using war to build kingdoms that tried to take over God's world (Genesis 10–11), Abraham heard God calling him to leave the region of the Babel-builders, to go to a place where God would establish a different kind of nation (Genesis 12:1-3).

Romans 4:1-5 (NIV)

¹ What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, discovered in this matter? ² If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God.

³ What does Scripture say?

“Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” [Genesis 15:6]

⁴ Now to the one who works, wages are not credited as a gift but as an obligation. ⁵ However, to the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness.

People often serve God for reward. Many people view the gods as a means to gain prosperity, protection, and well-being. We do our religious duty to gain the approval of the gods and avoid their disapproval. Then we're disappointed when bad things happen. Has God abandoned me? Didn't I do enough to earn God's approval?

But Abraham didn't serve God for the reward he would gain. He left everything for something that he'd never see: a nation representing God in the world. God saw his faith[fulness] and responded, “Good on you, Abraham! You're doing right!”

Remember the connection between *faith[fulness]* and *right[eousness]*? Human unfaithfulness did not nullify God's faithfulness (3:3). Out of his faithfulness, our heavenly sovereign did right by the world in giving us Messiah Jesus (3:21-22). God's gospel calls us to *faith[fulness]* to his Christ, so we're *set right* and *do right* (3:26).

That's how Abraham responded when God first birthed the project that would bring God's Messiah to the Jewish people and the nations. And that's how the kingdom of God functioned in Old Testament times according to its anointed king:

Romans 4:6-8 (NIV)

⁶ David says the same thing when he speaks of the **blessedness** of the one to whom God credits **righteousness apart from works**:

⁷ “Blessed are those whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered.

⁸ Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord will never count against them.” [Psalm 32:1-2]

There is a **blessedness** in living under God's rule. It's not a blessedness you earn by doing right. It's the blessedness that flows out of a faithful relationship: out of faith[fulness] to us God did right by us (providing Jesus), so out of faith[fulness] to the Messiah we respond by doing right by him. In that blessed relationship, God does not keep a record of our wrongs; it's all about our loyalty (faith) to his Son.

So who is this *blessedness* for? When the Davidic King reigned as God's "christ" (his anointed), a foreign ruler (Queen of Sheba) could recognize it:

1 Kings 10:8-9 (NIV)

⁸ "How **happy** your people must be! How happy your officials, who continually stand before you and hear your wisdom! ⁹ Praise be to the LORD your God, who has delighted in you and placed you on the throne of Israel. Because of the LORD's eternal love for Israel, he has made you king to maintain justice and righteousness."

The blessing of God's reign was the whole point of the Abraham project:

"All the peoples of the earth will be **blessed** through you" (Genesis 12:3).

So Paul asked how far the *blessedness* of God's faithful love and justice extends. Is it only for the circumcised (the Jewish nation)? Or is the blessing of God's reign in Christ promised to the uncircumcised (the people of all nations) as well?

Romans 4:9-10 (NIV)

⁹ Is this **blessedness** only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? We have been saying that Abraham's **faith** was credited to him as **righteousness**. ¹⁰ Under what circumstances was it credited? Was it after he was circumcised, or before? It was not after, but before!

In Genesis 17, God gave Abraham circumcision as the sign of the covenant nation. But God had already declared that Abraham was *right[eous]* as a consequence of his *faith[fulness]* (Genesis 15:6). And God had already promised to extend the *blessing* of his sovereign authority to the nations (Genesis 12:3).

Abraham did not gain God's approval by being circumcised. He already had God's approval because he'd given God his loyalty (faith). God is now doing the same thing for the people who'd never been circumcised (people of other nations). God recognizes gentiles as *right* with him purely on the basis of giving their allegiance (*faith[fulness]*) to God's Anointed. God has never called them to be circumcised.

The recipients of the promise to Abraham form a new global nation in Christ, not defined by the Torah's requirements for Israel, but defined by loyalty to Christ:

Romans 4:9-25 (NIV)

¹¹ And he received circumcision as a sign, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. So then, he is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness might be credited to them. ¹² And he is then also the father of the circumcised who not only are circumcised but who also follow in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.

¹³ It was not through the law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith. ¹⁴ For if those who depend on the law are heirs, faith means nothing and the promise is worthless, ¹⁵ because the law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression.

¹⁶ Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all. ¹⁷ As it is written: "I have made you a father of many nations." [Genesis 17:5] He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed—the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not.

¹⁸ 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." [Genesis 15:5] ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, ²¹ being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised.

²² This is why "it was credited to him as righteousness." [Genesis 15:6]

²³ The words "it was credited to him" were written not for him alone,

²⁴ but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead.

²⁵ He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.

Faith[fulness] toward Christ—not Torah compliance—defines the people of God. Michael Bird (from Ridley College in Melbourne) puts it like this:

Abraham's faith proves that justification is by faith and not by works of the law, nor is it restricted to people of the law. In this way, Paul is able to drive a wedge between Israel's election and Israel's law, and instead redraws election around faith in Christ, with Abraham the case in point.¹⁴

Your thoughts on Romans 4?

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¹⁴ Michael F. Bird, *Romans*, Story of God Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 139.

4.2 How Jesus sets the world right (Romans 5)

Jesus' faithfulness sets us right (5:1-5)

Zoom out in space and time, and see the transformation God is bringing to the earth:

Romans 5:1-2 (NIV)

¹ Therefore, since we have been **justified** through **faith**, we have **peace** with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,
² through whom we have gained **access** by **faith** into this **grace** in which we now **stand**. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God.

Verse 1:

- Humanity is set right with God (*justified*)
- through giving our loyalty (*faith[fulness]*)
- to God's anointed ruler (*our Lord Jesus Christ*).
- Consequently, we—the community that trusts God's Messiah—are no longer at war with God (*we have peace with God*).

Verse 2:

- God's *grace* is his generosity, and what he gave us is his *Messiah* as our *Lord*. Through him, we've *gained access to God's grace*, by giving him our loyalty (*faith[fulness]*).
- We who recognize his Christ as our Lord now *stand* in restored relationship to God, as King and kingdom.
- So, in a world where humans have fallen short of our vocation to image God (3:23), the community in Messiah's leadership *boasts in the hope of* reflecting *the glory of God* so the people of earth can see God.

But if we lose the cosmic scope of what God is doing and make it all about me, there's a danger of sliding into triumphalism, substituting a "prosperity gospel" that's all about my health, my wealth, my victories over my problems.

That's the rebellion's "gospel." It proclaims our power. Jesus took the powerless path to overturn the powers that had taken God's world. He was rejected because of those who wanted to keep their power. He suffered and died, trusting the Father to raise him up. Anyone who tells you "Jesus suffered so we don't have to" has not understood the gospel that calls us to take up our cross and follow the Messiah on the road he took. All who follow the Messiah in a world where people are still in rebellion against God will suffer for the same reasons he did:

Romans 5:3-5 (NIV)

³ Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that **suffering** produces perseverance; ⁴ **perseverance**, character; and **character**, hope. ⁵ And **hope** does not put us to shame, because



Source: <https://visibleearth.nasa.gov/images/56600/seawifs-sunny-day-in-europe/56602>

God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit,
who has been given to us.

We boast in the hope of the glory of God (verse 2) by laying our lives down as Jesus did, by extending grace to selfish people as God did. Every time a selfish person takes advantage of us, our suffering is an opportunity to show them the heart of God who kept faithfully *persevering* with a world that was doing wrong by him (out of unfaithfulness to him).

So it's your *glory* to *suffer* for doing good! That's how God's faithful *perseverance* is developed in us. It's how God's *character* is formed in us. And God's faithful character in us is the *hope* of the world.

This *hope* is what God will ultimately achieve in Christ. As Abraham discovered, this is a multi-millennia project, a hope fulfilled over thousands of years. But that doesn't mean that we, in our own lifetime, are put to shame while we're waiting for something way in the future.

Right now, in the present, we're experiencing the transforming life that giving our faith[fulness] to the Messiah produces: *God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us* (verse 5). We are the present reality of the Christ transforming the world: the love God has given to us in the Messiah, flowing through us by his Holy Spirit. The indwelling Holy Spirit changes everything for us now, and transforms everything into Christ's leadership in the age to come.

Does that make it worthwhile following Messiah Jesus now, even when we suffer because others are still living for themselves?

Romans 5:6-8 (NIV)

⁶ You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die.

⁸ But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Why did Jesus die? It's common today to think of Jesus dying for *me*, for the list of sins I've committed. While that is a tiny part of the story, the context in Romans is a bigger, global story. The "we" is all humanity, gentile and Jew, who've been unfaithful to God (Romans 1–3). As a result of this rebellion against God, we're enslaved to the powers of Sin and Death (6:17-18). That's why *we were still powerless until the Messiah died for the ungodly* (verse 6). Paul used the word *ungodly* in 1:18 to refer to the peoples of the earth who failed to recognize and live under God's authority.

Imagine how Caesar would react if he sent his son to a rebellious city to make peace, and they killed him. Instant destruction! The city would cease to exist. "Reduce it to a ploughed field" was Emperor Hadrian's instructions regarding Jerusalem in AD 133.

But that's not the kind of ruler God is. While we were still *sinners*—rebels resisting God's authority—God demonstrates his character (*his love for us* earthly creatures) by giving us his Messiah who died *because of our sins*, i.e. our rebellion against God's authority (verse 8).

If you're familiar with Custer's last stand (the battle of Little Bighorn), you might appreciate Tom Wright's comment:

Jesus was thus taking upon himself the direct consequences, in the political and in the theological realm alike, of the failure and sin of Israel. He was dying, quite literally, for their sins. (I once saw a bumper-sticker beside an Indian reserve on the shores of the Ottawa river to the west of Montreal, declaring that 'Custer died for your sins'. That was making a very similar point.) ... Jesus was taking upon himself the direct result of the ways in which God's people had failed in their vocation.¹⁵

God's response was not to crucify the rebels. God's response was to raise up his Messiah, calling on the rebels (sinners) to give him our loyalty (faith[fulness]). Astoundingly, *in his blood*—the assassination of the Messiah—we are set right (*justified*) with God, and therefore rescued from God's just anger at the murder of his Son:

Romans 5:9 (NIV)

⁹ Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!

Justification is so much more than just a court declaration. It's being *set right* with God as our heavenly sovereign through the Messiah, so it's the reconciled relationship of King and kingdom, a people living the rescue (*saved through his life*), empowered to serve him through the Holy Spirit who forms the resurrected life of the Messiah in us. Our lives in submission to God's Messiah are therefore our boast that this is how God sets the world right:

Romans 5:10-11 (NIV)

¹⁰ For if, while 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! ¹¹ Not only is this so, but we also boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

Undoing Adam's rebellion (5:12-21)

The rest of Chapter 5 contrasts what Jesus has done with how it all went wrong in the beginning. God crowned humans with his glory, representing God's dominion over creation (Genesis 1:26-28). But by taking the knowledge of good and evil into our own hands so as to be gods in our own right (Genesis 3:5), we disconnected ourselves and creation from our true Sovereign, introducing the powers of Sin and Death. With his faithfulness to his Father, Jesus has undone what Adam did: setting us right, and restoring creation to God's authority.

Paul starts telling the story of the great reversal Christ achieved (verse 12), and gets sidetracked into a description of how this functioned for Jews and gentiles (verses 13-14). Then he resumes the contrast between Adam and Jesus (verses 15-17), so he can finally explain what Jesus has achieved for humanity (verses 18-21).

¹⁵ N. T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God* (London: SPCK, 2006), 53.

Romans 5:12-14 (NIV)

¹² Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned—

¹³ To be sure, sin was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not charged against anyone's account where there is no law.

¹⁴ 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 is a pattern of the one to come.



Adam handed creation over to evil (Sin).

Sin (as a power) entered into the world through humanity (the Hebrew word *ā-dām*). By rejecting what our heavenly sovereign commanded, humanity handed God's world over to Sin, with the consequence that Death ruled (verse 12).

For Paul's Jewish audience, *sin* meant violating God's Torah (*the law*), so he explains that the nations were also under the power of Sin, even though they did not have the Torah and God did not hold them accountable to Torah's demands (verse 13).

The Torah also tells the story of humanity operating under the power of Death. It starts with Cain, and Lamech (Genesis 4:8, 23). Violence corrupted God's world (Genesis 6:11; 9:5-6). Warriors use the power of death to build kingdoms (Genesis 10:10). They made war to try and take the land promised to Abraham (Genesis 14). So yes: *Death reigned* over the nations, even before the Torah was given at Sinai.

Since the *Human* (*Ā-dām*) betrayed his calling, God has now given us a true human (Jesus). That's what Paul means by calling Adam *the pattern of the one to come* (verse 14). Jesus had something similar in mind when he repeatedly called himself *the son of man*. As *heir of humanity*, Jesus received the authority Adam abused. Humanity's unfaithfulness handed creation over to the power of sin, but God's messiah received the authority of heaven, and through his faithfulness handed creation back to God.

The tragedy of what the original human did is therefore undone by *the gift* God has given—the new human (Jesus) who restores creation to God's reign, renewing us as the people of God in him:

Romans 5:15-17 (NIV)

¹⁵ 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! ¹⁶ Nor can **the gift** of God be compared with the result of one man's sin: The judgment followed one sin and brought condemnation, but **the gift** followed many trespasses and brought justification. ¹⁷ 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!



"The gift is not like the trespass." (Romans 5:15)

The gift of being *set right* through God's Messiah means that that we actively participate in *the reign of righteousness* since he is our king, the leader of humanity to whom we give allegiance (faith).

Adam betrayed the dominion God gave him, so all humanity has lived under sin and death. Jesus has reversed this betrayal, returning earth to God's reign for all of us:

Romans 5:18-19 (NIV)

¹⁸ Consequently, just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people, so also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all people. ¹⁹ 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.

"All" here refers to the whole of humanity: gentile and Jew. The Torah helped to highlight the rebellion that was already in progress before Sinai. So, God's gift is both a human to undo Adam's rebellion and a Messiah (anointed ruler) for the people of God: one Lord for all people:

Romans 5:20-21 (NIV)

²⁰ The law was brought in so that the trespass might increase. But where sin increased, grace increased all the more, ²¹ so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Your thoughts?

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4.3 So what?

You may have heard of the doctrine of “**original sin**.” Based largely on this passage, it teaches that every human is born as a sinner because we’re the offspring of sinners going all the way back to Adam. By AD 400, Augustine (the greatest theologian of early centuries) was arguing that babies are born as sinners destined for hell, unless they are baptized. Even today, there’s an urgency in some churches to get children baptized, because baptism is understood to remove original sin.

The doctrine of “original sin” is widely accepted, in the Reformed tradition as well as Catholicism, though from early times the Eastern Orthodox tradition never viewed things this way.

But Paul was describing how we’re all born into a world that was handed over to the powers of Sin and Death long before we born. He’s not saying that every baby is an evil person even before they do anything. It’s a very different thing to say that a child was born into slavery to an evil regime than it is to say that the child is evil.

We’re already enslaved at birth because of Adam’s betrayal. As we grow up, we know what it’s like to live in that kind of world, and we participate in the evil we were born into. Hurt people hurt people.

That’s what Christ has undone, restoring us to heaven’s reign. God’s grace is revealed in giving us his Messiah. He is the expression of God’s *grace*—a keyword in this chapter (5:2, 15, 17, 20) and the next (6:1, 14, 15).

in Jewish thought, God called Abraham to undo what Adam had done. That is the trajectory Paul takes in Romans 4. Out of his faith[fulness] to God, Abraham was judged to be doing right, evident in leaving the power-centres of the Babel-builders, journeying with God to a land that would live under God instead of the other powers. Abraham’s faithful obedience launched the project that ultimately rescues the world.

What are your thoughts, meditations, and unanswered questions on Romans 4–5?
How do you understand Jesus to be the saviour of the world?

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For next time, read **Romans 6 and 7**, as we look at the emancipation (salvation) that comes through his leadership.

5 Journey to God's reign (Romans 6–7)

God's gospel—his good news that he has raised up his Messiah to reign as our Lord—liberates us from the powers of sin and death so the earth can be all God promised in the beginning. God's gospel therefore calls us to allegiance to his Christ. It's out of trusting his leadership (faith) that God sets us right (justifies) so we do right[eousness]. In this way, the gospel of the Christ ultimately restores everything.

Paul wrote to the church in Rome that was still finding their identity as the people of the Christ. The Jewish Christians had grown up with an allegiance to the Torah as the revelation of what God expected of his people. The gentile Christians recognized Christ's leadership, but were not observing the Torah.

Paul aimed to bring them together under Christ's leadership (Romans 6), to explain the Torah's limitations (Romans 7), and to give them a vision of shared life as the people of God (Romans 8).

But first, any questions from the first five chapters of Romans we need to address?

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5.1 Released from Sin to serve the Son (Romans 6)

Do Christians still sin? Do we go on sinning after giving ourselves to Christ? You might find Paul's answer confronting.

Romans 6:1-2 (NIV)

¹ What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? ² By no means! We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?

Christians often think of *sin* as any act that is less than perfect. By that standard, we're so conscious of our failures. These verses make us feel more of a failure.

Paul defines sin differently. *Sin* is the tyrant we serve in a world that has cut itself off from God as the one who decides good and evil. Paul is not asking whether you've achieved "sinless perfection." He's questioning whether it's appropriate to keep spending our lives in the service of Sin when we've given our loyalty (faith) to the anointed ruler God gave us. Instead of continuing to serve Sin, offer yourself in the service of your new Master (Romans 12:1).

The whole world was under the tyrant *Sin* (3:9). Then the righteousness of God arrived in his Anointed ruler. Jesus' faithfulness, at the cost of his life (his blood), rescued us from Sin, and restored us to God (atonement). So we give our loyalty (faith) to the Son who rescues us from Sin, the Son who sets us right (justifies). All of that was in Romans 3:21-26.

So, Paul's question is: which master will you serve today? Sin, or Son?

The power you serve (6:1-14)

At the cross, Jesus faced the power of Sin and its ally Death. The reign of Sin and Death ended when the Spirit of holiness raised Messiah Jesus out of death, appointing Jesus as *the Son of God in power* (Romans 1:4).

Your baptism was a sign of your liberation from living under the power of Sin, into the reign of the Son:

Romans 6:3-4 (NIV)

³ Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴ 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.

The promise of the gospel is: out of faith[fulness] we're set right (justified) so we do right[eousness]. It's not a matter of striving to do better. Paul doesn't say, "Try harder!" He asks, "Who will you serve today?" There's no point in straining God's grace by continuing to serve the old power (Sin) when Jesus has already overturned that power. Spend the life King Jesus has given you in his service.

If you're still not seeing Sin as a defeated tyrant we no longer need to serve, hear this:

Romans 6:5-7 (NIV)

⁵ For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his. ⁶ For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body **ruled by sin** might be done away with, that we should **no longer be slaves to sin**—⁷ because anyone who has died has been set **free from sin**.

Sin is the tyrant humanity chose to serve by not recognizing God as our sovereign, by giving power to things that are not God (Romans 1:21-23). Redefining good to mean 'what's good for me' causes us to do evil to each other. That's how the world became enslaved to Sin.

The righteousness of God arrived in the Messiah who overturned the reign of Sin, emancipating us from our enslavement to Sin, returning the world to the reign of our heavenly Sovereign.

Effectively, we were already *dead* under Sin, so it's the resurrection *life* of the Messiah that brings us to *life* in him:

Romans 6:8-11 (NIV)

⁸ Now if we **died** with Christ, we believe that we will also **live** with him.

⁹ For we know that since Christ was raised from the **dead**, he cannot **die** again; **death** no longer has mastery over him. ¹⁰ The **death** he **died**, he **died** to sin once for all; but the **life** he lives, he **lives** to God.

¹¹ In the same way, count yourselves **dead to sin** but **alive to God** in Christ Jesus.

Who do you recognize as Lord? The defeated lord who ruled with death? Or the Lord who brings us to life? Who do you now serve with the life he has given you?

Romans 6:12-14 (NIV)

¹² Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. ¹³ Do not offer any part of yourself to sin as an instrument of wickedness [un-right], but rather offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer every part of yourself to him as an instrument of righteousness. ¹⁴ For sin shall no longer be your master, because you are not under the law, but under grace.

Is this practical? Will this help you to frame each day in the service of our true ruler as you rise to offer yourself to him each morning?

The final phrase of verse 14 needs further explanation. What does it mean to say we are *not under the law, but under grace*?

- *The Law* is the Torah, the foundational books of YHWH's covenant with Israel that constituted them as his people. The Torah was a good thing: it provided Israel with a picture of what God defined as right for them. But the Torah only made Israel more aware of their failure, since it did not have the power to set them right with God (3:20). Like the rest of humanity, they remained under the power of Sin.
- *Grace* is God's generous treatment of humanity. *Grace* arrived in a person—the gift of his Son. So *grace* achieved what *Torah* could not: liberation from the power of Sin, into the reign of God's Son.

The contrast is all about who is in power. *Under Torah* they were still living under Sin. *Under Grace* they (and the nations) live under the leadership of his Messiah.

Messiah versus Torah: how are we set right? (6:15-23)

Paul's Jewish audience is now having a meltdown. They've always looked to Torah as the definition of what pleases God. If Paul tells them they're *not under Torah*, they fear that their gentile brothers and sisters will feel free to do whatever they like.

But *under grace* does not mean, "Make up your own rules." It means, "Live under the Messiah." The point is that the people of God are no longer **defined** by the Sinai covenant with all of its requirements. The people of God are now defined as those who are in Christ, in the covenant established by God's gift of the Messiah as our leader.

Grace calls us to leave the tyranny of Sin, and serve the Son instead:

Romans 6:15-18 (NIV)

¹⁵ What then? Shall we sin because we are not under the law but under grace? By no means! ¹⁶ Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one you obey—whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness? ¹⁷ But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you have come to obey from your heart the pattern of teaching that has now claimed your allegiance. ¹⁸ You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.

Whose are you? If you belong to Christ (giving him your loyalty/faith), you have come to life in him, and you now live in him. No longer slaves of Sin, we live in the service of the King of Righteousness.

So how can the Jewish Christians understand this concept of being liberated from the tyrant we were forced to serve, to become the people of God instead? Can you think of an example in Israel's history when God liberated them from a tyrant, to serve the LORD instead?

Romans 6:19-23 (NIV)

¹⁹ I am using an example from everyday life [a human-like case] because of your human limitations. Just as you used to offer yourselves as slaves to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer yourselves as slaves to righteousness leading to holiness. ²⁰ When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness. ²¹ What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death! ²² But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. ²³ For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Pharaoh was serving Sin when he refused God's command to "Let my people go, that they may serve me!" With ten mighty acts, the LORD revealed his authority. With the death of the firstborn, Pharaoh was shown to be merely a human ruler. At the Red Sea, Pharaoh's weapons of death sank, and the people rose from the water to live as a nation under YHWH's leadership through the Sinai covenant.

What God did for Israel then is what he has now done for the whole world in Christ. So while the gentiles

are not under the Sinai covenant (Torah), they are under Christ. As Israel was freed from Pharaoh to serve the LORD, the nations are freed from Sin to serve the Messiah who restores God's holiness and righteousness to the world.

The question is therefore the same for Jews and gentiles: **Who do you serve?**

- Serve Sin, and it will kill you.
- Serve *the gift of God* (i.e. *Messiah Jesus our Leader*), and we participate in his enduring reign that restores enduring life to a dead world (*eternal life*).

Your thoughts on Romans 6?



Passing through the Sea: out of slavery, to be God's people (1 Corinthians 10:1-

5.2 Torah's hope and limitations (Romans 7)

What role does the Torah play in the life of a Christian? Should we avoid “unclean” food (Leviticus 11)? Should we avoid all work on Saturdays (Leviticus 19:3)? Should we avoid shaving our heads and the edges of our beards (Leviticus 21:5). Should we never wear clothes that are a mixture of cotton and polyester (Leviticus 19:19)?

Paul has already described the Torah as limited to the Jewish nation: *Whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law* (3:19). Now he says that the Torah's reach is limited in time also:

Romans 7:1-4 (NIV)

¹ Do you not know, brothers and sisters—for I am speaking to those who know the law—that the law has authority over someone only as long as that person lives? ² For example, by law a married woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive, but if her husband dies, she is released from the law that binds her to him. ³ So then, if she has sexual relations with another man while her husband is still alive, she is called an adulteress. But if her husband dies, she is released from that law and is not an adulteress if she marries another man.

⁴ So, my brothers and sisters, **you also died to the law through the body of Christ**, that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit for God.

The marriage illustration (verses 2-3) makes it clear that you are no longer **bound** to a partner who died. The point is that **the Torah bound Israel** in covenant relationship with God until the Messiah died. Israel's life in partnership with God died (literally *was put to death*) when their God-appointed king died (*through the body of Christ*). That was the end of the old covenant relationship with God. The **body of the Messiah** was the evidence that the previous covenant relationship was over.

The resurrection of the Messiah was therefore the start of a new relationship. God's good news calls everyone—Jew and gentile—into faith[ful] relationship bound to the life of the one whom the Spirit of holiness raised from the dead, the Son in power (1:4).

Jews and gentiles had already died, and through faith come to life in the resurrected Christ. That's what our baptism declares (6:4). Consequently, Jews and gentiles *are not under the Torah* (6:14). The death of the Messiah terminated the Torah's claim on the Jewish people.

So now it's the resurrected Messiah—not the Torah—that lays claim to the Jewish people: *you belong to another: to him who was raised from the dead* (verse 4).

This is a new marriage, a new covenant relationship with the living God in Christ:

Romans 7:5-6 (NIV)

⁵ For when we were in the realm of the flesh, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in us, so that we bore fruit for death. ⁶ But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code.

Paul uses the word *flesh* for your natural life, the life your parents gave you. When you're reborn, you receive a new life from the Holy Spirit. The trouble with our flesh-life is that Sin was operating in us, tugging us to do evil, things that lead to death. The Torah highlighted what *not* to do: *Thou shalt not ...*, said the Ten Commandments.

Romans 7:7-12 (NIV)

⁷ What shall we say, then? Is the law sinful? Certainly not! Nevertheless, I would not have known what sin was had it not been for the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, "You shall not covet." [Exodus 20:17] ⁸ But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of coveting. For apart from the law, sin was dead. ⁹ Once I was alive apart from the law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died. ¹⁰ I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death. ¹¹ For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death. ¹² So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good.

Picture a school with a decorative water fountain and a sign saying, "No swimming." The sign has no power to reduce a student's desire to have a splashing time on a hot day. Students may never have considered jumping in, but the sign makes them think of it. The prohibition is powerless to prevent our desires, and it may inflame them.

So is the prohibition evil if it creates the desire to do wrong?

Romans 7:13 (NIV)

¹³ Did that which is good, then, become death to me? By no means! Nevertheless, in order that sin might be recognized as sin, it used what is good to bring about my death, so that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful.

God's Torah was a good thing. It helped Israel to recognize Sin for the tyrant it is. It blessed for those who obeyed, and cursed those who disobeyed. The blessings included fruitfulness, victory, and prosperity, if they did not *turn aside from any of the commands I give you* (Deuteronomy 28:14). But Torah also delivered disaster for disobedience: drought, defeat, disease, dearth, and death (Deuteronomy 28:18-24).

That was Israel's history. Solomon disobeyed, so God took most of the kingdom from him (1 Kings 11:31-33). Elijah announced a drought to call Israel back to YHWH (1 Kings 17–18). Eventually, both Israel and Judah were defeated by their enemies because of their disobedience (2 Kings 17, 25). The Torah brought death to the disobedient nation. Other kingdoms that were ruled by Sin and Death captured God's nation too, as Sin became utterly sinful throughout the whole earth.

You may have noticed how Paul put himself in this story. Did the good Torah *become death to me*, ... *bring about my death*? (verse 13) What does he mean by *me*?

- Is Paul seeing himself as part of Israel's story? OR
- Is Paul describing his own person struggle to do right as a Christian?

It's easy to impose our own feelings on what Paul is saying here, but this section is all about (dis)obeying Torah. Any suggestion that Paul is describing his personal struggle completely misses the point Paul made about *not being under the Torah* (6:14), about having been *released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code* (7:6 ESV). Let's read on.

Romans 7:14-25 (NIV)

¹⁴ We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. ¹⁵ I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. ¹⁶ And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. ¹⁷ As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. ¹⁸ For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. ¹⁹ For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. ²⁰ 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.

²¹ So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. ²² For in my inner being I delight in God's law; ²³ but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. ²⁴ What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? ²⁵ Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in my sinful nature a slave to the law of sin.

As early as the third century, Origen recognized that Paul was speaking “in character.” He was describing how helpless God's people felt before the Messiah came. The Torah was a good thing, but it could not save God's people. Only the Messiah could do that.

And that's Paul's conclusion in verse 25. God delivers his people through the gift of his Messiah as our leader (*Jesus Christ our Lord*). He is the one who rescues us from the wretched, miserable reality that was Israel's experience for more than 1000 years, the unending conflict of being torn both ways: a people yoked to God through his Torah, while also being born as a slave under the power of Sin.

The Torah was a good thing, but it could never save them. It left them cursed, conflicted and condemned—until Messiah Jesus arrived to deliver his people, *thanks be to God*.

And it's so different now that the Messiah has come to rescue God's people. The next sentence describes life in the Messiah like this: *Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus* (8:1).



Israel receiving the Torah at Mount Sinai —
Painting by Jean-Léon Gérôme.

5.3 So what?

In Romans 6–7, Paul was speaking to those who knew the Law (7:1). He takes them on the journey Israel took to become the people of God: out of slavery to Pharaoh, through the Red Sea, as the people committed to serve the God revealed in the Torah.

But Torah could only take them so far. It guided God's nation, but it could not save them. What the Torah began could only be completed by the Messiah.

Just as Israel faced death at the Red Sea and came out the other side, the Messiah faced death for his people and came out the other side to lead us. That's what our baptism means: we pass through the waters, set free from the tyranny of Sin and Death, rising into life with the Messiah (Romans 6:1-14). It's the same imagery Paul used in 1 Corinthians 10:1-2.

With Pharaoh's army defeated at the Red Sea, God's people were no longer enslaved to the tyrant. But their salvation didn't mean they served themselves; they were freed to serve the LORD, their new sovereign. That's what salvation means for us also: *Now that you have been set free from Sin, you have become slaves of God* (6:22).

Immediately after the exodus, Israel journeyed to Sinai to receive the Torah, the basis of their covenant relationship with the LORD. Romans 7 follows that journey.

Paul explains the goodness and the limitations of the Torah. It was good for them to have their heavenly sovereign's law, but it did not have the power to save them. It led to the death of their nation. Not until God sent his Messiah were the people of God raised to life in a new covenant—not based on the Torah's requirements but based on the life-giving power of the resurrected Christ who liberated God's people from their crushing inability to fulfil what Torah demanded of them (Romans 7).

Romans 7 contrasts the old covenant (based on Torah's requirements) and the new covenant (based on the life-giving power of the resurrected Messiah).

So, do we have anything to say to a believer who is struggling to avoid sin and to do right? Romans 8 is wonderfully helpful. Galatians 5 also describes how our natural flesh-life expresses itself. But Paul doesn't say, "Fight the flesh!" He tells us to live the life of Christ born in us by the Holy Spirit. He offers this promise: *Walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh* (Galatians 5:16).

By living the life the Spirit has birthed in us, the Spirit produces his fruit. Decide to live today in the life the Spirit has given you. At the end of the day you'll find you were not giving expression to the ways your selfish human nature wanted to react.

Living as restored people of the Messiah is so liberating. What do you think?

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For next week, read Romans 8.

6 Life with God (Romans 8)

The nations and God's nation have been unfaithful to God so done wrong by God, yet God remained faithful and did right in providing his Messiah to restore us to his sovereign authority (Romans 1–3). Abraham set the pattern: declared right and doing right out of faith[fulness] to God (Romans 4). The Messiah's faithfulness (doing right even when it killed him) undoes human treachery (giving dominion to sin and death) (Romans 5).

In Christ, God is completing for the world the salvation he launched in Israel. They passed through the waters, freed from slavery to serve the LORD (Romans 6), receiving the Law that clarified what God wanted but could not save them (Romans 7).

God then led them to build a house for God to live among them, and the glory of God's presence moved in. In the same way, the Spirit of God forms us into God's nation, a temple where God lives, regenerated as sons of God brought to life with the resurrected life of his Son (Romans 8).

Is there anything we need to address from previous chapters before Romans 8?

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6.1 Spirit-birthed sons in a suffering world (Romans 8:1-25)

The previous covenant left people feeling condemned by the requirements of the Torah, but the Messiah has set right all who've come to life in his leadership:

Romans 8:1-2 (NIV)

¹ Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, ² because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death.

God's good gift of the Torah had **condemned** his people. That was Israel's testimony. Because they were unfaithful (giving themselves to powers that are not God, as in Isaiah 31 and 39), God sentenced them to do time under the nations. The whole world was then ruled by Sin (3:9).

But their *condemnation* to life-under-Sin (actually a kind of death) was not the end. *God's gospel* announced beforehand that God would forgive his people and restore them to life under his reign (compare Isaiah 40:1-11 with Romans 1:1-6).

God's good gift (his Messiah) therefore "uncondemned" his people:

Romans 8:3-4 (NIV)

³ For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴ in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

This is how salvation works, perhaps Paul's best summary. Take it step by step, to see how the Messiah fulfilled for his people what they could not do for themselves:

- a) Since his people were under Sin, he was born *in the flesh like them*, in order to take on the tyrant (Sin) for them.
- b) Sin, acting through the flesh (the Jerusalem leaders) condemned him to death, even though (or perhaps because) he remained faithful to what God required.
- c) God therefore overturned Sin by “uncondemning” Christ—vindicating him (justifying him), reversing his execution (giving him life instead of death).
- d) In “uncondemning” Jesus, God *condemned Sin* (the power that put him to death), placing his Son in power (instead of Sin).
- e) So, **Sin no longer rules** over God's people: God *condemned Sin in the flesh* of the Messiah, who was acting for his people.

Therefore, all who give him their faith[fulness] are “uncondemned” (justified) through his faith[fulness], and therefore do right under the leadership of the one who set us right. Salvation transforms us, rescuing us from serving Sin, to serve our Saviour.

Any aspects of that sequence you'd like to pursue further?

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The Spirit who raised him up from the dead also raises us up to life in him. All who recognize his leadership (giving him our faith[fulness]) are brought to life by his resurrected life (pictured in baptism). And since the Messiah fulfilled the righteous requirement of the Torah for his people (compare Matthew 5:17), there is no condemnation for those who are in the Messiah: we are set right in his leadership.

Since we have come to life in him, we have the Messiah's life (given to us by the Spirit) as well as our flesh life (given to us by our parents). So, **which life will you live now?**

Romans 8:5-11 (NIV)

⁵ Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. ⁶ The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace.

⁷ The mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. ⁸ Those who are in the realm of the flesh cannot please God.

⁹ You, however, are not in the realm of the flesh but are in the realm of the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, they do not belong to Christ. ¹⁰ But if Christ is in you, then even though your body is subject to death because of sin, the Spirit gives life because of righteousness. ¹¹ 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 because of his Spirit who lives in you.

We're freed from the reign of Sin, but we still face Death:

- Flesh (people) gave Sin its power, and once enslaved we could not set ourselves free. The Son of God took flesh as one of us to confront the tyrant Sin, dethroning it as the Spirit of God delivered him from Death.
- He has his resurrection body, but we don't have ours yet. Jesus reigns over creation as Adam did before Sin gave Death its power over us. Death is the final enemy our Lord will defeat for us. We anticipate having resurrection bodies like our Saviour, but that's still future for us (1 Corinthians 15:12-28).

Right now, we live under Christ, in the bodies we were born with. We're free from the control of *Sin*, but we're still subject to its legacy: *Death*. The Spirit of the Messiah lives in us now, with the hope that, one day, the One who raised Christ out of Death's grip will restore life to our mortal bodies also (verse 11).

Your thoughts?

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How, then should we live?

Romans 8:12-13 (NIV)

¹² Therefore, brothers and sisters, we have an obligation—but it is not to the flesh, to live according to it. ¹³ For if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live.

Paul's answer is that the Spirit has brought us to life in the Son. We therefore participate in living in his sonship:

Romans 8:14-17 (NIV)

¹⁴ For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. ¹⁵ The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, "*Abba, Father.*" ¹⁶ The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. ¹⁷ 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.



A place in the family

Sonship language began with the previous covenant. The LORD told Pharaoh: "*Israel is my firstborn son, and I say to you, 'Let my son go that he may serve me'*" (Exodus 4:22-23 ESV).

Moses called the covenant people to recognize "*your father who created you who made and established you,*" to live as "*sons of God*" (Deuteronomy 32:6, 8, ESV).

The anointed king represented the nation, so he was recognized as God's son:

*"I will be his **father** and he will be my **son**,"* God told David (1 Samuel 7:14).

Each time a Davidic king was crowned, the LORD decreed, "You are my **son**; today I have become your **father**" (Psalm 2:7). The son of David called God, *"my father"* since the LORD *"appointed him to be my firstborn"* (Psalm 89:26-27).

So it's in the Messiah (the anointed ruler who represents God's people) that sonship is restored to us. What God did for Jacob's family in the first covenant—rescuing his son from Egypt—is what God is doing for the whole world in the Messiah, the Son who restores sonship to the earth. (That's how Matthew 2:15 understands Hosea 11:1). He is the only Son (John 1:14, 18), so *to all who give allegiance to the name God has given him, he has given the right to become children of God* (John 1:12 paraphrased). It's in the Son that we receive sonship, that is, restoration into the family of *our Father*.

As the *son of man*, Jesus inherited the dominion given to Adam in the beginning, the authority Adam lost when he handed it over to Sin. Jesus inherited that dominion when he was raised up as *the appointed Son of God in power* (Romans 1:4). It's in the Son that we receive our *inheritance* as children of the heavenly sovereign, the family who *co-inherit with the Messiah* his authority and his sufferings, so that we participate in the glory of his reign.

Does Paul's description make sense of life as you know it?

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This is like driving down a narrow country road with a ditch on each side:

- a) Some say, "Jesus isn't reigning yet. There is no kingdom of God until Jesus returns to reign in Jerusalem for 1000 years."
- b) Others say, "I'm reigning with Christ, so nothing can touch me. No suffering will afflict me because I am a child of God."

Group (a) has failed to understand that Sin has been dethroned, that God's Son has been raised up to reign. (This is under-realized eschatology.)

Group (b) has failed to recognize that we're called to suffer because Christ must reign until all his enemies are defeated, including death. We don't have our resurrection bodies yet. (This is over-realized eschatology.)

So, what are we to say about our present sufferings?

Romans 8:18-21 (NIV)

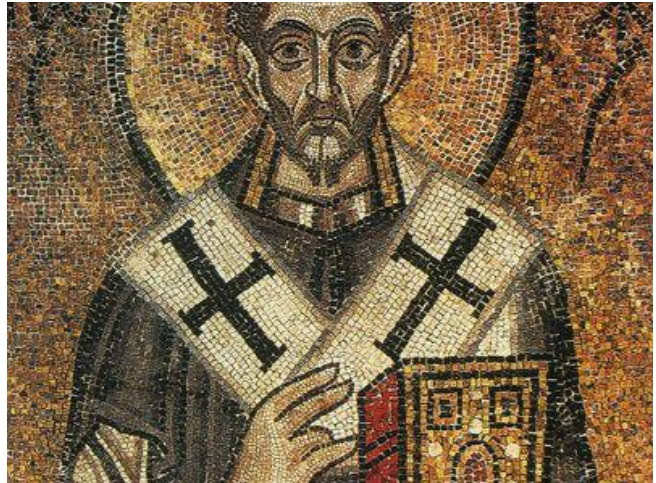
¹⁸ I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the **glory** that will be revealed in us. ¹⁹ For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. ²⁰ For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹ that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and **glory** of the children of God.

Let's be clear about what Paul means by *glory*. It's not a synonym for heaven, like "we're going to glory one day." Heaven is a glorious place because God is there, but that's not what Paul is saying. Earth was designed to be full of God's glory too (Psalm 57:5, 11; 72:19; 108:5; Isaiah 6:3; Habakkuk 2:14). God's glory is being revealed in the people who embody the reign of his glorious Son. God's glory is—slowly but surely—being revealed *in us* (verse 18), in his children (verse 21).

That's why the early church drew saints with a halo. The artist was portraying the glory of God they saw in this person. "We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son," John wrote of Jesus.

Now the glory of the Son's life is reflected in his people. We don't yet reflect the fullness of God's glory because our bodies are still subject to decay, but we've begun to reflect the glory of God to creation, the glory of God that calls creation to recognize God as its Father and Christ as its liberating king.

In the Son, we participate in both his glory and his sufferings:



Mosaic of Saint John Chrysostom (fourth century)

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-John-Chrysostom>

Romans 8:22-25 (NIV)

²² We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. ²³ Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies.

²⁴ For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

Adam introduced suffering to creation when he gave power to Sin. All creation now groans together (*systemazō*) and suffers together in shared pain (*synōdinō*).¹⁶ When Cain became an agent of Death, the godly looked set for extinction until God gave them another child (Genesis 4:25). The agony of bringing children into the world is the hope of re-creation (Genesis 3:16).

The people of God participate in that agony too. Just as creation groans in slavery to the wrong rulers, the children of God participate in that agony. For example:

Exodus 2:23–25 (ESV)

²³ During those many days the king of Egypt died, and the people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help. Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. ²⁴ And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. ²⁵ God saw the people [literally sons] of Israel—and God knew.

¹⁶ "Common pain" is the phrase from William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 977.

In life-threatening circumstances, God's answer was once again the birth of a child (Moses) to lead God's people out of tyranny to serve their true LORD. Israel was born as a nation of priests to extend the hope of God's reign to the nations (Exodus 19:5-6). But they fell back into slavery to the nations.

So God gave them a child (his Son) to rescue them. It is in the Messiah's name that *the nations will put their hope* (Matthew 12:19 quoting Isaiah 42:1-4). Suffering for his people, the Son dethroned Sin through his cross. He was raised up over Death in his resurrection. Messiah Jesus our Leader was *appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead* (Romans 1:4).

Salvation is not a private religious experience. It's not a ticket out of this world. Salvation is the rescue of a creation that has been groaning under slavery to Sin, into the reign of the Son. Creation's groaning is not meaningless: the common pain we've all known has been anticipating the birth of the Son who will liberate creation from its bondage to decay.

We ourselves know both the suffering and the hope of the Messiah.

How does this text shape your understanding of what salvation means?

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6.2 Living the life of Spirit-birthed sons (8:26-39)

At the end of the age, the Messiah will have set everything right and given us resurrection bodies. But right now, we're sons of God who are also fragile beings. Isn't that just like Jesus of Nazareth?

Jesus embodied human fragility because he was *the Christ*, the anointed ruler who set his people free not by force but by God's spirit (Isaiah 11:2; 61:1-3; Zechariah 4:6; Psalm 110:1). When God raised up his Christ to reign, the resurrected Christ breathed his Holy Spirit into the community under his leadership, empowering us for the same mission he received from his Father (John 20:21-22).

So we find ourselves in the same position as Jesus in his earthly life: sons of God anointed with his powerful Spirit, yet vulnerable in a troubled world.

Romans 8:26-27 (NIV)

²⁶ 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 through wordless groans.

²⁷ And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God.



Through the Spirit, we're empowered to do what Jesus did. In his mortal body, he carried our mistreatment at the hands of Sin without retaliating, so his wounds would heal the world (Isaiah 53:3 quoted in 1 Peter 2:24).

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our fragility to bear away the sin of the world instead of retaliating with violence since that only perpetuates the harm and abuse. Like our Father, sons of God feel the pain of the world. Like Jesus blood-like sweat in the dust of Gethsemane, we're lost for words as we cry, "Father, take this from me!" But the Spirit intercedes for us in an agony beyond words, so we hear ourselves crying inwardly, "But not my will; I'll do this with you if this is how you save the world."

Tom Wright describes the Holy Spirit's intercession within us like this:

Paul is talking about our *vocation* not just to *get through* difficult times but to **stand in prayer where the world is in pain so that God's own spirit may be present, and intercede, right there**. This is one of the most revolutionary and innovative moments in the whole letter. ... God's spirit comes to dwell in the midst of his world, in the persons of Jesus' faithful followers; but that world is in great pain. The spirit *inhabits* that pain, and calls out to the father from its darkest depths, *by means of* God's people being in prayer, spirit-inspired prayer, at that place.¹⁷

In the Messiah, we live in the painful world as the presence of God.

The pain we feel is hope-fuelled. We embody in the present what God has planned to achieve in the end:

Romans 8:28 (NIV)

²⁸ 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.

Verse 28 is thrilling, a favourite for many. But don't imagine that every experience you face must be for a God-intended purpose. When a young soldier was killed in World War II, well-meaning people sometimes told the parents, "God has taken your son for a reason." That's a shocking picture of God. What kind of god wants your child dead? Our children die in war because Sin drives the world to such violence.

Verse 28 says that God is at work in the world where Sin and Death cause so much suffering. God is restoring what he purposed from the start. In the agony Jesus suffered and the anguish we suffer, we know that God is at work to restore the world, to make all things new. So we who respond to God's call by aligning with the Messiah participate in God's eternal sovereign purpose for humanity and the world.

Romans 8:29-30 (NIV)

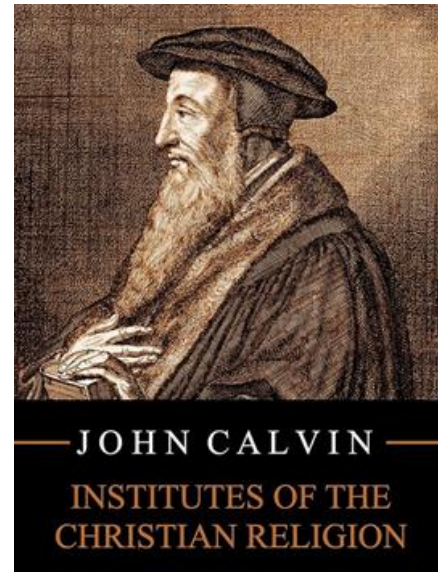
²⁹ For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. ³⁰ And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.

¹⁷ N. T. Wright, *Into the Heart of Romans: A Deep Dive into Paul's Greatest Letter* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2023), 133–134.

What is **predestination**? Is God's gospel *call* issued only to his elect, the individuals he chose beforehand to be saved? Are they the only ones who can be justified and taken to glory?

That is how John Calvin understood predestination. In the 1530s, Calvin wrote this:

As Scripture, then, clearly shows, we say that God once established by his eternal and unchangeable plan those whom he long before determined once for all to receive into salvation, and those whom, on the other hand, he would devote to destruction. We assert that, with respect to the elect, this plan was founded upon his freely given mercy, without regard to human worth; but by his just and irreprehensible but incomprehensible judgment he has barred the door of life to those whom he has given over to damnation. Now among the elect we regard the call as a testimony of election. Then we hold justification another sign of its manifestation, until they come into the glory in which the fulfillment of that election lies.¹⁸



Calvin's view of God's sovereignty said depraved humanity could not respond to God's call unless God empowered them to do so, and no one could resist if God chose us to be saved. That's how he understood predestination. There are alternatives.

Remember the first time you first used a GPS? For me it was 2008, in the UK. We discovered that even when we'd turned aside for coffee or sight-seeing, even when we took a one-way street, the GPS knew how to get us back on track, how to take us to the destination we'd set earlier.

When God created the heavens and the earth, he knew where he wanted to take us. And even when humanity got off track, God knew how to take us to the destination he'd always planned for us. Predestination is not about God choosing individuals to be saved and others to be damned; it's about God knowing how to take the world and its people to the destination he'd always planned.

When God led Israel out of Egypt, he had a destination in mind. When they reached the Promised Land, they refused to go in. God didn't force them. He said, "You won't go in? You want to die out here in the wilderness? Then that's what you'll do. I'll wait for the generation that will go in." God's sovereignty did not abrogate their choice. Their choice delayed God's plans by 40 years. So God waited, and led the willing generation to the destination he'd always planned.

Predestination is not about God choosing who to save and who to damn. It means God is leading the world to the destination he'd always planned, even before creation.

¹⁸ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, translated by Ford Lewis Battles. [Institutes III, xxi, 7] (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 931.

Calvin misunderstood what it means to be God's *elect*. Election begins with the call of Abraham. But God did not call Abraham in order to damn the nations; God called Abraham in order to save the nations. Imagining ourselves as the elect so God can damn the non-elect was a mistake Israel made too. As a missionary writer explained:

The promised blessing is, in the end, for all the nations. Abraham, Israel, the tribe of Judah, and the faithful remnant are the chosen bearers of it. Bearers—not exclusive beneficiaries. There lay the constant temptation.¹⁹

The Messiah was God's *Chosen* not to damn the world but to save it. The people of the Messiah are *in the Chosen One*, with the same mission: the salvation of the world.

It makes sense if you stop reading with individualistic Western eyes ("God chose me") and recognize the chosen as the community who give the Messiah their allegiance (faith[fulness]).²⁰

God knows the destination and knows how to get us there in Christ, but what's it like for us now living under God's sovereignty in a world that still resists God?

Romans 8:31-32 (NIV)

³¹ What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² 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?

Our confidence in God is assured by the fact that God has already given us what is most precious to him: his Son. God doing right by us (*the righteousness of God*) is already evident (*made known*) in *the faithfulness of Messiah Jesus* for all of us (*Jew and gentile*). He presented his Messiah as his gift to make *at-one-ment* with the world in rebellion (as Paul said back in 3:21-26). If he gave us his Son, there's nothing God will withhold from the community under his leadership.

Romans 8:33-34 (NIV)

³³ Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who then is the one who condemns? No one. 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.

For Paul's Jewish audience, there's a lot of history in these words. Israel's final tribe (Judah) was taken into exile in 586 BC because they were unfaithful to the covenant. Prophets like Habakkuk had accused God's chosen people of being unfit for service: "*The Torah is paralysed, and justice never prevails.*" God agreed (Habakkuk 1:4ff).

Babylon captured Jerusalem, destroying the LORD's temple. There was no way for the covenant people to perform the cleansing rituals specified in the Torah, no way to be set right with God. Zechariah saw their hopeless plight before God's heavenly court: "*Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the LORD, and Satan standing at his right side to accuse him.*" (Zechariah 3:1)

¹⁹ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*. (Eerdmans, 1995), 32.

²⁰ For a good summary, see the blog series by Tim Gombis, "Election According to Scripture" at <https://timgombis.com/2012/05/29/election-according-to-scripture-pt-1/>

Šā-tān is Hebrew for “enemy.” The Enemy’s accusation was that the high priest could not even cleanse himself (the rituals of Leviticus 8), let alone his people. Satan’s case is that the people God handed over to the nations could not justify themselves, so must remain under enemy control.

God did not accept the accuser’s argument. God cleansed Joshua, so God’s people could be restored (Zechariah 3:3-10). God promised to restore the kingship: *“Not by might nor by power but by my Spirit,”* (Zechariah 4:6). The son of David would ride into the capital on a donkey to lead his people (Zechariah 9:9).



Prosecutor versus defence

God has appointed his Son in power, and all who give him their faith[fulness] are set right (justified) in him. So, “Who is condemning?” Paul asks (verse 34). All accusations have failed to hold the earth in captivity. The heavenly court has already delivered its ruling: *There is no condemnation for those who are in Messiah Jesus* (verse 1).

The Messiah was accused and condemned to death by the enemies. In raising him from the dead, God’s court justified him (declared him to be in the right). He is now sharing God’s throne and pleading our case (verse 34), a judgement no one overrides.

Romans 8:35-36 (NIV)

³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?

³⁶ As it is written:

“For your sake we face death all day long;
we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.” [Psalm 44:22]

In Old Testament times, God lived in the temple in Jerusalem, so God’s people felt separated from him when they went into exile. The nations that conquered them had no concept of Israel’s global value as the people through whom God would save the world. They treated God’s flock as sheep to be herded into their kingdoms or slaughtered in battle if they would not submit.

Now the Messiah has come to gather the flock that had been sheep without a shepherd for so long. We now recognize his throne. The powers of Sin and Death still cause suffering for God’s people, but none of those powers can take us away from the loving leadership of the Messiah who gave his life to rescue his people.

Romans 8:37-39 (NIV)

³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹ 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.

These majestic words focus on the certainty of how the story will end under Messiah’s leadership. No power in the earthly or heavenly realm, in the present or the future,

nothing in all of God's creation can block the Messiah from completing his mission of fully restoring God's earthly realm to his heavenly throne. The outcome is as certain as it was when God established the heavens and the earth in the beginning.

But these words are not a promise that you (as an individual) will never suffer. That was untrue of Jesus. It was untrue of Paul. It's untrue of untold thousands who've died for their faith since then. Expect to suffer for the redemption of the world.

Regardless of how much pain the agents of Sin inflict on the people of God, nothing can prevent the world reaching the destination God set in the beginning (what God has predestined for creation). God's Messiah is already reigning as our Leader (*Christ Jesus our Lord*). No injustice, no harm, no oppressive power in any realm can prevent the Messiah setting all things right as we give him our loyalty (faith[fulness]).

6.3 So what?

Don't you love the cosmic picture of salvation Paul paints in this chapter? In the end, everything is ultimately redeemed as a completely restored new creation (verses 31-38). The Spirit sustains us with that hope in our present sufferings, as we wait for God to reveal the heirs of what he's promised (verses 18-28). The Spirit affirms our sonship, our place in the family, in the Son who sets us right with God (verses 1-17).

I introduced the idea of Satan as the failed accuser of God's people, and many Christians fear that Satan will overpower us if we don't conduct warfare against him. Paul didn't say that. He never tells the Christians in Rome to fight the devil. Satan never gets a mention, except to say that crushing Satan is something God will do (Romans 16:20).

So, when you're suffering, don't treat the devil as a power you must overcome. Don't waste your energy railing against the devil. Focus on the saving relationship we have with our Father, in the Son, by the power of the Spirit. Focus your prayers on "*Abba, Father*" (verse 15). Hear the Spirit groaning within us as he helps us in our weakness. Give no credence to the old accuser. There is no one condemning. The only voice to hear is Messiah Jesus interceding for us (verse 34). Prayer as Paul describes it in this chapter is not a battle against the devil but a joyful relationship with the One who has been raised up to reign, Messiah Jesus our Leader.

What else from Romans 8 leaves an impression on you?

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