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ROMANS 1

1:1—Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God,

Paul identifies himself as the author of this letter. As in most cases Paul uses his Roman name instead of his Hebrew name, “Saul.” We suppose that he wrote Romans about AD 56, while he was in Corinth. In terms of biblical timeframe, the writing of this letter probably occurred in Acts 20:2-3.

Paul refers to himself here in several ways. First, he calls himself a bond-servant of Christ. He views himself as having been purchased and so owned by Christ, chained to His purposes. This figure is common in Paul’s descriptions of himself. It reveals the depth of his submission to Christ as Lord and the depth of his conviction about how life should be ordered. It is an order of living that is quickly fading from the scene of American Christianity.

Second, Paul says of himself that he is called as an apostle. The word apostle means one sent with a commission. It implies official authority as a representative. The word is used 86 times in the New Testament. 72 of these occurrences are like this, a reference to a specific office. This short phrase, “called as an apostle,” denotes a summons for an official duty, and then a conferring of authority and understanding for carrying out that duty.

Third, Paul says of himself that he is “set apart for the gospel of God.” There are several things God could commission one to do. Paul saw his own commission as relating specifically to the Gospel. The term Gospel means good news or a good announcement. The term gospel is used by Paul in various ways in his writings. It can have a narrow meaning, referring specifically to the good news of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ (1 Corinthians 15:1-8). It can refer to a broader body of truth that flows out of those central facts that is to shape the Church and individual lives (1 Tim 1:10-11). In this letter Paul will set forth in an orderly and formal way this broader body of truth. This message of Christ’s work that restores humanity to spiritual life and health, that Paul refers to as the gospel becomes the subject of the rest of the letter.

An important thing to recognize here however, is Paul’s statement that he is “set apart for” this message. It is not the more common Greek word that has this meaning from which words like holy, sanctified, and saint are derived. It is a word that means to separate with boundaries. It is the word used of separating the wicked from the righteous in the final judgment (Matthew 13:49; 25:32). Paul viewed his mission as quite focused and even distinct with respect to that of the other apostles (Ephesians 3:1-13). Hindsight tells us the Paul was entrusted not simply with proclaiming the gospel and serving its purpose, but with being somewhat of a custodian of the truth itself. His writings reflect a desire to articulate it accurately and to guard its content carefully. This letter makes a significant contribution to that effort for which Paul was chosen. Historically it has provided a clear standard by which to preserve the accuracy of the gospel message.

Next Paul will move from this brief statement about himself to an important statement about this gospel.

1:2—which He promised beforehand through His prophets in the Holy Scriptures.

This is an important statement about the gospel of God. It speaks of a principle that is important if one desires to develop an understanding of the Bible as a book. We understand God's gospel precisely when we understand that it is fully expressed in its central figure, Jesus Christ. Therefore, the gospel is more fully known and experienced as Christ is more fully known and experienced. This in turn means that our experience of the gospel is fuller than was that of those who lived before Christ. Now it is possible to take such distinctions too far. It is also possible not to make them because of an over-commitment to continuity. It is easy to think that the understanding of Christ on the part of Old Testament saints was greater than it was. It is also easy to assume that they knew nothing about Him. His coming was clearly spoken of by the Old Testament prophets.

It is clear from these words of Paul that the Old Testament revealed the gospel of God. The prophets spoke beforehand of it. It is also clear from Paul's words that this disclosure came in the form of promises. God's gospel then is rightly understood when it is seen as a series of promises with respect to humanity. It is good news because it is an announcement of a series of actions God intends to take in humankind's behalf. The detail of that action become clearer as time passed. There was progress in revelation in terms of understanding God's intended action. But more of the details of God's actions were experienced after the coming of Christ.

So we understand that the gospel was everywhere in the words and symbols of the Old Testament. But its fullness was more clearly understood once Christ did His work in behalf of humanity. Now that work is accomplished, its impact can be more fully understood as we revisit the words and symbols used by the Old Testament prophets in the light of New Testament revelation. The words of Paul were ordained by God to illumine the words of the Prophets for us and bring about in us a fuller understanding (Ephesians 3:1-10).

1:3—concerning His Son, who was born of a descendant of David according to the flesh,

Having spoken of the gospel, Paul now turns to make some statements about its central figure, Jesus Christ. He calls Jesus here a descendant of David. This is important because the prophecies of the Old Testament are very definitive about this. The Messiah was to be a descendant of David. Clearly, Joseph was from the lineage of David (Matthew 1:1-17, Luke 2:4). Now we believe that Jesus was conceived miraculously apart from Joseph (Luke 1:34-35; Matthew 1:18-25). But Joseph was the one who occupied that role of earthly father. It appears that Mary was likely a descendant of David as well. The genealogy given by Luke (Luke 3:23-38), names Joseph as a son of Eli, whereas Matthew names him as a son of Jacob. We suspect that Eli was Joseph's father-in-law, Mary's father. If that is true then both Mary and Joseph were descendants of David. The two family trees separated after David. Joseph came through David's son Solomon, Mary through David's son Nathan (2 Samuel 5:14). Both Solomon and Nathan were born to David by Bathsheba (1 Chronicles 3:5). Jesus being a descendant of David seems to be clear by all accounts.

1:4—Who was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead, according to the spirit of holiness, Jesus Christ our Lord,

There was a critical point in the ministry of Jesus when the Jews demanded a sign from Him. He had made some important claims. The significance of His words and deeds was not lost to them. They asked him, “What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?” His reply on that occasion was that when they destroyed Him, He would be raised on the third day (John 2:18-22; Matthew 12:38-40). The resurrection out from among the dead was a sign from God that affirmed Christ’s identity as the Son of God, the one and only God/man. The power displayed by that event attested to the fact that this was a different life.

The differences between Jesus and all other men did not consist of subtleties, as among the rest of humanity. Though He was fully human, He was also distinct from other humans. The resurrection identified Jesus as the one the Holy Spirit had spoken of through the prophets (Isaiah 10:33-11:10), had caused to be conceived in the womb of Mary (Luke 1:34-35), and had empowered for ministry on earth (Luke 4:14-21). The Holy Spirit’s actions carried out through Jesus, particularly His resurrection, were the unmistakable signs that He was the “anointed one,” the Christ, the master of God’s creation.

The resurrection also affirmed His sinlessness and the effectiveness of His sacrifice. The sins of the world were placed upon Him and He died for them. They were forgiven, and since He had no sins of His own, it was only just that He come to life again, and so He did. The resurrection is a testimony to His function in Yahweh’s redemptive plan.

1:5—through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles, for his name’s sake,

Before Paul cites his authority that he had received from Christ, he cites the fact that he had been a recipient of grace. This was a dramatic reality to Paul. This wonder of his own salvation, the wonder of the favor of continued impartation of all things divine into his being without merit on his part never lost its luster. Paul’s view of life was that it was to be shaped by grace, this continued standing with God whereby His favors flow moment by moment into our beings and into our world. Paul had received this life through Christ and through Christ he had received authority for a special mission.

Paul defines this mission in this way, to bring about among non-Jewish people groups what he calls “the obedience of faith.” Paul was not interested in a legalistic type of obedience that resulted in arrogance. He was interested in producing obedience that comes through faith, through being united in one’s spirit with the Spirit of God. It is an obedience that comes out of one’s heart as an act of worship. It is not aimed at achieving merit but at expressing loyalty and gratitude. It is the kind of obedience that Jesus spoke of when asked what one must do to do the works of God (John 6:29).

Paul’s letters are directed at producing this kind of obedience. His words in places are quite directive, and he makes very frequent use of the imperative. He clearly expects obedience, and yet does not assume that it will happen apart from clarification and instruction. So he is not suggesting that if one has faith, obedience is automatically produced in them by the Holy Spirit without effort on their part. On the contrary, his own ministry was essential to bring this about. Elsewhere Paul wrote that Jesus died to forgive our sins, but the Paul himself suffered to carry to its desired end that work of Christ, the sanctification of believers (Colossians 1:24-29).

This is a critical matter in terms of ministry. Does obedience happen apart from our receiving information? Does it happen innately due to the presence of the Holy Spirit? Is there the need for the mind to acquire understanding of truth so that the Spirit can then have grounds upon which to convict and lead? We know that some level of truth has been placed in the conscience of man, a fact that Paul will refer to later in this letter (Romans 2:14-16). But this is likely basic moral guidelines such as not murdering and not stealing, laws that seem to be present in godless cultures. The Spirit was given to guide us into all truth (John 16:13). Because of His presence we don't need teachers in the sense that the world does (1 John 2:27). However, we still must need teaching and teachers since God imparts the gift of teaching (Romans 12:6-8; Ephesians 4:11). By Paul's command leaders are commanded to teach so that people live properly (1 Timothy 4:11-16; 2 Timothy 4:1-5), and individuals are said to need to be taught (1 Peter 2:1-3; Heb. 5:11-14; Titus 1:5-9, 3:14). So there is a process energized by the Holy Spirit that produces the understanding of truth and it clearly involves human agents. These must be sought out and listened to and the result is increased faith and trust in the truth, which faith then produces obedience.

This was the mission Paul was called to, to stimulate faith in a way that would stimulate obedience in non-Jewish people groups. We know from Paul's writings that he wanted to perpetuate a particular faith, consisting of a specific body of information (Colossians 2:7-8; 1 Timothy 4:6, 11-12). This in turn would produce a certain lifestyle. He was not interest just in faith, but in the faith.

All of this was for "His names sake." This is the grand purpose, the final end to which all that God orchestrates is pointed. Paul was committed to bring to Him the glory and reverence that He deserves (Isaiah 45:5-7, 20-25; Ephesians 3:10; 1 Corinthians 15:28).

1:6—among whom you also are the called of Jesus Christ;

Paul's calling to bring about in non-Jewish people groups the obedience produced by faith leads him to his interest in Rome and Romans. They are among those to whom he feels he has been directed. They live in the capital city of the empire that exercised control over much of the known world. From both the perspective of his own call and from a strategic standpoint, with both the present and future in mind, investment in the people of Rome was a must for Paul.

1:7—to all who are beloved of God in Rome, called as saints; grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul speaks of Roman Christians in two ways here. First, they are beloved of God. It is not that the rest of Rome was not loved by God. It is that those who respond to God's truth as they had, become special objects of God's affection and care. They demonstrate to others the depth of His love.

Second, Paul calls them saints. Verse 6 stated that they were called by Jesus Christ. This verse states what they were called to and where Jesus was leading them. They were called to be holy ones or set apart ones, that is the meaning of the word. This is Christ's objective in what He does in our lives. There is great diversity in our personalities, our circumstances, and in most everything about our current existence. But there is something common to us all. It is that we are designated by God as His, to be joined to His very being and so to each other. That is what it is to be a "saint."

From the human standpoint, being a saint has come to refer to one who has achieved a certain level of character. There is no doubt that this is the end toward which God is working in a “holy one’s” life. But they are saints in God’s eyes the moment they believe. The word implies both distinctness and a designated use or purpose. It captures the fact that those who embrace the truth of the gospel are joined to God by the Holy Spirit to be the visible representative of Him in the world.

Paul then extends to them a greeting/blessing from the Lord. Grace and peace from God are the ultimate things we could wish, hope, and pray for. If we have His favor to enable us and His peace to assure us, we have what we need for any circumstance. It is a great greeting because it is a great reminder of who we are, who we are in the very moment facing us, and therefore who we can be. It re-directs us from merely reacting and being shaped by life to being shaped by His resources.

1:8—First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, because your faith is being proclaimed throughout the whole world.

Before Paul addressed the Romans with any specific message, he wanted to express his personal joy for their story. We think that this letter was written about 56 AD. That means that in roughly two decades since the time of Christ there were believers in Him in the capital city of the empire that had facilitated His shameful death. The very ones who had asked if He was a king, who had nailed Him and that sarcastic inscription to a cross, were seeing His power reach their doorstep. This all occurred in an age when news traveled chiefly by word of mouth. It was the story of Jesus’ Church prevailing against the gates of hell.

The church in Rome likely started with many Jews in it. We read in Acts 18 of an expulsion of all Jews from the city by the emperor. This brought Priscilla and Aquilla to Corinth where they met Paul and proved valuable in the service of Jesus. It is possible that through them Paul learned much more about the Church in Rome and developed considerable passion to visit them. Generally, Jews were acquainted with the Scriptures. Gentiles were not. This would have concerned Paul, a church suddenly deprived of its core of spiritual people.

The expulsion of the Jews by Claudia (Acts 18:1-2), seems to have occurred before Paul wrote the book of Romans. Evangelical scholars generally believe that Romans was written during the time spoken of in Acts 20:1-2, which was after Paul had met Priscilla and Aquilla. So it is likely that the audience was primarily gentiles by the time Paul wrote Romans.

To the Jewish practice of giving thanks to Yahweh, Christians had come to include thanksgiving to Jesus. Paul states that he gives thanks to God “through Jesus Christ”, or “because of Jesus Christ. This transforms a Jewish statement into a Christian one, and in its words, witness is born to all the truths that center on the person and work of Jesus Christ.

This is also a statement of Jesus as the person who had brought all this about. He was the responsible personal agent of all of it. Because of Jesus, Yahweh was Paul’s God. Because of Jesus’ work in whomever, there came to be believers in Rome. Because of Jesus’ work in people of Roman, news of their faith was spreading through the world. It was all happening although Paul, the chief messenger to the Gentiles, had never set foot in Rome. Paul was amazed by the great Roman story that God’s grace and the believer’s faithfulness had provided.

It was all so strategic. As in any earthly kingdom, what happens in its chief city spreads through its realm. As went Rome, so went the Roman Empire. Paul observes that news about the Church in Rome was spreading and that meant news about Jesus was spreading. To Paul, the strategic thinker, there was great cause for thanks in their story. They had been a blessing to him though he has not set foot in their city.

1:9—“For God, whom I serve in my spirit in the *preaching of the* gospel of His Son, is my witness as to how unceasingly I make mention of you,”

It appears from the brief account of Paul before his conversion that he was a man of intentionality and strategy. His approach to ridding the world of Christians reflected this. The Spirit’s work in and through Paul was such that he now thought like this with respect to the benefit and progress of the kingdom of God. Because he thought strategically, he prayed strategically and in praying strategically he naturally prayed for the progress of the Church in Rome.

Paul refers to something about himself here that is significant, and it was very evident to any who followed him around. Paul served God in his spirit. He had at one time thought he was serving God. He was obeying the urges of his flesh. His desire to distinguish himself and to be influential in Judaism pushed him (Galatians 1:13-17; Philippians 3:4-11). It burned like a fire in his soul. But it was just him. It was not a heart of service. It was not submission to God. But it sure felt like it!

Service to the body of Christ needs to be like this in us. It should flow from within, not from our own needs and not from some expectation that we sense from others. Whenever it is sourced in our spirits from His Spirit there is through our efforts progress for the gospel. Now all believers have that Spirit residing in their own spirit. But the key is to quickly listen for and respond to His leadings and to learn to submit the things that arise from our own thoughts to those things that are of Him. He is always introducing into our minds thoughts that are His heart in the moment before us. This process described Paul’s life. It should be the passion and dream of every Christian to live in that way.

1:10—“always in my prayers making request, if perhaps now at last by the will of God I may succeed in coming to you.”

Paul’s prayer had been persistent. He asked God to allow him to travel to Rome and was determined on his part that this would come about (Acts 19:21). It would. But it would not come as Paul envisioned it. He hoped to come to them (Romans 15:32) and find refreshing rest in their company before pushing on to Spain (Romans 15:28). Very often the burdens placed on our hearts by the Holy Spirit evolve into something quite different as we pursue them. We must anticipate this and not waiver in our faith as the reality of God’s plan unfolds. Faithfulness in the moment must trump our own understanding of what God wishes to accomplish.

1:11—“For I long to see you in order that I may impart some spiritual gift to you, that you may be established;”

The goal of Paul’s conversations and efforts was always that faith be strengthened. His desire to see the people in Rome was not merely social. It was that he knew through his ministry to them their faith could be made more stable.

The phrase that draws attention in this verse is “that I may impart some spiritual gift to you.” We know that God gives the gifts and various manifestations of the Spirit sovereignly as He wills by His grace (1 Corinthians 12:11,18). So it is not that Paul was the source of the gifts. By using this expression, he may have meant that by exercising his own gifts he would stimulate their spiritual gifts. Their ministry to each other would then become more complete. We know that this would be a legitimate way of viewing a gift. God gives it to a person and as they exercise it in the Church, they themselves become a gift to the Church and the gifts of others are strengthened.

By saying this Paul could also be referring to the practice of his apostolic authority whereby some gifts would be bestowed supernaturally on various ones of them as he laid hands on them. Elsewhere he says that Timothy’s gift came to him as a result of a prophetic utterance and the laying on of hands (1 Timothy 4:14). It appears in that case that it was the Elders who laid on hands.

It must be added that it does not appear from the specific texts on spiritual gifts that apostolic authority was required for them to be bestowed, or that even Elder authority was required. But apparently gifts did at times become energized through such occasions. This is likely an example of words that are descriptive not prescriptive. But they express a desire that is prescriptive.

We should have Paul’s passion to strengthen and establish the faith of others and that should be paramount in our times with them. The word rendered *στηριχθῆναι* does not mean just to encourage. Encouraging is a work that needs to be done repeatedly. This word implies becoming fixed as opposed to moving about or being detached. The concept is likely to provide foundation and stabilizing thought, strength, and structure. It is the word used by Christ when He tells Peter to “strengthen your brethren.” It is a primary aim of ministry, and particularly the ministry of the apostolic company.

1:12—“that is, that I may be encouraged together with you *while* among you, each of us by the other’s faith, both yours and mine.”

Here Paul makes it clear that the benefit produced by spending time in Rome will be mutual. There is always this process going on in the body of Christ. Even those who are key leaders learn and grow from the process we call fellowship. The sharing of one’s gift ministers to both the giver and the recipient.

This is an important principle of Church ministry, that in blessing others, I am blest. In encouraging others and building them up, I am built up. It is this that keeps leaders from drying up and withering, but they must remember it and receive it both from the Lord and others.

Paul makes two statements within this verse to reinforce this idea. First, he speaks of being ‘encouraged together’ and then adds to that the words “among you” (literally “in you or with you”). Second, he says they will each be strengthened by one other’s faith (lit. by the in-one-another-faith”), and then adds to that phrase “both yours and mine.” The idea then of mutual edification and growth is championed by this wording.

1:13—“And I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that often I have planned to come to you (and have been prevented thus far) in order that I may obtain some fruit among you also, even as among the rest of the Gentiles.”

A visit to Rome had eluded Paul. He speaks here of planning to come often, yet not having succeeded thus far. We know that this did happen to Paul on different occasions. We suspect that by personality he made plans and set goals and so raised expectations. There is a huge upside to this, but the downside is that our plans can have to be altered because of the more urgent leading of the Spirit and then we have to deal with the unmet expectations we have raised and the inevitable criticism.

Paul was no stranger to this dilemma (2 Corinthians 1:12-18; Acts 16:6-10). There is a spontaneity factor inherent in the Spirit-directed life that we must factor in. It does not appear that this can or should be avoided (see previous verses as well as James 4:13-17). The balance of establishing a plan and then being willing to abandon it seems critical.

Paul planned to visit Rome because of the possibility he saw of bearing fruit among them. This was his passion, to strengthen Gentile churches. He longed to invest in Rome. He knew it was both strategic and needy. It is always the desire of the one whose heart is right to bear fruit for God. They long for opportunity to do so and they seek opportunity that aligns with their giftedness. Paul dreamed of Rome and the way in which his prayer to visit there would materialize would stretch him considerably. God does not remove the “stretch factor” that comes with our dreaming great things.

1:14—“I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to wise and to the foolish.”

When Paul says he is under obligation he uses a banking term so that he is saying that he owes a debt to the people he names. Now in what sense did Paul owe the Greeks and Barbarians, the wise and the foolish anything? How could it even be construed that as Christ’s apostle he representatively owed them anything? Only love can explain this expression. Only God’s own character, that which is within Him, demands anything of Him or constrains Him to behave towards someone in a certain way. So Paul is a debtor because of the love within him that constrained him (2 Corinthians 5:14-21). It was who he had become in Christ that placed a demand on his behavior. He labored because of this conviction, that he owed it to every person to extend the invitation to join God’s family of the forgiven.

This demand of love from within Paul was so great that it was not mitigated by the “status” and relative social rank of people. It had made Paul blind to all such distinctions. He looked and saw great value and worth in them and that was it. This reveals the remarkable transformation that had occurred in the Hebrew of Hebrews, the onetime Pharisee.

1:15—“Thus, for my part, I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.”

Because of the love of God that had filled Paul’s heart he felt constrained to minister the truth to all men. So he eagerly anticipated time with those in Rome. He wanted the Christians there to know his own vision and passion for that trip. He was driven to do it by who he himself had become in Christ.

The gospel has been mentioned three times already in this letter. Paul understood it as the body of truth for which he was set apart (verse 1), and as a work for which he was set apart (vs. 5). It is a specific body of truth the centerpiece of which is the truth of God's son Jesus the Christ (v. 9). It must be understood as all of this. It is truth. It is The truth about Jesus. It is truth that advocates a certain way of life, and it is a truthful way of life that must be propagated, to which men everywhere are called. They are called to learn it, to follow it, and to teach it. The rest of Paul's letter will be concerned with this, the clear definition of the facts undergirding the gospel along with the many implications of them.

1:16—"For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek."

There are two key words in this verse, a verse that again expresses something about the theme of this letter, the gospel. Those key words are the word gospel and the word salvation.

The word gospel has both a narrow and a broad meaning. The word itself comes from the word for good, joined to the word for an announcement. So the word's semantic value is "good news." It is used in the narrower sense to speak of the central facts regarding the person central to the good news, Jesus Christ. It refers in this way to the news about His death, His burial, and His resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:1-8). The term gospel can also be used in the broader sense of the body of knowledge that is true because of these core essential facts, even reaching back to times before the life and death of Christ (Galatians 3:8; Hebrews 4:2). This broader idea, the gospel with its implications, is what the theme of Romans is. Paul will speak to the entire scope of what could be called "the gospel experience," the thinking and lifestyle that are true because of the core truths of Christ.

The term salvation is also one with both a narrow and broad meaning. This word means to rescue or to make safe, healthy, or sound. We use the term today most often to speak of the moment of belief when one receives forgiveness from the penalty of sin and is pardoned by God. It is used very sparingly in this way in Scripture, to speak of what we would say in theological terms is our justification.

It is used in several different ways in the New Testament. At times it is used to speak of the process initiated by our pardon and forgiveness, the process of our sanctification in the practical world of real life (Philippians 2:12; 2 Timothy 3:15; 2 Corinthians 1:6). At other times it is used of our future glorification when that process will be completed in the sense of our being transformed into perfect beings (1 Peter 1:5). It is often used of being rescued from calamity (Luke 1:71; Philippians 1:19), or even sickness (James 5:15). It is used for being in a state of physical soundness (Acts 27:34), what we would call good health.

As stated earlier, in the world of American evangelicalism, the words "salvation" and "saved" refer most often to that moment in time when we pray the "sinner's prayer" and receive forgiveness for our sins. It is important and critical in terms of building an accurate doctrine of salvation that we do not impose this more narrow meaning on the texts of Scripture that use the various derivatives of the Greek word σωζω. That word has a broader meaning than our twenty first century American evangelical usage.

Paul says here that the gospel of God, meaning the truth that encompasses the facts of Christ's life and death with all its implications, is the power of God. It is astounding that the gospel appears to be the story of a man dying a shameful death, condemned by humans, and hung on a cross. But by the act of Yahweh this truth of a man dying on a cross had great power.

To those within the scope of belief the message of the cross epitomizes the power of God. The cross represents God's power to orchestrate the events of earth so that they bring about His purposes. The cross shows Yahweh's power to reverse the intent of evil and bring about good. It represents His ability to find a way to bring about His desire yet satisfy the demands of every aspect of His character. It shows His power to bring about through imperfect people and events matters of His will and of great eternal consequence. It shows his power to overcome the power of the evil one's lies, deceits, and schemes. It shows His moral power, power to provide for the complete moral reclamation and re-creation of those "hopelessly" immoral, power to reverse an immoral current. It shows His power to create, to raise up a righteous and holy kingdom in the midst of evil's cruel and vicious domain. In the midst of the kingdom of evil and against its suppression is the power of God and the cross that transforms the evilest subjects of that kingdom to make them instruments of righteousness given to the service of a holy God. And besides all this, the cross shows the unwavering, relentless, unthwartable love of Yahweh that focuses and directs His limitless power! The cross epitomizes the power of God both its infinite nature and what directs it.

To Paul the gospel is truth that has a vested ability and potential to accomplish work. That is what power is. Paul names the specific work it accomplishes, which is the salvation of everyone that believes. By salvation he means not only their forgiveness but their transformation from disobedient sinners into obedient children of God. Once forgiven they are re-united with Yahweh—His Spirit is joined to theirs. From within them there is this personal voice and influence seeking to build into them the character of God Himself. So the Gospel means salvation in real life—rescue from who they instinctively are.

The Gospel of God is the power of God because it provides for the joining of our spirits to His. But God's power toward us in the Gospel also includes our eventual transformation bodily into beings who are flawless, completely rescued from all the effects of sin, beings that physically display His glory.

The gospel should not be seen as simply the source of our forgiveness. It is the source of our transformation as well. The gospel does not have this power and ability independent of God. The gospel is simply an announcement of His action. This action, taken by God, motivated by His character, brings about the satisfaction of all God's requirements to restore humanity from their fallen state to a state of spiritual health and sound standing with God. We have only to believe in the report of that Divine action, the gospel. So the gospel is an announcement of action taken by God that results in the salvation of all who come to trust in the gospel's report of the action.

1:17—“For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, ‘but the righteous man shall live by faith.’”

The Greek word *γὰρ*, rendered “for,” signals that this verse provides further explanation which strengthens the statement just made. That statement was that the gospel was a display of God’s power in the lives of those who believed it. This verse then, explains in what sense that is true and can be observed. Through the gospel, a righteousness produced by God is being revealed, one possible for every human to experience.

This righteousness is not a human righteousness that reveals itself through mere outward acts of conformity to some code. It is unique, sourced not in man but in God. So this righteousness is the sort that pleases Him and conforms to His high standard because it is actually from Him.

This righteousness is being revealed, coming to light for all to see. It is an ongoing revelation. It is not over and done with. It is not an event recorded in history that we read about and reflect on. We not only observe this act of revelation, we participate in it.

Paul says it is being revealed from faith. Faith is its noticeable, observable manifestation. That means that the revelation of God’s righteousness is occurring through the lives of humanity, specifically through the lives of all who trust the gospel. Wherever there is trust in the gospel, it is certain that His power is the cause.

The presence of trust among humans can only be explained as the result of God’s work. It would not be there by our own effort and imagination. This God is too different to be a product of our own imagination. The world is full of gods of our own imagination, and they are nothing like this one true God, and they are not trusted, they are feared or used. So trust among humanity in God, is clear evidence that He exists, for its presence can only be explained by His power.

The result of this display of God’s righteousness is that more faith is produced. This is the idea rendered by the Greek phrase *ἐκ πίστεως εἰς πίστιν*, rendered in English “from faith to faith” or from trust to trust. The righteousness produced by God shows itself in trust in God. Individuals trust God in greater and greater ways and this trust in God spreads among individuals. It is becoming visible in diverse places, from the monastery to the marketplace.

Establishing trust in humanity towards God then, can be seen as very critical to God. It is what His efforts among humanity are aimed at, what His power is focused on producing in us. What our journey is about is increasing ability to trust Him and so to be empowered by Him and used by Him to produce greater faith in others. Faith is the means and end of His work in humanity.

All of this conforms to the statement God made through the prophet Habakkuk (Habakkuk 2:4), which Paul quotes. This statement is quoted by Paul here and in his letter to the Galatians (3:11). It is also quoted by the writer to the Hebrews (10:38). In the Habakkuk passage the righteous person who lives by trust in Yahweh is being contrasted with the proud one, particularly those of Chaldea. The New Testament writer's various quotations of that verse are "free quotations." That is, they seek to extract and state its principle rather than its exact words. The faith principle cannot be over-stated. It is a critical one in terms of understanding divine value and thought. Faith is what God seeks to produce, what He seeks out in hearts, and what He rewards. He does so without regard for other qualities that we would view as more meritorious. A person is considered righteous by God purely based on faith. It causes Him to forgive all other liabilities. He extends to them all that is His. So a person of faith finds life, God's life, eternal life, all that was lost in the Garden of Eden. A person is declared righteous by their faith, and they become more righteous by virtue of their growing faith. This statement's truth is being clearly demonstrated, "the righteous will live by his faith."

This trust-in-Yahweh-life is the righteousness that is being unveiled by God through the gospel. The gospel provides the entry level message that begins the faith-life. It also provides the truth that leads to more truth that leads to more of the life. This revelation is occurring because something else is also being revealed.

1:18—"For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness."

It is good that a righteousness is being produced by God in this world. This is good because the fact that He is Himself righteous means that He is angry with the unrighteousness of men, and that this righteous and just anger is being made known among men.

The fact that it is being revealed does not mean it is being fully experienced. But what the verses that follow will show is that it is being experienced in that just consequences are being meted out by God that humanity is experiencing for their disobedience of truth. The condition that will be described is one that exists in every human being apart from the grace of God and truth of the gospel. Their condition leads humanity on a journey in which they repeat Adam's sin many times each day. Morally speaking, all manner of depravity is possible in every person. More sobering, it is likely. This is what makes the gospel urgent, and it is why it is called good news. God always moves against unrighteousness.

The next 15 verses will speak of things we see in the world each day that are shameful and destructive. They are consequences to sin that humankind experiences. They are part of humanity's experience when they violate God because they're embedded in the fabric of creation due to the character of the Creator and Sustainer of all that is. Because God is imminent in His creation, that is, He is at work in it and is present and active in it, it reflects who He is. The result is that it tends to spew out that which violates His character. So the life of sin is a hard life.

In this verse the reality of humanity's stance toward God is very pointedly stated. The human condition is not one of ignorance, but one of deliberate choice. The truth is known, but it is suppressed in unrighteousness (see Appendix 1 on the suppression of truth). This means that humanity chooses to overwhelm the voice of truth by the force of their own will because they desire those things that are unrighteous. The result is that truth's voice is "held down" in them in favor of things that they would rather experience and do. This violates the will of their Creator and the laws of creation, and it means the loss of the life humanity was intended to have.

It is a great privilege to have our Creator speak to us and address us in a personal way from a heart of concern. When He does so it happens in a way we can easily pass over it. There are times when He speaks to us in mass through very normal channels such as through Christian leaders in Church meetings. There are other times when He speaks to us individually through a person that He places in our life at a time of His choosing. There are times when He sends us a message through circumstances. Sometimes He speaks to us very privately, through our own mental processes as we pray or ponder some issue in our lives. Always when He does so there is the witness within us of our own conscience that "this is the way, walk in it" (Is. 30:21). It is dealing with this inner voice that becomes critical in the salvation process. We must become people who listen to the Spirit directed voice of conscience.

None of this is to say that humanity knows the gospel and that they have all rejected it. It is to say that they know there is a Creator and that He is to be acknowledged and served. Humanity is created a worshipping being. They instinctively think of first causes. They do not know Christ instinctively, and they are not good instinctively. But as part of creation they are instinctively drawn by creation to ponder a Creator. In that pondering they make a series of moral choices, for no one can process such ideas without entering the moral realm. The truth of a Creator and Sustainer is one with great implications.

To the degree one suppresses this germ of truth in themselves, they experience the wrath of their Creator, and are punished by their own choices. To the degree one accepts that truth and grows in it, they discover who He is and the life He Himself gives. This section of Scripture is about the former, the life that is experienced apart from the Creator.

1:19—"Because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them."

This verse speaks to the issue of why the wrath of God is being revealed. It is a valid question to ask, "Why would a righteous and loving God be angry to the degree that He would allow human suffering?" This is a question that should be asked because reflecting on it helps bring to light a whole string of the Creator's attributes.

Here we learn that God is not angry with men because of what they don't know. That would be an injustice. He is angry because of their conscious response to truth that is evident within them. It is what they do with what they clearly know. He is also angry because of what they do with what is evident to them. The next verse will show that He is not referring here to specific information that leads to salvation, only to general information about God that men can clearly see and do clearly see. The subject of this verse is not what is known, but the fact that something is known about God to men, and we conclude that this refers to all of humankind. Whatever it is, and the next verse will speak to that, it involves things that God has made evident or clear to humanity.

This is also information that is clear within them. This does not mean they have concluded it is true. They have in fact done the opposite. But it does mean they have been able to consider it to the point of seeing its truth. They have then had opportunity to decide whether or not to accept it as true, and this is where they have stumbled and fallen. They have pondered the truth and its implications and chosen to extinguish the testimony of their own conscience within them in favor of being able to believe what they wish and so be able to act as they please.

There is no doubt our conscience can be weak and defiled. It can be weak due to a lack of the presence of the Holy Spirit. This is the case in the non-believer. In such a person however, the conscience is still used by God however weak and defiled it is to guide them to belief. The conscience can be weak through atrophy. That is a common condition we bring on ourselves by ignoring it, so that its voice we do not even hear. This is a common condition even in Christians. It can be defiled through information that is inaccurate. Exercising it according to the truth supplied by revelation corrects our conscience. God's design is that through the presence of the Holy Spirit our conscience becomes a means of hearing and following His voice to us.

What is the conscience? From a biblical viewpoint in the 21st century how are we to understand this inner voice that is present in every person? It is best to see it as an activity of the human spirit, that part of our being that makes us living beings that is from God (Genesis 2:7). One of the functions of this portion of our being is to work in conjunction with our mind as a witness to what is true and right. Our conscience is God's gift to us. That we have it is one of the things that distinguishes us from animals. They can be taught through negative and positive consequences to behave in a right or wrong manner, but they have no inner understanding of moral matters apart from our instruction and training. We have that inner moral compass that is part of God's image in us. It can be developed through the Holy Spirit's presence, through use, and through our understanding of truth into a precise and valuable asset.

This is what suppressing the truth refers to. It is the conscious act of replacing truth with fiction to gain some selfish end. It is this activity among humankind that has brought to light God's anger. We see that side of God in response to this selfish, reckless behavior in humanity. A being of lesser character might overlook it. God sees its destructive power.

The scripture frequently uses a metaphorical expression for this suppressing of the truth. It calls it hardening of the heart. It builds on the idea that just as hands can be hardened by the building of callouses, so the conscience can become insensitive to God's leadings and urgings by repeatedly ignoring them.

Hardening of the heart then, refers to a liability that resides in every person. We can make a choice to steel ourselves against the witness of our own conscience. The ability to over-rule our conscience is critical in a fallen world. There are a few errant ideas and superstitions that would otherwise lead us in a terrible moral direction. Sin damages and scars us so that it becomes possible for us to commit atrocities in the name of conscience. So it is critical that we be able to over-rule our conscience. Yet if we do so at the wrong times, we inflict great damage on ourselves. Therefore, God's provision of a written record of His will for us is so critical. Armed with knowledge of truth from this written record, our rational processes can be used by the Holy Spirit to rule our conscience, strengthen it, and conform its voice to the standards of God.

But this ability to rule our conscience with our rational mind can become the means of silencing our conscience. Self-serving thoughts and courses of action can carry the day. We can mute the voice of conscience entirely. In the imagery of Scripture this is pictured as developing callouses on it so that it is insensitive. At this point we lose a large part of our innate potential to know, understand, and relate to our Creator. To summarize, hardening of the heart is deliberately turning away from conclusions that our conscience is seeking to lead us to. It is resisting the influence of conscience and suppressing the truth. This has brought about the anger of God.

The anger of God is different than that which is generally seen in humanity. Our anger is usually personal hurt. It comes when we perceive that we are being de-valued or when our desires are being blocked. It is most often self-centered in the sense that it is an impulsive course of action aimed at meeting our own need and getting what our damaged, scared psyche tells us is right.

God's anger is different in that it is not impulsive, and it is based on desires that are right and just and in motives that are pure. It is a course of action rooted in perfect character rather than in a damaged and scared psyche. It is motivated by true and complete knowledge of motive and thought not by mere perception. It becomes a reality only when love has done its work, and so only after warnings have been given, multiple opportunities granted, grace periods extended, all the things we would hope to do, done to absolute perfection. When we study God's wrath this is what is revealed about it. It is fierce, but it is also just and very, very slow in coming.

Through this verse we know that the wrath of God is a reality, and it is being revealed. He is revealing it in hope that humanity will be drawn to repentance before the fullness of His wrath is shown and confirms them forever in their fallen state.

1:20—"For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse."

Psalms 19:1 tells us that "the heavens are telling of the glory of God." Here in his letter Paul makes the same kind of statement about creation. Creation is what theologians call general revelation. By this term we mean that creation reveals general information about the Creator, just as anything that has been made is an expression of the one who made it. We call it general revelation because the information specific to salvation is not evident in creation.

But Paul says here that information about God's existence, His character and makeup is "clearly seen" through what He has created. Because of the complexities of creation, both in terms of its volume and its intricacies, many things about God are repeatedly demonstrated so that great clarity is provided for both the simplest and the greatest minds. So vast is this information that David says that creation "pours forth speech" (Psalm 19:2).

Paul says here that men are without excuse. The world we live in reveals that there is a God, and it reveals what He is like, as long as we do not suppress the message or warp it to fit what we want the truth to be. If it is viewed as the creation of someone, it reveals much about that someone. To those who deny it is a creation of a personal being, its truth is lost. To those who imagine a being and work creation's message to fit it, the message is marred by their own ideas.

To those who let creation speak, it clearly reveals God's eternal power and His divine nature. That He has power to create such enduring power as the forces in the universe reveals that His power is eternal. That so much about creation is predictable and consistent, reveals His immutability and stability. That there is a spot in creation called earth that sustains our lives reveals His love, concern, and goodness. Creation's beauty reveals His beauty. Its order reveals His knowledge and His faithfulness. Its detail reveals His immanence. Its vastness reveals His transcendence. So there is no person that can claim not to have the information they needed to believe in God.

The testimony of Scripture is that this truth is made available to all. If they are good stewards of this truth, more specific revelation is brought to them by God. Thus, they can eventually come to know the truth about Jesus Christ that leads to salvation, if they continue to open their hearts to what truth they have been given. This principle, that God reveals Himself in stages and brings greater understanding of truth to those who respond rightly to what they know is stated in a variety of contexts in Scripture (Luke 8:10, 18; John 7:17, 12:36-43).

And so the idea that people exist who have had no opportunity to respond to the gospel while true, does not mean that information has been withheld from them. In the sense of their ears hearing the truth that Jesus died, was buried, and rose again, it is true that many have never heard. However, it seems from the overall testimony of Scripture that this is because of rejection of more general information on God. We must not be arrogant in this matter, but it seems that in His sovereignty and love God will move heaven and earth to bring an adequate knowledge of truth to those whom His omnipresence and omniscience tell Him will respond (Jonah 1-4; Acts 10; Acts 16:6-10).

1:21—"For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God, or give thanks; but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened."

This verse describes the overall action of humanity regarding God. It is, due to God's grace, not a statement about everyone. It does describe the trend that has been present in each person. When Paul says they knew God, he is speaking in terms of the knowledge that comes with general revelation. The word he uses for know here is *γινωσκω*, and it describes a knowledge that is personal, even intimate. So through creation there is a proper sense in every human that there is a powerful Creator.

But Paul goes on to say that they do not respond to this series of thoughts that are present within them by honoring their Creator. They do not acknowledge His goodness to them by giving thanks. Paul does not at this point say why there is an absence of this logical reaction. We can surmise from what follows and from other biblical revelation that it is due to humanity's aversion to be ruled by anyone other than themselves. There is an aversion to submission. It is more expedient to invent a god or gods that allow us to think as we naturally think and pursue those things we naturally like to pursue. These are the "futile speculations" Paul refers to. They are futile because they are not truthful. What is not truthful enslaves us and so wastes our efforts and our years. What is futile is an illusion that in time we must face, and that is the nature of the theology we invent and erect that allows us to behave as we please.

But there is something else such thinking does that goes beyond futile into the realm of tragedy. Paul describes it as the darkening of the heart. We know that light and darkness in Scripture refer to the presence or absence of truth. To have one's heart darkened is to experience loss of truth. So the truth once instinctively pondered of creation and a Creator is eventually lost. Such individuals with darkened minds cannot go back to it and find their way. It is forever gone, and that is the greatest tragedy that can happen to any human being. "They would not believe therefore they could not believe" (John 13:39). The thoughts of hope and trust in a benevolent Creator are replaced by speculations and superstitions and apart from the miraculous work of God's grace, the comfort and wisdom of the light of truth has been forever lost. It no longer resides within them but has been chased out by unbelief. They have come to believe their own lie, and that is called here the darkening of the heart.

1:22—"Professing to be wise, they became fools,"

Such as have darkened hearts become truth searchers, but not truth finders. Those who respond to what truth they know, however elementary, are those who are entrusted with more truth from God. So these profess to be wise and are impressive from a human standpoint. They might be lettered and of keen intellect. But they are fools because they cannot set aside a bias humanity has against the idea of a God.

Whenever we go against the truth we become fools. We cannot change truth by not believing it. It is the ultimate futility to think that truth can be altered. Yet there is always an air of wisdom about those who stand against truth. There is a certain appeal to humanity in their swagger, their independence, and their "freedom." So such a course can appear to be wise, courageous and attractive. It is pursued in the name of things like wisdom, enlightenment, reality, open-mindedness, free thought, all of which have come to sound more noble to humanity than things like faith, trust, and submission. But the reality is stated here in seven words. In the name of wisdom, humanity becomes foolish. It is a great irony that we can become foolish while all the time claiming to pursue wisdom.

1:23—"and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures."

Somehow in the mainstream of humanity it has become easier to ascribe creation to beings that are figments of our own imaginations rather than accepting the testimony of revelation about an all-wise, all-knowing Creator. The truth is that the glory of an incorruptible God is a profound treasure. It not only explains the existence of all things, but it explains the purpose of all things, and gives them value and significance. A God who is eternal and unchanging, who is not subject to any influence outside that of His own character, lends a dignity and value to all that is.

The fact that such a concept is so easily let go of argues strongly for the existence of a powerful rival who has considerable ability to deceive and to twist the human perception of reality. The result is that man is willing to blot from his mind the One who gives him eternal hope and dignity, this eternal, all powerful, holy being. In His place he imagines beings to whom he ascribes power against all logic, beings who like fallen man are subject to all manner of whim and diverse influence. The truth reveals an actual person, a personal being. Humanity exchanges this for an image, an idea represented by an image in various forms. In the exchange they let go of all that makes humanity distinct from the rest of creation, the glory of man who is made in the image of God. There is nothing that has degraded humanity more than unbelief.

1:24—“Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, that their bodies might be dishonored among them.”

Sin in humanity is such that it gradually spoils and eventually destroys all moral fiber that a person has. God's grace is the only thing that can arrest and reverse this process. It is what keeps within the humanity any standard of morality. God is not the author of this destruction. Rather it is He that keeps it from running its course. He is the reason why there is good in the world and why humanity rises to do good things. He only needs to withhold his grace and people will quickly spiral downward when left to their own thoughts and devices.

This verse describes a partial withdrawal of God's grace. Whenever individuals repeatedly chose to reject the truth of God's existence, He allows them to experience a little more of life without His grace. The result is always that they move a little further away from the dignity He gave them in creation.

This verse teaches that God lets go of convicting them on the inside regarding moral purity. Since lust is often the reason why they wish to be free of Him, He allows them to serve their lusts. The result is that which brings them dishonor. It is most often a secret life that eventually comes to light and brings them shame and loss, but not necessarily unhappiness. There is a blindness that settles in with this condition so that they are often content and sometimes proud of their lack of restraint.

Whatever their own evaluation may be, the truth is that setting aside the truth of God always brings shame and dishonor to a person. Humanity was made in the image of God, meant to reflect His glory and so to have a special dignity. They are meant to live by reason and truth, guided by a moral conscience, rather than living by mere instinct. When truth is set aside, God withdraws to some degree His grace, and the result is always a pattern of choices that degrade the person when it becomes known.

1:25—“For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever, Amen.”

This verse adds further thought to what has just been stated. Paul has spoken of the withdrawal of God's grace. God, at the behest of willful humans, lets go of them and allows them to pursue the way they please. Though it is not a total withdrawal of grace, without which not a soul would be preserved, it has far-reaching impact. Such individuals bring shame and dishonor on themselves.

This phrase states why this “giving over” is justified by God. Such people have acted deliberately and have made a very willful choice. They have willingly embraced a false theology and let go of a truthful one. The heart of the matter is that they have elevated to a position of supreme authority created things, from God's created things to ideas of their own creation. Either way, by deliberate choice, something or someone occupies the exclusive place that only God deserves. They experience the consequences of living under that rule.

There is tragic irony recorded in these words. Humanity, a special creation of God meant to rule over the rest of creation (Genesis 1:23), instead serves created things. There is a sad loss of dignity that comes with their willfulness, a loss of freedom, a distorting of the design of the Creator, and this is part of a groaning that Paul hears in creation (Romans 8:19-22).

1:26—“For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural.”

This is the second of three times in verses 18 through 32 that a “giving over” is spoken of (see verse 24 and 28). As individuals progressively move away from truth there is a progressive withdrawal of grace and truth. The first “giving over” happened when they refused to honor God as the Creator and be thankful to Him (verse 21). The result is not named precisely, only that their bodies were “dishonored among them.” This likely refers to a general promiscuity and loss/setting aside of sexual boundaries.

Because of their growing willfulness in this course of action whereby they set up for themselves false gods to serve and false theologies, God gives them over to what He calls “degrading passions.” These are specifically described as same-sex affairs. This verse speaks of the presence of this lifestyle among women. The following verse will address its presence among men. Here it is called degrading and unnatural. From these terms God’s view of the lifestyle is very clear. It is sin. In terms of design homosexuality is to Him, the designer, unnatural. That means that in the end it will not serve well. When we go against design, we are always settling for less than what the designer has for us, and this is true of all sin. This is ultimately why it is “degrading.” It takes away from God’s intentions and His plan.

Sin in general is degrading. But it seems that people are compromised as persons through sexual sin. We know this is true of molestation, incest, rape and the like. We are reluctant to think it is true of sexual deviance entered into by mutual consent.

That sexual behavior outside boundaries established by the Creator degrades humans is one of several reasons why Paul would say in another letter that the one who commits immorality sins against his own body (1 Corinthians 6:18). In some sense the impact of sexual sin is such that it is experienced in our very beings. That consent may be given so that there is no victim is meaningless. We ourselves are victimized by it. And so, it is not just a matter of it degrading us because people look down on us. We would not be made better if society simply would accept our actions. Sexual immorality robs us of something.

1:27—“and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error.”

Paul repeats his line of reasoning that he has made regarding women in verse 26, by stating that men have done the same thing. When men abandon the truth of God, they cast aside in time all of its boundaries, and this manifest itself in the expression of sexuality. It does not mean that everyman who does so becomes homosexual in orientation. Homosexuality is just one demonstration of humanity leaving the boundaries of sexual expression that God has set forth. Other examples would be pedophilia and bestiality, or some of the pornographic addictions of the modern era. It is incest, rape, sexual abuse and the like. Paul’s point is that abandoning God ultimately shows itself in sexual expression.

It is important that we remember that our sexuality was part of God's design in us so that it is not evil. It is in fact, good. Like many of the features of our design, it can become evil if not governed by the truth. That is always the issue when it comes to living in a fallen world. When we leave the safety of truth something within us dies a little more. Just a little more of God's image in us is tarnished and we experience the "due penalty" of our error. The penalty manifests itself in spiritual, emotional, and physical symptoms. The point of this pair of verses is that deviant sexual behavior is an ominous sign. Seeking freedom individuals have turned away from truth and in that act they always sacrifice something of themselves.

1:28—"And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things that are not proper."

Since humans wish to live without God, He allows them to experience such a life. Paul writes that He gives them over to a depraved mind. A depraved mind is different from a deprived mind. A deprived mind is the result of not being allowed access to certain facts and truths. It may be to some degree a product of one's own actions, but it also is the result of other things outside of one's own control. Knowledge has been withheld. A depraved mind is one that has chosen a moral direction, to disregard and set aside truth's standards of right and wrong and substitute one's own. It is a mind that increasingly sets its own moral and ethical standards. It is the kind of mind that produces the atrocities of Stalin and Hitler. But it is also the kind of mind that produces the apathy that tolerates injustice and abuse. Because it is not a mind that is properly submitted to truth, it cannot be one that guides in ways that are truthful. Because it is not submitted to a higher standard of morality, it sinks to the level of expedience, and a mind operating on the principle of expediency will soon dictate unprincipled and improper behavior.

It is a blessing to have a mind governed and shackled by the truth. It keeps one free. It is the displeasure and judgment of God that leads to a mind that knows no moral boundaries, produces no pangs of conscience, and yields no anguish over personal behavior. That is a mind from which God has withdrawn a portion of His influence. Just as such a person has chosen first to not acknowledge God, God has chosen not to acknowledge them. Their choice has brought on them moral consequences that reach far beyond theology.

1:29—"being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips,"

This verse makes two distinctive descriptive statements, then introduces a third which is continued in the verses that follow. The first descriptive statement is a verbal idea expressed by a verbal adjective in the perfect tense. It describes action that has gone on that results in a certain state. It is rendered in the NASB by the phrase "being filled." The idea is likely that this is the moral direction they have allowed themselves to travel, resulting in these things being in full bloom in their character.

The second descriptive idea is introduced by an adjective, rendered in the NASB "full of." This introduces five examples of thoughts/actions that have come about because of the character defects that have reached full bloom. These five terms, all in the genitive case, describe things that can be seen in individuals who suppress the truth. Those who are filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, and evil, are found to be full of these specific things, envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice.

The third descriptive phrase is introduced by the last word in this verse and it extends through verse 31. This phrase is a string of nouns and adjectives in the accusative case. They could be viewed as the NASB rendering conveys, as delineating a state of being. These describe what they have become because of who they are. When we suppress truth, it eventually shapes who we are and the results are destructive to all that is good in us. So in this verse we have what they have chosen to be filled with instead of being filled with the truth and with God Himself. Then we see what they are full of, courses of action that come with such compromise. Then we see a string of realities that describe what they are, the identity that has become theirs.

1:30—“slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents,”

When people suppress truth, they eventually suppress the truth about themselves. They become what is repulsive even to them, but they are unable to see the reality of what they are.

This verse is a listing of their realities, things that others would say are true of them. They are slanderers. The term used here means to talk against. They become those who speak against others. They are haters of God. This naturally develops in one who suppresses truth. It is natural for them to react to the embodiment and source of truth. They are insolent, or ones who insult others and abuse them. The unspeakable things that shock the public become more and more prevalent in those who deny the truth. They place themselves above others. The word rendered arrogant means “to stand above,” and this is what they wish to do. They are constantly placing themselves in positions where they get the spotlight. This quest naturally makes them boastful. They speak in a very inflated way of themselves and their achievements. The next term describes them as inventors of evil. This is perhaps the saddest of the things listed because it marks them out as intentional in their evil. They become sources of ways to pursue all that is vile and offensive to God. They think of new ways to pursue the same old lusts and this is a commentary on the futile lifestyle they are caught in. They are disobedient to parents. The word disobedient is ἀπειθεῖς, θεῖθω meaning to persuade. With the α privative prefixed to it, it becomes a word that means unpersuadable. So their suppression of truth effects one of the most basic of all human relationships, and can be seen in the young as well as the more mature. It is natural that the relationship that was to allow for the propagation of holiness (Deuteronomy 6:4-9), break down when truth is rejected.

1:32—“and, although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them.”

There is in the conscience of all humanity a witness that certain things are wrong. There is also the understanding that such behavior deserves the worst punishment, even death. This is likely speaking of the second death, final separation from God for all eternity, though it is certain the Law revealed that some of the sins mentioned above were capital offenses. So this may be referring to knowledge gained through written revelation, though not all of humanity had this revelation.

This understanding that some crimes are punishable by death is seen across all sorts of cultural lines. It is a witness to the presence of truth within each human. This idea, that certain things are inherently wrong is eroded as humanity suppresses the truth. In time, no truth is safe. It can all be suppressed. And so in a society that begins to champion moral freedom, there comes to be laws that are against basic moral law so that they violate the conscience of those with an ear for truth. A very twisted condition of morality develops full of contradiction as a society journeys away from absolute moral standards. It isn't long before laws protecting lifestyles that break moral law are the norm. This moral reversal happens to some degree in all men regardless of the culture. It is the ultimate insult to God because in the act of approving behavior that God labels immoral, humanity has deified themselves, or at the very least declared God impotent.

We must remember that such moral reversal comes because of God's judgment on humanity. Because they suppress the truth of God's existence, doing so because they like the idea of being their own master, God withdraws a measure of His grace. He withdraws that which restrains a person from behaving as a creature of instinct. They begin a journey down a path of moral independence. Along the way God graciously continues to call for their repentance. If they repent, God's grace takes them on a journey that will result in their full restoration.

Apart from such a journey of repentance a person moves progressively further from God and experiences the progressive withdrawal of God's grace and its counterpart, His truth. Without these, degrading passions set in and such a person loves it so. They continue to spiral away from God until they arrive at the condition described in this verse where the untrue is true, evil is somehow good, and God is only a quaint idea. They are where they are because they have been judged, let go by God.

The first chapter of Romans describes the condition of unbelieving humankind. If a person, or a group of people are different, it is due to God's grace in response to their trust in Him. This is the scenario that was introduced when Adam and Eve fell that has played itself out in the life of every person. Humanity began to suppress the truth. As the fig leaves covered their nakedness and helped cover the truth about their condition so they pontificate on morality and invent deities to cover over the bare truth of their willfulness. Every human has a choice to make about the Creator and the truth He reveals. To a person we suppress His truth to some degree. The book of Romans shows why the gospel is such good news. It is God's power brought to bear on this hopeless condition in man.

Romans 2

2:1—Therefore you are without excuse, every man *of you* who passes judgment, for in that you judge another, you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things.

Because of how this verse begins, we must establish how exactly it is connected to the previous chapter. The message of the last half of chapter one is that every human being is without excuse before God because God clearly revealed information about Himself through creation. Instead of responding rightly to this, and we must remember that creation began with humanity knowing God intimately, knowledge of God and truth was suppressed. God was and is set aside in favor of any system of theology/truth that allows individuals to live as they please. The result has been a downward spiral and an eventual loss of the knowledge of God to varying degrees.

In this decline there has always been the presence of individuals who are moralists, who embrace a higher road of morality for their own reasons and view themselves as better than the balance of humanity because of it. But the truth is that all of humanity is guilty of the suppression of truth. All in some way seek to live according to their own desire, independent of God. Some do so in a more “moral” way than others. Not all are murderers or adulterers or drunks. But all are sinners and what makes them so is that they suppress the truth.

Every person who dares speak of how bad others are admits by that action that there is a moral law, a legitimate standard by which we have an expectation of what is proper. There IS such a standard. There is One who is the source of that standard and who has revealed what that standard is. By His law those who pass judgment are guilty of suppressing the truth as well. The ability to see in others any measure of error reveals knowledge of what should be. Such people reveal that the ability exists in them to discern their own errors. Such a person then reveals that they are without excuse in their own sin. They have both the knowledge and the ability to distinguish behavior.

When Paul says that a moralist practices “the same things,” he is not necessarily saying that the exact acts are duplicated. Rather, that the same kinds of things are practiced in some form. This is because all sin comes from the same root sin, the suppression of truth. All are in some sense “moralists.” All in their own way are suppressing the truth, practicing the same thing as those they condemn.

In this chapter then, Paul is supporting his idea of the first chapter. That key idea was that the gospel is God’s power directed humanity’s way to bring salvation, and that as such he gladly embraces it. He is going to support this by showing that all people, even good and moral people, need salvation. He is building toward an idea which he will state clearly in 3:23, that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” This is the message of the old covenant. It makes the gospel the greatest news ever!

2:2—And we know that the judgment of God rightly falls upon those who practice such things.

The first chapter has stated that the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against the acts of men who suppress the truth. This is right and proper, because men are not ignorant of what they are doing with the truth. God has from the beginning, revealed what is right and wrong and has clearly revealed Himself. Humanity started out with full and intimate knowledge of God, but most have willfully traveled away from how that knowledge instructed them to live.

To the extent individuals suppress the truth they experience and will yet experience God's judgment. God's judgment is fair and right. It is fair and right because He is the Creator and so has the right to do as He wishes with what He has created. It is also fair and right because He has placed within each human a moral compass that they have suppressed in favor of pursuing what their own desires dictated. God is right both because of who He is and by normal standards of justice.

It is important to remind ourselves that the practice of the things listed in chapter one comes because of a suppression of the truth. Much will be said in the verses that follow about doing these deeds, about doing good, and about doing evil. The epicenter of the great argument of who is good and who is evil is that good means the acceptance of the truth. Doing evil refers to the suppression of truth. The latter can have a moral look to it.

2:3—And do you suppose this, O man, when you pass judgment upon those who practice such things and do the same yourself, that you will escape the judgment of God?

Since we demonstrate that we are moral creatures by declaring certain ways of thinking and acting either right or wrong, it is preposterous for us to think that our own thinking and behavior should not be judged. If we as created beings have been endowed with such ability and responsibility, what do we expect of our Creator? And if we can see that certain things are wrong in others, should we not see the sin of the heart that produces this as present and wrong in ourselves? What conclusion should we arrive at regarding these things that we ourselves do, things that we are on record as condemning? Should we not be repentant? Should we not change our minds about them and turn from them ourselves?

That is the only response that could be accepted as correct or fair or righteous. Yet, there is in humanity the ability to conduct life in duplicity and so blind oneself to the true moral nature of our own thoughts and deeds. But the truth does not change by our suppression of it. None of us by our supposed "goodness" will escape the judgment of God.

These verses are establishing the sinfulness and guilt of the best of us, the "good people" among humanity. We each suppress the truth about ourselves and our deeds. We declare ourselves good. Our moral reality, however, is that our deeds are concealed and successfully hidden by us. By this we have suppressed the truth.

2:4—Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?

There is in the nature and character of God an abundance of three things, kindness, forbearance, and patience. He does not react quickly to offense nor does He act unjustly toward it. He does not over-react to offense. In fact, to many offenses He has not yet reacted in terms of a visible response. This was demonstrated very clearly in Christ. His response was kind even in the face of insult. He did not consider wrongs He suffered, great wrongs. He remains patient. These qualities are in rich supply in God's character.

As a result He is always seeking to enrich humanity's understanding of truth so that they see themselves for who they really are and Him for who He really is. And so in each man, woman and child there are moments of various sorts when God seeks to draw them to a change of mind. It may be a moment when the subject of Him comes up in conversation or a private moment when thoughts of a Creator drift through their minds. But the kindness in God is forever motivating Him to do just one more thing to help an individual change their minds about what is true.

It is the scourge of our willfulness that we take this kindness of His lightly by dismissing such moments as quaint, as mere fantasy, or as outright foolishness. They are the voice of His kindness beckoning us to come and experience more of His goodness. It is also the scourge of humanity that when we do turn and acknowledge Him we somehow think this is a result of goodness in us, and we become arrogant and proud as if we are people of moral stature.

It is quite likely that Paul has such people in mind in these verses. His words here should be very sobering to Christian people. We should never forget that it is God's kindness that led us to repentance. It is not a result of superior moral fiber somehow innate in us as opposed to the rest of humanity. If we are becoming more sanctified in our thinking and behavior, the primary explanation for that is His kindness. It continues to bring about in us change of mind and heart. We should never take it lightly.

2:5—But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God.

When it comes to sin and evil, it is very easy to spot it in others and yet overlook the very same things in our own lives. This is one of the most despicable of traits and it is universal, present in all humanity. We must remember that repentance needs to be our continual activity. We need to be always looking at our own course of action seeing it for what it really is (1 Corinthians 11:31-32). It is all too natural to become one who views themselves as morally superior, devoid of the faults and blemishes that afflict the rest of humanity. We must learn to see and condemn in our hearts the sins and inconsistencies we notice in others. Now their sin may not demonstrate itself in the same way in our lives. We may suppress it, covered it up, or even rightly rule over it. It may be just a series of thoughts that we keep from blooming and growing. But we must be humble enough to realize that the potential remains in all of us for the vilest of offenses.

A stubborn heart is one that refuses to face the truth about itself. The difference between a strong will and a stubborn heart lies to a certain degree in this, the willingness to shine the light of truth on one's own thoughts and motives and see them as they really are and repent of the sin that infects them. Stubbornness blocks repentance, and this blocks forgiveness and dissolution of our sin.

Stubbornness is the normal path of humanity and it is why God has a day in store for dealing with evil and evil people (Isaiah 2:12-22; 24:1-13). The one who does not judge themselves rightly is not prepared for that day. The one who faces the truth about their sins, who responds to the conviction of the Spirit of God, finds mercy and forgiveness.

Two statements are made about "the day" by Paul. First, it is a day of wrath, God's wrath. His kindness, forbearance, and patience have been demonstrated for millennia. The day will come when humanity sees His anger. He is angry about evil and sin, its causes and its effects, the pain it has given birth to and the good it has robbed so many of. It has marred and devastated His creation. He is angry and so it will be a day of anger. It will not however be a day when God throws a fit of rage.

The second statement made by Paul is that it will be a day of righteous judgment. All will recognize the patience and kindness of God and the wickedness of all who are aligned against Him. It will be a day of vindication, when beings get the full measure of what they deserve and all present agree that the punishment inflicted is righteous and just. It is a day to be prepared for.

2:6—who will render to every man according to his deeds:

I believe we must accept a theoretical salvation based on absolute conformity to the Law. By this I mean that if an individual could perfectly keep the Law indeed and spirit, they would be saved. I say we must accept this idea since it is the basis upon which Christ could be our sin-bearer. He was our sin bearer by virtue of being the unblemished lamb without spot, the one who flawlessly kept the Law and so could be its fulfillment. The Law provided the theoretical way of salvation that allowed a Redeemer to emerge. So though theoretically attainable, justification by works could never happen among fallen humans due to their moral inability. This idea comes into play in Paul's words here.

Beginning in 1:18 Paul has been giving the view of humanity apart from the gospel, the news of God's power brought to bear in man's behalf to give salvation. Here the standard of God's judgment is stated succinctly. Every human being will receive what his own deeds deserve. That is the stark reality of humanity's situation.

God's mercy and love have allowed Christ to take the place of humanity and bear the penalty for their sin. Those among humanity who believe in this act of Jesus Christ will be saved. That faith/trust is the one deed God requires of us. That is the gospel. The gospel does not violate God's justice. It meets its demand. Every person will be judged according to deeds. The gospel simply provides for humanity an action they can take which supersedes all others.

The beauty of the story of Yahweh and His relationship to His created ones is that He has a plan to save and rescue them for His eternal purposes. That rescue calls for humans to simply trust God. Whatever they know about Him they must trust. To those who trust what they have come to know He will reveal more. To those who distrust even what they know will gradually fade from their thoughts.

So when we talk about the work of humanity and what God requires and desires from them, it was made crystal-clear by Jesus. When He was asked, “What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?” To that question Jesus replied, “This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent.” The requirement of faith, meaning trust, is all God asks for from us. Simply trust that He is who He says He is, our all-powerful, loving, Savior.

It is good to remember what was stated earlier (at 2:2). The epicenter of the great argument of who is good and who is evil is that good means the acceptance/trust of the truth. Doing evil refers to the suppression of truth. The latter can have a moral look to it.

2:7—to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life;

The law for all who seek glory and honor and immortality, and all that goes with eternal life is simple. To anyone who asks, “What good must I do to have eternal life?” God’s answer is the Law and with it this message, “Persevere in doing good.” The search for glory and honor and immortality through doing good runs amuck in humanity. Paul has already described this futility in his letter to the Romans.

In the first chapter Paul has described the glory that is truly glory. He also described the supposed “glory” that leads to humiliation. What is truly glory comes about and is sustained in us as God remains God in our thought, in all His glory (1:23). He is not set aside. He is not compromised. He is assigned a place above all else. He occupies the only place that the only God should be in, that of absolute authority and rule, where He is looked to in every matter for approval and blessing. We are at our best when we embrace God in all His glory.

The first chapter describes in some detail the supposed “glory” that leads to all that is dishonorable (1:24) among humans. When it becomes honorable to give another the honor reserved for Yahweh, then dishonor comes to us. The whole second half of the first chapter describes the disorder and chaos that comes when we affix honor reserved for Yahweh elsewhere.

This means that the quest for glory and honor is founded on trust that Yahweh is exactly who He says He is, in essence and in character. Only the quest for glory and honor that persists in that trust results in glory, honor, and immortality.

It is exactly on this point that the writings of Moses plainly report that Israel failed (see Appendix 1). Their trust continually faltered. Like Adam and Eve, they determined that God did not have their good foremost in His mind. He was not uniquely glorious. He was to be distrusted and watched as any human who made promises was to be suspect. This fear (distrust and unbelief) persisted in them. In that distrust they proved representative of all humanity. It led to their turning to other gods.

Many have sought glory and honor and immortality. They have done so apart from trust in Christ. They have engaged the classic pursuit of good deeds. They have done good. But God’s testimony is that they have not persisted in doing good (1 Kings 8:46; Psalm 14; Romans 3:10-18). In the case of all who would gain God’s approval by doing good, good with bad motives mixed in will not do. By the standard of justice apart from Christ, eternal life would be rewarded to those who continue perennially in doing good in both deed and in heart. Thus, among humans such a pursuit is never successful, as the history of Israel clearly demonstrates.

Considering the gospel and the mercy of God in it, we are able to understand persistence in doing good as accepting the truth about Yahweh as opposed to suppressing it. Yahweh, because His standard of justice is satisfied by the sacrifice of the life of His Son, can extend mercy. He does so through taking up residence inside us, re-uniting Himself to us. Through His indwelling Holy Spirit He produces in fallen people this perseverance in accepting the truth He has revealed through Jesus His Christ. To persist in doing good is to persist in believing/trusting the truth about the glorious nature of Yahweh in His becoming human.

But none of this comes to the surface in Paul's thought line here. It will. But right now Paul is dealing with the moralist, those who think they can gain acceptance and approval from God by virtue of innate goodness in themselves. By their own judgment they do more good than bad. But in that they are suppressing the truth of who the judge is and what His standard is.

What was true of these whom Paul is speaking of was that they were now suppressing the truth about Jesus Christ. They were not righteous even by God's merciful standard, and certainly not by His standard of justice apart from Jesus.

2:8—but to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, wrath and indignation.

The previous verse stated what had to be done by those who sought eternal life. This verse is the flip side of that. It speaks of the fate of those who do not care for the truth. These may seek glory and honor and immortality, but they are "selfishly ambitious." That is the rendering of a word used only here by Paul, ἐξερθεῖας. It is a compound, tying together the preposition ἐκ, meaning out of, and the word ἐριθεια, meaning strife. So the idea is as the NASB has indicated, they behave as they do "out of strife," choosing to strive against what God has set down as truth. They simply are out to pick a fight with God and do it their way. It is an interesting pursuit.

Again, the message of chapter one is that the wrath of God is already being revealed against those who obey unrighteousness. That is seen by the increasing indignity of the unrighteous acts. They are suffering from their sins. Here the moralist is being addressed. But the same point is re-stated. It is insubordination to truth that is the issue, not simply the acts coming from a life lived apart from God. There may be in such a person a very visible pursuit of glory, honor, and immortality. But like Cain, it is by their own rules and for their own reasons and involves altering the truth rather than submitting to it.

The moralist is as guilty of suppressing the truth as the person who engages in the worst kind of immorality, whatever that may mean. The rejection of the truth about Yahweh is the germ of all immoral conduct.

2:9—There will be tribulation and distress for every soul of man that does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek.

Adding to the thought of the previous verse Paul states clearly that God's justice/wrath will be applied universally. Its lead edge has been visible. Its full realization lies ahead. To separate oneself from truth is to separate oneself from God and from all that is good. It is to align oneself with all that is evil including evil's fruit, which is tribulation and distress.

There are no privileged souls in this matter. Jews, in whom there has been a tendency to perceive themselves as above the laws and principles God has ordained, are specifically named here. Though they are uniquely called as an ethnic group, they are not universally redeemed by virtue of their ethnicity. The unbelieving Jews will be accountable first and foremost among unbelievers because of the knowledge and understanding of God that is part of their heritage. Paul singles them out as being first in terms of accountability and this is because they were first in terms of the revelation of truth.

2:10—but glory and honor and peace to every man who does good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

It is good to continually remind oneself in interpreting this section of Paul's letter what doing good and doing evil relate to in this context. They relate specifically to embracing or suppressing the truth. Classic unrighteous deeds, i.e., things like deceit, murder, slander, insolence, have been established as consequences of this more basic and fundamental error. The man who does good, that is, embraces truth, inherits glory, honor, and peace. This will be Yahweh's just sentence that will be meted out without partiality.

This happens to a certain degree in this present life. Because God is present and acting in creation, we see His laws and His justice present in life. There is a glory and honor and peace that resides in a life founded on truth and lived in fellowship with God. But depending on the moral climate of the day in the place such a person spends their life, that experience of peace may be very limited.

However, the primary thing being spoken of here is that final judgment of God, when He renders to each person justice that accords with their posture towards truth. Those who embrace the truth about themselves, and God will be rewarded glory, honor, and peace. This will happen "in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God" (verse 5).

2:11—For there is no partiality with God.

The word used for partiality is προσωποληψία a compound word formed by joining the word for face to the word for receive. God is not one who receives people based on who they are recognized to be—the things associated in our minds by our visual recognition of their faces. Paul uses this word two other times (Ephesians 6:9; Col. 3:25). Ethnicity, title, who we know, our abilities, our personalities, our achievements, none of the things that might cause us to recognize one another enter into God's mind in judgment. On the one hand, this is a great comfort. It shows that He is perfectly faithful to who He is. He is influenced by nothing but His own character.

On the other hand, God's judgment and justice are dispensed based on truth, what is really true about how individuals have responded to the truth. Who they are makes no difference. Paul was especially sensitive to the belief on the part of many Jews that because they were Jews, had been given the Law, had theoretically shaped their culture by it, they had somehow individually received Yahweh's salvation.

Having established the guilt of moral and good people in the matter of suppressing truth, Paul is now about to turn specifically to the Jews. He will do this at several points in this letter. The gospel was good news for them just as it was to non-Jews, because there is no partiality with God.

2:12—For all who have sinned without the Law will also perish without the Law; and all who have sinned under the Law will be judged by the Law;

In this verse the Law is introduced into Paul's letter. The word Law will occur many more times. We can take the term to mean the first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch, and all the commands revealed in it. We can take it to refer to the ten commandments. We can take it to refer to all the commands God has given and all that He has revealed to humanity. It seems likely that in this verse and the ones immediately following we should understand it in this latter way.

It is likely that the Law was to be understood as "instruction." The Hebrew word for the Law (torah) was that instruction. The first five books written by Moses were called the torah. Through the writings of the entire Old Testament, we can understand the Law as the instruction (torah) that was delivered by Moses, taught by him, embraced, and explained further by the rest of the Old Testament writers. It includes the knowledge that this instruction made known to humanity of their inability to save themselves. It also made known to them Yahweh's plan for their salvation. But Paul is speaking here in the way the Law was seen by most Israelites. It was a body of laws which assured Israelites of Yahweh's special love for Israel and so their salvation. Paul goes after this thought.

In his argument against this thinking Paul first states that those without the Law would indeed perish due to their sin. But this verse seems to be indicating that they will not be judged by the Law. In other words, they will not be held responsible for what they do not know. The following verses seem to indicate that they will be judged by their own conscience, or that moral standard that was within them. Other Scriptures indicate that whatever moral standard they imposed on others and that by which they judged the morality of others will be the standard by which they will be judged (Matthew 7:1-2). This verse makes it clear that even by that personal standard they will fall short and they will perish.

Paul also indicates that those who know the Law will be held accountable for their deeds by its standard. These are described as *ἐν νόμῳ ἡμαρτον*. They sinned with the law, that is, they sinned with the law in-hand. Knowing the Law and thus having it in one's possession does nothing to mitigate personal guilt. It simply informs us of our guilt and of Yahweh's desire to save us. Those who have knowledge of the law are responsible to take the action it instructs them to take. They will be judged through it or even because of it. Their knowledge of what it summons us to will not save them, as the next verse confirms.

Either way, with or without the law God's judgment results in condemnation. Apart from the work of God as recounted in the gospel, the result of God's judgment will be condemnation. That is why Paul was not ashamed of the gospel. It is universally needed. There is not an individual or a people-group on planet earth that does not need it.

2:13—for not the hearers of the Law are just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified.

The truth this verse states is most important. The only way to prove oneself righteous before God is by doing the Law. That is, if a person could perfectly keep it they would have no guilt before God. Only one, Jesus Christ, has done that. Paul's point is that the Law must be done, not simply embraced as true or believed in if it is to be a means of salvation. The Law is the standard to which God Himself holds and is His standard in judging our deeds. The fact that He does so perfectly is the basis upon which He is said to be righteous, good, and perfect. Others must attain to that standard to be righteous by His standard. It is their behavior, their actual thoughts and deeds that would render them so.

Paul's primary point in this verse is that the Law must be done, not simply known, if it is to be a means of salvation. Having the Law does not mitigate guilt. The only hope of justification through the Law is to have no guilt regarding it, that is, to keep it perfectly.

Now we know that there is another hope the Law, meaning "the instruction," offers us. It instructs all to trust in its instruction and so pursue its way of life as being a blessing and a source of blessing from Yahweh. Furthermore, it instructs all who read it to hope in its instruction about Yahweh, that He is to be trusted as a personal Savior to atone for sin in spite of our failures (Deuteronomy 32:43).

2:14—For when the Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law are a law to themselves,

Here in verse 14, Paul begins to show that all people know something of the truth as the Law reveals it. In fact, gentiles who were regarded as certain outsiders, ignorant of God's law and any moral aptitude by the Jews were in some sense moral. He states that there are gentiles who instinctively do the things of the Law. This is found to be true in cultures that have not been touched at all by the Judeo-Christian ethic. There are certain things, such as murder, theft, lying that are wrong even in cultures that have no knowledge of the ten commandments. In other words, it can be said that even gentiles know the Law in some sense.

Such people groups are, in terms of the judgment of God, a "law to themselves." By this Paul means that they have set a standard by which they judge one another. It is by this standard God will judge them. These things that are "instinctively done" reveal an understanding of some truth. By this that they know, they will be judged. If a person conformed their thoughts and behavior to that to which they have ascribed, without exception, they would be justified. However, Paul will eventually point out that God, who knows the heart of every man, will show that none have risen to this simple standard of their own personal law. Paul's thought on those who supposedly are ignorant of the Law is concluded in the next two verses.

2:15—in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness, and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them,

Our conscience is a moral capacity that is part of the image of God that He placed in us. It is the ability to process good and evil and behave by such standards, as opposed to behaving by instinct. It enables free choice and sets us apart from other living things.

Long before it became a written code the Law was a moral force. It is a description of God's character. So because God Himself is continually present in the universe, His character and thought has been felt. This was and is true even when He is not acknowledged and even when His laws are not recognized or codified.

The written Law is an instrument whereby this conscience of ours is further energized for its work. The written Law, absorbed by our senses and recalled by our memory further enabled our conscience. It gives us a more accurate internal witness of God's standard of morality, so we are more enabled to see where we are falling short of God. The law tunes the voice of our conscience so that its voice can accurately accuse or defend us regarding our actions.

The "work of the Law" then, is to define good action and evil action. It is to enable further an internal witness in humans that can lead them through moral choices and dilemmas in a fallen world. So Paul's words in this verse could be understood as describing the Law-written-on-their-hearts work that God has done. He has always done this work by being present in His creation. He intensified it by giving His Law in writing. He intensified it even more by indwelling humans with His Spirit, a work the Law had spoken of (Deuteronomy 30:1-10), and was happening in believers in front of the Roman's eyes. And God will yet intensify it with more complete works of His Spirit in the ages to come.

The result is that every person has a conscience available to them to guide them about the moral nature of their acts. This is evidenced by the fact that even the most depraved of people know that some things they do can be revealed and some must be concealed. The most depraved know instinctively that some deeds by their very nature are culpable and that others are noble.

Paul's argument is that doing the Law is what is important. He maintained that some gentiles who were ignorant of the Law, were obeying the law better than some Jews. He was right. Many gentiles were turning to Christ, the One the Law pointed to, even as Jews were increasingly hostile toward Him.

2:16—on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Jesus Christ.

This verse adds an ominous element to the forecast of judgment because it teaches that God's judgment will extend to those deeds we have concealed and our secrets. The motives of our deeds will be included, not just the sanitized version of who we are, the image we present to others. That makes our salvation even more elusive than if it depended just on good deeds, and it makes the grace of God demonstrated in the gospel even better news. Paul's gospel included this teaching, that God will judge the secrets of men. It was good news because it taught this bad news.

When we think of God's revealing the secrets of hearts, we usually go negative. Many a time we remind each other that the bad we do cannot be concealed. It will be brought to light by the Judge of all people. However, it is likely in this context the message is more positive. Looking back to the previous verse the complete thought is that the gentiles will show the law written on their hearts on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of man. In revealing the secrets of humanity God will demonstrate that there have been many, many good deeds brought about by Him through the conviction of consciences. Deeds in accord with the Law will have been done by people who knew NOTHING in terms of the instruction of Moses or the rest of Scripture. They simply listened to God's voice from within. There will be abundant evidence that God has spoken continually to individuals because many will be the deeds done in response to the dictates of conscience.

Paul calls this gospel "mine" because he wanted to make a distinction between his own teaching that had been entrusted to him by Jesus Christ and that of the ample number of false teachers that were circulating in his day. His declaration of the good news always involved the whole and complete truth, the hard to accept elements along with the more affirming elements.

This is the first mention of the gospel since 1:16-17, when Paul spoke of it being the power of God, brought to bear with respect to the matter of humanity's salvation. The intervening verses have spoken to the issue of the universal need for salvation. The development of this idea will continue before the actual detail is articulated as to how the truth of the gospel saves. The fact is that God's judgment is coming, and all men will be held accountable to have lived by whatever revelation of truth they have been given.

2:17—But if you bear the name 'Jew,' and rely upon the Law, and boast in God,

Paul has shown that even the world's "good people" must be prepared for God to scrutinize their deeds on the day of judgment. There will be no favorites played and none who are cut special deals due to favored status. He now turns to specifically deal with the case of the Jews, a specific people within the larger family of moralists, ethnic Israelites.

The status of ethnic Israelites with Yahweh was not an easy subject. There was the wide-spread belief among them that they were not in need of salvation as others were, that they were children of God by virtue of being descendants of Abraham. This "status" was born out by the fact that God had given them the Law and that, by His own revelation, He had placed His hand uniquely on them and chosen them (Deuteronomy 4:32-40).

Paul will craft the words of verses 17-20 so as to bring together in one statement all the popular notions held by Jews about their special status with respect to God. These are the notions you would have heard "on the street," that the Jews would express regarding their standing with God.

The first of these is that they "called themselves" Jews. Paul's use of the middle voice probably is meant to support his eventual assertion that who we might proclaim ourselves to be in relationship to Yahweh is meaningless. It is who He proclaims us to be that will stand.

The second of these is that they relied on the Law. Again, the middle voice is used and it likely is meant to bring out their self-reliance in the matter of salvation. Paul will eventually demolish the folly of anyone thinking that they can rely on their personal performance to gain merit with God.

The third notion that was heard among the Jews is their boasting in God. Paul is referencing their view of themselves as morally superior to other people groups. It is true that Yahweh revealed Himself to them by His personal name. But Paul is referring to their pompous view of themselves that conveniently overlooked their stubborn and rebellious roots (Deuteronomy 9:1-6). Somehow, the reality of their colossal failure as a covenant people always eluded them. There came to be among them a view of themselves as a people of merit rather than of mercy. Paul feels the need, in the interest of their salvation, to kick their various moral props out from under them in these verses. He does this to show them why the gospel is such good news.

2:18—and know His will, and approve the things that are essential, being instructed out of the Law,

Paul continues his recitation of the common notions that the Jews had of themselves and their standing with Yahweh. They are for the most part self-explanatory. It is not that Jews alone had these ideas. These thoughts reflect the normal arrogance that all who begin to understand the truth must combat. There is a tendency in us, once God begins to lead us in following His will, to think we have an exclusive understanding of it. As we become sanctified to a very small degree, there is a tendency to think we have achieved more holiness than we have. As we understand a little something about the Scriptures, we tend to think we know more than we do.

The first suppression of truth we must guard against is the suppression of the truth about God. We must admit that He is. Soon after we clear this hurdle, we tend to begin to suppress the truth about ourselves, and we can stop short of being justified because we justify ourselves. This was the condition Paul was seeking to address here. The history of the Israelites shows them to be offenders on this point. In being such, their story demonstrates the presence of this twisted ability to justify ourselves in all of humanity.

The presence of this arrogance in us is brought out by the term rendered “essential” in the NASB. It is the rendering of διαφέροντα. It means to bear through. The idea is that one has passed up many lesser things to lay hold of something desired as essential. So it conveys the idea of possessing things that are of a “what-matters-most” nature. The Jews viewed themselves as having laid hold of such things by the mere knowledge of the Law. Paul has already proven that judgment of God is based on deeds and thoughts, not on mere knowledge. Though the Jews had moral knowledge, it did not make them superior morally.

2:19—and are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness,

The nature of truth is that it guides and enlightens. The Jews were given the written law and so had in their possession the truth. As they recited this truth and made it known it had impact. Its potential impact was great. With it they could be a blessing to all nations. As it was, many gentiles responded to the truth about Yahweh over the centuries as they learned it from the Jews.

It is easy under such circumstances to become confident that you yourself are a guide and the source of enlightenment. It is easy to conclude that there is something in you that produces spiritual movement in others, when producing such movement is simply one of the properties of truth. Truth is such that it sets free. So people of very low spiritual caliber can impact the lives of others if they simply repeat truth. The ability to say what the truth is may say nothing at all about one's personal faith. But by speaking the truth one can be used as a guide to another and a false sense of spiritual stature can develop. This lack of spiritual awareness had developed among the Jews in mass.

2:20—a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of the immature, having in the Law the embodiment of knowledge and of the truth.

The summary of the Jewish mindset continues with these words. The Jews had taken things that could have been true of them, by God's plan, and assumed that they were true. The last phrase of this verse reveals the subtlety of their error. They felt that in the Law they had the embodiment of knowledge and truth. The word rendered "embodiment" is μορφοσιν, which refers to an outward or visible form. Their practice of the faith was primarily the practice of ritual by rote. What was visible among them was far from what was true by Yahweh's standard.

The reality was and is that God Himself is the source of truth and Christ is its embodiment. Even before Christ it was important for Jews to understand that God was the source of eternal life, not the Law. Their personal relationship to Yahweh was their life. The Law was simply a means of guiding that relationship. They did not understand this distinction (John 5:39).

By Paul's day the Jews were rejecting the embodiment of knowledge and truth, Jesus Christ. They were rejecting "the torah (instruction)" written by Moses and referred to by them as the Law. Their mindset included all these lofty things that Paul has named. Their reality was that they only had the outward forms of life lived in fellowship with Yahweh.

2:21—You therefore who teach another, do you teach yourself? You who preach that one should not steal, do you steal?

Because God will judge all based on deeds, with no special status accorded anyone on any other basis, and because it is so easy for us to suppress the truth about our deeds, we must be diligent toward the truth. Above all else that we might do, we must instruct ourselves continually about who we really are, about the true moral nature of our various thoughts.

We must be reminding ourselves that the sins of others are very much crouching outside our door and can easily master us (Genesis 4:7). They are, in fact, already present in us in some form. All who would do as God wants them to must teach and preach to themselves and must apply the truth continually and specifically to their own thoughts and actions. Paul drives this idea home by the words of this verse. That which we require of others, we must be certain to require of ourselves.

**2:22—You who say that one should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery?
You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?**

It is easy to have a firm stance against a particular manifestation of a sin yet allow the same sin to be present in our life. This is always true of adultery. It is particularly noticed and reacted to by us when we see it in others. We have some ingenious ways of justifying it in its various forms and with its various trappings in our own lives.

It was easy in Paul's day for the Jews to spot and condemn idolatry as others practiced it. They had become good by this time at spotting and condemning this sin that had so haunted their culture for so many centuries. That which had undone them they could label in others, but they still were not aware of their own compromises.

We don't know in what sense the Israelites "robbed temples." It could be that their zeal against idol worship caused them to commit crimes against the shrines of idol worshipers and to justify such thievery as motivated by a concern for holiness. It seems likely that some of the sexual sins associated with idol worship they stole and made them their personal practice.

Paul's point is that our deeds are the basis of our guilt and our rhetoric against sin will do nothing to cleanse that guilt. That is why the power of God has been brought to bear on us, because when we seek to deal with sin the result is mostly rhetoric. The gospel is the truth about us, but also the truth about God's power brought to bear in our behalf so that our actual deeds and our thoughts are dealt with.

2:23—You who boast in the Law, through your breaking the Law, do you dishonor God?

With these words Paul strikes at the heart of the Jews perceived safety shield. They felt invulnerable to judgment because they had embraced the Law. All humanity has such a tendency, and it is perhaps our vilest ability. We wrongly assume that we do what we know, and that we need not learn what our minds already know. The result is that we are regularly guilty of engaging in thinking and courses of action that we know and proclaim to be wrong.

The Jews, though they had been steeped in the Law, were no different. Their lives were structured by the Law's ceremony. They zealously embraced its standard. But they had become blind to the fact that it continually revealed their own personal guilt. Their own arrogance had kept the Law from accomplishing its primary mission in their lives of instruction. They were failing to look at what it was telling them about themselves. Its message was that there were things present in their lives that were unclean and dishonoring to God. The Law revealed that they, along with everyone else, were lawbreakers, people who continually dishonored God by their deeds.

2:24—For “The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you,” just as it is written.

Paul quotes the words of one of the Jew’s most respected prophets, Isaiah (Is. 52:5). Isaiah’s words reinforce the depth of the Jews’ moral failure and their need for the gospel. The Law has revealed that they are incapable of saving themselves. In the case of the Jews, it had revealed that not only were they incapable of pleasing God, but they had also actually become a force against Him. Not only could they not rise to the vision He had for them to be a light and blessing to the gentiles, but they actually had also provided evidence to the gentiles that Yahweh was no different from their own gods (2 Kings 19:10-13).

The result was that the Gentiles, who knew Yahweh only by what they saw in the Jews and only by the limited power and blessing the disobedient Jews experienced from Him, spoke disparagingly of Him (Ezekiel 36:20-21). So though the Jews knew the Law, they were unable to obey it so as to experience its blessing and so were not a reflection of God’s blessing. By this they dishonored Him.

2:25—For indeed circumcision is of value, if you practice the Law; but if you are a transgressor of the Law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision.

Circumcision was an outward sign of the covenant. It was a badge of sorts that expressed that male Israelites belonged to Yahweh. It was commanded by God to Abraham long before the Law was given to his descendants. By its presence in a Jewish male it stated, “I and those with me are in covenant relationship with Yahweh. He is uniquely with us as we are with Him. We trust Him!” It was taking Yahweh’s name.

The Law came later. It was a covenant with the Israelites that spelled out a way of life that Yahweh would affirm and bless. That meant that circumcision was of value, Paul says, if the one who was circumcised kept the Law. Circumcision itself brought no such blessing. The blessings and the curse were associated with obedience to the entire Law, not just circumcision (Deuteronomy 27-28). If one was disobedient to the Law, they inherited the curse of the Old Covenant. The Lord’s face was set against them and so they were from a practical standpoint experiencing the same relationship with God that those outside the covenant experienced. In this sense their circumcision, because of their disobedience, was of no value.

2:26—If therefore the uncircumcised man keeps the requirements of the Law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision?

The logic of Paul’s question is flawless. Circumcision conveyed no special blessing from Yahweh. It did NOT release one from their obligation to obey Yahweh. This is plainly true in that only males were circumcised and according to the Law they were circumcised when they were only a few days old, long before they were making moral choices. Circumcision in such a one said nothing about what moral choices they would make. Conducting oneself in the way that aligned with the Law determined one’s experience of God’s blessing.

Since circumcision conveyed to a male child no special standing with God, then it must also be true that if an uncircumcised baby grew to become a man who obeyed the Law, His uncircumcision did not count against him. Paul's point is that since the former is true, then the latter is true as well. What a man does with respect to the Law is the determining issue in one's relationship to the Lawgiver.

Paul is talking about nothing less than how a matter is to be "regarded" by the one Lawgiver and Judge, Yahweh. "Regarded" is *logizomai* in Greek, the same word rendered "reckon" in other important Scriptures. It refers to actions of God that define how something is to be understood, officially valued, and remembered under His watchful eye. It then becomes the official version and divine view of the transaction for all of eternity. So this is an important matter, how Yahweh "regards" something. In fact, it is everything. Defining how Yahweh regards critical matters is of utmost importance in this treatise by Paul on the Good News.

We must remember in these verses that Paul is speaking of generations of people who had not seen Christ in the Law. They were viewing the Law apart from its clear projections that Israel could not possibly obey it (Deuteronomy 4:25-31; 5:28-29; 29:4; 30:6; 31:14-29). Paul has not brought Christ or the gospel into the equation yet. He is building a case for the value and beauty of the gospel and so is expressing life's rule apart from it.

2:27—And will not he who is physically uncircumcised, if he keeps the Law, will he not judge you who though having the letter of the Law and circumcision are a transgressor of the Law?

This had to be a cold and very hard reality for the Jews. Most were not accepting it. Paul's message was that the Jews, whose entire calling had been aimed at them becoming those who would judge the earth, could by their disobedience become the ones judged, and that by the gentiles!

The words are plain. The unbelieving Jews had only the letter of the Law. That is still a privilege, but one only realized if the Law is revered and pursued to be obeyed. It is a privilege that must be stewarded, an opportunity that must be parlayed into blessing through obedience.

Since an individual's stewardship of revelation is everything, then some unexpected and even stunning scenarios can develop in relationship to the instruction given by Moses in the first five books of the Bible. This verse describes a realistic one that was not even on the radar of most Jews. They supposed that their circumcision alone made them good stewards of the entire body of instruction given by Moses. The reality was that other people groups were now stewarding that revelation and Jesus' fulfillment of it and were taking the place in relationship with Yahweh that the Jews only supposed themselves to have.

2:28—For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly; neither is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh.

With this statement Paul begins to make some assertions that can be greatly misunderstood with respect to the whole of Scripture's testimony about God's future for Israel. Paul's words here are very important.

When he uses the term “Jew” here what does Paul mean? The answer is that he is using it as a designation of a people of right standing with God, for whom judgment held no threat, who would experience the promises made to Abraham. He is speaking of all, Jew or Gentile, who would be blessed by Abraham. This is his obvious meaning, since in the ethnic sense one is with certainty a Jew who is one outwardly, by natural birth. Paul is using circumcision in the same sense, to describe one who is in right relationship with God and under no curse of the old covenant or threat of judgment.

Now, Paul is not saying that God has not approached those who are ethnic Jews in a special way. Chapter 10 will make this plain. Nor is he saying that God has no special work in store for that ethnic group. Chapter 11 will make that plain. He is saying that the laws of salvation and spiritual standing are the same for all. Apart from Christ, right standing is attained only through obedience the Law. On this point the Law itself is abundantly clear. The Jew is in exactly the same position with God by birth as the gentile. Both are spiritually dead.

Both can have this spiritual reality of their existence radically altered. Another reality, that of Christ and His work in our behalf, is brought to bear on this entire matter in the following verse. It will put ethnicities, the Law and circumcision in their proper place.

2:29—But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God.

Again, in this verse Paul is using the term Jew of one who has special standing before God, one of His children. But he jumps ahead in this case to that which only becomes true through the gospel when he speaks of circumcision.

The real “badge” or sign that one is in covenant relationship with God is the presence of God’s Spirit within a person’s spirit. This is what Paul refers to as the circumcision of the heart. It is beyond anything that mere outward conformity to the Law could produce, and that is what he means when he says it is not “by the letter.” In Paul’s thinking this attachment of Yahweh’s Spirit to the human spirit was called “true circumcision” (Galatians 6:15-16). It is a good metaphor, this idea of circumcision of the heart, in that it implies a cutting away of the old inner-being with its proclivity to evil through the presence of the Holy Spirit. His presence allows for a dulling of one’s appetite for and responsiveness to evil. His presence introduces a powerful voice for good from within.

The final phrase of this verse speaks to the idea that such a person’s approval goes beyond the rather ordinary recognition of other people and comes from the judge Himself, God.

None of this must be construed as negating the idea that a special relationship exists between God and natural Israel. The verses that follow will show that, as will chapters 9-11 in Paul’s letter. It is just to say that any special relationship between God and ethnic Israel does not result in defacto personal salvation of each Jew. Most in Paul’s day were lost, outside the family of God, a condition which persists among the Jews to the present time.

Romans 3

3:1—Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the benefit of circumcision?

Now that Paul has shown that the standard for acceptance by God is the same for the Jew as it is for the gentile, and that all are equally prone to falling short of it, his argument begs this question. Since this is true, what exactly is the “privilege” associated with being a Jew? Does any such privilege exist? What is the point of things like circumcision?

Many have asked this question in Christian circles over the centuries since Christ. Many have concluded that the answer to the question must be “none!” Since the standard of salvation is the same for both Jew and gentile and since all people must be saved apart from all the ceremony connected to the Law, the Jews’ supposed privilege is fictitious.

But there is no doubt that there was some privilege associated with being an Israelite in the mind of God (Deuteronomy 4:32-40; 7:6-11). That their experience of this privilege was conditioned on their obedience to Yahweh’s commands (Deuteronomy 27-28), is true. That they, as expected, failed to keep their side of the agreement is true. The question is did they lose any privileged status they had whatever it was? It seems from the earliest of God’s statements that their disobedience was not a surprise to God. In fact, He projected their inability to obey the terms of the covenant (Deuteronomy 4:25-31; 5:28-29). He also projected the hope of a New Covenant (Deuteronomy 30:6).

Paul will give God’s own perspective on this question of the privilege of the Jews. He will reveal that perspective in a more detailed way as his letter progresses.

3:2—Great in every respect. First of all, that they were entrusted with the oracles of God.

Paul says that the privilege of the Jews is “great in every respect.” That is an important first statement. It indicates that their privilege is multi-dimensional. It cannot be relegated to simply one thing. We must be careful about defining their privilege, but we certainly dare not say they have none. Whatever that privilege is, we must recognize that it is of great reasoning.

Within the realm of Christian theology, the thoughts, and writings of many of the reformers were underdeveloped on this point. It is understandable, given the greater issues they confronted, such as the doctrine of salvation and authority of Scripture. They followed the error of Roman Catholicism and particularly the eschatology that had been shaped by Augustine in *The City of God*. Since Augustine’s time the trend in Christian theology had been to remove all privilege from the natural children of Abraham and bestow it on “the Elect.” By the time of the Reformation, it was acceptable and fashionable to view Jews with utter contempt. It is a legitimate question to ask if such racism tended to inform theology, as it often has done to our shame.

Paul, in speaking to the subject of the privilege of the Jew, is speaking of the natural, physical descendants of Abraham. He says that their privilege is great by every method of reasoning. Our theology must avoid the extremes that do not align with this statement. In giving a very concise answer to this question Paul says, "First of all." This does not mean that a list will follow, but that there is a particular privilege that is of foremost importance and is of a foundational nature.

The primary privilege of the Jews Paul says, is to have been entrusted with the "oracles" of God. Now, what are the oracles? This word is used by a few the English translations of the text and is the rendering of the Greek word *λογος*. Its most basic meaning would be "word." But it is used also of the body of truth/principles established by God and revealed to us as that which regulates life. It can be understood as the entire decree of God, all He has ordered for both time and eternity.

It is said here that the natural Israelites were "entrusted" with these. By the usage of that word, the oracles are characterized as a treasure that is to be guarded and put to responsible use. That is indeed how God characterizes the privilege of the Jews in the Old Testament. He characterizes His relationship to them as unique in that He has made Himself known to them through personal intervention in their affairs, through personal speech delivered to their prophets, and through written revelation delivered through their prophets. So they were entrusted with revelation, both information and relationship with God that made them unique.

None of this guaranteed their individual salvation. That came because of personal faith and was something everyone had to rise to. But the fact is that one can only trust in what they know. While all men had information through creation about their Creator, the Jews were given more specific information that was readily available to them at any time. This information was passed along in written form, which to their credit they preserved with great and detailed care. Predictably, they failed at obeying Scripture, and even at pondering rightly its words. But they did not fail at preserving the text of it. For that alone we owe them a great debt. This is a great privilege that they were given.

When the times were just right by God's design, that word about God became flesh and lived among them as one of them. God Himself was incarnated, becoming a man—a Jewish man. He spoke their language, lived out their culture, embraced their Scriptures, pondered them, obeyed them, and was the perfect and flawless demonstration of them. He fulfilled the prediction in them and fleshed out the commands and principles. He was the apex of God's revelation of Himself and was an Israelite.

When Paul says they were entrusted with the "*λογια* of God," He is making a very concise statement of a privilege accorded the Jews that is by God's valuation the greatest of all privileges. It is first among all because it is knowledge of the most Holy One. Of all that might be said about God's dealing with humanity, it is certain that the Jews were privileged in their experience of Yahweh and their knowledge of Him and His thought and plan for humanity (Deuteronomy 4:32-40).

3:3—What then? If some did not believe, their unbelief will not nullify the faithfulness of God, will it?

We have in the story of the Jews the account of their unfaithfulness with respect to the knowledge entrusted to them. The name God gave them as a people speaks to their strong will and rebellious nature (Genesis 32:22-32). In this way they perfectly represent humanity. As such they tested the great tenant of humanism and legalism, that humanity can rise to conduct that merits God's blessing. For the most part their pattern through history was to resist what Yahweh was leading them to do (Acts 7:51-53). What they merited was not God's blessing, but His righteous judgment. Though born into a position of spiritual advantage, they did not believe that God could or would do the things He promised.

Paul asks the question that is an important and critical one for all of humanity. Will their unbelief nullify the faithfulness of God? This is a question of huge importance in a practical and theological way. It is of practical importance to every individual because if God's promises are altered by our failure, it means our own salvation is at risk. Due to our inability, as chapter two has demonstrated, salvation will elude us. If this is true, then it is entirely possible that much of what we read in the Bible about what appears to be God's plan, may only be a statement of what He had hoped to do for us.

This question is of theological importance because it governs how much of the Bible should be interpreted. There is so much stated regarding what God intends to do with Israel that is surplus, that is, it has not been fulfilled to this day and will not be if God has withdrawn His promises to Abraham regarding His descendants. In interpreting such Scripture, do we write it off as irrelevant? Do we allegorize it and apply it to the "Israel" mentioned in the closing verses of chapter two? Do we have hope that God will yet do a special work that allows the promises to Israel to be fulfilled?

This question of Paul's is a significant one for several reasons and Paul's answer is very definitive.

3:4—May it never be! Rather, let God be found true, though every man be found a liar, as it is written, "That thou mightest be justified in thy words, and mightest prevail when thou art judged."

Paul's answer reveals that he finds the whole idea of God not doing what He promised repulsive. "May it never be!" is stated in what is termed the optative mood. It is a way of stating a desire or a hope. It is not a command, and it is not a statement necessarily of reality. It is a statement of strong desire. Paul states it in this way likely because of his great understanding of the far-reaching consequences and tragedy of such a scenario. It is a statement that expresses alarm. It is likely a colloquialism, an expression common to the vernacular of the day, that expressed the utter absurdity of an idea. So several English paraphrases use the expression, "What a ghastly thought!"

The remainder of Paul's words in this verse show that it is certainly not just a matter of Paul hoping and wishing that such an idea was absurd. He uses the imperative in the next phrase, commanding the readers to think differently than this statement. He says that in our thinking we must regard God to be true even if it means that all humans are liars. That is a powerful statement that reinforces the absolute holiness, or "otherliness" of God. To have an accurate view of God and therefore of reality, God must be seen as unchanging regardless of what that implies or proves about humanity. His character is the anchor of the universe, the foundation of all that is. It is our mooring during the years that He allows evil to exist.

But Paul is not simply calling us to a mindset or a point of view that we must embrace for our comfort. He is commanding this because it is true. It is the absolutely accurate depiction of reality. It is not that we must believe it in order to have hope. It is that it is true and so we must believe it to live as it will be required of us by our Creator.

Paul cites Psalm 51:4 as Scripture that proves the wisdom and truth of this perspective. God is proven true, or just and righteous, with respect to what He has said. If He has spoken, His words will be proven true and right.

Psalm 51 was David's confession of His sin with respect to Uriah and Bathsheba. God had sent word to him detailing his sin and His impending judgment against him for that sin. David agreed with God that His judgment was right and these words summarize his affirmation that God was right. They express what will be the testimony of every being when God's plan has run its course and all His words have proven true.

Paul's message in this verse is plain. Israel's unfaithfulness to the covenant will not alter God's faithfulness to what He promised Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. A life of blessing was lost to many generations of individual Jews who rejected the Mosaic covenant. Neither was there individual salvation for any of those offspring of Abraham who did not embrace his faith. But that did not nullify the Abrahamic covenant which was clearly unconditional (Genesis 15). God's revelation continued to be made through them. Millions continue to come to know Him through the written record of Israel's history, through the testimony and work of their Messiah Jesus Christ, and through the testimony of His apostles—all of them Israelites. These all are a blessing to all nations.

Scripture shows that there is a future work yet to be done by God among the natural children of Abraham that will result in God's word to him that his people would become a great nation being fulfilled and proved true to an even greater degree. All the promises made to Abraham and Israel will be brought about, and this will happen in a way that is clearly the work of God's sovereign grace.

The outcome of Yahweh's plan will leave men aghast at His goodness, His mercy, His righteousness, and His justice. All that has been arrogantly proclaimed against Him will be rendered foolishness. He will be justified and proved just. Against overwhelming odds in the human sense, Yahweh will prevail.

3:5—But if our unrighteousness demonstrates the righteousness of God, what shall we say? The God who inflicts wrath is not unrighteous, is He? (I am speaking in human terms.)

It is an amazing thing that evil is to be acted against in such a way by God that it will serve to commend the righteousness of God. This is not to say that He is the source of it. It is simply to say that He overpowers it. When His plan has run its course, He will reverse the intent of all evil and it will only have proved His absolute sovereignty. The cross is the perfect illustration of this.

Paul anticipates a twisted human logic that tends to flow from the minds of those suppressing the truth. This humanistic logic follows these lines. Since God has allowed evil and it is made to serve His purposes, is evil really evil? According to their logic, since God uses evil to advance His will, it is a great injustice that He would punish it.

Their conclusions are then varied. Some conclude that He will not judge sin. Some conclude that the Biblical revelation is contradictory and so invalid. Some conclude there is no such God. All this masquerades as intelligence. It is not that such an issue should not be pondered, and such a question not asked. It should be. It should be both asked and answered, but in the end the answer must be sought in the totality of what God has revealed. Then that answer He has provided must be submitted to.

3:6—May it never be! For otherwise how will God judge the world?

Paul begins the verse with the same expression he used in verse four. The previous thought expressed is a kind of logic he hoped would never take root in the minds of the readers.

It remains the great hope of Christians that God will judge the earth, that there will be a day when wrongs are made right, the victim's cause championed, and those who have scoffed, abused, persecuted, and inflicted pain will be punished. A world without such a day or season is an unjust one, which means God is not just. If He is not just, then it is a miserable thought that He is an all-controlling God.

The apostles taught that on the day of the Lord the righteous would be rewarded for persevering against the resistance of evil men. Now if it is true that there is no real evil, then it is also true that evil will not be judged. This means that wrongs will not be righted, evil will continue, and so the same cycles that have vexed creation since the fall will continue. The world will never be made right and God's promise of salvation is an empty hope.

Instead of this hopeless merry-go-round of evil, we know that God will not only bring about good, He will do it even in the face of great evil, so great and powerful is His goodness. But God must judge and condemn evil to bring the good He intends to bring. It is the only hope we have. It is part of the good news.

3:7—But if through my lie the truth of God abounded to His glory, why am I also still being judged as a sinner?

Once again Paul anticipates the twisted logic of sinful man. The essence of this question is the same as the one in verse five. But the specific example of a lie is used. Paul presents himself as the one who had lied. He asserts that his fabrications about himself, God, and his life, will make the truth as demonstrated by God more glorious and bring its truthfulness more to the fore once His plan has run its course. Paul is saying that it is true that our evil provides a backdrop whereby things like God's love and mercy and goodness are clearly revealed.

Paul anticipates the excuse some would propose, given this reality. Since their evil is assisting God, then it does not concern Him. Some were apparently saying that God will not hold us accountable for our sin because it serves to enhance His glory. In the phrase "Why am I also still being judged a sinner?" Paul parrots the words of these, or he is stating what some were suggesting his gospel of grace allowed for. This was apparently the "party-line" among the Jewish leaders who opposed the gospel and sought to arrest the spread of Christianity.

3:8—And why not say (as we are slanderously reported and as some affirm that we say), “Let us do evil that good may come”? Their condemnation is just.

Among the Jewish leaders with whom Paul was once associated and likely among other false teachers that sought to draw a following to themselves, this synopsis of Paul’s doctrine was often being offered. Word drifted back to Paul and so he could see how his words were being twisted. This is his attempt at laying that rumor to rest.

Paul clearly distances himself from such thinking. He will provide a more detailed answer that will reveal the practical flaw in this logic in chapter six. This is no doubt one of the reasons he wants to meticulously lay out the detail of the gospel in this letter. He wants it to be very clear what his message is and he wants the truth that he desires to spread accurately defined. He is “going on record” by these words that he is writing against those who either maliciously or ignorantly misrepresent his message.

When Paul says that their condemnation is just, we are not sure how this is to be taken. Paul may be siding with those slandering him, saying that their condemnation of such an idea is proper. This would be a disarming approach to the matter, saying in effect, “If I were saying such a thing it would be dead wrong!” It may be that there had been an affirmation of Paul’s doctrine on this point by the apostolic company and a condemnation of those slandering him. In this case Paul would be saying that such a condemnation of his accusers by the apostolic company is just. He spreads no such message. He could also be referring to their condemnation that would come from God, and that because they had twisted his words, they were deserving of punishment to be inflicted by the One True Judge. Whichever his meaning, he effectively separates himself from any doctrine that would abuse the grace of God and the sacrifice of Christ that God had brought about.

3:9—What then? Are we better than they? Not at all; for we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin;

Early in his letter (1:16), Paul stated that he was not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God brought to bear on the lives of any who believe it to bring them salvation. This he said included Jews and Greeks. From that point on he began to offer ideas to under-gird that statement, seeking to show why the gospel is good news to all men. Beginning in this verse he will make a series of statements, including those made in Scripture, to show the universal guilt of man.

He begins by asking two questions. The first is a way of guiding readers to a conclusion. By asking “What then?” he is asking the readers, “what have we concluded so far?” He wants to specifically make sure the Jews among them have drawn the right conclusion.

As a Jew, Paul is willing to own his own past arrogance. He transparently includes his past hypocrisy as he asks, “Are we better than they?” An expanded version of this question is, are we Jews who have the Law and follow it, in less need of salvation than non-Jews? He quickly answers that question. In doing so he uses an expression that is considerably stronger and graver than any he has used thus far. He says that “both Jews and Greeks are all under sin.”

The two words “under sin” are important. It is not just that we do sinful things. It is that we are “under sin.” That changes the picture of our need considerably. It means that sin controls us, that we are held in its sway. As the letter moves on Paul will show that we are under it in the sense of being under its influence, led into more sin by sin. We are also under it in the sense of being under its sentence—awaiting judgment by God for the deeds we have committed that are against His will. We are also under it in the sense of under its domain. We live in an imperfect world that is marred by sin.

All of this is best summarized by an understanding that we are under sin in the sense of being under its curse. Everything we think and do in some way falls short of what we would like it to be and what it should be. It causes us to habitually fall short. All of this is true of all people, whether Jews, who had been chosen to experience Yahweh Himself in a special way, or the Greeks who had invented and fabricated a whole hierarchy of gods. All are “under sin.”

3:10—As it is written, “there is none righteous, not even one;”

The Scripture demonstrates that God has several ways of viewing humans from a moral point of view. One way is to see individuals considering their fellow human beings. In that sense he speaks of righteous people and wicked people. Another way He has of viewing humanity is considering a certain kind of deed, specifically, deeds of faith. In that sense there are righteous people, those who trust the truth of revelation. There are also wicked people, those who cast truth aside. Another way He has of viewing people is in the absolute sense or legal sense, considering His own character and standard. In that sense there are no righteous people. In the matter of being culpable and so subject to the penalty of sin, there is no human being aside from Jesus Christ who has lived in God’s will in the absolute sense to satisfy the demands of His justice. There are many who have been called righteous in one of the senses previously mentioned (Acts 10:2; Job 1:8).

Beginning in this verse, Paul quotes various Old Testament Scriptures as a means of establishing a moral valuation of man in the more absolute and legal sense. The first is this quote from Psalm 14:1-3. It is a Psalm that describes the Lord’s view of humanity as He looks from heaven, or we might say, from a heavenly perspective. From that point of view the entire human race is marred by the fall and all show in some way the effect of evil. It can be said of none of them that they are unblemished by sin.

3:11—There is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God.

There is testimony in other Scripture of men who seek God. But there are the solemn words of Jesus who said that “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him;” (John 6:44). So we understand that when men seek God it is only because God has first sought them out and drawn them toward Himself. This verse, viewing the matter in the more absolute sense, says that none seek for God. The words are true apart from the initiating work of God. There are none who understand God apart from His work of revealing Himself.

3:12—All have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good, there is not even one.

The absolute language continues in this verse. We know that many have been useful to God, and even Satan and his demons serve a purpose in His plan. But these words speak of man's inability to initiate what is good, that is, doing right things for right reasons, in the right way. By that standard all of humanity are found to have turned aside. If God did not initiate good deeds in us, such deeds would not happen. In terms of God's original purpose in making man, to rule the earth for Him, man has become useless. God must keep His hands very much on man and continually intervene within men to preserve His creation. In the end it will survive only because He preserves it for a season.

3:13—Their throat is an open grave, with their tongues they keep deceiving, the poison of asps is under their lips;

This is a quote of Psalm 5:9. It is a statement made by David regarding his enemies. We often see in our enemies the vile side of humanity. If we ponder the truth of our enemies conduct carefully, we will see the same capacity in ourselves. The truth is that in all humanity this evil of the tongue lurks (James 3:2-12). It is an "open grave" in the sense that it reveals things that are inside a person that are normally concealed. There is in all men the practice of deceit, through words said or through silence we can deceive. We shape the ideas of others and influence the atmosphere of situations according to our own ideas and agendas. There is the practice in all of us of gaining an advantage of some sort through our words, of spreading a poison that kills what is not advantageous to us.

3:14—Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness.

This is a paraphrase of Psalm 10:7 in which David is characterizing the dealings of wicked men. In quoting it Paul is again focusing on the evil that is so evident in the speech of men. There is no easier way to spot evil in people than to listen to their words. Their words reveal what is in their heart. The gospel is good news because in all of our speech we see our sin and our depravity. We see that despite our best efforts our evil pops out in unguarded moments and shows evidence of its work. Our cursing and bitterness reveal what is transpiring within us. It reveals where we have failed to think as God thinks.

Cursing today is usually understood as a use of certain expletives. However, likely it is to be more properly understood as speech that is the opposite of blessing. Rather than bringing thoughts to someone that lift them, we give them words that bring hurt and destruction. Bitterness is the expression of a perspective warped by pain and disappointment. It comes due to our inability or unwillingness to forgive the actions of others or to trust the sovereignty of God over circumstances.

3:15—Their feet are swift to shed blood.

Verses 15 through 17 are taken from Isaiah 59:7-8. That chapter is a message from God to Israel about the separation that has occurred between Himself and His people because of their sin. He tells them that their plight is not the result of His lack of power. He can save them. But their sins stand in the way of him granting their prayers. With that He lays out a litany of charges against them that show the extent of their fall from fellowship with Him. The verses are particularly apropos to Paul's argument. Whereas David's words that he has quoted thus far from Psalm could be construed to apply only to the "rabble" and perhaps even mostly to foreign enemies, these words were addressed by one of the Jews most respected prophets to Israel and were speaking of Israelites.

This phrase, "their feet are swift to shed blood," likely refers to an overall moral impulsiveness that caused them to rush into vengeful action and all that was motivated by self-interest. Humanity easily sets aside things like forbearance and mercy, and it is often done with the rhetoric of Christian zeal. The Isaiah passage states that our alleged good works will not cover our iniquity, because even they prove to be evil (Is. 59:6). It is a true evaluation, and nothing proves it truer than our frequent display of zeal for morality that is just feet that are swift to shed blood.

3:16—Destruction and misery are in their paths,

No two words summarize the sin experience better than these, destruction, and misery. They are combined in these words borrowed from Paul from Isaiah with the figure of the path. In this way they describe what sin does to us and what it does through us. Sin destroys. That is part of its nature. No matter what the sin is, somewhere somehow it does a destructive work. The destruction of some sins is readily and immediately apparent. With other sins it is at first unnoticeable and follows slowly. But sin destroys and because of that sinful people destroy. The author of sin Satan, is rightly named by God as "the destroyer." His sin continues to do its destructive work in others. We are like him when we sin in that we become destroyers. Misery is the twin that is always where destruction is. Our sin makes us miserable, and through it we spread misery to others. We must always remember that no matter what the mirage of sin appears to be, this is its fruit, always!

3:17—And the path of peace they have not known.

Peace blesses people and whole nations. Times of peace are needed for prosperity and for progress. A land that is at peace is a land that soon experiences multiple other blessings. Sin is such that it robs humanity of peace. It robs us of personal peace which usually leads us in pathways of activity to compensate. That inevitably robs others of peace and when they strike back, we are at war.

Sinful people do not know the path of peace. In saying this, Isaiah is not suggesting that we do not want peace, or do not believe in it. It is the inner craving of every person, and it is their continual quest. But it is foreign to their makeup to produce it now that sin has marred the human psyche. We simply do not know the path. We do not recognize the things that make for peace. We only know the end. But the path that leads there lies beyond the scope of our comprehension. If we can contemplate the end and reason our way backwards to envision the path, sin has disabled us to the point that we are incapable of walking the path. So the path of peace is unknown to us. The gospel is for this reason good news at a deeply personal level, because it enables us to take the first steps down the pathway to peace.

3:18—There is no fear of God before their eyes.

Respect and reverence for God is the lens through which everything should be viewed. Solomon said that this “fear of God” is the beginning of knowledge (Proverbs 1:7). It is the essence of God’s instruction to man (Job 28:28; Ecclesiastes. 12:13). There is that about practicing it that cleanses and sustains. The fear of Yahweh is the necessity of every season in our lives and of every era in human history (Psalm 19:8). Sin blinds us to this practice. We cannot practice sin and maintain full intimacy with God. To the degree that we hang on to one, we lose the other. In the absolute sense in which Paul is talking, Isaiah’s words express this truth.

Sin has done a work in humanity such that there is no fear of God before their eyes. This does not mean they are not afraid of God. The multiple superstitions of humanity’s many religious schemes show an obsessive fear of divinity. The moment of the first sin Adam’s reaction to God was to be afraid (Genesis 3:10). But there is a fear that is devoid of submission and reverence and trust. That is what characterizes humanity. They are steeped in superstition, yet able to blow through barriers of conscience. And this condition reveals that their fears follow classic unhealthy, sinful lines, not those that are the work of God in one who communes with Him.

With these words Paul concludes his citation of Scripture that supports his argument that all men, Jews, and Gentiles alike, need the work of God that the gospel reports.

3:19—Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, that every mouth may be closed, and all the world may become accountable to God;

What advantage does the Jew have? That is the question that began chapter three. Paul said, in answer to that question, that their advantage was that they had been entrusted with the oracles of God. God gave to them in writing a body of “truth-principles” relating to Himself, to them, and to life with respect to what His plan for humanity was. These, when pondered and applied, could be a source of every kind of wealth to them. These oracles were commonly known as “the Law.” In dealing with the advantage the oracles of God, or the Law, confers, Paul had to make it very clear that it did not make the Jews better or negate their need for personal salvation. He has let Scripture speak to this issue to establish that all men are slaves to sin and are alike in their need for redemption. Yet there is an advantage in having the Law, a greater one according to Paul (3:2). What exactly does the Law contribute to a person that gives them an advantage? And, what is the hope of humanity as a whole since all are sinners and condemned? Those are the issues Paul will speak to beginning with this verse.

Paul's words communicate immediately that there is something we know with certainty. It is common knowledge. It is that whatever the Law says it speaks to those under it. So it not only speaks to a standard of morality, but it speaks to those under it (literally "in" it, *ἐν*, those operating in its sphere of influence) about their morality. This is perhaps as important and more useful than the definition of right and wrong. In terms of the context then, the Jews have been sent a specific message about their moral condition by the Law.

Next, Paul says that this message has been sent so that every mouth may be closed. In other words, the Law speaks what it speaks to provide for those it speaks the plain truth so that all argument about what the truth is will be completely settled. The Law does this as a part of God's plan to keep the whole world informed of their accountability to Him. Its purpose was to keep a people from rising above accountability for their deeds. Many Jews have thought that God's choice of them and His giving of the Law to them meant that they were somehow immune to God's judgment. They thought it imparted a certain righteousness to them. Paul has made it clear that it had not done so and called the Scriptures as a witness.

Here Paul states that the Law's purpose was not to release humanity from condemnation and accountability, but to hold them to it. There seems to be in Paul's choice of words here a teaching that through the Jews the accountability of the world is sealed. We know that is true whether Paul is alluding to it here. There is in the written account of Israel's experience under the Law, in the teachings and symbols of the Law itself, and in the life and testimony of Israel's Messiah, Jesus Christ, great accountability imposed on the world by God. Though that written revelation has not reached every person, and though it is true that men will not be held accountable for what they do not know, it is also true that the story is known throughout the world and that those who know it know more than a story. They have in their possession a story that as it is more fully pondered, understood, and obeyed, becomes a light to their feet and to their paths.

3:20—because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin.

Chapter 2 has stated clearly that judgment of humanity by God will be based on deeds (2:6-10). Since that is true, how can the statement of this verse be true, that no flesh will be justified by doing the deeds of the Law? Does the Law provide a faulty standard of guideline for behavior? Paul will address that idea later by teaching that the problem is not in the Law, but in the moral incapability of man. No man will be justified in God's sight through the works prescribed in the Law, because no man can do them.

Those living under the Law, if they approach it truthfully, earn this life-giving lesson. They come to learn and comprehend their own sinfulness. By that they are humbled before God and learn the fear of God. By that they are conditioned to accept the greatest news, the gospel. And this is the advantage of the Jew. It is great advantage by all standards of reasoning, because it provides a gigantic assist to anyone who is searching for the truth. But it does demand a truthful search, or it blinds rather than illumines.

So Paul has established the advantage of the Jew. They have been given tools that when applied truthfully, help them overcome their prideful self-sufficiency with respect to pleasing God. They have tools that can shorten their journey. But these can also block their journey if used untruthfully.

3:21—But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets.

Paul has been talking about the plight of humanity, all of humanity, apart from the truth proclaimed in the gospel. It is a hopeless one. Judgment will be based on deeds. Yet no one, even those who have the Law can produce deeds that result in salvation. The Jew's only advantage is that through the Law they can arrive at an understanding of their own hopelessness earlier than those without the Law. But that is only an advantage if there is a solution. That is why Paul is not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the story of the power of God being brought to bear on this matter, resulting in salvation being available to both Jews and gentiles.

Now in this verse Paul will begin to bring the gospel to bear on this whole subject of man's salvation. He begins to speak of a righteousness that has as its source God Himself. It is not sourced in man's efforts, not just another scheme to produce more good deeds. This is a critical point. It is a rightness sourced in the judge Himself, and so there is no doubt to its adequacy. It is in this sense apart from the Law. Yet, it is not something new. It is what the Law pointed to and what the prophets had called Israel to.

Paul explains that the righteousness of God is revealed. Its revelation is complete, and it stands established (perfect tense). This is being witnessed (present tense) by the law and the prophets. The arrival of this righteousness from God had been projected in the writings of the Law and prophets since Eden. These writings now continued to testify of the truth of this righteousness of God embodied in Christ. They were no longer predictive in this respect. They served as an affirmation of Jesus' identity as the Christ.

Since ancient times men and women had found forgiveness from God and right relationship with Him by faith in Him, trusting that He loved them and would provide a sacrifice for their sins. According to the writings, somewhere, at some time, somehow, God would provide a sacrifice of greater value than the symbolic ones they were making to demonstrate their faith (Genesis 22:8, 14; Deuteronomy 32:43). It would be a sacrifice that would redeem all who would believe and would place them under a new covenant with God. Under the new covenant something in the inner being of each child of God would occur. God's Spirit would be united with them and so prove that they had been fully absolved of all guilt (Deuteronomy 30:6; Jeremiah 31:31-37; Joel 2:28-32). All this came about through Jesus the Christ.

Now God had viewed all who had faith as righteous before this sacrifice was made by Him. But the reality was that humanity's sin still had not been paid for. Until the standard of God's justice was met it would not allow God to release and unleash all that comes with right relationship to God. But all this that characterized life under the new covenant would freely flow once the sacrifice was made. This was the sacrifice made by Christ, the appointed Sin-bearer and Savior of humanity that had been written and spoken of in the Law and the prophets (Genesis 3:15; Isaiah 53). It would be an event that would usher in a heightened experience of the righteousness of God. It would result in the removal of sin, not just the forgiveness of it. It would represent a greater level of the experience of redemption that one day will be complete.

3:22—even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction:

There are two points of observation that should be made here before the meaning of this verse and its place in the flow of Paul's message is delineated. The first is that Paul is speaking of what we would term "the Christian experience," and calling that "righteousness of God." Christianity is God imparting righteousness to us. Daily we should embrace the forgiveness that affords us and we should listen for the prodding of the Holy Spirit and seize the opportunities He orchestrates to display through our thinking and behavior God's righteousness.

The second observation is that Paul is repeatedly emphasizing that distinctions between Jew and gentile are lost in Christ. If we were writing this verse as American Christians, we might say something like this: "even righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no inherent moral superiority in Israelites." The emphasis Paul is seeking to make is not just one of ethnicity. He is seeking to neutralize the Jews idea that they were morally superior due to their possession of the Law and their traditions in it. Paul emphasizes that righteousness is through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. This was a primary objective of His, to place the gentiles on the same spiritual plane as the Jews.

In our thinking regarding what lies ahead for the natural seed of Israel we can re-erect the wall between Jew and Gentile. Paul's message was that what God had planned for the Israelites was never just for the Israelites. Gentiles who believed were invited into and made a part of. Our message must be that whatever God's plan is, it will involve Him bringing Jews of His choosing to faith in Jesus Christ. He has not rejected them as a people. There are not two separate peoples with differing requirements for salvation or different destinations.

In this verse Paul concisely states the solution to man's dilemma. He has said that now, that is, in the lifetime of himself and his initial readers, a righteousness sourced in God had been brought to light. Here he says that it is a righteousness that comes through faith in Jesus Christ. It is faith that has as its object Jesus Christ and specifically the death He died for us. Trust is all Christ ever required for salvation and it is all that Paul ever required. There are other things that are part of what Paul calls in his writings "the faith." But only faith is required to be justified, to enter that course of life. Furthermore, it is faith that is required to be sanctified, to make progress in "the faith." As we trust Jesus the Christ more and learn to entrust more of our lives to Him, God's righteousness comes to be displayed in us.

The righteousness of God is said to be "for" all who believe. The Greek preposition used is εἰς. Here with the accusative, it expresses the idea of benefit or advantage. So the righteousness of God has been manifested not just for all to be in awe of, though it is an awesome thing. It is not just for all to long for or to be attracted to. It is for the benefit of all. God's righteousness has become flesh and blood, and it has become something that can be imparted to humanity. It becomes a privilege, a benefit, and possession of all who believe in Jesus Christ. There are neither distinctions nor restrictions beyond faith/trust in whom may enter these benefits. The righteousness of God is universal in terms of the need it addresses. It is universal in its appeal, and it is universally offered.

3:23—for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

God's righteousness has been manifested for the benefit of all who believe. It is not just that it has been made known for all to be in awe of. It has been manifested in a specific way so that it is of benefit to all who believe. The full benefit will be detailed as Paul's letter moves on, but again here, the idea of it being for the benefit of all of humanity is being reinforced. It is for all because all have sinned. There is no segment of humanity that does not need it. There are no people who have sufficient merit to not need righteousness from God. All fall short of God's glory. They have fallen short of His glory, and they are falling short of His glory always (the tense of "fall short" is present and expresses here what continually happens).

The imagery of this verse is, as many have noted, very practical. Inherent in the word for sin is the idea of missing the mark, as when one shoots an arrow. The idea of falling short is a precise one, because an arrow falls short when it is not aimed high enough or when the shooter has a bow with insufficient power. The shot was not wide left or right. The arrow did not overshoot the target. It landed short. It is the imagery of a lack of power for the range required by the shot.

When humanity was originally created, they likely reflected the glory of God physically, because they were continually in the presence of Yahweh. This was the experience of Moses when he spoke to Yahweh face to face. His face reflected physically the glory of God (Exodus 34:29-35; 2 Corinthians 3:12-14). When Adam sinned, that glory was lost because fellowship with God was lost. The result was that Adam knew he was naked (Genesis 3:10). There was this immediate physical effect, but the more profound effect was the one nakedness was a symptom of. Adam had died spiritually. Ever since, humanity has been spiritually dead, and so they always are falling short. They will continue to fall short in their own efforts to restore themselves to that position of glory.

The few words of this verse describe the entire human dilemma, the cause of all that tortures us during our lives on earth. The gospel is good news and is to be embraced gladly and unashamedly because all have sinned. By embracing the gospel we are not saying anything about ourselves that is not true of everyone else.

3:24—being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus;

This verse is a continuation of the previous thought. We can understand verses 23-24 as reading something like this, "For all have sinned and are continually falling short of the glory of God and all are being justified freely through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus." This does not imply universal salvation. Paul is saying all whether Jews or gentiles. Just as all need salvation, all are invited by God to be freely justified through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

This verse uses three words that summarize critical ideas found in God's revelation of Himself and His plan. One of those "loaded" words is the word "justified." It is a participle form of the word for righteousness, and so from the standpoint of etymology means to make righteous. Having spoken of the righteousness of God being revealed, Paul makes it clear using this word in this verse that not only has God's righteous been made known to us, but it has been effectual toward us, having been credited to all who believe in Christ.

This verbal idea of being made righteous has occurred three previous times in the letter (2:13; 3:4, 20). But this is the first time it is used to describe a work that is accomplished in us by God. The rest of the verse shows that it is not based on our own merit or work that we are made righteous. So though the idea of being made righteous may be inherent in the word's etymology, we understand that the Biblical concept of justification means to declare righteous. In other words, it is not that God has made us sin-free. It is that He has declared us free of sin's penalty. The idea that we can be declared righteous without really being righteous is the only hope of humanity, as the first half of this chapter has shown.

The second "loaded" word in this verse is the word "gift." This word is an adverb which is placed in the clause to describe how the action of us being justified has come about. Some translations have rendered it with the word "freely." That captures the idea, and it is an idea that Paul was very intentional and careful about presenting and protecting with respect to our justification and the message of the gospel. The idea that we have been declared righteous freely is further enhanced by Paul's addition of the short phrase "by His grace." The effect of Paul's word choices is that the cause of our being justified rests in the character and acts of God not in routines or rituals carried out by us.

This idea that we have been given a gift by being declared righteous is reinforced further by the third "loaded" word in the sentence, which is "redemption." This word is used ten times in the New Testament. It is formed by combining the word for something that "loosens" with the word for "away." So in terms of its etymology, it refers to "a loosening away," an idea which is retained and clearly seen in actual usage and the entire Biblical concept of redemption. Redemption in general involves a price being paid to attain the release of someone or something. It is the rendering of satisfactory payment to satisfy an obligation. It is the paying of an obligation or a ransom.

In the case of humanity, the obligation was to God Himself. Much has been falsely said about the price being paid to Satan. The truth is that God's only debt is to His own character and justice. A price had to be paid to satisfy His justice and so maintain His perfection. His character had been violated and a just payment had to be given. That is what our redemption was, and the price paid was the life of God's Son, Jesus Christ. Since Adam's act bound us to the consequences of God's justice, God has moved along His plan to loosen us. Christ's death became the thing that loosens us. He is the personal agent by whom God's standard of justice could be met, by whom we could be loosened from our obligation to God. Jesus rendered this payment, one that we could not possibly render ourselves. That is the idea of the Biblical concept of redemption.

3:25—whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. *This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed.*

When God paid for our sin He did so publicly, orchestrating the events and the aftermath so that Christ became the central event and person of history. He did this publicly because He wanted to bring to light for all to see this plan, He had to impart His righteousness to man and He wanted to bring to light to depraved and undeserving nature of humanity.

The entire life of Christ was a public one, and He died in public with hundreds to witness. The events were painstakingly recorded in writing and preserved. They would become the object of myriads of sermons, countless pieces of art including dramas, musicals, and movies. They have been the subject of an infinite number of conversations across all sorts of cultural lines through many centuries of human history. It is all a matter of public record.

The events were an exhibit, that is the meaning of the word “demonstration.” It is the showing of evidence. This exhibit, composed of the life and death of Christ, showed that there was a propitiation or atonement for sin. Sin could be dealt with and was dealt with by Christ. His death paid the penalty, and His resurrection proved the payment was satisfactory. The blood of Christ was central to this plan because when shed for us it met the standard of God’s justice. Sin would not simply be passed over. It would be fully atoned for. And because it was atoned for, God’s relationship to humanity could be fully restored to what it was before Adam sinned, and Yahweh’s justice served and kept intact.

This exhibit also showed the righteousness of God. There was the sinless life, but also the rightness of God stepping in to deal with an enemy of His creation that was too powerful for humanity. What God’s plan had allowed by way of evil, He made provision for and so demonstrated His righteousness. But Paul’s main point here is that God’s public display of Christ exhibited His righteousness with respect to forgiving the sins of the people of faith since the time of Adam. Those sins of men like Abraham, Moses, and David, were not simply passed over. They were in time, paid for in full.

There is no sin committed that is ever passed over or viewed as insignificant by God. He demonstrates forbearance, a word which is a compound meaning to “hold up.” God “holds up” under enormous displays of evil. He delays punishment. In the case of humanity from Adam to Christ, He extended forgiveness based on faith and delayed punishment. But now His righteousness in forgiving that sin has been demonstrated. He was righteous in forgiving it because satisfactory payment was to be made, and since He is not a creature bound by time, the payment was made. So Christ was an exhibit of God’s righteousness, demonstrating that His righteousness never is compromised though His forbearance may make it appear so. His passing over of sin is never a result of Him letting go of His righteous character and compromising His justice. This is an important point because a universe controlled by an unjust being would be a risky proposition.

3:26—for the demonstration I say of His righteousness at the present time, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

Paul wants to come back and linger for a moment on the idea of God’s demonstrating His righteousness. Christ was God demonstrating to man His righteousness. Christ was the central exhibit in terms of evidence for God’s existence and His nature and character. It is an exhibit Paul says, “for the present time.” Paul recognizes that in Christ there came to be changes in how believers would relate to God. With sin paid for, the Holy Spirit would reside in believers, and so there was something very significant about the days Paul was living in, the present. He clearly recognizes it and was occupied with calling men and women to the present experience of the faith and to letting go of the trappings of the old.

In Christ then, we have a present demonstration of the fact that God is just, that He went to great personal lengths to carry out His love in a just way. We also have a compelling demonstration of him being the justifier. So much of what He does He does through others. But when it came to paying the penalty for our sin, He Himself stepped forward and bore our punishment.

Paul makes clear elsewhere the purpose of God in this exhibit of His righteousness. It is not simply to fix humanity, though that is clearly significant to God. It is for His greater purpose of bringing all things into harmony with His character and His will (1 Corinthians 15:28; Ephesians 3:10; Habakkuk 2:13-14; Psalm 46:10; Isaiah 45:4-24). Yahweh's plan is not just occupied with justifying humans. Its purpose is that Yahweh Himself might be proved to be just and to be the one and only one who can justify.

There are several great ideas and themes in the Bible like justification and redemption. But the grand theme and purpose that unites them is the glory of God, and this is the ultimate purpose of all that is. It is certainly the ultimate objective we can seek to accomplish through our lives.

3:27—Where then is boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? Of works? No, but by a law of faith.

When Adam sinned the glory of humanity departed. Ever since man has felt the insatiable need to be affirmed. He has sought significance in countless ways. And so any special standing that might be real or imagined, he embraces and clings to. Religion has always provided fodder for boasting, because its thought grows out of man's desire to distinguish himself and establish his significance. All religion has a common element, laws of works. Religions produce lists of actions that humans can do to have status with deity.

Inevitably there is also a status with each other that comes from these laws of works. Wherever there is status there is boasting in one form or another.

The gospel eliminates this boasting. It reveals God as the justifier. Justification is a gift given in equal measure to all who believe, regardless of their moral or ethnic roots. Wherever works come into play there is room for boasting. Since the Gospel presents salvation as an accomplished work done by Christ that we have only to accept, boasting is eliminated. No one has an edge, no one is loved more, no one can speak of having needed less help from God. All such talk is silenced by the law of faith.

3:28—For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from the works of the Law.

With these words Paul introduces the next great thought that his letter will focus on. A critical aspect of the gospel is that salvation is based exclusively on faith. It is apart from any works associated with the moral and ceremonial standards of the Law. The word for apart is χωρις, and it means just that, outside of and apart from. The idea of separation by open space is inherent in it.

It is one thing to say that doing the works of the Law is insufficient to bring justification. Such a statement allows one to suggest that God adds to our good works from some reservoir of holiness to bring us up to that standard His justice demands. This represents God as the author of a grand “assist” in the matter of salvation. That makes salvation a result of our works and the work of God combined and salvages human pride. It is a different matter altogether to say that we are justified “apart from” the works of the Law. The former allows that God saves good people who do their best. The latter allows that some may be justified who have never done anything good from a moral standpoint, who may have in fact distained standards of morality.

This is a critical point in Paul’s letter, and the defense of this idea represented a critical point in the Christian Church. It said something very important about Jews and gentiles, which was critical for both groups to accept. It acknowledges that before both were justified, they were on the same spiritual plane. It acknowledges that once justified they are on equal spiritual ground.

This principle of salvation apart from the works of the Law undoubtedly raised many questions in the minds of Paul’s readers. Why did God then give the Law and focus such attention on it for so many centuries? What is its purpose if not for justification? Is it true that all those men and women of the Old Covenant era were justified apart from the Law? Does the Scripture support such an idea? Does this not represent a quantum shift from all that the Old Testament teaches? If Judaism was true, isn’t Christianity a cult? These were likely all questions that would have occurred in the minds of the readers and threatened to divide the early Church.

These were also questions that honest minds had to ponder, because there had to be harmony between what God had done and what he was now doing. If there was not, then it was legitimate to question the veracity and validity of the whole of Scripture. So this is a critical point in Paul’s detailed statement of the gospel and it is important to note that this is a very straight-forward statement. Paul makes no attempt to soft-pedal what the gospel taught. Justification is by faith, apart from the works of the Law. He will go on in his letter to answer the host of questions that this idea raised.

3:29—Or is God the God of the Jews only? Is He not the God of the Gentiles also? Yes, of the Gentiles also,

Here was the critical point that was both emotional and apologetic in nature. Jews and gentiles were on equal footing spiritually. Yahweh loved both equally and valued both equally. There were no favorite sons on the one hand, nor were their bastards or stepchildren on the other.

It is difficult for us to imagine how emotional this point was in the early church. There had been no “affirmative action” on Jesus’ part when he chose his disciples. All were Jews. Even in choosing the man who would be the one to take the gospel to the Gentiles, Yahweh chose a “Hebrew of Hebrews.” So there was much circumstantial evidence against this idea Paul was pushing in this verse. But he had learned by actual audience with Christ that this was true.

Some religious historians today suggest that Paul did brilliant PR work through such ideas, broadening the base of the “fledgling faith.” They speak of appeals like this as though they were the product of a human strategy session or a business plan. The reality is that this was simply the truth, and the “new faith” was not new at all. It was the same faith the way it looked after the next step in the plan of God had been taken. It was the fuller movement that had been disclosed in the writings of the Old Testament.

From the perspective of Paul, with knowledge of the work of Christ on the cross, this all became incredibly plain. Looking at the Old Testament through that lens of the knowledge of Christ made words about His family enfolding large numbers of gentiles became patently clear. The idea was there all along. It was simply awaiting its time. So as Paul begins to support his statement that a man is justified by faith apart from the Law, he offers this statement first on the scope of Yahweh’s loving rule. All ethnic groups had their deities. Was Yahweh just one more of these? No! He was the God of Gods and the Lord of Lords. His rule extended over all people and His loving kindness was now being directed toward them all so that they would be drawn into covenant relationship with Him under the terms of a new covenant.

3:30—since indeed God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith is one.

This verse can be understood as beginning with the short phrase “since it is true.” Paul is taking an important tenant of the Old Testament revelation and offering it as foundational to his argument that one is justified by faith apart from the Law. It was also an important tenant of Jewish theology and a very emotional one. It remains so to this day.

The idea that God is one might appear to 21st century Christians to be a statement about the structure of the Godhead. But to the Jews it was primarily a statement of monotheism and of God’s utter uniqueness. There is no one like Him and no other being that is the source of things divine. Yahweh is the one through whom all other spiritual beings have existence, are allowed power, are permitted, or commanded to act. It is for His purpose they exist. This is the primary thrust of this idea that God is one in the Old Testament.

Now all that is has a God, and all people have a god. This God is Yahweh, who became a man, Jesus the Christ, and who revealed Himself to all and for all through the Jews. Paul states that among both the circumcised and uncircumcised, faith is the distinguishing mark associated with right standing with God. God embraces those with faith.

The terms for circumcision and uncircumcision are περιτομην and ακροβυστιαν respectively. The former comes from two words, the word for cut and the word for around. The latter comes from two different words, the word for end or extremity, and the word for penis. The NASB rendering speaks of the circumcised being justified by faith and the uncircumcised through faith. That reflects the fact that Paul uses two different prepositions, εκ and δια. In this case however their usage equates. Both are used with the genitive case to express the means used by God to bring about justification. The usage of two different prepositions seems to be for stylistic reasons.

A more significant observation may be that Paul does not use the definite article in speaking of the faith of Jews. In the case of Jews, they are justified by faith. In the case of the gentiles, they are said to be justified by means of the faith. This is likely the anaphoric use of the article, identifying the faith of the gentiles as the same as that mentioned earlier of the Jews. So Paul's intent could be captured by this rendering, "...and the uncircumcised by the same faith." This shows that he is in every way trying to strengthen his basic idea that Jew and gentile are spiritual equals in the Church and that Christianity is not a new movement.

What is the fundamental point of this verse then? It is that there is one God who declares both Jew and gentile righteous based on the presence of faith in them. The fact that this is a continuation of what had been occurring pre-Christ will be proven by Paul later in a scriptural examination of how and when Abraham came to be justified. But first, Paul wants to comment on an important and emotional implication.

3:31—Do we then nullify the Law through faith? May it never be! On the contrary, we establish the Law.

In embracing the idea that all people are justified by faith, do we make the law a meaningless appendage? This was a very important question in the mind of Paul's readers and remains so to all Christian thinkers. One cannot read about God's giving of the Law and the words of the Law itself and think it is all unimportant. Life and death, blessing and cursing are all associated with the Law. This begs the question, does a position that does not make the Law central to God's relationship to man legitimate? And then there is the matter of human depravity. Is it not the nature of sinfulness to cast off moral restraint? Is it not possible that anyone who lessens the significance of obedience to the code is just following their own evil instincts? These are the questions that must be asked, and Paul invites them.

Paul repeats an expression he has already used to give an emphatic answer to this question. The statement "May it never be!" is a colloquialism that expresses repulsion, horror, the absurdity of an idea.

Paul will not disclose here the significance of the Law or give extensive treatment to its purpose. He will do that later in his letter. Here he says only that in embracing justification by faith we establish the Law. The idea is that when we embrace justification by faith we endorse and embrace what the Law's standard says about the human behavior. In our belief in Christ's sacrifice, we each become exhibits of the Law's truth. We establish forever it's rightness. It is not too much to say that in being justified by faith we justify the Law, agreeing that it has testified rightly to us about the true nature of ourselves and our deeds. We are habitual sinners, unable to establish merit with God. Our only hope is the sacrifice of Christ.

Romans 4

4:1—What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found?

Paul has made some strong and definitive statements about the sinfulness of humanity and their inability to bring about their own right standing with God through obedience to the Law. They are however, liberating because they were preceded by his reference to the good news of the gospel which he said is “the power of God for the salvation of all who believe. So the bad news coming from God that we cannot save ourselves is liberating if we accept it. It is so liberating that it may seem too good to be true.

Paul turns to Abraham, the great patriarch of the Jewish family, one who is referred to in Scripture as the “friend of God” (Is. 41:8). He asks what Abraham found, or experienced. The word “found” is not in the Greek. A verbal idea is understood and the NASB has legitimately chosen to insert the word “found.” Another way of us understanding Paul’s words might be this: “What shall we say with respect to the story of Abraham?” We could even say, “How does the Scriptural record of Abraham shape our theology on the matters we are talking about?” Paul will reconstruct Abraham’s personal experience with God and through it prove that Abraham was justified through faith, not through obedience.

4:2—For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about; but not before God.

There is no doubt that Abraham obeyed God. There are ample incidences of his obedience recorded in Scripture. But the issue Paul wants to deal with is specifically Abraham’s justification. His first observation is that if Abraham was declared righteous by God due to his obedience, then he has something to brag about. Now, why was this important to Paul and to his argument? It is likely because the message of the Old Covenant had been so very clear on this point that men are on dangerous ground when they begin to boast before God.

It is likely that Paul’s most skeptical critics occupied common ground with Paul on this idea that boasting is dangerous. This is not to remotely imagine that they were not guilty of it. But Paul’s point is weighty. If Abraham or any other individual by their own merit and effort gain standing with God, that is a clear and significant achievement on their part. It is, in fact, most significant and should be rightly applauded. That is Paul’s point.

Paul quickly adds the words “but not before God.” Even if one could live without sin, they would not begin to compare to God. They would simply have equaled Him in one small area. This little phrase, “but not before God” is Paul’s way of saying, “But it isn’t this way with God. Abraham was not justified by his works.” This will be supported by Paul in the next verse.

There appears to be contradiction between Paul and James at this point (see James 2:21). James says clearly that Abraham was justified by works, and specifically in offering up Isaac. The two human authors, writing under the influence of the Holy Spirit, use the same word for justify, and the same tense and mood, to say what appears to be opposite things.

Looking at this seeming contradiction we can react in several ways. We can reject both Scripture and the faith as contradictory. We can do as Martin Luther and others have done and deny that the book of James should be in the cannon of Scripture. We can also embrace faith, assuming there is no contradiction in God and look for the paradox in this matter that explains the contradictory language. We know that things that appear contradictory can be true and that such puzzles can require our greatest effort to resolve.

Both human authors observed spiritual paradox. Paul spoke of finding strength through weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9-10), of an earthen vessel holding a treasure (2 Corinthians 4:7), of the foolishness of God being wisdom (1 Corinthians 1:18-22). James spoke of finding joy in trial (1:2), of big things governed by little things (3:5), of the extreme sorrow of worldly comfort (5:1). Just as both writers individually observed paradox in spiritual truth, the divine author who inspired both their writings established through them a paradox. It is this; faith is what justifies us, apart from works, yet we are justified by works.

This paradox can only be explained by the nature of faith itself. We find in Scripture that faith is a work. In fact, faith is described by Jesus as THE work of God (John 6:28-29).

Faith also involves trusting what we believe to be true, and we cannot help but be shaped in some way by what we believe to be true. A case in point is made by the author of Hebrews in citing this very same incident, the offering up of Isaac by Abraham which he says Abraham did “by faith” (Hebrews 11: 17-19). Due to the nature of faith, there is somewhat of a cause/effect relationship. We say somewhat because though faith shapes thought, and thought shapes action, the presence of certain actions do not mean faith is present. The big lesson of the Old Testament is that action learned by rote can be present without faith being the cause (Isaiah 29:13; Ezekiel 16; Romans 2:28; Hebrews 4:2; Jude 5). The New Testament demonstrates that this is true through individuals like Judas. So the relationship between faith and works must be pondered and stated carefully.

Paul is speaking in this portion of his letter of what causes God to declare a man righteous. James is speaking to the more practical issue of how our justification manifests itself to others in a way that does the kingdom of God good (James 2:14). Both are a legitimate use of the word justify. What we learn from both is that God declares us righteous when we believe. This declaration of His is perceived by others through our works. The presence of the divinely inspired paradox in Christian thought reveals that God wants us to give very careful thought to the relationship between faith and works. The absence of either, or imbalance between them is always unhealthy.

4:3—For what does the Scripture say? “And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.”

With this verse the intent of the former phrase, “but not before God” is established. Paul meant for us to understand that a man may boast of his good works before men, but those works produce no special standing with God. He offers this testimony of Scripture as proof for his claim that Abraham was justified by faith apart from works. It is from Genesis 15:6. Abraham believed God’s promise that he would give him an heir from his own body, a natural son through Sarah, and that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars. Abraham had clearly expressed doubt at the beginning of this conversation with God. But because of God’s words to him he came to believe. And so He was justified when he trusted God’s word to him.

It appears that Abraham had believed in God previously, having made his way to the promised land at God’s direction, but there was something more at stake in this moment. The promise of being a great nation, of being a blessing, and of personal blessing had already been given to him (Genesis 12). But there is something about this event that came after His rescue of Lot and the King of Sodom that was compelling to Abraham and to Yahweh. It is said that it was at this point that his faith was “reckoned as righteousness.”

It is interesting that there is not record of any deed done by Abraham that demonstrated this belief that was so reckoned by Yahweh. At God’s previous statement of the promise Abraham had packed up and moved from Ur. But no demonstration of his faith is recorded here. It is only said that he believed God. There follows in the Genesis text the solemnization of God’s covenant with him, and the ceremony is devoid of the normal display of commitment on the part of both covenant parties. Abraham does not pass between the animal halves, only God does. This clearly confirms that he was justified by faith and that the covenant was clearly God’s doing apart from anything Abraham might do. Such is the concept of God’s reckoning.

The term *ελογισθη*, rendered “reckoned,” describes the official accounting of wealth, specifically what account it is credited or charged to. Paul uses it to describe actions of God that define how something is to be understood, officially valued, and remembered under His watchful eye. It then becomes the official affirmation and divine view of the transaction. When God observes faith in His word on the part of an individual, it is noteworthy to Him. He sees it as and records it to their account as righteousness. This is Paul’s point. It is not at all a matter of how humanity might evaluate a person’s life. What matters is the value assigned a person’s course of action in the official record that will be used by the Judge (Revelation 20:12).

God’s dealing with Abraham is one of the clearest statements in Scripture about how this valuation process of God works. This reveals the currency of value in God’s economy and that currency is faith.

But we must be somewhat careful of the idea of “currency.” Due to the character of the one doing the reckoning, Yahweh, there is inherent the idea of justification being a gift. God benevolently and graciously contributes Jesus His Son, from His own treasury of grace, in response to our faith to justify by the standard of His justice this reckoning. In this way the transaction meets the standard of His own audit. So it is not that in faith we discover the currency of heaven and can make adequate payment for our debt. It is that faith on our part moves God in our behalf to apply the righteousness of Christ to our account and so reckon us righteous.

The reckoning of God is such that it “results in” (εἰς δικαιοσύνην) righteousness. When faith is reckoned as righteousness, it is because the giving of a gift has been involved. This is an important idea in defending Paul’s position that men are justified by faith apart from works of the Law.

It seems evident that this reckoning of faith is not just true of our justification, but of our ongoing value as servants of God’s kingdom as well. Deeds of obedience carried out in faith will be rewarded. Other deeds that might involve the same actions will not be rewarded because they involve some motive other than faith (Romans 14:23). We surmise that a good deed is such not because it is assigning a value. It is assigned a value because it is carried out in faith. And so it is written that without faith it is impossible to please God (Hebrews 11:6).

4:4—Now to the one who works, his wage is not reckoned as a favor, but as what is due.

Paul makes this statement that comes from the reality of the work world. Payroll is not reckoned or accounted as a series of gifts. It is money owed. It would be an injustice if a worker was not paid what they had earned. In making payroll an employer is not considered generous. They are doing what they must legally or at least ethically do.

Paul is alluding here to an idea which he will later state. If we are justified by our works, then in justifying us God didn’t do any real “reckoning,” and He extended no real favor or mercy, and there was certainly no gift involved. In that case justification is a simply, straight-forward action taken to meet an obligation. In that case God has at some point incurred a debt to us, like an employer. If we have by deeds earned a certain moral standing, then in justifying us He is only giving us what is due us. His alleged lovingkindness to men like Abraham could be questioned were that the case.

4:5—But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness.

Paul continues to make use of our experience in this world of employment and wage-earning. It is important to note Paul’s switch here. He has used the example of a wage-earner who has legitimately earned his wage (μισθος) in verse four. He switches here to “the one not working.” That’s interesting. We are not represented as lousy workers. Our situation morally is such that we cannot be construed to be engaged at all in the work God has for humanity. Paul has already established this and driven it home in his letter (from 1:18-3:20). Our hope is in this “reckoning” not simply because all work leaves our account clearly short. There has been no legitimate effort on our part! There must be the application of “funds” from another source.

The key to becoming justified in God’s eyes is not to engage moral deeds and so earn it. In fact, that is impossible. The key is the good news, to become an object of this reckoning. The reckoning applies moral wealth from another source to one’s account. This is done by God for all who believe in Jesus Christ, the one whose death on the cross provides the wealth that enables this great “reckoning”, this Divine shuffling of resources to be carried out. This faith in Jesus Christ appears on the official ledger of God as a “sin-blotted-out-and-gone” kind of righteousness. It is an adjudicated righteousness, given to those who were not working.

4:6—just as David also speaks of the blessing upon the men to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works;

This verse begins with a subordinating conjunction that links it to the previous thought. Continuing to strengthen his defense of justification by faith not by works, Paul now appeals to the testimony of the writings of a great figure in the Old Testament, David. It was important to Paul to show that these concepts were not a fabrication of his mind, but a God-directed defining of the truth about the relationship between God and humanity. It is the truth as it has always been.

Paul will cite David's description of the experience of being pardoned and forgiven. Before quoting David's words he points out that David described being right with God as a blessing. Paul leans heavily on that word. A blessing is something above and beyond what was expected. Everyone understands that about a blessing, and they use the word in that way. All who have been forgiven by God sense that there has been conferred on them something quite beyond what they could have created or achieved for themselves. Paul's argument is that David's testimony that describes forgiveness as a blessing can be true only if forgiveness is by a reckoning of God, not by the forgiven person's own efforts.

(See Appendix 2 for commentary on this "one word argument" of Paul)

4:7—Blessed are those whose lawless deeds have been forgiven, and whose sins have been covered.

As we have said above, the word "Blessed" is the key word Paul wants to cite in this quote from Psalm 32. Paul hangs his argument on the normal usage of that one word. If an individual paid for his sins or in some way compensated adequately for them, forgiveness would not be called a blessing. It might be called a status or a rank, but not a blessing.

David speaks of forgiveness as having one's sins blotted out or covered over. The blessing is that these have been acted on by someone else to remove the guilt of them. This action against the guilt of our sins is the greatest of blessings. It is not within the scope of anyone's ability to achieve what David describes here. It is an act of God.

4:8—Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not take into account.

These words of David express the accounting of Yahweh that He predetermined whereby those of faith could be redeemed. Due to the payment rendered by the blood of Christ, the sin we are guilty of will not be considered. This is a fortuitous state that has come about in our lives. It is not something we have engineered or achieved. It is a spiritual blessing, and it is like anything else we term a blessing, in that we cannot explain why it has come our way. We stand forgiven because of efforts outside of our own. It is the work of God carried out by Jesus Christ. All that we have through His sacrificial death for us is a blessing, pure and simple. It is the wealth of another freely given to us, apart from any qualifying process completed by us.

4:9—Is this blessing then upon the circumcised, or upon the uncircumcised also? For we say, “Faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness.”

Having de-bugged the concept of justification, showing that it is a blessing not a rank or status garnered by specific acts of obedience, Paul turns to deal with one such act of obedience to which mythical power had been erroneously attached. The act, or rite was that of circumcision.

Circumcision was a ceremonial right prescribed by God. It was a symbol in the physical body of the male of what was to be a deep spiritual reality. It symbolized the removal of ignorance and rebellion that produced sinfulness and alienation from God. There was much emotion attached to this symbol among the Jews of Paul’s day who had come to believe. Many were saying it was essential for Jew and Gentile to be circumcised if they wished to be justified. The debate over circumcision raged in the early Church.

As Paul turns to deal with this issue, he poses the question that was foremost in the minds of many in a straight-forward way. Picking up the concept he had just reinforced, that justification was a blessing, not something achieved by merit, he asks if this blessing rests only on those who have been circumcised. This is important. Can it be proved that righteousness was reckoned only to those circumcised? Can it be proven that it was reckoned to those who were uncircumcised? What are the facts in this regard?

In pursuing these things, Paul will focus on Abraham, as promised in verse one of this chapter. What was the experience of this one of whom it is clearly said that faith was credited to him as righteousness? So much that Jews and Gentiles who were part of the Church believed was based on Abraham. What specifically was Abraham’s experience in the matter of justification and circumcision?

4:10—How then was it reckoned? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised;

The rite of circumcision was established well after it was recorded that Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. It is recorded 2 chapters later in Genesis 17, but a few years have elapsed by that time since Abraham’s justification recorded in Genesis 15. Ishmael is not yet born in Genesis 15 and he is 13 years old in Genesis 17. Abraham himself is 99 years old when he is circumcised. Sort is clear from the record of Scripture that Abraham is accounted righteous long before he was circumcised. This was an important piece of evidence that needed to sway many in the early church who were insisting that Gentiles needed to be circumcised.

4:11—“and he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised, that he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be reckoned to them.”

Circumcision was given as a sign of the covenant that came through Abraham to all his heirs (Genesis: 17:11). This does not mean it was insignificant, as the context in Genesis indicates. It properly designates it as a sign of righteousness not a cause of it. There was a precedent set in Abraham, showing that justification happens apart from circumcision, or any other work for that matter. He was declared righteous due to belief plus nothing.

In that event he is seen as the spiritual father of all who embrace faith as a means of being made right with God.

There have been various signs that God has established along the way as He was relating to humanity, circumcision and baptism being the most widely observed. It has always been easy to confuse and even substitute the sign for the reality (Jeremiah 9:26, Malachi 1:10, Acts 7:51). Paul wants to establish the distinction between the sign and the reality that is very clear in the record of Scripture.

4:12–“and the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also following the steps of the faith of our father Abraham which he had while uncircumcised.”

Paul is very careful to reinforce his words, to not give any sense that Jews were more elite in the family of God because they were physical descendants of Abraham. He stated in the previous verse that Abraham is the “father” meaning spiritual father, of all of those justified by faith. Now he says Abraham is the father of circumcision, meaning the first practitioner of the rite itself. No one could take from this that those who had followed Abraham in this rite were in no need of imitating Abraham’s faith because of what Paul says next. He explains that Abraham is a father to those who followed him in both the rite and in the faith. So whether circumcised or uncircumcised to be a child of Abraham was to embrace his absolute trust in Yahweh, which trust he had before he observed the rite of circumcision.

Those who were “of circumcision only,” Abraham’s physical descendants, could not rightly regard Abraham as their spiritual father. It is following his faith, whether circumcised or not, that makes one a spiritual descendent of Abraham.

4:13–“for the promise to Abraham or to his descendants that he would be heir of the world was not through the law but, but through the righteousness of faith.”

There are several very important ideas communicated by this verse. The main idea is that the promise made to Abraham would not be fulfilled through his obedience to the law. The promise would be fulfilled through the righteousness sourced in faith. It was dependent only on God being true to his promise and plan to provide a righteousness sourced in Yahweh not dependent on the works of humans.

This point made by Paul was plainly evident in the language God used with Abraham everywhere He stated and restated His covenant. It was also evident in the symbolic solemnization of the covenant in Genesis 15. All the symbols of the old covenant that would be established later would support this that Paul observes. The law of course was not given for 400 more years, and it fulfilled an entirely different purpose than being a means of gaining God’s promise. But the Law itself spoke very clearly of Yahweh being the hope for humanity’s salvation.

There are several other ideas represented in this verse that help us align accurately other areas of our belief. Paul represents the promise made to Abraham as also being made to his descendants. He has already shown by descendants God did not mean just physical descendants, but also those that embraced Abraham's faith. While this would eventually include many who were his physical descendants it would also include many who were not. The promise made to Abraham can be embraced as their own by all who believe in God's message, regardless of ethnicity. It was made to Abraham and his descendants (Genesis 15:18), and that includes his spiritual descendants, those who follow in his faith.

Another important idea mentioned here is the content of that promise. It is that these descendants would be heirs of the world. This phrase, "heirs of the world," relates to several things that go beyond the usual 21st century understanding of salvation, and beyond Paul's present discussion of justification. "Heirs of the world" relates to humanity's destination in the plan of God. It is given definition by bits and pieces of data occurring throughout Scripture. Humankind's justification, which saves them from sins penalty, is brought about by God as a step in a plan. That plan calls for the restoration of humanity to their original role to be the agents that carry out God's rule over the earth (Genesis 1:26). The promise to Abraham that he would be blessed and that he would be a blessing relates to this restoration that God is moving creation toward.

The schedule of this restoration of the rule of Yahweh through people is dependent on purposes being accomplished by God with respect to the presence of evil in creation. Evil must run its course in Yahweh's plan. That fact was made plain to Abraham (Genesis 15:16). But God's plan is that those declared righteous based on faith should inherit the earth.

To accurately align our thinking with all that the Bible teaches regarding salvation, we must see the promise made to Abraham as relating to this restoration of God's rule through humans on the earth. Salvation does not relate only to God's judgment of us. It relates to His passion to save us for His eternal purposes.

We believe that biblical data teaches that this kingdom of God exists on earth today in spiritual form, so that God rules in the hearts of people, millions of them, throughout all of the world's kingdoms. God's kingdom exists across all political lines. Jesus spoke of this form of his kingdom frequently (Matthew 13; Luke 17:20-21).

There is a second stage in this restoration that will involve the return of Christ to the present earth to set up an actual literal and visible kingdom that He Himself would rule. Jesus spoke of this stage of God's kingdom as well (Luke 19:11-27; 21:27-28; 22:28-30; Matthew 19:28-29).

Then there is the ultimate establishment of God's kingdom when the present heavens and earth are done away with, and a new heaven and earth are created (Revelation 21:1). This will be the ultimate, pure form of that kingdom from which death, evil, and the evil one are forever banished (Revelation 19:10, 14; 21:22-22:5). God's work of restoration will be complete at that point and those who have embraced Abraham's faith will rule with God over the new creation.

So the promise will be fulfilled to Abraham and his descendants that they will be heirs of the world. This is the plan that Paul foresaw and that is reflected here in his choice of words. The primary point of Paul and this verse is that obedience to the law was not how one would gain this experience of the kingdom of God. That experience is laid hold of in the same way that Abraham originally was given the promise, by faith.

4:14—“for if those who are of the law are heirs, faith is made void and the promises nullified.”

There have always been and will always be those who are of the law persuasion (literally “out of the law”). They are persuaded that through conforming to the law they can and will gain sufficient merit in God’s eyes to be blest of Him with an inheritance. Some in the Church in Paul’s time were embracing this, that one could only be justified if they subjected themselves to the law’s demands. The position was and is untenable. Such a position excludes all from salvation because, as Paul has said, “by the works of the law no flesh will be justified in his sight” (3:20).

Paul says that if such thinking is correct, if some supposed level of obedience to the law earns one the status of being an heir of God’s promise, then faith is made void. That is because the lifestyle and ceremony prescribed by the law can be carried out to some degree by rote, without even believing in God. In fact, laws governing externals will usually take us into mindless conformity. No if such conformity to the Law brings justification, one’s faith is irrelevant. It is also true that if such thinking is correct the promise is nullified. If the promise is only attained by conformity to the law, since the law cannot be adhered to perfectly by anyone, then the promise will not be laid hold of by anyone. Faith is made void and the promise is nullified if they were made conditioned on the works prescribed by the law.

Is important to understand that the law was never given as the means of justification as Paul has already made clear. Paul will later make clear that the law had to do with justification only in the sense that it made the people aware of how sinful they were. Justification has been and will always be through faith. The law leads us away from ourselves and to Christ as our source of goodness and salvation.

4:15—for the Law brings about wrath, but where there is no law, there also is no violation.

This verse states concisely and well the bottom line with the law. The Law brings about wrath. That’s it, pure and simple. It is not because the Law is defective. It is because we are. We cannot adhere to the Law. That’s a big problem because when God gave the law, he made it clear that those to whom it was given were “under it.” They were subjected to its blessing if they obeyed and subjected to its curse if they did not. Since none can obey the law, this means that those who were under it were subjected to its curse, always. That was a terrible weight.

Now the law was never about justification. Justification was always by faith. Many who embrace the law mistakenly approach it as a means of justification. That is classic religion, approaching rules and regulations as a means of justification. Religious people fabricate in their minds a “works” economy, believing that if they perform well with respect to the things prescribed by their own conviction or the law, they will inherit the blessing of eternal life. This idea persisted through Paul’s time and does so until this very day.

Those Jewish Christians in Paul's day who believed that Christians were only justified if they placed themselves under the law had to reckon with an important reality. The reality was this; if one was truly "under the law" they could not and would not be an heir. To place oneself under the law with the intent of gaining by obedience sufficient merit to be justified by God is counterproductive. The sooner one realizes they've made a mistake in doing this, the sooner they arrive at the destination the law was meant to take them to, faith in Jesus the Christ. The reality is that the law brings about wrath. Faith brings about forgiveness and acceptance.

The second part of this verse is equally important. It helps us understand the first part more fully and helps us understand God and his dealings with men more fully. There are things that are not inherently right or wrong but have been declared so by God for certain people at certain times. The eating of pork, the practice of circumcision, and the keeping of the Sabbath are examples. There are scores of others. Other things are wrong all the time, such as adultery, murder and lying, though the penalties varied from era to era.

There is no violation of the law if that law was either not made or if it has been set aside by Yahweh. That is an important principle in apostolic teaching. The Apostles struggled to get the early church to embrace it. Their message was that since Yahweh had set aside the old covenant, violations against its codes were no longer being punished by Him. A lack of conformity to the law did not block people from their Creator.

There is another important implication to this. Since there has always been only one condition with respect to justification, that being the requirement of faith, then there is no sense in which anyone has been or is "under the law" with respect to being justified. There is no series of codes outlining ceremonies or deeds that must be done to affect justification. There is only testimony that where faith is exercised God credits, or "reckons" it, as righteousness. The law, and this includes all that God commanded Moses to teach Israel to observe, had no jurisdiction in the matter of justification. Because there was no law there could be no violation and therefore no forfeiture or inaccessibility to justification.

4:16—"for this reason it is by faith, that it might be in accordance with grace, in order that the promise may be certain to all the descendants, not only to those who are of the law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all.

The "it" of the opening phrase of this verse refers to justification. Justification is by faith. There are two reasons given in this verse as to why God has ordered this.

The first reason God has ordered justification to be by faith rather than by works is so that it might be the result of His grace. Grace is the unmerited favor of God. It is God bringing to and through us His blessing and doing so apart from any test of worthiness on our part. There is one explanation for any person's justification—God's grace. The law proves this and will do so for all eternity. The law is "exhibit A" of what our moral makeup and ability really are. So justification is by grace and God ordered it this way for a reason, in order to bring about a specific purpose.

The second reason God ordered justification to be by faith was so that the promise He had made might be certain. The word rendered certain is *bebaian*, which refers to that which is solid and well-founded. Yahweh wanted no conditions attached that created a poor foundation for His movement and Kingdom. The requirement would be faith. The object of faith would be His Own Son. He would be the Kingdom's foundation and King. Then Yahweh's desired result would be assured. The promise would be certain to all the descendants of Abraham.

This does not mean that all the physical descendants of Abraham are heirs. That is patently clear from all that Paul has already written. It is those who embrace his faith that will be heirs. If justification by works had been the foundation, then nothing would have been certain. On the contrary, the Law and history have proven that with certainty NO person would be justified by works prescribed by the Law.

The remaining words of this verse strengthen this idea that Abraham's faith is what is to be embraced. The promise extends to all who have believed as Abraham believed. Two groups are mentioned as having this common destiny. Those who are "of the law" are mentioned first. Paul is referring to those who were a product of the old covenant. Their spiritual lives had been shaped by the Law. They lived when the Law had been given as that by which mankind could experience God's continuing blessing, presence, and deliverance. The Law was not a means of justification. Those who lived in the era of the Law AND who embraced Abraham's faith would inherit the promises made to Abraham. This group was mostly, though not entirely, composed of Abraham's physical descendants. The distinguishing mark, whatever their ethnicity, was their faith.

The second group mentioned were those who embraced the same faith as Abraham who for various reasons did not experience the Law. They were a product of faith, not the Law. They may have lived before the law was given. They may have lived outside of Israel during the era of the Law. They may have lived after its formal era, such as those living during Paul's day. They had this in common with those who believed and trusted in Yahweh and lived in a tradition, an era and place regulated by all the ceremony of the law. They all shared a common belief and trust in Yahweh.

Both groups are descendants of Abraham in the mind and view of God. They stand in His presence together as heirs of the promises, as the next verse will affirm. Both are so because of God's grace and the presence of the faith that grace produces.

4:17—(as it is written, "A father of many nations have I made you") in the sight of Him whom He believed, even God, who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist.

There is a brief parenthetical citing of Scripture here (Genesis 17:5). This is done to affirm to the readers that Paul's teaching aligns with the Scriptural record which is always the mark of sound teaching.

Then Paul continues his thought of Abraham being the spiritual father of all who embrace faith in God. This is not just a kind of literary picture that is the product of human analysis. It is the way God views the matter. It is so in His presence. Paul states this in a way that is definitive and dramatic. It is the one who gives life to the dead who views it this way. It doesn't matter what the ethnicity of the person is or where on the globe they are born, the One who will raise and judge the dead views them this way, as Abraham's children and therefore heirs of the promises Yahweh has made to them. They will be raised to this great calling and purpose and legacy.

This One who has ordered this so is also the One who is calling into being what does not exist. He can bring into being things that do not exist. He has shown Himself amply capable of this. In terms of spiritual relationships between Himself and people and people with each other He is continually bringing these into existence where nothing existed. There may be no genetic link whatever to Abraham. It does not matter. Those who follow Abraham's faith will be called heirs because God has summoned into being a spiritual linkage with Abraham where a physical one does not exist. So kinship to Abraham, and therefore membership in God's covenant community, is brought about by God in response to faith. It is a work of His that neither death nor any other obstacle can block.

4:18—in hope against hope he believed, in order that he might become a father of many nations, according to that which had been spoken, “so shall your descendants be.

In hope against hope is a great expression of the power of faith. Literally the phrase is “beside hope and upon hope he believed.” Faith enabled Abraham to embrace the hope that the thing Yahweh said raised in him and to build on that a certain expectation. In that moment when Yahweh spoke, Abraham came to believe he would have a descendant when there was no hope of it happening. He believed because of who was speaking.

Now consider these things. Abraham was 75 when the Lord called him to leave Heron (Genesis 12: 4), 86 years old when he had Ishmael (Genesis 16:16). Somewhere between these events this promise of having descendants was made to him. At 90 Abraham was circumcised (Genesis 17:24). He was 100 when Isaac was finally born (Genesis 21:5). His wife gave birth at 90. This was hoping against hope! Abraham was embracing the hope aroused by Yahweh's promise that he spoke, and he was daring to expect it to become a reality.

That is what faith enables us to do. It goes beyond hoping in normal human process. It is hoping that which is beyond what is normal and reasonable to expect because God has promised to do a thing, in this case give Sarah a son. We know that this hope of Abraham's was so unreasonable that both himself and Sarah had lapses along the way. We know that the promise was so unreasonable that on one occasion when Sarah overheard the promise reiterated to Abraham, she laughed (Genesis 18:12). The name Isaac (“he laughs), commemorated the laughter of Abraham and Sarah over the prospect of Isaac's birth (Genesis 17:16-19; 21:1-7).

Faith is hope placed in God. There was no thing and no person able to bring this promise about. Faith leads us to hope in that which is utterly unthinkable. Abraham's faith was in the simple statement of God after He had instructed Abraham to look up into the night sky of Palestine at the stars. God said, “so shall your descendants be.” Faith enabled a childless couple who were somewhere between 75 and 85 years old to believe those words. And when they did, God credited it to their account as righteousness.

4:19—And without becoming weak in faith he contemplated his own body, now as good as dead since he was about 100 years old, and the deadness of Sarah’s womb,

Scripture uses both language that is absolute in describing humanity’s behavior and language that is general. This is an example of the latter. Earlier Paul had used absolute language when he quoted the words of David, “there is none righteous, not even one (3:10, Psalm 14:1). He chooses here to commend the overall consistency of Abraham’s faith, which was remarkable. He does not dwell on the momentary lapses of faith that are evident in the Genesis account.

Abraham contemplated the weaknesses of his own body, the utter impossibility of the whole promise of God. It is not that he had his head in the sand ignoring reality and so enabled his faith. He faced reality squarely without becoming weak in the faith. The words of Paul are very definitive on this. Abraham considered His own body “already having died.” He contemplated the death of Sarah’s womb. It had been infertile and remained so for 90 years. Yet his faith did not weaken. Abraham’s faith was remarkable because he thought through these things and still believed. His faith remained over the 25 years that he waited for Isaac to be born.

4:20—Yet, with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief, but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God,

Though there was ample reason to get weaker in faith as the 25 years past, we are told that the opposite happened in the case of Abraham. He grew strong in the faith. The promise of God was to him too profound and serious to be relegated to a “wait and see” status in his mind. He did three things with respect to that promise.

First, he did not waver. We must so embrace God’s word on matters that we weather doubt each moment it arises. We must in those times answer two questions, “Who is God to me right now?” and, “Am I shrinking Him?”

Second, Abraham grew strong in faith. Faith is something we should get better at as time passes. And we should be able to get stronger in our belief as the promises are delayed. The more human thing would be to start excited and strong, but as time passes believe increasingly that something had gone wrong or that the word from the Lord had been misunderstood. Walking with the Lord enables the opposite to occur

Third Abraham gave glory to God. We do this when we exercise faith. When we remain faithful and do the things, we must do in order for God to do His essential work, we give Him glory. When we trust that He can do it and that His time of doing it is best and so rest from our normal human anxiety, we bring Him glory. It is clearly seen that He is our God that we are allowing Him to be God.

Remember, Paul is citing this faith of Abraham to show us what Abraham “found” (verse 1), with respect to the matter of justification. Paul is building a theology of justification from the Scriptural record of the life of Abraham. Clearly, Abraham found that faith in God is warranted, and he found that such faith is nurtured and strengthened by Yahweh Himself in the process of walking with Him.

4:21—And being fully assured that what He had promised, He was able also to perform.

This is a fourth thing, the final thing that happened in Abraham in terms of the promise of God. He allowed himself to be fully assured about the ability of God in this matter. This is what we must rest in eventually, God's overwhelming ability. He can do all that He purposes to do. The only thing that limits what He does is His own will. Therefore, if it is not done what He has promised we can be certain that it is only a matter of time. He is able in terms of ability and in terms of His own plan in the case of things He has promised.

It is relatively easy to believe God can do what we ask and hope. It is a journey to trust that He will do it, and legitimately so in some seasons. In many matters we cannot be confident of His will. In these, we must believe He is able to rescue us and continue to seek to discern if it His will so to act. In the matter that concerned Abraham, God had made His will clear. The timing was not clear, and we imagine that this is what caused Abraham to lapse in faith at times. This seems to be within the expectations of God, and He meets us in this area of our imperfection, not retreating from His promises.

On things God has promised to us, such as our eternal salvation, power in hardship, power to be sanctified from sin, we must allow ourselves to be fully assured. We must let go of all our contingencies and alternatives. God wants us to rest in His promises and so to experience them. Our endurance in these has great reward (Hebrews 10:32-35).

4:22—Therefore also it was reckoned to him as righteousness.

Faith clearly came about within Abraham and His trust grew stronger as time went by. God knowing faith to be present in Abraham accounted him as righteous. Where faith is, justification results by God's gracious rule. Looking at Yahweh's response to Abraham, we can be certain that when trust in Yahweh comes about, salvation from Yahweh also comes about. There is clearly no other way to be declared righteous. There is clearly no person who trusts Yahweh that Yahweh rejects. This is affirmed by Paul's statements that follow.

4:23—Now not for his sake only was it written, that it was reckoned to him,

The declaration in Genesis 15:6 that Abraham believed God and He reckoned it to him as righteousness, seems somewhat outside the immediate story. It is conspicuously placed amid an account of a conversation between God and Abraham. It is like a parenthetical idea, or commentary.

It turns out that it is recorded as it is for a much broader reason than that of giving the reader an understanding of that conversation. We suspect that there was this sense given to Abraham in this conversation and that this was passed along in the oral tradition that became the written record. As Moses wrote the account the Holy Spirit directed the placement of this declaration at this point in that account. Paul tells us it was not simply to declare what was true in the case of Abraham. It was meant to be a theological statement with application beyond.

4:24—But for our sakes also, to whom it will be reckoned, as those who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead.

The statement made regarding Abraham was recorded to declare a doctrinal truth that would govern all of humanity's relationship to God. The rule by which anyone must be justified is revealed in this record. Paul says that it is written for our sakes. Then we have some words inspired by the Holy Spirit for readers of Paul's letter that he had no way of knowing about. Literally "for the sake of the ones about to believe". It is written for the believers of the entire Gospel era forecasted by the prophets, all who believe in God's message about Jesus Christ.

That "good-news-message" is that He is God, our Lord who provided by His own life and death a way of salvation for us. This was stated to us by God through a very dramatic sign, the resurrection. The empty tomb and post-resurrection appearances accompanied the predictions and the verbal declarations of angels. Those who believe this statement of God about Jesus are justified.

The point of this verse is that Abraham was credited as righteous because he believed God's testimony about his future heirs. That he was so credited with righteousness is clearly stated in Scripture. This is recorded for our sakes so that we would know that we are credited with righteousness when we believe Yahweh's testimony about Christ

The next verse reveals the actual content of Yahweh's testimony, what God was saying about Christ through the resurrection. It is considerably more than that Christ is alive. That He is alive affirms the truth about who He is and what His death accomplished.

4:25—He who was delivered up because of our transgressions and was raised because of our justification.

This statement by Paul combined with the previous verse gives us a summary of the work God carried out through Christ Jesus. Just as Abraham was declared righteous because he believed in the work God would do to bring about what He had promised, so we are declared righteous when we believe in the work God did for us through Christ to make us his heirs.

This work of Christ is described here. Jesus was delivered up because of our transgressions. This is the only reason the Jewish authorities and the Roman authorities had power over Him. It was because the sin of humanity was laid on Him, and so by God's plan He became the sacrifice for us. He was without sin, but our sin gave death power over Him. He died for us and because of us. But once He suffered and died for our sins, those sins were paid for, and so were removed. Because He had no sins of His own, death had no power or hold over Him. So He became alive. He died because of our transgressions. His resurrection happened because His death paid for those sins and so they were removed from God's sight.

The resurrection then, proves two things. First that Christ's death was an acceptable sacrifice that met the standard of God's justice with respect to our sin. "It is finished" were Christ's words and His resurrection proves those words true. Second, that Christ was sinless. If He were not, He could not have qualified as our Redeemer and death would have held Him firm as it has every other human.

Romans 5

5:1—Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Where there is faith there is justification. That is the answer to the question Paul posed in the first verse of the previous chapter. There he asked, “what then shall we say that Abraham, our father according to the flesh, has found?” The text that communicates to us the story of Abraham and Yahweh clearly demonstrates that Abraham was declared righteous by Yahweh by he believed Yahweh’s promise to him. We are justified, meaning declared righteous, in the same way, by believing God’s testimony to us about Jesus Christ. This is the conclusion just affirmed by Paul in the previous verse. Right standing in relationship to our Creator-God is granted freely to us when we trust His word to us.

Since we are declared righteous by faith, we have peace with God. There’s no longer need to make things right, no anger to appease, and no affections to win over. It is made possible through the work of Jesus Christ on the cross, which was a finished and complete one. There is no more to add to it to get it right or to enhance it. Trusting that, we are at peace and rest with God. This is a foundational principle of Christianity upon which everything in terms of the practice of the faith is based. It affects both our doing and our being.

This is not to say that God’s work in us is finished. Our forgiveness is complete, but in terms of our being made righteous in behavior the work is just beginning. The penalty of sin has been paid for and its power over us broken. Now God begins the work of reproducing Christ in us. That process continues the work of salvation. It is a process we carry out with Him, for which He will graciously reward us, commensurate with our trust in Him in the matters of real life.

5:2—through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exalt in hope of the glory of God.

Through the work of Christ, we are introduced, given access into the existence that Adam and Eve forfeited. The restoration is partial. It is a restored relationship with God and the opportunity to carry out His will on earth in behalf of Him. Paul calls this a state of grace, and it is first and foremost that. He means that through the work of Christ God’s favor flows into us and enables us for transformation. Grace involves our forgiveness but also our empowerment. We are forgiven and all that belongs to God He makes available to us to fulfill His will in us and through us (2 Peter 1:3-7). We stand in grace and by grace.

Not only have we arrived in this blessed state, but there is also more that we have to look forward to and it is better. When God’s plan has run its course, the restoration will be complete. We understand that in the plan of God there is a day when He will restore the glory Adam had to humanity, and even greater glory that He is preparing. We understand that our present life in Christ, if lived to its fullest, is still only the earnest of our inheritance (Ephesians 1:14).

To live in this state of grace is a remarkable thing. We must remember that grace is the essence of our present lives if we are living the right way. All understanding of our present standing and responsibility should, in the final analysis, reflect this grace. There is effort we must expend, but it is enabled and multiplied manifold times over by God. The life God prescribed for us will not happen without that effort of ours, but neither would it happen with it if not for God's great process of multiplication. The life he has for us requires all that we have, but we could muster all that we have and not get close to it.

The testimony of all humanity's religious efforts is that humanity needs grace from God. They lack what grace brings, the presence of God himself in life and the faith, the tranquility, the change of character, the change of spirit, and the raw moral power that this grace brings about. So whatever our understanding of this Christian life is, to be precise it must represent it as a grace life, grace initiated, grace maintained, by grace enhanced, and to greater grace pointing.

This future hope is not just for better days or a better life. It is the promise of the ideal and perfect life, the experience of what "eye has not seen nor ear heard" (Isaiah 64:4; 65:17; 1 Corinthians 2:9). These are the things spoken by the Spirit to us in the Scriptures and in the recesses of our own heart as He assures us of the reality of the promises of God. It is the assurance of the great good that awaits us, the hope of glory of God.

We exult in this hope. The word used here is used most often in Scripture for boasting or bragging. It expresses the idea of an absolute confidence in something to where it is spoken of as a reality. It is either a very bad thing in the case of braggadocio, or a product of the right perspective on what is true and real. The latter usage is where the idea of rejoicing attaches to it. We speak and feel confidently about our future experience of God's glory. This word for rejoicing will appear again in verse 3, then again in verse 11. Three things are mentioned in these verses toward which we feel and speak with absolute confidence the first of these is about our future. It is one of hope.

5:3—"And not only this but we also exult in our tribulation, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance;"

It is characteristic of Christians historically that we do not just speak with an abandon confidence about our future. We speak with the same confidence in our present tribulations. This is a very important characteristic of what fellowship with God and the witness of the Holy Spirit in us leads us into. There should be a tranquility with respect to trial and difficulty. There should not be apprehension about God being absent or displeased, as was the Israelites error (Exodus 17:1-7). There should be a sense of rest amid the turmoil of trial with a confidence that God is doing His work in our character through the tribulation, and He is present with us during trouble. As years go by, we should lapse into anxiety less and less to where eventually we speak confidently of the leading of the Lord in the worst of circumstances. Christians can in this way boast or exult in tribulation, because God has revealed persistently and at times vary dramatically His purpose in allowing trial.

It would be hard to find any concept more plainly taught in Scripture or more thoroughly supported by Scripture than this idea. God's will and plan include us experiencing tribulation to bring about His purposes in us. In this verse and the next two, Paul will specifically speak to the chain of developments set in motion in a life through the experience of tribulation.

The first thing that happens is that tribulation produces perseverance. The word rendered “brings about” could be understood as “works to completion.” It is the verb that is understood in the verses that follow. It conveys an important idea. In trial God is accomplishing something. He is not simply doing something. So we don’t wish to just “get through it. The goal we should focus on first amid trial is to get through it through faith. We want to be able to appropriate faith, firmly trusting that we are in God’s will while under tribulation’s pressure. To live by faith is to experience a strong belief in God’s presence and companionship while in trial. It is to persevere in faith, even when that presence is not felt. That is the ability that tribulation brings about. Done this way tribulation brings to completion God’s great work in us.

So what we are looking to develop through tribulation is a confidence in God’s good pleasure with us in the midst of circumstances that suggest He has abandoned us. Circumstances might tell us He has, as Job’s friends made clear to him. Our own feelings might tell us He has abandoned us, as David’s frequently did to him. Faith assures us He has not (Job 19:25). This is faith-in-Yahweh perseverance. Tribulation works our faith and so strengthens our resistance against fear and anxiety, the very things that cause us to give up hope and abandon faith. This is perseverance that is faith based, not pride based, not simple stubbornness.

5:4—“And perseverance proven character, and proven character hope;”

This unwavering confidence, that God’s will for us includes these stresses imposed by tribulation, is a faith-based perseverance that keeps us from casting aside elements of the character of God that He has called us to pursue for ourselves. That character when embraced in trial, becomes deeply rooted in our souls.

There is a fleshly perseverance. It endures out of pride, stubbornness or just a desire to be seen as one who perseveres. But that perseverance is marked by a different inner thinking pattern, one that in fact is faithless or a faith in oneself. Many persevere while abandoning all hope in God.

Perseverance of the faith-in-Yahweh has common ground with the resistance training athletes engage. Christians have always found inspiration in that sort of imagery (1 Corinthians 9:26-27; 1 Timothy 1:8; 6:12). There is a similar mindset involved. The results of the one is physical with various changes in the unseen being. The results of the other are in the unseen realm of our being, with various impacts on our physical beings.

Paul describes the results of this spiritual training with some important terms. Perseverance rooted in faith produces proven character. Inherent in the term “proven character” is the idea of documentation. It means that it is genuine with respect to who God is. It has no hidden impurity. Tribulation and trial, when approached through faith in Yahweh, burn away such impurities. As we contemplate Him in trial we let go of idols, and self, and secret things. We seek to understand truth and the result is that we embrace more fully what is pure and right and good. It is in this sense that perseverance brings about proven character.

Proven character is approved-of-God character. It is the kind of character that matters to our Maker and Judge, not just the sort that makes for a good eulogy. If trial simply produces a grit or determination in us, then we have failed to embrace it as it was intended. Our quest is to become those of the character of Christ.

This type of character, which trial causes to become deeply rooted in us, and whose presence trial documents, “works to completion” hope. Hope grows and flourishes where the character approved by God is growing and flourishing. It is faith-based character, founded and practiced based on the idea that God is both good and powerful. That means His promises are true, therefore justice and goodness will be served. That alone is our security. The unwavering belief in a Redeemer, a faithful Judge, a loving Father, a compassionate Provider, the great Physician, the eternal and unchanging One, cannot help but produce hope, and that is a hope that cannot be shaken.

Now if such things are true, it means there is much that isn’t true. It is what is NOT true that provides the basis for the fears and anxieties which rob us of hope. It is likely that humanity cannot live without hope, and it is certain that we cannot be healthy without it. It makes sense therefore, that one of the fruits of redemption and of this state of grace we have been introduced into is increased hope.

5:5—“And hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.”

Paul speaks of this hope that flows out of a proven character here. He is not speaking just of hope in general. There are many hopes that disappoint, proving to be ill founded. This hope is not that kind which day after day has no tangible basis. Its lead edge is our current moment by moment experience through the Holy Spirit who is in us. Through Him we sense God’s presence and love, and, in this experience, we are sure that so much more awaits us. Through the Holy Spirit God’s love is presently being poured into our lives. As we listen and develop our spiritual senses with respect to His stirrings, we become increasingly aware of the care, protection, and provision that He provides along with the forgiveness, the wisdom, the discernment, the stamina, and all the other things related to power that He bestows.

This life in the Holy Spirit is the “earnest of our inheritance” (Ephesians1:14). Each impulse of His should remind us of what awaits us both in this life and in that which is to come. If we feel alone and without hope, we have only to reflect on what is true. That is that such a state that is the result of the fallen state of the world is only seasonal. Either its time will pass, and our hope will be renewed, or our lives will pass and our hopes will be realized.

This hope is by its very nature hope, in that it cannot yet be fully laid hold of. But the tastes and glimpses of it that the Holy Spirit orchestrates give it ground.

5:6—“for while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.”

To explain this hope and to rekindle it in the hearts of his readers Paul revisits the story of our redemption. His purpose is to show the extreme nature of God’s love for us, how unmerited His favor was. We need to be constantly reminded of the magnitude of that love because our hope seems incredulous apart from His great love. That love that is in Yahweh for us is the only reason our faith and hopes should be clung to. Apart from that they are fantasy and wishful thinking. Knowledge of our own weaknesses and moral failures will drive such hope from the mind of any thinking person. In any discussion of our hope, Paul knows it is important to remind us that such hopes are not connected in any way to our merit. They have been extended to us at our worst with no prerequisite reform or moral makeover demanded of us. They are extended to us while we were helpless.

None of this is to say that humanity has no ability. It is just said we have no ability in the matter of undoing what Adam did and then what we each individually do because of our fallen natures. We are absolutely powerless in such matters, and it is in this plight that God extends to us the free gift of justification.

Christ's death came at the right time. We have only a small idea of the magnitude of the timing issue surrounding the life and death of Christ. It came at a time of relative peace in the world under Roman rule, when there was a language that was widely understood (Greek), and when news could be disseminated over the three most inhabited continents. It came at a time in biblical history when many of the types and symbols of the Old Testament had been established and were, to some degree familiar at least to some, to educate regarding the work of Christ. It came at the right time in terms of biblical prophecy. We suspect that were all theological prejudices removed we would agree that Christ died in accordance with a very precise schedule laid out by the prophet Daniel. 482 years elapsed from the time of the command to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem to the event in Jesus' life we refer to as Palm Sunday (Daniel 9:24-27). We believe that these factors are what Paul had in view in speaking of "the right time" for Christ's death (see also Galatians 4:4).

We also see in the statement of Paul the fact that Christ died for the ungodly. Many have suggested that the atonement of Christ was limited, that He died and made atonement only for the elect. While most would agree that Jesus' atoning work only applies to the elect, there is hesitancy due to statements like this one in Scripture to embrace the idea of a limited atonement.

But apart from all the things that may or may not be implied in Paul's words here, we must sharply focus what his primary purpose in making this statement is. It is to reinforce the idea that grace is unmerited favor, and our justification comes to us apart from what we deserve or what we've learned. That continually refreshes hope in us. It is not an overstatement to call these words a theology of hope for humanity. It is because justification is by grace through faith that we have hoped. It is because of this that our dream of salvation and atonement through Christ must not be rejected as fantasy. Our hope can always be re-kindled in any trial by reminders of this grace.

5:7—"for one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die."

Our hope that a man died in our place is admittedly abnormal and unrealistic. We just do not see people willing to die on behalf of others. Paul speaks of our experience in this world very candidly. We just don't see a human being stepping up to die even for a righteous person. In concept we can imagine that somewhere somehow someone might lay down their life to save someone who was good. This is considered the ultimate sacrifice. Our examples are usually limited to times of war or times when there's the threat of violence. But in situations involving legal judgment and penalty this is almost unheard of, even when it is a particularly good man whose life is to be saved. The volunteers are generally not forthcoming!

Many have volunteered to die for a cause. Dying in the place of another person is different. Paul is seeking to stir the hopes of his readers by reminding them of the incredible nature of God's acts toward us. We can have incredible hopes when they are founded on a history of incredible love and commitment.

5:8—“but God demonstrates his own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

Without any actual performance on the part of those who would live after Him, and after several thousand years of dismal moral performance by those who lived before Him, and despite the outright rejection of His peers, Christ died for us. His death, unlike ours, was not because of his own sin, but because of the sins of others. He was our substitute, willingly bearing our sins. This could perhaps be explained by a number of imaginable motives but is explained accurately by love and a degree of love not possible for fallen humanity. That is very significant. God is driven to act dramatically by His love for us. It is a love that defies description and experience.

It is not that over the years of the Old Testament humanity had proved themselves worthy. It is not that God looked ahead and saw that this would improve. It is simply that He loved us and that his love is long-suffering and unconditional. It is our inability that fuels His love to do greater, more sacrificial, inexplainable things. His love motivates Him to exercise his kindness and power all of which makes us recoverable.

The love Yahweh demonstrates is His own. He is not conforming Himself to some noble standard outside Himself to be perceived or proven to be of a certain nature or character. It is His own love, very real and genuine so that He died because He wanted to not because He had to, not because He was in a moral pickle of some sort and had to do it. There are perhaps a few ways in which God could have accomplished our salvation. But it was a demonstration of His love and this to Him was good and right. Love is the explanation of how our redemption has come about. There is no other reason for our salvation except God's love for us.

5:9—“much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him.”

If Christ died for us when we were sinners, how much more will He pass over us when the time arrives for His anger to be vented at the sin and rebellion of those that refuse to believe in Him? That is Paul's point in these words. Since His love was not deterred by the guilt of our sin, how much greater will be our experience of His love now that our guilt has been removed? To make oneself an object of God's love through belief in Jesus Christ brings the most lavish of blessings. These surpass our ability to imagine.

These words of Paul speak only of being saved from wrath. So they focus on the judgment that we don't receive. Elsewhere in Scripture and in Paul's words the blessings we have received from God instead of wrath are spoken of (1 Corinthians 2:9, Ephesians 1:3-14).

5:10—“for if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his son, much more having been reconciled, we shall be saved by his life.”

The death of the son of God was a powerful force and remains so for eternity. It is because of His sinless and powerful life that His death still exerts great power in the spiritual realm. By His death the fate of millions is being reversed, the grip of demons is released, and eternal destinies are changed. All of this comes to those who are natural enemies of God. It is extended to them because of one thing only—the death of God's son.

Through Jesus' death, the sins of millions are forgiven and an eternity of possibilities become open to them. They become recipients of a myriad of Jesus' acts carried out in them, for them and through by the Holy Spirit. He is in them and with them and is constantly acting in their behalf. And then there are His angels, those who minister in behalf of those who are His, carrying out actions in the invisible world and providing for the life Christ is leading His children to live.

Each moment of each day we are being saved, lifted to a higher, more noble life, by Yahweh's actions on our behalf. For this we were reconciled, made right with God, so that we might become what we were not, instruments of the beauty, order, and glory of God. We are now those who are joined with Him to further His movement that will result in creation being restored to the place where it reflects His glory.

5:11—"and not only this, but we also exalt in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation."

This is now the third thing spoken of in this passage that we exult in. Again, the word exult means to brag or speak confidently about, with an abandoned confidence. Verse two says we do so with respect to our hope in the glory of God. Verse three says we do so with respect to our tribulation. This verse says we do so with respect to God.

This does not mean we speak irreverently or in a flippant way about God. It means that through all He has done and revealed to us we speak as those who know Him and understand Him. He is not unknown or whimsical or random to us. We know that we are confident of our place in His heart and His plan. We are confident of what He is doing even during uncertainties. He is for us. We are His friends. We are forever loved and forgiven. Whereas other deities are unknown and mysterious, and the thought of them brings anxiety and fear, we are comforted and inwardly strengthened when we think of God. This state of mind and being has come about through the one to whom we have given control and submitted our lives to, Jesus Christ, who has reconciled us with God.

Paul refers to this here as "the reconciliation." There are a great many reconciliations between warring parties in the history of humanity and each person who has lived can point to a few personal reconciliations. But there is none more significant than this one that God has brought about, because the enmity between God and man is the source of all other conflict. It is this war that leads to the war within us, which in turn leads to the wars between us (James 4:1-2). So when peace comes between God and ourselves through the Lord Jesus it is the reconciliation, the peace that brings about all other peace, the event that assigns new meaning to all that we do.

5:12—"Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin and so death spread to all men, because all sinned—"

Paul begins a statement here to which he will not return until verse eighteen. It is a statement about two men, Adam and Christ when it is completed. Verses thirteen through eighteen are given to as supporting evidence. Paul's purpose is to explain that two men brought about two very different results among humanity. He will take time to explain with some thoroughness the result of Adam's act, just as he has already explained with considerable thoroughness the results of Christ's act in dying on the cross. It is, in fact, this lengthy explanation of the results of Christ's death which gives rise to the comparison that Paul will make here. Is an important comparison that helps us defend the justice of God.

Some might see the consequences of Adam's fall that all humanity has suffered as harsh. Some might see the free gift of salvation as lenient. This comparison that Paul will make in these verses reveals God's perspective on both events.

Paul makes it very clear that our experience of death comes from the sin of one man. It is as if every man and woman ever born was standing there with Adam and sinned along with him. They then experienced spiritual death, which is separation from God. Because of this they experienced because of spiritual death, physical death. The text says literally, "death passed through all men." Physical death has done its devastating work in humanity ever since Adam sinned. We do not die because of our personal sin, though we all are guilty of personal sin. Rather because of Adam's sin we are born spiritually dead and so eventually experience physical death as well.

The statement in this verse that all sinned is not referring to the fact that all have committed personal sin, though that is certainly true. It is referring to the fact that when Adam died spiritually, all His offspring also died spiritually. So from God's viewpoint all of humanity sinned when Adam sinned and Yahweh's union with them was severed. That is the nature of Spiritual death. It is separation from our Creator. Now, what can we learn about God's viewpoint from other Scripture that might help us understand this somewhat curious perspective, that all died through Adam?

The first possible explanation is that we know that from God's point of view offspring are said to be present and participants in actions taken by their ancestors, years before they were born. So for example, the Levitical priests are said to be present with Abraham when he paid tithe to Melchizedek (Hebrews 7:1-10). Some have referred to this as the principle of seminal headship, whereby God viewed us as present with Adam. We might use different terms to describe this today. Adam is the genetic head of humanity. All are Adam's genetic offspring. When Adam sinned and His union with God was severed, something happened to Him genetically. That seems conclusive, since deterioration, weakness, and death became eventualities. So from a genetic point of view, whatever God's union with Adam was, it had a genetic impact when it was severed. Chaos to some degree slipped into the gene pool. And so all Adam's offspring would be born spiritually dead and would experience physical death.

The second possible explanation is that when Yahweh enters covenant with someone, He views that covenant relationship as extending to their offspring. It does appear that God viewed Himself as being in covenant relationship with Adam (Hosea 6:7), so that when Adam broke the covenant God viewed him as the covenant head of humanity and as having acted for them. Some refer to this as the principle of covenant headship, whereby God viewed us as present with Adam because Adam has entered into a covenant with God in behalf of all his offspring.

There is a third possible explanation. We know that God works through established human authority. There is much mystery to this, but it is a well-established fact of Scripture that Paul himself in this letter will eventually affirm (Romans 12:1-7). God assigned Adam a position as head of humanity so that he decided about himself and God that the rest of humanity had to live with. This position Adam was assigned has been called "federal headship," authority to decide for all what their course will be. This is a pure and simple explanation what many Christians in the rank and file somewhat vaguely espouse.

The idea of covenant headship or federal headship might have its strongest support in the actual account of the fall. It appears that Eve sinned first in terms of time, but Adam's sin is viewed as the critical one throughout Scripture. There appears to have been some authoritative role assigned Adam by God that made his sin of particular significance and consequence. With what we are learning today about the genetic makeup of humanity the idea that Adam was the genetic source of humanity might make the most sense.

So there are various ways to explain why from God's point of view all humanity sinned when Adam did. But the fact is that they did in His eyes, and so all experience death. The following verses show that they experience death apart from their own personal sin. (See Appendix 3 for thought on whether imputation of Adam's sin is "just" on God's part)

5:13—"for until the Law sin was in the world; but sin is not imputed where there is no law."

This verse is the beginning of a parenthetical thought that will not be concluded until verse seventeen. This parenthetical thought is meant in part to provide further explanation to the statement that all men sinned when Adam did. That is a thesis that sparks great interest and debate, and Paul knew it would. He felt the need to offer proof for it. When the rest of this parenthetical explanatory thought is given, its total message will be this: all participated in Adam's sin, and all may participate in Christ's righteousness.

Now, what is the message of the words of this verse? It is that before God gave the law to Moses' sin existed. Before the Law was given, actions were being done by humans which by the standard of the Law were sinful. But by God's standard of justice these were not chargeable acts. They were being done ignorantly. The word "imputed" is the same word rendered "reckoned" in chapter 4 (see 4:1-10), and it means to charge to the account of someone. So all who lived between Adam and Moses committed acts that clearly violated the Law of God, but they were not charged as lawbreakers because the Law has not been given to them.

This does not mean God ignored sin, as the judgment of the flood indicates. But as His response to Cain, who murdered his brother, indicates, Yahweh responded differently to sin when no law had been given. Sin by God's standard was clearly happening in the world from the time of Adam until the Law was given but the people of that era were not charged as lawbreakers because the Law had not been given to them.

This idea will remain somewhat of a mystery. Were all people of this era then, not in need of justification? Clearly not since Abraham is said to be justified by faith. What about the law of conscience that Paul had spoken of in chapter two (2:14)? They were not held to a standard that God had not made known, but they are held to a standard dictated by their conscience. Are they not guilty by means of that law? Clearly there was not the giving of the law as it would be given at Sinai, but there came to be known laws of God that were gradually given to men, i.e., thou shalt not kill. Clearly the people of Sodom and Gomorrah were viewed as “exceedingly wicked” by God and held accountable (Genesis 18:20). But there is no biblical record of a time when God charged the whole of humanity with the body of knowledge regarding right or wrong that Israel had. There are several instances however, that show that He dealt with sin and evil corporately. He was considerably more merciful on an individual basis than He could be after the law was given. The statement by Paul that sin is not imputed when there is no law means simply that humans were not charged with sins associated only with the Law.

Sin as we know it was alive and well, even rampant, before the law. God dealt with it as a force and He dealt with sin corporately, actively seeking to restraint it. But individuals did not experience judgment for sins committed in ignorance. They were not held to a standard that God had not made known. The logical question that arises that Paul will answer next is “Why then did all people die?”

5:14—“Nevertheless death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those who had not sinned in the likeness of the offensive Adam, who is a type of Him who was to come.”

Even though sin was not imputed from the time of Adam until the time of Moses, all people died in every sense of that term. Now if personal sin is the cause of death, and personal sin was not chargeable before the law, why did people die? The answer is that Adam’s sin and subsequent spiritual death that was inherited genetically by all is the cause of physical death.

We may debate the point of in what sense it is true that all sinned in Adam. But what is plainly taught here is that we all died physically because Adam died spiritually. Paul speaks of those of the era between Adam to Moses and says that they all died, even those who had not personally sinned in “the likeness of the offensive Adam.” By this he means that theirs was not a willful sin against the clear instruction of God as was Adam’s offense. This is because God had given a clear instruction to Adam about eating of a specific tree. In the aftermath of Adam’s fall no human had access that tree. So no one committed that particular sin, but they still died physically.

With this Paul turns to speak of Christ. He says that Adam was a type of Christ. Adam was typical of Christ in that he acted in a way that impacted all humanity. Christ would do the same but in a different moral direction. Their acts in behalf of humanity would have totally different results. Paul is not saying that their actions and the results are parallel in every respect. They are similar in that both acted in a way that impacted all humanity. So Adam and Christ were similar, but also dramatically different. The fact is that most of the comparisons that follow are sharp contrasts.

5:15—“but the free gift is not like the transgression. For if by the transgression of the one the many died, much more to the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abound to the many.”

Having spoken of the similarity between Adam and Christ, namely that in both cases one behave so as to impact all, Paul now begins this verse with the word “but.” He will now make a series of contrast between these two men in their opposite roles. The contrasts are dramatic.

Paul begins by speaking immediately of “the free gift.” The gift Paul is speaking of is justification. It is being declared righteous based on our faith in Jesus Christ. This standing is immense in value yet is free! It came to us based on the act of one man, Jesus, the Christ.

The “good news” is that the gift “does not impact in the same manner” as the transgression! That is, it does not bring ruin. By Adam’s transgression many died, both spiritually and physically. Life as it was meant to be lived was lost. A life of pain in every way came down to us through Adam’s spiritual death. Life became a grim fight for survival, nothing compared to what had been before spiritual death.

But the grace of God as it flowed to us through Jesus Christ gave a gift to humanity that “abounds toward many people.” The message Paul wants to convey is that Christ did not just get back what Adam had lost. He brought an abundance to life! He went beyond the abundance that once was and brought to us life that will exceed the quality of Adam’s life before he sinned! The grace of God is such that “much more” abounds toward us through the work of the God/man Jesus Christ.

This speaks to all that will be ours when the plan of redemption runs its course. We don’t know how long Adam and Eve existed before they died spiritually. We do know that they never experienced ruling creation at the level they were intended to. The glory Adam had we are beginning to experience through the Holy Spirit. It will be more fully restored and augmented in us when Christ rules the earth and we, in our new bodies, reign with Him (Daniel 7:13-14, 21-22). Our glory will be further enhanced when He establishes the new heaven and earth (Revelation 22). So much lay ahead for Adam, but he died spiritually and lost it all after only a little taste of what God had for him.

5:16—“And the gift is not like *that which came* through the one who sinned; for on the one hand the judgment *arose* from one transgression resulting in condemnation, but on the other hand the free gift *arose* from many transgressions resulting in justification.”

The pathway of justice and its outcome in the realm of God contrasts sharply with the outcome of normal human processes of justice, and law and order. It is because it can, due to the essence and power of the Judge. When the Judge has the capacity to raise people from the dead to right all wrongs, and pay infinite amounts for damages, then justice can be carried out much more thoroughly. So God’s intervention in the matter of our guilt before Him can change everything.

The era and situation produced by Adam's sin and the ensuing judgment is one of condemnation. Because of the spiritual death Adam's act imposed on humanity, an era in which humanity continually fell short and therefore could only confirm their condemnation resulted. The cycle of condemnation was repeated in every new life produced in the human family. Because all were born dead spiritually, all would eventually show the evidence of that by their own personal transgression. Adam's spiritual death was passed on and so as a result his deeds were replicated. We are all in a sense twice dead. We are born dead and then confirm ourselves dead. This cycle is all that can happen given the limitations of humanity. Corruption and spoilage spread. Guilt is universal.

But in the realm of God and His infinite grace something else began to take shape. God was moved in love by the hopeless plight of man even before it came about. The exponential increase of sin and evil produced in God a reaction that worked alongside mere human processes of justice. God had a reaction of grace to the human problem. The result was that in response to a mounting offensive depravity in humanity there came to be an offer of just pardon from God.

So due to the grace of God and despite the rising sea of transgression, the gift of God's Son as the sin-bearer for humanity came about. The gift that brings peace with God and forgiveness contrasts sharply with the judgment and condemnation that came to the transgression of Adam. Judgment and condemnation are the logical outcomes of evil. But thanks to Yahweh, the gift also arose out of many transgressions. That is illogical except by grace. Only the grace of God can explain how something so good can be brought about by something so evil.

Both the state of condemnation humankind finds itself in and the state of being declared righteous that believers find themselves in, have this in common. They are each the work of one man. But the similarity ends there. The gift does NOT produce what the one man who sinned did, that is the good news!

5:17—"for if by the transgression of the one, death reigned through the one, much more those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ."

Once again in this verse there is the presence of the idea of "much more." The comparison being made between Adam and Christ is meant to show that Christ because of grace did "much more" than just undoing what Adam did.

Through Adam death reigned in humanity. All fell under death's power, and this includes all the various forms of death-spiritual, physical, and eternal. We would expect based on how all normal comparisons are made, for a different kind of statement to follow "death reigned through the one." We would expect something like "life came through the other." Instead, we are told believers will REIGN in life through Christ. Our destiny is to experience that for which Adam was made that he never got to experience because of the entry of sin into the picture. We understand that our lives will extend beyond the life of this planet and the present heavens to the new heaven and new earth.

Paul characterizes us here as having received two things. First, we have received the abundance of grace. Paul's perspective on grace is always like this. He taught that God has not just behaved graciously toward us, but that grace toward us has super-abounded (Ephesians 1:7-8). We have received and are receiving countless favors from God as His children. These have impact on everything from our standing with Him to the little things of this life that lift our spirits. We are always being blessed with His favors.

The word abundance also governs the second thing Paul says we received, which is the gift of righteousness. Righteousness sourced in God, absolute, uncompromised, and undiluted, has been assigned to us as if it is ours. God has not just extended SOME forgiveness. He has forgiven us. The righteousness of God Himself in the person of His own Spirit, He has put in us. Through the Holy Spirit His righteousness has been written on our hearts so that we can listen and live by it. Whereas through Adam we became incapable of meeting God's standard, through Christ we have graciously met it, we can display it amid the kingdom of evil, and we will be made to exemplify it through eternity.

5:18—"So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men."

Paul returns to the comparison he had initiated in verse twelve. There he had stated that through one man death came to all men, because in that one man all sinned and died spiritually. He left that thought hanging to affirm the idea that when Adam sinned all sinned. Then he began a series of comparisons that let him back to this idea that completes the thought of verse twelve. All inherited condemnation because all inherited spiritual death. All were born separated from God. This is how we are when we begin our physical lives.

Paul says that "through the one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men." There are a couple of important things he teaches in that statement. One act of Christ brought about our justification and that one act was His laying down of His life. This was a whole series of acts Paul is viewing as one, and this is a reasonable view. Now, Christ did many righteous acts. He was unique because He did only righteous acts. These many acts and the fact that He was without sin in all his thoughts and actions, made Him qualified to be our sin-bearer. But He could only become our sin-bearer by laying down His life and this He did. So we are justified in this sense by one act.

Paul says this result is justification of the sort that produces life to all men. He is talking here about spiritual life and eternal life. Now, in what sense does eternal life come to all men? Only in the sense that it is available to all men and sufficient for all men. It is received only by those who believe. (See appendix 4 on this passage and the conversation on the scope of the atonement)

5:19—“For as through the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One, the many will be made righteous.”

This is the final statement of a long line of comparisons between Adam and Christ. The many, all of humanity, were made sinners by Adam. They participated in his sin in terms of their genetic makeup, and as a result died spiritually, and so became sinners by nature. Because they are sinners by nature, they sin. We do what we do because we are who we are.

On the other hand, those sinners who believe in Christ are viewed by God as being “in Christ.” It is as if they did His righteous deeds. Those righteous deeds are credited to the account of believers. This gives them spiritual life, which in turn enables them to do the deeds of Christ, and it gives them eternal life in which they will inherit an incorruptible nature and be remade as those not able to sin.

5:20—“and the law came in that the transgressions might increase; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more,”

This is a profoundly significant statement about the law, sin, and grace. The law came in, or was given by God, that transgression might increase. Paul has already pointed out that sin existed, but it is not charged where there is no law. So from a judicial point of view there was less sin before the law was given. This had nothing to do with the character of the people living then. It is simply that where there is no law there is a blindness to sin. And God in His great justice allowed for this ignorance. So we can say that though much was happening that was against the desires of God, there was less sin that humanity recognized. Without the law a sinner could view themselves as sinless.

The law changed this. Like a mirror, the law discloses to humanity who they really are morally. With knowledge of the law those who had been unaware of any sin in themselves, suddenly could see themselves as they really were. Moses expressed this revelation brought about by Yahweh’s Law in Psalm 90:7-11.

For we are brought to an end by your anger;

by your wrath we are dismayed.

You have set our iniquities before you,

our secret sins in the light of your presence.

For all our days pass away under your wrath;

we bring our years to an end like a sigh.

The years of our life are seventy,

or even by reason of strength eighty;

yet their span is but toil and trouble;

they are soon gone, and we fly away.

Who considers the power of your anger,

and your wrath according to the fear of you?

Transgression increased in three ways. First, there was naturally a greater number of symptoms that individuals could identify. So sin increased in terms of volume. But second, it also increased in terms of its offensiveness. A completely different type of sin began to abound. There came to be willful sins, acts carried out with full understanding that they were sin. There came to be sins just like Adam's sin, and they were and are committed as a matter of routine. Perhaps the most heinous of all examples of this was Israel's rejection of Jesus, but Christianity's slaughter of the Jews certainly deserves the same standing in infamy. Third, the Law or any policy or rule tends to heighten our desire to do the outlawed sin. The "forbidden fruit" seems more desirable to us and so added to sin's allure. So the Law caused sin to increase and continues to with each new generation.

God wanted transgression to increase because only those who were aware of their need could be rescued, and His agenda was to rescue and restore. It is to this purpose that sin was made to increase. However, a wonderful thing happened as it did. Grace increased more. With humanity now aware of their sin, and the vehicle for keeping them aware of their predicament firmly in place, God could extend righteousness to more and more sinners who saw the truth and believed. And so it came to be that grace super-abounded, increasing logarithmically.

The law then, was never the means of salvation. But it was a tool of God designed to promote salvation by making humanity aware of their sin. The Law brings condemnation and guilt. But it stimulated the appetite for grace and helped humanity look outside themselves for salvation.

That the law was not a means of salvation was of paramount importance to Paul, and this idea is germane to the truth of the gospel. One will not generally believe in the work of Christ until they have accepted what the law has revealed about their own sinfulness. There would be no felt need to do so.

Grace increased in another sense with the advent of the law. We develop a clearer picture of grace as we understand more fully our inability with respect to obeying God. That He would ever be pleased with us becomes a growing wonder to those who have felt the condemnation of the law. And to have felt that condemnation and then come to an understanding of the good news is to sense a deep assurance of His love.

So the fact is that only by His grace the truth about one's own sinfulness becomes known. The more we acknowledge truth, the more we experience of God's grace. So it is true just as Paul has said, the law increased sin, but such sin only caused our loving God to extend greater grace in order to do what He wanted to do for His own glory in behalf of humanity.

5:21—"that, as sin reigned in death, even so grace might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."

This verse tells us why God established the law and allowed sin to increase and so increase His flow of grace toward us. Sin ruined humanity through death. God designed them to bear His image and so to rule over creation. But sin marred that image of God in humanity. Humanity was ruined by it and died spiritually. Humanity became separated from God. So having been made to rule over creation they now were mastered themselves by sin and natural processes. Because of sin they would eventually return to dust, the rudimentary elements of the creation they were to rule. So sin reigned in death. It held humanity captive and itself sought to rule the earth.

Humanity would have never risen above this, and in fact likely would have gone extinct, had it not been for God's special love for them. In love He extended special favor which took the form of myriads of actions on His part to preserve physical life and to reintroduce spiritual life back into humanity.

Just as sin had mastered humanity, grace freed them. Grace did this through righteousness. It did so first, by defining righteousness through the law so that humanity would no longer be blind to their condition. Where Satan had blinded their eyes, the truth enabled them to see who they were morally. The law told them they were not okay. Then second, grace provided righteousness through God becoming a man, a perfect man who would fulfill the law and so could bear the sin of humanity. Grace allowed humanity's sin to be imputed to Christ, and Christ's righteous standing to be shared by humanity. The result is that humanity can be rejoined to God and so made spiritually alive.

Where there is spiritual life there is no judgment of sin by eternal separation from God—what is called second death. This means there is eternal union with God, or what Scripture calls eternal life. Jesus Christ, Yahweh in human form, is central in this great story that results in us being set free from the law of sin and death.

Romans 6

6:1—“what shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace might increase?”

From the time God's grace came to be understood a devious and unholy thought has occurred to individuals. It has a few different strains, but the common thread is that due to grace there is no particular urgency to avoid sin. Addressing this line of thinking fit perfectly here in Paul's letter. He has just stated that where sin increased, grace increased even more. In other words, the deeper humanity fell into sin, God's grace increased and did so disproportionately. In other words, it increased as sin increased, but grace increased more. This was good for humanity, extremely good.

It is easy to see how some would twist all this and teach that sin in the end was a good thing and served God's purposes well. There was a movement of false teachers who are advocates of living without the restraint of any moral law. The movement was called antinomianism, *nomos* being the transliteration of the Greek word for law. They were anti-law. The line of thinking that they perpetuated was that we serve God by our sinfulness since we increase the flow and the glory of His grace. Paul poses this question; “are we to continue in sin that grace might increase?” He will put into writing a rebuttal to this line of thinking. His rebuttal has served Christians well for centuries as this devious thought repeatedly rears its head.

6:2—“May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it?”

Other translations have stated this verse with the English phrase, “God forbid.” This is a rendering of the Greek phrase *mh gevuvvoito*. It is unfortunate that it has been rendered by this phrase “God forbid.” The word God is not part of the original wording. It makes it sound like such a thing will not happen, by an act of God Himself! The Greek phrase is stated in the operative mood a relatively rare occurrence in the New Testament. It was a mood used to express a wish or prayer for someone or some situation. A good rendering therefore would be “I pray not!” While Paul is certain that this line of thinking is forbidden by God, it is not that He has actively intervened to remove it. Christian people are not immune to having this line of thinking and falling into this trap. It is frequent among them. But it is destructive, and Paul's hope is that it would never come about that his readers would be trapped by this erroneous way of living.

Paul poses another question to give his readers a system of thought that would guard them from this error in asking this question. He will go on to explain it thoroughly in the ensuing verses.

Paul's choice of tenses for the verbs are interesting. In describing our having died to sin he uses the aorist tense, which in the indicative mood expresses undefined action (in terms of its duration). It is action being viewed as accomplished and done. Our death to sin Paul is presenting here as an accomplished fact. In speaking of our potential action of living in sin Paul uses the future tense. So his question is how could we, the very ones who have already died to sin, take a course of action that leads us to live in it? The question is how. It is not that it is impossible. If it were impossible in Paul's mind, he would not ask how it could happen, because it could not happen. Paul is saying that such a thing is not impossible. It is illogical. It would be an awful choice, given what we know about sin and evil.

That gives rise to the question of how such a state of thinking/living comes about in people like the readers. Paul answers this question of how by making sure the readers understand in what sense they have died to sin.

6:3—“or do not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into his death?”

This is the third rhetorical question Paul has asked so far in this chapter. How we live our faith is usually the result of what we know or do not know. And so Paul questions what the readers have come to know and understand about our baptism into Christ.

Paul wants to explain in what sense we have died to sin. It is obvious that we have not died to its influence or presence in our lives. Yet he plainly states we have died to it. Because Paul proposes this idea that we have died to sin in the form of a question, we deduct from that that the experience is spiritual. We would certainly not need to be told if it was otherwise.

We learn several things about this death-to-sin experience in the short question. Whatever the exact nature of our death to sin, it happened when we are baptized into Christ. It is an experience we have because we are in Christ. It is an experience that relates in some way to His physical death. We will see in the next verse it also relates to His resurrection.

Paul has just finished talking about the spiritual death we all experienced in Adam. Paul said that all of humanity was viewed by God as being there with Adam participating with him in his sin. And indeed, genetically we were all there. Whatever happened to Adam when sin entered him was passed along to us, so that all of us inherited spiritual and physical death. Whether something happened genetically to be passed along physically or if it was purely spiritual remains open to speculation, the fact is that all who are of Adam died. The message of chapter 5 is that just as in Adam all died, so all in Christ will live.

Now in this chapter Paul is saying that another death experience has been ours. He will show that this is a vicarious experience, that is, experienced in us as we enter the experience of Christ. Christ died and we experience a death to sin through His physical death. We enter this experience through baptism. Some of course have viewed this baptism as water baptism. Some would view it purely as the baptism of the Spirit. Others would view Paul as associating water baptism with believe, as the early Christians often did. They would see him speaking here of new birth, both the outward human act of baptism, and the divine inner act. This latter view seems best.

When we believe, we are baptized in the Spirit. This moment is captured by the symbol of water baptism. We are united with Christ. This is what it means to be “baptized into Christ.” We no longer exist apart from Him. We will forever be accounted as Christian in this true sense of the term.

What is revealed here is that our experience of spiritual birth is seen by God as us having died with Christ at His death. As we were present in Adam physically, so we are present in Christ in terms of what we might call spiritual genetics. Things like the foreknowledge of God and His election of us placed us in Christ before creation in God's mind. So from His point of view, we were there on the cross with Christ. Later in time when we are born physically and then through belief and the baptism of the Spirit are born spiritually, this is confirmed and becomes part of our identity. Our sins were paid for in His death. We became separated from them, forgiven and cleansed completely from the guilt. We died to sin.

The death of Christ was certainly for sin. However, Paul gives another perspective on the experience. It is also a death to sin that is provided for us by Christ's death. This is critical in terms of the idea he feels he must deal with in this portion of his letter. Living in sin is totally contradictory to God's intentions in our salvation, His view of our salvation and His will for us. This notion that was spreading in Christianity was a heresy of the worst sort. Paul will go on to develop this idea that we have died to sin.

6:4—"Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, in order that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we also might walk in newness of life."

God's view of us is so thoroughly and completely that of being "in Christ," that He even views us as having been with Jesus in the tomb! When Jesus died all His spiritual progeny died and they were laid to rest in the garden tomb along with Him. But even as we talk about this being God's viewpoint, we must realize this is more than a way of looking at things. There is something essential and necessary about us being baptized into Jesus' death and burial. It is an experience of our spirit's done by God's Spirit that is mysterious. We must understand that it is real.

Paul says it happened and that our death and burial with Jesus happened "in order that" something else might come about. That language implies that if we expect to see "B" happen, it is essential that "A" happen first. In this case "B" is to "walk in newness of life." So that "newness of life" might happen, we died and were buried by God with Jesus through the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

It is evident from Paul's words that we must not look at our new birth as largely symbolic. There was and is in the timeless realm of the spirit an experience of our spirit's death with Christ. This makes it possible for there to be a resurrection to a new life. Of this spiritual resurrection Paul says that it is an experience like Christ's physical resurrection which happened "through the glory of the Father."

How then was Christ raised from the dead? There were many dimensions to this great event. There was the power of the Father's decree at work. There was the energizing of the Holy Spirit, there was the power of the sinless life of the Son. "The glory of the Father" is a summary of all the excellent perfections of the Godhead that were brought to bear on the dead corpse so that the finality of death was simply and dramatically brushed aside. So dramatic was it that the earth shook, the guards shook, and they became as dead men (Matthew 28:1-4).

The glory of God, all His unfathomable essence was at work in that event in our behalf. He was doing all He was doing for us, the spiritual progeny of his own Son. He was creating a new experience of life for us, a newness of life. This “newness of life” refers to a restoration of union with God, the union forfeited by Adam in the fall. God does this through His personal work within us, through the truth as we come to grow in our understanding of it and through the gifts of others in the family of God. It is a life that is new and different because the Holy Spirit inspires new and different thinking in us. We discover the excellencies of God personally and privately, but also publicly as He makes Himself known to us through others, He is stirring in. It all produces a new way of life in us. This newness is properly understood both as instantaneous, in terms of what happens within us, and is a process in terms of it working its way into all the various nooks and crannies of our lives.

Why should we, who have had such a work done in our behalf and who are amid an extensive makeover, allow ourselves to contemplate continuing in sin? The only way such a course of thinking is possible is that one does not understand what God has done in them and to them. It is the one who doesn’t know what their spirit has undergone that can entertain the thought of multiplying their experience of grace by continuing in sin. We experience more of God’s grace by rising to newness of life. That is the way of the glory of the Father.

6:5—“for if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall be also in the likeness of His resurrection,”

When two branches of a tree grew closely together, they eventually grow together and become one. The word “united” is the rendering of a word that means to grow together. Since by the Spirit we have been united with Christ so that as His spiritual progeny we have died with Him, then it is certain that we also participated in the same way in His resurrection. Here Paul uses the certainty of the one to argue for the certainty of the other.

It would be totally illogical to suppose that we died with Christ, but we did not rise with Him. But those who advocate continuing in sin advocate such randomness from God. So by advocating a twisted experience of grace they are setting aside the experience of grace that God has ordained. We were “grown together” with Him to be united with Him in life. We are not to die with Him and remain dead but be raised to a new way of living. Our present lives are not incidental. God has a plan and desire to bring about through them. We were united with Christ to die to sin and to live to righteousness and that is the subject of the thoughts that are to come.

6:6—“knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin;”

Paul finally gets to a plain statement of the purpose of all that God has worked toward in uniting us with Christ. In doing so he clearly identifies what is crucified and what died. It was our old self that died, literally “the old-of-us-man.” Now what exactly does this mean? There is only one explanation that holds up to the data of Scripture. What does not exist anymore for a believer is the person whose spirit was separated from and alienated from God.

There are three factors at work in an unbeliever that guarantee that they will be slaves to sin. First, their body has certain instincts and certain desires and needs that draw them towards sin. Second, what the Bible calls “the flesh” is influencing them. This is that self-centeredness that is a part of our mental and emotional makeup that we inherited from Adam. It works within us to lead us to act apart from the will and desire of God. It includes the desire to be our own master. Third, our spirits are dead with respect to God. His glory departed from humanity when Adam sinned, and this means His spirit was severed from ours. An essential part of us came to be damaged, or more properly, dead.

So we have three contrary influences in us if we are unbelievers. In fact, there is nothing within our being at all to mitigate against sin. The flesh may make a show of doing so, but this in the interest of self-promotion so that it simply produces a different kind of sin. Slavery to sin is the result, with nothing in us that empowers us with respect to righteousness.

This person, the person devoid of the spirit, the slave to sin becomes one who was crucified with Christ the moment they believe. They are also raised with Christ. The new person is inhabited by the Holy Spirit and empowered for God’s business. God’s laws are now written on their hearts through the presence of the Holy Spirit in their spirit. The body may now be pointed in a different direction so that actions taken against God are replaced by actions instigated by the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 4:22). The impossible is done now, but only through the Holy Spirit. This is the activity other Scripture describes as the laying aside the old self. The flesh will simply change the type of sin committed and can only produce a life of self-indulgence.

The believer is no longer a slave to sin. They now have an option. Now, they can and do make the choice to sin and they can and do choose to indulge the flesh. But they have a choice. The spirit gives them a resident voice that speaks against such thinking and action. So believers are different and the key thought to embrace is that the old self whose spirit was severed from God and who was condemned and guilty before God died. Now we are no longer slaves to sin.

Those who suggest that we continue in sin do not understand the slavery sin brings about, and they rob others of moral freedom by their teaching. The Christian has died to sin, and that is much more than dying with respect to its legal demand and claim. It is a death which imparts/impacts how our present lives can be conducted. Our body which had been sin’s instrument has been released to become an instrument of righteousness. We have a choice now.

6:7—“for he who has died is freed from sin.”

The word rendered “free” in the NASB, is *dedikai÷wtai*, from the word meaning to justify. It is a perfect tense which conveys the idea of action that has been taken that has produced a certain state. It is in the passive voice, which means the subject has been acted upon. So the one who has died in the sense Paul is speaking of, by being in Christ and therefore crucified with Him, has been justified and remains in that state with respect to sin.

Such a one who has believed in Christ is free from sin first in the judicial sense. The believer is freed from the guilt that hangs over them. Because this is true it changes their relationship to God. A believer is free from sin in a second way in that they need no longer be directed by their own needs and desires. So they are justified in the more practical or experiential sense that James speaks of (James 2:21-22). They are now able to obey God so that their deeds can give evidence for their faith and so declare them righteous before humanity.

6:8—“now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him.”

The word “if” can be understood as “since.” This reflects the real force of Paul’s words. This is the third time in Paul’s response to the question, posed in verse one, that Paul was referred to the fact that in Christ we have been given a new life. We are not the same, because we are in Him. Here Paul simply restates our belief.

It would be a random thought to think that those who are in Christ only participated in His death. Because they’re His spiritual progeny, they were also in Him when He was raised from the dead. They now can live in Him, one with Him and with God (John 17:21). The believer lives with Christ, joined to Him by the Holy Spirit.

The tenses used here by Paul are interesting. In expressing our death with Christ, he uses the aorist tense. It expresses action that is being viewed as done and over with. We have died. In expressing our act of belief, Paul used the present tense. Our belief is an ongoing action in the present time. In expressing our living with Christ Paul used the future tense. It is a course of action we are anticipating. So a course of action lies ahead of us based on what we are presently believing in that has transpired in the past.

It is evident that our living with Christ unfolds in stages. There is the challenge of living with Him through the ongoing trials of this life that Paul anticipates. If we keep believing we will keep living His life rather than our own. Then there’s the future fulfillment of this when we will be present bodily with Him. This latter sense is likely secondary in Paul’s mind in terms of the present argument. He is arguing against a believer indulging in sin. We should not entertain such dabbling in sin because it argues against all that we now are and all that we can become. It argues against the destructive nature of sin as well. Through faith and belief in who we are in Christ, we should rise to all that God wishes to orchestrate through us, not sink to what our sinful desires urge us to do.

6:9—“knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, is never to die again; death is no longer master over Him.”

We believe we live with Christ. By this we mean that a new kind of life lies ahead of us characterized by spiritual life, our Spirit’s being united with His spirit. We believe this about us because of what we believe about Christ. He died because the sin of the world was placed on Him. Once it was atoned for by His death, death had no power over Him (4:25). He will never die again. There is no other death experience that awaits Him whereby we will lose the existence we have in Him.

And so because we are in Him we have spiritual life and will always have it. This will be true even at the instant we die physically. We will not be separated from Him for a moment. As death cannot master Him because our sin is atoned for, so it cannot master us for the same reason. Sin is atoned for.

6:10—“for the death that He died, He died to sin, once for all; but the life that He lives, He lives to God.”

Christ died for sin on one single occasion. He said as He died, “it is finished.” God’s work with respect to the penalty of sin was done. Jesus died with respect to our sin, the sin of humanity. That is the only explanation possible for the death of the sinless God/man. It was a once for all act carried out willingly by Him (John 10:17-18), to atone for our sin. Because He wanted to atone for our sin so that it could be justly forgiven, His was a death that had to be experienced one time by Him. Then it was over.

The life that is now Jesus’ is one that is totally separated from sin. The days of being tested and tortured by it, of living among fallen beings subjected to their sinful whims is over. His life He lives “to God.” No longer is the need to suffer and die for sin looming on Jesus’ agenda. Freed from that He is occupied with a work of righteousness and bringing about all that He has promised with respect to creation. His death changed the status of sin and evil in creation. Paul’s point is that it changes death’s status in us and its power over us as well.

6:11—“even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.”

What transpired in the experience of Christ with respect to sin we are to pursue as our own experience. We are to consider it true with respect to our own day to day existence. The word rendered consider is the same word that appeared in the discussion of Abraham in chapter 4, where it was said that Abraham’s faith was “reckoned” as righteousness. His faith was recorded in the official record as righteousness. Just as his faith was officially recorded by God as righteousness, we are given permission to officially view ourselves as having died to sin and having been made alive to God. This is because we are united with Christ. Our relationship to sin is forever changed.

Now, in what sense are we dead to sin? We know that it is not that we are not capable of sin. All of Paul’s warnings come because it is still able to influence us. Were either of these true the question that started this chapter would not have been asked.

We are dead to sin in two ways. We are obviously dead in terms of the penalty of sin. We died with Christ. The penalty due us because of sin was carried out and it no longer has a claim against us. We are also dead to sin in the sense that the old us who was enslaved to sin is dead. The indwelling of the Holy Spirit changes our makeup. We are no longer who we once were. Being dead to sin is not just a mind game we carry on through positive thinking. We have been changed in our inner being so that we can choose whom and what may master us. Paul is urging us to exercise this choice against sin. Rather than continuing in sin, he says to consider ourselves to have died to it. No longer allow ourselves to be mastered by it.

The “considering” we must do is part of the mentality and intentional thought process we must engage in. It is not that it is just a mentality. It is a reality, and this truth has practical power to change our lives as we place our faith in it and shape our actions based on it. When we consider or reckon ourselves dead to sin, we do not view ourselves incapable of sin. Rather we view ourselves as having had enough of it and being free to choose a better course of action.

Part of our “considering” is that we view sin truthfully. Its pleasures are seasonal and counterfeit. It is foolish to engage because it enslaves. It offends God who is our lifeblood. We understand the truth about ourselves. We view ourselves as having been summoned to the privilege of rising above sin’s mess. We can still choose sin. It will still do its awful work in us. It can still enslave us if we allow it to. But if we consider ourselves dead to it we understand that through the Holy Spirit there is power for us to separate ourselves from the lifestyle once punished and enslaved us.

6:12—“therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body that you should obey its lusts.”

Paul makes a command here using the present imperative. In this way he is forbidding the continuation of an act in progress. In effect is saying “stop letting sin reign in your mortal body.” This is something we do as God’s people. We believe in Christ and are redeemed people, but we still allow sin to reign in us in terms of the actions we choose and the courses we pursue. Each individual must get to the point where they have had enough of this condition, and they make a break with it. They must stop letting it happen. We tend to give sin permission and invited it in where we should ban it.

The fact that Paul gives this command and has to speak to the issue of “sin reigning” in Christian people is sobering. It tells us that it is a condition that can and does develop in us and we’re the ones who must not let it happen. God has equipped us. He has done his part. If this happens it is because we have left our work undone.

If Paul’s command seems to oversimplify a complex battle, it is because we must remind ourselves of all that God has provided that can be brought to bear on our personal struggle. There are our own prayers and those of others, the companionship and fellowship of other believers, the teaching of the truth, the help of church leaders, all of which are energized by the indwelling Holy Spirit, to produce in us the things we need in the moment to separate ourselves from sin. So when God says that the condition of sin reigning in us must not happen, He is giving us a commandment that is based on the fact that all of the resources of heaven are available for us to utilize in our personal battle against the evil one.

Two things then, are certain in terms of ourselves and sin. First, it can master us. Second, we can master it through all that God has done and has made available to us.

6:13—“and do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourself to God as alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God.”

An instrument is a tool that is used to bring about a specific result. Our bodies can bring evil into the realm of visible reality. They are not the source of evil, but they are a tool in evil’s hands by which it perpetuates and multiplies itself.

Our death with Christ and our being raised with Him, the fact that through the Holy Spirit we are a new creation, means that we can interrupt at critical times the normal flow of thoughts as they grow into actions. Due to the presence of the Holy Spirit and to His application of truth from within, we can master both our thoughts and therefore our actions. They can be conformed to the mind and will of God. Our death to sin becomes a real and tangible thing. This is the activity referred to by Paul in this verse.

It is to whom and to what we present ourselves in the moments of each day that determines the type of tool we are and result we bring about. Like all Christians, Paul's original audience in Rome needed to learn this lesson and its routines. Taking up the cross daily involves this dying to self and until we take our faith to this level it will remain benign. A benign faith is neither feared by hell nor greatly used by heaven. It is in falling into the ground and dying that we produce much fruit (John 12:24).

We cannot present the members of our bodies for obedience to Christ without take captive our thoughts to the obedience of Christ. If we are content with appearances, keeping our sin invisible, we will remain slaves to it. It is as we present our brains as tools of righteous thinking that we begin to experience holiness. So we must not allow our thinking to be unbridled.

But it is not just a matter of bridling our thoughts. The Holy Spirit works in the realm of our actions as well. We must ask often, what is the nature of our deeds? Are our actions demonstrations of holiness and love, of purity and kindness, or are they self-serving and self-promoting? Presenting one's members as instruments of righteousness involves a continual, critical awareness of one's own thoughts and actions. They must be viewed in the light of truth, not appearance.

We can and will deceive our own selves. There are deeds we do that appear good, but if we are honest and bold enough to look at them knowing what we do of our thoughts, we will find impurities in our motivations. There are thoughts we pursue without actions that are known only to ourselves. We must be honest about what occupies our minds.

These are primary activities involved in presenting ourselves to God. It is not a matter of simply praying a dedicatory prayer of some sort. Is the activity that should preoccupy us in all else that we are doing, and it is the most noble and difficult of all the disciplines.

6:14—"for sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law, but under grace."

Critical to the whole idea of being dead to sin is the era we live in as those born after the death of Christ. Before God appeared on earth to die for humanity's sins, He kept humanity "under" law. By this it is meant that He established and employed the law as the standard by which our actions and thoughts were judged. The law became a black-and-white standard that condemned all of humanity. Because it was a written code, it had no mercy and knew no leniency. It was just law.

This is not to say that God had no mercy or grace. It is not to say that man did not experience God's mercy and grace. It is that the law, a written expression of God's character, made certain demands on our character which we could not meet. This in turn offended God's justice.

There was no way humanity could be reunited with their Creator under such circumstances. God's character was continually offended, and His justice demanded that this be dealt with. Even though God's mercy allowed Him to forgive people of faith based on what Christ would do, until it was done an actual union of God's spirit with humans could not be affected. And so while we were under obligation to the law we remained slaves to sin. Until Christ's blood was shed there would be no giving of God's Spirit, and so sin continued his mastery over us. Until the requirement law was fulfilled in our behalf by Christ, we could only be forgiven, not completely freed. Once Christ died, Grace could spread because God's justice had been satisfied. He held nothing back.

And so we are being told throughout Paul's writings to be "under grace." Just as we were under law, subject to its demands, we are now under grace, subject to all its flavors. God has freely given us all things (Romans 8:32; 1 Corinthians 2; 12), and that includes His own Spirit which is placed within us who believe in the work of Jesus in our behalf.

6:15—"What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? May it never be!"

Paul begins this verse with the words "what then?" He is seeking to draw the readers to a proper conclusion. He wants to deal with the conclusion that some would undoubtedly make in error as they pondered the idea of grace and being free from the law. These would say that since they were not under law, they could freely indulge in sin. Such a thought might seem logical. But it is an idea that reflects an ignorance of sin and the collateral damage that comes with willfully engaging in it. Paul responds to this line of thinking with the same expression used in verse two of the chapter, "May it never come about!"

The decision to sin because God's grace neutralizes all legal effects of sin is one that remains common among Christians, to their own shame and pain. This is the doctrine of demons and perhaps no other idea has robbed the church of vibrant faith more than this one. The idea is this; since God's grace is such that His forgiveness is without limit, I can do anything I please. The person who says such a thing has not considered that God's eventual judgment of sin is only one facet of sin's downside. Paul will make that clearer in the thoughts that follow.

6:16—"do you not know that when you present yourself to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death or of obedience resulting in righteousness?"

Paul approaches the question of verse 15 by seeking to address the lack of understanding that such a position reflects. That was the usual approach of Paul and the rest of Scripture's authors. Knowing the truth and facing it leads to change in behavior. Whether it was real or willful ignorance, the reader's needed to be reminded of an important truth. The truth is that when we willfully decide to obey someone, we become at that point their slave. And when we decide to embrace a course of action rather than separate ourselves from it, we voluntarily become mastered by it. We can choose to join ourselves to evil and in doing so we separate ourselves from good. When we do such a thing the result is "death."

Now what did Paul mean here by death? He meant spiritual death, just as God did when he told Adam he would die. Now how can the Christian die spiritually? Some would say that they can lose their standing in Christ due to willful sin, and so lose their salvation and so be separated from God. Others would say that by choice they will have the life experience of one who is spiritually dead, though God in His grace will forgive them. So they experience all the symptoms of spiritual death because of their disobedience. This latter position seems the most consistent with all of Paul's teaching.

The "death" Paul is speaking of is the relational separation that comes between God and one of His children when they wander from Him and do not listen to his voice. Soon they do not hear it. They are living the equivalent of a godless life, the life of one who is spiritually dead. They arrived at such a state by presenting themselves to sin and obeying it. On the other hand, they could have presented themselves to obedience, to submission to what God's will and desire is.

Now here's an important point in discerning the meaning of this verse. The results of obedience that we would expect Paul to point out if he was speaking of the loss of salvation, would be "resulting in life." Instead, he says "resulting in righteousness." The result of yielding oneself to God is the opposite of the deeds of spiritual death. It is the deeds of righteousness. And so Paul is contrasting what happens to a life visibly when a choice of obedience/disobedience is made.

The important thought however, in the matter of choosing a course of conduct is not so much the resultant moral look. It is to whom you have entrusted yourself as your master. Sin is a deceptive, self-serving, cruel, and abusive master. God is a gracious and loving master whose design for us is straight-forward and good. Whom do we wish to serve? That is what is at stake when we ponder choices of conduct. There is no such thing as getting away with sin. Our souls will bear its impress if we choose to engage in it.

6:17—"But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you are committed,"

Paul is addressed his readers as those at risk. He has told them that they need to stop presenting their bodies as instruments of sin. That is a way of saying, "stop choosing sin!" If they continued choosing sin, they would become its slave. So they occupied the spiritual ground that many Christians occupy. This verse confirms that. They are at risk, and yet they have clearly been changed and they have entered the sanctification process.

We must never think we are "done" with sin and the battle associated with separating ourselves from it. It can enslave us all over again. The Romans had clearly been slaves of sin at one point, as all people are. They also, clearly, had escaped from that slavery. The testimony about them on this point could not be clearer. They had become obedient from the heart. There was no counterfeit Christianity or feigned spirituality. They had not merely embraced the forms of the faith. They were obedient for all the right reasons. Their obedience came from an inner work of the Spirit in their hearts.

Their obedience was also precise. They became obedient to a specific form of the faith, the one that they had been taught, and which had been given to them as the standard by which doctrine and deeds were to be judged. This is what is meant by the statement that they had been "committed" to it. They had received a pattern by which truth was to be discerned and judged. They had been placed within its boundaries and were to think and behave considering those boundaries.

What we can say therefore about the Romans is that there was nothing deficient in their faith or experience that put them at risk. It is simply a reality of the human experience that sin can master us if we present ourselves to it and willingly engage in it. The Romans had taken the right steps. They were off to a good start. Their faith had been established on a good foundation. They needed to maintain their vigilance regarding sin so as to remain free from slavery to it. Theirs was a glorious past. Their future will be shaped by them taking on the new vigilance and standing against any lie that endorsed continuing sin.

6:18—“and having been freed from sin, you became slaves to righteousness.”

Paul continues to summarize the ground gained thus far by the Romans. They had experienced, through belief in Christ in obedience to the apostolic message, freedom from sin. They had become “slaves to righteousness.” They had experienced the compelling need from within, produced by the Holy Spirit, to do God’s will. They tasted the fruit of the Spirit. Their journey in Christ had reflected the signs of spiritual health. There had been tangible change in their lives.

All this commentary is a setup for the advice and counsel Paul will give the readers in the next verse. It is vital for us to be called up to high ground morally, to vigilance toward sin. This advice applies to every Christian. There is no one on safe ground, immune to the power of sin. It does not take a deficient experience or a weak foundation to be victimized by sin.

6:19—“I’m speaking in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh. For just as you presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness resulting in further lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness, resulting in sanctification.”

Paul is speaking in human terms in the sense that he is using words and figures that are part of the everyday lives of his readers. He is drawing primarily on the imagery of slavery to help them understand how important it was to separate themselves from sin. As human an institution as slavery was, it was a good illustration of our spiritual dilemma.

The flesh is weak. That is a way of referring to our fallen state, what we inherited from Adam. The flesh is not so much a reference to our physical makeup but has to do more with our ethical or moral makeup, and specifically the fact that sin, particularly self-gratification, self-centeredness, even self-deification, is present within our beings. This presence of sin, Paul refers to often as “the flesh.” It is not just that we do sinful acts. It is that sin is within us. We think of it and feel it, invent it and dream it. Paul uses the term “flesh” to designate this presence of sin in our beings. It is this weakness we have, this propensity to be self-serving rather than God-serving, that makes the use of the terms associated with slavery appropriate.

Because of our flesh we can still as Christians move into sin, be deceived by it, and reap its consequences. We can do all that instinctively and rather naturally. So plain straight-forward language on the matter of sin is appropriate.

In the past the Romans had willingly engaged in impurity and lawlessness. Their behavior was quite simple to explain. They made conscious decisions to engage their bodies in sinful actions. They wanted to do those things and wanted to do them repeatedly. That was true not just of the Romans. It has been true of every human being since Adam. We must own this. At some point we decide not to curb a simple idea that arises in our mind that is contrary to the testimony of the Law and the affirmation of the Holy Spirit. Then we decide to act, to allow our bodies to experience what we have thought about, or to use our bodies to bring about the desired result. This is true of every sin from murder to telling a lie. We present the members of our body to serve that idea or thought.

The result is “further lawlessness.” When the action of the thoughts is engaged these begin to take on their own life and lawlessness increases in us. Lawlessness is a term which describes a lack of restraint and of submission to moral boundaries. It tends to feed on itself and increase log-rhythmically. Paul notes that as we yield to sin a downward moral spiral result. It leads to more sin and more lawlessness. He calls us to put an end to that pattern.

We are called to do something different now. In the same way that we make conscious decisions to act out are evil thoughts and so to allow the members of our physical bodies to become slaves to sin, we are now to intentionally act out the good things God puts in our heart through the Holy Spirit. We are to do this just as we did the other. It is to be done intentionally, resolutely, with a sense of anticipation, with a view toward an experience and an objective. This will bring about an upward journey that the Scripture refers to as sanctification.

Sanctification refers to the process whereby the Holy Spirit makes us more holy over time. It does not happen in an instant, though we might wish it to. The Spirit uses different instruments to sanctify us. He uses the truth as it is found in Scripture. He uses life experiences viewed through the lens of this truth. He uses the spiritual influence of others. He uses all this as we live life in relationships found in a local church. All of it is to produce in us the character of Christ. We must simply present our bodies, including our minds to such experiences with God and people, determined to have the experience of conviction. We become people of conviction through the conviction of the Holy Spirit regarding what is right, what is wrong and regarding our personal accountability to God (John 16:8-11). Conviction, both negative and positive, is the road that always leads upward. So there is no such thing as a bad experience of conviction as long as it is of the Holy Spirit.

6:20—“for when you were slaves of sin, you are free in regard to righteousness.”

When we choose to sin, using our bodies to bring about an experience or a result that is contrary to God’s will and heart, we are free from righteousness in two ways.

First, righteousness is absent in us. It does not mean that good deeds from a human perspective are absent in us. What makes a deed good is the motive behind it, specifically a motive to bring about what God wants. This motive is gone when we hand our bodies over to sin.

Second, we are free regarding righteousness in the sense that the compulsion and conviction to bring about what is right and good has been forfeited by us. We callous ourselves to the voice of righteousness, the voice of the Holy Spirit. We become free of His control and that is a miserable thing. We lose the sense of passion and conviction that characterizes the life directed by the Spirit. There is no fire in the soul, no urgency in speech, little sense of mission and purpose. We become normal, fallen people. We lose the pleasure of living life in the way it was meant to be lived. To yield to sin should be understood as sacrificing the deepest of pleasures.

So to yield to sin is to lose something of one's own soul. Thinking as a normal human should even mitigate against yielding to sin's allure. Ultimately, no pleasure is derived by being free from what righteousness leads us to do. Because of the price paid in our own soul and spirit, there is no sense in which we should sin because we are not under law but under grace. There is no sense in which we should sin so that grace will be increased. That thinking, which is what Paul is arguing against here, leads to a terrible kind of existence and robs us eternally. It does not and cannot lead us to a greater experience of grace. It does the opposite.

6:21—"therefore what benefit were you then deriving from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the outcome of those things is death."

This is a summary statement. It looks back over the various things that Paul has said about the former way of life, a life shaped by evil desires. It asked a very pragmatic question. What benefit did sinful living bring you? It is a good question. Even aside from moral standards, a case can be made to avoid sinful behavior. It produces pain and hopeless complexities in relationships. In every case it takes from our dignity and puts the health and soundness of our beings at risk, to say nothing of our future. Most of what we pursue in our sinfulness we will later be ashamed of. The adulterer might revel in the pleasure of the moment and may continue to do so for many years. But it is difficult to face that past as life ends. The losses along the way include some of the most grievous of this life. The alcoholic, the thief, a liar, and the one who spends their life in self-righteousness and arrogance eventually share the common experience of shame and indignity. That difficult ending is their experience only if they are fortunate enough to see the truth about their lives and face it squarely. In that case their shame may save them!

Paul says that the outcome of such things is death. In some cases that death is physical, but in all cases it is spiritual. The one who chooses sin instead of righteousness will not know the joy of experiencing the presence of God apart from repentance. Many Christians can speak to these truths and apply them to unbelievers. But they are written in Paul's letter for believers to read. It is believers Paul is seeking to admonish and steer on the right course.

We conclude that there is a warning in Paul's words for the believers in Rome, Christian people, genuine believers. To separate oneself from the will of God is to separate oneself from the presence of God. Though believers cannot remove themselves from belonging to His family, their seat will continually be empty at mealtime as they are off pursuing the various pleasures of sin. They will quench and grieve the Holy Spirit until they feel no conviction regarding right or wrong and no sense of accountability. Believers who feel forgiven and understand that forgiveness has been freely extended to them must understand that there is no benefit to sinning when the cost of sin and sinfulness is weighed out. The outcome of the sinful thoughts we entertain is always that they bring the symptoms of spiritual depth.

Who wants to live separated from Yahweh, who is limitless in His love and power? Who wants to have none of His fruit present in their lives? How much better to enter the experience now of life eternal. It was the life Jesus lived and it is the life He now gives. How much better to pursue and experience that!

6:22—“but now having been freed from sin and slave to God, you derive your benefit, resulting in sanctification, and the outcome, eternal life.”

The outcome of becoming more holy, more like Christ, more in harmony with the will of God, is always eternal life. When we think of eternal life we generally think of the next life, and specifically, never-ending life. We must remember that souls are eternal, therefore all will live forever. When Scripture speaks of eternal life it is speaking of a way of living, the quality of life that Adam and Eve experienced before they chose sin. It is the way of living revealed to us, modeled to us and made available to us through Jesus Christ. (John 1:1-14) it is a life lived in union with the Creator. As we make progress in sanctification, we inherit more of that life, until the day when time ends, and we inherit what is ours in His eternal kingdom.

When Paul speaks here of eternal life, he is not talking about earning future entrance into heaven. He is talking about entering the experience of eternal life today, of our souls increasing in union and harmony with our Maker. This comes because of sanctification according to Paul's words. And according to his words sanctification comes as the result of being enslaved to God.

It is clear from this chapter that the Romans had not yet been enslaved to Christ (See use of aorist imperative in verse 19). They were being exhorted to do it. They needed to act in their own behalf to ensure this outcome, the experience of life lived in union with their Creator. They needed to never again blindly follow sin's dictates.

The time sequence of the salvation process is being made clear to the Romans by Paul. We must return frequently and experience it anew. The Romans had been freely given freedom from sin, their old master. They were being enslaved to God. They were deriving from this a benefit, the benefit of being under God's care and resources brought to bear in their lives. The results of this benefit were they were becoming more holy. The outcome of this would be their experience of THE way of living, the firsthand experience of living in union with God. But they were doing what we all tend to do. They were dabbling in it. Paul didn't want this for them. He wouldn't want it for you. We simply must press forward to enter all that God was placing in front of us through the presence of His Spirit in us.

6:23—“for the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

This verse is most often directed by us towards nonbelievers in our attempt to bring them to belief. While that is not inappropriate, we must remember that it is originally addressed to people like us, believers. It should be applied by us when our sanctification is at stake, not just in dealing with those whose justification is at stake. Verses 21 and 22 provide the immediate backdrop for this verse, but so does the entire chapter

Paul is trying to get his Roman readers, who were being addressed as believers, to separate themselves from sin. Some were buying into the idea that sinful behavior was not of great concern. Their logic was that since we are not under law but under grace, personal sin is of little consequence. This line of thinking often gains a foothold in our thought processes. We can think that the forgiveness that we have gained in Christ allows us to enjoy a particular sin we want to engage and escape consequences. This verse provides the perfect answer for such thought and should be always on the mind of every believer.

The grace of God changes the judicial power of sin. Sin can no longer eternally separate one who is in Christ from God. The blood of Christ provides atonement for the past, present, and future sin of those who believe in Jesus Christ. They are freed from its ability to condemn them to the second death, eternal separation from God. However, sin continues to have the ability to enslave them at the practical level of this life. So believers can still be addicted to control substances. The believer will still suffer the civil consequences of sin they engage. A believer will still suffer the pain that their own infidelity can bring down on them. Most importantly, a believer, when they choose a course of sin, separate themselves from the blessing of God in that area of their lives.

In doing consciously engaging pleasurable sin believers are voluntarily garnering for themselves, much as one would wages, the experience of separation from God. The term used for wages is *ojwǵnia*, which is used of rations for a soldier, a stipend. Believers who opt for sin are subsisting, not thriving. God always views mere living the natural human experience as death. It is making the choice Adam made, rather than saying “yes!” to what God wishes to restore them to. And so Paul reminds the Romans, and all who have ever sought to find a deeper understanding and experience of the salvation experience, that the wages of sin is death.

On the other hand, as an alternative to separating ourselves from the will and way of God, we should choose joining ourselves to Him in every matter. That is an alternative freely available to us, and it is an eternal offer. It is one that will always be available to the children of God. This comes through the merit of Jesus Christ and His work in our behalf.

The idea that we are justified by Christ’s merit is often spoken of in Christian circles. But it is equally true of our sanctification, which also comes to us through the merit of Christ. In the case of justification, through belief in Christ we gain right standing with our Creator through the forgiveness made available by Christ’s blood. In the case of the sanctification, through Christ’s blood we have the presence of the Spirit within us. We can continually know and choose the heart of God in a matter. That is the extent of the gift He has given.

And so because of Christ we can live a certain kind of life. It is one that is revealed to us in moment-by-moment installments. It is the result of Him living in communion with us even as He did in the beginning with Adam. The Scripture calls this way of living life, and it is eternal. The right of God to deliver it to us, and the right of us to live it will not expire or be revoked. Even physical death will only move us deeper into the experience of it. It is all based on the sacrifice of Christ.

Much can be said about the contrast Paul makes here between death and life. But this is the essence of it. Death is separation from our Maker, life is union with our Maker. It is a contrast of huge proportions, an entirely different vision for life. The secondary contrast is the one Paul makes between wages and the gift. Wages involve an agreement. They are expected. They come to us predictably, even mechanically. We get nothing less. We expect nothing more than our wages. They come by several different routines or procedures, but they do come. Sin produces such wages. They come predictably. We agree to them when we choose sin, and we will receive them. Those wages are death—experiences of separation from God. This experience of death is what we receive because of choosing to sin. If we don't want that experience of being separated from God, then we should separate ourselves from sin.

Eternal life on the other hand is a free gift, not wages. It bears all the characteristics of a free gift at all times. It is initially received as a free gift is. It is given out of love and for love's sake with no payment required. It becomes ours. Like a gift, there are no conditions attached to it. Its giver is God the Father, and it comes to us through the merit, and work and mediation of Christ. It becomes the possession of the one to whom it is given.

Here Paul speaks of this eternal life being "in Christ." His emphasis may well be that this life is resident in Christ (John 1:4), and thus we have the life because we have Christ. It is not so much that Christ died and because of His death our debt was paid, then God loved us and so gave us the gift of eternal life. Rather, it is that God loved us and gave Christ to us as the source of eternal union with God for all time. To be in Christ is to have this life. The life is not a separate gift from Christ, is in Christ and in receiving Him we receive and have access to that life. The readers had this gift because they had Christ. They had only to live the life, that is, to choose the life Christ lived in the practical realm of their lives.

We must now attempt to state in capsule form the message of Paul since verse 15, so as not to lose sight of the point of his argument. Remember that he asked a question in verse 15. That question was, "shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace?" His response to that question can be summarized in our language like this: "No! Because though works don't matter in terms of gaining God's approval, by choosing to sin we can be enslaved by it, and experience nothing of the blessing that goes with the life we have been given in Christ. Our lives will simply be more of the same if we continue in sin."

Romans 7

7:1—“or do you not know, brethren (for I am speaking to those who know the law), the law has jurisdiction over a person as long as he lives?”

Paul made the statement in verse 15 of the previous chapter that we are not under law but under grace. That was an important teaching in the early church. It had its risks. One of those was that people could respond by casting off all moral restraint. They could become lawless. The question, should we sin because we are not under law but under grace? is the issue Paul continues to address in this chapter. His point will eventually be that we have not been released from the law only to become slaves of sin. We have been released from the law to be joined to God, and then to become those who do the deeds of God.

The message of the Scripture is that we have been released from the law so that we might be joined to God and become the agents through which His rule is carried out in creation. This was His original plan for us (Genesis 1:26), and now is the end toward which His salvation plan is moving. So the idea that we have been released from the Law so as to enjoy sin is a ruinous one. But the solution is not to bind ourselves to the law. This is often the tactic of Christian teachers. This chapter will show that it is a very short-sighted and poor one. There is no safety in the law.

Far from embracing that tactic Paul begins with a series of statements that affirm and reinforce the previous one that we are indeed not under the law. He wants to be sure his readers get that news and understand that they have rightly heard him. He will provide an illustration that is easily understood, and then give it a twist to show that we are not under the jurisdiction of the law.

Paul's readers know the law. There was likely a strong enough Jewish presence in the Roman church that Paul could be confident about this and could call them to reflect on what they knew of the law. And so that is where he begins. He will use the law to teach about the law.

The law, Paul says, has jurisdiction over a person only while they're alive. The word rendered jurisdiction is κυριοστικν. A far better word might be dominion. We know that the law has jurisdiction beyond time in the sense of condemning past behavior. But the law has dominion, that is, it has the final and authoritative say in shaping moral obligation, only among the living. Obligation is the key word there. All humanity has a series of moral obligations which are shaped by the law, and which cannot be argued against and cannot be altered.

There is, however, a force besides the law that trumps and terminates obligations imposed by the law and that is death. Death alters obligations imposed by the law. A dead person is not capable of action and so is not responsible for producing actions that conform to the law. The laws are irrelevant with respect to them at that point. Law relates only to the realm of the living. Paul will illustrate this idea through the marriage relationship.

7:2—“for the married woman is bound by the law to her husband while he is living; but when her husband dies, she is released from the law concerning her husband.”

We must remember that this passage is not addressing the issue of divorce and is not attempting to make an exhaustive statement on the issues surrounding divorce. So it is a mistake to take these words and teach that there are no grounds for divorce at all. Other passages are specifically addressed toward this issue.

Paul is putting forth an illustration about the Law, from what the Law says about marriage. He has stated that the law has dominion over one's behavior only while they are alive. He gives this example from the law's regulation of marriage. This example shows that the death of a spouse alters both spouses' obligation to each other. The dead spouse is certainly released from all obligation. So is the living spouse.

In this illustration, it is the living spouse that Paul focuses on, in this case, a woman. This is the unexpected twist in the illustration. She is bound to husband if he lives. Paul's point is simply that death dissolves the marriage. Therefore, after a husband dies, his wife is no longer bound to him. She is free to love another man and enter into marriage with him, if that be what God orchestrates with regard to her remaining years. All that the law says about marriage she is free from with respect to her deceased husband. He died. When he did, so did the marriage, and so, in the sense of the marriage, she died also.

7:3—“so then if, while her husband is living, she is joined to another man, she shall be called an adulteress; but if her husband dies, she is free from the law, so that she is not an adulteress, though she be joined to another man.”

This verse states the obvious scenario that develops for a married woman due to the Law's dominion over the living. If her husband was alive, she is labeled by the Law an adulteress, should she walk away from the marriage and marry another man. As much as anyone might try to change that, it is what the law clearly says (though we must remember again that this is not meant to be an exhaustive treatment of marriage and divorce). However, the legal scenario is totally different, and her actions are judged totally different if husband dies, even if her actions are the same. Laws of marriage do not apply to a married person whose spouse has died. They are in fact, no longer married.

7:4—“therefore, my brethren, you also were made to die to the Law through the body of Christ, that you might be joined to another, to Him who was raised from the dead, that we might bear fruit to God.”

Paul plainly states here what he is wanting to express through the illustration of marriage. Just as the woman in the story died to the marriage through the death of her husband, we died to the law through the death of Christ. His giving of his body atoned for all possible offenses we might become guilty of against the law. Because of His bodily sacrifice, the Law's statement against us became irrelevant.

The purpose of God in this was that we might be joined to Christ. We have been made one with Him, our spirit's indwelt by His Spirit. And God did this with a certain vision for our lives in mind. Just as in a marriage fruit/offspring are born, so God had in mind to produce in us fruit. And so the character of Christ comes to be displayed in us. As we behave in Him, we bring about his life in others and these are the results God envisioned in orchestrating all that is made known in the gospel. The gospel is the power of God resulting in the rescue of all among humanity that will believe it.

7:5—"for while we are in the flesh, the sinful passions, which were aroused by the law, were at work in the members or body to bear fruit for death."

Paul uses the term here, "the flesh," that he uses several times in his writings. Here he speaks of being "in the flesh." To be "in the flesh" means to be devoid of the presence of the Holy Spirit—an unbeliever. As such, one has no capacity to please God. They have not been "born again." (See Romans 8:8–9). (See under 6:19 for a precise definition of the flesh)

Paul is describing the experience that is ours before we embrace the gospel. He says that while we are in that condition, devoid of the Holy Spirit, the "sinful passions" were at work in us bearing fruit for death. Spiritual death is another way to describe this condition of being "in the flesh." If it is not remedied it brings about the "second death," which is eternal separation from God. In the meantime, it produces all that one would expect would come about within the life of one devoid of God's Spirit. Their conscience becomes calloused, and they can live in sin without any feeling of guilt and remorse. They may become increasingly corrupt from visible standpoint, or they may maintain certain standards in the name of decency for pragmatic reasons. But the fact is that they are guided by sinful passions.

When we think of sinful passions, our mind goes to indecency, promiscuity, homosexuality, adultery and the like. But we must remember that the driving passion of the soul separated from God, is the quest for affirmation and worth. Therefore, one's sinful passion may come out in such a way that they are a moralist, a doer of noble acts all to lay hold of the approval and the acclaim of those around them. So this verse is not necessarily describing one who is perverted by moral standards, and we must always bear that in mind. The "respectable" obsessions and passions we pursue for self-gratification is no less the flesh than those that drive us towards sexual deviance.

Very noticeable in this verse is Paul's statement that these desires are "by the law." The new American Standard Bible has added the term "aroused," which directs us to Paul's intended meaning. The law arouses sinful desires in several ways. First, it creates an awareness of them in us. Without law a desire is simply a desire. It is law that makes certain and affirms one's sinfulness. Because of this it arouses them in the second way. It introduces into our life's moral decision. Once we know something is evil, we must make a moral choice. The activity of choosing gives rise to an increased ability to justify and to deceive. So the law awakens in us liabilities that were not yet developed. A third way in which the law arouses sinful desires in us is that it produces guilt. Guilt can produce good things like repentance, but often arouses our desire to be well thought of and with that, like Adam and Eve, we are led into all manner of behavior to conceal our shame, or to compensate for what we have lost. The fourth way in which the law arouses evil desires is that it makes what is unlawful more desirable. The law brings rebellion out in us, our desire to be our own masters.

It is not that the Law is the source of these things. It is that in prohibiting them, the Law increases their attractiveness to us. It is an uncanny characteristic of the portion of us the Bible refers to as the flesh, that what is prohibited becomes the thing we want to do. To Adam and Eve there was something in that which they had not experienced that was enticing. It was not unknown, because God had revealed consequences to them. What had not been experienced drew them, and the idea that in prohibition is an intent to keep one from what will be good for them pushed them further toward sin. The latter may be the best explanation for why we seek out what is against the law. There is within us a distrust of the “not good” ruling given either by God or our fellow humans. This distrust arouses our desire to do the very things that the law prohibits.

This principle, that the law arouses sinful desires in us is an important one in Paul’s teaching that he develops in this chapter. It is why most efforts at self-reform fail. The drawing of boundary lines tends to make sin more extensive and more desirable. We have speculated as to why this is, but in the end, we are unable to explain why this reaction is bound up in us. It simply is, and it is why the law could not make people more obedient. Law in general and the Law awakened sinful desires in us that are mystifying. Though we cannot give an adequate explanation of this ourselves, every honest person will witness that this is a part of the picture of themselves that their own self-evaluation has revealed. In speaking of this Paul’s point is that before our regeneration by the Holy Spirit we were driven along by sin. The Law added to the problem, it did not provide a solution.

7:6—“but now we have been released from the law, having died to that by which we were bound, so that we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter.”

We are released from the Law in the sense that it cannot produce condemnation in us. This is true if we are thinking right about Christ and His work on our behalf. Where there is no condemnation, the need to deceive, to manipulate, and to compensate is removed. Such desires that were aroused by the Law and given by it more occasion to be active still exist but can be subdued and governed by our knowledge of the truth in Christ. Our sin can be dealt with forthrightly. This is because we have been released from the Law. We’re like the woman Paul referred to earlier whose husband had died. That marriage ended with his death. When he died, the marriage died, and in a sense, she died as well through his death.

In the same way, through Christ’s death we died to the Law. Its requirement has been met for us in His death. We were joined to the Law in order that we might become aware of our sin and our sinfulness. It is done—it’s job complete. Its time has ended. Through Christ it has been laid to rest for us who believe. We have been joined to Christ. Since the Law’s demand has been met in us, His Spirit has taken up residence in us.

We serve God differently than when we were under the Law. We do it not to gain His blessing or appease His anger or to compensate for evil. All these were part of what the Law led us to do. We now serve in “newness of spirit”. We live by the Spirit’s impulses and leadings. There is acceptance and freedom and freshness where there used to be obligation and failure—the great death spiral. We were destined under the law to repetitious failure. The new era we are in because of Christ’s death is devoid of the need to perform.

In the Law's place is capacity to be. What we sought to become; we now simply are. We serve our Creator. The phrase "oldness of the letter" refers to the time of following directions meticulously hoping somehow to get life right, but constantly having to start over. It was a time of being stuck in a sort of moral carousel. The newness of spirit refers to us being suddenly declared right and God joining Himself to us at the deepest level of our being as our Counselor and Friend. The presence of His Spirit in us changes everything!

We see in this verse the difficulty and inadequacy of the Law. It was essential, in that there had to be a standard established for human behavior for us to be aware of our sin. The Law was also essential because it reveals our incapability to save ourselves. As human beings we naturally seek to perform our way into a favorable position. We believe we are okay morally and can fix ourselves. The Law shows us something deeper is wrong. Through the Law we soon find that we become obligated to and condemned by the Law. We find ourselves in moral debt. So we are slaves to the Law's judgment, bound by the Law's standard. Another way of stating this is that we are slaves to sin, bound to it by the Law's standard.

All of this makes the Law look bad, as if it is the problem. Paul will deal next with this line of thinking. Here he reminds us that we have been freed from the Law's sentence which was separation from God, by being freed from its standard. Its standard has been fulfilled for us by Christ and since its standard does not relate to us, it cannot condemn us. We are released from the Law because through Christ, we died to it. And so we parallel the woman in Paul's earlier story, who because of her husband's death, died to the Law's demand that she remain married to him.

7:7—"what should we say then? Is the Law sin? May it never be! On the contrary, I would not have come to know sin except through the Law; for I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, "you shall not covet."

This section of Romans, beginning with this verse and running through the end of this chapter, present some complexities in interpretation. Paul uses the first person, and so seems to describe his own personal experience. This presents some problems later. One example of these problems is found in verse 9. There he refers to himself as having been alive before the Law. In what sense was Paul alive before the Law? A second example occurs later in the chapter. He will refer to himself as being a wretched man and of not being able to do the things that he wanted to do. If that is true of Paul, some suggest that it is a damning statement of the effectiveness of the Christian faith by one of its key leaders.

These kinds of problems have been resolved in several ways by various schools of interpretation. A quick "fly-over" of these indicates three general trends of interpretation. Some have resolved these issues by suggesting that Paul is using himself as representing the experience of the people of Israel. Others have suggested a similar idea, but that Paul is speaking of himself as a representative of humanity in general and that he is outlining in this chapter the human experience including his own that led up to his salvation. Others insist that Paul is speaking of himself and his own experience even as a Christian.

It would seem best to understand Paul's statements in these verses in this way: Paul is using himself to express what we could call "the lesson of Israel." Israel, representing all of humanity, demonstrated through the Sinai covenant the absolute necessity of grace on the part of God and the moral inability of humanity to procure God's favor. We will speak more to this later.

As we begin this section of Romans, we must recall that Paul has just established that we were enslaved to sin because of the Law. That is, due to the Law's condemnation of us we were separated from God, who is our only source of salvation. To be separated from God is to be enslaved to sin. Paul has also said that there is no sin charged to us apart from the Law (Romans 5:13). He has also stated that sin increased through the Law (Romans 5:20). One could think of it as logical then, to say that the Law is the problem, an instrument of evil that brings about evil. Paul does not want this faulty line of logic to take root in the church. The phrase "May it never be" is used by him to show that such a thought should not be allowed to occupy our minds.

Paul insists in this verse that the Law did not cause sin. It revealed to us that sin exists, and that it exists in each of us. Like all truth, the Law sheds light on reality and it brings to light the true nature of things. Paul uses the example of covetousness in his own life to affirm this function of the Law. Coveting, desiring what belongs to another, is present in all of us much of the time. It would have been considered just normal to us apart from the command not to covet. The awareness of that Law provides an internal witness against us when we covet. As a result of the Law, we become aware that we sin in this way and that we do so frequently. We learn that we can sin apart from any action.

This is the Law's relationship to sin. It defines sin's fruits and reveals that it is present in us. So the Law is thorough. It reveals not only that we do sinful things, but that sin as a governing principle resides within us. Through the Law then, we come to know that we are being influenced and controlled by sin, and we become aware of the extent of its presence in us and in the world around us.

7:8—"but sin, taking opportunities through the commandment, produced in me coveting of every kind; for apart from the Law sin is dead."

Sin is lawlessness. It is thinking and acting independently of God. It is rebellion against what God desires. This is the sense in which sin is dead apart from the Law. It is not that we would do no sinful acts apart from the Law. We would likely commit adultery even if there was no Law against it. But at that point adultery would not be rebellion or lawlessness because it would not be against the Law.

Sin as a governing principle comes alive when the Law is made. We rebel. We decide to do what we want to do rather than what we should do, and at that point the Law has brought to light that we are sinners, meaning that we are rebels within. We are not just weak. It is in this sense that sin "takes opportunity" through the commandment. The establishment of the Law created the opportunity for sin to rear its ugly head in each human being. We don't just commit sin accidentally. We do it on purpose.

Paul continues to use the example of his own covetousness. When he became aware that covetousness was sin the result was not that he coveted less. Rather, his covetousness sank to a greater depth because it now occurred in him by his own choice. He was a willing participant to some degree, though it is also true that it occurred against what the Spirit was speaking within his own spirit. The Law did not in the end help him with coveting. The Law made him more aware of it, and sin working within him now caused him to willfully covet.

Paul seems painfully aware of the tendency in human nature to want to do what is forbidden. And so the moment we become aware that we cannot have what belongs to someone else, we've become more aware of what they have, and then we tend to focus on it more and more. There comes to be in us coveting of every kind.

This tendency to be drawn to the forbidden fruit is a result of sin's presence in us. Because sin is present in this way, the Law has the opposite effect we imagine that it should have. The problem is not the Law, it is sin's presence in us.

7:9—"and I was once alive apart from the Law; but when the commandment came, sin became alive, and I died;"

This verse presents some obvious difficulties. Paul says that he was once alive apart from the Law. It is obvious that he is using the term alive in the metaphorical sense, not speaking of physical life but of spiritual life. He says that he was alive apart from the Law. The question is when was Paul ever apart from the Law. We might say that he is referring to the time of his early years when he was ignorant of the Law before what we have termed the age of accountability. We have generally believed that to such as are ignorant of the Law in this sense God does not impute sin. This is what Paul has already stated. But we have not generally said they are spiritually alive. In fact, we have generally said that we are born spiritually dead due to Adam's sin and this is Paul's stated position (Romans 5:12-13).

It is difficult to imagine Paul referring to himself as being alive in any sense before his Damascus Road experience. It is also difficult to imagine him speaking of himself being apart from the Law, since he has in his letter so far only viewed those from before the era of Moses as being without the Law. So embracing the idea that Paul is speaking here of his own experience has difficulties.

Some have resolved this by suggesting that Paul has begun to use himself as representing the experience of the people of Israel. This eases the problem in this verse and in the entire chapter. If this is true then Paul is saying here, "we as Israelites were once alive, on good ground with God." We would understand this as referring to the time from the call of Abraham to the giving of the Law at Sinai. We can imagine without too much difficulty an era in which the sin of early Israelites, though present, was not imputed, because the Law had not been given. We can also see how the later Israelites were unaware of their sinfulness and quickly accepted the terms of the covenant. "All that the Lord commanded us we will do!" (Exodus 24:7). We know from their history that Israel's sinfulness came alive, and they were not able to keep the Law. And so this idea is possible. Paul was using the term "I" in the sense of "we," and speaking as an Israelite, as one with a certain history and heritage.

We still must ask in what sense all Israelites were live from Abraham to Moses. Is Paul speaking of the absolute presence of faith in every one of them that results in their eternal salvation? Or is he speaking of the general presence of faith among them and the favor of the covenant being theirs? The position is legitimate, but not without its challenges.

Others are suggesting a similar idea. They say that Paul is speaking of himself as a representative of humanity in general. By this logic he is outlining here and in the rest of the chapter the human experience, including his own that led up to his salvation. Those who embrace this position would say that the entire chapter should be interpreted this way. Paul is describing humanity's search for righteousness apart from Christ, and through the Law. In this case Paul is speaking of either a normal human and the things they learn and feel during a normal sincere spiritual journey. It ends happily with an encounter with Jesus Christ.

Others suggest that Paul is speaking of human history before the giving of the Law, from Adam to Moses, and since the giving of the Law. In this case his words would reflect those of an imaginary human who lived after the fall of Adam, during the era of the Law, right up to Paul's present-day. In this case Paul is using himself to sum up the total human experience from Adam to himself and so is speaking of the collective human journey.

It would seem best to understand Paul's statement in these verses (7-25), in this way: Paul is using himself to express the lesson of Israel that God has given to all humanity through the Old Testament. This lesson of Israel was essentially the lesson of the necessity of grace on the part of God and the moral inability of humanity to save themselves. This is the conclusion that we can say the "Israel experiment" arrived at. It reveals humanity's inability in spite of revelation, instruction, dramatic intervention from God Himself, His long-suffering/patience and His considerable mercy. Paul embraces those lessons as they are—realities of our individual lives. He presents himself here in the full light of what revelation has taught us about ourselves. What revelation has taught us about the chosen people, it has taught us about ourselves, and we do well to embrace its lessons rather than to be deluded by sin's flattery (Psalm 36:1-2).

Thankfully, Yahweh did not give the Law as a means of justification. Justification has always been by faith. Clearly the Law was given as the means of procuring Yahweh's blessing and reward. By conformity to it Israel could procure prosperity that Yahweh conditionally promised in a good land. So God never put the eternal souls of human's at risk by giving the Law that actually made humans worse. Many generations did suffer consequences that they were convinced they could avoid by obedience. Yahweh knew they could not. Their eternal souls were never at risk through the giving of the Law.

The fact is these became a critical example to humanity. God can handsomely reward for all of eternity Israelites for any suffering His love for the whole of humanity placed on them. Israel did us all a great service. They performed the great experiment that tested classic humanism, the idea that by our goodness we can come to earn God's favor and gain salvation. The average person in every culture from all time should be grateful for Israel's example. If we are attentive to the historical record of it, we are saved the pain of embracing classic religion and its pursuit of salvation by works. The entire story tells us to turn straight to faith in Christ.

It is apparent that it is accurate to say that sin was and is present even when there is no Law, but that it is not charged to one's account (5:12-13). It is also accurate to say that the Law aggravates sin. It multiplies its intensity and its frequency. It is in this sense that the Law makes sin alive. The Law does this because of the nature of sin and the fact that it is resident in us, not because the Law itself is bad.

The Israelites proved this that Paul had said about the relationship between the Law and sin. Israel became guilty of breaking the covenant soon after it was made and so "died" as sin sprang to life. They "died" in the sense of losing the blessing of Yahweh, even as Adam had. Through the Law and their effort to earn God's promise of prosperity by their own good works they found out the truth about themselves and all of humanity. Sinfulness is a part of who we are and so we cannot live by the Law's dictates and cannot earn Yahweh's blessing through good deeds.

7:10—“and this commandment, which was to result in life, proved to result in death for me;”

Due to the presence of sin in each human, there is a moral reversal that comes about. Information that should allow an individual to conform to a standard of holiness, ends up revealing that individual's moral shortfall. This is the universal experience of humanity. The Law held out a tantalizing promise.; “Do these things and the Creator will bless you.” It was tantalizing because it was the blessing of Yahweh that Adam had forfeited. The Law would test the fundamental principle of all human religion—that by doing good we can gain favorable status with God. God tested this idea in a very visible way, and mercifully did so with no one's personal justification at stake. Justification has always been based on faith.

The test was very straight forward. Yahweh gave relatively simple, and clear laws by which Israel was to abide. If they did, they would be blessed. If not, they would be cursed. The Law was no sooner revealed than sin reared its ugly head in them and kept them from obeying the Law. Despite years of trying, Israel inherited the curse.

This prospect of the Law and its blessing is not a tantalizing game a cruel God plays with us. It is the work of a gracious God who wishes us to know our inability so that we won't waste the time seeking to save ourselves. He wishes for us to accept His provision of a sin-bearer and the resultant free gift of salvation.

So the Law, from the perspective of unknowing Israelites, held out great promise (Deuteronomy 28). They brimmed with confidence in their ability to do it (Exodus 24:7). It would result in life as it was meant to be lived, in interrupted fellowship with God. God knew their inability (Deuteronomy 4:23-31; 31:14-30). He had a plan through which He would make this life available to all of humanity, but it would necessitate them learning and accepting the truth about themselves as demonstrated in the written story of Israel and confirmed by each person's experience.

The lesson of Israel is that we are utterly incapable of obeying God and so righting ourselves morally. The damage done by Adam's choice is irreversible apart from the intervention of Yahweh. The Law proved this and continues to prove it to all who seek to find life through it. Its result is always death, all the time. This is due to the presence of sin and his power in us. Fortunately, He is! He is present and hears our groaning under sin's power and sees its wreckage.

7:11—“for sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, deceived me, and through it killed me.”

Israel demonstrated that because of sin in us, three things happen with respect to the Law. First, it creates an opportunity for sin. The word rendered opportunity is *αφορμην*. This word means a base of operation, or a foothold for an advance. So due to the strength of sin in us the Law does not give us opportunity for perfection, but opportunity to advance in our sinfulness.

Israel demonstrated a second thing; sin does a work within us and deceives us. This is likely a reference to sin's ability to make us feel righteous when we are not, to erect in us a righteous façade. The Law in Israel made certain one felt superior and not in need of salvation. When Messiah came, He had to confront a very self-righteous group in terms of those who studied the Law. Sin in us creates legalism and it becomes a very affirming voice in time and so deceives us.

When this deception occurs in us a third thing happens that Israel demonstrated. We become what we might call confirmed sinners. Not only does the Law confirm that our actions have been bad, but it has also demonstrated that sin is present or resident in the fabric of our being. It is part of who we are. Because of the Law our sin has become willful. We come to do what we know is against God's will. Therefore, sin is imputed to us and our spiritual death is confirmed.

It is in this sense that the Law kills us. It is not that we were born spiritually alive and then are killed. Is that we are born spiritually dead, but God in His mercy does not hold us responsible for our sinful acts, because they are done in ignorance. As soon as we develop awareness of right and wrong, this Law then becomes a witness against us that we are dead. And so in this sense the Law kills us, bringing to an end an era of mercy in which we are not charged for our sin and sins.

7:12—"so then the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good."

Paul begins to draw conclusions from the things he has said about the human experience with the Law. He has said that the Law provides no solution for sin in us, that it only aggravates the problem, and that this is not because there is a problem in the Law. The problem is in us, sin has taken root in us and become a part of our beings.

Paul uses three terms to express his conclusion regarding the Law. He concludes first that the Law is holy. The word means set apart as distinct. It came to be used of things that God designated as of Him and uniquely for Him. In this case it is referring to the idea that the Law is of Him and therefore like Him and therefore it is morally and ethically pure. Since this is true of the Law, it means it is such that it brings definition to that which is imperfect and impure.

All three words holy, righteous, and good, are used frequently of God. The Law is an expression of what lies outside the boundaries of His character. There is overlap in the meaning of these three words, but each word adds its own subtle shade of meaning to the statement. Holiness conveys to us that the Law is sacred and not subject to how we might wish to alter it. The word righteous expresses that it is right by the standard of God's perfect character and so by His standard of justice. The word good expresses its potential, what it can produce in us and among us. So this is the Law, something that is holy, righteous, and good.

This shows that the Law is not something that tips all things in God's favor so that some sordid need in Him is satisfied. That might be the case in law instituted by an earthly regime. The Law is impeccable because it aligns with the perfections of Yahweh.

There is a sense in which the Law has and does hurt us. But we should not allow a twisted logic to convince us it is our enemy or that it is bad. The fact is that if our character was shaped by the Law, it would be wonderful. That is God's plan, long-range, for us.

7:13—“therefore, did that which is good become a cause of death for me? May it never be! Rather it was sin, and in order that it might be shown to be sin by affecting my death through that which is good, that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful.”

Paul accomplishes several things through his statements in this verse. First, he restates the fact that the Law is good, and does so two times. Second, he makes clear that though we enter the experience of spiritual death through the Law, the Law is not the cause. Third, he states what the cause is of this good thing bringing about something bad. It is our own sin. Fourth, he states that this whole experience of spiritual death on our part is allowed by God through the Law to make sin's true nature clearer. It cannot masquerade as harmless or as good, as it once did. It is shown to be sin and that is crystal clear. Fifth, the Law brings to light what Paul refers to as the utter sinfulness of sin. The word rendered utter by the NASB is *υπερβολην*, meaning to throw beyond. With the preposition *κατα*, it refers to an exceeding of a standard which itself surpasses all others. So the Law casts our sin in an extreme light so that it is seen for what it is.

Sin is doing that which is contrary to the will of God. It is doing what misses that particular and specific desire of His for a particular moment. The Law makes sin “utterly sinful” in two ways. First, the Law and its ensuing consequence, the full-blown experience of physical death, leave no doubt that sinful things are contrary to God's will. The experience of Him turning His back and separating Himself from us comes very personal through the Law. Through the Law, the sinner knows the offensive nature of their sin to God.

The Law makes sin “utterly sinful” in a second way, by moving it from the realm of an accidental and innocent act to willful act. The fact that an act is against God's will does not cause us to stop doing it. So the Law reveals that our sins are not the result merely of good people slipping. They're often premeditated and willful acts of rebellion.

Sin is no small appendage to otherwise upstanding, moral people. It is invasive, so much so that it is part of the identity of the entire stream of humanity. The Law is what reveals this.

7:14—“for we know that the Law is spiritual; but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin.”

Paul contrasts here the essence of the Law and the essence of humanity. In saying that the Law is spiritual, he is saying that it is of the Spirit. It is an expression of the very innermost being of God. When we read the Law and ponder it, we come to know God. This is because it is Spiritual, and that word is used here in its most profound and holy sense. The Law is, because it is sourced in the very being of God.

On the other hand, Paul speaks as a representative human being who as an Israelite has learned the lesson of the Law. He says, “I am of flesh.” This is a reference to influence that crept into every human when sin entered the human stream. Some have referred to this as a sin nature. Paul's chosen term is flesh. It is a way of referring to the sin he has been talking about that is attached to our very being. Again, his use of the word flesh does not infer the problem is the body, and that if our bodies were wiped out, we would be free of sin. Rather, the term refers to the fact that sin residing in us is an inescapable fact of our human experience, and it has been ever since Adam sinned.

Because of the existence in us of this that Paul calls “the flesh,” we are no longer like God in the sense that we once were. The image of God in us is marred. We are spiritual beings, but we are not Spiritual. That is, we are no longer a pure expression of God’s Spirit. When Paul says, “I am of flesh,” he means much more than the fact that we have a visible body of flesh and bones. His next statement is the plain literal meaning of the symbol

The phrase “of flesh” means “sold into bondage to sin.” The flesh then, refers to sin that is resident in us—that desire to be our own master instead of submitting to the will of God. This desire is resident in all humanity and will be because of Adam’s fall. It is part of our earthly, or fleshly, existence. It can be very blatant, or it can lie latent and spring to life in a heartbeat. But one thing is certain, all humanity has this that Paul refers to as the flesh. The result is that we are all in bondage to sin.

The question is this; is Paul talking here about the human experience apart from Christ only? Or is this simply the human experience even with Christ. Many interpret this to be Paul speaking of himself before Christ and as an Israelite under the Law and without Christ. There is that which makes this interpretation attractive. Paul says some terrible things about himself beginning here with the fact that he is sold into bondage to sin. Is that the testimony of one who is been redeemed? When Paul says wretched man that I am! (Verse 24), is that the voice of one who is set apart and therefore a saint? Does that not contradict what is said in chapter 6 about being enslaved to God? (6:22). These difficulties have led many to interpret this as Paul speaking of himself as an Israelite of the Law and apart from Christ, his past.

It must be admitted however, that the language of the text is such that it appears that Paul is speaking of his present experience. He employs the present tense throughout and seems to be addressing ongoing action happening within him. Those who embrace the view that Paul is speaking of his present experience, believe he is speaking to the bleak reality of the Christian life. Though we are redeemed, we have not yet entered the full experience of freedom from the presence of sin. Though we are viewed as holy through Christ, we have not yet been made holy by God. The result is that though we have been declared free, we have not been totally set free from sin yet. Through the truth, as we come to know and follow it, we are experiencing more and more freedom, but we still must contend with the flesh, that voice of sin resident within us that leads us astray (James 1:14-15).

It seems best to conclude again, that Paul is continuing to speak of the human experience, as demonstrated by Israel. This includes the experience of born-again people. This position creates potential inconsistencies in Paul’s statements but that is because he is describing an experience which because of sin is inconsistent. That is likely a point he wants his readers to understand. The letter is dedicated to articulating that the gospel is the power of God with respect to salvation—our complete and final salvation, including salvation from the presence of sin.

7:15—“for that which I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate.”

It is probably not useful to try to extract from Paul’s words in verses 15-23 a precise definition of the mechanics of our sinfulness—a precise definition about the portion of our being sin originates in. Rather, Paul is expressing the experience of sinfulness and what frustrated holiness feels like. The entire letter is a mixture of the facts surrounding the gospel and the experiences surrounding it, and this verse simply reflects his statement in 1:16, “I’m not ashamed” (feeling), “of the gospel” (facts).

To the previous statement that he is “sold into bondage to sin,” Paul adds this for explanation. This verse is a transparent statement of Paul’s experience in this life. It is the experience of every human. It is profound in terms of its universality in the Christian community. Now it might at first glance cause us to be disillusioned and wonder how one who is a leader could have such an experience of Christ and the Holy Spirit. That only reveals our narrow concept of sin and sinfulness. This is a statement that the full gamut of humanity, from the unbeliever to the new Christian, from the unseasoned to the mature will feel, if they are thinking right about sin.

The one who is new in the faith is aware of sinful deeds that he slips into, perhaps drunkenness or sexual sin for example. The season saint thinks of things he would like to do, like praying without ceasing or ridding himself of bitter thoughts, or pridefulness. So must confess, “I am doing the very thing I hate!” The point is that this is not a statement necessarily of debauchery. It is a statement of one who realizes that there is within them a moral ceiling of sorts that they continually must push back with the help of the Holy Spirit. No matter how high we rise, there is unfinished business if we are honest in our evaluation of our own holiness. Whether in our thoughts or in our actions we must admit that until every moment is Christ-directed and every thought Christ-centered, we are doing the things we hate.

There is a mystery in this situation to Paul. He does not understand what he’s doing. There is nothing he is tolerating in his life that would give rise to sin. Now most of us cannot honestly say we don’t understand our behavior. There is ample we can point to that we have tolerated that gives birth to sin. There is ample lust that we feed for the things of this world to explain our sin. Paul did not understand what he was doing. He’d reached the point that he was well-centered, and where he had come to hate sin, a point which many Christians never reach. Yet despite this he found sin and sinfulness in his life. He was up against that ceiling that can be pushed back further and further but that cannot quite be broken through during the earthly existence.

We know that Paul was not harboring the sort of sins that disqualify one from respect and leadership. But we need not because of that, assign this statement to his life before Christ. If our concept of sin is biblical, which it usually is not, we can very easily see that Paul’s statement is one of the human experiences.

The Christian will be set free of sin. The gospel provides that solution and that hope through its central figure Jesus Christ. Through the Holy Spirit the Christian can experience a steady stream of victories over sin. But until they see Christ they will not be totally and completely like Him (1 John 3:2). This is the “groaning” that Paul will speak of in the next chapter, a steady awareness of the short-fall of our own experience of Christ.

7:16—“but if I do the very thing I do not wish to do, I agree with the Law, confessing that it is good.”

Paul identifies what he should do and what he wants to do. He also identifies what he does not want to do. In both cases he is in harmony with the Law. He spurns what is against it and pursues what is in harmony with it. But then he finds that he does the very thing he has spurned, and he spurns the very thing he wants to do. His frustration over his failure is an affirmation of the Law.

Paul has affirmed by pursuing the standard of the Law that the Law is good. By desiring to behave in a way other than how he has been behaving he is affirming the Law's testimony about his behavior. So it cannot be rightly said, as some were saying, that the Law was the cause of man's moral shortfall.

7:17—"so now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which indwells me."

By making this statement Paul is not side-stepping personal responsibility for his sin. He is seeking to identify what specifically the presence of sin has done within each human being. Earlier he has made it clear that everyone is held responsible for their deeds (2:6-8). It is inconceivable that a just God would hold people responsible for that which they could not do, so Paul is not excusing his behavior.

It is legitimate however to say that a force outside of us took up residence within us, and then influenced us to commit sin. And that is what happened when Adam fell. Sin took up residence within each human being. The Law cannot solve that problem. It can and does reveal it, but it cannot solve it. The gospel is the only solution to the problem of sin within each human. That is why Paul is not ashamed of the gospel. It is the power of God brought to bear on the problem of sin.

7:18—"for I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the wishing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not."

Though the previous verse might have sounded like Paul was side stepping his sin, here he clearly owns it. As he speaks of no-good dwelling in his flesh, he is not talking about his physical body. He is referring to that portion of his inner being that longs to be its own master and to have the body do what it desires to do. There is no good at all within our flesh, this force for evil in us. Now it can masquerade as good and frequently does. But there is no good in it. When we accommodate the flesh, it only produces evil. That is why the Spirit's presence is so essential. Only through His work can we hold the flesh at bay.

We may have lofty dreams of doing good, but because of the flesh we will find we are unable to rise to that good. The willing is present, but the ability to perform is not. This testimony of Paul does not just apply to his life before the gospel. Passages such as 2 Corinthians 3:4-6 make it clear that Paul still considered his own being a liability, except where it was subjected fully to the control of God through his Spirit. Apart from the Holy Spirit our performance of good will always be marred by false motive and by straight out moral failure.

7:19—"for the good that I wish, I do not do; but I practice the very evil that I do not wish."

Paul is not suggesting that he does evil against his own will, as if he has no mind in the matter. He is not saying that it is even unintentional by statements like this. He is saying instead that he is willing to do good and even decides to do good and plans to do good. Along the way he finds he loses his will. His mind changes and against all original intentions he does the opposite of what he had desired to do. So there is a difference between what he embraces with his mind and what he practices. This has been the dilemma for all who have experienced human life, save one. This is a statement we all identify with.

7:20—“but if I am doing the very thing I do not wish, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me.”

This is a similar statement to the one in verse 17. Paul wishes to emphasize it. As stated earlier, his point is not to dodge responsibility for his actions. He has, after all, said that he is the one who does the sinful deeds. But he wants to establish that something is wrong in the core of his being and that of every member of humanity except Christ. Sin is not external to our beings; it is part of who we are.

Yet sin is not part of God’s original design of us. However, sin has invaded our beings and is able to shape our behavior from within. By the original design, as God created humanity, it is accurate to say that we are not sinners. But by Adam’s choice to sin, that design became marred, and sin forever joined itself to us—forever, that is, until our redemption is completed. This is our reality, but through the gospel that reality one day will be changed.

7:21—“I find then the principle that evil is present in me; the one who wishes to do good.”

The word rendered “principal” by the NASB is Law. Through the Law we discover a law of human nature. It is the great human problem that causes most of the others. That law is plainly stated here that evil is present in us. It is a law that is inalterable in our present state. Even belief in Christ does not change it presently, though it will. The one who refuses to accept this law will remain forever bound by it. The one who thinks they can easily overcome it, will be continually surprised by its dominance. Evil is present in us, and our desire to do good does not mean that somehow, we have escaped this curse. Evil is present in us no matter how much we desire to do good.

There are many who do not accept this. They think that because they desire to do good, they are good people at their core. But what each of us must remember is that we are a mixed bag at the core of our being. Until this basic identity is dealt with through belief in Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, we have only one destiny. That destiny is to continually slam up against our moral shortcomings in spite of every intention we might have of doing good. Therefore the Law was essential. We would be deluded by our awareness of our good intentions were it not for the Law’s testimony of our actual performance. Its testimony is that evil is present in us, the ones who wish to do good. This important function of the Law was revealed when the Law was given (Deuteronomy 29:4; 30:1-6; 31:16-18; 5:28).

7:22—“for I joyfully concur with the Law of God in the inner man,”

Our intentions are noble. They are not merely cosmetic. They’re sincere and come from deep within us. Ours is not a mere outward acknowledgment of what is good and right. There is an inner attraction to it. It is both an emotional and a mental one—what Paul calls a joyful concurrence with the Law of God. It is not a begrudging acknowledgment that the Law of God is right and good. It is not a token, ceremonial participation in the Law’s demand. It is a concurrence that comes from one’s soul. This is what makes our evil difficult to accept, because our goodness seems so real and genuine. It is also why some of the hardest people to bring to the faith are the “good people” of this world. The problem is not one of sincerity, but of constitution. We have been disabled and incapacitated to some degree by sin’s presence in us.

7:23—“but I see a different Law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind, and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members.”

Paul was conscious of the war within him. War is the strong word he chooses to use here of the conflict between his desire to serve the Law of God and that opposite drive to please himself. He places the seat of the good desire in him as being his mind. His desire to serve his own interest he places in the members of his body.

There are two problems that can arise in interpreting this statement by Paul. First, he separates his mind from his other body parts, as if his body can somehow function apart from his mind. Second, he seems to suggest that sin is in his body but not in his mind.

The best way of resolving these difficulties is to say that Paul is writing with an ancient understanding of the human body, and specifically the human mind. Even with our current understanding of the human makeup, it is not always easy to imagine the source an evil thought. Does it come from what we call our mind, or does it come because of certain sensory systems in the parts of the body that signal the brain in a certain way? There is a complex interplay between sensory perception and what action our mind directs our body to take. Many thoughts originate in data the body senses and feeds to the mind. Paul did not understand all we understand of the mind and body today.

We should also understand that Paul's purpose is not to name the exact place in which sin resides in our beings. He is simply trying to draw our attention to the significance of the moral tug-of-war that we are all aware of inside us. He is describing in a way that the readers will recognize how sin seems to unfold as an event. Even though he intends to be an obedient child of God, he finds that the execution of those intentions breaks down. There are strong desires in the body that direct us in a way that conflicts with what data in our mind would tell us to do. In other lingo he will use, this is war between the flesh and spirit, and is a battle for the mind as that which controls the body (Romans 12:1-2).

The primary point is that there are two opposing forces at work in our lives and both are “inner.” There is the desire to please God, and then there is the desire to please ourselves. The result is conflict and conflicting messages sent by our actions. We are prisoners of this “Law of sin.” It is a kind of spiritual gravity that produces friction, drag, and resistance as we seek to progress in holiness.

Paul says this law is in our members, and he is right. Sin is not only what our body does, but it is in our body. It has been inherited by every human since Adam. This will be resolved only when we receive new bodies. Again, this is not to suggest that the problem is the body, but it does suggest that the body is the host.

We must remember that there are such great limitations in describing the human being. For the sake of issues like Paul is discussing we compartmentalize our beings. The fact is we are unity, and there is great interplay between spirit, mind, and body. It is best in the case of this verse to simply say it describes the war within, rather than using it to precisely define where sin lives within our beings. Our dilemma is the presence of sin within our beings. It keeps us from rising to the moral plane we wish to live on. We are tethered to the earth and cannot soar.

7:24—“wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?”

Paul states that he is a wretched man. This is not a statement of his worth to God. It is a statement of frustration, even disgust at his own moral inability. It is the voice of one who had repeatedly tried to fulfill the Law's demands by his own moral power. His conclusion is this, evil is present in him, the one who longs to do good.

He asked a question, calling the evil that is in him a body of death. This is a graphic image that represents him living within a dead corpse. This is an accurate image. It is not that the problem is our physical bodies, but the result of sin becomes plainly evident in and through them. This happens in two ways. There are our physical deeds, which fall short of what they should be, the deeds of our hands, our feet, and perhaps especially of our minds. Then there is displayed in our physical bodies aging, sickness, and other weaknesses that culminate in our death. All these bear witness to our fallenness, and further display our separation from God and the loss of His glory. So the result is that we who were to display the image of God, now display something quite different. Our bodies are bodies of death, public displays of spiritual death, exhibits of all its symptoms.

Paul asked the question “who will set me free? It is a cry of desperation, that expected no solution among humans. There was no solution among humanity apart from the intervention of Yahweh. There was no principal or force or technique Paul or anyone else could embrace. And so it was not a matter of “what will set me free?” It was “who will set me free?” Who would intervene in behalf of humanity to change their plight?

7:25—“thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the Law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the Law of sin.”

The gospel is good news because of its power. It is the story of the power of God brought to bear on our hopeless condition. It is about God doing for us what we could not possibly do for ourselves. He has done it by becoming a man Himself, in the person of Jesus Christ our Lord. The result is that the credit is all His. Like the leper who returned to thank Jesus, we should return often to express our gratitude. Our salvation is a monstrous blessing that we would not otherwise have. It is why Paul was not ashamed of the gospel.

Paul is overwhelmed momentarily by the emotion of this whole matter of our innate sinfulness and of our rescue by a loving powerful God. It is an emotional matter. It cannot be understood without stirring emotion in us. To grasp our condition apart from God, and to grasp our position through Christ, is to be overwhelmed with gratefulness. And so Paul's otherwise systematic approach to salvation is interrupted with this spontaneous worship. That is instructive. When our zeal lags, we should reflect on Yahweh's goodness. Where our mood falls, it is because we have lost sight of our true and good fortune.

Paul has expressed the truth and has expressed how it has touched him. Now he returns to summarize the thought of verses 13-23.

We have here the expression of an experience, not a precise explanation of the source of the experience. Paul speaks of the inner tug-of-war between what he terms his mind and his flesh. As in verse 23, he refers to two laws, with a slight alteration. He refers to the Law of sin as he had in verse 23. He says that he served it “in his flesh” (“members” in verse 23). He refers to the Law of God (Law of my mind in verse 23). He says he served it with his mind. This language is not meant to provide a precise description of the exact role different parts of our being play in our conduct. If that were true, we would have to conclude that our minds are pure, perfectly serving the Law of God. We could conclude our bodies have a mind of their own. We know neither of these ideas is true.

Paul is expressing the idea that his intentions regarding good do not translate into real flesh and blood deeds. His deeds seem to have a life of their own. Even though not a precise definition of the mechanics of sin, this is an accurate expression of what sinfulness feels like. Every human being who has sought to live righteously has felt and experienced this. It accurately conveys our frustration. That hopeless frustration is what makes the gospel so liberating. Apart from the gospel, all one has is the condemnation of their own conscience and the frustration of their own performance.

Romans 8

8:1—“there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”

Through belief in Christ, we are set free from the Law’s condemnation of our actions. Apart from Him, all we did was continually fall short of the Law’s standard, even when our intentions were good. That cycle starting with good intentions, followed by a lackluster performance, followed by guilt, is only broken through turning to Jesus Christ.

Chapter 7 described the cycle and the frustrating reality of being caught in it. It isolated the problem. The problem is in us—more precisely, our problem is that sin has attached itself to our being. Like a parasite it draws life from us and develops a life of its own and becomes in a sense its own body within ours. It cannot be shaken through our own efforts at self-reform or self-improvement. Only Christ can set us free from this body of death.

Chapter 8 describes how that salvation comes about and the absolute certainty of it. It speaks of mysterious things that we must ponder. Paul is not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God brought to bear with respect to the issue of our salvation. The goal of this gospel is to do much more than set us free from sin’s eternal penalty. It is to break the cycle described by Paul in chapter 7, a cycle, believers are still susceptible to.

The gospel has the power to lift us to a higher moral ground and to impact our practical follow-through with respect to our intentions. God’s will in the gospel is that we “get saved” from poor implementation of His will. It is that we would become effective instruments of His rule over creation.

The first thing that must be addressed is our guilty/condemned status with God. He cannot work through us if we are alienated from Him. Christ’s death as God’s designated sin-bearer allowed for our offenses and our sinfulness to be pardoned by God. The result is that for all who believe in Christ there is no condemnation. The word rendered condemnation is κατακριμα, what we could refer to as “down judgment.” It is to mark someone out for punishment. In the imagery of the gladiators, it is a thumbs-down judgment by the crowd that called for their death. There is no more down verdict from God on us, not ever. It is simply not part of our world any longer. Instead, there is a constant willingness on God’s part, because of Christ, to reach out to us and use us in His work and plan. There is an endless stream of pardon and forgiveness.

The precise reason for this is that we are “in Christ,” that is, identified as part of Him due to our belief in Him and His Spirit’s presence in us. The absence of condemnation is not because we are without sin. It is that our sin is now pardoned and forgiven. We are at once both the same and different. We are sinners, guilty apart from Christ. We are saints, forgiven in Christ. We must not overplay either of these or we let go of something of the truth. The one thing we are certain of is this, that there is no condemnation now of us by God. There will be conviction of sin, but no condemnation. The difference is that conviction is meant to correct. Condemnation is meant to separate out for punishment. We no longer have something to make up for, and no outstanding moral requirement to meet. This impossible task has been finished for us by Christ.

This verse and its truths are of enormous consequence in one's spiritual pilgrimage. In this truth there is comfort, encouragement, and power. Every spiritual leader must know how to access these if they are to stand against legitimate accusations that arise within them from the evil one regarding their own unfitness for the thing God has called them to. They will not be at His business long before they will need to be rescued by this great truth.

8:2—"for the Law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the Law of sin and death."

This verse provides more explanation for the statement in verse 1 that there is no more condemnation for those who are in Christ. Paul has spoken of the Law of God which he serves in his inner man (7:22). This is likely a reference to the Mosaic Law. He has spoken of the law of sin which is present within his members (7:23). This refers to the presence of sin, which like a parasite, has attached itself to us. It acts as a sort of spiritual gravity, keeping us bound to our earthly ways. Counteracting that law is what Paul speaks of as the law of the Spirit of life. This is a reference to the presence of the Holy Spirit in us, and the spiritual inertia—an inertia of motion, that we can now experience.

In this chapter Paul will mention the Holy Spirit 21 times, more than any chapter in our Bibles.

Through the Holy Spirit there is now a different law that operates in us that can overcome what Paul refers to as the law of sin and death. It is the actual person of the Spirit of God who has taken up residence in all who believe in Jesus Christ. In this sense this life is in Christ Jesus. It is found in and experienced through belief in Him. It is available because His death atoned for our sins and made peace between ourselves and God. There is no offence or sin remaining on our account, and so God's justice has been satisfied. He is free to relate to us now as He did with Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. His presence is continually in and with all who have embraced Christ and the work God has done on our behalf through Him. This means that the law operating in our beings whereby we never rise to the things God has called us to, need no longer hold us down. Through the Holy Spirit we can rise to obey the Law of God that we have embraced in our minds. We are in this sense set free. We have a choice where before little choice existed, because of who we were and specifically our spiritual makeup. There was no inner force that offset our fallenness. It reigned. Now there is more than a force, there is a person.

Paul has spoken previously of the law of sin (7:23). Here he adds to that term, calling it the law of sin and death. Because of sin there is spiritual death, separation from God, and ultimately the second death, eternal separation from God. This is the scope of the effect of the law of sin and of death. It operates in us and apart from the work of Christ, sin and death would do their full work in us and would isolate us forever from God. We have been set free from all this through belief in Christ. The result is that there is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus, and there is hope to rise above falling short of the will of God, and of experiencing partnership with Him in every matter of our lives.

8:3—“for what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and *as an offering* for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh.”

The Law clearly communicated the standard of righteousness and goodness. It clearly described all that we should and should not do. It was not able to help us do what was good. It was information, and it was accurate and good information. It could not solve the problem because due to our makeup we are unable to apply and implement the information. The Law gave us the parameters of behavior that in the end we are not capable of sustaining. The problem was not that it required too much. It was precise in its requirement. The problem was that we were capable of too little. There was something the Law could not do and that was to change our makeup so that we can keep the Law perfectly. It could not change our humanity. It can and does make our fallen humanity readily apparent.

God can change our inner makeup. But to do this He had to be able to pardon our offences so that He could unite with us, as had been His original design. This He did through Christ. Paul makes a precise statement here about Christ—what He became and what He did.

Christ came in the likeness of sinful flesh. Christ had a body like our fallen bodies. He was fully human. But Christ was without sin. He was tempted in all points as we are yet without sin (Hebrews 4:15). Jesus was not born with a body like Adam had before he sinned. He came in a body like Adam had after he sinned. Yet Jesus never sinned.

Now what exactly are the parameters of the statement that Christ came in the “likeness of sinful flesh.” There have been many ideas set forth over the centuries on this “likeness of sinful flesh” idea. Some of the early Gnostic heresies taught that Christ only looked like a man, that He was like men in appearance but not really a man. The Greek word itself has a breadth of meaning that would allow this interpretation. However, John refuted this idea by stating clearly that Jesus had come, “in the flesh” (1 John 4:2). He said that any spirit that denied this, was not from God. Sound doctrine therefore demands that we teach that Jesus’ body was real, normal human flesh.

Paul’s statement preserves the humanity of Christ but also preserves His sinlessness. The proper way of understanding this statement is to say that Christ was fully human, even to the extent that His body suffered the same weaknesses as ours. But He was not a fallen human. He was a second Adam, born of a virgin, so that he lived in a fallen body, without inheriting Adam’s fallen nature. It is in this sense He came in the likeness of sinful flesh. Again, Jesus was not born with a body like Adam had before he sinned. He came in a body like Adam had after he sinned. Yet Jesus never sinned.

Paul also says that Jesus came for sin. The NASB captures the intent of Paul’s statement by adding the idea that he came “as an offering” for sin. This was Yahweh’s designated purpose in Jesus’ coming, to be God’s designated sin bearer. As a bona fide human, He could serve as a substitute for humanity. As one who is without sin He qualified as that substitute. As the one sent by God to do this, He was so designated not just in theology but by His actual name (Matthew 1:21), assigned at the command of God to convey the decree He Himself made about Jesus’ role as sin-bearer.

By offering Himself as the satisfactory payment for our sin, Jesus “condemned sin in the flesh.” By this Paul means that Jesus’ death spelled the end for sin’s unmitigated attachment to our inner beings. Our relationship to God can be restored and we can be united in spirit with Him. By this His character can be imparted to us. This solution perpetrated by God for sin’s presence within us, is a real-life person. His own Spirit takes up residence within us, the very person who inspired the words of the Law. Sin’s spell over us has been broken by Him and the character of God Himself can now take root in us.

Our inability to rise to the kind of life God desires, as was express in the Law, has been addressed. The very person who inspired in human writers the Law, speaks within us. He writes in our hearts the Law He brought to be written on tablets of stone centuries earlier (Jeremiah 31:33; 2 Corinthians 3:1-11; Hebrews 10:16). The Law could describe what we needed to rise to, but it could not help us rise due to sin’s sway over our inner being. Christ came to break that sway and to allow the Holy Spirit to occupy our inner beings.

8:4—“in order that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.”

The phrase “in order that” identifies this as a statement of practical result. We find then stated in this verse the intended result in real life of the actions of God that were reported in verse 3, namely the sending of His own Son. The intended result is that the righteousness of the Law be fulfilled in those who walk according to the Spirit.

The NASB has rendered *δικαιωμα* as requirement. Now that is an accurate rendering that conveys the full adequacy of the sacrifice of Christ in our behalf. The requirement of the Law, if one should try to gain favor with God through it, is that the entire Law be kept, all the time (James 2:10). Paul has made it clear that such obedience is impossible for us.

So our first observation about Paul’s thought here is that Christ’s sacrifice meets that requirement of the Law, all of it. So complete would be Jesus’ obedience that He Himself said that He had come to fulfill the Law (Matthew 5:17). The requirement of the Law, that we keep it in its entirety, is fulfilled in our behalf by Christ.

Paul adds to this an important thought that transitions us to all that He wishes to say about the Holy Spirit. To those who have believed in Christ forgiveness has been granted. They have been justified, declared righteous through the righteousness of Jesus. Without a pause or break, Paul states the present reality of all those who have had the requirement of the Law fulfilled for them by Jesus Christ. They do not “walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.” They are not merely normal people. They have a different life possible for them.

The word “walk” conveys how someone is choosing to live. Walking in the Spirit is the process of making life decisions, from the smallest to the biggest, according to the promptings and urgings of the Holy Spirit. It is the opportunity made available to all who will trust in Jesus’ sacrifice for them and be forgiven. Living by the flesh and dabbling in sin has been presented as absurd by Paul. Here he seems to talk as if it is just assumed that to be forgiven and freed from sin is to live the new way, by the life-giving Spirit. Anything else would be unthinkable!

So we should not take Paul to be stating here that a person walking in the Spirit will do all the Law prescribes. He never demands conformity to the Law from believers. Nor should we suggest that we can tell whether a person is “walking in the Spirit” because they are righteous by the Law’s standard. Remember, to be justified by the Law one must always keep the entire law (James 2:10). Here, Paul is saying that because we have placed our trust in Jesus’ sacrifice, we now have spiritual life, life with the Spirit. It is our privilege to be steered by the Holy Spirit of God in even the smallest matters of life. Were Paul saying that all who are forgiven, de facto walk in the Spirit, then he would not have had to command people like the Galatian Christians to walk in the Spirit (Galatians 5:16-26).

Having said that, something important must be affirmed. It is never presented in Scripture that God is interested only in saving us from the penalty of sin. He longs to rescue us from its powerful grasp and the death it works in us. God’s will and plan in our justification is that we be sanctified. This is conditioned upon us walking according to the Spirit. This describes the process of making life decisions, from the smallest to the biggest, according to the promptings and urgings of the Holy Spirit. This is His will for us, plain and simple! The opposite is to make those decisions according to our natural instincts, the flesh. It must be clear in our thinking that to not walk according to the Spirit is sin.

At this point Paul begins a series of thoughts that speak to this journey of sanctification. Because that process depends absolutely on setting aside the voice of the flesh and obeying the voice of the Spirit, Paul will make several references to these two forces at work in humanity. These must be interpreted precisely to emerge with a clear theology of both justification and sanctification. The force of Paul’s words here is that our sanctification is the intended result of our justification. But his words also clearly say that this intended result requires our cooperation.

8:5—“for those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those were according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit.”

Paul is contrasting two different systems of motivation inside people. The flesh, that portion of our being that has been damaged, distorted, and warped by sin, always leads us in the direction of self-gratification and preservation, and even self-deification. So those who are “according to the flesh,” that is, being shaped by it, have these things as their motivations. They can be believers or unbelievers (verse 8 will affirm that this is possible for believers though should be resisted). In either believers or unbelievers, the result will be the same. Their acts may be noble and good, or they may be incomparably evil. The distinguishing thing is the motives, which we cannot see. The motives of those motivated “according to the flesh” relate to themselves. This eventually tarnishes their deeds even though by outward appearance their deeds themselves may not be evil. Their rewards for those deeds are whatever they get from this life. They will not be rewarded by God.

An unbeliever who responds to the work the Holy Spirit is doing in them and so begins to place their mind on the things of the Spirit, will soon become a believer. A believer who sets their mind on the flesh, will soon do things that only unbelievers should do. So our lives will take the shape of what we are setting our minds on. If we set our minds on the things the Spirit is planting in us, we will trust think things that align with the character of God. Appropriate motives will lead to a myriad of different actions that align with Scripture.

8:6—“for the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace.”

Paul now speaks to the contrasting results of these two mindsets. The mindset of the flesh leads to death. When Paul uses the term death in this letter it most often refers to spiritual death and its symptoms. The symptoms of spiritual death occur whenever we lose touch with God. So these certainly appear in those who are spiritually dead, in whom God’s Spirit does not dwell. That is easy to see. But it is also true that those who grieve and quench the Holy Spirit can experience and portray all the signs of spiritual death, though technically they belong to Christ. In either case it is true that the mind set on the flesh, thinking thoughts about how to gratify oneself as opposed to pleasing God, results in journeying away from God and that is the essence of spiritual death. There is nothing in the flesh that leads to anything good (7:18). The best it can do is to produce a mixed bag which in the end is more destructive than what is straightforward evil.

On the other hand, the mind set on the Spirit brings spiritual life. The person who is listening for the voice of the Holy Spirit and is obeying it, who is listening for His subtle leadings and responding to them is experiencing spiritual life. It is a life lived in union with God, as life was meant to be lived. Anything else is not life. It is death.

A life lived in union with God always brings with it peace. There is an inner tranquility and confidence that comes with knowing one is in harmony with the Creator and nothing else matters.

8:7—“because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the Law of God, for it is not even able to do so;”

We must understand the depth of the problem that is part of who we are as humans. No one is morally neutral. We are either looking to God’s Spirit or we’re listening to the flesh, and when we listen to the flesh, we are pondering things that are hostile toward God. The things that concern God we react against. If we are sensitive to our own feelings and the voice of the Spirit, we will recognize that hostility. We’ll recognize our minds are set on the flesh. We are thinking of us, our concerns, and pleasures we would like to indulge. We have allowed ourselves to get into a mode of thinking thoughts that are not subjected to God’s laws. When we allow our mind to settle into such thinking it is only a matter of time before we act in the same way.

We can never rid ourselves of the danger of drifting into this mode. We are unable to reform what Paul refers to as “the flesh.” It is a fact of our earthly existence, and it is a particularly stark and ominous reality. “The flesh” cannot be subjected to the Law of God. So as we live this life not only does it resist our walking with God, it seeks to take us the other way. “The flesh” is that portion of our very own beings that fights us every step of the way in our journey to become more holy. It is constantly looking back and so we have thoughts of turning back. If we allow our minds to become set on the flesh, we will never make progress in the things of God.

8:8—“and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.”

Up to this point in this chapter Paul has been speaking of walking “according to the flesh,” or of having one’s mind “set on the flesh.” That is something believers can fall into rather easily. Now in this verse he mentions those who are “in the flesh.” Not only are they walking according to the flesh, not only are their minds set on the flesh, but they are also “in the flesh.”

Just as a believer is “in Christ,” an unbeliever is “in the flesh.” As the next verse will reveal, these are those who do not belong to Christ. There is no voice of the Spirit in them. They have no choice in the matter of their mindset. They cannot be in the Spirit; they can only be in the flesh. They cannot please God because they cannot subject themselves to the Law of God. Even where the standard is set for godly behavior, they have no desire to rise to that standard. It is simply not in them to please God.

Therefore, the gospel is good news. Apart from God breaking the stalemate there could be no escape for humanity. It is simply not in us to please Him. The gospel is the account of how God has brought his power to bear on this stalemate.

8:9—“however you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to him.”

A believer is “in Christ.” Not only does God see him as in Christ, but he actually has also been joined to the being of Christ through the Holy Spirit. This experience for believers of the Spirit somehow became fuller and deeper after the death of Christ. It is somewhat elusive to try to articulate the change that occurred between the Spirit of God and humans at the death of Christ. Jesus spoke of the change that would transpire before He died. He said, “He dwells with you and will be in you.” (John 14:15-18, 26; see also 16:7-15; 15:26-27). The contrast in prepositions in English translations might be the best way to explain the change. Before Christ’s death, the Holy Spirit was “with” us. Now He is “in” us. The finer points of the Greek prepositions raise some debate about that simple explanation. But it is useful.

There is no doubt that the Holy Spirit had been at work among humanity before Christ died (Genesis 6:3; Matthew 10:20). But His ministry was able to become more intimate to the point of permanent union once sin was atoned for. This we believe is the change that occurred as we look at the statements of Scripture. The Holy Spirit now dwells inside every child of God without exception and without hiatus. This union then produces the organism known as the church.

Of this we can be certain from Paul’s words here. The inference of the first word in this verse, “however,” is that the presence of the Holy Spirit was within the readers Paul was addressing. His presence in us means that we can do the impossible. We can know and to live in subjection to the desires of God. Such things that promote spiritual life and peace. If we are believers in Jesus Christ, we are “in the Spirit” even as we are “in Christ.” In the Spirit in this usage refers to having been baptized in the Spirit by Jesus, as John the Baptist predicted (Matthew 3:11). Being under the control of the Holy Spirit was a special occurrence during Old Testament times, i.e., Matthew 22:43). But it is normal and routine for God’s people since Christ died. That is both glorious and remarkable, but it also represents staggering potential which the ensuing verses allude to.

8:10—“and if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, yet the spirit is alive because of righteousness.”

To believe in Christ is to have Him in you, and to have Him in you is to have hope. It is hope of growing past who you are to whom God would have you be. It is the hope of a whole different sort of potential in this life. It is hoped of rising from the dead both literally and figuratively. It is hope of eternal life.

The body is dead because of sin. By saying this Paul is referring to a level of inability in us due to our mortal and decaying bodies. We are limited in many ways by what happened to our bodies when Adam sinned. Physical weakness became a fact of our existence.

But through belief in Jesus our spirits are infused with divine life through the Holy Spirit. There is divine power within us which can strengthen us when our own strength is lacking. It can heal us physically when we are sick. Even as we witness increasing weakness in our bodies, we can observe increasing strength in our inner being (2 Corinthians 4:16).

All created things bear the marks of their Creator, but none more so than the person who begins to submit to the promptings of the Holy Spirit from within them. This is the righteousness of Christ being expressed through their bodies, and such a life is part of the new creation that God is bringing about in His world (2 Corinthians 5:14-17; Ephesians 2:10).

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8:11—“but if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who indwells you.”

The word “if” could be rendered since, and that would capture Paul’s thought in this verse. The same power that gave life to Christ’s body in the garden tomb gives life to our bodies. They are infused with divine life through the Holy Spirit. Though they are mere mortal bodies, God’s Spirit orchestrates His plan and carries out His work in this world. Through our bodies, His body, the Church, becomes visible. Just as Jesus overcame physical death, we who have believed in Christ overcome spiritual death. Our bodies, which formerly dishonored Him (1:24), now become instruments through which He can be glorified (1 Corinthians 6:20), and each Christian should rise to this potential.

Our hope is that just as Christ was physically raised from the dead and had a different body with different capabilities, we too will be given new bodies. Our destination is to be like Christ in every way and that include His miraculous changing of our physical makeup.

8:12—“so then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—”

It is possible for Christians to be led by the flesh. This verse makes that clear. We can make such choices in the moments of each day, though they go against all sound logic. Such choices also go against the purposes of God. All that He has done for us is aimed at lifting us above such a life.

We have an obligation. Since Yahweh has done so much and loved so deeply, and since His grace has made everything freely available to us that pertains to life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3), we have an obligation to respond to His Spirit's promptings. These are obligations to rise to the agenda of our Creator who has come in that moment to our rescue. We have no obligation to the flesh. We have spent enough time gratifying it. It has done nothing in our behalf.

An obligation speaks of that which is owed. Though grace is freely given, the writers of Scripture still represent us as being indebted to God. This should be understood as the same obligation the rescued one owes the rescuer. It is a debt motivated by gratitude and integrity. It is the demand of all that is logical and decent. In purely human thought anything less would be considered treachery. God's motive in extending grace to us is first and foremost His own love. His love compels Him to address our spiritual plight. So what also motivates Him is a love-vision that we should grab hold and rise to new life (2 Corinthians 5:15-17). Next to our obligation to Him, any other obligation pales.

8:13—"for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live."

"Living according to the flesh" is simply responding to and pursuing the self-centered desires that spring up in us. It is the natural way to live. It requires no special effort on our part. All we have to do is what comes naturally, and we will live apart from God, which is the definition of spiritual death. As long as we live according to the flesh, we will continue to experience symptoms of spiritual death. This is true even of those who are spiritually alive. They will have all the symptoms of spiritual death if they choose to live by the flesh.

On the other hand, by the Spirit's promptings and power we can say "no!" to those desires that rise in us and so stop the natural course of our behavior. Paul calls this "putting to death the deeds of the body." That is a graphic picture. It is the truth about things our body does, from the places our thoughts take us to the places our feet take us. We can absolutely kill these courses of action. Paul's language tells us that doing so must be intentional and premeditated. It will likely be painful. But the result is life.

It is a great paradox that to live we must die. Paul is, of course, talking about living in harmony with our Creator and dying the death Jesus died to Himself long before He died physically (2 Corinthians 4:9-12). Our dying that we must do is the same. It is dying to ourselves. It is dying to our own desires—intentionally putting to death those thoughts and acts that take us away from what God desires us to do. Our desire to be praised, recognized, treated with dignity, and our desire to enforce our personal rights, to repay wrongs, to get what we "have coming," all of these would have made Jesus unwilling to be crucified. He would have missed God's mission for Him. We must imitate Him in dying to the desires of the flesh. To do that is the way to life. Anything else is not really living.

8:14—"for all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are the sons of God."

This verse is often taken as being a statement about spiritual identity. Those who maintain this see it as saying that all those who are truly sons of God are being led by the Spirit of God. Therefore, anyone not being so led is not a son of God.

There is another way to look at this statement. It can be seen as a statement of the simple reality that the Holy Spirit is supplying direction to every believer from within. It says nothing about their ability to discern precisely that leading and their willingness to respond obediently. It is a simple witness to the fact that they are being led and directed in a certain way. So from a practical point of view though He is leading them, the degree to which that shows through is subject to factors within particular individual's own makeup and will. The verses that follow would seem to fit well with understanding the statement in this way. It is a statement about what God is doing in our lives, not necessarily about what we are allowing Him to produce in terms of practical outcome in our actions.

Our reality as outside observers of other's lives is that we cannot always be certain of people's spiritual identity. This is because we cannot know all that is going on inside them. The reality is that people who are in Christ and indwelt by the Holy Spirit can at any time choose to live according to the flesh. In that moment if they belong to Christ, they are being led by the Spirit. But they are not listening. What we can be confident of is that those being led by the Spirit are certainly the sons of God, and that is what Paul is saying to us here.

Paul does not make the converse statement. We must be careful about any inference that those were not following the leading of the Spirit are not sons of God. It is certainly true that many who are not following the leading of the Spirit of God are not His children. But it is a different matter to suggest that all who are not following the Spirit are not being led by Him and do not belong to Christ.

8:15—"for you have not received the spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, "Abba! Father!"

This verse begins with a conjunction "for" which means it is adding further explanation to what has preceded it. It is the third verse in succession to begin in this way. All these verses follow in the wake of Paul's inference that we have an obligation as believers to live by the promptings of the Spirit. He clearly and plainly states that we have no such obligation to the flesh. Listening to the Holy Spirit opens a new way of life for us.

Those in Roman knew about spirits. Their pagan religions had taught them thoroughly about spirits to the point of superstition and fear and slavery. There is nothing quite so enslaving as spiritism, where everywhere and always one need be concerned with satisfying and appeasing this spirit and that, and where even inanimate objects are believed to have spirits. The gentile Roman certainly knew that world well. To them the thought of following the Spirit would conjure up all sorts of anxious thoughts. They had done this before and existed in the bondage of that world. The Jewish believers had witnessed the bondage of spiritism in the pagan culture. Though they were by upbringing monotheistic, they were familiar with spiritual slavery. Their own history was laced with it.

Perhaps for those reasons Paul feels the need to describe the spirit that develops in one who is controlled by the Holy Spirit. That is most likely what he is doing here. He's not so much describing the Holy Spirit as he is describing the human spirit under the control of the Holy Spirit. Apart from Him our spirits are whipsawed by other spirits who enslave us to various fears. Fear is the great weapon of the evil one and through it he gains power in our lives. Paul wants to contrast this former spiritual state which the readers have experienced with the spiritual state the gospel brings about in the life.

Yet another reason the gospel is good news is that it addresses the state of what is certainly the most critical part of our being, our innermost being, our spirits. Our spirits are eternal. They are the essence of who we are. When they leave our bodies, our bodies become lifeless. We are spirits as much as we are physical beings.

Something happens in our spirits when we receive the Holy Spirit. Our own spirits, rather than being afraid of the Creator, increasingly sense they belong to Him, in a relationship of unconditional, unwavering love. They are restored to the One by whom and for whom they were made, God. They are increasingly secure and tranquil provided they are fed with what is true and good.

The words Paul uses to express the new bond between our spirit and God's reveal some very important ideas about that relationship. We feel a sense of belonging to God so that the relationship moves beyond friendship. There is a growing spirit of adoption in us. The security, the care, the love, the interest, the communication, all that we can imagine a perfect father being to his son, develops between ourselves and God. The longer the journey, the closer we become if we listen and respond to Him.

This growing intimacy within us between our spirit and God's, is expressed outwardly by a crying out. Sometimes it is verbal, and audible cry, by which we call out to God as an expression of a burden we are carrying or a blessing He has granted. At other times that cry is within us. Paul expresses the cry with two words, Abba and father. The term Abba is one of endearment that a child would commonly use in Paul's day to address their father. Dad, or even papa or daddy, would be the equivalent in our culture. It is a cry that expresses the familiarity of our relationship with God. The other term, father, is just what the word expresses. It too is a term of endearment, but also the title of respect that expresses the more formal and even authoritative side of God's role in our lives. We should daily experience both ends of this relational spectrum.

Both ideas are present and in balance in the healthy and intimate relationship with God that is expressed in these two words. As our spirits are led by God's Spirit a deepening intimacy develops. This is as it should be. It is to this purpose that Yahweh set about to save us.

8:16—"the Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God."

As the Holy Spirit unites Himself to our spirits there is a growing consciousness in us that we are dear and important to God. It is a rational thought, but it goes much deeper than that, and that is the only way the experience Paul is referring to here can be described. There are thoughts that our minds ponder that originate in our senses. There are other thoughts our minds deal with that originate in our spirits, in this case through the Holy Spirit. That is the deepest kind of thought there is. It is more like a realization, and sometimes is an entire state of mind. Such thought's grip us in a way that they can govern all others unless we resist them, and we intentionally steel ourselves against them.

This experience of a heightened inner consciousness and conviction that we belong to God, is both a precious and a powerful thing. It is precious in that it provides tranquility. It is powerful in that it carries great potential for life change. The grieving of the spirit (Ephesians 4:30), begins with a negative response to this inner witness on our part. It happens when we doubt God's love. It happens when shame makes us lose sight of Christ's death for us. It was very visible in the Israelites during their wilderness wanderings. It was termed a lack of faith by the writer to the Hebrews. This lack of trust in the love and goodness of God robs us of peace and power to rise and leads to the quenching of the Holy Spirit (1 Thessalonians 5:19).

The inner witness of the Holy Spirit with our spirit is the essence of the power of the gospel's power to change our lives. It is the net result of Christ's death, burial, and resurrection. It is salvation at work in day-to-day matters.

8:17—"and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him in order that we may also be glorified with Him."

The voice of the Holy Spirit also speaks to our own spirits about the wonderful implications of being children of God. The great implication of our being called His children, is that with Christ we enter all that is God's, which is everything. This concept was an important part of the mindset that the Apostles taught the early Christians to develop. We are God's heirs! (Titus 3:7).

Our adoption as God's offspring is not just a way of speaking and thinking that makes us feel valued. It is the reality of how God looks at things. That includes us entering ownership of all that He has, which is a remarkable idea to contemplate. In terms of His kingdom, Christ is its designated ruler for all eternity, but we will rule with Him as co-heirs. Since that kingdom extends to all things and places, the scope of our inheritance is beyond our capacity to comprehend.

Now where there is a kingdom there are those who rule and there are generally subjects, those ruled over. This raises an interesting question. If God has a day for judging the wicked and if all who have not embraced faith are confined for eternity to hell, who is left but believers to be subjects in this kingdom? And if all believers are heirs of this kingdom, over whom will they reign?

To those who believe that Christ will return to earth to set up an earthly kingdom, this is not a significant problem. They believe that Christ will rule on this earth as its rightful ruler and that all who are His from all ages will be raised to rule with Him. Together they will rule over all who are left on earth following the judgment associated with "the day of Yahweh" (Is. 2:12ff).

Those who do not believe in a kingdom of Christ on this earth believe that we will rule over a new heaven and earth, even as Adam did over God's created works. Humanity's original role as God's appointed rulers over creation will be restored in the new creation. They also point to the scriptural idea that we will rule over other beings such as angels (1 Corinthians 6:3).

Now if it is true that believers will rule with Christ over an earthly kingdom, then we have a concept that significantly impacts how we understand this verse. We can be open to the possibility that believers will have differing experiences of their reign with Christ. All are His heirs in terms of being present with Him when He rules the earth. Those who have been faithful to the truth and who have been faithful in discharging their responsibilities will be rewarded with positions of leadership in that kingdom. Those whose love was lukewarm and whose obedience was intermittent occupy lesser positions and will to some degree be themselves subject to the rule of more faithful saints.

There is much scriptural evidence to support this latter idea. The second half of this verse is typical of that scriptural support. It is clearly a conditional statement about who is an heir. In this case the condition is that one suffer with Christ and if they do so, then they will be His coheir.

Now given that condition, being an heir can certainly not be equated with being justified. If being an heir is being justified and having the right to enter heaven, then making it conditional upon one's willingness to faithfully suffer would certainly go against what Paul has stated thus far in this letter to the Romans. However, if our role in the future kingdom is a reward for faithfulness, then the statement makes perfect sense. It is likely that our glorification is in some way connected to our being sanctified, submitting faithfully to that process of God in our daily lives whereby He conforms us more to the character of Christ. This faithfulness He will reward.

It is a solid exegetical conclusion in respect to this verse and in respect to many in Scripture like it, to say that the roles of believers in the future earthly kingdom will be varied. These will be assigned by the Sovereign Ruler based on our faithfulness in serving His kingdom in its present form. Those willing to suffer with Christ on this earth are promised in many places great reward when He arrives on earth to rule.

8:18—"for I consider the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us."

Paul and the other early Christians who had seen Christ always had this mentality toward the suffering connected with Christ, the Gospel, and all that goes with belonging to God. It is nothing (2 Corinthians 4:17; 1 Peter 1:6). That is how Paul "reckons", values on the official record, the sufferings he himself encountered in the work of the gospel.

When Paul says in these words that these sufferings are not worthy to be compared with the glory of Christ, that is a much stronger statement than simply saying that our present sufferings are worth it. He is suggesting that the glory we will one day gain, makes the present sufferings of such miniscule value as not to be mentioned in the same breath. Even if these should involve our very lives, they are not worthy of mentioning. Our present sufferings have nowhere near the value necessary to even open negotiations to purchase a smattering of what will one day be freely given to those who are faithful. That is how great the treasure is that awaits us.

8:19—“for the anxious longing of creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God.”

Here Paul begins a series of comments that have to do with creation, and by that he seems to be speaking of created things, apart from humanity. In doing so he employs figurative language, giving human-like characteristics to the matter that makes up the things of creation. In the process Paul uses three lengthy compound words that start with the preposition apo (aÓpokaradoki÷a anxious longing; aÓpoka¿luyin the revealing; aÓpekde÷cetai waits eagerly). This gives the phrase a rhythmic flow like a sad song of lament. The result is a picture of creation with a collective soul, expressing a collective sorrow.

Creation, speaking first of our planet and its immediate atmosphere, is the host to the jewel of God’s creation, humankind. Humanity is its designated ruler and was so created that they have powerful impact on creation. But it is a fallen humanity, separated from their Creator, and so not equipped with knowledge and wisdom to rule as they should. The task of ruling is either left undone or in some cases over-done. So fallen humanity’s rule is usually done wrongly.

To speak in harmony with Paul’s figurative language, we are self-serving and abusive toward creation. The fall of humanity and the resulting self-centeredness, compulsiveness, and impulsiveness that drives them is clearly seen in the condition of the planet. Paul pictures a collective groaning of Earth under our self-serving rule in these verses. He depicts creation as a person who has an anxious longing. Paul uses this word one other place (Philippians 1:20), where it refers to his own personal desire for the day when prayers of many would be answered and he would be released from prison. So creation here is pictured as waiting, languishing for release from its abusive masters.

The better day creation longs for is said to happen at the time of the revealing of the sons of God. The revealing of the sons of God is a reference to those who through faith, by means of the sacrifice of Christ, have been made right with their Creator. Paul affirms elsewhere that the day will come when Christ returns to earth to rule it with all his children, resurrected from the dead in new bodies (1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:11). It will be the beginning of a different era for this creation. It will be radically different because the rule of creation will be carried out by those who are perfectly executing the will of the Creator. All who have been rescued by Jesus will be revealed by Him.

The accurate and precise picture of these events must be pieced together from the words of Jesus, the Old Testament prophets, and the apostles (Matthew 13:36–43; 24:29–31; Luke 19:25–28, 1 Corinthians 15:20–28; 51–58; 1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:11; Romans 11:25–32; Revelation 19:11–20:10). But it is the revealing of the sons of God in a redeemed, restored, perfect state that creation is appointed for and awaiting. Presently, creation bears everywhere the scars of fallen humanity who are separated from their Creator. It also bears the scars of the evil one who also is forever separated from the Creator. The planet has borne the brunt of both the abusive evil beings and evil humanity. Creation behaves differently when it is addressed by one perfectly related to its Creator. Christ demonstrated this when he calmed the storm, healed the sick, and raised the dead. Creation is designed for a certain kind of ruler, and it bears the wounds and scars of lacking that.

It is important not to get caught up in the figurative language and attribute to matter a collective soul. Nowhere in Scripture do we find evidence for that. Terms like “mother nature” are misnomers if taken in the literal sense. Creation as it is referred to here is separate from humanity. Though God’s spirit is active in it, it is itself simply soulless matter. But as the host of fallen humanity, it bears everywhere the scars of their self-serving rule.

8:20—“for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope”

Creation did not choose to become what it has become. It cannot make such a choice. When God made it, creation was not as it presently is. Four critical things besides natural law have happened that have made the planet what it is. These four things are important factors in the concerns over our environment. First, evil has entered the human stream as the immediate consequence of the curse on man and woman (Genesis 3:16–19), and on the ground itself (Genesis 3:17–19). Second, evil in humanity has caused humanity to not steward the earth according to God the Creator’s wisdom, so it bears the marks of our foolishness. Third, humanity became so evil God had to destroy much of original creation by means of a flood, which had cataclysmic impact that is still visible today. Fourth, God as ruler over natural Law acted on it, so that the earth simply functions differently. It may be an oversimplification to say that the earth’s former equilibrium was interrupted, but it seems to be the case. It seems that some natural processes were slowed, perhaps by the interaction of opposing forces against them. The result is that the earth we experience produces less and recovers slower than original creation.

Thus, the present earth is not at all like the original creation. Paul uses the term futility to describe the thing that shaped much of what we now see. It is a word that summarizes well what God predicted would happen due to sin on the earth when he spoke with Adam after his sin. “Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field; by the sweat of your face, you shall eat bread until you return to the ground . . .” Due to our sin, “no sustainable progress” became our lot. We can certainly produce and invent. But the earth will not sustain our processes and provide the necessities of survival as we wish. Work became toil. The earth provides for us only by great and repeated effort.

Futility is a word that describes much about our human existence, as “the preacher” repeated so often in Ecclesiastes. Without becoming depressed and excessively pessimistic, we must admit that a few pursuits involved in survival come with great effort and do not remain “done.” They’re completed, only to have to be initiated all over again. So there’s much futility in this life and this was unknown before sin. This experience of futility can and does overwhelm humans at times. That is by design.

Now Paul says clearly that God did this, that is, He subjected creation to futility. We can say then that the curse was just that—a curse. It was not that evil shaped the creation. Rather creation changed due to the will and action of the Creator. So we see confirmation of the idea that the creation, and all the natural laws that were part and parcel of it, remain under the control of its Creator, God. We see that creation is not something He set in motion that became bigger than Him—the monster that grew out of the lab experiment. We are given the plain truth that God subjected creation to futility.

We are then given a one-word clue about what motivated this action. It was done “in hope.” It was not done in resignation, or anger, or as a final act of withdrawal. It was done in hope. This can only mean that it was done with a particular result in mind other than the futility that immediately followed. There was a desire and a plan that the futility would help bring something other than itself about. The futility would act as fertile ground that would help produce something else the Creator wanted to bring about. The next verse will allow us to see what that result would be. Our futility would make an important contribution to the germ of faith that God wished to infect humanity with.

8:21—“that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God.”

God subjected creation to futility with this hope in mind, that such subjection would be temporary. God’s plan aimed to glorify all humans who would acknowledge Him. These would be glorified—raised from the dead and given new bodies. These would help move creation toward freedom from its slavery to futility. And looking at these statements and to rest of Scriptures testimony, we believe that the time will come when Christ rules the earth and His “glorified” people carry out His rule.

To digress for a moment from the present text, at the time of Christ’s rule with His holy ones over the present earth, there will be a lightening in the curse that now devours humanity and creation. This lightening of the curse will be a result of the transformation in those ruling over creation, who are conformed to the character of Christ. Once glorified and being guided by King Jesus their rule over creation, these will alter and restore the earth considerably. This likely happens when Satan is bound for 1000 years (Revelation 20).

There are numerous references in the Scripture to future conditions on earth that, if they are to be taken literally of the present earth, can only be true if there is this lessening of the curse’s effect (Isaiah 11:6–9; 65:20–25, for example). This is not to say the earth is eternal. We know that the present earth is destined for complete destruction (2 Peter 3:7, 10, 12; Revelation 20:11; 21:1), and that the eternal state will be experienced in the new earth (Revelation 21:1). Such projections of this creation being set free, we take as referring to the millennial reign of Christ when the curse is apparently lightened. We would agree that these will be fulfilled to their fullest degree when a new heaven and earth are created. But we argue for a redemptive work on the present planet because we believe the Scripture speaks of it.

It would seem reasonable to project that God’s subjection of creation to the curse was meant to lead that portion of creation that was most precious to Him, humanity, to faith. In the same way that the Law makes us aware of our sinfulness, the futility of so much related to this life is to instruct us about the consequences of living independently of our Creator and exercising our will against His. So creation came to be one of God’s agents to lead individuals to faith in God. Through the sheer futility of activities essential to survival, humanity would have the ongoing confirmation that it is hard to live outside the sphere of the Creator’s will and plan.

8:22—“for we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now.”

Paul has established that God intentionally acted in response to evil. His action was to subject creation to futility. The curse was not in this sense a natural consequence of evil, as if built into the fiber of the universe. Nor were evil beings the first cause of this change. It was a state intentionally established by God. Though He is not the source of futility, He allowed it for a period. It will be lifted once He is revealed and is present on earth, and with Him a completely redeemed portion of humanity. These will rule with Him for 1000 years over a believing, though still fallen humanity and creation.

In this verse Paul likens the journey toward that point in history to the pains of childbirth. The gathering of these children of God and their accompanying care, education, and development is the work God is occupied with. He has marshaled all His created works to help bring humanity to mature faith. It is a work being carried out against great resistance. Creation for the sake of illustration, is assigned a collective nervous system here in Paul's thought, and so moans as a woman giving birth.

Paul is not suggesting that creation itself produces the new strain of humanity, free from the consequences of the fall. The creation does not behave according to its intended design and so in this illustration is pictured as laboring to help bring about the existence of the community of the redeemed. When that occurs, it can then be redeemed, recover, and resume the existence it once had before the fall of man. Until the present time this has been the story of salvation history, the focus of all of God's created works and work. to bring about this restoration of the dignity of humanity through the formation of a community of the redeemed. This community, with Christ as its king and source of wisdom and with new bodies, will then be used by Him for the restoration of creation.

8:23—“and not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body.”

Not only is creation groaning under the futility now inherent in it, we ourselves as God's children groan even moan in agony within ourselves. There is presently, even within us, a gnawing, unsatisfied longing to be who we were made to be. Our restoration is currently incomplete even in Christ. We have what Paul refers to as the “first fruits of the Spirit.” The first fruits are great! God has placed His Spirit within us, and our spirits are united with Him. But the various things that are a part of our bodies—particularly our minds with their old patterns of thinking and behavior, remain a mixed bag. There is a ceiling above which we cannot rise in the moral sense, the emotional sense, the intellectual sense, in every arena of our existence.

Though it is proper to speak of the Christian life as one that is deeply meaningful and gratifying, it is also proper to speak of it as incomplete, as unfulfilling, and even as frustrating. These are obviously not things we speak of much in our proclamation. But this groaning within that Paul is describing is something we both think and feel.

It is one of the great blessings of the human experience to receive the Spirit of God. There could be nothing which could add more to the human experience than this. Paul describes us as having the “first fruits of the spirit.” We’re like farmers who have tasted the harvest. We know it is there and that is assuring and is fulfilling. It is cause for celebration. There is much anxiety that disappears with this assurance. The full harvest lies ahead. Security is our destiny of hope and conviction. But it is not in our grasp. There is much yet to do and it requires much of us, including some pain.

Continuing with the imagery of farming and of first fruits, Paul says we wait eagerly for a different season to arrive. What we’re doing is good in one sense and it is accomplishing that which is of value. But it is not the end for which we are destined. It is what we do for now. We wait eagerly, as we anticipate an experience which we have been told is good beyond description, that the Holy Spirit gives us a taste of (1 Corinthians 2:9–10). But Paul generally presents the abundance as a hope, as something that lies ahead for us.

There is a truth we can be convinced of from Paul’s writings, and we can say we have been adopted as God’s children (Ephesians 1:5). There is another sense in which we await the entire experience of that adoption for which we are predestined. Here in this context Paul is talking about that greater experience of adoption, which he equates with what he calls “the redemption of our bodies.”

Paul does not feel the need to elaborate on the details of this redemption of our bodies in this letter to the Romans. He was apparently comfortable that they would understand how this redemption of our bodies would be brought about. He gives greater detail of this in his letter to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 15:51–58). To the Corinthians he also speaks of the same inner groaning describing it as a desire to be clothed (2 Corinthians 5:1–10). There is still much that remains a mystery about this redemption of our bodies.

We don’t know exactly what was lost by humanity in terms of the physical body when Adam and Eve sinned. We are told that their eyes were opened, and they knew they were naked. They had an immediate awareness by their sense of sight of something missing. Whatever was lost by us physically, can be linked to our inner groaning and our inner loss of significance. But it was also discernable to the eyes of Adam and Eve. Whatever the loss, it results in a longing that leads to the passionate pursuit of more out of life.

In our natural human state ungoverned by truth God has revealed, this groaning is a hopeless pursuit of something that eludes our grasp. To the degree that the child of God is obedient and exercises his faith in the truth, this is groaning is soothed. While it is not totally satisfied, these know and are confident that it will be. They understand what it is about and are not taken in by those pursuits that promise fulfillment apart from God himself.

The understanding of this groaning is a watershed idea to grasp. Understanding what it is keeps us from much heartache and the compounding of our emptiness. It helps steer us right at the crossroads. It helps us endure in kingdom work at those times when we might choose to let go and pursue pleasure. It pushes us through the very normal seasons when life gives us a heightened sensation of its fleeting nature, and when the dread that life may be passing us by sweeps over us. Our thoughts go to the day of the redemption of our bodies. We recognize the groaning and can turn to our hope in that day. It is the only means by which this inner need of ours will be satisfied. To seek to deal with it in any other way would be an empty pursuit, a chasing after the wind.

There is a great shortfall in all of life's experiences. Our hope in an indescribable future is why "the preacher" could make his simplistic sounding conclusion about how life is to be lived: "fear God and keep his commandments" (Ecclesiastes 12:13).

8:24—"for in hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one also hope for what he sees?"

Paul is explaining here that we are not making the choices we are making to achieve more in the present life. It is in the realm of the unseen that we are placing our hope. He begins by saying that we have been saved "in the hope." Earlier he explained that God subjected creation to futility "in hope" (verse 21). In that statement he was speaking of God's hope. It is difficult for us to conceive of a timeless God hoping. But here we learn that hope is His motive in allowing creation to suffer under the rule of fallen humans. It was a means by which a better state could be brought about, a rescue of humanity could be made.

The plan of salvation is based in hope, God's hope. Now admittedly the hope of an all-knowing, all-powerful God, is different from ours. But it is still hope. It is a vision for a better situation, which vision is in this case certain, because it is God's. It is not our vision. In hope we have been saved and in this context the hope in view is God's great and majestic vision for us. His hope is in a particular day when He will save us from our fallen bodies that experience such weakness, deterioration, and ultimately death.

The hope we can embrace is not just a higher plane of existence we rise to in this life through Christ. No matter how high that might be by virtue of God's grace and our obedience, it is still the first fruits of the Spirit. It is not our hope. What we already have cannot be construed to be hope. Paul's point is that hope, relates to what one does not yet have or experience. It is a great error for us to believe that any present experience of God, no matter how great, is the ultimate experience that can be lived. We simply cannot yet lay hold of that for which we are laid hold of. Our inner expectation arises from our spirit. That expectation cannot be met until our redemption is completed.

The reality of this life, even for the saved, is an ongoing inner groaning. Our hope does not relate to anything that can be experienced in our present life. There is a sense in which we will die disappointed because this life simply cannot deliver that for which we have been made. We are saved in hope, God's hope. He has a vision for our restoration, a destination toward which He is moving us. We will realize our hope only on the day we experience His completed plans/vision for us. We live for that day, and presently we only get tastes of what will be. These are meant to give us hope. They are not the end He has promised.

8:25—"but if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it."

The person whose only hope is what they can presently achieve from this life will not persevere in the face of trouble, even if their hope in the present experience of life is a grand one like a deeper experience of the Spirit. Our hope must be grander, grounded in what God has revealed regarding eternity. Only then will we persevere in obedience in this present state of incompleteness, amid all the hungers aroused by it.

Paul says plainly that if we hope for what we do not see we will persevere, and our wait will be an eager one. Now it is a risky thing to live life hoping in what cannot be seen. We discipline ourselves to think in terms of tangible concrete realities. This is the only kind of living that can be construed to be wise. But in and of itself, this is not wise. We must not allow ourselves to slip into the sterility of the purely concrete. While conducting much of our practical affairs based on concrete data, we must allow faith to invade every aspect of our lives so that there are no compartments. In the end Jesus must be Lord of all. When He is He always requires faith and trust of us.

Herein lies a tension that is the difficulty of the Christian life. It is why it cannot be reduced to patterns and routines. It is said of the father of our faith, Abraham, that “he went out not knowing where he was going” (Hebrews 11:8). The hope and conviction of the reality of the unseen must shape our lives as it did his if we are to persevere. Yet we must live with present realities firmly in view. This tension is critical to maintain because power and wisdom lie only in truth. We must live life in terms of what is concretely true, i.e., the outgo must not exceed the income. At the same time, we must live life in terms of what is abstractly true and real, i.e., the kingdom of God and eternity. Both elements of truth should shape our life decisions. If we hope in what is not seen we persevere in the pattern of delayed gratification, of not doing what we might hunger for. At the same time, we persevere in a pattern of doing the works of God that faith inspires.

8:26—“And in the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.”

Paul has spoken of the idea that creation “groans” under the futility allowed by God because of evil (verse 22). He has spoken of us groaning as we live in our imperfect bodies, awaiting God’s completed work of redemption in us (verse 23). Now we are told of the groaning of the Spirit. Just as creation aches as it is used by God to bring about His purpose, and just as we ache, longing to be more what God wants us to be, the Holy Spirit aches also. We are told several things about His efforts on our behalf.

First, the Holy Spirit helps our weaknesses. It is a given in Paul’s letter that we are weak regarding becoming who God would have us be. We are vulnerable to sin, due to what he has called the flesh. We are weak physically. We are weak emotionally. We are weak in terms of wisdom, knowledge and understanding. It is these various weaknesses that the Spirit counters through His work in us.

Second, due to our weakness we do not even know how to pray as we should. We know that the Spirit orchestrates prayer and directs us to pray, and so we’re told to “pray in the Spirit” (Ephesians 6:18). This is prayer that is composed of thoughts placed in our minds by God Himself. They consist of the will and mind of God in the matter. So we are enabled to ask for that which He desires to do, and led to pray prayers that will surely be answered. In this verse however we are told of an activity of the Holy Spirit that augments our own prayerfulness. We are told that He intercedes for us, making up for a lack of understanding and knowledge. He does so with groanings too deep for words.

This is referring to something that happens within the Trinity that we can only slightly understand from our own experience. We experience our spirit communicating with our mind. An example of this is found in Paul's description of our "groaning" in verse 23. As we read there of our groaning, we are aware of what Paul is talking about. It is difficult to understand how our mind and emotions might be functioning regarding this inner groaning of our spirit, but we are very much aware of an inner sense of incompleteness at times. It is the sense of there being a shortfall in all that life has to offer. It can be quite pronounced, especially in those who have no knowledge of truth. But the point is that our spirit's communicate something to our minds.

Just as our spirits are not at rest in this life, so in harmony with our own spirits God's Spirit living in us is also not at rest, and so within God there comes to be a "groaning." It is a longing to bring completion to that which is lacking in us and in our world. This is likely an overly simplistic view. It always is such when we try to understand God in terms of our experience. But there are similarities, and it is a helpful way to begin.

It seems to be Paul's understanding that there is a way of communicating within the Godhead which cannot be captured by language. The Holy Spirit's activity in our behalf is felt by God Himself from deep within His being. God aches together with us and with His creation. This is a profound concept and idea, that when the Holy Spirit groans, God feels it. The Spirit's intercession does not come to God from outside His being, in the same way our prayers come to Him. It comes from within Him. It is a product of who He is. It must be granted that we are imagining this based on what we are reading here and expressing it in human terms. God is a different being than us, but He often expresses who He is in ways that attribute humanlike characteristics to Himself, to help us understand His nature in a clearer way.

What this verse captures is that the ministry of the Holy Spirit includes providing a pathway into the very inner being of God whereby He is acutely aware of the needs that we cannot articulate. Many other Scriptures speak of the Spirit being how things of God are imported to us. This verse describes how things related to us are known to God, are felt by Him, and become innate to His greater understanding of all things. His omniscience is in this way tied to His omnipresence. His understanding of us and our needs far exceeds our own as He is present in the deepest part of our beings and everywhere in His creation simultaneously.

This truth allows us to that our vast God is personal. We can be strengthened by the fact that our needs are not lost on a gigantic whiteboard in heaven or buried in a list in the recesses of heaven's database. Yahweh feels them and processes them as we experience them, and this happens because of the truth of the gospel which reunites us with our Creator. It is the power of God brought to bear on our existence. This verse captures how dramatic the change comes about in our existence through our belief in that gospel.

8:27—"and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God."

One of the great challenges of living life as a fallen human being is that there is so much that we were meant to know which is now veiled. When Adam and Eve fell, they came to know about evil, but they lost the ability to know God as they had. Though there was much they did not know before, all they needed to know was accessible to them because they knew God.

The fall changed dramatically how humanity lives. Ever since that event our key difficulty is that we do not know the mind and the desire of God in day-to-day matters. Another way of saying this is to simply say that we do not know God well. We do not know Him as one gets to know a friend so that we sense what He is thinking. And even in the case of the obedient and the mature who know God as one does a best friend, there are still issues that arise in which they simply do not know the mind of God. And so the challenge of both the weak and the strong is to know the mind of the Spirit.

Knowing the mind of the Spirit is a challenge because we cannot see and know the heart of another, much less that of God. There is a spiritual dimension that we need to be able to function in which has been lost to us. God functions well in that realm, in fact, He functions perfectly. There is nothing He does not know. He searches the hearts, we are told here, and the word heart is plural. There is no inner being and therefore no motive of any being in existence that is unknown to Him, and that includes Himself.

Through the ministry of God's own Spirit, He has restored some of this to us. As we live for Him we grow in our ability to hear the Spirit's voice and discern His leading. But it remains our greatest handicap that we do not know the mind of the Spirit of God, and worse we don't even know our own heart and the voice of our own spirit well.

There is no such dilemma within the being of God. Just as God easily knows the hearts of all beings, He thoroughly understands what is happening within Himself. Because He is a perfect being, there is no conflict within Him. His mind and His Spirit are in perfect harmony. There are not multiple voices or influences in Him. To know what His own Spirit is saying to Him in behalf of us is very simple in that it is an exact harmony with what His mind is telling Him, and what His mind has already ordained and planned. His Spirit is orchestrating and seeking to bring about His will. His Spirit is pleading within Him in complete and utter harmony with Him about the very things He is doing and desiring to do. The Holy Spirit's requests on our behalf are always heard and always granted.

Paul's point here is that there is from God's end of things no mystery world of the Spirit. So there is not the waiting, nor the uncertainty, nor lack of clarity on the part of God that is so apparent on our end as we groan and struggle for perspective, for words, for wisdom, and for understanding. It is all crystal clear to God, and His Spirit and His mind are always in perfect harmony. What the Spirit is saying within God from within us is clearly heard, known, agreed-upon, and embraced by God.

8:28—"and we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to his purpose."

Our comfort and strength amid all that we do not know and understand in this life is our faith. And we know that all things that exist are allowed to do so because they fill some function in what He is bringing about. We know that no single thing is out of the Spirit of God's understanding (Colossians 1:16). Ultimately then, we who have been summoned to believe in Christ can be assured that good is being worked and brought about in our behalf.

This is true not because it is all being done by good people, good beings, or good forces. But ultimately it will be shown that those things He in His goodness has done have so countered and shaped the results of even the evil and vile things of the devil, that good is brought about through it all. This is not to say that we must see all things as being good. They are not. He is asking us to trust His judgment in allowing their existence and to trust that He can act in a way that creates something good out of what was intended to be evil.

In relation to this verse, God does not want us to imagine that the origin of all things is Him. Rather, He wants us to trust in His omnipotence and believe that all things were not only created by Him, but were created for Him, and this extends to the realm of evil. We must remind ourselves that if this is not true, then He really is not omnipotent. The moment we identify something He cannot do, such as bringing about something He desires through the acts of those dead set against Him, we have admitted that He is not omnipotent.

In this verse, God is calling us to believe and embrace the complete sovereignty of His creative power. He is good and He is the cause of good. Because He is good and is all-powerful, He is continually working and initiating at strategic moments those things that will shape all things, so that His purposes are brought about. We must understand by saying this that we are not to see in this that God is reacting and counter-acting continually. Rather in His foreknowledge, knowing all that would be initiated and brought about by lesser beings, He ordained his own creative events so that in the end His good pleasure would be brought about.

There is clearly in these words limitation on whom may bank on being an object of God's goodness. It is those who love God who will be beneficiaries of His goodness. These words do not ensure that everyone can count on a good outcome, or that everything will turn out good for everyone. Those who rebel against God, who deny Him, who have aligned themselves with all that He hates, will simply have what they have created for themselves, complete separation from Him and His goodness. It is those who love Him that can rest in the belief that He will bring about good for them even though the evil they suffer is horrific.

Paul's words explain something important about those who love God. He says here that they are "called according to purpose." The translators of the NASB have added the word His, and it is obvious from other Scripture that this edition is warranted. This idea that those who love God are "called according to HIS purpose" is such an important one that Paul will spend the next two verses expanding it. It will be clear that those who love God have been acted upon by God, and are being acted upon by God in love, so that their lives are moving in a certain direction. Their love for Him is explained by His love for them. He is the first cause. The presence of this love for God in their lives is a sign of the work that He is doing in them and so is a sign that in their case all things will be caused by God so that all works together for good.

Paul will explain what that good is that is being brought about by God for them. His words will also reveal some representative actions God has already taken all of which assure us that His love guarantees that nothing can rob us of the good He intends to bring about in our behalf.

It is this grand end, and all the intermediate actions from God required along the way, that the Holy Spirit knows and intercedes for. At the limit of our own understanding, His takes over. His “groaning” addresses these actions of God that assure that His purposes are carried out according to his great plan. It is in God’s purpose, known to the Holy Spirit, that we find our greatest good, and He intercedes for us according to that purpose of God.

8:29—“for whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren.”

Verse 28 spoke of us being “called according to purpose.” Yahweh has a clear end in view. God has summoned people intentionally and purposefully. That verse implied that specific ones are summoned, and this verse continues to employ language in terms that convey that idea. It tells us that those whom He has summoned, He knew before. Some have suggested that He summoned those whom He knew beforehand would respond to the truth. While this is somewhat possible in terms of the language and grammar, and while it avoids the problem of God not acting to save all, it is a point of view that creates other problems. It makes salvation a result of human choice (see John 6:65), and it makes faith something inherent in us (see Ephesians 2:9-10).

These subjects have been the source of vigorous and at times violent disagreement. One cannot find in the meaning of the words themselves absolute clarity. Furthermore, in what has become known as the Calvinist/Armenian debate, no matter what choice one makes they must live with certain scriptures that seem to argue in favor of the view that opposes their own.

So does God call all men or only a chosen few? Do believers arrive at belief by their own free will or are they acted on by God to believe? If God influences the decision of a person, does that mean that the person does not have free will? Conversely, if man makes a choice poorly on his own, in the exercise of free will, does that mean God is not sovereign? All these questions become part of this debate.

These verses seem to be describing a believer’s life journey from heaven’s point of view. There is no reference to human action in them. They are a description of action God has taken, is taking, and will take, actions that are meant to ensure that His purpose is brought about. These are offered as an expansion of the idea that God works among all the things that come about, through various influences, so that a good final ending for those whom He has called is guaranteed.

Paul speaks in this verse of two actions of God in behalf of believers that precede their call. He speaks of God foreknowing them. This of course means that He knew about them, because there is nothing He does not know. While this is all the word itself demands in terms of its English meaning, it is also within its biblical meaning to say that God related Himself to them in a special way. While this idea of previous relationship is present in some of the other instances of this word usage, it is not necessarily present in all of them (see Acts 26:5; Romans 11:2; 1 Peter 1:20; 2 Peter 3:17; for the other occurrences of προγινωσκω).

Whatever the scope of action included in this word, one thing is certain. His knowledge of us before time, includes all He knows about everything, which is everything. Our call to adhere to the truth began with what God knew beforehand. God's call of us was preceded by Him knowing us, whatever that might entail, and there is considerable evidence in this context that this included God personally relating Himself to individuals who would then be objects of His special mercy and love.

Another word used here that has big implications is the word predestined. This is the second great action of God taken before His actual call to individuals. Based on His foreknowledge, God predestined people. The word means to limit beforehand or to set boundaries beforehand. God assured a certain outcome in the life of those He foreknew. This can only mean that He exercised control over events in time to bring about a certain result. So we must say that from heaven's perspective those whom God foreknew are acted upon by God sovereignly so that a specific thing is certain to happen which Paul names here.

The destination of those God called is stated in the original language very precisely. They are "predestined conformed to the image of his son." The result of God's call will be that Christ will be the firstborn of many that bear His likeness. The addition of the verb "to be" or "to become," is legitimate, but it can add some confusion to what Paul is teaching here. It seems best to understand our being conformed to Christ as a destiny that we will realize when God's processes have been finally completed. This means it will occur after a resurrection from the dead when we are given new bodies and stand perfected before Him.

It does not seem that our being conformed to the image of Christ in the completed and perfect sense is being guaranteed in this life. There is nothing in Paul's writings that suggests that he viewed our obedience in this life as predestined. The mere presence of his letters, and his many exhortations and commands indicate that he felt it was not destined to simply happen in this life apart from great effort and diligence on our part.

Yet our destiny is certain. It is a work God has begun in His collective family and He will complete it in them (Philippians; 6). This work of His will go on in us collectively until the day of Christ when it is fully realized. So believers are predestined to this absolute conformity to Christ. It is their destination. But it is a mistake to embrace the idea that there is a guaranteed degree of holiness that is predestined and therefore guaranteed in the present life. Holiness is the will of God for us, and we are to pursue it. All the power of heaven is available to aid us in that pursuit. But it is not a guarantee that we will pursue it in each moment as we should. Our own wills enter the process each moment of our lives, and we can't assume that we will get more holy and be conformed even if we pay no attention to the process ourselves and do not distance ourselves from sin.

8:30—"and whom He predestined, these He also called; and whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified."

In this verse key actions taken by God in His sovereignty and in our behalf are set down. It is important for us to observe in these words that none whom God has foreknown are lost along the way. Reaching back to those whom he foreknew in verse 29, we see that actions He took in behalf of them are carried out toward each of them. They are not carried out towards some of them and there is no partial experience of being justified and glorified.

Each of these actions displays God's love for us. Having related Himself to us in some way in eternity past, He predestined us for glorification. That means instruments through whom He will be glorified through all of time and eternity. We sometimes refer to glorification as Heaven. Glorification does involve a place. But it involves a role as well which is of prime significance. Yahweh ordains events and experiences that are essential to us getting to that destination, providing for faith to take root in us and to be embraced by us. These ordained events include the work of Christ done in our behalf, the various acts of special revelation whereby humanity could know of God, and the events whereby that revelation became personally known by those He foreknew.

Those who were thus predestined He called. This has been mentioned already and refers to a special work of the Holy Spirit within that convinces a person of the truths of God with respect to Himself and to themselves. It is not that they know it all. It is that they come to trust the integrity of what He does make known to them. The call of God is the inner conviction that "this is the way, I must walk in it" (Isaiah 30:21). It is an intellectual affirmation, and it is a more subjective assent at the same time, the witness of one's inner being as it is drawn along by the Holy Spirit. Those who are thus called respond. There is no percentage of success on the part of God in drawing those humans He has predestined. They are predestined and so they respond to the call. He is the only one who bats 1.000.

Because of their faith, these are justified. This term means to declare righteous. It is not that they are righteous. They are declared righteous, forgiven, and pardoned by the work of Jesus Christ in their behalf. The result is that they are accepted by God and so reunited with their Creator. This is part of their destiny, to be cleansed from all sin by the mercy of God so that their sins and lawless deeds are no longer counted against them.

This restoration to their Creator with the ability to accurately depict His glory is what is being captured in the term "glorified." The glory of man is sourced in God, the glorious one. What was weighty (that is the meaning of glory) about man, as opposed to all the other created creatures, was that man bore the image of God. God's glory was visible in humanity. Evil marred that glory, and individually as we live, we continue to journey further from Him and mar it further, apart from the work of God described in these verses. When a person is foreknown, predestined, called, and justified, they are on the road back to God's glory being fully restored in them. They are reconciled to their Creator.

As Yahweh's plan unfolds, the day will come when that restoration is complete, and the physical creation is restored (that is the context of these verses). At that point this work of glorification will be completed. We will be physically reunited with God, meaning we will live in new bodies that host His glory, no longer "naked" (2 Corinthians 5:1-8). The dwelling of God will be with humanity (Revelation 21:3), and His glory will be experienced by them in a totally different way (Revelation 2:5 for example). That is the destiny of all who have been foreknown, and that is the completeness of our conformity to the image of Christ that awaits us.

God's work in us was initiated before creation (Ephesians 1:3-4). It is fixed, having been decreed by Him who knows all things and has power over all things. It is complete, in that all in whom the journey was instigated will take it and will arrive at their destination where the glory of God is fully restored even in their physical bodies and outward appearance. The work of glorification will be completed in all whom He has foreknown. It is certain and unstoppable.

8:31—“what then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us?”

This verse begins with the question we should always ask as we learn the truth about God. What should we say about these things? Given what is true about God and His kindness toward us, what should now be our response? What impact does this have on our opinions and ideas about real-life situations?

Because no person or thing can thwart the purposes of God, and because we have been called in conjunction with those purposes, and because our present faith is the work of Him bringing about those purposes, we can have utter confidence in our eternal destiny. There is no calamity that can take from us what God will measure out to us. There is no plan that Satan can perpetrate to keep us from being glorified and forever being God’s children. None of this is to say we will not have trouble in this life or that we cannot lose everything of this world’s goods. Trouble in this life will be more pronounced because of our faith (John 16:33). But it remains true that nothing can rob us of the good that God has planned for us when we are ushered into His presence. By asking this question, Paul is calling us to reflect and be blessed repeatedly by our privilege.

We must note that no one can stand against us because God is for us. There remains room in that statement for us to hurt ourselves by failure to obey or persevere. We must accept even in this statement some degree of responsibility on our part to take up our cross daily and follow Him. At the same time, we must not suggest that those were predestined can by their own wills reverse God’s eternal destiny for themselves. It seems from all of Scripture’s calls to us to obey and persevere in the faith, that we must embrace the idea that it is possible for us to not rise to moments in this life as God would have us to. And so what happens in those cases? It seems from Scripture that we will suffer loss of reward and blessing (1 Corinthians 3:10-15). But we are secure in our position as His children. Nothing can undo God’s choice of us. In this sense no one can stand against us.

8:32—“He who did not spare his own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?”

The message of this verse is that if God gave us His Son, He certainly gave us all else that is His, which is everything. This staggers the most vivid of imaginations. The love of God is unknowable; it is so wide, high, and deep. Yet it is important for us to know it (Ephesians 3:19). This question posed by Paul is one of those statements made in Scripture that quantify God’s love, or more accurately, show that His love for us is unquantifiable. More statements that develop this idea of the boundless nature of Christ’s love will follow in this context.

The action Paul summarizes in the phrase “deliver Him up” warrants the attention of all humanity. It is the statement made elsewhere of Judas, that he delivered Christ up (Matthew 27:4). It is true that Judas did deliver Christ up and is eternally responsible for that deed (Acts 1:15-20). It is also true that Satan put that thought in Judas’ heart (Luke 22:3; John 13:27). It is also true of Jesus Himself that He delivered Himself up (Acts 3:13). But God knew in eternity past all those actions would come to be. To bring about a different purpose He allowed them and allowed them to grow to fruition at just the right time. So God’s loving acts were premeditated.

When we understand all that was included in the incarnation, God's Son becoming human flesh, we understand that in crude terms God "packaged" His Son in just the precise way to serve us best. He delivered Him to us, allowed us to do as we pleased with Him, then reversed the intentions of hell and humanity to bring about our eternal salvation. He saved us at our worst and even through our worst, and that helps us see the boundless nature of God's love.

Yahweh's "delivering up" of his own Son shows that His love for humanity cannot be separated from His quest to establish His glory. Our conviction that His own glory is the goal of this plan is an accurate one (Isaiah 45:4-5, 20-25; 1 Corinthians 15:28). But it is not perceived accurately by us if it somehow relegates His great love for us to being a mere means to that "greater" end. His love for humanity and His glory are melded together. They are inseparable. We must be careful that the subtle error that His own glory matters more to Him than our rescue, does not creep into our thinking. They are inseparable. It is in rightly comprehending the love of God that we can be filled with God's fullness (Ephesians 3:19). And it is in the wake of the salvation of a remnant of fallen humanity that the universe will be filled with Yahweh's glory.

Paul's message is that in so presenting His Son in human flesh and delivering Him to us, God was delivering to us all that is His, which is all that is. And these things come to us freely. This is a concise affirmation of all that Paul has said so far in his letter about the workings of God. This is the outcome the gospel achieves for all who believe. It is good news about a message of mercy, love, and grace that involves no merit on our part. It is a report of all that comes to us because of something in God that instigated actions of God that then created a reality. His goal is that we should receive far more from Him than forgiveness. That is from His point of view a means to His end of giving us all that is.

8:33—"who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies;"

If God has related Himself to certain people, and done so in eternity pass, if He has predestined them to bear in their physical beings His glory for all eternity, if He has forgiven them and declared them righteous by means of sending his own Son to die for their sins, then there's no possible means by which any charge could be effectively leveled so as to prevail against them to prevent His plan from happening. To be one who has in this way been summoned by God to Himself is what is meant by the term God's elect. The word elect comes from a compound Greek word that means "spoken out." It came to be used of all who were spoken through God's sovereign decree into the existence summarized in verse 29.

The term rendered "bring a charge" is similar in sound to the word for elect but is a different word. It too comes from a compound Greek word, one that means "to call in." It came to be used of calling an outstanding debt due. Employing words with similar sounds might have been intentional on Paul's part, to produce a catchy phrase, and to make the summary of an important truth easy to recall.

The most significant word in the verse is likely “God’s.” It is important because it affirms that we are what we are by the sovereign choice and decree of God. This gives us security. His omnipotence renders all other powers powerless. That is the reality of our situation. It is a blessed reality. God assures us that our faith is the victory that overcomes the world (1 John 5:4), because it is His victory. It is rooted in the fiat command of God, the same command that spoke into existence the heavens and the earth. It is inviolable and unthwartable. It is no exaggeration to say that all the blessings of our position that have been enumerated in Romans 8, and they are numerous, exist, repeat themselves, and are certain because they are works of God. They are established and finished in His mind. We are God’s elect. That makes our position what it is.

Clearly then, we can say we are Christians because we were spoken into existence, and we were spoken into existence because we were found by God to simply be the best expression possible of who He Himself is. That is a remarkable thing. And so a word “God’s” in the phrase “God’s elect” is likely the most important word in this verse. It is the key word in Paul’s entire articulation of the gospel. The gospel is good news because it is the work of God’s power, His omnipotence brought to bear on the issue of our salvation. Thus, the gospel creates a final and thorough solution to man’s greatest dilemma, the dilemma that all religions have sought to solve.

8:34—“who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us.”

This verse completes the thought started in the previous verse by the statement “God is the one who justifies.” Having stated this, Paul asks, “Who is the one who condemns?” His thought is that we are declared righteous by the One who is the lawgiver and the judge, and since this One answers to no one, being Himself Almighty God, there is no one who can legitimately level the charge against us. Who would they be by rank, title, qualification, or character who had such judicial power?

The remainder of the verse supports the idea that God’s judgment of us is final and cannot be swayed or subverted. Our sins were paid for by God himself. So there is no doubt about the payment being made. Not only did God the Son die for our sins, but He was also raised, proof positive that God is pleased with Him and His sacrifice. This was also proof that our information which we received from Christ was in fact from God. It was not the words of a deluded, would-be savior. Jesus is at the right hand of God, exalted due to His obedience, His obedience affirmed. This is an important idea, that the exaltation of Christ is proof that His condescension and sacrifice was pleasing to God. But the phrase also sets up the last statement of the verse, which pictures Christ interceding for us.

This idea that Christ is at the right hand of God borrows from earthly imagery to show us His influence within the Godhead. We believe that Father, Son, and Spirit are three distinct persons, yet all of one being, all of them equally divine. We also believe the Son, having become a man, remains forever one. This statement in this verse allows for those complexities in the Godhead which stretch the best of our analytical abilities to their limit.

The overall picture of these verses gives us iron-clad assurance of our unchangeable position in the family of God. We are there by God's choice of us before time, but also because of determinative action in the detail of our lives which led us to faith, by His provision of Christ to sacrifice Himself for us, in an act which was affirmed by God by the bestowal of the reward on Christ of a position above all others (Phil. 2:10-11). Our position remains secure through the intercession of Christ for us at God's right hand so that we are protected from all the forces that would undo what God has done.

8:35—"who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?"

These are the sixth and seventh in a string of rhetorical questions Paul has asked. Each of the questions in its own way strengthens his point, namely that those who believe in the gospel are secure in their position as God's children. They have faith as proof that they have been acted upon by God. It is also proof that they will continually be acted upon by Him and so come to be glorified. There is no force that can act effectively against what God has Himself determined to bring about in them.

This verse gives a list of examples of things that have been a part of the Christian experience over the centuries. There are things that can cause misery and result in death. They're things that cause great anxiety. But they are powerless to take away from us that which God has proclaimed ours.

8:36—"just as it is written, "for thy sake we are being put to death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered."

This is a quote from Psalm 44:2. That Psalm is a song that recites God's past blessings, then speaks of the present time of difficulty, when God seemingly rejected His own people. There are seasons when the kind of circumstances Paul has just named sweep over our lives. At such times it feels and looks like God has turned his back on us. Paul was familiar with these types of circumstances. He knew that in the plan of God these things intrude into the lives of God's children. They are in fact, quite normal.

It is easy at such times to apply the terms of the old covenant to our situation. We can begin to surmise that God must have turned against us and brought the curse against us (Deuteronomy 28:15-68). Paul cites this Scripture to remind us that there are times even under the old covenant, when these types of things were simply part of life. There is no evidence in Psalm 44 that anything had been done to deserve such things. They were and are many times simply the result of living in an evil world that lashes out against God's people. If no linkage could be established between suffering and our behavior under the old covenant, then it certainly cannot be assumed under the new covenant.

In such circumstances the Gospel assures us of two things. First, because of Christ we are accepted by God, even when we are unacceptable, and loved by Him even when we're unlovable. Second, the curse of the old covenant (not of original sin), has been removed in Christ. He was punished, and we will not be. When the abuses of the world are heaped on us, we can be certain that God is with us. They are a result of fighting alongside Him and He will certainly strengthen us through them.

8:37—“but in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us.”

The message of this verse is exhilarating. Paul does not pretend that we do not experience the various traumas of verse 35. They are part of our experience. It is what happens to us when we are “in all these things” that is significant. We overwhelmingly conquer. That’s military imagery that describes decisive victory and total domination. In the athletic imagery of our day, it would be termed a blowout, or lopsided victory.

Now what does this mean in real life terms? What is it we conquer and what objectives do we gain as we suffer tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, or sword (verse 35)? The objective we gain is that which God has predestined us to possess. It is to be glorified—redeemed and restored to rule over God’s creation as He originally intended. That destiny for us is mightily opposed by those who would take the world as their own inheritance. But all of the power of God is directed against them, and the outcome is never in doubt. It is a battle that was decided early, the outcome was never in doubt. The victory will be a lopsided one despite moments of drama. It is through God that our victory is secure, and it’s overwhelming nature is due to his overwhelming love.

In Romans, this handbook of the gospel that Paul is writing, he wants to assure his readers that there is great power in the gospel, so much so that our celebration is an absolute certainty. That is why it is good news and is why Paul was not ashamed of it.

8:39—“for I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, the things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

It is the love of God that the religions of the world seek to gain. To curry the favor of the gods, whoever they might be, has been the underlying objective of billions of lives. Untold effort has been expended toward it.

The gospel speaks of that love in a very different way. The love of God cannot be stirred up nor does it need to be. It is already in continuous full bloom, so much so that God is the One seeking out from among humanity those upon whom He can freely lavish His love. For those who been called by Him and have responded to Him there is nothing which can trump the love that He has for them.

The list of examples that Paul gives covers things, beings, personal forces, and impersonal forces. Some have suggested that a person themselves can separate themselves from the love of God. We must acknowledge that with this statement Paul is addressing those who believe, who by that act of faith have confirmed God’s call of them. These are eternally secure, and that is who Paul is speaking of here when he speaks of “us.” It is absolutely against Paul’s words to believe that Satan (an Angel), can so influence the will of a person (a created thing), so that they can thwart God’s will for them. It would mean that Satan could snatch someone from Christ’s hand, someone He has supposedly predestined. There is no room in Paul’s thought for such a thing to come about.

This verse is a fitting summary of praise. It is a climax to a chapter which began with the thought that there is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus. Paul himself was convinced of the truth of the statement, and he was inspired to write it by the Holy Spirit. It is written so that we would know who we are in Christ and the overwhelming security that we have in things related to the kingdom of heaven. Life would be cruel to Paul's readers and to Paul. They would not see in one another's earthly lives a lot of reward to be gained by following Christ. Faith in a different sort of inheritance was what they were called to, and Paul assures them and us that this will not elude their grasp.

Romans 9

9:1—I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit,

With the start of this chapter Paul makes a shift in his focus to an extensive discussion of Israel. At first it might seem to be a very abrupt shift. The truth is that if we think about what Paul has been speaking of it is not so abrupt. He has been speaking of the certainty of the call of God, that it surely cannot be thwarted. He has just concluded one of the great Biblical statements on the love of God. His teaching on the Gospel and on salvation has been clear and very definitive. For any doctrine like this that defines how God deals with humanity the test case of that doctrine is Israel. So Paul has spoken of the calling of God, and of things like predestination, justification and glorification. He has spoken extensively of salvation being a work of God not of man. The question is this; does what Paul has articulated about God square up with how we know God has dealt with Israel? That is the direction Paul is going to take this letter.

Paul begins with this, a statement of his sincerity. He could be viewed as having turned against his own ethnic family and in some circles, this was the word on Paul (Acts 21:28, Acts 24:5-6). So he wants to articulate by this solemn oath at the outset of his teaching about Israel the absolute sincerity of what he is about to say.

9:2—“that I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart,”

Having prefaced this statement with a solemn oath to emphasize the truthfulness of the statement that was to follow, Paul reveals what can only be described as a constant burden that he is carrying around within himself. It is an intensely emotional one, such as would be felt in the wake of the death of one's spouse or child. It is described by him as a “great sorrow.” It is not simply a label that one might place on a sad event that impacts others. It is much more personal than what we would call a sad event. It gave him unceasing grief. Time did not ease it. It was a nagging burden that would not pass. So we see in two short verses that what follows is intensely important to Paul and intensely personal and emotional. It is a matter in which he has invested a great deal of thought. Like grief, it is something that he has mulled over during many idle moments at all hours of the day and night. It constitutes a deep personal loss.

9:3—“For I wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsman according to the flesh,”

This is one of the most noble statements of care and love made by a man in the Scripture. It is Paul's heart, and his feelings are attested to and shared by the Holy Spirit. Many thought Paul had abandoned Israel. Clearly, he had not, but clearly their rejection of Christ was a concern that consumed him.

He makes clear here that the “Israel” he is concerned with is ethnic Israel. There is another Israel, which he will allude to beginning in verse six. But the immediate concern that he wishes to address is his concern for those whom he refers to here as “brethren,” and “kinsmen according to the flesh”—those who were Israelites as a matter of ethnicity.

Of these kinsmen according to the flesh Paul says that he would trade his own salvation for theirs if it were possible. He then goes on to make an important listing of their privileges. But the important thing to define here is this. Paul will speak for three chapters on Israel, and it is ethnic Israel he is speaking of, except where he specifically widens the term, which he will do. He will speak of the past present, and future of this ethnic group.

There is a privilege that is theirs by their lineage and by their God ordained tradition. It does not equate to justification, a point they themselves were mistaken in. But they have and do occupy a special place in God's heart and Paul is in precise harmony with God in the emotion and thought he expresses here towards them. God had proclaimed that He would give Himself for His people (Isaiah 53). He had done that. Paul was willing to do the same.

9:4—"Who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and the promises,"

We must continually recall what a name means to God and what the name Israel means, because there is a story of God and His grace in it that is lengthy and powerful. The name Israel means "he fights with God" (Genesis 32:22-32). That has proven to be a one- word summary of their history. Yet God's grace kept being extended to them along with His covenant love.

God's grace meant that certain things belonged to them. We should probably understand this "belonging" as meaning "entrusted" with something as stewards. There is nothing that belongs to anyone other than God in the pure sense of that term. So Paul is about to list some things they are stewards of. This is not to imply that the things are somehow less available to them. One has only to look at how seriously God took the ancient boundary markers to understand that entrusting property to someone was a matter of ownership in our legal sense. So something real and significant is being expressed here as having been entrusted to the Israelites.

Israelites are being looked at here as a race, as a unit or group, in much the same way as we do when we say that the National Parks belong to all Americans, or that there are public lands that belong to all Americans. The things Paul is about to list are owned in this same way by Israel in God's eyes. Others may experience and enjoy them, and individual Israelites may never do so by choice. But the fact is that they are from God's point of view things that belong to a particular people. They are in this sense uniquely blessed and, in this sense, God has placed His name on them (Deuteronomy 4:32-35), revealing Himself through them to many others.

Paul speaks of several specific things that were revealed first to Israel and that the world knows and experiences through Israel. These are their Yellowstone and Yosemite— national treasures. As those places belong to Americans and are experienced by going to America, there are these things that are revealed through Israel and may be experienced by all who wish to embrace the things revealed to Israel. The key word in understanding the sense in which these things "belong" to Israel is this word revelation. Israel was entrusted with knowledge of God (Deuteronomy 29:29). Revelation was their national treasure, and they were unique (Deuteronomy 7:6), among the world's people groups.

Paul lists the things first revealed to Israel that come through them to others. The first is what he calls the “adoption as sons.” There was a special standing conveyed to Abram and to his descendants, founded only in God’s grace. He chose them to be His sons. This was not a standing that conveyed eternal life to each individual Israelite. Rather it was the privilege to know and understand those truths that lead one to eternal life. The Lord set His love on them in a unique way making knowledge of Him readily available to them. They were allowed privileges like no others had been allowed and in this sense they were adopted as sons. They experienced unheard of things (Deuteronomy 4:32), and these experiences remain forever theirs.

The second thing Paul lists is what he terms “the glory.” This is likely a reference to the physical manifestation of God’s glory, the shekina glory that was visible in the pillar of fire that guided them at night during the wilderness wandering, in the holy place within the tabernacle, and later in the temple. This “sighting” was unique, never occurring to a people other than Israelites. This “glory” was a visible manifestation of God’s commitment to them to protect, to guide, and to bless.

The third thing Paul speaks of as belonging to them is the covenants. There are three covenants that are specifically addressed to Israelites which affect them all. The first was the one God made with Abraham. It is first mentioned in Genesis 12. It is consummated as a covenant in Genesis 15. It is re-stated in Genesis 17, and again in Genesis 22:16-18. The covenant is unconditional. It involves personal blessing for Abraham (Genesis 12:2), blessing for his offspring (Genesis 17:6-7), and blessing through a specific offspring to the entire earth (Genesis 22:18). It also involves a specific land that would be given to his descendants (Genesis 15:17-21; 17:8). It was conditional only on Abraham’s faith, which resulted in his personal justification (Genesis 15:6). It did not contain provision for the personal justification of all his descendants. This came to all who would embrace his faith, regardless of ethnicity. But there was an advantage of sorts from a purely human vantage point to his physical descendants in that revelation of the truth about gods and God, Yahweh, came through them. In this sense they had the advantage of greater access to the truth in which to place their faith.

The second covenant that “belonged” to the Israelites was the Mosaic covenant, also referred to as the Old Covenant or Sinai Covenant. It is spoken of throughout Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy in detail. It was a covenant that established terms whereby they would be blessed as a nation and would experience life in the land God had promised to Abraham. The Sinai Covenant was not about personal salvation.

Their acceptance of the terms of the Covenant is reported in Exodus 19:8 and Exodus 24:1-8. This covenant did not have to do with personal justification, which was by faith. It had to do with experiencing the blessings of God, as opposed to the discipline and even revenge of God. It was accepted by the Israelites very optimistically. God knew that they would be unable to keep its terms (Deuteronomy 4:25-31; 5:28-29; 31:16-29).

In this sense the Old Covenant was inadequate, being conditioned on human obedience. It was prophesied that God would replace this covenant with a new one that would involve forgiveness of sin and the gift of the Spirit, so that God’s blessing could be experienced apart from the condition of obedience to the Law (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

The third covenant that “belonged” to Israel was made with David. It provided that the household of David would rule over Israel forever (2 Samuel 7:8-17). It is not made with the nation, but certainly involved the nation and provided for its leadership.

In these three covenants there is the greatest of legacies made available to Israel. Theirs was a position clearly understood by David (2 Samuel 7:22-24). Paul recognizes the fact that they are in this sense uniquely loved by God.

Paul goes on to say that the giving of the Law belonged to them. He was right in citing this as a blessing. It is a great blessing to have revelation from God. It is direction from the Creator that provides wisdom and understanding for life (Deuteronomy 4:5-8). The possession of the Law was rightly understood as a high privilege. It clearly did not justify anyone. But it could lead individuals on a journey that would break their self-sufficiency and pride down and cause them to embrace by faith their God as the one who would provide salvation for them. It had capacity for great blessing in this sense, though its message and work were one of condemnation.

Paul speaks next of the “service” that belongs to Israel. The NASB has added the word “temple” to that. That would appear to be a good addition. Our word liturgy is related to the word Paul uses. The things that happened in the temple were richly symbolic. They instructed those who cared to reflect on them on very grand subjects like redemption and sanctification, forgiveness of sin and substitutionary atonement. They illustrated God’s heart in these things and gave “hints” regarding His future. The “liturgy” of Israel that was based in the temple spilled over into the homes and personal affairs of all the people. It was evident in their calendars and the days of their week. All its detail spoke in symbolic form of their God and of them and their future.

Paul also speaks of the promises as belonging to the Israelites. There were promises of a land and a seed associated with the covenants. There were promises of personal blessing, promises of security and protection, and there were promises of future glory. The Old Testament was full of promises even in the wake of Israel’s failure to live by the terms of the Old Covenant. Their story is and continues to be a grace story. The fact is that there was not ever an individual that lived by the terms of the Old Covenant. That the Israelites were ever blessed by God was only by His grace.

The promise of One who would keep the covenant and bear their sin was their sole hope. The promises of blessing they did experience came to them as credit extended to them because of what this anointed one, the Christ, would do. These promises belonged to them in the sense that they had knowledge of them and could freely choose to embrace them in the sense that they had opportunity regarding them. They could believe and embrace them and allow their lives to be shaped by them and in that case God’s grace would have allowed them to enter the full experience of them.

9:5—“whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.”

In terms of men who were revered, Israel had quite a legacy. The patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, remain among the few men from the ancient world who are internationally known. Through them the critical significance of faith was revealed by God to all who care to pay attention.

And then even more significantly, Jesus, the anointed one, the designated ruler of all that is, was an Israelite. Paul adds the phrase “according to the flesh.” It is the second time in this chapter he has used the expression. It makes clear that as in the case of the Israelites he is talking in terms of physical lineage. In this way the string of good things that he names that come to the world through Israel ends as it began. He spoke of his “kinsmen according to the flesh,” and he ends with identifying Christ as an Israelite “according to the flesh.”

Paul's subject has been made clear. He wishes to address the subject of the spiritual condition and plight of these ethnic Israelites who have been known as children of God. There would have been in the early church many questions about this. He has already addressed their need for salvation. But what about the numerous promises made to them in the Old Testament writings? How did that all relate to this seemingly new and separate thing God was doing with the Gentiles and Jews, forming through the Spirit the Church, the body of Christ? Had God abandoned all that He had said He would do as far as a land and a kingdom? Since all these things "belonged" to Israel, yet Israel clearly rejected Christ, where did that leave things between them and God?

9:6—"But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel."

Paul has just run off a litany of things that had been entrusted to Israel by the sovereign decree of God. The question that must be asked is this: since Israel has been appointed as the trustees of all these things of God, what has happened to them? Specifically, why are they not responding to the truth of the gospel? And even more specifically, has God's sovereign decree failed? Paul wants to show that it has not. In fact, it is alive and well, moving along as planned.

The first point in defense of this idea is that it has never been true that all who trace their ethnicity to Abraham are Israelites. Elsewhere, Paul will speak of an "Israel of God" (Galatians 6:16). He means by this those who embrace the faith of Abraham, not necessarily those who are his physical descendants (Romans 4:11-12). This is not precisely the direction this argument will immediately take here when Paul says, "they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel." Rather, he wants to show that not all the physical descendants of Abraham are Israelites. Rather it is a certain and specific strain of his physical descendants that are Israelites. One has never been able to look at ALL of Abraham's descendants to see what God is doing because not all of them are Israelites, and by that we mean not all of them are considered Israelites in the ethnic sense. This is true even though the genetics of Abraham are certainly present in them. Rather, there is a particular family of one of Abraham's grandchildren that are considered Israelites.

To find the offspring of Abraham to whom God has entrusted the things Paul has mentioned, one has always had to look beyond those who trace their physical ancestry to Abraham. The rest of this chapter will document this idea and add to it.

9:7—"neither are they all children because they are Abraham's descendants, but: 'Through Isaac your descendants shall be named.'"

Paul offers this as proof that not all the physical children of Abraham are considered ethnic or physical Israel. We know that Hagar bore Ishmael to Abraham. We know that Zimron, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak, and Shuah were his offspring through Keturah (Genesis 25:1-2). It could be even that Abraham had other unnamed offspring through "concubines" (Genesis 25:5-6). Only Isaac, one of Abraham's descendants, was considered an Israelite. The name Israel was not bestowed in fact, until God called one of Isaac's several children, Jacob, by that name (Genesis 32:28). So one was not considered an Israelite in the ethnic sense because their father was Abraham.

9:8—“That is, it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants.”

Paul began the chapter by speaking of his “kinsmen according to the flesh,” the Jews, ethnic Israel. Certain things belonged to them that are best summarized by the term he uses in verse 4, promises. Yet at the point in history at which Paul is writing, most of these Israelites are rejecting Christ. They are outside the community of Christ which is God’s family. Was one to conclude then, that God’s word regarding Israel, given repeatedly through the Old Testament prophets had failed? Paul is saying in a rather lengthy answer, “No!” He is amid this developing argument.

Having established that not all the physical offspring of Abraham were Israelites, even in terms of the ethnic designation, he now speaks of whom among Abraham’s offspring were Israelites. This designation was not given to the children of the flesh. By this Paul meant the mere physical offspring of Abraham. We should not read into this term flesh too much. It is not a statement of motive. It is a statement of physical origin. It is not merely the physical offspring of Abraham, what we would refer to as genetic offspring, to whom belong the promises. It was only one of those physical offspring of Abraham, a particular one whose birth had been promised to Sarah (Genesis 17:15-21). He would be a physical child of Abraham but what would distinguish him from the other sons would be that he was the child designated (“regarded”) as the one to whose descendants the promises would be given (Genesis 15:2-6). In this sense he was the child of God, not simply the child of Abraham. He came because of a miracle of God (Genesis 17:17; 18:12; 21:1-7). The other children were no less descendants of Abraham (Genesis 21:13). But they were not children of God in the sense of being heirs of the covenant promises God made to Abraham.

The English word “regarded” is used here of these “children of promise”. This is the NASB rendering of the Greek word *logizomai*. This is becoming a familiar word by this point in Romans. To repeat, this term describes the official accounting of wealth, specifically what account it is credited or charged to. Paul uses it to describe actions of God that define how something is to be understood, officially valued, and remembered under His watchful eye. It then becomes the official and eternal view of the event. So when Abraham believed God’s promise, his faith was “regarded” as righteousness. In other words, God recorded righteousness to Abraham’s account (Genesis 15:6; Romans 4:18). Abraham is by this forever righteous.

The miracle child, the child promised and brought about by the will of God—Isaac, was the only heir among all of Abraham’s genetic offspring. Isaac was “regarded” so by God and so by Abraham and so by history. The same came to be of just one of Isaac’s offspring, Jacob. So here, though Abraham had many offspring, God “regarded” certain ones as the heirs through whom His promises would be passed along.

9:9—For this is a word of promise, “At this time I will come, and Sarah shall have a son.”

Paul quotes from Genesis 18:8 the words used by God to confirm to Abraham and Sarah that a son would be born to them. It was a promise. At the time appointed by God, Sarah gave birth to a son who was named Isaac (Genesis 21:1-7). This promised son would be an Israelite, the first of what we would call Jewish descent, even though other sons had been born to Abraham.

We must remember that there was no distinct genetics involved in being a Jew at this point of time except they were descendants of Shem. So were many other people groups. So the genetics from this point of time were established only by the promise of God. The promise is the thing that marked out Abraham's descendants. The ethnicity was born out of the promise. This selection process of God would be continued through Abraham's son Isaac, and through one of Isaac's sons Jacob, who would father those who would become the foundation families of the various tribes of Israel.

9:10—"And not only this, but there was Rebecca also, when she had conceived twins by one man, our father Isaac,"

Not only was only one of the eight sons of Abraham a child of God, only one of Isaac's sons was considered such. This is the example Paul will go into next to support his contention that not all who trace their ancestry to Israelites were Israelites in the important sense of the promise of God.

Paul's point is made stronger in the case of the offspring of Isaac and Rebecca because their offspring were twins. One might wrongly argue that in case of Abraham's sons, only the one born through his marriage to Sarah was a true Israelite, and that is the reason for the difference in designation. Paul's citation of Isaac and Rebecca will provide evidence that something else was at work in the shaping of Israel. Paul's eventual point will be that this force, the person Yahweh, continues to be at work in the designation of Israelites. The point here is that a set of twins were born who were conceived through Isaac, who was the child of promise, an Israelite, the second of the so-called patriarchs.

9:11—"for though *the twins* were not yet born, and had not done anything good or bad, in order that God's purpose according to *His* choice might stand, not because of works, but because of Him who calls,"

Three ideas occur in this verse which Paul has already spoken of in this letter to the Romans. There is the idea of God's purpose, God's choice, and God's call. In the previous chapter it was said that "God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to his purpose." So the idea of a grand purpose of God has been presented.

This purpose leads to specific action on God's part. He summons, or calls, certain individuals to a special standing with Himself (8:28-30), that will extend into eternity. That much Paul has already established.

Here Paul wants to affirm that God's choice is based on His purpose and that it is not based on performance. God designated one of these twins to be the third of the patriarchs, to inherit the promise made to Abraham. He would be the first to bear the name "Israel," though he was not given that name at birth. This was very deliberate on the part of God. It was to demonstrate that God's purpose comes about. Paul says simply that it "stands." He means that God's purpose is established and comes to fruition.

But Paul's big point is that God's purpose comes to be established apart from human effort, or performance. It stands because it is of God. The thing God desires to do with respect to His choices comes to be true. It is true because it has been purposefully chosen by Him. It is unthwartable. It does not happen because of the purposes and choices that originate within the hearts and minds of human, nor due to special merit on their part.

This is an especially interesting point in the case of these twins, because one of them, the one who was chosen of God, ended up being a schemer and manipulator who consistently sought to gain an advantage. The advantage he gained was not due to any of this self-effort. It was the result of God's choice.

This text and the support that follows has become central in the argument of the Calvinists against Armenians. It greatly strengthens the Calvinist position in that argument. However, in fairness to the Arminian position, it should be noted that in chapter 8, God's predestination of individuals was based on foreknowledge. In this text of chapter 9, it is their actual performance that has not occurred. One could still argue that their eventual choices/actions were known to God so that His choice was based on what He knew of their hearts. It is however a difficult and uphill argument if only this text is considered. The argument between these two camps ultimately boils down to what is encompassed by the word "foreknew" in 8:29.

What we know from chapter 9 is that actual performance does not govern God's choice. It is made beforehand, not after a life has been lived or even while that life is being lived. We also know that God's choice reflects His purpose, and that His purpose is why things are and this purpose will shape the outcome of all things.

9:12—"it was said to her, 'The older will serve the younger.'"

This was the specific choice made by God that would come to be reality. It would be the actual experience of the twins. It would be so because of some unrevealed purpose of God, not because of good or bad actions taken by them. It would also be so because of the specific choice of God with respect to that purpose. The result would be that the older of the twins, Esau, would serve the younger, Jacob. The twins would live their lives and, in the record, we see very deliberate action taken by Rebecca and Jacob that helped make this a reality (Genesis 27:5-45). We also see actions of Jacob in which he submitted himself to Esau (Genesis 32:13-21; 33:1-14). In this record we see the mystery of the merger of the divine and human will. It is a mystery that eludes our grasp.

We know that it is the purposes of God that stand, and we see here that His purpose gives birth to choices He makes regarding individual's roles in His plan. There were choices involved in who would inherit the covenant blessings. They were not inherited by all of Abraham and Isaac's descendants. That is Paul's point to this point.

9:13—“Just as it is written, ‘Jacob I loved, But Esau I hated.’”

This is a quote from Malachi 1:1-3.” In that context God is proclaiming to Israel through Malachi the depth of His love for them. His point there is the exact point Paul is emphasizing here, that though the two men were brothers, God chose Jacob and placed on him His covenant love and blessing. He did not choose to bless Esau in the same way. It can be clearly seen in Scripture that there was and is positive action of God toward Esau’s descendants (Deuteronomy 1:4-6). So the word “hate” is not to be taken in the way we might feel it as we read it.

The term “hate” is used here to describe God’s lack of action about Esau. The term is used to describe the sinful action of humanity when they plot evil against each other (Leviticus 19:17). But “hated” is also used to describe the one who is not the recipient of special love and affection that is accorded another (Genesis 29:31). It does not express a random, predisposed emotion on the part of God toward Esau. The term “hate” is used to convey one who is outside the bounds of God’s covenant love as a result of God’s sovereign and deliberate choice. Esau was still loved by God in the sense that God is love and so all that is experiences the results of that which He is. But Esau did not become an object of the special covenant love of God and so in this sense he was spurned or hated. The words hate and love in Biblical usage carry with them the idea of chosen versus not chosen. The word hate when used of Yahweh does not convey a premeditated, calculated determination on His part to bring pain and ruin on someone. That is against His nature.

9:14—“What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be!”

Paul has stated that not all who were descendants of Abraham were Israelites. This principle could be well supported historically. There were at least seven men who were Abraham’s sons, but Isaac alone was chosen by God as the one who would inherit the covenant promises of God. Isaac himself fathered twins, but only one was specifically chosen by God and later in his life was called Israel (Genesis 32:28). A number of those then who were of the same ethnicity as Israelites were not in fact considered by God to be Israelites. For whatever reason these were passed over by Yahweh. Paul has stated that God’s choice was made before they had a chance to “prove themselves” by either good or bad behavior.

Paul anticipates that some will see this as an injustice. We must remember that as fallen human beings we should never want God to operate strictly by justice. If He had done so humanity would be extinct. There certainly would not have been anyone chosen to receive special love and affection from Him. He would certainly not show love and mercy to all people.

To this idea that because God has made a choice, He is by that act unjust, Paul gives a reply he has already used three times in this letter (6:1, 15; 7:7). He uses the phrase “May it never be!” By this expression Paul means to relegate such a thought to the realm of the unthinkable and absurd. It goes against all that is true and logical as well as against all that is good. The verses that follow will explain why this “logical” sounding idea is totally illogical.

9:15—“For He says to Moses, ‘I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.’”

This is a quote from Exodus 33:19. Mercy and compassion are key words in understanding how God could choose some, pass over others, and still be trusted as just. The quote comes from an incident that was a personal crossroad for Moses. It was a moment in his leadership when he needed to hear from God. He had come down from the mountain at the command of God because the people were engaging in idolatry, worshiping the golden calf. Moses deals decisively with the matter and intercedes for the people. God does punish them but stops short of destroying them. He then commands Moses to lead the people on to the promised land.

The Lord states that He will send an angel with them, but He Himself would not go “in their midst,” because they’re obstinate and He might destroy them (Exodus 33:2–4). Both Israel and Moses understand the gravity of this. It is a moment when Moses needs some sort of confirmation from God since he knows that it is impossible to lead the people apart from God’s gracious care for them.

Moses’ logic was impeccable on this point. If God refused to go with them because they were too obstinate, what hope did he as a mere man have to complete this assignment from God? He needed confirmation that he himself really was sufficiently enabled and blessed by God to do this. He asked God to show him His glory. God replied that He would make all His goodness pass before Moses and would proclaim the name of Yahweh to him. God then makes the statement that Paul quotes here.

Taken out of context the statement reads like a declaration of a whimsical being, arbitrary or selective in His kindness. However, when the context is considered, it is a declaration that God’s actions and plan include acts of mercy and compassion that He graciously extends by His own choice and for His own purposes.

9:16—“So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy.”

The immediate question that Paul is dealing with is this; is God just in choosing some on whom to show special blessing? Here, Paul says that this choice of God is not based on what a person wills or how they might “run.” This is an important statement that eliminates the criteria that we might suppose influence God’s choice.

The choice of God does not depend on the decision of the person. This would seem to eliminate the popular notion that God knows ahead of time who will respond positively to truth and chooses them as His children. If it does not depend on the man who wills, then it is not based on a person’s choice with respect to the truth. It is very difficult to imagine the choice of God being based on His knowledge of some future noble decision based on this verse.

The choice of God does not depend on the one who “runs.” Running here seems to be used metaphorically as in other passages written by Paul, of a faithful and persistent effort expended in the pursuit of a goal or specific course in life. God does not choose to embrace for special relationship those whom He sees as special or obedient. That is the thrust of Paul’s statement that it does not depend on the one who runs.

What do these statements mean but that God's choice is not to be explained by His justice. To examine God's justice to explain His choice of embracing certain individuals is to look in the wrong place for an explanation. As stated earlier, by the standard of God's justice, all would be condemned. That is a very important principle in processing this matter. There is no individual who would be chosen if God's choice were a just reward for what a person decided to do or what faithful effort they expended. There is not a decision a person could make, nor course of living they could rise to that would in and of itself satisfy God's justice.

This critical truth does not relate to something whimsical in God, but to the incapability and fallenness of humanity. So it should not be thought that God's choice can be explained by His just nature. It is something else in His character, which does not violate His justice (there is no "violation" or "moral balancing" as we perceive it in the character of a perfect being).

The something else in God's character that we're looking for is named in this text. It is His mercy that explains His choice. If we wish to find the basis of Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob's favorable status with God, we need to look no further than the mercy of God. Again, by the standard of justice, all deserve condemnation. All are not condemned for the simple reason that God has shown mercy to some whom He has chosen. His choice of whom is not based on the merit of their choice or their effort. It is simply an act of mercy. This is not to say that His choice violates His justice. He will show in eternity that His acts of mercy were in fact just, because of the substitutional death of Christ. But the explanation of the existence of a group of individuals who reflect God's presence and blessing, and a group that does not, lies in God's mercy. To certain undeserving individuals He has been merciful, that is Paul's point, pure and simple.

9:17—"for the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "for this very purpose I raised you up, to demonstrate my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed throughout the whole earth."

Paul returns to his broader contention that God's choice, that which is based on His mercy and His purpose, determine the course individual lives then take. He offers the Old Testament record of God's word to Pharaoh as further proof of this. This Scripture is found in Exodus 9:16. Paul does not precisely quote it but states its broader principle.

The Exodus account is the record of God's instruction to Moses on what he was to say to Pharaoh. This "speech" was an appeal to Pharaoh to see the implications of the power of God through the plagues and submit to that power. God's intention was to help Pharaoh experience something that would demonstrate that there was no one like Yahweh in all the earth (Exodus 9:14). He explains to Pharaoh that He could have cut both him and the Egyptians off from the earth. Verse 16, the verse Paul quotes, says that God allowed them to remain "in order to show you My power and order to proclaim My name through all the earth." Paul states the broader principle, that Pharaoh had been raised up for this divine purpose of making Yahweh known.

This demonstrates that when we look from the human perspective at the choices God has made, we will not see individuals that by our standard "deserved it" being chosen by God. We will not see individuals such that by their course of action curry His favor. We are looking at people whom God chose for His own purposes.

The story of Pharaoh tells us that God's purposes relate to the revelation of who God Himself is. He demonstrates His power and does so in ways that will lead to the spread of information so that it is promulgated throughout all of humanity. In the case of the Israelites and Pharaoh this meant that the story would live beyond their times and be told in cultures around the globe.

Those chosen by God are chosen to help in this mission of making Him known. It does not mean they would declare words in His behalf. But they will be instruments through which He displays something about Himself. Their own blessing flows out of this purpose. The purpose of God in choosing them is not to bless them apart from Him. It is to bring proper honor and submission to Himself through them, and all who have ever done so find that in pursuing this they are blessed themselves. That is always the way it works. To be related to Yahweh is to be blessed, because that it is just the nature of Him and all He does.

To pursue blessing in and of itself is to try and catch the wind. To respond to God and to be His instrument is to find blessing. God's appeal to Pharaoh is about this, responding to Him. In the Exodus account, Pharaoh is appealed to as one who had a choice, and he was held accountable as one who had a choice. In the account he is presented as one whom God hardened against repentance because he himself chose to do so. God delivered to Pharaoh what Pharaoh chose.

9:18—"so then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires."

This verse states plainly the principle that the Exodus account of Pharaoh reveals. It is a somewhat complex principle that can easily be distorted, so that God's justice is questioned. Paul will address that issue in the verses that follow. He has already however, given important information about this matter.

For God to choose to bless no one would be just on His part. All would be condemned, and none would be blessed. God's mercy motivates Him to choose from among the condemned persons whom He will have mercy on, bless, and rescue. Such an act of mercy presumes justice. There can only be mercy where justice has been established. So God's choice is one motivated by mercy which intervenes where justice has passed sentence. The first statement in this verse restates that God has mercy on those whom He chooses.

The second statement is harder. It speaks to the issue of people becoming incapable of responding to truth. It speaks of God bringing this about in them. Now if we embrace Paul's first thought, that mercy interrupts the eventuality that is natural and just, then we can see that the "hardening" spoken of here is simply further spiritual deterioration, a consequence of living apart from God. It is a consequence of an individual's moral inability that compounds over time. It is also proper to say it is a consequence of not being an object of God's mercy, which is the perspective Paul takes here. This does not make God the author of evil, or the cause of an individual's moral plight. It means only that conditions God has allowed confirm people in their chosen courses unless His mercy plucks them from the current they are in.

9:19—“you will say to me then? “Why does He still find fault for who resists His will?”

Paul anticipates the precise questions that have been passed down through the ages when God’s power and sovereignty are confronted. Since God chooses whom He wishes, and by doing so allows others to pursue a different course, is not His will being done? And if people are doing what He has chosen for them, why does He hold them responsible? These have always been popular courses of logic as men seek to find fault with the dealings of God. They are questions that should be reverently asked, and it is good that those who believe ask them.

To legitimately ponder these questions, they should be thought of in the context they are raised in. Remember that Paul is discussing the plight of Israel. From a national standpoint they had rebelled against God. What was to become of them? That is the larger question being raised here by Paul. Specifically, he is asked if the word of God concerning Israel, that He would bless them and make them great, had failed. Was God not able to do what He wanted to do?

Thus far Paul’s argument has been no! It has not failed! His primary line of defense has been that God has chosen certain ones, and the implication has been that they are few, from among ethnic Israelites who are as a result living faithfully. He does not actually state that until later (11:5), but he has laid the groundwork for that statement.

Now it was widely believed among Jews, and rightfully so, that they were under the judgment of God for breaking the covenant. Believing Jews were even more concerned about this because they were aware that the Jews by-in-large, had rejected their Messiah. Among the Jews then, there was a great awareness of the cloud of God’s judgment hanging over them.

Now if all this disobedience was the result of God’s choices, why then was God punishing the nation? Why was their homeland occupied by the Gentiles? Why were they scattered throughout the provinces of Rome with no country to call their own? Was God behaving fairly and justly in finding fault with Israel? This is the kind of question thinking people ask, and they must have a means of dealing with it. Paul investigated this himself and so anticipates it, and now answers it.

9:20—“on the contrary, who are you, oh man, who answers back to God? For the thing molded will not say to the molder, “why did you make me like this,” will it?”

Paul’s answer to this question of God’s justice is not as neat and clean as we would like. We would love for there to be no tensions at all in our concepts of God, and no gaps. We prefer black-and-white statements that have no contradiction. Paul does not give such a statement here and we must assume from that fact that such an answer cannot presently be given by us.

Paul’s answer to the hypothetical questioning of God’s character is to question our submission to the Creator. That is important to recognize in terms of our interpretation of the following verses. In our questioning we must remember our place, and that is not an issue of inferior rank among equals. It is an issue of actual inferiority, in wisdom and understanding, and character, and in every other imaginable area.

Paul illustrates the immensity of this difference between us and our Creator in two ways. First, there's the illustration of the molded object. This figure of speech likely is based on the practice of making bronze castings. This is a meticulous and lengthy process in which the artist carefully shapes an object to his precise wishes. He then uses the original object to make an impress. That is then used to fashion a mold into which molten bronze can be poured. Paul is likening us to the finished object which emerges from the mold. As beautiful and valuable as that piece might be, the real genius is the artist. It is absurd to think that the object molded had some greatness beyond that of its maker.

The point of this first illustration is just as Paul puts it, "who are you, O man?" We do not have the beauty, power, or understanding we do independent of our Maker. If we have questions, we must not suppose that we have thought of matters foreign to Him. Any facility we must think of such things is only due to the capacity we have been granted by our Maker. Such capacity is clearly inferior to His. The thing molded would clearly not have the capacity to intelligently discuss the thought processes of its Maker. There is so much that shapes an artist's work, and so much the artist is expressing through his work.

We cannot articulate or completely process all that has gone into any good thing God is producing. It is beyond us in every way. Who are we? We are creations of a complex, all-powerful being, animations of sorts, deeply loved, with some measure of freedom. We ultimately exist to serve His purposes and help bring about His will. As we ponder our Maker, and that is the noblest of activities, we must remember who we are and not be either surprised or disillusioned if there are gaps in our understanding of who He is.

9:21—"or does the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use, and another for common use?"

This is the second figure Paul uses to illustrate the immense contrast between ourselves as created ones, and our Creator. The essential question of the first illustration was, "who are you?" The essential question in this illustration is "who is God?" More specifically it is this: "Since God is God, does He not have the right to shape the things He creates, as He pleases, including us?" A related ethical question is this: "Do we have any moral basis by which we can condemn God since any of the capacity we have is derived from Him and is clearly inferior to His?"

The stated question is rhetorical one asked to emphasize an important point. God has created or has the right to shape in the same stream of humanity two types of people, and He does. One type of person is shaped for honorable use. This "honorable use" is to be inhabited by His Spirit. It is not simply to be used by God, since all things, including the devil, can and are used to fulfill His purposes. But the honorable use is to be His temple, the abode of Him, even filled with Him. The fruit of the Spirit defines such people (Galatians 5:22-23). The other type of person is for "common use." This "common use" is to be occupied with the normal or common things related to this life. It is to do all that is normal. Normal pursuits and pleasures, mistakes and vices define the lives of such people (Galatians 5:19-21).

These two types of people occupy different roles in God's creation and have separate destinies under His rule. That is what is suggested by the imagery of the potter and the clay. But more importantly this is not an injustice. We must be careful not to get side-tracked by the imagery Paul is using. It is being offered as an illustration of a principle. The principle is that God has the right as Creator to shape creation as He pleases without being guilty of injustice. No created being has the right God has, but as Creator, He does. There is in this sense a double standard of justice—God has a right to do that which we have no right to do. This is based on His character and His abilities.

The verses that follow must be approached very carefully because this is the principle that is being spoken of. They must be approached with this question in mind: are these verses describing what God has the right to do, or what He has done? Many interpret these verses according to the latter; a description of what God has done. A very dogmatic stance regarding the elect and the atonement of Christ has emerged. But we must demand intellectual honesty of ourselves and admit that there is a different way to view these verses.

We must remember that the essential question being addressed here is the one posed in verse 19, which is “why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?” These questions insinuate that something may be askew in God's character, that He finds fault with those who have only done what He has programmed or destined them to do. It may be that Paul, like us, knew of no cut-and-dried answer that gives firm definition to the boundaries of God's sovereign will and man's free will. Therefore, he wants us to understand that even if God does intentionally shape and control people in matters eternal it would not prove God unjust or unfair. He is still within His rights and still behaving justly because He is the creator of all that is. In bringing something into existence He certainly has the right to decide its function.

9:22—what if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction?

Verses 22–24 are one sentence in the original language. That sentence is in the form of an if/then clause. After reading this verse, one would expect a “then” clause, or a conclusion. No conclusion is offered. This is the reason the NASB has begun the verse with the word “what”. It is not italicized because though it is not present in the Greek it is clearly necessary to make the thought of the sentence complete.

The thought of this verse is that there are “vessels” of wrath. This term is in keeping with the imagery of the potter. These are the vessels for “common” use (verse 21), as opposed to those for honorable use. These vessels of wrath are “prepared for destruction.” The term prepare does not demand that we understand God as being the one who prepared them. It can be seen as being in either the passive or middle voice. If it is seen as a passive voice, that means the vessels have been acted on so as to be prepared for destruction. The context it seems favors this interpretation since the term “vessel” really links verse 22 to verses 20 and 21, and the imagery of God like a potter shaping persons for a particular use. But the term “prepared” taken as a middle voice could convey the idea that the vessels acted on themselves, giving themselves a particular shape, which lends them to destruction. This does not fit the context as well but is grammatically possible and has scriptural support.

The point of this verse seems to be that God could have acted within His character, creating persons who would then by their own choice be filled with evil, and then He could be patiently endured the repeated antics of such people. Under such a scenario, He is willing to destroy them immediately. They offend his holiness and contradict His goodness. But He does not destroy them immediately. Instead, He endures them, though their eventual destiny is determined. Not only does He endure them, but He does so with great patience. This condition is clearly temporary, and it is purposeful. The next verse will reveal what His purpose is.

9:23—and He did so in order that He might make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory.

The words, “He did so” are added by the translators of the NASB. They refer to God’s action of patiently enduring. The reason God endures evil so patiently is that among the evil are those He will extend mercy to. Our understanding of who these might be is absolutely nothing. Some of these vessels of mercy start out filled with great evil. Paul was one such vessel. Others believe at a very young age. But all such vessels are chosen beforehand, and Ephesians 1:4 reveals that this choice was made before the world was created. God is waiting to punish sin until all those so chosen to make the choice of faith (Matthew 13:24–30, 36–43).

The destiny of these vessels of mercy is to be filled with glory. The word glory appears twice in this verse. The glory they are destined for includes everything that makes God’s glorious. His glory is a physical thing that will be present in our bodies. It is also a matter of character which will be resident in our inner beings. It is also a description of all that is His which will be ours. Glory is the right word, and it is why the impartation of the gospel is said to be a ministry that is in glory (2 Corinthians 3:7–11). The word in the Hebrew language was the word used for the heavy or weighty. The things of God in the end are the ultimate things of value. Other things have a certain weightiness that quickly fades when compared to the significance and value of Him, His judgment, His word, and all else that is His.

9:24—even us, whom he is called, not from among the Jews only, but also from among the Gentiles.

The vessels of mercy, those prepared beforehand, are clearly identified here. Paul says they are “us.” It was widely thought that such a calling out and selection was the heritage of the Jews, so that the community of mercy vessels designated by the term “us” were like Paul, Jews. Paul goes on to clear this faulty thinking up. The “us” refers to those who accepted the truth of the gospel, whether Jew or Gentile. It includes all people who Yahweh has called, and this calling crosses all ethnic lines. All such people will be recipients of His mercy first, and then His glory. Paul turns to Scripture to show that this has been God’s plan all along, to bring Gentiles to the faith.

9:25—as He says also in Hosea, “I will call those who are not my people, “my people,” and who are not beloved, “beloved,””

Paul is citing Hosea 2:23 in this verse. In the next verse he will cite Hosea 1:10. Both were verses spoken to Israel of their rejection and future restoration. Why does Paul cite these two verses from Hosea as specifically speaking of Gentiles? Why not more specific ones like Isaiah 49:6?

Some systems of theology might suggest that this shows that God has no future program for ethnic Israel, that passages in the Old Testament that speak of the future glory of Israel were directed at the elect within Israel and were speaking of what would become the Christian church. From a hermeneutical standpoint this is a major leap, to see passages specifically naming the nation Israel to be speaking metaphorically the church. Such a position then faces great difficulty in the interpretation of Romans 9–11 which are obviously aimed at Paul’s kinsmen according to the flesh, ethnic Israelites. There is another explanation that seems more reasonable.

We must remember that ultimately God co-authored these words of Paul. So the difficulty of us understanding this choice of verses is not a matter of simply understanding Paul or Paul’s perspective. We must also respect God’s intent, and we must understand that since the choice of which Scripture to cite is His, we must assume that His choice is the best choice for what He wished to convey overall in this letter.

The principle conveyed in these words of God/Hosea was the thing that would give both Gentiles and Jews hope. The principle of Hosea’s entire ministry is that God is merciful, as Paul has been saying, giving second chances and renewed opportunity to those previously set aside due to disobedience. Hosea’s words were directed at Israel but give hope to all who have fallen short. Mercy is the very nature of God (Jonah 4:1–11). During the passage this is spoken in a very straightforward way regarding God’s choices, mercy is an important principle to bear in mind when considering the choices of God. These words regarding mercy also lay the foundation for what Paul/God will later say about Israel.

So, remembering that Israel’s opportunity came because God set them apart from other nations, Hosea’s words remind them that they would go through a period where they will be set apart from God. At the same time Hosea’s words assure them that they would once again be embraced by God. The same words assured Gentiles that God would open the door for them in His time. The setting aside of the nations meant opportunity for Israel, and the setting aside of Israel made opportunity for the Gentiles. This rhythm of God ultimately gives hope for all.

9:26—and it shall be that in the place where it was said to them, “you’re not my people,” there they shall be called sons of the living God.”

Again, Paul teaches that these words that were directed at Israel are the reflection of a principle that is the result of God’s merciful nature. He is a God of second chances and renewed opportunity. There is always hope because of who God is. Israel’s entire history is “Exhibit A” in this revelation by God of Himself for all to know, place confidence in, and hope in.

9:27—and Isaiah cries out concerning Israel, “though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea, it is the remnant that will be saved;”

These words and those from the next verse come from Isaiah 10:22–23. They are a free quotation from the Septuagint. Whereas the previous verses laid down through God’s dealings with Israel the principle that He is a God of mercy, these verses make it clear that this does not mean that all individuals are saved. Israel paid consequences for their choices, and individuals by the thousands have done so as well. It was a remnant who came through the various disciplinary actions of God.

The principal God's dealings with Israel demonstrate is that when we look for Him doing a saving work with people, we should be looking small. So as Paul reflects on his own concern for the welfare of Israel and what God is doing among them, he knows that he must not look to the mainstream or to what the majority are doing. He must look on the fringe at those who are making movement away from the majority.

This adds to the idea expressed earlier that not all are chosen by God. Here we find that it is a few who were so chosen. It should not be thought that God is not working, that His power is lacking, or that we are ineffective because of the few that respond to His truth. That was likely a line of thinking that even Paul wrestled with. Has the word of God failed because only a few are responding? Paul's words here coincide with what God has revealed throughout Scripture, that great efforts are aimed at encompassing a few (Matthew 7:13-14; Luke 13: 23-30).

9:28—"for the Lord will execute His word upon the earth thoroughly and quickly."

These words are not a direct quote from Isaiah but the expression of the Holy Spirit's summary of Isaiah's thought. It is not so much a statement of the speed of the plan as it is the thoroughness of that overall plan and its decisiveness. God's plan with Israel unfolded rather slowly, but suddenly Christ was revealed. His death too, was sudden, as was His resurrection. There was coming the destruction of the city of Jerusalem, which would be dramatic and would suddenly change the plight of the ethnic Israelites. So as God's plan unfolds, it is full of events that are sudden. His plan is complex and of long duration because it is thorough. It is full of very decisive moments.

The critical thing is the idea that Yahweh will execute what He has decreed. This was of particular importance in understanding the Jew/Gentile issues that early church leaders had to wrestle with. It remains critical today because Christians have always needed the theology of hope that is underpinned by His revelation of what the future holds. The belief that He will execute His word upon the earth thoroughly and decisively is critical to our faith.

9:29—and just as Isaiah foretold, "except the Lord of the Sabbath had left us a posterity, we would have become as Sodom, and would have resembled Gomorrah."

This is a quote from Isaiah 1:9, the Septuagint version. It summarizes Isaiah's message. It was a message of short-term doom but long-term hope (i.e. Isaiah 1:24-26).

The term "Lord of Sabbath," meaning the Lord of hosts or armies, is used. A good way of understanding it is to render it "the Lord, the Almighty," or "the Lord who is the strongest of all." We might also gather from other Scriptures information and say, "the Lord sovereignly works His will through all forces." All the horrors that came upon Israel came about because God permitted them. In each case he promised to meet out justice to those who carried out cruelties against Israel (i.e., Isaiah 10:5-14). He was sovereign over all such forces and exercised that sovereignty so that a remnant, literally "seed," would remain. His discipline in this way was not the same as his punishment of Sodom and Gomorrah, although even in that case Lot and his daughters were saved. Those twin cities of evil would never rise again, whereas the restoration of Jerusalem and Israel is promised by God.

9:30—what shall we say then? That the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, attained righteousness, even the righteousness which is by faith.”

Paul gives an intermediate conclusion here to what he has been saying about Jews, Gentiles, and the choices of God. A rather remarkable reversal of fortunes has occurred. The Gentiles, over the roughly two millennia that had passed since the call of Abraham to Paul's day, had not pursued righteousness as laid out by Yahweh, the God of the Israelites. There had been no movement among them by-in-large, except in rare cases such as in the Nineveh through the preaching of Jonah. Except for the occasional God-seekers such as Rahab, the Gentiles viewed the religion of the Jews as a curiosity, but not as something they should take time to experience or pursue.

Yet, presently, Paul was witnessing a great work of God among Gentiles. It was not what had happened among the Jews, but it was the same God doing it, Yahweh. It was different in that it was a righteousness by faith. It started with a humble admission of guilt—they were trusting what God said about their moral condition. It continued with a trust in what God said about Christ, that He was their sin-bearer, God in human flesh. It bore fruit in them through their trust in the leading of the indwelling Holy Spirit. As they heard His voice and sensed His leading, they trusted it and obeyed it and their lives were being changed. The results of this faith were that a community of God's people were becoming visible in the cities and towns of the Roman Empire. What the Jews had not done, the Gentiles were doing. The righteousness which is by faith was in full bloom among them.

9:31—but Israel, pursuing a Law of righteousness, did not arrive at that Law.

Paul describes Israel as pursuing “a Law of righteousness.” That is an important statement. They sought to pursue right standing with Yahweh through the acts prescribed by the Law. Another way of describing it is that they sought through their own work and moral performance to gain God's blessing. Their question was like the man that came to Jesus and said, “What good thing must I do to inherit eternal life?” The Jews were looking for that Law.

True to their name, Israelites in general fought with God over their moral condition. In contrast to the Gentiles, the masses of Israel made no lasting admission of their own moral inability. Instead, there was a persistent belief that they did not need mercy and grace as others did. So though they pursued the outward acts of righteousness, they never even got them. In truth they were characterized by idolatry, injustice, greed, and all the other symptoms of godlessness so much so that they were exhibiting more symptoms of depravity than the Gentiles were (Ezekiel 5:5-8; 16:47-52).

The next verse reveals that there is nothing wrong with wanting one's outward life to display righteousness, per se. How one pursues that desire is critical.

9:32—Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as though it were by works. They stumbled over the stumbling stone,

There's nothing wrong with wanting to display righteousness if it is not just a desire to display it. Somewhere along the line the Israelites slipped into doing what all humans tend to do. They wanted to look good but were not broken by how they really were. Cleaning up their act did not include their thinking, only their outward behavior. That is what Paul is referring to when he says that they pursued a Law of righteousness "as though it were by works." They sought to be righteous by doing the deeds of righteousness. That is like trying to become wealthy person by spending a lot of money! It may create a certain appearance, but it will not change reality.

It seems to be instinctive to humanity to pursue goodness in this way. God knew that and so gave us the Law. We are to trust its testimony about our performance, and we mean by that primarily our thoughts and motives. As we seek to "be good" the Law will remind us often that we are failing. At that point we are at a crossroad. The question at this mental crossroad is this, will I justify my inner thoughts, or will I trust what God says about them and trust in His solution?

Most do as the Israelites did. They justify their performance. They say they are good people, meaning they can save themselves. At that point they relegate themselves to never becoming righteous in God's eyes. They blind themselves to the truth about who they are. They will never become righteous because they are refusing to travel the road that leads to it. That road is the road of truth and of faith. It is to trust in God's testimony about us and in what He has done for us. Righteousness can only be gained by such faith. Pursuing it by works will only aggravate the problem.

9:33—just as it is written, "behold, I lay in Zion a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense, and he who believes in Him will not be disappointed."

This is a quote from Isaiah 28:16. Paul uses it to show that God revealed ahead of time that many Israelites would not embrace God's revelation of both Himself and themselves. The result would be the great paradox Paul was addressing, that many who were His children in terms of ethnicity, were not His children.

The passage in Isaiah concerns itself with the deplorable spiritual conditions that existed in Israel. It is graphic, portraying the prophets and priests as carrying out their ministry in a drunken stupor, vomiting and wallowing in it even as they were prophesying. The result of such hypocrisy and blasphemy would be that they would not hear from God fresh thought and vision. Their leadership would be in meaningless routine, "order on order, order on order, line on line, line on line..." (Verse 13). They come to rest their faith not on God, but on the observance of superstition, on formulas based in sorcery and the like (verse 15). So far were they removed from the truth that they believed that by such things they were safe spiritually. They had drunk the poison of idolatry and legalism. It had run its course and exacted its toll. They were now paying the price.

For this reason, God says he was laying a cornerstone in Zion. He was rebuilding. It wasn't exactly starting over. Neither was it a patch job. It was something new, based on the old. This "cornerstone" would be a person. It would be the prophet like Moses. He was promised through Moses by God to provide Israel with understanding of God's will and plan for them (Deuteronomy 18:15-22). There was one warning. It would be catastrophic for any who ignored Him. Because this prophet would be such a One, and because they were who they had become, the result would be very mixed. Many would not see the promised prophet as the start of something, as a precious cornerstone, but as an obstacle, something to be removed and discarded so that the real building could be done. They would take offense at Him.

Of course, this is what happened with Jesus, the Christ, this anointed one. Many Israelites had drunk the old wine and it was "good enough." (Luke 5:39). But to all who believe, Christ became the chief cornerstone, one through whom every promise made, and every hope raised would be delivered.

The phrase, "will not be disappointed" is an important one. The myriads of promises made by God are only realized in Christ. To all who believe in Christ the promises will be delivered to the "enth" degree. The disappointment will come to those who seek to find righteousness apart from Christ, to all who stumble and take offense at Christ's disclosure of truth. Their wounded pride will keep them from the eternal experience of God's goodness.

To go back to the question at the beginning of this chapter which asked if the word of God had failed, we see that Paul has put an important piece of evidence forward. Far from failing, the word of God concerning Israel had come about. That is the message of chapter 9, and that message will continue in chapter 10.

Romans 10

10:1—Brethren, my hearts desire and prayer for them is for their salvation.

With these words Paul brings the reader back to the thoughts he had begun to express in the opening words of chapter 9. He has a great burden for Israel due to their spiritual condition. That condition is simply stated here. They are outside the experience of salvation. Paul has already qualified that general statement. It is not to say that every individual in Israel is in this condition, but many are. So taken as a group they are outside the faith, and this grieves Paul. In some circles he is being seen as an enemy of his own people (see Acts 4:5; 21:8). Nothing could have been further from the truth, and so he is grieved about this misunderstanding as well.

There are two ironies here. There is the irony expressed in the name Israel, which means “he strives with God.” It is a great irony that the people on whom God chose to place His name, were subsequently given the name Israel. These chosen ones stand by-and-large outside His family. They need the prayers of all those like Paul who belong. The second irony is the irony of Paul—one who had endured so much at the hands of the Israelites for Israelites, somehow loving them so persistently and deeply. That was an irony like the irony of the love of God himself.

With these words Paul continues his effort to articulate a clear understanding of Israel. Why was this important? There are very practical reasons. There was a relationship between Jew and Gentile in the fledgling church. There was the fact that Israel was and is an illustration of the human condition. Israel is an illustration that every member of the stream of humanity should ponder and understand to know themselves. There is the matter of the reliability of God’s word—that certain things have been predicted regarding this nation. There was the matter of the false security of many Jews who believe that their uniqueness was that they did not need salvation. What about Israel? Were all bets off now?

Therefore, in this grand presentation of the gospel, the plight of the Israelites needed to be clearly understood. It makes the gospel richer, clearer, wiser, and more attractive.

10:2—For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge.

Paul acknowledges Israel’s zeal. That is important. From the human perspective zeal is admirable and it is of great merit. People who believe strongly and sacrifice for what they believe in are almost universally viewed as good. Zeal is seen as proof of sincerity, and sincerity is seen as the ultimate currier of divine favor. There was great zeal within the culture of the Israelites that remains to the present day. It is perhaps unparalleled, so that their traditions have endured against all odds around the world. Among the Romans, Greeks, Egyptians, and the Babylonians, the zeal of the Israelites was certainly legendary. We expect that zeal should be efficacious, that is, that it should count for something with respect to gaining mercy from the judge

Paul makes a very astute observation about their zeal, one which reveals the real and actual eternal plight of all who rely on zeal as their badge of merit. He observes that their zeal is not based on what is known to be true. The inference is obvious. Zeal, when not governed by truth, can only lead us in empty pursuits, and exhaust much energy and resource, bringing no return, and impeding meaningful progress.

The implication is clear. Zeal, or what we often refer to today as passion, must be cultivated and governed. We might say that it must be domesticated, rather than being a wild impulse. All of Scripture calls for zeal. But it must grow out of and be directed at those things that God is jealous and passionate about. If it is not then it will be like Jehu (2 Kings 10:16, 31), and Israel of Paul's day, a very mixed bag.

It is one thing to have zeal for the Lord. It is another thing to have zeal that is OF the Lord, governed purely by all that is real and true.

10:3—For not knowing about God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God.

God has spoken of the Israelites having great zeal but that this zeal was not in accordance with what was true. That is the worst kind of zeal because it creates an inertia of its own that is hard to overcome with the facts. Hearing these words Paul identifies the specific thing the Israelites are ignorant of. They are ignorant of God's righteousness. Paul is not saying that they do not know God is righteous. He's saying that they do not know that God wishes to freely impart this righteousness of His to them. It is freely available to all who will accept it by believing in Jesus.

Paul began his letter by speaking of the gospel and how it reveals, or makes known, this righteousness of God. It is through the gospel that ignorance of the righteousness that God wishes to freely impart to us is lifted. What we call "Romans" is a detailed treatise of how God imparts His character to us through Jesus Christ. Through Christ He makes us righteous in the judicial sense. Christ bears our sin as our substitute and so removes our guilt. God also seeks to bring about righteous in us in the sense of our everyday behavior through the Holy Spirit's ministry. The Spirit of God is now joined to our spirit because we are forgiven by Christ's sacrifice.

Because Israel is ignorant of this, they seek to establish their own righteousness. They are not alone in this. This is perhaps the universal quest of all who believe in deity. They seek to establish merit and righteousness and so curry the favor of their god. They do this with great zeal.

There are two kinds of ignorance. One is a pure ignorance like that of a child, who simply does not know. There is also willful ignorance. Israel had this latter kind of ignorance. Some were ignorant because they did not care to know about God's righteousness. Some were ignorant because they did not believe in their need for God's righteousness—their own was sufficient. Some were ignorant because they were not paying careful attention to the message of God's revelation. Some were ignorant because they were not sorting lies from truth and so were embracing the lies. Others were ignorant because they were altering the truth with their own version and their own half-truths. There were all sorts of reasons that they did not know about God's righteousness and were trying to establish their own. But their ignorance was not because they did not have the information they needed. They were ignorant because their own choices rendered them so.

Israel then, needed the salvation experience that Paul embraced. It was one which God had made freely available to them after speaking of it for millennia. They needed to subject themselves to the righteousness of God. This subjecting is the heart of the matter, and that is why most Israelites and most of humanity don't experience God's salvation. We must subject ourselves under the dictates and implications of this truth.

Subjecting oneself to God's righteousness involves accepting as true God's assessment of us. It is initially a very negative view. We fall short. He is not pleased with our character or our performance. Not only that, apart from Him we have no potential. This is not to say we don't do anything good. We are capable of and do certain good deeds. They're simply not good enough, though they may be our best.

The good news is that God's love motivates Him to reclaim us for Himself, for our original purpose. He wants to make us what we cannot be on our own. But we must accept the bad news about ourselves to participate. That's offensive to us. Like Israel we won't subject ourselves to that "abuse". Inheriting all the good God has for us involves us subjecting ourselves at the entry point to this rather humiliating assessment. Most never get past this. After we navigate these narrows, His word involves astoundingly good news of our dignity and worth to Him. He asks us to submit to His authority in day-to-day matters, choosing to obey Him rather than to gratify our own desires. He becomes our advocate and companion.

There is linkage between knowing and subjecting that is evident in all of Scripture. Hearing news that we don't like the sound of, draws us to a crossroad that we must ponder carefully. Labeling information as untrue because it has unpleasant implications may lead to ignorance. When it is spiritual ignorance, it is always to our own harm.

10:4—For Christ is the end of the Law for righteousness to everyone who believes.

The Law provides a standard for all who would earn salvation by their own effort. It is an unattainable standard but is nonetheless the standard. It is the level to which we must rise if we suppose that we can prove good enough to enter heaven. This striving to meet the demand of the Law ceases when a person believes in Christ. At that point they are declared righteous by Yahweh. Their sin is charged to Christ's account, and Christ's righteousness is credited to their account. Therefore, belief in Christ ends the relationship between a person and the Law as a means of earning Yahweh's commendation.

None of this is to say that God's intention when He gave the Law was to provide humanity with a means of earning their salvation. His purpose was through the Law to convince those who thought they could earn salvation by good works, that they could not. It was to personally demonstrate to them their need for mercy and grace and so their need for Christ.

10:5—For Moses writes that the man who practices the righteousness which is based on the Law shall live by that righteousness.

This is one overall message of the old covenant, that obedience to the Law would lead to life (Leviticus 18:3-5; 20:22; 25:18; Deuteronomy 4:1,10,40; 5:33; 8:1-3). By "living" and by "life" the Law was speaking of living a life blessed by Yahweh. The Law was an agreement no human could live by, but was an agreement nonetheless, one that nearly every human being who begins to think of heaven and God seem to make. Trying harder just seems to logically make sense to us. And so when we begin to have thoughts of God, inevitably we seek to reform our lives and conform to some standard.

The righteousness based on the Law is our aim. We are after merit with Yahweh based on adherence to the moral standard dictated by the Law and the system of worship set forth in it. The one who in this way could keep the Law would experience the blessing of God. They would be living life with Him. The one who chooses to approach God through this merit system, apart from faith, will live or die based on how they measure up to the Law's standard. Because of the moral impairment in humans such a life is unattainable through any such merit system.

As in Chapter two a theoretical salvation based on absolute conformity to the Law is being referenced here by Paul. I think we must accept such a way of salvation since it is the basis upon which Christ could be our sin bearer. He was our sin bearer by virtue of being the unblemished lamb without spot. He was/is the appointed One who flawlessly kept the Law and so could be its fulfillment. The Law provided the theoretical way of salvation that allowed a Redeemer to emerge. So though theoretically attainable, it could never happen among fallen humans due to their moral inability.

10:6—But the righteousness based on faith speaks this, “do not say in your heart, who will ascend into heaven?” (That is to bring Christ down),

Paul quotes Deuteronomy 30:12 here. Whereas the words of Romans 10:5 are the summation of Moses message, these words in verse 6 are a direct quote from the Septuagint.

Within the message of Moses about the righteousness based on the Law, is a message of justification by faith. That is the purpose of the Law, to send a message about who we are, specifically our need for grace, and who Christ is, God's appointed sin-bearer and ruler.

That message is surprisingly clear. In the section of his writings we know as Deuteronomy, Moses has instructed Israel regarding their eventual captivity due to their breaking of the covenant and on the importance of repentance on their part at that time. They were to repent and then they would enter a remarkable era when Yahweh would circumcise their hearts and lead them back to the land He promised (Deuteronomy 30:1-2). Moses predicts a great time of restoration. It would be physical restoration to the land from the far reaches of the earth (30:3-5), and spiritual restoration (30:6).

This spiritual restoration could really be more properly called the new creation since it would involve “circumcising” their hearts. God would do something in their inner beings that would enable them to do what they had never shown the ability to do before (see Deuteronomy 29:4). His Spirit would indwell them. This re-creating by God would bring about a golden age of their obedience. Moses speaks of how Yahweh will bless their obedience at that time (Deuteronomy 30:9-10).

The account then records Moses warning to them about not squandering such opportunities. Moses' words on the plainness, clarity, and availability of God's revelation to Israel (Deuteronomy 30:11-14) come to Paul's mind as he is writing the Romans. Yahweh's revelation would fully equip Israel for the failures in their spiritual journey. In the later writings by other Israelites that Yahweh provided, they were always urged to return to the Law, the writings of Moses, as their foundation (see particularly Joshua 1:8; Malachi 4:4; Psalm 1, which were placed at critical junctures in their version of the Scripture). Life was in repentance and in the message of Moses about Yahweh and the One who would serve as their Redeemer.

The revelation that was Moses' legacy to Israel included a song they were to learn. It was written for the time when they were scattered through all the nations (Deuteronomy 31:14-22). They were to learn it and pass it along. The song recited their habitual rebellion and the curses that came on them as a result. However, it ended with the promise of atonement for their sins that Yahweh would provide for them and for all people (Deuteronomy 31:43).

The writings of Moses also recorded the promise of a great prophet, THE prophet like Moses. Clearly Israel's welfare rested in this one and would depend on their obedience to this One who was their hope (Deuteronomy 18:14-22). So the written revelation given to Israel in the Law and the liturgy of the law were quite clear in painting an accurate picture of faith in Christ as humanity's hope.

Moses' warning is that the understanding of what God has said to them is not difficult or out of reach. There were no secrets to it (see also Deuteronomy 29:29), and no decoding necessary. The great possession of Israel, as Paul stated in Romans 9:1-5 was the revelation of God. So Moses' words to them exhort them not to view the Law as something that was hopelessly beyond their ability to understand and embrace. It is important to see that within the Law is the provision for the problem it reveals. Its standard of morality when embraced and pursued reveals our depravity. Its worship ceremony, when pursued, reveals the hope of Christ and the gospel.

After saying that the Law's message is not out of reach, Moses writes, "it is not in the heaven that you should say, who will go up to heaven for us to get it for us and make us hear it so as to observe it." In the context, Moses' words are warning for a particular age that would unfold in stages that would lead to the eventual restoration of Israel. It would be critical for Israel to not look beyond the clear message of the Law and for them not to listen to voices other than God's Spirit, so as not to miss out on the blessing of God.

By Paul's time these words were the message of the hour for the Jews, Paul's kinsmen according to the flesh. It was the gospel, the message about Christ, and it had been perfectly foreshadowed by the Law. Israel was to avoid the urge to look elsewhere, or to excuse their disobedience by imagining they lacked the information and teaching they needed.

In this letter to the Romans Paul quotes a portion of these words of Moses, and attributes them to the voice of "the righteousness based on faith." Faith sees in the Law the provision of grace for the moral shortfall in every human that is exposed by the Law. It sees Christ foreshadowed. Moses called for Israel to pursue the law with all their hearts. That is important. They were to look inwardly and observe where their heart was even in those moments when they were doing the actions prescribed by the Law. Within their own beings they could come to understand their need for Christ if they let their conscience be guided by the truth. Righteousness based on faith would speak to them if they allowed it. But it demanded that they let the law judge their thoughts by its truth. They could not make it say what they wanted it to say.

Paul quotes Moses' words, "do not say in your heart, who will ascend into heaven?" He then adds his own commentary, saying, "that is, to bring Christ down." Paul is supposing with Moses that some would not apply themselves to the revelation in the Law of Christ and faith. They would give a token effort to the Law. They would go through its routines and not reflect on their application or implication. They would whine for an easier path that was more to their liking. Like all humanity, that was the way of Israel and Moses knew it. They would seek for something additional from God, like the rich young ruler. Moses foresaw them wandering from the way of attentiveness to revelation. It was not their way, nor the way of humanity to give their whole hearts to the things prescribed and revealed by the Law. What brought personal pleasure or met their various appetites they would give attention to.

By Paul's time the voice of faith, the solution to the dilemma of our uncircumcised hearts, was speaking. The Messiah, the sin-bearer and future King, had already come down from heaven as Paul states in His commentary on Moses' words. He had atoned for sin. He had risen from the dead, up from the abyss. The presence of the Spirit within each person who had faith would confirm all of this. The voice of those of faith was not speaking of a future Anointed One. It was speaking of Jesus as the Christ, and His Spirit living within all who believed. Moses' warning about what not to do, if heeded, led to belief in Christ. A person of faith needed to look no further than the Law to see the person of Christ confirmed. They needed no voice, other than that within them, to believe and obey. Revelation was plain and becoming even plainer.

10:7—or, "who will descend into the abyss?" (That is, to bring Christ up from the dead).

Moses' words as rendered in our English versions were "who will cross the sea" which the Hebrews who rendered the Septuagint interpreted in the way Paul quotes here. Their point is the same as that of verse 6. The voice of the righteousness based on faith does not say that there is a hidden, unintelligible portion of information from God outside the Law which makes the Law "doable." One need not suppose that the secret lies in heaven (as per verse 6), or that it has been stolen by the forces of hell or forgotten and lies within the realm of the dead (verse 7). It is not as if the Christ solution propounded by the Law needs to be conjured up by some additional, unavailable formula. That was the point of Moses in Deuteronomy 30. The Law is clear and complete when its message of faith is listened to.

When God is fully worshiped and trusted, He Himself will keep His covenant promises as the Law lays them out. One has only to move beyond the "do" message of the Law and this "trust" message becomes very clear. One has only to heed the Law's predictions of dismal human failure to know of the hope of Yahweh's salvation. This required humility, specifically admission of failure. To such a person the sin offerings, fellowship offerings, feast days, and all the other ceremony revealed a work God was doing in their behalf, the work of mercy and grace. In addition, the testimony of real-life blessings to the humble would affirm Yahweh's presence with His recurring salvation.

So the Law, particularly in its narrative portions, spoke to them of faith message not so much a works message. The heroes of Moses' writings were Abraham, Joshua and Caleb, men of faith. Moses projected himself as having fallen short, dying outside the land as the disobedient ones had, despite his considerable moral strength.

10:8—but what does it say? “The word is near to you, in your mouth and in your heart” that is, the word of faith which we are preaching,

Through Moses God addresses the great human tendency—to not really perceive that which we know. In the Law the Israelites had the message about Christ and His mission. They had only to ponder the words their own mouths spoke, and their own inner beings had stored. This they had to do if they were not going to miss the blessing God had earmarked for them. That much was an individual choice. Each Israelite had the responsibility to arrive at a personal decision of faith. It was near them. They had what they needed to execute on this matter. But they had to do it.

Paul was seeing Israelites fail to arrive at faith by the thousands. They were turning away from the core message of salvation through Christ, foreshadowed by the very words of Moses that they knew and embraced. The warning of Moses for the day of Paul was not being heeded and for this Paul was greatly burdened. He longed for them to listen to the voice that produced faith, the voice from without and within that witnessed to the truth of the gospel message.

The voice of righteousness based on work speaks loudly within every human. It is our own innate conclusion about God and it is clearly reflected in all the religious schemes of every era. It says within us that we appease God and are accepted by Him based on our good deeds. If we do enough of the right kinds of things, we will be accepted by Him.

Knowing that this is the language or dialect of the fallen human heart, God composed the Law in that dialect. The Law is a message about what it is that one must do to be righteous. It describes the works of God. So it did not compromise morality and so give up the sacred ground of righteousness and fear of Yahweh. Those are critical, and no man can see God or please God without them. But the Law, written in this “do” dialect, is also a clear set of instructions about how moral failure is to be handled, and so moral failure is universal and routine. So strong is this message that rituals are built right into the calendar by the Law. In such provisional rituals the Law reveals that our righteousness based on works falls short.

But the rituals also clearly show that there is a supply of righteousness outside us that God has opened to us. It comes from God, and we have only to demonstrate faith. In response to our faith, He supplies to our account His own righteousness. That message is implicit in the Law and explicit in the great heroes of the Law, Abraham (Genesis 15:6), Caleb and Joshua (Numbers 14:6-38; 32:11-12).

The great gospel apologetic, Romans, that Paul was in the middle of, discloses the intricacies of what can only be referred to as the great gospel transaction, how the perfect record of Christ with respect to the Law and the death of Christ come to have merit on our behalf. The following verses allude to the great transaction of faith that brings about a new standing with God, that of being declared righteous, and a new journey in which we are rescued from our previous condition.

10:9—that if you confess Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved.

This is the message embraced by those of faith, the truth the Law pointed to. It is the universal testimony of the dead and the living who have been justified. It remains the definition of what “the faith” is at its most basic level, the seed if you will that provides life.

It is best to start with the end of the verse, which is the result to which faith brings us. The result is that we are saved. The word means rescued or made sound or cured. In our present day it has become the term used to describe the moment in time that we are justified. We must remember that this is not the way Paul, or the other New Testament writers use the term. Rather, Paul uses the term “save” to refer to the entire work of God in us. So the term encompasses the moment of belief when we are declared righteous, our journey of sanctification in this life, and our final and complete sanctification in Christ’s presence in glory, the moment when we are declared righteous in final judgment and given our eternal inheritance. When Paul spoke of the gospel being the power of God unto salvation in 1:16, this entire experience of which justification is a part, is what he was speaking of. So this verse is a one-sentence summation of what the faith school teaches about how one comes to experience salvation.

Two ideas are set forth by Paul as the essence of the salvation by faith experience. The first idea is to “confess Jesus as Lord,” or literally, to “confess the Lord Jesus.” We find an anartharos construction here, the definite article not being used in the Greek before the term Lord. This is a way of expressing the absolute uniqueness of this lord. We would say it this way, the Lord. This term lord was use of those with authority. However, by both the grammar used here, by what we know of the Jew’s use of this term, and by what Paul says elsewhere, we know that this was nothing less than the confession of the divinity of Christ. We confess that He is Yahweh of the Old Testament in human flesh. The word “confess” means to say the same word, to agree, and to embrace the same idea. It refers in this case to stating through one’s own words agreement with the testimony that Jesus is God, the Sovereign over all that is, including oneself.

The second key element in our faith is the belief that God raised Jesus from the dead. It is done with the heart, or the inner being. That is always where belief occurs. Paul’s point was not trying to make this some kind of “super belief,” as the word “heart” might convey in our present day. In the ancient view of the human being, thought occurred in the heart, feeling occurred in the kidneys and intestines. Often the heart was simply an expression for one’s inner being. Believing in the heart means that the words one speaks in a “confession” are the expression of what one believes to be true—pure and simple. There is no duplicity in what they believe. Their words flow from an inner conviction. The inner conviction is about the signs Jesus Himself had stated would prove that He was who he claimed to be. There was His statement, “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up” (John 2:18-19). There was also His prediction that “As Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the fish, so must the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth (Matthew 12:39-40).

We are given in this verse then a very concise statement of the salvation by faith position. It stands in direct opposition to the idea that one can earn their salvation. Paul will clarify in the next verse what he meant in this verse so that the position is crystal clear and works are kept out of the salvation equation.

10:10—for with the heart man believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation.

This verse starts with the conjunction “for”. This shows that its function is to add thought that further explains the statement of verse nine. Belief, Paul says, happens in the inner being. We become convinced that Jesus was “raised from the dead.” It is the result of a consideration of evidence, and the more subjective experience of the conviction of the Holy Spirit. These work together so that at some moment known to God we change from unbelievers to believers. We become convinced that Christ was God in human form. At that moment we are declared righteous. It is all based on Christ’s work. It has nothing to do with our works, even our confession of faith, since faith could not occur apart from the Holy Spirit’s conviction. It is in our inner being that a transaction occurs that results in our being declared righteous.

Now it is true that out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks (Matthew 12:34). It is true that what is in the person’s heart shapes action (Matthew 15:18). But that is not what Paul was dealing with here. He is speaking about what faith, if it could speak, would articulate about salvation. If faith were given a voice, it would say that its presence within any individual directing and enabling them to believe in Christ, results in them being declared righteous. This begins our conscious experience in the process God started before the foundation of the world. Belief results in justification, the initiation into the salvation experience.

After describing this initiation into the salvation process, Paul speaks to what leads to its fuller realization. It is the outward, verbal confession of Christ as Lord that leads to progress in our spirits with Him. It is likely that Paul is not referring here to just a verbal assent, but more of a declaration of conviction, and that is what he intends by using the word confess. A confession became in Christianity another word for a doctrinal statement. It is likely that this usage came out of an understanding of verses like this. The confession is a realization and an affirmation. When someone verbalizes that Jesus is God in human flesh and is the rightful Sovereign over their life, their salvation begins to bear fruit and that continues as their submission expands.

10:11—for the Scripture says, “whoever believes in Him will not be disappointed.”

This is a quote from Isaiah 28:16. Paul has already quoted this passage just a few verses earlier (9:33). It is the perfect description of the reality that encompasses those who enter the salvation experience—no one who believes in Christ will be disappointed.

The primary idea of Paul here in the idea of disappointment is not likely the emotional one. In other words, he is not primarily going for the idea that we will say to another person, “it was worth it!” when we see our heritage, though that is certainly true. Paul’s point and Isaiah’s point is likely that Christ will follow through and do all that He has promised by covenant oath to do, for all who believed in Him. It is a statement of Christ’s character and commitment first and foremost. We will not be disappointed because He does not disappoint. He is faithful. On all who believe He will bestow His covenant promises made to Israel. These are the inheritance of all who confess Him.

The universality of the Abrahamic covenant is undergirding Paul’s treatment of the subject in chapters 9-11. What God was up to with Israel in Paul’s time had to do with what He is up to through Israel, and this is the point Paul’s discourse is moving toward.

10:12—for there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all, abounding in riches for all who call upon him.

When God promised Abraham that all nations of the earth would be blessed through him, He was revealing His plan to enter the human stream Himself as an Israelite, to die for humanity's sin, to draw Gentiles to Himself, and take up residence in the spirits of all who believe. He Himself, a Jew, would be the key element in that blessing. Paul could see from his vantage point that this great blessing had come about. If many Jews stumbled, this was still true. God was blessing all the world through the Jews. The days of distinction were passed. No longer were Gentiles second to Jews. They were on equal footing, all ruled by One, Jesus Christ. He is the head from which all parts are equally receiving direction.

The figure used in this verse is that there is one kingdom under one benevolent, generous ruler, and all the subjects of that kingdom are equally cared for. In terms of the subject at hand—Paul's concern for the salvation of Israel, it is not that Israelites have been excluded. They need only to call on Jesus and they will join the millions of the earthly family who have been justified by faith and the millions of Gentiles who were doing the same. This family of faith embraces all who are of faith without distinction, and it treats them with distinction.

10:13—for “whoever will call upon the name of the Lord will be saved.”

This is a quote from an Old Testament prophecy made by Joel (Joel 2:3). In that context Joel is describing a period that precedes the great “day of the Lord,” the appointed time when God confronts evil on the earth. Peter recognized that the events that happened at Pentecost, specifically the outpouring of God's Spirit, were the inauguration of that great era leading up to the day of the Lord. It would be an era when the great invitation would be extended to all men to experience life in fellowship with God and the restoration to health that it brings. In its original form it was an invitation to call on the name of Yahweh.

Besides this critical idea of salvation three other ideas are important. The term whomever is critical, showing that it is a universal invitation. Absent is any idea of it being the God of Israel speaking only to Israel. The name of Yahweh is critical, the covenant God of Israel who revealed Himself to and through Israel. The condition is a call to this specific God. It is not just a general quest for salvation or a request to another supposed being for salvation. It is a distinct turning to Yahweh. The calling out is critical. It is the call of Genesis 4:26. This is not a dependence on oneself and good works. It is a realization that one is in trouble and falling short. It is a cry of dependency, a call for help.

10:14—How then shall they call upon Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And How shall they hear without a preacher?

Paul has spoken to the idea that the offer of the righteousness of God is universal. It is available to whomever will call on the Lord. Here he asked three questions related to the prerequisites of people coming to the point where they call upon the name of the Lord.

For people to call on the name of the Lord there must be the declaration of a message. People must hear through that message about Christ, then they must believe in Him to be declared righteous. Only then can their call to Him for the riches of salvation be heard.

Though these questions lend themselves well to an appeal for human agents to help the spread of the gospel, the verses that follow seem to reflect that seeking evangelists was not primarily what Paul had in mind here. He has in mind here God's process of revelation whereby He revealed Himself to and through Israel through general revelation, special revelation, and by Christ—the word incarnate. It is likely meant by Paul to extol the glory of the gospel of which he was not ashamed, it being the full story about the salvation of humanity

10:15—and how shall they preach unless they are sent? Just as it is written, “how beautiful are the feet of those who bring glad tidings of good things.”

The act of declaring the truth of the gospel could only come about as God sent individuals out to do it. The gospel was not intuitively known, and it was not subjective truth. It is not a loosely defined body of ideas. It is a specific set of objective ideas which can be taken wrongly and taught errantly. So those who declare the gospel must be sent. The idea of sending with the commission, as an authoritative representative is what is being portrayed here. It has to do with those individuals whom God has chosen over the millenniums to officially speak for Him.

The quote is from Isaiah 52:7. It is a passage that speaks to the restoration of Israel, and in the context, the one bearing glad tidings is the Messiah, who announces peace.

10:16—however, they did not all heed the glad tidings; for Isaiah says, “Lord, who has believed our report?”

Paul's string of questions could lead one to believe that where people are not believing, such as among the Israelites of Paul's day, it is because of ignorance of the message. So Paul's statement of concern for the salvation of Israel could take a turn here and become an appeal for God to commission and send more preachers.

The human tendency where a message has not been obeyed is always to plead ignorance and a lack of understanding and even a lack of clarity. But Paul points out that the real problem with disobedient and unsaved Israelites is that they have not heeded the glad tidings. The clarification means that they have heard it and simply chosen not to give it appropriate attention. This is not a recent condition. It is not something that has happened in Israel merely with respect to the Christian message. It has been their problem historically. In this they are typical of all humanity. No less a man than the great prophet Isaiah observed this among them and posed the question that Paul quotes here from Isaiah 53. It could be said in fact, that they did not heed the Christian message because they had not heeded any of God's previous messages, and so were not prepared for their Messiah.

10:17—so faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of Christ.

This verse shows that Paul has not been appealing for more to proclaim the Christian message, although that is certainly a good thing to do (Matthew 9:37–38). Rather, he is returning to the line of logic set forth in his questions in verses 14–15, to show that the preaching or proclamation which needed to be made, heard, and believed, was made by Christ. In other words, God himself made the proclamation of Himself by becoming a man and in particular a Jewish man. They had what they needed for salvation and God's word about Christ was continually being proclaimed by His called one's, the apostles. It is the word of Christ, the message authored by Him, proclaimed by Him, and entrusted to the apostles by Him, of which He Himself was the subject. It is that word or message that is essential for the salvation of all.

10:18—but I say, surely they have heard, have they? Indeed they have; “their voice has gone out into all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.”

Paul begins this verse with the question that many might ask about the necessity of belief in Christ. Is it not true, with certainty, that many have not heard this word of Christ? Are all of them condemned? Many skeptics have asked, “Is not the requirement of belief in Christ an injustice on the part of God?”

Paul's answer to this question is somewhat surprising. He replies to the question in a tone that equals the degree of certainty with which it was asked. He says, “Indeed they have.” He does not acknowledge the presence of those who have not heard. To support this answer, he quotes the words of David in Psalm 19. In that Psalm David speaks of what we will call general revelation about God. By this we mean that which is revealed about the Creator simply by examining what is created. David said that this creation, without any audible voice, each day and night revealed volumes about God. Creation “pours forth speech” (Psalm 19:2).

It is of interest that Psalm 19 is very specific. It says that it is the heavens that declare the glory of God, and then speaks specifically of the sun. Using language of appearance, it speaks of its “journey.” That is the classic way in which the heavens have been understood by man, until relatively recently. This is true not just of the sun but of the stars as well. And so the astrologers studied what we know as the signs of the zodiac which spoke of the “sign” the earth was under or the “house” it was in at various times of the year.

There is some evidence in the Scripture that in the beginning God gave these various stars and their formations their names and that these told a very different story when interpreted according to His script. Some suggest that therefore the wise men in the East knew of the King being born of the Jews. They knew not just by a particular star's appearance, but by the fact that the story of this king was the overall message of the astrological story.

This all is speculation to some degree, though it seems clear from Scripture that it was God who named the stars (Job 38:31–33; Isaiah 40:26), and that He placed them as they are to be signs (Genesis 3:14). This would make what we refer to as “general revelation” much more specific and if it is true would mean millions early on had greater knowledge of the truth of God and Christ than we would have thought. It would also explain why Paul could make this statement in Romans 10 about those who have supposedly not heard the gospel.

If God placed a story in the night skies, we would expect that it would become distorted, even perverted in time. It seems very likely that this is what has occurred, and that what has come to be known as astrology is a perversion of the story the stars were intended to convey. The real story may still have been known at Paul's time among the Jews.

10:19—but I say, surely Israel did not know, did they? At the first Moses says, “I will make you jealous by that which is not a nation, by a nation without understanding I will anger you.”

Paul opens this verse by posing a question meant to address what was to some an incredulous idea, that Israel was ignorant of the truth about God, as lost as were the heathen. His question could have been worded like this: “Is Israel really and truly ignorant—really?”

Paul then quotes from Deuteronomy 32:2. Deuteronomy 32 is the record of a song which Moses taught Israel at God's direction. The purpose of this song was stated in Deuteronomy 31:14-22. It was to be a witness for God against Israel in the future when they found their disobedience had separated them from God. Because they would make Him jealous by what was not a God, He would make them jealous by what was not a nation. The song is revelation of Israel's moral bankruptcy, of God's mercy toward them, and of His plan for them. In the end it is the story of their restoration, not their rejection. But along the way it speaks of the time when God would pour out His affection on others, and His wrath on Israel.

Paul's point in citing this line from the song is to show that from the start there was not only knowledge of God, but relationship with Him and disclosure by Him of the detail of where that relationship was going. There was disclosure that other peoples would be given what use to belong to the Israelites. So Israel not only knew the word about the Christ, they knew they would reject it! Amazing! They knew that others would accept it and occupy the position they thought was exclusively theirs with God.

To all Jewish readers of Paul's day this quote comes from Scripture they were very familiar with. If they cared they could look around themselves and see that though Israelites knew about the Christ, they were rejecting Jesus Christ, and so were becoming “outsiders with respect to the real household of God.” In terms of knowledge of Yahweh others were now clearly rising above them in understanding. Their position was being occupied by no nation, but by a rag-tag, eclectic assemblage of people of all ethnic origins in the fledgling church that was the body of Christ.

They did know, and yet they came not to know. They knew the word about Christ, but came to reject the Word incarnate, Jesus, who was the Christ. For the time being their Christ became the king of an invisible kingdom across political and ethnic lines. Meanwhile, they continued their rebellious ways following that which was not truth, and which was not God. Yet as they watched this fledgling community, they were jealous of what they saw. Pilate recognized their envy of Jesus (Matthew 27:18). They were convinced the truth was not true yet envied the obvious presence of God's Spirit among the believers, and this provoked their anger wherever the gospel was preached. They, the knowing, became willfully ignorant.

10:20—and Isaiah is very bold and says, “I was found by those who sought me not, I became manifest to those who did not ask for me.”

These words are found in Isaiah 65. They occur at the start of that chapter which is a bold proclamation to Israel of God’s plan to turn away from the mass of Israelites and show Himself to a small remnant. God says He will bring forth offspring from Jacob to inherit His kingdom (Isaiah 65:9).

Verse one, the specific verse Paul quotes, was clarifying the basis of God’s sovereign choice of Israel over other nations. That choice was not based on merit on their part. Specifically, it was not since they were seeking Him. He revealed Himself to them though they were not even looking for Him.

Paul is providing this data in response to His own question in verse 19, “surely Israel did not know did they?” This is His way of saying that even Israelites were ignorant by choice of the truth of God, the general revelation He had made available. Verse 20 confirms this. They came to know God only because God took initiative and showed Himself to them. They did not come to know Him because they were searching for Him.

The writings of Isaiah confirmed that the Israelites needed to be saved and rescued by God, the same as the rest of humanity. Isaiah was very bold. We might say he was very straight-forward in his description of Israel’s natural condition. They too were ignorant and remain ignorant of Him apart from His gracious work in them. They were depraved even as the rest of humanity.

The next verse will reveal an even bolder statement by Isaiah that shows Israel’s need for salvation. All of this supports the idea Paul expressed at the start of this chapter, that he prays to God for the salvation of Israel. They were people who believed that they only needed to be saved politically from enemies like Rome. They lost sight of their need for repentance and new birth—rescue on a spiritual level.

10:21—but as for Israel he says, “all the day long I have stretched out my hands to a disobedient and obstinate people.”

Israel heard from God, yet as individuals did not hear. There were those within Israel that “found Him,” yet most continued on in their way. So in spite of God’s great revelatory work, by and large Israel remains stubbornly self-absorbed to this day.

This is a straight-forward statement from God of His own patience and Israel’s continued rebellion. The words “all day long” project an image of God’s endurance and persistence. His was no mere cursory attempt. It had been a consistent effort that had endured since the call of Abraham roughly 1700 years before Paul. It was an effort which had borne the heat of the day. It was an effort of love, an invitation to rest and relationship. Yahweh had “stretched out His hands” to them, which likely denotes the act of rescue and of bringing them to safety. The plain and simple facts were that Israel was a disobedient obstinate people.

Israel was like all the rest of humanity in that they needed to be saved. This is the great point of this chapter; Israel’s need for salvation. God had never said anything different. He had never said that He chose them because they were morally superior. These words are from Isaiah 65:2, and the passage is one of several similar statements by God about the spiritual condition of Israel. They needed, like everyone else, the full experience of God’s salvation, and that was Paul’s prayer for them

Looking back over chapter ten, Paul began by stating Israel's lost condition—they need to hear the news of the gospel and respond to it. Verses 16–21 summarize their condition, and show it is not a new development. It is a result of a universal condition, the same one all humanity has, sin and rebellion. Verses 16–18 show that they have heard the truth all along but have not believed. Strictly speaking Israel's problem is not a lack of information. Despite all the information they have been given they are ignorant. This is an incredulous claim, and Paul frames it in the form of a question in verse 19—is Israel ignorant? He then points out that early on they were told they would be made jealous by God. Others would come to have that which they did not have, which was God himself. Paul then cites Scripture which is a bold declaration by Isaiah of Israel's lack of any innate spiritual zeal. Yahweh, in their case, showed Himself to them although they weren't looking for Him. And finally, Paul quotes a statement by Isaiah that captures the stark reality of Israel's spiritual history. God had continually reached out to them in mercy and love. They continually fought and resisted Him even as the name Israel suggests. They need to be preached to and brought to salvation.

Romans 11

11:1—“I say then, God has not rejected His people, has He? May it never be! For I too am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin.”

With these words Paul continues his teaching about his “brothers according to the flesh,” ethnic Israel.

Islam is founded on the idea that the Jews violated the covenant and so it was given to another line of Abraham’s seed, the descendants of Ishmael. Many Christians have a similar scheme. They believe that Israel violated the covenant and so it was given to the Church. Still others suggest that God never made a covenant with ethnic Israel. He made it with the elect among Israel and so it continues to be in force with all the elect regardless of ethnic origin. All such views are found wanting by the words of Paul in Romans 9-11. Chapter 11 is a chapter of conclusions that shape our understanding of past, present, and future events that relate to ethnic Israel. It is ethnic Israel, because that is who Paul said he was speaking of, “my brothers according to the flesh.”

First, to the question of whether or not God has rejected ethnic Israel, Paul’s answer is as clear as could be asked for—“May it never be!” There is no ambiguity in this statement, nor should there be in our theology.

A diversion from the thought of the text is appropriate here. Our ambiguity on this matter began to be formalized in Augustine’s work *The City of God*. Augustine and the various apologists of his day found it increasingly difficult to defend the statements of Scripture which seemed to speak of a glorious kingdom of Israel. In their day Israel lay in utter ruin, victims of the Roman machine. The thought that it could ever again be a force in the world was great fodder for those who were enemies of Christianity. In fact, it was laughable. It was far more palatable to allegorize all the passages of Scripture regarding Israel’s future, and even to allegorize Israel itself and to make it all a mystical picture of Christ and His church.

This allegorizing of Scripture went far beyond the allegorizing of Israel. In fact, it reached a feverish pitch and a number of important things were sacrificed. The most important thing was that the words of Scripture lost authority, and that authority naturally shifted to the one, or one’s, who “understood” the allegory. They held the interpretive key and so held the authority meant for the Scripture. In time this allowed authority to shift from Scripture itself to the hierarchy of the Church. This contributed to some of the darkest days of Christianity. This is an area that is outside the course of the concern of this text, but the danger of the Church evolving into a merely human institution was given an “assist” in its development by failure to handle the issue of God’s relationship to ethnic Israel correctly.

The thinking perpetrated by Augustine’s work developed its own ugly mutations. These allowed such notable men as Martin Luther to carry around a dark anti-Semitism in their minds. It led to numerous crimes against the Jews perpetrated by the Christian Church. It also meant that when evil men such as Hitler rose to power, with a devilish agenda toward the Jews, he found a ready mindset, even a theology among those in the Christian community that muffled the collective conscience. Much of this anti-Semitism could have been effectively resisted if we had embraced Paul’s straight-forward statement that God has not rejected ethnic Israel.

This verse begins with the phrase “I say then”. This shows that what follows is an assertion based on the things Paul has thus far said in discussing his brothers “according to the flesh.” Chapter 10 showed that though they were chosen in terms of God revealing Himself to them, this did not result in the individual salvation of all of them. In fact, they were shown by this to be disobedient and obstinate and like everyone else, in need of God’s salvation. As the instruments of revelation in God’s plan of redemption, they thoroughly demonstrated the problem of sin and evil.

It is not that Israelites were Yahweh’s people by birth, and as such by their performance fell from His good graces. They never performed like children of God, because individually they never became truly related to Him. It is not that Yahweh rejected them. It is that they never responded to His invitation to come to Him, though He chose to reveal Himself to them. So the experience of the very salvation they revealed to the world was only entered into by a few of them. Despite this, Paul will show that God’s posture toward them in the long term has not changed.

Paul first offers himself as evidence of this fact that Israel has not been rejected. If they had been, there would have been no “Damascus Road” for Paul, no special visions or revelation, no authority conveyed to him for leading the church. If God has rejected Israel, we must somehow explain Paul, as well as the rest of the apostolic band.

What has Paul said now over the course of two chapters and the start of a third regarding ethnic Israel? He has stated that God has not rejected Israel, yet he has clearly stated that he himself prays for their salvation. So they have not been rejected, but they are not saved. His position is that God has not excluded this great ethnic group from the *offer* of salvation. He has not rejected those who have responded in faith, and He has not cast aside the promises He made to Abraham regarding his offspring. There is abundant proof that God is still moving among Israelites. At the same time, they are still showing what has been their habitual slowness of heart.

11:2—“God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew. Or do you not know what the Scripture says in *the passage about Elijah*, how he pleads with God against Israel?”

Paul begins to clarify God’s present work in Israel, showing why it can be stated that God has not rejected them.

Paul’s statement that “God has not rejected His people whom He *foreknew*” is an important one. How should it be taken? Does it mean that He foreknew in the sense the term is used in chapter 8, where those whom He foreknew were predestined to become conformed to the image of His son? Or does it mean simply that God foreknew all Israelites in the sense that He related Himself before time to them, intending that they should be instruments of revelation, the people who would receive and act out the Law, and that they should be the ethnic group through which He Himself entered humanity? Used in the latter sense it would not relate to the issue of their personal salvation. It seems best not to water down the term foreknew in this latter way.

Is it possible that Paul is saying here that God has not rejected Israel, that there is a group among Israelites that He foreknew, predestined, called, justified and will glorify. So though many are not saved, there is a group that have been and this is no different than has always been the case in Israel. This seems to be the direction Paul’s argument is headed and the following verses will bring this meaning out.

This means that it is proper to speak of all Israelites being the children of God in the sense that they were chosen instruments of revelation, central to His plan for humanity, and ethnically related to the incarnate Son of God. It is also proper to understand that by this the experience of salvation was not automatically conveyed to them, an understanding many of them lacked over centuries of time. They needed as individuals to turn to God, personally placing faith in God's plan for their salvation. Like all who have rejected truth, those Israelites who rejected the faith will be eternally lost. They are outside the sphere of salvation.

But within the community of Israel were those to whom God personally related Himself, whom He foreknew, predestined, called, justified, and glorified. There would continue to be such people from among Israel such as Paul, though Paul will say that they will be still fewer in number. So God had not rejected those from among His people whom He foreknew in this sense. All His covenant promises would come to be fulfilled to this faithful stream.

This chapter deals with that faithful remnant of those Israelites whom God foreknew, and Gentiles that He foreknew who would be merged by Him into that Israelite stream. It sheds light on what God was doing then, what He is doing now, and what He will yet do. This second verse has served the purpose of narrowing down the company of people whom God has not rejected. None whom God has foreknown have been rejected or will be rejected. They are predestined. Paul will offer as Scriptural support for this idea a passage about Elijah (1 Kings 19:10).

11:3—"Lord, they have killed thy prophets, they have torn down the altars, and I alone am left, and they are seeking my life."

This passage of Scripture is found in 1 Kings 19:10. In it Elijah feels he is alone, the only Israelite left who is of the faith. It appeared to be true from the perspective of this righteous, very weary man. The "they" in this statement of Elijah referred to the Israelites.

Elijah lived during a low ebb of the spiritual tide in Israel—not the lowest, but low. The proponents of Baal had more followers and more political clout than the followers of Yahweh. How could such a condition come about in Israel among the people of God? Had God rejected His people? The answer was both yes and no. Yes, many had been rejected by their own choice. They were Israelites who were not saved by Yahweh. But the answer was also No! The hand of God was on a chosen few.

11:4—But what is the divine response to him? "I have kept for myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal."

There were a chosen few in Israel during Elijah's time, who remained loyal to Yahweh, who had not allowed their conscience to be eroded and so clung to what He had declared to be good and right.

Aside from any symbolism that might surround such a number, a movement of 7,000 people is a significant one. On the other hand, when viewed as a proportion of Israel, it is a very small number. That is significant for those who give themselves to the work of God. We are often looking for a remnant, not a large following. Much could be made of the number seven thousand, seven being a number that symbolizes completeness, the number of God, and so on. Whatever the significance of the number might be, it is certain that it is of God's choosing, the result of His work, and therefore is complete. The amount of people, though not large proportionately, was the number God wanted and served His purpose.

From our point of view, we can ask, "Why so few?" This is a very easy question to ask, especially from our present perspective and in matters that concern the welfare of the souls of men. At the same time, given the moral bent of humanity, and if we were to embrace intellectual honesty in this matter, we should also compel ourselves to ask, "Why so many?" Neither this few nor this many can be fully understood against the backdrop of God's love and His justice.

Paul's point in citing this incident is that the relatively small size of the number of Jews responding to the gospel does not mean God has rejected Israel. On the contrary it confirms He has not. The smallness of the number in Paul's time had historical precedent. It was a commentary on Israel's moral condition, but not on God's commitment to the covenant He had made with them. Because it is a covenant based on grace, God finds a way to keep it, not break it, and this leads to His process of choosing and predestining and glorifying. This process is still evident in Israel.

11:5—"In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God's gracious choice."

Paul confirms the comparison we have alluded to. There was historical precedent in the history of God's dealing with Israel for the truth being ignored by many them (see Deuteronomy 29:4). Such was the case in Paul's day. The significant historical precedent however is the presence of a faithful remnant. The presence of this remnant proves God's grace is still operative among them, that His sovereignty is not being negated by human action, that His power extends to the realm of the inner being of everyone, that His mercy and love does not negate His justice, nor does His hatred of evil negate His lovingkindness. The presence of "the gracious choice" of God conveys hope in that it confirms that His name, I AM, describes His makeup and His dealings. He is who He is and what He is doing will always be, and it will always be a reflection both of His simplicity and His complexity.

The fact is that since the death of Christ at the hand of the Jewish religious leaders, there has been a remnant of Israelites who have embraced His work on their behalf. The apostles and Paul were the beginnings of this small but faithful group. They are, as are all who have responded to the gospel, a tribute to the grace of God singling individuals out for salvation.

11:6—“But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace.”

The previous verse spoke of a remnant in present day Israel who believe because of their being chosen by God. The emphasis in that statement is on the fact that it is a gracious choice, the word “God’s” being added by the NASB. This verse now re-emphasizes the fact that those Israelites who constitute this remnant are chosen based on grace, not because of any personal merit. Since it is a result of grace it cannot, by definition, be as a reward for works.

We see by this statement Paul’s teaching on the issue of salvation by grace very clearly. When he speaks of salvation being by grace, he does not mean grace-assisted, where grace is bestowed on people who are making a good effort, to kind of push them over the top. In that case grace would have partnered with human effort to produce a remnant which would be as much a result of human choice as of divine choice. If something is truly by grace, then it is apart from the character, the effort, and the overall goodness of the individual upon whom it is bestowed. That is an important conclusion we can draw from this statement by Paul, and it helps establish God’s definition of grace. Salvation by grace means that salvation comes apart from human effort and merit.

11:7—“What then? That which Israel is seeking for, it has not obtained, but those who were chosen obtained it, and the rest were hardened.”

Paul is ready to state the point that he has been building toward thus far in this chapter about the subject of whether God has rejected Israel. It is an intermediate conclusion of sorts and a very important one. This intermediate conclusion includes his restatement of the choice made by God of individuals in Israel to constitute a chosen remnant and it builds specifically on the idea previously stated that this choice was based on God’s grace not on individual merit. The result of this choosing done by God is that many who were arrogantly assuming that because of faithful performance of tasks relating to the worship system prescribed by the Law they were justified, were in truth not justified. The favored status they were seeking as individuals and as a nation, and the full blessing of God that went with it, was eluding them. What they were seeking for they were not finding. This was because there was no repentance or humility in them. The work they were doing was just more classic humanism, religion according to the flesh, and God was rejecting that. So the majority of Israelites were just like the Gentiles, missing out on the blessing of their heritage by rejecting faith.

Meanwhile there were Israelites who, like the apostles, had been chosen. They were repenting of their sins and laying aside their arrogance toward Christ. Ever since Christ’s rejection this has been happening, a small number of Jews are recognizing Jesus as the Christ so that in every generation there are physical offspring of Abraham who become Christ-followers.

Paul then adds a thought that is new in this lengthy treatment of his brothers, the Jews. He says that the rest who have not responded to the Gospel are hardened. It is not just that they aren’t chosen and so do not experience the gracious act of God and salvation. They become hardened to the truth. “Hardening” is the term Scripture gives to the process whereby an individual becomes unwilling, then incapable of sensing the will or desire of the Creator. Through repeated exposure to the truth and repeated rejection of it, they become calloused to it. They not only DO not believe, but they also cannot believe. Jesus had alluded to this possibility on several occasions (i.e., John 12:36-43), and to the urgency of believing while there was opportunity.

There is something in the thought and conscience of humanity that can become calloused to the truth. When this happens the truth no longer convicts, it no longer gives joy or imparts peace. Properly understood this constitutes the greatest tragedy that can occur in a life. So much is lost and so very much forfeited. It is not that we see it only among Israelites. It is a danger and threat that every human faces with the opportunity to believe.

The following verse will be offered by Paul as Old Testament support for his assessment of this hardened spiritual state of his own people.

11:8—“just as it is written, ‘God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes to see not and ears to hear not, down to this very day.’”

These words are a statement of the thoughts of Isaiah recorded in passages like Isaiah 29:10. The word for stupor comes from a word which means to stun. It describes perfectly one who is incapable of responding as they might. It is not that they do not have what it takes. Isaiah’s words are that they do have eyes and ears. But something has rendered these incapable of doing what they should do. This something is called a “spirit.” This likely refers to their own inner being. Something becomes characteristic of the very core of who they are. It goes beyond a mental block and that is what makes it so permanent. The result is that capability they should have they don’t, and things they should be convicted about and that they should perceive they do not.

Paul says that God gives them this spirit. It is said in the Old Testament that God hardened Pharaoh’s heart. By these kinds of statements, we do not necessarily conclude that God or His Spirit hardens hearts against the truth. It seems more logical from all the Biblical data that God “gives over” such people to a natural process, as Paul suggested in chapter one. He withdraws from them, and the result is that both by their own thought processes and the influence of evil beings bring about in themselves a hardened condition. So it is proper to say that God gives it in the sense that He does nothing to prevent it and that He passes a sentence of sorts on them. This does not mean that it is the work of His Spirit. I can proclaim that my car will be dirty and that does not make me the source of its dirt. The dirt exists, I have only to stop my work and the dirt will continue to do its work by the natural order of things. This is the best way to understand the hardening of hearts. It is the natural condition toward which every human is traveling apart from the gracious intervention of God.

11:9-10—And David says, “Let their table become a snare and a trap, and a stumbling block and a retribution to them. Let their eyes be darkened to see not, and bend their backs forever.”

This quote comes from Psalm 69:22-23. That is a Psalm where David pours out his heart to God during some unspecified time of trouble in his life. But like several Psalms, it is also a Psalm which in many parts would be true to an even fuller degree of the experience of Christ. These words come from the section of the Psalm where David is asking God to carry out sentence on His enemies, naming the things they rightly deserve. It comes just after he states that they have given him vinegar to drink, a remarkable figurative statement by David that would be the actual experience of Christ.

David's words describe what would be the just response by God to such people. Paul, quoting from the Septuagint, affirms that this is the inheritance of those who align themselves as enemies of God's anointed ruler. This was the lot that fell to Paul's earthly family because of their rejection of Christ. They were experiencing this, all of them except those whom God chose as part of His remnant. Their table, those things that provided for them sustenance, including the "scheme" they laid out to meet their own fleshly agenda, would entrap them. It would serve their need in the moment and then become their cruel taskmaster.

That is the nature of evil and its work in us. It causes us to stumble, undoing all progress we hope to make. Evil also blinds our eyes to the truth. The great biblical symbol of truth is light. Just a little light enables us to function to gain more light, and that is the nature of truth as well. Rejection of truth impairs us. To reject Christ is to reject that first light that helps us see all other truth that enlightens us to understand life and death and beyond. Without truth our perceptive abilities themselves are impaired. It is not just that our surroundings are dark. We become blind, what we could call conscience-impaired, because of rejecting Christ

The bent back is the symbol of one who in life has become debilitated. Theirs has become a life of pain and sorrow. This is a very apt description of what has happened to the Israelites. Once a people of great glory, they have had a history of great pain which continues to this day. They have been cursed in a sense by their heritage by not living up to it. We must remember that the Old Covenant came with both a blessing and a curse. God's oath was that He would bless them for their obedience and curse them for their disobedience. He was equally bound to do either, depending on their faithfulness. They had been reminded of this along the way by prophets like Jeremiah (Jeremiah 11:1-5).

Punishments like these reiterated here by Paul were not reactionary and certainly not arbitrary. God had been long-suffering in the matter. Though there had always been a remnant among them, the course chosen by the Jews in general was disobedience, and this was repeated over the span of many generations. Their obedience was occasional and very selective. This overall spiritual plight of Israel remains one of the great tragedies of the story of humanity. They who bore the solution to creation's fall, also demonstrated loudly and dramatically creation's fallenness.

11:11—"I say then, they did not stumble so as to fall did they? May it never be! But by their transgression salvation has come to the Gentiles, to make them jealous."

It is helpful to have an overview of what Paul has stated thus far in this chapter. Paul started this chapter with the words "I say then," or more literally, "I say therefore." This type of phrase has been characteristic of his treatment of the subject of ethnic Israel (see 9:14, 18, 19,30). It has been a flowing discussion building on a whole series of intermediate assertions. This chapter is more of the same.

He begins with the blunt assertion that God had not rejected Israel (11:1). That assertion will shape the chapter. His first exhibit in support of this assertion is the presence of a remnant of Israelites who were accepting the Gospel, including himself. He proves that this has been the norm in terms of how God has historically dealt with Israel. He follows with the assertion that the remainder of Israel has been hardened. A picture of Israel at the time of Paul has been painted. Generally they are in a “stunned” spiritual state, unresponsive to the truth. They are stumbling regarding the truth of Christ and Him being the promised Messiah. Paul supports this by speaking about what Scripture says (verse 8), specifically what Isaiah and David said. That brings us to verse 11. It is Paul’s second exhibit in support of his assertion that God has not rejected Israel.

He begins this verse with these words, “I say therefore.” He is adding his proposition to those of Isaiah and David in Scripture. This was in line with his God-given role as an apostle (see Ephesians 3:1-13). The verse starts with a question. It is a critical one that has huge implication in terms of how we are to understand prophetic statements made in the Scripture. Because of this, it has huge implications in terms of how we are to understand the role of and future of our planet.

Paul’s question is, “they did not stumble to fall, did they? That is an important issue. His answer is simple. It is an expression he has used frequently and provides a very definitive “NO!” There is no doubt about its meaning. So we have solid and good information here about something. That something is defined by the question. The “they” obviously refers to unbelieving Israel, Paul’s brothers according to the flesh, the subject he had introduced in chapter 9, those with whom this whole portion of his letter is concerned with. He is focusing not on the remnant who have believed, those we refer to in theological jargon as “the elect.” He is speaking to those who have stumbled, as per David’s words, who were now in a state of spiritual stupor.

The meaning of this question centers on what Paul means to convey by using the word “fall.” Elsewhere, Paul uses the word fall to describe those who lack faith and so fall in terms of the opportunity to be justified (see verse 22). But this could not be his meaning here, or he would be contradicting himself by the emphatic answer, “NO!” He has already stated that he is praying for the salvation of Israel. By that he has said that most of them have fallen in the sense of personal justification. It seems best to take these words as asking if, because of their unbelief Israel had lost their “privileged status” with God, the status he had described specifically at the beginning of chapter 9 when he launched into this treatment of the subject of Israel. This can best be understood first as the advantage of revelation and so of a spiritual heritage that prepares one for salvation. This heritage will always be Israel’s, it has not been lost. Secondly, there was and is a certain role of Israel in God’s future for the world that is centered in the promises made to Abraham.

When taken literally the messages of the prophets indicate that there is a role for Israel as long as this planet exists (Jeremiah 32:35-51). This role will require that they come to believe in Christ, but such a revival and renewal will happen through a great miracle of God (Zechariah 12:10-13:2), that Paul will allude to later in this chapter. This is in fulfillment of the various land promises made to Abraham when God entered covenant with him (Genesis 15:17-21).

So to summarize Paul's thought, Israel has not fallen from God's grace to the degree that He will not bring about what He had said and written that He would do in and among them and then through them. Though they have fallen in the sense that many will not ever participate in such blessing or inherit eternal life, they have not fallen in the sense of God withdrawing grace from future generations and revisiting them with spiritual blessings. It is part of the story of God's sovereignty and grace that is still unfolding.

The meaning we assign this simple question "Have they stumbled so as to fall?" not only has far reaching implication in terms of the meaning of whole sections of Scripture. It also has practical impact on how we view our present earth, its varied life forms, perhaps the solar system and beyond. If the prophecies with respect to the future of the nation of Israel are not to be taken as referring to ethnic Israel around the earth we know as Palestine, then they refer to the kingdom of God's elect as many have concluded. This in turn means that there will likely be no earthly reign of Jesus Christ. The Scriptures which speak of such things must be speaking metaphorically, referring to the rule of God over the new heaven and earth which He will create. The implication of this strain of teaching is that the present physical earth, and perhaps much even of the present creation beyond this planet, is not to be redeemed, at least as the matter that composes it stands in its present form. It relegates the present creation to the role of having been subjected to futility never to be released. While this is certainly the Creator's right, and while it does not create any irresolvable questions regarding His character, it does not square best with what Paul said about creation being set free (Romans 8:20-22).

What is the meaning of the present creation? That it is destined for destruction is undeniable from the testimony of Scripture. But is it to come to its end without a window of time in which it experiences the rule of the perfect man with redeemed humanity? Is it all to be a demonstration of the power of evil to warp and to corrupt? Is it to demonstrate for all eternity that something can become by God's assessment unredeemable? Is it just to demonstrate His sovereign power to destroy it? Or is this creation's purpose more comprehensive and glorious, to demonstrate the grace and love with which God's sovereignty is carried out even where evil has wreaked its terrible havoc and so offended Him? Is there to be a window in which this present creation reflects the power of redemption, if only briefly? Scripture teaches of such a window that makes wonderful philosophical sense.

Now the remainder of this verse is important as well. It helps us understand more the purposes of God being achieved through the evil of Israel's "stupor." Paul mentions a specific good that is coming about by Israel's disinterest in the gospel. Through their transgression, he says, salvation has come to the Gentiles. Now it is clear that through the death of Christ salvation became possible to all, both Jew and Gentile. Some would see the Jews rejection of Christ and the subsequent crucifixion of Him as the transgression in mind here. But Gentiles share in that guilt. It is also clear that salvation came to the Jews as well through that transgression.

It is abundantly clear from numerous passages in the Old Testament beginning with the Abrahamic covenant that God's plan was to bring salvation to more than just the Jews. However, as the Jewish culture developed there came to be quite a line of demarcation between Jew and Gentile, so that there was little opportunity for the Gentiles to hear any detail of Yahweh and to participate in community with His people.

However, in the remnant of Israel, who received the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, who were experiencing the leading edge of life under the new covenant, these barriers were breaking down. The Holy Spirit was being poured out in the Gentiles as well. A new era had clearly dawned in which God was stirring among them and they were being anointing with great power for the work of this new form of His kingdom. Salvation had come to the Gentiles.

Where the Jews were resistant to the Gospel, and this is the “transgression” in mind here, Paul himself found the Gentiles responsive. Where the Jews wouldn’t admit the truth of Christ because of their sin, the Gentiles were embracing Him by the thousands. Paul could see it building, but even in the new look of the kingdom Paul did not see that Israel had lost their place in the plan of God.

Paul says that this movement among Gentiles was happening by the plan of God to arouse the affection of the Israelites, to stir them from their stupor. This provoking of the Israelites to jealousy was not a new idea, having been projected by the prophets of the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 32:21), and already mentioned by Paul in this context (Romans 10:19). But it was and is fascinating. God has pursued the Gentile horde out of deep love for them, but there is a strong place in His heart for His wayward love, the people of Israel. His plan and affection for them remains intact.

11:12—“How if their transgression be riches for the world and their failure be riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their fulfillment be!”

From the question of verse 11, Paul moves to the exclamation of verse 12. It is a self-explanatory statement. Its essence is that if evil among Israelites can be used by God to bring such a blessing as salvation to the Gentiles, what blessings await the Gentiles when Israel becomes obedient? If God can bring good through evil, what might He produce through good?

What God will produce through good in Israel is spoken of frequently by Old Testament writers. The prophet Zachariah foretold of the time when Israel is “fulfilled” (Zechariah 12:10-14:21). The result will be that the Lord will be king over the whole earth (Zechariah 14:9), the fear and reverence of Him will become universal and His blessing will encompass the entire planet. It will be the time when this creation, which has been subject to futility, will be redeemed. Humanity will experience life as it was designed to be lived.

11:13—“But I am speaking to you who are Gentiles. In as much then as I am an apostle of Gentiles, I magnify my ministry.”

When Paul says that he is “speaking to you who are Gentiles,” he is not talking just about the words in this part of his letter, or this discourse on Israel, or even of this letter. He is speaking of being marked out by God to speak the truth to Gentiles and to reveal by his ministry what had been only alluded to in passing in the writings of the Old Testament. God had told Abraham that through him all nations of the earth would be blessed. But nowhere had the extensive movement that God would bring about among the Gentiles, including the pouring out of His Spirit into them, be spoken of in detail. This was Paul’s role, himself a Jew, to be an instrument by which this mysterious movement of God would be made known and explained.

It was not just that Paul spoke the gospel to the Gentiles. He articulated clearly through this epistle and others, and through oral instruction the new era and how it fit in what had been perceived as an Israel-focused kingdom of God (See Ephesians 3). His teachings brought into full light the teachings of the Old Testament, so that it could be clearly seen that the cross and the subsequent age that saw the Gospel preached to all people while new and different were not an addendum or appendage to what God had been doing. There was an absolute continuity. This had been God's plan all along. It was not a matter of there being a "Plan B" because "Plan A" had run hopelessly amuck. In saying that he is speaking to Gentiles, Paul is talking to them about Jews to strengthen their understanding of themselves and God's workings among them.

When Paul says that he "magnifies" this ministry of his to Gentiles, he uses a word which means to glorify. This was not a puffing up of his ministry for his own glory, but a description of his ongoing public apologetic on God's embrace of the Gentiles so that all would understand Gentile's status in God's plan and the depth of His love for them. His passion was to see them established on equal footing with Jews in the mind and affairs of local churches. The ministry to Gentiles was critical in God's eyes, and Paul aimed to give it the attention on earth that he knew it was receiving in heaven. He had another motive however in his ongoing public defense of the partnership with the Gentiles in spiritual things.

11:14—"If somehow I might move to jealousy my fellow countrymen and save some of them."

Paul brought public attention to his ministry to Gentiles. He did this by clearly announcing to Jews, when they resisted the gospel, that he was turning to the Gentiles (Acts 13:44-47, 18:6). He would even do this later in Rome (Acts 28:28). It is not exaggerating to say that this cost Paul his life. He refused to be secretive about association with Gentiles (Galatians 2:11-14) and refused to shape the Church in a way that would be less offensive to Jews. This magnifying or glorifying of his ministry to Gentiles was intended by him to stir up jealousy in the Jews, a godly jealousy, a desire not to miss out on what God was doing in others. Paul wanted them to know about the works of the Spirit that were happening among the Gentiles, the experience of the new covenant that they were entering. He hoped by speaking openly on these things that some with good hearts would be jealous of these experiences so much so that they would want to embrace Christ and Christianity. So though Paul was focusing on Gentiles he did so with his own unbelieving family in mind. In this he was following God's heart, who has not set aside and cast-off ethnic Israel.

11:15—"For if their rejection be the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?"

Paul contrasts here two separate and different eras in the unfolding plan of God. They are distinct but similar in that each which will be accompanied by specific changes in the spiritual climate of Israel.

The first era Paul was witnessing. The rejection by Israel of Christ brought about His sacrificial death which enables all humanity to choose to be reconciled to their Creator. Two estranged parties, God and humanity, can experience the cessation of hostilities now through the gospel which God used Israel to bring to its fullness of power.

Paul then states that Israel's acceptance of Christ, when He presents Himself on earth and brings about a spiritual revival in Israel, will be accompanied by another great event in God's plan, the resurrection of the dead. In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul speaks of a great trumpet call of God which apparently announces the coming of Christ and the result is the resurrection of the dead in Christ (1 Corinthians 15:51-58). In Isaiah 27:13 we read of a great trumpet blast and the result being Jews coming from around the world to worship Yahweh in Jerusalem. Could this be the same trumpet? Paul is linking the two events together, the revival of the Jews and the resurrection of dead believers.

Some might take this future event to be simply a symbolic statement of Israel receiving spiritual life through acceptance of Christ, a sort of spiritual resurrection. But there is no reason for such a tepid interpretation. There is ample evidence that the nation will be resurrected, brought back to life (Ezekiel 37), and that these two projections of the resurrection of the dead in Christ and the establishment of an earthly kingdom of Christ in Jerusalem happen during the same period.

11:16—"And if the first piece of *dough* be holy, the lump is also; and if the root be holy, the branches are too."

We see in Scripture two uses of the word holy. First, there are those things referred to as holy that are by their very essence wholly unique and set apart. God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit may be all that is holy by essential nature (1 Samuel 2:2), though some might argue for the Angels (Psalm 89:5-7). Second, we see several things proclaimed to be holy by the Lord. This does not mean that He has examined their essence and found them to be holy, but simply that He has set them apart for a wholly distinct purpose of His.

This second sense is what occurs when various objects are declared to be holy by Him, objects which are inanimate with no morality or personality (Exodus 19:23; 30:29, Genesis 2:3). We are also declared holy a declaration made by Yahweh despite our actual condition. In fact, the term holy is most often not a description of innate quality, but a description of a designated role in the good purposes that further God's plan. God is "set apart" from all that is by His very essence. We are set apart from the rest of humanity by His calling of us. In this sense Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were holy. They were set apart from all of humanity at that point. When Moses led the people from Egypt, he led a holy people in this sense (see Deuteronomy 14:2, and a family of verses like Leviticus 20:26). God made it clear that they were not set apart in terms of any innate goodness (Deuteronomy 9:6,13).

Paul is saying that this quality of being "set apart" by God did not and does not relate to Israel's performance. It simply is. It relates to God's covenant with Abraham. Comparing this to bread, it was true with the first piece of dough and so is true of the whole lump. Comparing this to a tree, it was true of the root, and so is true of the branches of the tree. A tree does not have the root system of one species and the foliage of another, unless it is tampered with through grafting, an idea Paul will make use of in the next verse. Israel was "set apart" for a role in God's plan, and they continue to be even as the generations have come and gone.

11:17—“But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive were grafted in among them and became partaker with them of the rich root of the olive tree,”

Paul is speaking here of the understanding he seeks to impart in the course of his ministry to Gentiles of their relationship to Israel. Though ethnically speaking, they are from a different root, they now grow in the place of natural branches, ethnic Israelites who did not embrace the faith of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Such Gentiles, during the era of the Old Covenant, were considered by the Jews as of an inferior status, though it is certain God did not consider them that. Their ethnic roots were dissimilar. But curiously, the spiritual fruit was the same.

Since the sacrifice of Jesus, Paul pictures the Gentiles as having been made partakers of all the privileges that had been made available through Israel (9:4-5). Paul will make clear in verse 20 that the natural branches that were broken off were broken off due to unbelief, and that all who are grafted in are grafted in because of their faith. This figure of the root of the tree, its natural branches and its grafted branches should govern our view of much of the past, present and future.

Ethnic Jews were not justified by birth, but by faith. They were born into a culture that gave them all the privileged information and so there was a kind of corporate experience of God that they enjoyed together or at times suffered together. But they gained personal justification and sanctification only through personal faith. Without it they were broken off from the personal experiences marked out by God for them. They had only the peripheral and surface experience that those of faith around them were entering. That became a very pathetic kind of experience as the number of those who believed shrank to the remnant size that Paul referred to earlier.

The right way of viewing Israel is to see ourselves as branches grafted into that tree. It is not to see them as grafted into us. From Paul's perspective it is not that there are Jews who will participate in the kingdom of God with Gentiles. It is that Gentiles will participate in the kingdom promised to Jews with the Jews. This has been understood wrongly by the Church for much of the era since Christ. Our nomenclature has said believing Israelites were/are a part of the Church, not believing Gentiles are part of believing Israel. The latter is more in line with the picture Paul is now painting in these verses. It is a picture which apparently typified the position he continually sought to help the Gentiles understand in his official capacity as their apostle. He will continue through verse 24 relating thoughts that build on this figure.

11:18—“do not be arrogant toward the branches; but if you are arrogant, *remember that it is not you who supports the root, but the root supports you.*”

Historically there has been no lack of arrogance on the part of the Gentile dominated Church toward Israel. This stands as one of the great blemishes in the Christian Church's stewardship of the mysteries of God. We have simply not gotten this one right. Rather than being the sympathetic intercessors for Israel as Paul was, some of our foremost leaders have led the arrogant charge against them that has brought about their wholesale persecution and slaughter.

We must continually remember that we are living off promises made to Israel, in particular the covenant made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God views these things as their national treasure. If they do not believe in them individually, and so do not personally participate in them, they are still theirs in some sense, though not with respect to eternal life (9:1-4). They are as a people to be respected and loved and prayed for on this basis. The covenant relationship established with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob supports us. As the root holds the tree up and nurtures it, so that covenant of God with Israel is extended to us and now supports our faith. The person of that covenant, THE Israelite, Jesus Christ, is the source of our life in that faith, and He provides all that we need to grow and persevere in His grace.

It is a must to understand the covenants of Scripture because they do provide the basis upon which our relationship with God is built. A covenant is a bond established between two parties in which they merge their future welfare, and indeed all that they have and are. They become as one in nearly every practical sense. Covenants have clearly spelled out terms that describe matters that they govern, along with any limits and conditions. The making of a covenant was accompanied by a symbolic action that indicated agreement and participation by both parties. The most dramatic symbolic action was when the parties each cut their wrists and joined hands together allowing a mixing of sorts of their blood. By this they were symbolizing the merging of their possessions and beings regarding the objectives of the covenant. Perhaps this early and crude expression was the source of the term for covenant, which means to cut.

When God entered into covenant relationship with Abraham, He laid out all that He would do for him. It was a decidedly one-sided kind of agreement extended to Abraham and to his offspring by God involving a relationship and a land. After Abraham had asked God regarding the Promised Land, "how may I know that I shall possess it?" God took symbolic action regarding this "cutting" to show His commitment to His promise (Gen. 15:8). God instructed Abraham to cut in half a heifer, a goat, a ram, a turtledove, and a pigeon, and to lay the halves opposite each other. Normally the two parties would have passed together between these carcasses to demonstrate that they were giving their very lives to fulfilling the covenant they had made. In this case it was a one-sided covenant and so the presence of God passed between the halves of the carcasses alone, and God re-iterated His commitment to Abraham. So committed was Yahweh to this course of action, of being Abraham's shield and reward, and the land being a visible, tangible expression of that, that He, the God over all that is, entered covenant with mortal man in terms that mortal man could understand.

This covenant relationship with Abraham and his offspring is the root into which we Gentiles have been grafted in. This root, the pledge of God Himself to Abraham, is what supports us. It is the thing upon which our faith is based. We do not understand this if we become arrogant toward the Jews. We have at that point lost sight of our very roots.

11:19—“you will say then, ‘Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.’”

Paul anticipates the move Christians would make toward arrogance and the faulty logic that would cause it. It is an error to say that God so wanted to graft Gentiles in and include them in the blessing of the Abrahamic covenant that He cut Israelites off. It is a mistake to think that some merit on our part led to God turning towards us. This latter idea can easily be embraced by Christian people particularly as we read the statements of God Himself about Israel’s spiritual condition in the Old Testament.

We must see that Israel was not unique and distinct in their propensity. They were and are typical. Israel’s history given to us in writing illustrates the problem of evil in all humanity. It reveals its extent and stubborn persistence. To the degree we identify weakness and corruption in Israel, we identify sin in the entire human stream, including ourselves. We must see ourselves in the pages of the Old Covenant before we can see ourselves in the New Covenant.

Israel is not in their condition of being separated from the experience of the Covenant because God decided He loved Gentiles more, or that Gentiles were morally superior. The next verse will reveal how the Israelites came to the place they are in.

11:20—“Quite right, they were broken off for their unbelief, but you stand by your faith. Do not be conceited, but fear;”

That Israelites were broken off does not mean they had no access to salvation. It does not mean that individual Israelites lost their eternal salvation. It describes the loss of their culture which centered in a centralized worship of Yahweh and repeated exposure to the ceremonies of the Law. All of these conveyed the information necessary to build a life of faith and belief in Yahweh. Since they did not exercise faith, they lost the culture that by design of Yahweh grew such faith. In not believing they separated themselves from the experience of all that flowed from the Abrahamic Covenant, including the blessings of the new Covenant.

As stated earlier, we cannot suppose that any Israelite was “saved” simply because they were of a certain ethnicity. Many Christians have mistakenly thought this, and many more Israelites have mistakenly thought this. The requirement for justification has always been belief. The testimony regarding Abraham’s justification is this; “Then he believed in the Lord, and He reckoned it to him as righteousness” (Gen. 15:6). Those of Abraham’s offspring that did not believe, God did not account as righteous.

Huge numbers of Israelites over the years, though ethnically speaking a part of the family tree, were cut off from the blessing of the Covenant. On the other hand, Paul is saying that many who are not part of the ethnic offspring of Abraham believe the things Abraham believed. By this action they are grafted into the tree by God and become recipients of all the blessings of the promises made to Abraham. They become Israelites by new birth, though not Israelites by birth.

Paul says that Gentiles stand by faith. Faith has always been the distinguishing mark of the children of God. Gentiles who are believing are the focus of God’s sovereign work. That is because they are believing. Gentiles who do not believe will not be grafted in. To suppose that Gentiles are innately good because they are not like the Jews is to fall into arrogance and self-deception, the twin enemies of any spiritual progress.

Paul says that there should be fear on the Gentile's part. This does not call for anxiety. We need not have the sensation that we could be victims of some arbitrary action by God. It refers to a humble reverence with respect to God's mercy, grace and goodness and a nurturing of our trust in Him. We must guard against any bitterness that can creep into our thinking toward God, or any distrust that can keep us from obeying Him fully. We will find individually that we will never experience New Covenant life if our trust of God fails, and we take our lives back from His control.

As we re-visit the written history of Israel we will see our own hearts through them if we are listening to the conviction of the Holy Spirit. We will not see some innate moral quality in ourselves. Such humility should be constantly renewed in us as we are reminded that spiritual health is flowing into and through us who are Gentiles because we are trusting God as a way of life. We will continually be confessing humbly of the presence of unbelief in us.

11:21—"for if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will He spare you."

God relates to people based on a faith economy. There are no exceptions. Scripture's prophetic passages reveal that faith will wane among Gentiles even as it has among Israelites (Luke 18:18; 1 Timothy 4:1-3; 2 Timothy 3:1-9). When it does God will not spare judgment. The Day of the Lord will deal with all such arrogance.

Paul has already declared that there is no partiality with God in terms of His standard (2:11). He has also declared that no one can be justified by works, meaning by means of their own moral effort (3:20). He has clearly stated that faith—trust in God—is how we are declared righteous (Romans 3:21-24). God will extend grace and mercy in judgment only where there is faith, and this is true of both Jews and Gentiles. There is a window of opportunity for humankind. It remains open to all for a timeframe known only to God. That window will close, and Paul will soon (verse 25), speak of a time when the full number of Gentiles will have been grafted in and the window closes.

11:22—"Behold then the kindness and severity of God; to those who fall, severity, but to you, God's kindness, if you continue in His kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off."

God deals decisively. He is either immeasurably for someone, or immeasurably against them. Either there is nothing that can prevail against them or there is nothing that can save them. His power is either administering events for their eventual blessing, or to bring them to justice and judgment. The fact that He is a personal being and that He is imminent in His creation leads Him to deal with everyone justly within His creation.

Now here in this passage Paul is speaking more about God's corporate dealings with kingdoms and nations of the world, past, present, and future. In both cases, whether dealing with individuals or people groups we are summoned by Paul to observe God's dealings. We are to see that He can and does behave with great goodness and kindness, or He believes in a more detached way.

The word used here for severity, ἀποτομῶν, is used only in this verse in the New Testament. It is formed from two words, a word for cut, and the preposition meaning “away from.” Where Paul has been speaking of the breaking away of branches, he now speaks of what is best described as the detached nature of God toward those who reject Him. When they separate themselves from Him by their unbelief, they experience nothing of Him. Other Scriptures speak of Him not responding to their cries (Isaiah 59:2).

Paul is summoning the Gentiles to believe and so to respond obediently. Their receiving the blessings of God’s kindness and mercy is not a matter of some innate goodness in them, or an arbitrary whimsical affection in God whereby He just “likes them.” It is a result of them listening and responding to the workings of His Spirit in them. This is what constitutes “continuing in His kindness.” It is to persist in being drawn along by the things that His grace is orchestrating within you. It is responding to His conviction with repentance and obedience (See Romans 2:4).

These kindnesses of grace do not continue forever within a person or towards a people. Whole groups have been cut off from God’s gracious disclosure of truth because they do not respond to the inner summons of His Holy Spirit. His work in us comes in windows of opportunity. Our obedient response is critical. Israel as a group, not as individuals, had missed their window. God will orchestrate another one for them as a people (Zechariah 12-14). But generations have rejected Yahweh’s salvation. We are to learn from their mistakes and respond to God’s kindness.

11:23—“And they also, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in; for God is able to graft them in again.”

Here Paul begins to speak of a possibility with respect to Israel’s future. Their future is dependent on their belief. That means that since God is in the business of orchestrating faith, there is hope for them. Since they have not stumbled to fall, and we have seen that the meaning of this is not that they are being justified but that they have not been “written off” by God, there is hope that their future role the prophets spoke of in the Old Testament will yet be realized. In this verse Paul does not say that will happen, only that it can happen. Clearly, he connects the possibility of such a thing to them believing. Something would have to happen whereby they come to believe in Christ. They would then be grafted in by God, restored to a place of the blessing of the covenant.

The verse leaves the possibility of their future wide open. Paul will speak more definitively to this momentarily. But clearly here he affirms that Israel as a people group has not been written off, and that they can experience restoration and revival.

11:24—“For if you were cut off from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, how much more shall those who are the natural branches be grafted into their own olive tree?”

The practice of grafting is a fascinating thing. Through grafting it is common to see almonds produced from a peach root. It is common to see peaches and apricots on the same tree. It is common to see different citrus fruit on the same tree. The practice of grafting has gone on for centuries and in its own way is somewhat miraculous, yet quite ordinary.

The overall image used here by Paul of grafting is astute. It illustrates so well what God is doing in terms of the Abrahamic Covenant, and it shows the range of possibilities open to Him. As naturally as we graft trees, God can give spiritual life to the most unlikely people. That is the common phenomenon of grace-at-work.

Paul in several places has referred to Gentiles as being from a “wild olive tree.” That is a figure of speech that shows both the similarity of Jew and Gentile as members of the human stream, and their dissimilar spiritual heritage. The Gentiles in general were wild. They were religious, but their religion was instinctive and superstitious without the light of truth. It was not the work of God, cultivated deliberately by revelation and characterized by an infusion of truth. It had not been shaped by Him with a view toward productivity and profitability.

The Israelites religious system had been hovered over by Yahweh. He very painstakingly laid it out in detail. They had subverted it, but it was the product of intentionality on God’s part. It had been cultivated as opposed to being spontaneous and uncared for. It gave birth to faith in many Israelites. By-in-large Israel rejected Yahweh’s Messiah. They do to this day.

Meanwhile, wild, pagan Gentiles were acted upon by God to become participants in all His grace does to bring about productivity and profitability. Where there had been unchecked instinct and ignorant enslaving superstition, there was now the intentional care of God. His Spirit’s work and the light of truth were bringing hope and peace where fear had been.

Paul’s point is that if this could happen in the case of branches from a completely different tree, how much more could it happen in the case of branches taken from the tree itself. If God could work the miracle of bringing about godliness in the Gentiles, then He could certainly do it among the Jews.

11:25—“For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery, lest you be wise in your own estimation, that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in;”

A mystery exists where a certain condition has come about and the factors that brought about that condition are either unknown or not understood. A mystery is a mixture of the known and the unknown. The explanation for what is observed as real and true is lacking, or sometimes the observation of what is true and real is clouded (i.e., the earth is flat), because of biases or ignorance in observation. Some mysteries involve looking back, such as the classic criminal mystery where events must be reconstructed to understand what has happened. Some mysteries involve looking at what is true from a different perspective. Some mysteries involve looking back and forward, such as scientific understanding of the mysteries of earth’s seasons.

In the Bible there are prophetic mysteries, where we know something will come about, but we either do not have information about the intermediate steps and the seeming detours along the way, or we perceive that information wrongly. The result of this lack of understanding is that we can find ourselves completely out of sync with God’s thought on a matter.

This was Paul's concern with the Gentile church. Church history has proven that his concern was a divinely inspired one. His specific concern is named here, that the Gentile church become wise in their own estimation. They could deduce information from what they saw happening spiritually among the Jews that would be false. The result would be arrogance. They would see themselves as superior, the Jews as inferior, and so make the same mistake the Israelites had made in the centuries previous.

The Jews had mistakenly jumped to a conclusion about Gentiles that was strictly a result of God's timing and the order in which He executed His plan. Because salvation started with them and came through them, they deducted from that the false assumption that they were of better moral constitution, even to the point of not needing salvation. They also concluded that the Gentiles were unloved and rejected by God. This was a tragic and mystifying error, given God's revelation to them. Paul did not want the Gentile church to make the same error, viewing the Jews as rejected by God, unloved and unsavable, and themselves as of better moral constitution. Supplying their own explanation for Israel's resistance to Christ and the Gospel could, and tragically did, lead to that.

This is the reason Paul has dealt for so long in this letter with the truth surrounding the condition of Israel. Paul has divulged information that will help the readers understand a mystery. What Paul has divulged can be summarized with two short sentences. Yes, Israelites need salvation. No, they have not been rejected by Yahweh.

So Paul has stated that Israel's present condition and the obvious future blessing of God promised in Scripture to them IS a mystery. How could such blessing come about given their rejection of Christ? That is a great mystery that Paul wishes to inform us of. He will explain in these verses how the promises to Israel spoken of in Scripture will come about.

Paul identifies two pieces of important information in the Israel/Gentile/Christ puzzle. The first piece is that a partial hardening has happened to Israel. In the larger context of His remarks about Israel he has spoken of hardening (9:18). It is a condition allowed by God, the source of which is simply the fallen human condition. All God must do for it to occur is to do nothing! It is where we naturally drift. We drift away from Him, not listening to His voice until it becomes unfamiliar to us and we can't hear it. A person or a people are said to be hardened when they have no experience of and no sensitivity to the voice of conscience and the movement of God's Spirit in and through them. Apart from God's grace it is the most natural of human conditions.

Paul describes Israel's condition as a "partial" hardening. This is referring to the fact that there is a remnant of Jews, individuals like Paul, who are responding to the gospel. This "partial" hardening is a summary of the ideas he developed in greater detail in verses 1-10 of this chapter. It should not be expected therefore that there be much response among the Jews to the truth about Christ. Our deduction as we observe this should not be that God has rejected them. We should pray as Paul did for their salvation and believe as Paul did in their future revival. So the first piece of the puzzle that solves this "mystery" is that a "partial" hardening has happened in the hearts of Israelites with respect to Christ.

The second important piece of the puzzle is that this partial hardening has a shelf life. We do not know the exact length of time that this condition will continue. We are told here that it will terminate when the “fullness of the Gentiles has come in.” What is this referring to, this “fullness of the Gentiles”? The term rendered “fullness” is usually used of completeness or maturity. It would seem to be best understood here as referring to the time when God’s work among the Gentiles is completed. This likely involves specific Gentile individuals that must be born and brought to faith, specific individuals that must be confronted with opportunity, all the things associated with bringing to completion the years of God’s focus on the salvation of Gentiles.

Regarding this period of time, Luke records words of Jesus that speak of “the times of the Gentiles.” It is a time when the Jews as a people and their country and city will be dominated by Gentile nations (Luke 21:24). Jesus taught that three things would be true during these “times of the Gentiles” regarding Israel. First, the land would be occupied by Gentiles. Second, the throne would be empty. Third the people would be dispersed. These things became their reality in AD 70 and will not completely end until Jesus returns.

These “times of the Gentiles” include the specific events as well involved in evil running its course among Gentiles and Jews. This is referred to by John as the spirit of Anti-Christ (1 John 2:18-19). This spirit, or movement will result in a final Gentile world empire, the crowning jewel of the godless nations and Satan’s work among them. It will be led by a powerful Gentile ruler we call the Anti-Christ (See Daniel 7:23-28; Matthew 24:15-23; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12). This will signal the time is approaching for the “Day of the Lord,” the time designated by God for confronting sin on the earth among both Gentile and Jew (Isaiah 2:12-23; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12). This “day” will be a period when humanity is visibly ruled by God.

11:26—“and thus all Israel will be saved; just as it is written, ‘The Deliverer will come from Zion, He will remove ungodliness from Jacob.’”

The partial hardening of Israel will end when the “fullness of the Gentiles has come in.” In other words, when God has accomplished His plan regarding the Gentile nations. The result of the arrival at this point in God’s plan will be an extra-ordinary spiritual work carried out by God in the hearts of a multitude of Israel. No longer will only a remnant of living Jews be saved. There will be many. Zachariah 13:8-9 indicates that by some means two thirds of the Israelites living in Israel at that time will perish and be “cut off.” But of the remaining third God will say, “They are my people,” and they will say, “Yahweh is my God.” They will embrace faith to a person.

From Zechariah’s account a restoration of Israel will come about only because they repent and embrace Christ as their Messiah. This comes only because of what can only be described as a forceful work of grace done by a sovereign God among them (See Ezekiel 20:37-39, Zechariah 12:10-13:3). When we speak of a restoration of Israel it must always be against this backdrop of spiritual revival first. The Israelites by that work of God will become a different people from whom ungodliness has been removed.

If the words of the prophets are allowed to speak according to their normal meaning, their words speak with one voice about such a restoration of Israel and form a consistent testimony about how such an event will unfold into an era that is the final chapter in this planet's history. God's plan to deal with evil on this earth was revealed through Israel. Their persistent disobedience demonstrated evil's might, even as God's solution to Israel, Christ, was born as an Israelite in Israel. In the end His victorious rule over evil will be demonstrated through Israel but will encompass all people.

11:27—"And this is my covenant with them, when I take away their sins."

Paul is quoting here from Isaiah 59:21 of the new era when the Jews enter the experience of the New Covenant, because God has brought them to repentance and belief in Christ and so taken away their sins.

In a way of speaking, the ink on the agreement that constituted the Old Covenant was barely dry when God began to announce that it would need to be replaced by a new one (See for example Deuteronomy 4:25-31). By the old covenant God is not referring to the Abrahamic Covenant, but the Mosaic Covenant, the era of the Law. The Law was given as the standard by which the material blessings, like the land and other promises made to Abraham could be realized.

The era of the Law was a necessary one in the plan of God. It was necessary because it would fail to enable Israel to inherit the blessing. So the era would demonstrate clearly the sinfulness of humanity and teach their absolute dependence on grace. The era of the Law was a means of conditioning a whole planet for right thinking about the need for a sin-bearer and a merciful, gracious God. Therefore, in the Law God spoke of the need of Israel for a new heart (Deuteronomy 5:29; 29:4; 30:6), and eventually revealed that He would make a new covenant with Israel on which He would write His laws on their hearts (Jeremiah 32:39).

Paul's assertion that "all Israel will be saved" must be interpreted by placing his own remarks in the context of Biblical prophecy. In doing so we realize that He is not speaking of every ethnic Israelite that has ever lived being saved just because of their ethnicity. He is talking about a particular group living at a particular time in the future. At a future time, all Israelites left alive in the land of Israel will acknowledge the truth of the gospel.

That is the power of the Gospel, which is Paul's broader subject. In cases where God has chosen individuals, the Gospel will eventually break down the most formidable barriers and bring salvation to the hardest of hearts. Its power to save will not mean every person who has ever lived will be saved. But its power, which is the power of God Himself working, will be found to rescue many from a typically stubborn people group and bring about in them the blessings of the covenant made thousands of years earlier to Abraham. It will prove able to do so against all the power of Hell.

11:28—“From the standpoint of the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but from the standpoint of God’s choice they are beloved for the sake of the fathers;”

From the perspective of we Gentiles who are part of God’s Church, who have been chosen by God and who by grace have been brought to faith, our view of ethnic Israel involves two realities. We experience a kind of double vision. For the most part they disdain the message of the cross. In Paul’s day, they violently opposed it. That is one of the images we see very clearly. That image must have been crystal clear to Paul, who like Christ, suffered so much at their hands. On the other hand, if we accept Paul’s testimony and the testimony of the rest of Scripture, we see the reality that they are still a select people in God’s eyes. That seemingly split personality of Israel is the force of the words Paul uses here.

This is an intriguing scenario that the Church has struggled mightily with. Any individual who tries to give definition to this reality is faced with a very formidable intellectual pursuit. In ethnic Israel since the time of Christ we see enemies of the cross of Christ. We see scores of such Israelites who are obviously not chosen for eternal salvation. We see a few Jews responding to Christ, obviously chosen for eternal salvation, experiencing the presence of the indwelling Spirit, obviously part of the group we call the elect.

Yet we are to view this mass of unbelieving as “elect” in some sense of the term. We are to make room for them in our theological understanding. This cannot mean that they are by ethnicity individually elect in the sense we are, individually destined for salvation though unbelieving. It must mean that there is an appointed role for them as a race in the plan of God, as history has recorded there once was. This agrees with all that Paul has said, and can in fact, be the only scenario that explains all the statements he has made over the course of these three chapters.

So Israel as an ethnic group are elect. Again, this does not refer to the issue of the personal salvation of each Jew. It refers to them being a race of people to whom God relates Himself to in a special way to reveal Himself to creation. When the time comes for Him to stand on earth again to establish His rule over creation, He will visibly identify Himself and His host of children, elect from all nations, with the revived nation of Israel (Zechariah 2:11). This is the choice that God has already made, and it will be His chosen way of fulfilling the promises He made to Abraham regarding being His God, His shield, His sure reward, of blessing him and making his name great, of blessing all nations through him, of giving him a seed and a land.

The explanation for Israel’s future blessing Paul identifies clearly here as being “for the sake of the fathers.” Yahweh’s covenant with Abraham explains our double vision with respect to Israel in the era since Christ. God is bound by His covenant love for Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to their offspring. He will restore them to His side when He appears to rule the earth. He will do so by arousing faith in them.

When David’s rule was established, he sought out offspring of Saul whom he could show kindness to “for the sake of Jonathan,” the man he had entered a covenant friendship with (2 Samuel 9). This is the nature of God’s future response to the offspring of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

11:29—“for the gift, and the calling of God are irrevocable.”

The word rendered irrevocable is from a word which describes having second thoughts. Concerning His choosing of Israel, Yahweh does not have what we would call “buyer’s remorse”. His gift to and His calling of Israel are “without afterthought.” This is just who Yahweh is. Regarding gifts, He gives and those things He summons people to, He does not at a later time change His mind and cut short the transaction.

A gift of God is something graciously extended by Him apart from merit or deservedness. It can be a deliverance, or an endowment of some sort, but He will not reconsider and take that gift back. Paul is speaking here specifically of Israel’s position in God’s plan, but the thought relates to all that God extends by His grace by way of calling and privilege. He does not withdraw those things that are motivated by His grace.

This basic characteristic of God means that the grace He extended to Abraham, in particular His promise that He would be Abraham’s shield and sure reward (Genesis 15:1), and that his descendants would inherit a certain land was a promise that He has every intention of keeping. From the standpoint of God’s choice, ethnic Israel is loved because of God’s covenant with Abraham. That love has not stopped. It has not been passed to others more deserving. At some point in this earth’s history Israel will be powerfully operated on by God and a great work done in their individual hearts so that all of them who are alive at that time will behave as one, embrace Christ and be embraced by Him (Malachi 3:6).

A secondary issue regarding this verse is this: what about incidences in Scripture where it is said that God relented or repented? One of these is reported in Genesis 6:6, where it is said that He was sorry that He had made man on earth. How are we to understand such statements? It is a tricky area of thought.

That Yahweh felt something very real and that it was righteous thinking when He said that He regretted making man is obvious by the ensuing action He took of destroying much of His original creation. We can only say of this that God experiences some sense or feeling that is best expressed by comparing it to our human experience of regret, without it quite being that. If it were the same as our regret, we would have to say that He does not know the end from the beginning. That would contradict all He has proven Himself to be.

We know that concepts of God’s being are expressed in terms of human experience to help us understand who God is. So we hear of things like God’s eyes, ears, arms, and mouth. Yet we know He is not a physical being, that He is not a man, that He does not have such body parts. We can only say of this, that we are told that God is not a man so that He changes His mind (Numbers 23:19).

We believe that Yahweh does not deviate from His sovereign plan which was made with the foreknowledge of all that each being, and person would decide. As that plan unfolds and the decisions are made, God experiences the emotional reality of them without deviating from His course. So in the case of His regret at making man, He moves to destroy man, yet His grace leads Him to preserve Noah’s family, and a representative group of animals, and so creation was not destroyed. He felt what is best described by our emotion of regret, but the action He took showed that He had not given up on His creation.

God’s action toward Israel is following a prescribed course. It will not change. Their position in His plan is clearly marked out. We will see them rise from their fall.

11:30—“For just as you once were disobedient to God, but now have been shown mercy because of their disobedience,”

Paul, speaking to Gentiles, shares in this verse the first half of his thought. There was a time when the Gentiles were disobedient to God. This was the clear path that we Gentiles were following in, with very few exceptions. But now we are being shown mercy. By this Paul is referring to the clear action of God that Paul himself was witnessing in his day. It continues to the present. God has been revealing Himself to thousands from all people groups, more recently making His written word available to them, indwelling through His Spirit all those who believe and bestowing on them all the privileges that go with being a child of God. God has turned to us as Gentiles in the wake of the disobedience of the Jews.

So the first half of Paul's thought expresses what we once were in terms of our spiritual experience and the fact that this has changed. Our spiritual experience is now different. In this same way, something will happen to Israel's current spiritual state.

11:31—“so these also now have been disobedient, in order that because of the mercy shown to you they also now be shown mercy.”

The words of our English renderings of verses 31-32 can present to us a puzzling picture. They can be construed to make Gentile evangelism a knee-jerk reaction by God to the disobedience of Israel. They can then be construed to teach that the Jews are grafted into the Gentiles, rather than the Gentiles grafted into the Jews. However, they are saying that just as God showed mercy to Gentiles and reached out to enfold them and bring them into His family, so He will enfold the Israelites by His mercy once again. Each people group gains from the experience of the other and both come to faith.

It is helpful to understand Paul's message about Israel and Gentiles as if it were three acts of a great play. In Act One Israelites were the key characters. They were the primary focus of Yahweh's attention. The Gentiles learned about Yahweh through them but did not embrace Him en masse. Israelites proved disobedient to Yahweh at every turn in Act One, continually and habitually disobedient to the call of God to them. They proved unwilling and unable to trust that He is good and His will best for them. Act One closed with Israel rejecting their Savior/King and asking the Gentiles to kill Him. They did.

Surprisingly, in Act Two Gentiles are the primary focus of Yahweh's attention. We Gentiles learn much about ourselves and the perils of disobedience, and Yahweh's mercy by Israel's mistakes given in writing to us. Many Gentiles, though not all, are drawn to the Savior and King Israel rejected and killed in Act One. Meanwhile, most Israelites remain convinced Jesus was an imposter.

In the yet-to-come Act Three, Israel's Savior and King will re-appear on earth. Israelites en masse will enter the belief Gentiles have demonstrated to them for centuries. They will because of that faith in Him, be shown mercy as Act Three is ended by their King. Gentile and Israelite then become one people under their King's rule.

The message is very simple. God has not cast Israel aside. Moslems believe He has. Many Christians have believed He has. He has not. Paul's "kinsmen according to the flesh" have not been cast aside as a national entity. It is certain many individual Israelites along the way have been lost eternally due to unbelief. It is evident that a myriad of Gentiles has been joined to Yahweh with Israelite believers of the past. It is evident from Paul's message that there remains a revival that Jesus will affect among an entire generation of ethnic Israelites. Together all these, Israelite and Gentile believers will inherit the promises made to Abraham in a new covenant relationship to Yahweh. This is the single spiritual body that Yahweh regards as Israel.

11:32—"For God has shut up all in disobedience that He might show mercy to all."

This chapter begins to conclude this lengthy discussion of Israel by Paul. This verse points to the main purpose of God in allowing evil and so points toward the purpose that this Israel subplot serves in the drama of God's plan. That great purpose of God's plan is clearly stated in Scriptures like 1 Corinthians 15:28, "that God may be all in all," and that the "whole earth might be filled with the knowledge of God" (Habakkuk 2:14).

It is amazing that such purposes of Yahweh have been served through events intended to dishonor Him and that are evil to their core. It is certainly not that evil was caused by Him. It was not that He needed it. But in His response to evil, He will bring great glory to Himself and demonstrate clearly that He is sovereign over it. He will do so not just by crushing it, though that is the eventual outcome. But He will do it by showing that His sovereignty and power are infinite so that even evil has been made to serve His purposes all along its way.

Along that way it was important that evil not be minimized, nor be seen as good when it brought about His purposes. Apart from God, evil is a terrible force. It is such that left unrestrained, it thoroughly destroys human beings en masse. It was important to show this reality and so demonstrate that creation needed its Creator. It could not overcome evil on its own. There was no ability in humanity to do so. In fact, humanity could not do it even when informed clearly of evil and given a gigantic assist by God.

This verse describes one thing God has done to deal with evil. He has shut up all in it. Paul means that God has allowed evil to exercise enough power over humanity to show that all humanity is paralyzed and dominated by it. There are no exceptions despite all the good intentions expressed by humanity in their noble moments. All eventually follow their own devices unless sovereignly moved on by a gracious God.

Paul calls this condition being "shut up in disobedience." Our sinfulness predestines the outcome of our actions apart from God's mercy. We are imprisoned, with no way out. Both Gentile and Jew clearly demonstrate this. Though their histories have been distinct they have much in common. The predominant thing they share is their spiritual dependence on the mercy of their Creator.

It seems apparent that God's intention in allowing evil to enslave humans was to show mercy to its victims. It was to let the disease run its course enough so that we would seek treatment. He did not want evil's effect to be so subtle, the distinguishing characteristic of its originator and perpetrator (Genesis 3:1), that its presence and seriousness was unknown to its victims. Anything less than full disclosure would not have characterized God. Had this disclosure of evil not been allowed, would we worship goodness in God and look for His mercy?

Where justice is not perceived to have been violated, mercy is not called for. If justice is ignored and evil over-looked then justice is forfeited. So for justice to be assured and for mercy to be given, evil was allowed to do enough of its work to clearly define itself, its presence, its scope, its consequences and its penalty. Where evil exists, justice reveals and defines it and make it offensive. Where justice does this work, there can be mercy.

So God allowed evil enough power to enslave every person ever born, except the God/man, the designated sin-bearer, Jesus. Justice did its work through the Law. Then Christ could do His great work of mercy by rendering just payment for evil for all who would believe. By establishing justice Yahweh established legitimate mercy, and the best possible scenario for an eternal era, Act Five.

11:33—“Oh the depths of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!”

With simple words Paul begins a statement on the transcendence of God. In all our understanding of God’s nature we must maintain this perspective that He is beyond our ability to comprehend. Because of what we do know of Him, the unknown is not terrifying. There is in what is unknown to us a rich vein of indescribable wealth. What God knows, and how He can put to work that knowledge is such that each grain of truth we uncover reveals a whole new vista of the great work that confounds our senses. After speaking to the issue of God’s intertwined dealings with Gentile and Jew and to the future of those dealings, Paul marvels aloud at the depth of what the matter reveals about the character of the One who has planned it all and held it on course. This and the thoughts that follow are a great statement of worship.

As stated, the transcendence of God must be maintained in our minds so that we can deal in faith with those things He does that can seem briefly inconsistent. That He is unknown to us because He has not fully disclosed Himself is one thing. That He is unknowable to us because we are incapable of understanding Him is a completely different matter. Both are true, and the latter is what we mean when we speak of the transcendence of God. When Paul speaks of God’s judgments being unsearchable and His ways unfathomable, he means not just that they are hidden, but that their explanation lies in a dimension for which we have no senses. The edicts He has issued, the verdicts He has rendered, and the outcomes these have generated we can neither dissect nor reconstruct. They simply are. But they are simply good as well because of His innate goodness and that is why His mysterious half does not terrify us.

11:34—“For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor?”

It is a great question that Paul asks. God is self-existent, all powerful, and all knowing. He did not derive anything from anyone. In all the statements of God in Scripture we never hear of Him getting wiser and growing more mature, because He is complete and perfect and always has been. He has no need for perspective, no need for further data. Even time is His servant. There is no being that can claim to know God to predict Him or speak for Him apart from Him initiating and enabling the action. There is no one who counseled Him and imparted the understanding to Him that enabled Him to do what He has done. No one can claim to have inspired His thoughts or shaped His actions. He did not become who He is, He simply is. Who He is in totality defies our understanding.

It should not surprise us that we have differences of opinion on even how to interpret what He has put in black and white, in hard copy in front of us. This situation relates to the fact that we are in process, not that He is. Our perspective of the great mysteries of God is continually being added to. But none of this warrants our leaving off from the search. The search is not futile or fruitless. Our search is always yielding more though it is never complete. It is always making us both wiser and better though we can never say we're done. Though we will never say we have known the mind of God, we can say we are knowing it in bits and fragments and that this incomplete discovery is a source of abiding wealth.

11:35—"Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to Him again?"

This is another way of stating God's self-sufficiency and complete independence. He has never needed "capital" of any sort from anybody. No one can say that in any case they got God on His feet or carried Him through some season of distress. He has no outstanding debt or obligation of any sort. What He has needed He has always had and what He has desired He has always brought about at the exact time it pleased Him.

The eternal self-sufficiency of God is why His goodness is so important to us. If He were not good our lot would be terrible because it is certain that He cannot be controlled, bartered with, subdued, or in any way manipulated. It is His goodness and His desire for our welfare and benefit that enables us to have confidence in His power and self-sufficiency.

11:36—"For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be glory forever. Amen."

This verse makes some important statements about "all things." When we see the term "all things" we must understand it as referring to ALL things. These thoughts teach important ideas with very practical implications. We know that there are things which are created by humanity and certain conditions for which humanity is responsible. We know that we author certain acts that we alone are responsible for. We know the same thing is true of the evil one. So when Paul says that all things are from Him how are we to understand that? It can only be in the sense that only that which He allows comes to be. Only that which He can use for His ultimate purposes is allowed to transpire. Such things are the only things that come about. They are from Him and through Him in this sense.

As the sovereign of the universe, God will take responsibility for all things. He will hold perpetrators responsible, but He will bring about justice and what is ultimately good from that which He allows. In this latter sense He can be trusted to accept full responsibility, though He is God and so is not held accountable by anyone other than Himself and His own perfect character. So all things are from Him, that is, allowed for in His plan. They come about through Him, that is, only by His permission. Ultimately, they are all to Him, that is, they serve His purposes.

Of course, this is not to say that they do so in the short term, or in and of themselves. It is to say that when they are viewed in concert with His own complimentary actions, and when all such action has been completed it will be shown to be "to Him." Then it will be seen that He has caused all things to work together for the good of those He has called.

Paul makes this statement at the end of this long discussion of the plight of ethnic Israel. The evil that had come to Israel, through Israel, and from Israel was their own. They were and are held responsible for it. But God's plan has not been altered one iota by it. He was acting to bring about His purposes even in their evil, and nothing demonstrated that better than the suffering and death of Christ. It made the gospel a reality. That gospel is the story of the power of God brought to bear on the matter of salvation, and we must remember always that His power was brought to bear on an evil event to atone for evil.

Paul concludes with what is the ultimate end to which all things finally point, the glory of God. His statement of praise comes as the final thought in the discussion of ethnic Israel and it provides the bridge to his very practical instructions to those who were the people of God, His chosen instruments to help bring about His plan.

Romans 12

12:1—I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.

From a discussion of ethnic Israelites and based on the hard lessons illustrated by their experience, Paul gives this urgent word of exhortation to his spiritual brothers in the body of Christ. He is also giving these words based on what he has just stated that God's purposes are the designed end of all that He allows to be. Paul's "therefore" also reaches back and captures the entire message and tone of his letter that he summarizes here as "the mercies of God." Those mercies have been great, but they are not for all time and the opportunity presented by them is to be seized. There is only one logical personal response for all people.

The action Paul is urging his readers to take involves their bodies. In terms of the philosophies that were looming on the horizon of his time, our physical body's value and importance to God would be greatly minimized. It often is. Ours is a faith that focuses on the inner being. But it is also one which is not complete until it is worked out in thought and deed manifested by our tongues, our eyes, our hands and our feet. God's desire is to capture our hearts, but to do with our bodies what He does with all He has created, bring about actions of Him, dedicated to Him (11:36).

There is a sense in which God's work of grace in us begins with the recognition of the nature of the deeds we are doing with our bodies. There is then a work of His Spirit in our inner being of repentance through which our minds are changed about those deeds. It leads us to reflect on what is present within us that prompts such deeds. The gospel can then work to transform us beginning with our inner being. Transformation is always with a view toward this, that God be glorified by that which our bodies begin to outwardly reveal and demonstrate of his Spirit working inside us.

Paul has just spoken in detail of a people with a lengthy tradition of ritual sacrifice. There had been no shortage of ceremonial sacrifice in Israel. But something had been missing in it all, a point which God had made abundantly clear in prophetic declarations (Psalm 50:8-15, Isaiah 1:11-16; Hosea 6:6). God longed for his people to demonstrate by deeds done with their mind, souls and bodies their allegiance to Him and to His Law. Paul wants his readers to do the thing most Israelites had failed to do, to be themselves living sacrifices.

This is a wonderfully descriptive term of what God desires to produce in us. He wants people to be fully alive while fully dead. Through His Spirit we can be fully alive to God, aware of His desire for us in each moment of the day. Through that same Spirit we can deny all that our own desires might seek to lead us into. This is the state that Paul is wanting us to journey into, described in some detail in Chapter 6-8, and described perfectly by this metaphor of a living sacrifice. In this state, we have made a very intentional decision about the instinctive, fleshly way of living. We have died to it and are putting all that remains of it to death. In its place we are searching for God's mind and leading.

This pursuit is our spiritual service of worship. The term “spiritual” is NASB rendering of the Greek word λογικός. It would be more naturally rendered logical or rational within the Christian framework of what logical thought is. The Greek word by its etymology is formed by making an adjective out of the word logos, which means “word.” It sounds like our word “logical” which comes from this Greek word for speech or reason and the Latin word λογικά. In Greek thought the λογος was the kind of spiritual/mystic entity that lay behind reality. In Christian thought that λογος is the mind of God, recorded in Scripture and embodied in Christ. Our presentation of our complete being to God is what we could call a logical response, the only rational thing to do in view of what God has made plain about Himself, us, and life in this evil world.

Now it IS a spiritual act. It happens through the work of the Holy Spirit quickening the powers of reason within us so that we respond positively to the truth. We must not minimize the importance of the Holy Spirit in all things pertaining to God. At the same time, we must not discard the importance of us using our own minds and applying thoughtful analysis to behavior decisions. We must think through rationally even AS we are guided by the Holy Spirit. Given the history of Israel and all that we can learn from it, presenting our bodies as living sacrifices to God is the only logical decision to make and the Spirit will help us see the particulars of this. As always, He will help us apply the Scriptures to matters of real life.

12:2—and do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.

In this verse Paul speaks to the more practical activity entailed in presenting our bodies. It is not an act that is done once in the church service. It may be one that has such a beginning. But this must be followed by a lifetime in which thought patterns are individually scrutinized and transformed. Because it is a process, it is not because of this any less of a transformation.

Transformation is a command in this verse. That affirms to us that it is a divinely inspired work that we must intentionally engage ourselves with. Transformation does not overwhelm our own mental and emotional faculties, but instead fully utilizes them. It is in this sense both rational and spiritual. There is a presenting of ourselves that the Holy Spirit orchestrates within us that we must not resist.

When in response to His leading we present ourselves to Him, He leads us in thought that results in the renewal of our mind. It might be thought spurred on by the ministry of others to us, thought flowing out of time spent praying, or thoughts stimulated by the Scripture. But it will be thought that is new and different from that which is routine for us. This thought then begins to transform our actions. Our actions begin to be shaped not by our instincts but by the hand of God. By such actions our lives begin to incarnate, or document what the will of God is. We become a pattern for all who would desire their own lives to be shaped by His powerful hand. We become a documentary for all to watch of what such a life lived in fellowship with God looks like.

Paul uses three words to describe God’s will. Some have suggested that within God’s will there are three zones. We can do what is good, we can do what is even better—that which is acceptable, or we can do what is perfect. To interpret this verse in this way is a mistake on at least two counts.

First, this verse is making a statement about the overall direction one's life takes as they are beginning to be transformed. It is not dealing with individual instances in which one needs to discover God's particular mind and heart. As our minds are transformed and we present our bodies for service to God, we work by our actions His will. There comes to be a dominant tone in our lives of goodness and completeness.

Second, grammatically all three of these adjectives describe God's unfolding plan. His will is singular, and the three adjectives are all singular. They are to be taken together as describing God's will. This too indicates that Paul is making a generic statement about the overall nature of God's will as it will prove to be in our lives, our lifetimes, and in the universe when all events have run their course. It will all prove to be good, and acceptable and perfect.

Verses one and two constitute basic principles of submission and service to God which Paul will now build on.

12:3—For through the grace given to me I say to every man among you not think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith.

Submission to the truth in our minds and service to God with our bodies are the responses God is seeking to orchestrate in us through salvation. These two things are to preoccupy us. His desire is not that we remain the same, with a "life goes on" mentality. This verse is a key one that continues to describe the transformation in our thought processes that is the implication of the truth of the gospel.

The verse begins with the word "for," appropriately linking it to what has gone before. That small word signals to us that what follows will be more information about the renewal of our minds and the work of transformation that we are to be giving ourselves to.

When we think apart from God, we tend to exalt ourselves. Our flesh loves to seek out recognition and adulation. It seeks to avoid all that would detract from us and present only those things that bring recognition and commendation. Our appetite is so insatiable for this that our evaluation and presentation of ourselves can easily become skewed, distorted, and outright errant and unrealistic.

Paul's instruction on this matter is grace-based. It is grace that enables us to approach this tendency in ourselves. Paul would not have addressed it in himself or others apart from grace. However, it is his authority to give such commands as these that he is referring to when he speaks of the grace given to him. He was not an apostle because he was better or had no such challenges as these. He was an apostle and was living the life he taught because of grace. Grace is a one-word summary of the process of God favorably embracing an individual and bringing His power to bear on their life without them deserving it.

Paul was an apostle by grace but was nonetheless an apostle. He spoke for God with unique authority. His commands are God's commands, and his counsel is God's counsel. We must read them and make them the rule upon which our lives are based and our church functions.

There is a way in which we are to think about ourselves. What we allow ourselves to believe about ourselves will greatly impact what we think about other people and every circumstance that confronts us. This is true when we begin to think we are better or worse than we are. Humility leads to orderly and legitimate expectations. It leads us to health in terms of how we judge matters. It is a way of thinking that turns us away from the very things Yahweh is trying to save us from and towards health and soundness.

Paul uses a phrase that clarifies what characterizes healthy thinking about us and others. We are to bend our thinking in the direction of “sound judgment.” “Sound judgment” is to be our goal. That word rendered sound judgment is σωφρονεῖν/v. It is formed by combining the word for salvation with the word for thought. So it refers to thinking that has been “saved,” meaning made truthful and therefore healthy and sound. In the context of what Paul said in verse two, this means that our thinking is transformed to align with that of our Creator-God. It is thinking NOT shaped by normal human instincts, preferences and tendencies, all of which work to exalt us and make us first.

“Saved” thinking is based on a presupposition stated here by Paul, that “God has allotted to each a measure of faith.” “Saved” thinking is founded on ecclesiology, what Scripture reveals about God’s design/function of His community. Each person had been allotted a measure of faith. The important implication is this; sound judgment comes through a collective perspective, not by our own. It comes to us by hearing and respecting the perspective of others on ourselves and others as given by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit shows us through others that by design “God has allotted to each a measure of faith.” Our thought toward ourselves and each other is to be subjected to and shaped by this perspective of others, that they too have been allotted a measure of faith even as we have. The whole of faith resides only in God. We are not to be deluded by our own ideas and evaluations. We are to be prejudiced only by the idea that other’s perspective is essential to our own proper understanding of God’s desire for all people and things.

Now given the importance of this idea, what does it mean that God has measured out to each believer a portion of faith. It is evident that this is not an attempt by Paul to convey that each Christian is given a different SIZED portion of faith. That would bring inequality. We would be instructed to seek those out with the greatest portions of faith. Rather, the context will show that each person has through the Spirit a capacity to contribute a perspective, a way of thinking that is the lens through which they see life and people. The words that follow through verse eight will further explain. Each person in God’s family, when under the Holy Spirit’s leading, are adept at seeing a certain human need. In fact, they tend to see the whole of humanity through that lens. It might be the lens of instruction, of encouragement, of leadership, or the various other lenses mentioned in verses five through eight. This perspective leads them to provide a need-meeting behavior. It is natural for them to see others from this perspective AND to personally trust God to meet a certain need that helps others to mature in their faith. This will become clearer as the verses that follow are understood.

None of this is to say that there is not a difference in the amount of faith, or the strength of faith in Christian people. Jesus Himself referred to the apostles as having small faith. Stronger, greater faith is a fruit of our transformation process and will be increasing in us with passing time if we are truly being transformed. A person's faith CAN show the degree to which they have been examined and trusted by God. Faith does develop in greater measure to those who faithfully steward it. But Paul is not saying the varied strength of Christian's faith is the result of a sovereign allotment of God to them. He is simply saying that the focus of their growing faith in God will be varied.

On this subject, it is a complex thing to examine someone else's faith. Rather than trying to look inside them, a task we are incapable of, it is a good thing to carefully observe where a person's faith has taken them. Do they trust God in increasing amounts to obey Him more, sacrifice more, love others more passionately, and push the kingdom of God ahead in some way? Does their faith lead them to pray more effectively, to be bolder, endure more hardship, conquer greater obstacles? Looking at ourselves and people through this lens of faith will shape individuals and organizations and movements rightfully. Our faith is present to the degree that we have been faithful. Growing trust is the measure of completeness and maturity in us.

To return to Paul's subject, there is no health and soundness in those that have the wrong view of themselves. It will warp every judgment they render, every decision they are called on to make. There is no health in the church if we assign influence based on worldly position or if we suppose the Spirit is present and working where earthly symbols of power and influence are present. Faith/trust is God's currency. He gives it, then rewards it and increases it. Our own is not such that we can exercise it independently. And so we should always examine ourselves for evidence that our faith/trust in Yahweh is expanding through the perspective added by others.

Looking backward and forward in the context of these verses, we are to present our bodies to God as living sacrifices because in them He has placed a portion of faith that enables a way of serving Him. It is by faith that we serve strategically, in line with Yahweh's plan. Increasingly we see in our real-life moments what God our Father is doing. Trust bends us toward conforming to that. So faith/trust transforms our minds. Our minds then direct our bodies. Our giftedness is then energized by the Holy Spirit and becomes effective in bringing about spiritual objectives.

12:4—for just as we have many members in one body so that all the members do not have the same function,

This verse begins with the same conjunction as the previous verse. It is continuing the thought process. That process could be understood like this:

1. Present your bodies sacrificially to the Lord.
2. Be transformed by the renewing of your mind, by a different way of thinking.
3. Think humbly, always in terms of your need for the faith-perspective of others, the perspective the Holy Spirit provides through them.

Now in this verse Paul begins to apply all this to how the community of believers will look and behave as we individually are transformed to live this way. These verses are important in our ecclesiology—what we believe about God’s design and purpose of the Church. Here Paul says that the church will look like the body that we give as a living sacrifice to Christ. Paul does not state that directly in this verse but sets the comparison up with the words “just as.” Our bodies have many members and not all have the same function. He will not use the word function in the next verse. He wants us to get that message regarding diversity here.

Diversity will not be Paul’s primary point in this passage, but it is a significant one. There is a designed diversity in the human body and there is in the church as well. Our faith will take us in different directions in terms of the role we end up playing in the church and the perspective we provide for it.

12:5—so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another.

Paul’s thought does not take the direction we would expect it to go from verse four. We might expect him to say, “so we who are many have diverse functions.” Instead, he speaks to the issue of our unity. He makes two statements about this unity.

First, Paul states that we are one body in Christ. In this statement the whole church is pictured as one living organism. This metaphor was a common one used by Paul and appears in several of his letters. It is developed more thoroughly in Ephesians 4, and in 1 Corinthians 12. The human body is an illustration of unity in diversity, a singleness of intent and purpose in the myriad of perspectives, roles and functions. In all our separate ministries within the local church there is the common experience of the Holy Spirit instigating and empowering them all toward one grand purpose.

Second, Paul states that we are individually members of one another. His first statement has outward and corporate implications. This second one deals with the inward and individual implication of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. It is such that we are not independent but dependent. We are neither emotional nor spiritual islands. Our lives are intertwined, and we contribute that which sustains life to each other. We must live in plurality and think in plurality to arrive at God’s design for us.

Both statements then speak to the idea of our interdependency. Whether we view this figurative body as a whole entity made up of individual parts, or a few individual parts composing a whole, we arrive at the same principle. Each part finds its true purpose in the whole, and the whole functions because of the diversity of the parts.

Both the unity and the diversity of the body are critical. Both give us the reason why our presentation of our bodies as living sacrifices is so critical. The body’s health and function depend on our sacrificial giving of ourselves to the higher good.

12:6—and since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let each exercise them accordingly: if prophecy, according to the proportion of his faith;

Paul now names the idea of the spiritual gifts directly. The idea of each person’s function being predictable and of specific design and our diligence in applying faith in the use of these is spoken to in the next two verses as well.

Paul solidly links the gifts to “the grace given us.” This does not mean that the various gifts are the result of greater or lesser amounts of grace. It simply means that though they are diverse they are all a tribute to God freely moving in individuals without any merit on their part. Paul has already based his own authority to speak into the lives and affairs of the Roman church on this gracious provision of God in his own life which made him an apostle (verse 3, 1:1-7).

In all the Scripture we find the idea of grace intertwined with the discussion of spiritual gifts. All agree that the gifts are of grace and say nothing about the merits or moral makeup of the individual upon whom they are bestowed. The gifts that are mentioned are all different, and that is important to remember as well. God’s grace has different expressions, and we should not suppose that any of the gifts are more or less of an expression of his grace.

Much has been said and written about the gifts of the Spirit. There are theories of spiritual gifts that tend to see lists like these as comprehensive. By that I mean that for something to qualify as a gift, it must be listed in Scripture. Others say that such things are examples only to speak to the diversity of design in individual Christians, and therefore a list of actual gifts would be infinite.

Thinking on the spiritual gifts is relatively infantile at this point in history. Such great emphasis was placed for so many centuries on the clergy, that the idea of meaningful ministry being carried out by the laity was virtually lost. There were no books that we know of published on this specific subject of spiritual gifts until the last half of the 20th century. The result is that there is currently no majority view with respect to this matter. I add my thought to this considerable mix (see also the writing on 1st Corinthians 12).

It seems best to me to view this passage as THE comprehensive listing of spiritual gifts in the Scripture. 1 Corinthians 12 is a listing of “manifestations of the Spirit” or phenomena associated with the working of the Holy Spirit. The word “gift” does not appear in that chapter except in the plural form in association with healing. The first verse of 1 Corinthians 12 is revealing. If we do not place the word “gifts” in our rendering (it is not demanded by the original), then we can easily see that the chapter is about “spirituals” or “spiritual phenomena.” The message that follows is because Paul does not want us to be ignorant of the phenomena that characterize the presence of the Holy Spirit, nor deceived by spiritual phenomena that is of different spirits.

In the city of Corinth with its multiple spiritual sideshows, one can easily see how Paul would want to give the Corinthians principles to guide them into an experience of legitimate spiritual phenomena. Whereas our culture might not be experienced in spiritual phenomena, Corinth was (note that I did not say it does not exist in our culture). They needed help in sorting out what was of the Holy Spirit, and what was of other spirits.

Ephesians 4:11 is thought by many to be another listing of gifts. However, it can easily be viewed as a listing of gifted people, occupying certain offices in the church. So we can understand it as a listing of offices not gifts.

1 Peter 4:10-11 is to be understood as teaching about our manner as we use our gifts. Each gift requires our words and our actions. Whether by words or acts, we should seek to serve others well. The service of others, the giving of ourselves for THEIR good not ours, marks the proper stewarding of our gift in the opportunity before us.

This list of the gifts given by Paul in Romans 12 I would see as comprehensive. It is not just a list of examples to which we can add an infinite number of talents we observe in people. These seven things described the diverse ways in which people are “wired.” They describe how different people approach life. It is not simply what they do, it is who they are.

Multiple “personality” tests have been developed by students of human behavior in the last century. It is interesting that most of these tests defined human behavior in terms of 3 or 4 basic types of personality with several blends. The significant thing to observe from these mostly secular efforts is that there is not an infinite number of such personality types. There are relatively few.

I believe that these gifts listed by Paul described the Master Designer’s crafting of human personality. It is why students of human behavior have been able to identify types of personality and common motivations. God makes all people according to one of these patterns that leads to their being drawn to serve in the ways Paul identifies here. When we say God “makes” them this way, it may be that He does so in the womb or that He has designated events in each one’s life so that life shapes individuals according to one of these patterns. Either way it is His grace that gives them a valuable role in the lives of each other. I would purpose that even unbelievers have such a “gift” though it is exercised for fleshly, selfish purposes. A gift is “spiritual” when it is controlled by the Holy Spirit, but it is woven into the fabric of who we are by our Creator.

We must not make these verses just about gifts, however. The key thought is that of exercising faith and trust in God. In verse three, Paul stated that viewing ourselves more highly than we ought to think is to be avoided. We are to view ourselves through the lens of faith, specifically the measure of faith that God has developed in us. In this discussion of the gifts the key idea is that we are to use our gift in proportion to what our growing faith allows. The phrase “according to the full portion of his faith” is only used with respect to the first gift. It is to be understood however in the rest of the gifts. In fact, in the listing of the last three gifts we are even told how applying faith and trust to the use of our gift adds to our zeal in exercising it. All this demonstrates that applying faith to one’s giftedness is the principle point of Paul’s message here.

What is meant by this idea of carrying out our giftedness in proportion to our faith? It likely means that we are to take the giftedness resident in our bodies and through faith elevate it from the realm of normal self-centered, attention-drawing activity to it being a living and holy sacrifice acceptable to God. We are to exercise our gift with a boldness that goes beyond our own fleshly confidence. We are to exercise our gift in conjunction with God’s specific leading in situations. We are to exercise our gift with a view towards His glory not our own. The principle of exercising our gift “in faith” applies to all the gifts, the more “up front” gifts and those that operate in the background. The result is that we individually and collectively will have impact beyond our own ability, beyond what we see and beyond the level of the activity itself.

The first gift on this list is prophecy. Prophecy refers to declaring God’s message for the moment. At times that message involves elements of the future, what God intends to do in the future with some current condition or situation. But it does not always include such predictive elements. Prophecy is concerned primarily with what is, and what needs to be.

Now all Christians are called to have such truth-centered conversations. Prophets are specially equipped for such moments. They speak such things without regard for consequences that may come to them personally. They are passionate in their appeal to their audience. In terms of personality, they are the kind that are straight-forward. They see things in terms of black and white, right and wrong, good and evil. They distrust ambiguity. Through them the Lord lets his people know what His heart is matters.

The role of the prophet is a very important one in any local church. There always needs to be a fresh perspective on the Lord's heart, a reminder of what is right and good. It is not that such a word is inerrant—it must be passed through the grid of Scripture, as all that is spoken in the church must be.

This idea of our words conforming to the advice and counsel of Scripture may be present in the words of this verse. Given the words of 12:1-3 would expect to see such an idea expressed. Within the phrase “according to the proportion of his faith,” there seems to be a summons in this direction. The word rendered “proportion” in the NASB is *αναλογιαν*. It is the word from which we derive our word analogous. It can be understood to be conveying the idea of “conformable” or perhaps “harmonious with.” The phrase “his faith” is, in the original language, simply “the faith.” This helps us to understand that Paul is calling the readers to practice speaking words and doing deeds that reflect the faith that we have embraced together and implicitly those deeds/words that reflect the leading of the Holy Spirit.

The role prophets play, which is primarily applying the principles of Scripture to practical matters, keeps organizations and movements on course. It is God's way of both warning and reassuring. Paul says that those with this gift are to use it according to the proportion of their faith. That means they are to use it as much and as often, as boldly and persistently, as their faith-walk orchestrates. Their gift will demonstrate their faith.

12:7—if service, in his serving; or he who teaches, in his teaching;

The gift of service speaks of the person who enables the ministry of another or others. By their sacrifice, complementary tasks are accomplished that enable a larger objective to be achieved. Servers are doers who are led by the Holy Spirit to work in the background removing obstacles and barriers. In their service they moved by their faith and trust in what God is wishing to accomplish to seek out ways they can help forward movement.

Rather than restating his complete idea, Paul uses a literary technique called ellipsis, where an idea is purposely left out of the phrase and supplied by the reader and in this way, attention is drawn to it. So if Paul were to have stated his entire thought in this verse it would have read something like this; “If someone's gift is service, let him serve as the Spirit directs his faith.” So his idea is the same as the previous verse. Those with a gift of service should exercise that gift by the Spirit's impulses, sacrificially, to the “enth” degree that they're growing faith enables them to do it in the way He leads them.

The principle is that our giftedness is the vehicle by which our faith demonstrates itself in faithful sacrifice. In other words, the Spirit will be leading the one with the gift of service to trust in the goodness of God and be a living and holy sacrifice through serving.

It is the same for all seven of the gifts which Paul will mention. They are the primary vehicle we have for Spirit-motivated service.

The third gift Paul mentions is teaching. Those with this gift are the analytical ones. They tend to approach all of life in this analytical way. So first of all they are led by the Spirit to process the teachings and doctrines of the faith. They develop an understanding of Scripture's intricacies and so can pass along that understanding to others. They can make complex things simple and can see the whole in terms of its various parts. They enjoy learning and discovery.

Paul's command to teachers is the same as the servants. Allow your faith to reveal to you the leading of the Holy Spirit to sacrificial service in your giftedness—teaching.

12:8—for he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness.

The fourth gift mentioned by Paul is exhortation. These are the people who are cheerleaders by nature. They exhort others. They are optimists by nature and often very relational. They want people to act and be transformed. So they come alongside them to strengthen them. They are of enormous value when energized by faith and the boldness that comes from the Holy Spirit.

The fifth gift identified here by Paul is a person with the gift of giving. There are those who are drawn by the Spirit to causes, are entrusted with financial resources and so rise to fund various ministry ventures. They are motivated by the good in something and they quickly identify it. They are sacrificial by nature, willing through the Spirit to put the needs and comfort of others ahead of their own. Their faith leads them to be all this to God's people and His mission.

Paul urges these givers to give with generosity. Beginning here Paul speaks to a tone that is to accompany our actions. WHAT we do is not the only thing God is seeking to transform. He is concerned with HOW we do it. What is the accompanying emotion people see in us as we do the things the Spirit leads? That is part of the metamorphosis He is bringing about in us. As our faith grows it is what happens with each of the gifts. We are not just led to use them more, to tackle greater challenges, or to push the mission through greater obstacles. The attitude that accompanies our exercise of our gifts adds force and impact to them.

Now, again, all Christians are called to do the activities associated with each of the gifts. We are not allowed to look at the ministries associated with any of the gifts and leave them to those with that gift. All Christians must have hard conversations, not just prophets. All must instruct others, not just teachers. All must serve, not just servants. All must encourage, not just those with the gift of exhortation. All must give, and so on.

Next Paul speaks of the gift of leadership. Leadership is the work of influence. It is the thing someone must do for anything to move from the realm of dream into reality. Leaders see how things could and should be. They have that in their personalities that influences and inspires others. They have that in them that motivates them and leads them to work harder and sacrifice more than others. The accompanying emotion that others see grow in them is diligence. This diligence is the key thing that must stay fresh in leaders. Their growing faith will require their diligence and so Paul focuses them on cultivating this heart attitude. It is the diligence of leaders that is so important to the Christian mission.

Lastly Paul mentions those who have the gift of mercy. In the mission that is Christianity there are many encounters with those who for various reasons are passed over. Some are passed over because they need more care, some due to their own failure, some due to the failure of others, some due to sickness. But God is a God of second chances in the case of those who fall short. He brings meaning and purpose in the case of the sick. So He has called many to the ministry of mercy. By personality they want everyone to be included and to feel good. They are for the underdog whom others have passed over. Their faith leads them into reclamation projects and into a ministry of comfort where loss has been sustained. They must be cheerful where others are not, able to stimulate hope in those who have given up. This is their contribution that their faith will enable them to make. Cheerfulness becomes an emotional mark of those with the gift of showing mercy.

Each of the seven gifts is unique. But they have three things in common. First, all are graces of God, manifestations of His free, unconditional love and care for humanity. Second, because they are sourced in God, all these gifts are at their best when they are used in trust and dependence on Him, according to the leading of the Holy Spirit. Faith makes them strong beyond the strength of the person they reside in. Third, all of them are means by which individuals become living sacrifices for God. We give ourselves because in us resides a giftedness that is critical to God's work.

12:9—let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor that which is evil; cling to what is good.

From a discussion of gifts Paul has begun to mention accompanying attitudes the Spirit begins to cultivate in us. Here he moves his discussion exclusively to attitudes the Holy Spirit is continually calling us up to. Chief among these is love, which is where Paul begins. It gives birth to all others.

There are many ways in which our love can become hypocritical. It happens very easily in us because of the flesh, which can be understood as our instinctive self-centeredness. Under its influence we become self-serving and selective in our love. We choose who we will love and when we will love. The result is not anything like the love of Christ. In its place is a whimsical, self-promoting, mechanism that dispenses affection when some advantage is to be gained.

Paul addresses this disease he is concerned about first, hypocritical love. He also gives the antidote in these verses. We obey his first command to demonstrate to each other genuine love by implementing what follows all the way through verse 21. Verses 9 through the end of chapter 12 can be seen as a practical description of how a genuinely loving person behaves.

So in verse 9 we can observe that when we learn to abhor what is evil in us, all that the flesh prompts that would serve our own interests, we are able to cling to what is good. What is good is what serves the highest interests of others. This in turn serves God and brings Him glory. His Spirit is prompting us to act in the highest interests of others. This is how we offer ourselves as a living sacrifice. We make ourselves readily available to serve their highest interests.

Paul's words here deal with what is inside us, which is always what true Christianity seeks to do. These words strike at the heart of our problem and command what only the gospel can bring about. They describe the practical end of the salvation that God is seeking to bring about in our lives.

12:10—be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor;

There is to be a definitive warmth within the Christian community that is visible outwardly and in our public manner. We are called to sacrificial, selfless love that goes beyond smiles and words. We are also called to a pleasantness and affection with each other that is clearly visible. Brotherly love includes all the niceties we associate with love. Very often our love can become stoic and mechanical. It can become a series of acts carried out in a begrudging, unfeeling, and detached sort of way. We are urged here toward the basic displays of kindness and thoughtfulness, appreciation, and affection—things that communicate to people that they are loved and valued. Devotion is key in this. There is to be a certain persistence in our demeanor with each other as opposed to moodiness. Devotion is seen in persistence that is not blind but joyful and fresh.

Brotherly love is characterized by the statement in the second half of this verse. It is displayed by us when we defer and do so in a manner that confers honor. It is a “you first, because you are worth it” mentality. Bestowing honor and dignity is one of the great acts we can do to make someone else’s life better. People just get healthier when they are appreciated and are made to feel significant. They develop a collective sense of being blessed.

In the vocabulary of our day we might say that God wants us to both love each other and to like each other!

12:11—not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord;

The work of the Kingdom is ordained by God and energized by the Spirit. Though enabled by the Spirit, it still requires our diligence. This idea is present throughout all the Scripture (i.e., to Peter 1:5, 10; 3:14). In terms of the hard, complex work of the Kingdom, we are not to be found to be stragglers. There are many who never rise spiritually because they continually fail to invest effort in the quest to be holy. They have a different way of approaching the tasks of the Kingdom than they do the tasks that they do for themselves. We should all notice this in ourselves so that others are not negatively impacted and so that others do not need to point it out to us. In analyzing this weakness in ourselves we can quickly conclude that something is lacking in terms of our inner motivation.

And so in Paul’s letter it is natural that he would speak to fervency of spirit. By adding this to his description of how we should “look,” he tells us once again that we ourselves play a role in our own motivation. The presence of the Holy Spirit does not negate our own need to watch over our own spirits and to direct them so that the right kind of zeal characterizes us. We must do the things that need to be done. We must muster our zeal to the tasks of the kingdom. We must regularly examine our own affections. What do we love? What are we willing to pour ourselves into? What occupies our mind in idle moments? What are we dreaming about?

We must also consider what we are praying for. What are we pleading with God to do? What are we doing that will absolutely require His intervention? What answer to prayer are we looking for? What are we praying for ourselves that needs changing? What heart changes in others are we praying for? Is what we are praying an expression of God’s heart? Is it just what we want? As we ask these questions of ourselves, we must examine the answers to them in light of God’s word and what we understand of it.

We are to serve the Lord. That is a very simple idea. But it is easy for us to become enslaved to all sorts of things—organizations, causes, pleasures, leisure and people other than Him. It is very, very easy for us to become self-serving as well. This little idea captures the essence of the whole matter, even as Joshua did when he told Israel “choose this day whom you will serve” (Joshua 24:15). Who or what is ordering our lives? That is the question these verses are dealing with, and it is the most important question of life.

12:12—rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer,

For Christians their greatest dilemma, the dilemma of being estranged from their Creator and His creation, has been solved. They have the hope of a future reality when they will experience reconciliation. It is a great and profound hope that makes sense of all that tends to crush us in this life. This hope should make us a joyful people. But it does not necessarily. Paul is urging us here to be what we should be. Like everything we are asked by God to do, we do this by faith. It is as simple as reflecting on the truth of our ultimate destination.

That truth gives us hope, and where there is hope there can be rejoicing. Such hope helps us persevere in tribulation. There is tribulation in living the faith because we have an enemy. Paul experienced tribulation, orchestrated by Satan among nonbelievers, who wrongly came to believe they should kill Paul. Satan orchestrated trouble for Paul among believers, who wrongly came to believe they should discredit him. He always experienced trouble from within the family of God and from outside this family. That is the nature of the present life and our hope in God, the righteous Judge, helps us persevere. To persevere is not just to hunker down, hide, and survive. It is to keep pushing the work forward. You do not persevere at doing nothing. You persevere at believing the truth, at applying the truth, at responding to its implications in the situations in front of you, in defending the truth, and in spreading the truth.

Throughout our changing situations we are to be devoted to prayer. Prayer should remind us that life demands more of us than we can muster. It should remind us that through us God wants to do what is humanly impossible. It should remind us that Yahweh is wanting us to ask him for help. For this reason, we are to be devoted to prayer. The idea is that we do more than tack it on. It is something we are to never to stop doing or be separated from. It is to become instinctive in us, something that comes to be far more than the activity it starts out as.

As stated earlier regarding prayer we should pay attention to our own prayers. What are we pleading with God to do? What are we doing that will absolutely require His intervention? What answer to prayer are we looking for? What are we praying for ourselves that needs changing? What heart changes in others are we praying for? Is what we are praying an expression of God’s heart? Is it just what we want? As we ask these questions of ourselves, we must examine the answers to them in light of God’s word and what we understand of it.

12:13—contributing to the needs of the Saints, practicing hospitality.

Our love is to extend beyond loving rhetoric. We are to make regular contribution to what Paul describes as “the needs of the saints.” This likely refers to the needy within the wider body of Christ, since we know Paul orchestrated such collection (2 Corinthians 8:1-15). We know that such offerings were considered the norm as well as to meet the needs of those who proclaim the gospel, including Paul (2 Corinthians 11:7-9). So this exhortation to contribute extends to life needs and to missional needs, all that it takes for fellow believers to do what is confirmed by others to be God’s will for them.

Our contribution is to be more than cash or goods. We are to practice hospitality. That enabled men like Paul to do the work God had called them to do. This meant more in that day than having people over to your home for dinner. It meant giving people a place to stay until they went on their way. It involved extended stays at times. It enabled people through times of legitimate hardship.

Hospitality involves sharing what is yours with others, allowing them to participate in the blessings God has given you. It is the act of opening your heart and releasing to others that which will encourage them in their faith and help them on their way.

12:14—bless those who persecute you; bless and curse not.

To bless comes from a compound word. One of the words means to speak, the other means good. To bless supposes that our words shape the fortunes of others, as does the act of cursing someone. When Paul tells us to bless those who persecute us he is saying much more than that we should speak well to them or even about them. We should actually wish and hope for good for them. We should pray and work for it as we have opportunity. This is a high standard, but it models the actions of God Himself who extends His blessing to all men. This is what led to the utterance of Christ on the cross when he said, “Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

It remains one of the most noble and lofty standards. If we embraced it in our churches, it would radically alter their look and feel. Instead, we nourish hurts and brood over those who in some way slighted us. Now, if we are to bless those who persecute us, who violate every standard of God’s justice, what of those who merely irritate us?

12:15—rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep.

Our selflessness is to extend in two directions, and both can be a challenge. We tend to think of empathy as what we do with respect to those in pain. Here we see that it is to be practiced regarding those who have reason to celebrate as well. The flesh can enter each situation, perhaps even more when others are successful. We can feel no joy at all in their behalf. When that is true of us, it is certain that our love is hypocritical and still is encumbered by much of ourselves. We are to enter the emotional lives of others.

We can deduce from the principle that underlies this verse that a Christian should never feel alone (1 Corinthians 12:26). A Christian wedding or a Christian funeral should be distinct not just because of what is said there, or what is believed to be true about those occasions. They should be displays of hearty support. Our celebration should be noted for their vigor. Our times of grief should be noted for the sheer volume of participants in the outpouring of care. There are things that we all do alone. But what we have in the body of Christ is not mere community. It is through the Holy Spirit, an ontological oneness, a oneness in our very beings. At times of grief or celebration that unity should be visible.

12:16—be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation.

In this verse we see more on the authenticity of love. It is easy within us to hang on to certain prejudices that we have and make distinctions in our minds about the relative value of people. In commanding us to be of the same mind toward each other Paul is addressing this bent that the flesh nurtures. This is not so much a call to develop a unified approach or strategy. Paul will address that elsewhere (Philippians 2:1-2). This is a call to drop any distinctions we might be tempted to make among ourselves and to have equal respect and value for each other. It is easy for us to become haughty

All people should receive our love and devotion who are part of the body of Christ. It is easy to be “haughty.” This word is a rendering of a term which simply means “high things.” The word is used to describe high mountains or high places. This refers to a supposed high value we think something has, not an actual one. It does not convey an idea of innate value. It is likely referring to those things that rather arbitrarily assign social status to people.

Now we must remember that such “haughtiness” or “high-mindedness” is not exclusively a disease of the rich or powerful. It infects the poor and the disenfranchised as well. One’s non—status can be a point of pride just as can one’s status. All such thinking is to be disallowed by us. We are to associate with the lowly, those who might be viewed as undesirable by us.

We are to keep from being wise by our own estimation. This phrase is one which we see often in the wisdom literature of the Bible. It refers to the person who exalts themselves above others. It is the ultimate hypocrisy that stands within us as the antithesis of love. There is to be a clear dignity extended across all economic, intellectual, ethnic, gender, personality, and social lines so that none of these differences imply superiority or inferiority.

12:17—never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men.

For every course of action that we can take as humans there is an appropriate time. There is not an appropriate time to do evil. There is an appropriate time for justice, and even for just revenge. We know this because God says of Himself that He is an avenger of wrong. But it is never right for us to concoct evil to pay someone back for hurt or an injustice.

This verse has to do with that tendency in our flesh to inflict pain on someone because they have done so to us. There is no end to the schemes we can come up with to pay back, punish, and destroy those who brought pain to us. Vengeance is the business of the righteous judge and we have to leave it to Him. This does not mean that we are being called on to set aside justice. We are not forbidden here from pursuing justice through the established criminal and civil processes. We are forbidden to engage in evil schemes that come about when we take justice into our own hands.

To this end we are to respect what is right in the sight of all men. This means that particularly in this area of responding to evil done to us, we are to stay within appropriate channels of justice, as civil Law has laid down. There is likely a broader principle of behavior being taught here. It is that we should shape our lives with an eye on how we will be perceived. This does not mean that we must keep everyone happy, or that if everyone does not approve of us, we have done wrong. It does not mean we should shape our lives by the majority view. It does mean that because we want to touch lives, we should build bridges to people. We do so when we approached them respectfully and when our lives and manner is such that we are respectable.

The church should be a culture of forbearance and respect. When it becomes such that perceived hurts must be paid back, and when individuals do not shape their actions based on the impact they will have on others, Christ is no longer the head.

12:18—if possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.

We are not to be people who are hard to get along with, hard to please, or anxious to quarrel. There is to be about us a graciousness that makes living with us and working with us easy. We are to seek to need little from others and to be able to give much. We are to be and do all we can do so that peace characterizes the atmosphere around us.

This command by Paul calls us to take initiative wherever we can to maintain peace. It requires that we constantly recall how much grace we have received from God and that we extend this grace to others. The church is not a place for those who believe the worst, or who find it difficult to overlook imperfections or even injustices. Because we are all sinful, we must value peace greatly. There will always be ample to quarrel about. If any nation is torn by war, malnutrition, and starvation, then poverty and a host of things will soon be its lots. This is because war prevents the things that need to happen for healthy existence from happening, and so pestilence creeps in. It is the same in the church. We are to do all we can to preserve peace.

12:19—never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, “vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.”

Paul names the thing here that any attentive reader would know was coming from the things said in verse nine. The desire for vindication can easily stimulate in us a quest to set matters straight, as the truth shows them to be. This then can be seized by our own flesh and grow into a desire for revenge. We may begin nobly, seeking to defend the truth and plan to expose the lie. That is the work we can see Jesus and the apostles doing. We clearly see Paul defending himself to believers and nonbelievers. We must not stray in the matter of payback, as our flesh so easily does. We must not inflict pain and hurt on those who cause us hurt and pain. That is our natural bent which we must steadfastly resist. Jesus resisted any such urge through faith (1 Peter to: 21-23), and that is our calling.

Paul says we are to “leave room for the wrath of God.” That is an interesting idea. If we do not see retribution and vindication, it is not necessarily because the matter is not offensive to God. His anger burns against many such things. By “leaving room” Paul is calling us to literally “give place” to the wrath of God. In other words, don’t play God’s role, allow another to play it, and he goes on to say that one is the Lord. We must leave that room, step out of that role. Paul quotes Leviticus 19:18. The previous verse in Leviticus says, “you shall not hate your fellow countrymen in your heart; he may surely reprove your neighbor but shall not incur sin because of him.” The verse clearly allows the speaking of truth to those who commit offense against us but our hurt does not give us license to sin. We sin when we seek to settle the score.

12:20—but if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink: for in so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head.

The message of these statements is that rather than seeking revenge against our enemies we should go to the other extreme and take opportunity to serve them. Paul began this section of his letter saying that our love must not be hypocritical. In that context, this verse makes perfect sense. The ultimate way of showing love that is not hypocritical, is to extend love even to those who have wronged us.

This verse is a quote from Proverbs 25:21-22. The expression “heaping burning coals on the head” has been taken two different ways. Some have suggested that it symbolizes conviction—a conviction that will arise in the hearts of our enemies when we serve them. The suggestion is that this conviction is a righteous form of revenge, and one that can make enemies reverse their course and treat us justly. A more likely interpretation is that the expression refers to the practice of getting hot coals from someone when one’s own fire has gone out in your home, carrying them in a container on one’s head. We can imagine that this was a common occurrence in the world of Solomon who apparently wrote the proverb. The idea is that serving our enemies will be regarded as a gesture of great and timely generosity. Whatever the precise meaning, the expression certainly recalls sharing generously, in a way that is unexpected. It is calling to attention the idea of us standing out from average people by loving beyond what all would consider just and normal. It is intentional over-service, that will have the effect of proving the presence of love that is not hypocritical. James had learned this from Jesus (Matthew 5:38-47).

12:21—do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Evil is real and alive. It has made our experience on earth much different than it was designed to be. We can unknowingly add to its power. We do so when we respond to evil in a fleshly way. At that point we have perpetuated the cycle and given evil greater impetus. If we respond to evil in that way, we have been overcome by it. It will begin to shape our lives. Rather than being rescued from evil and being shaped by the Holy Spirit, those Christians who take this path fall into a downward spiral. They become shaped by the very things we should loathe. Beware! Pain can become a primary force in our lives, leading us away from all that God intends

The previous verses have given us counsel that help us break the cycle of evil. The gospel is God's power that brings about salvation. That salvation includes a journey in which our lives are shaped in a way different from the norm. Our response to the pains evil produces on and in us, governs whether we are shaped by evil or by the Holy Spirit. Responding to evil in like kind will lead to a strange contradiction in us. We will find that we hate evil, aligned ourselves against it and are forgiven for it, yet we are shaped by it. Responding to evil by the actions orchestrated by the Spirit breaks the cycle and perpetuates good, first in us and then in those we influence. This is not to say that we could destroy evil by our actions. But we can overcome it in the moment and keep it from doing its greater work of enslaving us.

Romans 13

13:1—let every person be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God.

In chapter 13 we find one of the clearest statements in Scripture regarding how Christians are to relate to civil authority. It is important because as Christians it would be very easy to be carried along by an attractive but false logic into insubordination to such law and authority.

Our errant logic in this matter can seem so right. We subject ourselves to God and obey Him. We fight conformity to the world. We refuse to follow human standards of morality. Therefore, we can suppose we are released from what government may require of us. The error of this thought is that it assumes that God has not established such authority and is not exercising sovereignty over it. We can assume it has an agenda that is completely independent of Him.

Paul begins his charge by an immediate affirmation of the legitimacy of human government in the plan and sovereignty of God. He states that all authority is sourced in God and stands (perfect tense) established or instituted by Him. We can only say from such an all-inclusive statement that authority is a primary instrument in the hand of God whereby He shapes the course of the world so that His purposes come about.

The statement that all authority is sourced in God leaves many unanswered questions. We are not suggesting by this that all authorities that have ever existed have therefore been functioning righteously. Paul is only saying that they are in power with God's permission and therefore are serving some purpose of His. We can acknowledge the truth of this since we believe that the evil one himself ultimately will serve some purpose of God's. It is therefore logical that evil men do so as well.

The idea of a sovereign God who is following a meticulous plan raises many questions in our minds. Christians have not answered all these questions even to their own satisfaction. But we have chosen to believe that the plan of God does not exist independent of evil but includes it. We assume that God did not switch His plan once human choice began to undo the order in creation. Rather, we believe that Yahweh had formulated a plan before time involving the existence of all that is and that this plan included the eventual "invention" of evil and its eventual demise. We believe this can be affirmed without making God the actual creator or source of evil.

So as we encounter civil law and its enforcement we are to cooperate and be submissive to it as God's agent. We are to see and understand it as such. It is part of our worship of a sovereign God.

13:2—therefore he who resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves.

One cannot function in a godly way without responding rightly to authority. Rebellion is very natural human behavior that flows out of our self-centeredness. Submission is learned behavior. To be godly, submission cannot be simply passivity, or it would include submission to evil, and the evil one. It must therefore be intentional and wise. It must be an act of our will which we carry out with an eye on the One who is over all things, and an ear listening for His wisdom.

Paul says clearly that resistance to authority is resisting the ordinance of God, what stands ordered by Him. We can find ourselves un-ordering what He has ordered. That is the force of Paul's words. In trying to do so we face an impossible task. We will be judged for resisting God. That reality should never be allowed to be pushed from our minds. We know that Rome had its excesses. That may even be the reason Paul felt it important to give this teaching.

A couple of things stand out about this principle. First, Paul's words do not exclude any aspect of that government, nor does he suggest any immunities from its jurisdiction. Second, his teaching would not have been popular among the Jews, a significant portion of his audience. So the historical context of this teaching adds to its significance. If there were any room for margin in this idea of submission, Paul certainly would have seized it.

There was plenty of liability incurred by taking this position ranging from political liability to philosophical and theological liability. Paul did so not only for himself but for the church for centuries to come.

Many Christians over the centuries have rightly concluded that much is at stake in this issue subjection to civil authority because of these words penned by Paul. They have seen in the teaching of this verse that our submission to God is fleshed out by our submission to other authority. This has been embraced even in times when government and governors targeted Christians for abuse and persecution. Submission has always been seen as a means of subjecting one's life to the much wider and comprehensive purposes of God. Submission to government is placing faith in the principle that our meaning is found as we take our place in serving the script of the Creator.

The verse includes a solemn warning that certainly adds to its power. Submission is a matter God is dead serious about. Those who set it aside will not be rescued from the consequences of their action. The consequences Paul talks of are both earthly and heavenly. There will be practical consequences on earth, including death. There will also be the loss of commendation and reward from the One who will ultimately serve as our judge.

13:3—for rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same.

This verse is a simple, common-sense statement about our relationship to civil authority. If we do the things God is seeking for us to do, we will not be doing the things that civil authorities punish. Christians, because they are practitioners of goodness, should not be fearful of submitting to the enforcers of Law. They will have nothing to hide. The truth will exonerate them. They will by all accounts be model citizens.

This is the general description of how life works. There have been exceptions. There would be others in the future in the Roman world where Christians had to fear civil authority just because they were Christians. Other apostolic writers set forth principles for such situations (1 Peter 2:11-25; 3:10-17; 4:12-19).

Paul himself was no stranger to trouble and persecution from the mixed bag that composed civil authority in Palestine. Nor was Jesus. Rome had its abuses and its cruelties, but the apostles urged this submissive behavior to win over the minds of hearts of those in government and to ease their suspicions of this new faith (1 Peter 2:11-12). At the leading of the Holy Spirit, they taught the principle of submission. In the end it would bring peace to the lives of those practicing the faith. Historically the mission of Christ has moved forward where there is stable government, and stable government comes about where people submit. This has generally been the rule.

13:4—for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; For it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath upon the one who practices evil.

Here Paul speaks to the role of civil government in the mind of God, and that role is to avenge evil. Paul describes government as a “minister,” twice using the word *διακονος*, the word used for deacons in the church. This strengthens the idea that such officials and authorities are established by God. They are “for good,” meaning for our welfare. They do what they do so that there might be a healthy fear on the part of citizens of becoming involved in evil.

Paul said government does not bear the sword for nothing. He is using the term sword not only in the literal sense of offensive weapon, but in the figurative sense as an emblem of government’s ability to enforce its will and to inflict harm on those who rebel. Here, God affords no protection to rebels. They will be struck down.

Paul describes civil government as “an avenger,” who brings wrath. The Lord has revealed earlier in this context, that He Himself is the avenger (See 12:19). God has appointed governments who bring His wrath to bear on evildoers now. The work of God of bringing vengeance on workers of evil is being done in the present. God has ordained civil government as His ministers to carry out this part of his work. We must be comforted by this idea that God uses even those who don’t acknowledge Him as His ministers. Too often this becomes a matter of consternation to us. It should comfort us by demonstrating to us His complete and utter sovereignty even over evil, and over every institution of authority supposedly of man.

None of this is to say that all such evil is fully punished now. God will join government in punishing evil on His great day of judgment. None of this is to say that all such authorities are godly. They are simply of God. This means first He allows them to exist and second, that they exist under the greater umbrella of His authority. It is certain that all earthly authority and kingdoms are brought to a swift and abrupt end at the exact moment of time in which their existence ceases to be God’s will (see Daniel 4 on this subject).

13:5—wherefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience sake.

When Paul uses the phrase “for conscience’s sake” he is speaking about that part of our being through which we hear the voice of the Holy Spirit. It is not that this portion of our being is flawless and cannot lead us astray, wrongly informing us. In fact, that is why we must be careful with it (see 1 Corinthians 8:7-13).

In this case, because civil officials are often godless, we can refuse to respect their rule and authority. They can anger us and we can feel justified in our rebellion against them. That rebellion is not, from conscience that is rightly directed by the Holy Spirit. It is the voice of conscience being directed by the flesh. We must demand of ourselves submission to government to keep our conscience tracking right, to keep ourselves from being deceived.

Rebellion can feel so very right to us, so right that we can mistake it for godly zeal. Our rational faculties must hold our more subjective faculties in check at this point. Submission must carry the day rather than rebellion. And so submission is appropriate not just because of the potential of experiencing the wrath of the authorities, but to maintain our own spiritual health. The presence of a spirit of submission is an important indicator of our spirituality.

13:6—for because of this you also pay taxes, for rulers are servants of God devoting themselves to this very thing.

Rules and perhaps even considerable portions of the bureaucracy we scorn are in place to keep humanity on course in terms of right and wrong. Therefore, God has allowed human government. That it is excessive—even corrupt, we acknowledge and seek to correct to the degree that the system allows such input. In a democracy that opportunity is significant. In other forms of government there is little such opportunity.

We do not have the option of not paying taxes “for conscience’s sake.” This thought has always crossed the minds of Christians. Paul’s words here assure that we cannot follow such a train of thought and suppose ourselves to be hearing from God. In this section of Paul’s letter, he has now called rulers the ministers of God three times, and we must remember Rome was the ruling power that had carried out the crucifixion of God’s only Son. Though evil, it absolutely achieved Yahweh’s purposes.

Taxes are somewhat like the Old Testament tithe, which went toward maintaining the priests and the theocracy. Government, no matter how it is done, costs money. The money is often not spent wisely. It is often spent excessively. But we pay the amount assessed to us and view it as supporting the order God established for His own purposes.

13:7—Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor.

This verse starts with an important principle. It is that we should behave toward all people, but rulers, with behavior that is customary and appropriate. We should not assume that because we are loyal to Christ, we should honor no one else. We should not allow ourselves to begin thinking that displaying respect and honor are an erosion of our worship and love to God. The opposite is, in fact, true.

Paul acknowledges four different activities as examples of appropriate behavior on the part of God’s people toward earthly authorities. Taxes are appropriate for us to pay. The custom of showing respect, whether by bowing down or by standing up or by any other action dictated by culture, is appropriate. Respect, the same as we show toward God, is appropriate. Showing honor in whatever way time and culture dictate is appropriate as well. So we are not to become falsely pious over these matters and suppose that somehow we’re honoring God by holding back our support of human government.

This is not to say that we worship such authority. There are lines that we must draw, as the story of Daniel illustrates. The drawing of lines and taking stands against civil government must be entered into very prayerfully and carefully. It is only orchestrated by God on rare occasions. Paul has laid down the normal path orchestrated by the Holy Spirit.

13:8—Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the Law.

The previous verse outlined actions that we should view as indebtedness. We owe to other things like taxes, custom, respect, and honor. We are never to fall short of fulfilling these obligations. They are to be current at all times. This verse begins with this idea. No such debt is to remain outstanding. No situation is to arise in which we do not answer the call and rise to the occasion.

There is only one debt that we are to regard as never paid. It is an obligation that we can never close the books on. It is the obligation to extend love to others. This is the work God is doing. Loving describes His moral makeup better than any other word. It summarizes the commands He has given us to do. We are to love others and in doing so we will be responding to an obligation that will never be paid in full. It is an obligation owed to the Creator Himself who loves us without ceasing. That obligation compounds daily and we can keep up with it as we experience His continual goodness in innumerable ways. So in this sense, to love is to lead a moral life.

This is not a verse against borrowing money. Its context and its wording show that it is primarily about staying current on all obligations, financial and otherwise. It is about never regarding us to have loved someone enough, so as to say, "I'm done loving!"

13:9—for this, “you shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not covet, and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

This is the same teaching that Jesus gave when he was asked the question, “what is the greatest commandment?” (Matthew 22:34-40). Love for God and our worship of Him is best demonstrated and expressed when we show love for others. It is the most tangible way of showing love for an invisible God. This is what Jesus meant when He taught that the most important commandment is to love God and that the second was “like it” (Matthew 22:39). The second is “like” the first not only in importance but also in how it is carried out and how it evidences itself. We show love for God by loving His people (Matthew 26:31-46), and acts done for their welfare He considers acts done for Him.

Paul cites four Commandments of the ten that have to do with our behavior toward one another. Clearly this is not meant to be a complete list, but as the wording indicates, it is a sampling. It served to demonstrate Paul’s point that we have an obligation to love that is never fulfilled. It is the debt that remains outstanding, and that we are to regard as such.

13:10—love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the Law.

Jesus said that he came to “fulfill the Law” (Matthew 5:17). His life ended with the greatest demonstration of love the world has ever known. He gave his own life as the sacrifice for our sin so that we might have right relationship with God. In loving, Jesus not only kept all the commands of the Law, but he fulfilled what its symbolic sacrifices projected—becoming a substitute for us, our sin-bearer who made atonement for our sins. Love qualified him and love motivated him to carry out his work, finishing what the Law started. All that was understood by Paul as he wrote these words.

In Paul’s description of love in 1 Corinthians 13 we find goodness. There is nothing in love that does wrong for someone. Love stirs people to provide what others need, not necessarily what they want. Its actions are just but are also sprinkled with mercy. If there is firmness it has been preceded by patience and kindness. Love has a community mindset. It is not just a matter of giving a person what they want. It is providing for their needs in a way that will not harm someone else or impact them in a negative way.

We see both kindness and severity in the love of God (Romans 11:22). It gives what is right and just and so reinforces what is moral and good. God’s love does not serve what is self-centered and self-serving, and it is not at work where people use others to gain some advantage. Love promotes the deeds that agree with the Law, and this is powerfully demonstrated by the life of Christ. Such love is the fulfillment of the Law.

When Jesus spoke of love for one’s neighbor, someone asked, “and who is my neighbor?” To this question Jesus told the story of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37). The story illustrates that a neighbor is anyone who crosses the path of our life. We may know them, or they may be strangers. They become our neighbor when we see their need. Likewise, a good neighbor is not one who simply keeps his yard clean and his fences tight. The neighbor is one who helps meet the needs that arise in front of them, giving more than a token effort to them.

13:11—and this do, knowing the time, that is already the hour for you to awaken from sleep; for now salvation is nearer to us than when we believed.

Paul wants his readers to approach the matters he is addressing with urgency. He is likely thinking particularly about the work of love, which he has just called them to. But since love is all-inclusive and summarizes the righteousness of God, we can view this as applying to all what Paul is urging us to do as we live out our faith. One of the great tendencies of the flesh is to procrastinate. Our flesh can do its work so that the only practical change our faith makes is to give us a set of good intentions.

Paul says that we should know the time. His teaching regarding the Christian life always had a strong eschatological element, a clear belief in a future event that himself and his readers might very likely experience in their day. That event was the return of Christ to rescue his children from the judgment of sin and sinners on the Earth that will be carried out in connection with the “Day of the Lord.”

In this verse Paul clearly uses the word “salvation” of the time when believers will enter the actual experience of what Christ’s death was all about, to bring us to where He himself is in glory. We do not know the exact timing of this rescue, which we’ve called “the rapture,” in relationship to other events that have been revealed.

We know that just before the “Day of the Lord,” the day appointed by God to confront evil and evil men (Isaiah 2), there will be a great tribulation on earth. It will be a time when the spirit of antichrist, which has always been present on earth, comes to be personified and incarnated in a great world leader. That leader seeks to destroy all that is associated with Christ and removed them from the earth. And so we call this leader “the antichrist.”

There will be two things happening on Earth at this time. The antichrist will be leading his great spiritual work of seeking to annihilate all that is associated with Christ. At the same time God will increasingly oppose that movement so that there will be a great cosmic disturbance on a far grander scale than the plagues that afflicted Egypt. This work of God against the kingdom of evil will crescendo, serving as a kind of final warning or announcement of the main event—the day of the Lord. Somewhere before that main event when the sun is darkened and the moon turns to blood (Acts 2:20), Christ will rescue all who believed in him, the living, and the dead. He will catch them up from the earth to be with him (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; 1 Corinthians 15:51-58; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-17). This is the salvation that Paul is reminding the readers of and it is as he taught in his other writings (1 Thessalonians 5:9; 2 Thessalonians 2:13).

The imagery of night and day, and of rising to the work was common in Paul’s other writings as it is here. In all of them there is hope and confidence and urgency. Paul’s instructions always are based on a divine schedule that Paul knew to be unfolding. This family of events involving the Antichrist, the rapture, the day of the Lord, the revival in Israel, of the reign of Christ, Paul saw as imminent. Nothing needed to happen in His mind before those events came suddenly upon us. That is what time it was and is, and it is the agenda associated with that that Paul urges us to understand and rise to. Though we may not know the exact date we can be certain that we are nearer to it with each passing hour. Paul employs the metaphor of sleeping in, to urge us into action. We should not allow ourselves to be lazy in the sanctification process and our service to our Lord and Creator. Time is moving too fast.

13:12—the night is almost gone, and the day is at hand. Let us therefore lay aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light.

Night and darkness are typical in Scripture of things like ignorance, and deception, times when truth is absent or suppressed. Since the fall of Adam, the earth has been a place of such darkness. It is in this sense that Paul is speaking here. The prince of darkness has so influenced the earth that the truth has become veiled or hidden (2 Corinthians 4:3-4). But that era is ending. The day is at hand.

The figure of day is an appropriate one. It is speaking of the time when the truth of God’s existence and Christ’s identity as Savior and Lord will become plain to all. Paul is speaking of the time when Christ will stand on the Earth again and rule over its kingdoms (Revelation 19:11-20:6). It is the day of the Lord when God will confront humanity with the truth about themselves, their lives on the earth, and who He Himself is. Since this fate is the end to which this worldly system is moving, we should not be deceived by it. We should know well its emptiness spurn it. We should lay aside like old and worn-out clothes, all that it promotes and urges. We should embrace those things that enable us to live by the truth.

Paul saw the truths God has made known to us as armor (Ephesians 6:12-18). They equip us so as not to be harmed by the assault of all the lies on our being. And so this important truth about who we are in Christ and the truth of our destiny should change our lives in the present. It is not that the future renders the present irrelevant and meaningless. It is contradictory to allow our hope in the future to lead us to indulge in the deeds of ignorance that are the normal part of human existence. The truth should transform us and should make us especially wary of the destructive capacity of instinctive, godless living. And then once we are rescued by truth, we should be compelled by the plight of the blind and ignorant to live in such a way that truth is made credible to them.

13:13—Let us behave properly as in the day, not in carousing and drunkenness, and not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not in strife and jealousy.

We are to “behave properly as in the day,” meaning that we are to be shaped each moment by the truth. Paul uses the word *εὐφροσχημονῶ*, an adverb that means well-patterned or well-formed. The truth is our new pattern for thinking and behavior. It sets us free from those things that distract and trap us.

Paul lists examples of behaviors that we slip into quite naturally if we are not alert. Each of these is a result of a way of thinking that we gravitate toward. They can so occupy us that they rob us of more precise and intentional actions that God seeks to orchestrate in us.

These are alike in that they all involve us following our instincts for pleasure and instant gratification. They are very easy and require no discipline from us. They can feel right because they just happen. But they are not informed. From a purely pragmatic point of view they introduce problems and complications into our everyday lives. From the point of view of truth, they rob us of what is true wealth and true, unencumbered pleasure and joy.

The idea of casting off all restraint sounds like freedom. However, in all cases wisdom shows that such freedom is very short-lived and soon gives way to the harsh task-master of reality. So the carousing drunks are enslaved by their inattentiveness to an occupation. The sexually promiscuous and sensual face the harsh realities of broken relationships, sexually transmitted disease, the loss of dignity. Those who give in to jealousy and strife are enslaved by bitterness, disillusionment, and a growing inability to see people, events, and even themselves as they really are. Darkness enslaves. The truth sets us free and keeps us free. Since we are rushing toward the moment of truth we should live in the light of truth. Nothing else makes sense.

13:14—but put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts.

This verse dispenses great counsel with very few words. It is simple and short but thorough. It captures the essence of our present challenges as we live in a fallen world.

To put on the Lord Jesus Christ involves intentionally listening for the leadings and urgings of the Holy Spirit and letting these shape our actions. It involves actual visible deeds. Engaging those deeds is a catalyst that begins to alter our minds. They make Christ visible to others. So it is displaying the character of Christ in the real-life situations that arise in the course of every day. It has a powerful impact in us.

To make no provision for the lust of the flesh has two primary implications. The flesh refers to our natural, instinctive drive to satisfy our own desires, to advance our own interests, to have our self-centered needs met and to be our own masters.

We provide for the flesh first, when we set aside the truth of the Lordship of Christ. He has the right to rule as sovereign over every detail of our lives. His interests are what matter, and so ours must be submitted to His care, and our desires submitted to His agenda, His timing, and His method. To take back control of these is to make provision for the flesh.

Second, we make provision for the flesh when we mindlessly or consciously refuse to shape our behavior by what we know to be true. In either case we set aside fragile boundaries that are based on the truth. The flesh is such a powerful force in us that it needs little by way of provision to do an extreme work. We can undo much that God has done by relatively small compromise.

So failure to subjectively allow Christ to speak about situations in front of us allows opportunity for the flesh. Failure at a more objective level to keep in place in our life's boundaries based on truth is another way in which we allow opportunity for the flesh.

Romans 14

14:1—Now accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgments on his opinions.

Paul gives us a command to accept the one who is needy in terms of the faith. He uses a term of these needy ones which could be rendered “sick.” They are in some way deficient. In 1 Corinthians 1:3–33 where Paul speaks to the same type of issues he does here, he speaks of those who have a “weak conscience.”

It seems from all the Scripture says that conscience was built into the human psyche by Yahweh to serve as a moral guide. A conscience becomes dysfunctional when it is not used, or when because of false doctrine, it is “programmed” wrongly. Conscience energized by the Holy Spirit and by accurate teaching can and does serve as an accurate guide. A person who is weak in faith could be so because of the weak conscience. They could be abstaining from things they are free to do. They could be indulging in things they should not do.

This condition is called a weak faith because there is an essential inability to trust God and what He has said. All inadequacy and sin can be boiled down to an inability to trust God and this inability can be the result of an unwillingness to obey Him. So when referring to the weak Paul is talking about those who for various reasons are unable to trust God and his truth as they should.

He says that we are to accept these, and the word *προσλαμβανω*, conveys the image of taking them to our sides. The purpose for accepting them is not so that we can dispute with them and condemn them. He will not name the precise reason we should accept them until later in the chapter. In verse 19 he will talk about pursuing together the things that make for peace and the building up of one another. Here he speaks only of what is not a valid reason for calling a weaker person to your side.

Our motive and work as God’s people is not to simply expose. It is to expose and then build up the weak one’s faith. Our purpose in relationships cannot be simply to pass judgment. It must be to pass along those things that are essential for a strengthening to come about

Paul is covering here a mistake we frequently make in ministry. We attack symptoms of weak faith, from legalism to promiscuity, rather than ministering to strengthen the faith of those that are displaying them. We are to judge things rightly and precisely with wisdom energized by the Holy Spirit. But we are to provide a nurturing relationship—an accepting and protecting one, where unconditional love is the order. In the context of that type of relationship we are to speak the truth.

14:2—One man has faith that he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats vegetables only.

It seems that among Christian people there have always been convictions about things that we eat and drink. This is in part because of dietary restrictions that were part of the old covenant. It is also a result of the commonsense observation that we are what we eat and that how our bodies react to food and drink differs greatly from person to person. A fear of death also enters our opinions about what we eat as does the fact that our information on this entire matter is incomplete.

Part of the difficulty has been the varied nature of these convictions. In Paul's day we can deduce that there were several strains of thought present in the church on this matter. There was the ongoing strong influence of the Jews and what could be called the Old Testament diet. There was the apparent vegetarian diet mentioned here (See verse 14). There was the presence of men like Paul who apparently felt free to eat all things. There was the issue of eating meat that had been offered ceremoniously to idols and then marketed.

Paul identifies this matter as a "faith" issue. He says that the one who eats all things does so because they have the faith to do it. One who eats vegetables only, he characterizes as weak. He does not enlighten us as to the thinking that was at the root of the vegetarian movement. We surmised it was not a line of thinking based on medical advice, as such a course of action might be based on today. It must have been some type of religious or spiritual thought since Paul clearly labels it as a characteristic of the weak. These were not like those today who arrived at their conclusions based on scientific or medical research. They arrived at it because of an inability or an impaired ability in faith and trust.

Paul uses this as an example of situations that arise in the church that could cause turmoil. They need to be ruled by a spirit of acceptance, an embrace rather than a judgmental and intolerant spirit. That does not mean that the conviction of the weak is to become the official position of the church. It means only that the position of the weak is not to be disallowed or ridiculed. The goal is always to make the weak strong, and they will NOT become so by learning to go against their conscience. They must be loved and embraced and then their conscience must be rightly programming by right teaching.

14:3—Let not him who eats regard with contempt him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats, for God has accepted him:

There is an arrogance that can easily accompany either supposed or actual correctness. That is the issue Paul is addressing here. We must be on guard against it because it will spring up inside us. It is the most natural direction for us to go. Our flesh sees to that very well, and so we must through the Holy Spirit stop such thought in its tracks. Instead of allowing thoughts to go in that direction we should make them contemplate God's love, his grace, and his clear intentions of using that person. And He will use them as He does all of us, despite our patent shortcomings and weaknesses.

There is one thing certain about such persons that we judge or treat with contempt. God accepts them as they are. They're loved by Him as much as we are. Paul uses the very same word here that he used in verse one. What he has called us to do in verse one he now states is what God does with such weak-in-faith people. He uses the aorist tense of *προσλαμβάνω*, a word that means to take to oneself, to use, to admit to friendship. The aorist tense indicates that Paul views the action as having been completed by God, and so is an expression of its great certainty. We cannot suppose that holding such people at arm's length is an action on our part that harmonizes with God.

14:4—Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and stand he will, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

When we judge someone, we assume the role of their master. Perhaps more significantly in this case, we assume the role of their master's master. That is the essence of the question God confronts us with here. When we find ourselves pondering the failures of someone in a way that concludes their lack of value to the kingdom, we must ask ourselves who we are.

The difference between discerning and being judgmental is love. Both require the same skill set in terms of sorting through our senses and providing us with truth. The difference is that love leads us to believe the value and worth of another, the best rather than the worst. In all discerning there is a jumping off point, a point which can leave the realm of concrete evidence and begin to make assumptions. This is true because we do not know the heart and cannot know the heart. Love demands that we see worth, value, usefulness in someone. Judging simply allows us to reach a conclusion and pass a sentence.

There are situations where we are called to pass along God's judgment on a matter. The church is called to exercise such authority over its members (Matthew 18:15-20; 1 Corinthians 5:1-13). Such action is not being judgmental. Its goal is that restoration might be brought about (1 Timothy 5:19-20). Our challenge is to clearly speak to one another about sin, and to do so in a loving and gracious manner that affirms value and worth. These verses are not demanding that we refrain from that activity, as if it were only the work of God himself. It is a call to observe obvious boundaries that must exist in our minds. These boundaries must be in place since we fulfill our mission with each other under God the Son, who is head of the Church, and under God the Father, our Creator. In the end we must view one another as peers. We must exercise discernment in harmony with the Scripture. These must govern what is said and how it is said.

Paul makes a very important statement in this verse about what has been termed the perseverance of the saints. This term refers to the idea that God grants strength to His own children so that a pattern of repentance emerges in their life, and they are prevented from rejecting Christ. Some of the Christian community takes verses like this and suggest that Christians cannot "habitually sin." The difficulty with that idea comes in defining habitual. Who can say that they do not have a habit of sinning? How frequent must sin occur to constitute a habit of sinning? At the other extreme are those who would deny that God's will and grace act with such power in our lives. In the thinking of these there is no sense in which God prevails on us to make us anything other than what we desire to be.

There must be in our thinking room for what this verse teaches. His teaching about those who are weak in the faith is that they are God's servants. There is a sense in which all things and all people are God's servants. That is not the sense in which the term is being used here. This is not speaking from that universal perspective but is speaking of those who believe in Jesus Christ. They have identified themselves as belonging with His willing servants. These are all answerable in the end to Christ himself. He determines their deservedness and what their service has been worth.

Paul clearly teaches that such individuals will stand. Three times he uses various forms of the Greek word *isthmi*, to stand. The effect is to show that weak ones will not only be clearly accepted as belonging to Jesus but will be shown to have lived by God's grace and enablement. They have value to God. Such persons, even those who are weak, He can work through and so is able to approve on that day when He judges the thoughts and deeds of all men.

None of Paul's words say our own decisions are not important, and that there are no distinctions in faithfulness among the members of God's family. There clearly are. But in each there will be found faithfulness, and we must be careful about reaching conclusions about the relative value of each other.

14:5—One man regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. But let each man be fully convinced in his own mind.

From the example of food, Paul turns to the area of sacred calendar days. There have likely always been days that are held sacred since calendars came into existence. The Jews, at God's command, had set aside a number of these. Though from Paul's perspective all of these spoke of Christ and had their significance in the era before His death, burial, and resurrection, he did not ever quarrel with those who wished to observe these red-letter days.

There is considerable evidence that Paul himself loosely observed them, and that the apostolic company respected them out of courtesy (Acts 15:19–21; 21:17–26). Paul only entered conflict on this issue where Jews demanded such participation from Gentile Christians. That is the heart of the issue in the words of this passage as well.

There are certain things one may choose to do in their worship God that are shaped by what culture they are in, by their past, or even by their personality. All such things are good when they are an individual's response to the Holy Spirit's leadings.

There is however in observing such things the danger of pride and arrogance that one's own flesh can arouse. It leads to a sense of false superiority and status and then to a demand that one's own convictions be imposed on others and demanded of them. In fact, this seems to be the normal religious experience shaped by the flesh. We generally love to make what comes naturally and easily for us, the standard of measuring the goodness of others. It is the perfect self-gratifying scheme. Paul wanted none of this and that lies at the heart of what he is saying in these verses.

There is everything right about having personal habits and routines of discipline that strengthen our faith and produce for us intimacy with God. We should be fully convinced of the urgency of sticking with those things, whatever they prove to be for us. We should not allow them to make us arrogant. We certainly should not equate them with the end that they may happen to help us arrive at.

14:6—he who observes the day observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord, for he give thanks to God; and he who eats not, for the Lord does not eat, and gives thanks to God.

In practicing special observances or in not practicing them, the critical factor is the Lord's influence and leading. If He is leading us to take a certain action, no other course will do. If He is not leading regarding a certain activity, then it should by no means be entered into.

There is something about the giving of thanks that signals the origin of action. If a person is doing something that is being accompanied by thankfulness to God, it likely is being orchestrated in them by the Holy Spirit. The flesh tends to produce arrogance, grumpiness, and a sense of entitlement. The inability to give thanks for something accompanies a lack of inner conviction about it. For all that God leads us to do there is inward, quiet gratitude, even if it is an act of abstinence. It is the greatest of blessings to be led of God. For that reason, the genuine experience is often marked by this inner shalom and gratitude.

The thing Paul wanted to promote in the Christian community was an open heartedness to the diverse range of activities the Holy Spirit was to promote. The church is healthiest when it has a kind of holy spontaneity. It is most effective when its activities are diverse (1 Corinthians 12:4-11). There is infinity in the Godhead that reflects itself in diversity among us. There are scriptural boundaries that describe righteous behavior in us. So for our conduct to be righteous there is not infinite options.

14:7—for not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself;

Properly understood, Christianity should spell the end of one's self-obsession. Christianity rightly practiced is the shaping of a person's entire being. It is the governance of the Spirit over every moment of their lives, right down to the moment of death. So in terms of the calling of God, it is the end of setting one's course according to what is pleasurable or desirable. It is the increasing surrender of control to Christ so that life itself on this Earth becomes expendable.

But this statement by Paul is also the reality of every being that comes into existence in this universe, not just a choice Christians make. The disbelief of what is true does not change the truth of it. The fact is that even evil itself does not have a life of its own. All things exist by Yahweh's consent and exist for His purposes (Colossians 1:16). Whether then we are spiritually alive or dead we are answerable to the one who is Lord of all that is. When we understand this, we have grasped reality in its entirety. When we implement it into our thought patterns and our life routines everything is altered.

When we hear this, we might be initially repulsed by it. When we embrace it, we find peace. This could perhaps be called the "First Law of Human Existence." It is that we exist not for ourselves but for the purposes of our Maker. Because of this we must constantly set aside our fantasy of independence. We must celebrate and cultivate our dependence, and we must practice interdependence.

14:8—for if we live, we live for the Lord; therefore whether we live or die, we are the Lord's.

What the Lord wants from us and through us is central to our lives. There is nothing else that matters to the one who embraces Christ as master. Paul and the apostles and committed ones in the early church, lived daily with the prospect of their faith costing them their physical lives. It is true today in much of the world. In fact, it is certain that from a sheer numbers standpoint, more are being killed for their faith today than at any time in history. The truth is that all people everywhere must have this attitude if they are to be of any real use to the kingdom (Luke 9:62).

The essence of Christianity is the issue of ownership. It has always been true of those who lead the way in the things of God that they regard themselves as belonging to someone else, the Lord Jesus. Therefore they are beholden to Him (1 Corinthians 6:19–20; 1 Peter 1:17–19). “We are the Lord’s.” That is the simple, inescapable reality that gives us great security and joy. It also gives us a sense of accountability down to the smallest of life’s details

14:9—For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.

Christ’s death and resurrection are the two events that the gospel is based on (1 Corinthians 15:1–3). Christ’s death is a substitutionary, vicarious one. He died to take the place of others. His death atones for the sins of all who believe in Him. His resurrection was proof of this. It let us know that all He had said about Himself was true—that He was from God (John 8:42), and that His death would allow humanity to be saved from their sins (John 3:14–16). It was a sign He Himself delineated as the ultimate proof of His authority (John 2:18–22).

He died and rose again with a specific end in view. Paul names it here. The purpose was that He might be the sovereign ruler over His creation, both the living and the dead. His victory over death means that not even death can keep anyone who was rejected Him in life from facing Him as a sovereign ruler. Neither can death change the destiny of those who have embraced Him in life.

The same is true if we take the terms living and dead in a more figurative or spiritual sense. He is Lord of both the living and the dead. He is Lord over all those who believe and who are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. He rules over those who set themselves against Him, whether aggressively or passively. He is who He is regardless of whom individuals might try to make Him in each moment. Our opinion changes nothing regarding His identity. Our decision changes only our destiny not His.

In this grand treatise on the gospel that we know as the book of Romans, there are several junctures at which Paul makes very important points about the gospel. This is one of those points. The purpose of the gospel was not simply to comfort fallen humanity, though it does do that. It is to restore the essential order of Yahweh’s fallen creation. It has the power to bring to all creation the understanding of its order. That order is that God the Son is its sovereign ruler, and that God the Father is its sovereign designer and controller (1 Corinthians 15:20–28).

14:10—But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God.

After speaking to the grander position of Christ as the sovereign ruler over all the grand purpose of God, who is working all things to a very specific end in which all be subjected to Christ, Paul asks, “who are you?” Though these are not his actual words, they are the intended meaning. He wants us to think about who we are imagining ourselves to be in despising others. We are to defer to Christ in those moments when the actions of others might ruffle us. We do not know what He might be seeking to accomplish through their actions. We are like Peter when the Lord told him to follow, who said, “Lord, what about this man?” (John 21:21). We move into this realm of thinking about the responsibility of others very easily. Jesus replied to Peter, “if I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!”

Those charged with leading must walk a fine line. On the one hand they are responsible for the flock and must discern truth. On the other hand, it is to Christ that all men must answer. They are His servants not ours. We do not behave for Christ in His capacity as judge, or as master. We can only appeal as fellow servants to the good senses of others. We must all give account of ourselves to the Judge.

We must avoid the idea that because we have been forgiven from our sin, we will not be held responsible for the way our lives are conducted. We will give an account of our stewardship, what we did with all that God's grace gave us. Our salvation will not be at stake, but our reward will be. Specific sins will have been forgiven. But where sin diverted us from stewarding our lives well, it will be noted by the One who is our judge and knows all things. Paul speaks of these things through a very vivid figure in his first letter to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 3:10-15). Jesus' teaching expresses the same basic idea (Luke 19:11-27). Believers will be evaluated just as managers are and so compensated for their thoroughness. Unbelievers will simply be condemned for their lack of faith and their evil deeds. But every person will make their appearance before the Judge, and every knee will bow to Him.

14:11—for it is written, “as I live,” says the Lord, “every knee will bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.”

This is a quote from Isaiah 45:23. It is the prophetic word that reveals the end to which God will bring all peoples and nations. It is a decree of God that cannot be altered. Because of the certainty of this end, there is no need for us to cast judgment. All who may be supposedly taking advantage of God, and all who may have taken advantage of us will in the end take advantage of no one. We need not condemn them. If the judgment seems to be slow it should remind us of God's grace and mercy and so bless us. If He is that good to the unfaithful, how much greater our blessing if we follow Him.

Paul gives us this assurance from Scripture, the testimony of God Himself that this end is to be. It is sobering because judgment will include us. It is comforting because all wrongs will be righted. This is a matter of the unalterable decree of God, and it should shape our attitudes and behavior towards those who disappoint and offend us, who do not conform to the standard of behavior God has called us to.

14:12—so then each one of us shall give account of himself to God.

There is both freedom and accountability in this truth. There is freedom in that we have only to please Him, not the whims of the expectations of others. There is accountability. All are answerable to the one who knows our every action, thought, and motive. He cannot be tricked, scammed, or manipulated. Things will be as they truly are.

The statement stands in the middle of a chapter that deals with our conduct toward each other in the church. In the end, this alone can guide us. The desires and counsel of others might be considered, but we must answer to God for our actual decision. Others must answer for their actions. In the end our counsel to each other must be very guarded and given with great care, not brashly. It is enough to give account of our own deeds without participating during action chosen by others.

14:13—therefore let us not judge one another, but rather determined this—not to put an obstacle or stumbling block in a brother’s way.

Since our brothers will be held accountable for their deeds, we must influence them with great care. We must act to equip each other for that day. Our goal should not be to pass judgment on someone—to confront them with their weak, immature faith. Our goal should be to be certain that we do not hinder in any way their growth in the faith. If those we are concerned for are listening to the voice of the Holy Spirit, we need not focus on their weakness of faith. They will grow, make progress, and become strong. We must only make sure that we foster the process instead of throwing obstacles in the path.

Criticizing the choice, a person has made by the dictates of their own conscience can cast them into a world of freedom that they are not equipped to handle. Better to respect their choices and let them sharpen their habit of listening to their conscience, than to suggest to them that their conscience is of no value. We put obstacles in the path of spiritual growth in many ways, and this is especially true if we pass judgment on action that has been entered into in sincere faith.

14:14—I know and am convinced of the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; But to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean.

Paul knew two things. He knew that nothing was inherently unclean. He was not saying that there was no such thing as moral impurity or sin. He is speaking with reference to Old Testament regulations against certain foods, certain objects, and certain bodily conditions. Paul knew, for example, that there was nothing inherently immoral in pork, or in a pig. For the sake of teaching broader lessons, God had declared such things unclean. So a host of things had been designated unclean in order to serve the great purpose of teaching humanity critical truths regarding evil and sin. Paul would become convinced of this through the Lord Jesus.

Paul had no doubt about this. It had been repeatedly confirmed through his personal audiences with Christ and in his conversations with the eleven who had heard Christ’s words repeatedly. Paul also knew the dilemma of the human mind. It can believe something is true even when it is not.

To use terms familiar to us, our consciences can be programmed wrong. If they are being guided by a mind that does not have a precise understanding of truth, they can give wrong readings to us. A Christian who does not have solid understanding of truth has a weak conscience. They are prone to think right is wrong and wrong is right. But they’re doing a right and good thing in learning to live by the dictates of their conscience. Unbelievers for the most part do not do this. It represents an important shift. Such living by conscience is to be encouraged not discouraged. Encouraging anyone to eat when their conscience is telling them not to can be very short sighted. They are then encouraged to go against their conscience in other areas that may involve real sin.

So we are to encourage all to follow the inner voice of conscience. This is the grand objective. In the greater interest of promoting long-term spiritual growth and strength we should not say or do that which would divert them from living by their conscience. We should look for opportunity to instruct their minds rightly with respect to the truth, so that their consciences become more reliable. But we should not direct them to violate their conscience.

14:15—for if because of food your brother is hurt, you are no longer walking according to love. Do not destroy with your food him for whom Christ died.

Paul was speaking in the context of his day when individuals steeped in Judaism and in pagan superstition composed the church. To shape their new faith, all manner of issues had to become regulated by the new covenant, not the old. There were issues involving the old covenant regulations. There were also issues regarding eating food sacrificed to idols. All such factors muddled the waters of conscience among the church people of the day. Those who understood the truth precisely, rightly ate anything. But Paul realizes the power of his own influence. He knew that it could be more powerful than the voice of conscience and could lead a person to go against their conscience. This he was unwilling to do. So he sacrificed eating certain food in certain situations for the greater good of affirming the choice of others to live by the voice of their conscience.

This lifestyle Paul chose was the life of love. To live by love is to fulfill the Law (Matthew 22:34-40; 7:12). When we come out from under the great principle of love, we inevitably undo the Spirit's work in the lives of others. It is accurate to say that by choosing to do an act that in and of itself is permissible, we can be doing what is wrong. This is the importance of love. Love for God governs what we do, love for others governs things like how and when we do it. And such love for others is love for God. They are the ones for whom Christ died. To embrace caring for them is to further the work He began and so to show love for Him.

In the end, morality is not just a matter of doing and not doing certain things, though that is certainly true in some areas. Morality includes the spiritual welfare of others—the impact of my actions on their relationship to God. This is the way we must ponder our actions. It is not only the action itself that matters, but the tone that surrounds it and how it might be perceived that I must think through.

14:16—therefore do not let what is for you a good thing be spoken of as evil;

There are many things in Christ that are good for us. There is a great freedom that Paul has spoken of. Because we are made right by the blood of Christ, all the dietary laws related to fellowship with God have been set aside. All the superstition that has shrouded the thinking of humanity about God, and about various gods and spirits we are free from. That means that “nothing is unclean in itself.” Nothing possesses some innate moral capacity to damage our relationship to our Yahweh our Maker.

This knowledge is a good thing. Paul wants to be sure that this that is such a blessing to us, shape our behavior in such a way that we be a source of spiritual help to others, not spiritual sickness. Such freedom is a good thing but practiced wrongly it can influence wrongly. Just as nothing is unclean, so nothing is clean of itself. Wrong motives can change the impact of any action. Paul wants us to preserve the reputation of Christ's church by behaving with the spiritual health of others in mind.

14:17—for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

The realm over which God reigns is not one that has physical boundaries. His kingdom is experienced wherever and whenever He is King. It can be experienced in the dark dungeon that is the world of a prisoner. It can be experienced in the world of the rich, comfortable, and powerful. Its experiences do not come through prerequisite ceremony and ritual. It is not entered into through merit, earned by adherence to formulas. And when it is being experienced its characteristics are not certain foods and drinks.

The kingdom of God is experienced by being “in the Spirit,” meaning under His control and influence. When we submit to God, listen for His voice, and obey its pleadings, we are functioning in the spiritual mode, or to label it more distinctly, the Spiritual mode. When we are functioning in this way, we make God visible. In this way He becomes the mind of a diverse body that moves as He wants it to move and accomplish work that He wishes to accomplish.

Where such Spirit-directed life is happening, the visible signs are expressions of righteousness, peace, and joy. Righteousness, or rightness—what we would call harmony with the character and mind of God—is evident. Peace is evident as well. Peace is the absence of conflict and the presence of magnanimity and bigness of heart. It always accompanies the influence of the Spirit. He opens hearts of men and women to each other and produces the trust that inspires vulnerability, trust that quells feelings of being threatened. Joy is also present. Joy is a sense of contentment and rest, a conviction that things are as God wants them, that His purposes are being served. Joy is also a distinguishing mark of the Holy Spirit’s presence. Joy is the ability to embrace the eternal and the present, and to strip away all the pain and setbacks that may have arrived as mere packaging.

Righteousness, peace, and joy are the marks of the experience of the kingdom of God. If we are searching for the normal routines and ritual of man-made religion, we will miss it. This includes the rowdy and bawdy revelry that marks the more sensual approaches to divinity. It also includes the austere, disciplined practices that mark the ascetic pathways of so-called spirituality. Either extreme can be equally self-serving and fleshly, a pendulum swing away from the genuine work of the Holy Spirit. The beauty of the Gospel is its power to bring something different, and this is because it brings about the righteousness of God through the work of the Spirit of God.

14:18—for he who in this way serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men.

There is an affirmation that comes with living life in the power of the Spirit. Serving Christ involves setting aside what you like or want. It is setting aside what meets some need or satisfies some desire in you, for grander purpose. It is doing what may be less desirable for the purpose of advancing that which pleases Him and brings Him pleasure.

So Paul is speaking of a very specific way of serving Christ, the only way Christ Himself has made known. That way is to refrain from doing what is permissible in order to impact the life of another by strengthening their faith. It is a refusal to exercise one’s freedom in the greater interest of exercising influence. This is the way of serving Christ that touches His heart, a free will offering, a real-life statement that He is pre-eminent. It is worship.

Paul borrows the language of the Old Testament to reiterate what he has already stated about service and worship (Romans 12:1). We are acceptable to God because of Christ's sacrifice on the cross. Paul is not talking here about gaining that acceptance, the right to become a Son of God. He is talking about an acceptable way of expressing gratitude and love to God, a gift that can be given to Him as one might to a friend or lover. The type of selflessness, others-oriented living Paul has been describing is the perfect gift to give the One who has everything. Yahweh is moved and blessed by this way of living when we embrace it.

14:19—so then let us pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another.

Since this is an acceptable sacrifice to God, since it tells him we love Him, and since it is proper and right and brings Him glory, let's do it. If this is the right agenda, let's embrace it as our agenda. That is the simple command of Paul. To pursue something is to set it forth as an objective. It is to set about in our quest to grasp hold of a specific thing deemed desirable.

There are two things that give a course of action worth and nobility. One is if there is that about it which makes for peace, peace within and peace without. Whether we are considering a personal decision or contemplating a response that involves others, we should assign a high value to peace. We want to do what brings us peace with God, where we are not left wrestling our own conscience. There is nothing worse than doing what promotes some selfish need or brings something pleasurable to us and then have our conscience condemn us. There is no end to the evil that gets worked in the body of Christ because of a conscience that is not right with God. But peace within ourselves is not all we should seek in deciding a course of action. We must also pursue that which makes for peace with others. If they've been offended by past events, we must pursue action that helps restore them. It is worth making sacrifices of pride and ego (not principal), to do so.

We must avoid courses of action that create strife. But none of this is to say that there should be peace at all costs. Throughout Scripture we see many examples of God-directed action which did not make for peace, and this is nowhere truer than in the life of Christ. Peace is to be the general course we pursue as we regulate personal courses of action that we ponder. But to the same degree, we are to do those things that build others up. Paul is talking here about building up each other's faith. So our acts are not just to be "feel good" actions, but actions that are productive in terms of faith building. More than simply enjoying each other, it is a matter of helping each other grow up in the faith and be more like Christ. There should, even in the levity, be strategic moments when we stimulate each other's walk with the Lord.

There is an interesting discrepancy in the Greek text in this verse. Some ancient manuscripts give this verse as it is rendered in the NASB, as a command (volitive subjunctive). Other texts give it as a simple statement of fact (present active indicative), "we are pursuing the things which make for peace". The latter would report this as the apostolic course, the intentional direction the church should collectively come to pursue as God honoring. Taken in either way, it represents a standard and important pattern for us.

14:20—do not tear down the work of God for the sake of food. All things indeed are clean, but they are evil for the man who eats and gives offense.

As stated earlier a large issue of the day among Christians was eating, specifically it seems the eating of meat. Jewish Law relative to pork, and meat offered to idols and subsequently available as food, were primary issues, as was the ongoing vegetarian question. As Americans it is hard for us to imagine the full extent of this issue, living in a culture where meat is abundant, where there is refrigeration, and where there is a massive meat industry that offers a varied, abundant, and sanitary supply. It is different in other cultures where for financial and practical reasons having meat to eat is more problematic. For much of history simply getting one's hands on meat of any sort was challenging. So type of meat and source of meat was a weightier matter. Because of the presence in the Church of Jews, vegetarians, and the idol factor in the culture, meat had potential to create controversy and confusion in the church.

Paul speaks into this milieu by repeating here what he has been saying. The issue with meat, from whatever animal, whatever supplier, or whatever source, is not clean versus unclean. Food of any type is amoral. What gives eating morality is not what it does to you, but what it does to others. If by eating a certain food we inhibit the spiritual growth of someone, then we've done something evil. But the evil is not in the food. It is in us. Our self-centeredness has led us into action that is self-centered, not God-centered. The issue is simple. Do we promote via all our actions the spiritual progress of others?

The action the Holy Spirit is seeking to orchestrate in us always relates to the spiritual progress of others. If we find we've not assisted that, it is because we have not listened to Him in the matter, and that is our sin. In that sense something good can become something bad if it is not the thing God is seeking to do in the moment. The issue is to promote the faith of God's other children.

If eating certain foods were merely a matter of irritating other Christians, Paul would not have addressed it. People who get angry over matters that God has given freedom in must be dealt with in a confrontive way based on truth. Paul is concerned about our actions undermining spiritual development in others, not simply upsetting their ill-founded, fleshly sources of pride. Our goal is to strengthen all that is true or right in people because that is the work God is doing. We must be certain to tear down only what He is tearing down, not what He is seeking to build.

14:21—it is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or to do anything by which your brother stumbles.

The Greek text does not include the words "to do anything," though they are the best way to capture the intent of the text. For emphasis Paul is repeating the principle of living for the spiritual welfare of others. He uses a different metaphor than he has been using, though it is a common biblical one. It is the metaphor of stumbling.

All who walk understand stumbling. It comes because of something in our path which we do not see or which we do not account for properly. It can cause a fall that can ruin our lives or can simply cause a close call. Either way it slows down our progress. Stumbling illustrates what can happen with respect to our spiritual growth and progress. Subtle things can cause people to break stride. Some can result in a fall into ruin. It matters little that the whole thing may have been accidental. Therefore, it is good to be safety minded in the way we conduct our lives. That is what Paul is calling us to.

There is freedom to drink and eat all things, because nothing that we can eat or drink has innate moral capacity to inject evil or good into us. But that is not to say we cannot sin by eating and drinking. We can if what we are doing or if the way we do it causes a fellow believer to digress in their faith. Again, the issue is not a matter of making a legalistic Christian mad or causing the Christian with a bad understanding of Scripture to take offense. The question is, do we impede their progress in the faith? More precisely, it often involves this question, do we blur the boundaries that their developing conscience is establishing? Such boundaries may need to be adjusted, but there is no benefit in leading a person to abandon living by their conscience. Therefore, abstinence is an appropriate position to adopt on occasion, perhaps for a season. It is not the best position for all Christians for all time, as some would say. But it could very well be the best position in each moment.

14:22—The faith which you have, have as a conviction before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves.

In the first sentence of this verse, we find one of the hardest tasks of the Christian. In the remainder of this verse and extending into the next verse, we find a great principle on maintaining personal peace and tranquility.

It is very difficult to obey the first sentence in this verse. To apply all that Paul has said about living out our faith and draw that into this verse takes the following long sentence. My task is to sense the definitive voice of the Holy Spirit and the deep conviction that accompanies it, to feel His call to accept responsibility for the spiritual welfare of a specific individual, to shape my own lifestyle with that in mind, to do all this and accept that this call is not God's call to everyone, or perhaps ANYONE else, is my job. That is most difficult!

We must feel deeply about developing faith of others. We are to feel deep urgency and conviction about our own actions. Yet we are not to expect the steps we are called to, to be those anyone else is being called to. They are ours. We have no choice. To our question, "Lord what about him?" God's reply will be "you follow me!" (John 21:22).

We must cleanse ourselves from thoughts that lead us to label as right or wrong, evil or good, the heart of another. That is difficult for the one who is living life in the Spirit. It is perhaps more difficult than for the one living in abandonment to the flesh. Have personal convictions, but these must remain personal, that is the force of Paul's words. View them as matters over which you have no choice. But don't expect or need the company of others in holding them. If others arrive at the same conviction, then you have comrades. If they do not, you must not allow this to become in your mind a statement about them.

All this counsel and teaching from Paul is about matters of eating and drinking, matters for which there is no definitive morality involved. It is not to be applied to all aspects of Christian living, those for which Christ has made very clear statements about what is right and what is wrong. This is an important reminder.

The second half of this verse provides wonderful counsel on maintaining the inner tranquility that comes with the presence of the Holy Spirit. It is a happy occasion when one has obeyed the voice of the Holy Spirit. For the person who experiences this there is no joy that can match that which sweeps over them and intervenes in the wake of doing the right thing. Circumstances and consequences cannot dampen that happiness.

The word Paul uses here for happy is μαχαριος, which means supremely blessed. The obedient attain that for which all men hunger. Happiness is not something we find, but something we cultivate and then eat the fruit of.

It is a great loss to have to face oneself and realize that you did not rise to that which the Spirit was impressing on your conscience. That is a particularly bitter strain of self-condemnation. And self-condemnation is a devastating curse as Judas learned. One cannot suppose that they will ever find inner peace if they continually go against the voice of their conscience. They are sowing seeds of conflict within themselves with each such act.

14:23—but he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin.

Faith is an inner assurance of the truth of something. In terms of behavior, it is the conviction that the Holy Spirit is leading us to pursue a specific course, that this course is the will of God, and that it is to be done with His help. It is trust. Such an approach to living is to shape both major events in our lives and common, everyday decisions. God has provided in such a way for us that we can have an inner assurance of His mind and heart in each moment of our day.

Our conscience is an important link in arriving at this point of assurance. In fact, such a life cannot be attained apart from an informed and trained conscience. Therefore, to choose what goes against our conscience is to deliberately choose not to listen for God's voice and not to attempt to live by faith. Paul applies this to the matter of eating. There was as we have seen, a greater challenge in eating in Paul's day because of the spiritual climate. Eating was more than choosing what was healthy.

Having just stated that living by conscience brings happiness or blessedness, Paul now states what can lead to inner turmoil. When we doubt the will of God in a matter and pursue it anyway, it is because we have no faith to pursue the matter with God. Therefore, at that point we are living apart from Him, which is sin. We feel condemnation, not blessedness. We feel the shame of Adam and Eve. We hide. Going against conscience extracts something precious from our very souls and so from our experience of life.

We understand that conscience develops. It can give false leadings when one is ignorant of truth. It atrophies when ignored. Therefore, a person who lives by conscience will make mistakes. The challenge for young believers is to start listening to their conscience. As unbelievers they learned to ignore it and this habit is the first thing that must be broken. So in the case of the weaker brother, we want them to listen to their conscience, whether it is precise or imprecise. They may "over abstain," but we can slowly teach them the truth so that they discern rightly between good and evil. The thing we don't want to do is teach them to ignore their conscience. If we indulge in what their conscience is telling them not to do, they will follow us and we have unknowingly taught them that the leading of their conscience is nothing. We have taken the place of their conscience which is a short-sighted practice. It is much better for them to set the immediate agenda. In the aftermath we can teach them gently regarding the truth of the matter. In approaching things this way, we will help them move past the ranks of the weak. This is the subject that the next verse moves into.

Romans 15

15:1—now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength, and not just please ourselves.

There are many ways of viewing the weak/strong issue. Some view the weak as those who don't know the truth. Some view those with principle and conviction as weak, boasting of their own tolerance. In this context Paul is viewing weak as an issue of being weak in faith. This is, weak ones are those unable to trust in the truth and the source of truth, God Himself. The lack of obedience is not the disease itself. It is a symptom. An inability to trust the truth can come from ignorance of the truth or inexperience in the faith life. Peter lapsed in faith in the early years and rose to the occasion often and admirably in his later years. This was true of all the disciples.

There are times when enough time has passed for people to be strong, yet they are still weak (Hebrews 5:11-14). This happens because they have not trained as they should (Hebrews 5:14). The matter of diligence is essential for forward movement and growth (2 Peter 1:5-11). Whatever the reason for the weakness of the weak, Paul makes it clear that we are to accept our role in the progression of their faith. He says that we do this when we place their needs ahead of our own.

To review what Paul has said, the wrong approach to helping the weak is to flaunt your own strength and freedom in matters in which they have a question. In the interest of others who need to grow we should speak and act in a way that will help them listen and follow their conscience first and foremost. One's conscience is the primary tool of the Holy Spirit. A secondary concern is to help them understand the truth of the matter so that their conscience can be accurately molded by the Holy Spirit. There is interplay within us between our thinking processes and the working of the Spirit. That is where the entire matter of being led by the Spirit gets tricky. Our conscience can signal us wrongly and often does. The weak must learn what is true and right. But the more critical habit is for them to listen to their conscience. This habit cannot be jettisoned because the conscience is misguided in a matter, or the person will be confirmed in their weakness. We avoid bringing this about such damage to the faith of others by the sacrifice of what might be pleasurable for ourselves. Instead of flaunting our strength, we are to serve the need of the weak in such matters and at such times.

The next verse has some additional important thought that is critical in this matter. It is critical because there is no future for the church if the course of the strong is habitually shaped by the desires of the weak.

15:2—let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to his edification.

We are to embrace what is best for other's progress in the faith. Those things which are good in this sense, we are to pursue. Another's good is defined by what strengthens their faith.

This is not a command to be people pleasers. There are a host of sins that arise during relationships with people who would be very pleased to engage our support in doing what is clearly wrong. We are not to set our agenda by what pleases the most people except where please is defined as it is here by Paul. What is "pleasing" is that which is good for others in the sense of strengthening their spiritual health.

This principle of setting our agenda according to the spiritual needs and progress of others is a lesson God attempts to teach early on to all who would follow Him. This is missional living. The rank-and-file of the church will all experience this call to ministry. It is a key element in Christ-likeness, but it goes against all that comes naturally to us.

If by nature, we are people pleasers we will tend to do something that might look like what Paul is commanding us to do here. But being a people pleaser is not sacrificial living. We do it just to gratify some need in us. This is something entirely different. It is a different lens through which we are to view both those around us and our own behavior. Obeying this particular command places us in a number of very delicate situations. They require initial restraint on our part, then eventual face-to-face, hard conversation, lovingly carried out. We must in the short term behave in a way that doesn't raise issues in the mind of the weak. But in doing that, we must be ready in due time to gently, graciously, draw them along to the full experience of grace. This is what Christ has done and is doing in the world. The Christian who reckons with this command crosses a spiritual threshold to an entirely different level of living.

15:3—For even Christ did not please Himself; but as it is written, “the reproaches of those who reproach thee fell upon me.”

The maker of all that is, when living on earth, lived and died for the spiritual progress of others. He bore the spiritual weakness of humanity in all its fury. The millenniums of evil's seething naturally boiled over when the Son of God began to speak the truth. Jesus became the target for every being that desired to strike a blow at God, though He had done no wrong. Jesus absorbed it all willingly because He desired the spiritual progress of those who had a heart for the truth. Since Christ lived this way, it must be our ambition to do the same. While our lives do not provide forgiveness for sin as His did, we can advance the work of God in others and foster those things He Himself is orchestrating in their lives.

The quote in this verse is from Psalm 69:9. The first part of that verse says, “zeal for the house has consumed me.” When Jesus cleansed the temple, John noted how that phrase was embodied in Him. There was a zeal in Christ for the things of God the Father that overwhelmed all other concerns, including that of self-preservation. God incarnate did not live to please Himself.

15:4—for whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.

The Scriptures were given as that to which we are to turn for instruction, to come to know that which we otherwise could not have known. They are the vision of God for us. They were to be composed through His inspiration of human authors. Over time He breathed them into these human authors so that they communicated His exact thought through a variety of styles without error. The result is a precise book whose statements can be examined in their minutest detail throughout the different genre (see for example how Jesus and Paul gave themselves to observing scriptures detail in Matthew 22: 31-32; Galatians 3:16).

The Scriptures are written for our instruction. They fill a gap in our understanding of ourselves, life, our world, and God. Without them we are ignorant. This instruction we receive from Scripture enables a cycle of hope that God wants us to be caught up and swept along in. One's life is not sustained apart from hope. It is the great human need. This hope is not contrived as many hopes are. It is the legitimate hope that is in harmony with spiritual realities.

The cycle of hope works like this. The Spirit enables our minds to comprehend truth of Scripture. God's gift of faith enables us to believe that truth. Our spirits, working with our minds draw hope from that which we have come to believe. That hope motivates us to persevere in action and belief that corresponds to the Scripture. That perseverance strengthens faith, which in turn leads to greater hope and greater motivation and we are so sustained.

The cycle of hope is a result of the Scripture, our minds, our spirits, and His Spirit. It is the result of His plan to rejoin Himself to humanity as revealed in the gospel. It is a critical part of our earthly experience of the salvation that the power of God seeks to bring about, which His grace makes freely available. Instruction, perseverance, encouragement, and hope are four important words in the believer's vocabulary and life. Paul's thoughts here and in the next verse help us understand the interplay of these ideas.

15:5—Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus.

God gives perseverance and encouragement. He gives them through the work of His Spirit and as the previous verse mentioned, through the instruction of the things written in Scripture. We cannot forget that these important things come from Him. The Scriptures are of value because they enable us to deepen our relationship to Him. It is in relating to Him that we can find encouragement and perseverance. This is not to minimize the Scripture or relegated it to being mere words on a page. Because it is the word of God and is true, the Scripture has power. It is what it is because it is sourced in God.

In this verse Paul asks that God be allowed to do another great work among the Romans. His prayer and desire is that they be of the same mind, meaning having the same objective, purpose, and vision. This was the desire of Paul expressed in different ways in all his letters. This unity of purpose allows the great power of God to show itself. It is the mission mindset captured in verse two, "let's each of us please his neighbor for his good, to his edification." If all are pulling together for the good of their neighbor's spiritual health, then spiritual health and fitness will come to multitudes. Self-obsession is the great enemy of our individual and corporate health.

15:6—that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

God is glorified in unanimity. When the actions of a local church and their words all line up, without inconsistency, people see, hear, and feel God. Paul is not interested in the cosmetic or forced unity, unity just in voice. He is interested in single-mindedness, that is the force of the word rendered “one accord.” The unity of voice is not produced by a leader who enforces policies or rules about what can and cannot be said, though it is certain that there must be an understanding about expressing dissent. Unity is produced by leaders doing those things that magnify the mission and model the sacrifice that is demanded by it.

The minds of the followers must be influenced before they can speak with one voice. They must think the same. Here Paul makes clear that it is God who brings this about. He is said to grant it in the previous verse. He brings it about through the interaction of His people with each other and so it is a journey we are taken on by Him to unity. It does not simply spring up in us individually so that we suddenly all think the same.

Yet there is a divine side to this unity that no one can manufacture. We should understand this to be because of the fleshliness of humanity and the work of the devil. When unity is missing, it is because one of these two forces or both has gained a voice. Unity is the work of God. But leaders must preach all that is conducive to unity, and all must pray that God would grant it. We all must obey the Spirit to bring about.

When God interrupts the course of a deadly disease or when He brings about the unexpected in terms of normal events, we are stunned. There are other miracles that are equally stunning but are built into the natural order. In fact, natural order itself is a miracle. Without the miracle of God there would be chaos. Unity of the church lies somewhere in between the common miracles of natural law and those that are unexpected. It is natural, in the sense that all believers are one in Christ, organically united by the Holy Spirit. But their cooperation with the Spirit is something that fluctuates. There are times His presence overwhelms and at such times there is always unity. There are those times where He seems to operate more in the background. This is mysterious. At such times, and they seem more frequent, our own influences can gain the upper hand. That is always where unity breaks down. At such times and for His own reasons, God demands greater sacrifice of our own wills, and this demands more intentional action and alertness on our part. That is why in the matter of unity it is right that Paul command it as if it were our work and at the same time somewhat wistfully hope that God would grant it.

15:7—“wherefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God.”

Christians ultimately are defined by Christ. We become Christians in God’s eyes through belief in Christ. We will be seen by others as Christians when we behave like Christ. “Just as Christ” defines us, both how God sees us and what He desires us to become.

God is glorified when we are accepted by Christ. That is a testimony to God’s mercy and His limitless love. God is glorified as well when we accept each other. It is a testimony to His power to transform. It demonstrates His sovereignty to bring this condition about in humanity because it is most unnatural. The more natural thing among us would be for there to be rivalry, competition, factions, and social distinctions. Instead, there is to be acceptance.

Acceptance refers to a basic love that we are to extend to every believer, so that all receive the ongoing message from others of worth and dignity. It is not an acceptance of spiritual status quo. All the New Testament instructions speak of us pushing each other forward in our faith (Hebrews 10:24; 2 Peter 1:12-13). Acceptance is our fundamental belief in each other's worth and value in the body of Christ, the church. It includes embrace and edification. We are to convey to each other unequivocal affection and unwavering loyalty. The emotional equity of acceptance provides the basis upon which we can then build up each other's faith.

We find referenced in this verse the ultimate purpose that God's plan and working seeks to bring about. It is the revelation and confirmation of His glory. It was also referenced in verse six. It is the demonstration of His complete "otherliness," or holiness. He is moving all of creation toward the full knowledge of its Creator and to submission and rest in that Creator. That is the salvation the gospel is aimed toward of which belief in Jesus Christ is the entry point.

A person's experience in a local church can and should provide them with tastes of what their future holds. The glory of God is experienced by any who experience acceptance from fellow-believers. It is a window through which they can experience and dare to believe their Creator.

15:8—for I say that Christ has become a servant to the circumcision on behalf of the truth of God to confirm the promises given to the fathers.

Throughout chapters 40-46 of Isaiah we find references to God's servant. At its most basic level this references all through whom He was revealing Himself to the world. These references are certainly to Israel as His national servant. But they can be understood as true and trustworthy because of one specific Israelite, Christ. He was THE servant who would serve the purposes of God that He wished to bring about in Israel and in the entire world. In these verses Paul will speak to this same idea, namely, that through Christ certain decrees/promises of God are being established both in Israel and among non-Israelites.

Paul says that Christ has become a servant to the circumcision. This does not mean that He came to serve their whim. It means that he came to serve their need as God had identified it. He came to die for their sins, to be their sin-bearer to which their entire worship liturgy pointed. He served their greatest need without which none of God's covenant promises could be conveyed to them.

Christ is a servant on behalf of the truth of God. This phrase names who and what He served. Whereas He served for Israel's benefit, He took His orders from God's word, God Himself being His master. He advanced the truth of God. He submitted to it. He enabled it to be brought about—all that God intended to do to save the creation that was lost in Eden. Christ was the person God's decree depended on, His own name, Jesus, proclaimed that Yahweh would bring about the salvation He desired for creation (Isaiah 59:16; 52:10).

This salvation would be declared through the offspring of "the fathers"—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It would also come about through one of their offspring. This role was promised to them along with all that went with it. They would be primary instruments to which God would reveal Himself and through whom He would intervene in behalf of the fallen world.

These promises of a legacy that included a land, a seed, and a role of being a blessing were spectacular. They were confirmed, meaning they became “stable” or certain and established through Christ. His blood met the demands of God’s justice so that God could justly display his goodness to Israel, and all who embrace the faith of their fathers. It all became certain and deliverable because of Christ’s work. It could not have happened apart from Him. Christ then served their greatest interest by submitting Himself to the will of God, which ironically meant submitting Himself to Israel’s abuse and rejection of Him.

15:9—“and for the Gentiles to glorify God for His mercy; as it is written ‘therefore I will give praise to thee among the Gentiles, and I will sing to thy name.’”

God’s purposed in Christ’s mission did not relate only to the Jews, any more than the promises to the patriarchs related only to Israel. Part of his promise to Abraham was to bless all nations through him. So Christ served Israel and all peoples by His obedience to God’s decree. God’s mercy in sending his own Son to die for the sins of the world would be praised by the Gentiles, all who would believe in Him through the message of the gospel.

Paul quotes Psalm 18, which is itself given in the historical context of 2 Samuel 22. This Psalm was penned by David when his kingdom was made secure by victories over enemies without and within. David in writing the specific sentence Paul quotes, seems to have realized that God desired not just to make a statement of Himself to Israel, but through Israel to all nations. And so he speaks of singing in the presence of the nations, which through Psalm 18 has come about. This idea is present in many of the writings of the prophets, and Paul would give a sampling of these in the verses that follow. God would do great work to gather scores of Gentiles into His church. The presence of a church in Rome was evidence of this.

15:10—and again he says, “rejoice O Gentiles, with his people.”

These words come from writing much more ancient than those of David. They are from the song of Moses recorded in Deuteronomy 32. This was a song inspired by the Lord which was to serve as a witness against Israel in future years when they turned their backs on God and He hid his face from them (see Deuteronomy 31:14–22). From the beginning there were statements that got injected into Israel’s literature which reminded the astute reader that God’s covenant love would extend itself through Israel beyond Israel. It would do so through Jesus. It would enfold all who would place their faith in Yahweh’s Anointed One, the Christ,

15:11—and again, “praise the Lord all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples praise him.”

Those in Israel who knew the heart of God, envisioned the worship of Yahweh being embraced by the nations. Israel’s privilege was to be God’s servant to this end (Isaiah 44:24–45:6). It was not an exclusiveness that God would bring about among them. They were simply those he chose to begin with, then to be Himself incarnated as one of them, and finally to rule the earth from their country. All His blessing extends equally to any and all who call upon Him. These by their faith enjoy every privilege originally extended to Abraham.

This Scripture from Psalm 117, the shortest of the Psalms, states this divine vision for the world. It is typical of what God revealed to all who cared to listen to His heart. His kingdom was for the blessing of all people.

15:12—and again Isaiah says, “there shall come the root of Jesse, and He who rises to rule over the Gentiles, in Him shall the Gentiles hope.”

This quote comes from Isaiah 11:10. It is one of the central passages of Scripture describing the conditions on Earth when Jesus the Christ establishes His kingdom and rule over the nations. His rule will be first and foremost one of justice. He will deal face-to-face with the wicked and remove them from the earth. So not all Israelites or Gentiles will hope in him. But those who do not He will judge (Isaiah 11:4). The result is that every hope humanity has ever had throughout history will come about because He reigns in righteousness. Those who understand that Christ is God’s appointed sin-bearer and ruler place their hope in Him. These make up a myriad of people that are overwhelmingly Gentile.

This prophecy by Isaiah was largely unknown or ignored by Paul’s fellow Jews, even those who embraced the Christian faith. Paul had to expend considerable effort persuading Jews to accept on equal footing non-Jews. Once open to the idea, its truth can be clearly seen throughout the Old Testament Scriptures. God’s people would trace their spiritual roots through Abraham, but their ethnic makeup would include a multitude from every tribe and nation (Revelation: 9-10).

15:13—Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

With these words Paul gives what sounds like a conclusion to his letter. It does not turn out to be that, whether it was initially intended to be. The words are fitting in terms of what is been said thus far in this chapter.

This verse begins with what has been rendered in the NASB “now may the God.” That is exactly how verse five had begun. In that case Paul spoke of the God who gives perseverance and encouragement. In this case he speaks of the God of hope. In both cases he wants to call us to behavior that is an expression of who God is. The grandness of the gospel is this, that Yahweh wishes to join Himself to us, and has provided the means to do so. Therefore, His character can become ours. We can become what is not our nature, because we have His nature. That is the extent of the salvation that is offered to us, and it is the power of the gospel.

After believing there can still be the old turmoil of our normal lives. There could be in the Church the same Jew/Gentile divisions that are seen outside the church. There can be the same striving for status and for recognition that the flesh always craves. In place of this, Paul wants us to experience joy and peace. Belief in the gospel should logically bring that, its implications are that profound and far reaching. Its truth should free us from so many perceived “needs.”

The gospel is a message of hope because God's nature is affirmed in it. His nature inspires hope. He is both perfect in power and in goodness. There is no good thing He is unable to do. What He does is good because He is capable of nothing else. As we grow in our understanding of the truth that we have believed in, we will become more and more immersed in the joy and peace it inspires. The truth of the gospel causes us to be creatures of hope. As we grow in the gospel hope "abounds" in us. It is unnatural to have hope if we examine ourselves and life apart from God. But hope becomes to us natural.

Paul states the only explanation for this metamorphosis—the power of the Holy Spirit. The gospel works a miracle because its truth allows His presence in us. It is not that we become good and think right once our minds have the right information. Is not that we are good and need only a new way of thinking. What we become is not the result of a brilliantly conceived, self-help project. It is a new creation of our innermost being by the Holy Spirit. As He fills us, we abound in hope. This all requires our attention our submission and our obedience. But it is His doing, and it could not transpire apart from Him being joined to us.

This hope was possible because Jesus did for us we could not do for ourselves. He removed the guilt of all our sin so that our relationship to God was restored. We have only to believe in the good news for this process to be unleashed in our lives. That is the power of the gospel.

15:14—And concerning you, my brethren, I myself also am convinced that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and able also to admonish one another,

Paul was convinced that the process initiated in the Romans by their belief was well underway. Because of this they have a certain corporate capability and potential. He was convinced of this because he had witnessed this elsewhere, in dozens of cities involving thousands of people. There was a collective power in the local church. While no person can fully represent Christ, together we are His body. It is accurate to say that collectively a group of believers are "full of goodness." God's intention in the gospel is that He enable us in such a way that we enable His processes in each other. We are to see in one another what He is doing, reinforce it and encourage it. That is the message of chapters 14-15. Paul knows enough about the Romans that he is confident they are traveling this path.

It is important for us to interpret these verses as speaking of our corporate standing not our own individual standing. Together we are filled with all knowledge. That is not the status of any one individual. We find our health and reach our potential in community with other believers. We experience the gospel's pragmatic power when we involve ourselves in the lives of other believers.

There is an ability that grows in each of us to admonish one another. The word admonish is a compound word formed from the word mind and the word to put or place. We develop the ability to plant in the minds of each other that which each we need in given moments. To admonish involves the intentional conversations meant to call others up to the things that are next for them. Of course, this involves truth, but it also involves a tone that is critical. It is an urgent and corrective tone, but it is also one that presumes their dignity, worth and their high calling. It is we-can-do-this tone, a we-are-meant-for-this tone. It is a remember-who-you-are tone. Admonishing is a common task in parenting. Done apart from the Spirit it is marginal at best. Thankfully, it is a skill developed by the Spirit as we humbly pursue the character of Christ. It becomes very effective. It is inspired and energized in each of us and working in concert we admonish one another, and spiritual progress is the result. This corporate power of admonishment is what Paul is recognizing here.

15:15—but I have written very boldly to you on some points, so as to remind you again, because of the grace that was given me from God.

It is true that in the local church there is the collective power to promote spiritual growth in its members. This does not mean it is self-sufficient or self-perpetuating. Paul knew that the Romans needed leadership in some important doctrinal and practical matters that he could provide.

A local church tends to have vulnerabilities in its collective mode of thinking. As a result, it profits from the stimulation of solid and stable leaders outside its circle. Paul was such an influence and had been called and equipped by God for such a role. He understood this calling clearly as an apostle, and boldly rose to it. God's grace enabled him for it, and Paul credits this letter to the Romans as springing from God's gracious enablement of him as an apostle.

He realizes he has written "boldly." He may be thinking here of the fact that he himself had never visited the Roman church, though he obviously knew several of them very well (see chapter 16). He may have felt this way because the Roman church was likely the work of other apostles as tradition holds. Its members could have viewed Paul in a fleshly way, as invading someone else's territory. However, the apostles ascribed to no such schemes. In this sense Paul wrote boldly. But as an apostle he wrote appropriately, seeking to remind them of right thinking and living. The apostle's viewed this activity of "reminding" as an important part of their ministry (2 Peter 1:12-15).

15:16—to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles, ministering as a priest the gospel of God, that my offering of the Gentiles might become acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

By the actions of God that sprang from His own grace, not from merit on Paul's part, God had separated Paul out from humanity to be a minister of Jesus Christ. A minister is one who serves the wishes and desires of another.

The title minister that we use of those employed by churches comes from passages of Scripture like these. The word Paul uses here is λειτουργον, rather than the more common word used in the Bible that we render minister, διακονος. It is a compound word formed by combining the word for a people with the word for labor or toil. It has in mind the labors of a priest of the old covenant, which Paul's words reflect. Ministers are workers. But their focus and purpose is not just tasks. They do tasks with a people of God in view. This people of God they have as their aim and purpose, to form such a people from ordinary people. Ministers are first and foremost to be those who serve and carry out the desires of the Head of the church, Jesus Christ. Ultimately Paul answered to Christ. His work involved people, so he always had an eye on them and he loved them. But his ambition was to please Christ (2 Corinthians 5:9; 1 Corinthians 4:1-5). Paul assisted Christ in what He is doing, forming a people in a way that they too served Christ.

Paul saw his ministry as having specific focus, the Gentiles. This was the work God had set him aside for, even though Paul himself was a Jew. This was a complex work. He had to think through all the teachings of the Old Testament and render decisions on what was to be embraced by the Gentiles and what could be let go of. It demanded tremendous power of intellect, a deep understanding of the Old Testament and Jewish tradition, expertise in Jewish Law, a profound grasp of grace in the mission of Christ, and a few personality factors that would enable Paul to "swim upstream." The phrase "to the Gentiles" is rhetoric to us but took a great work of grace and empowerment on the part of God. and then great sacrifice on the part of Paul.

Paul describes his ministry as that of a priest. Priests did three primary things. They taught the people, helped them engage the necessary routines of a righteous life as defined in the Law. The priests also facilitated the people's public worship. To do the latter they were schooled in the "how to's" and they were faithfully available to assist all who came to the place of worship. Paul draws from the imagery of the Levitical priests of the Old Testament to describe his work.

The Levitical priest ministered the Law. They helped direct people's lives according to the dictates of the Law's demands. Paul ministered the gospel. He helped people live their lives by its implications, and its blessings. He helped them see the gospel as the fulfillment of the Law, and themselves as priests of God. The Levitical priests offered the sacrifices of people to God. Paul offered to God the changed lives of people. These changed lives were a gift of love he wished to present to God. These were the lives of people who had been ignorant of their Maker, now living in fellowship with and devotion to Him.

Paul did the work he did, such as speaking boldly to the Romans on some points, to push this process of sanctification along in the Gentiles. They did not "become acceptable" in the sense Paul is speaking of without such efforts on his part. There were things they needed to learn about and issues they each needed to tackle over time. The sacrificial gift of the Gentiles to the Lord would become complete and acceptable only with the sacrificial efforts of many along the way who would build on Paul's foundation that which God wanted built.

The Holy Spirit will be the One who will be found to have orchestrated all such work. So it will all be attributable to God's grace. God's grace, flowing to His children through the Holy Spirit, enables both the follower and the minister in their own responsibilities. The minister speaks through the Spirit, the hearer responds in obedience. In the end the work will be seen to have been accomplished by the Holy Spirit, using individuals like Paul as instruments of the truth.

15:17—therefore in Christ Jesus I have found reason for boasting in things pertaining to God.

Paul was always conscious of the power the Holy Spirit was exercising through him. He spoke of these achievements when it was profitable because they were real. They are a reminder to us that He who is in us, is mightier than he who is in the world. This was “boasting,” but it was not for Paul to exalt himself. It was to demonstrate the power available to ordinary people because of the power of the gospel. It was boasting about things pertaining to God, that is, it is bearing witness to what has been seen of His Spirit moving in one’s own self and in the innermost being of others. It is the story of God’s unconditional acceptance of sinful people purely because of their faith in Christ. It is the story of His great power working in and through such people to bring about godliness in themselves and others. As we engage this in the Spirit, it is a work that is more satisfying than any other.

Paul boasted of the great love and goodness of God and His faithfulness to the covenant He had made centuries earlier with Abraham. In Christ Jesus, that is, by examining the data we have about His life and His words, one learns so very much about God, and that is how God intended it. By believing in Christ Jesus, having His Spirit living within us and experiencing His creative powers within and seeing it in the lives of others, one finds so much about God to proclaim, to exult in, and to praise. This is the boasting Paul is speaking of here. It is what filled the empty void in Him that had led Him as a younger man into the empty pursuit of the trappings of status (Philippians 3:4-9).

15:18—For I will not presume to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me, resulting in the obedience of the Gentiles by word and deed,

To speak of one’s own fleshly accomplishments is to dwell on trivia, all of which will pass. All of it will be undone in time and that is true even of noble human achievement. Passing time has a way of neutralizing our impact and eroding all our best efforts. The work that Christ accomplishes through us within others is a quite different matter. It has a lasting impact. It is work that He does with respect to eternity, and no amount of passing time erodes its significance or its glory. It is a work done in the very souls of people which are eternal and of consummate value.

Paul had reached the point of realizing that this was the only achievement worth speaking of. Anything else was presumptuous. Presumption happens when we dare to think that our paltry performances would be noteworthy in the presence of perfection. It would be comparable to a beginning musician demanding equal time after the performance of a virtuoso. In Paul’s case Christ had met a stubborn, headstrong, deluded Jew, on the road to Damascus. He had been bent on undoing what God was doing. Instead, God had transformed Paul into one who had bought thousands in scores of cities to faith in Jesus Christ. Paul’s circle of influence had resulted in the birth of the world-wide Christian movement that would encompass tribes and nations Paul did not even know existed.

When Paul speaks of the obedience of the Gentiles, he is making a statement that was both factual and prophetic. It was factual because it could be legitimately stated that there was now a self-sustaining movement among the Gentiles. The Spirit clearly established His presence in them. Now, apart from Paul, the way of life was spreading among them. It was a prophetic statement in terms of what the centuries of time would bring. The faith would spread so that it would be present in every continent that makes up the planet.

Paul speaks of his work in terms that are instructive. It was to him the work of bringing about the obedience of gentiles in word and deed. It is not simply the work of bringing people to believe in the work of Christ, though that is clearly the beginning. That basic belief establishes a foundation upon which mature faith can be built. It grows into a trust in Yahweh that results not just in rhetoric, but in a distinct way of living. Paul wanted the Gentiles not just to embrace monotheism. He wanted to help them move along in the sanctification process. He envisioned them arriving at a point of completeness in Christ, having stimulated much more in them than justification (Colossians 1:28).

15:19—in the power of signs and wonders, and the power of the Spirit; so that from Jerusalem and around about as far as Illyricum, I have fully preached the gospel of Christ.

Paul continues here citing the completeness of God's work among the Gentiles. Theirs was no second-class experience of God. All the things that God had done among the Jews in the Jerusalem church had been experienced among the Gentiles. Paul speaks of the signs and wonders because these were an important piece of evidence that authenticated the movement by the standard God established for the people of Israel (Deuteronomy 18:22).

The Gentiles also experienced the full power of the spirit. This was important to the apostolic company in the days when they themselves were processing the issue of the Gentiles coming to faith (Acts 11:15-18). God was obviously accepting the Gentiles. How could the apostles in the church do less?

As in other places Paul is stating here his own urgency in pursuing the call of God. He had been thorough in his God-given role of establishing the church among the Gentiles. He speaks to the geographical areas his ministry had thus far covered. He had ministered from Jerusalem through Asia minor and into Greece as far as the town of Illyricum. This is the name of the province northeast of Italy, across the Adriatic Sea. It was considered the frontier, inhabited by the barbarians. Paul's point is both that he had been faithful, and that God had been faithful. The gospel had "worked" in a multitude of places among a variety of cultures already, as Paul delivered it. This affirmed the authenticity of it as Paul was delivering it. Therefore, the Romans should pay attention to what he has written boldly about. He had been instrumental in the Gospel being *πεπληρωκεναι*, fulfilled. All the prophetic projections about the movement of God out from Israel to all people stood fulfilled before the eyes of Paul's generation.

15:20—And thus I aspired to preach the gospel, not where Christ was already named, that I might not build upon another man’s foundation.

Paul talks about what we would call a personal philosophy of ministry that shaped his work among the Gentiles. He wanted to take the gospel to places where there was no knowledge of Christ. He left it for others to work in places where there was a presence of believers. This was his general pattern, to evangelize within a community and move on. He pointed others to the work of organizing local churches, Titus and Timothy being primary examples. He viewed this as his calling and the work of establishing churches and leading them as work belonging to others. And so he draws the parallel of not building on another man’s foundation.

This is not to say Paul never lingered in a place to help the church grow. We know we did so in Ephesus (Acts 19:10). Also, much of his letter writing, such as this letter to the Romans, concerned itself with this work of drawing people long to maturity and helping the churches become stable and strong. But Paul’s primary focus was on the work of the frontier, giving the gospel to those who had not heard it. This is not a prescriptive thing that all are called to, but it is a descriptive, describing Paul’s personal calling.

15:21—but as it is written “they who had no news of Him shall see, and they who have not heard shall understand.”

This is a quote from Isaiah 52:15 that Paul uses as a biblical rationale for his philosophy of ministry. It speaks of the life and ministry of the coming Messiah, God’s servant, and this thought as recorded by Isaiah leads right into the well-known, often quoted passage on the suffering Messiah—Isaiah 53.

The first part of Isaiah 52:15 says, “thus he will sprinkle many nations,” referring to the atoning work of Christ that is the heart of the gospel. Paul viewed the spread of the news about Christ, which is what the gospel is, to be the appropriate aftermath of the cross, including its spread among the Gentiles. This was God’s plan from the beginning. It is one of the primary ways in which Yahweh would bless all nations through Abraham.

15:22—For this reason I have often been hindered from coming to you.

Because Paul’s primary call was to work in areas unreached by the news of Christ, he had often been directed away from Rome. Others were there working for the Lord, and the church was well established there. So it was natural for Paul to move away from the capital of the empire rather than into it.

He wants the Romans to know that his reason for not coming there was not that he did not view them as important or strategic. His call simply worked against him making the trip there and lingering there. Paul will now begin to explain his travel plans that could include a visit to the Romans. These plans did not exactly happen as he anticipated. But they did come about, and the expenses were paid by the Roman Empire.

15:23—but now, with no further place for me in these regions, and since I have had for many years a longing to come to you

The work of God is never done in a particular area. But His work for a particular individual is often done in that area. The question is never is His work done. The answer to the question “Is His work done?”, is generally an emphatic no! The question is always is His work through me done? Each person is used by God in different ways.

Knowing how God uses you is an important part of stewarding your years on earth. There is some variance over the course of one’s lifetime on how God will use them. But it is not that great generally. We have a “sweet spot,” a portion of God’s work that we are particularly effective in. Sometimes the primary need of ministry lies outside our area of giftedness, or perhaps outside our calling. There are times when we notice this, and the Lord provides the person to fill that need while we remain present. There are other times when we are to move aside and give way to another with a different anointing of God. There are still other times when we are to move on and trust the Lord to provide that work in our absence.

Paul’s comment here that there was no further place for me, was not an indication that the Lord’s work was done in those places. It was that his role in that work was completed. Paul’s personal mission from God involved other places, and this led to a course of events that no one could have anticipated.

It is tricky to process the matter of when God is through with you in a particular place. But it is a question that must be constantly processed. There is no future in simply doing what you have always done, or what is comfortable and known. We must be about the work that God is summoning us too wherever that may be. One can leave too early or stay too long, and both are equally damaging and must be avoided.

It would seem from Paul’s processing of this that the decision to leave is made before it is known where one should go. That is what makes it a hard one to make. The unknown is not stimulating to most of us in the way it was to Paul. Paul knew his work in the region he was in was done. He was not certain where to go next, and this was true on other occasions of his ministry (see Acts 16:6–10). In that situation it seems he began to formulate direction by pondering his personal desires. There was the assumption that these were sanctified to some degree at least, by the Spirit. And so since he had desired for some time to come to Rome, he began to formulate a plan that included that.

When we’re faced with discerning what God has next for us, there is every reason to consider what we desire. If we have lived obediently and have sought to live in harmony with the Holy Spirit, our own desires may be things He has placed in our hearts to do. These desires must be held in the light of what we know God has historically done in people and what we know and can comprehend of eternity. Our thought of how our pursuits will turn out may be imprecise. Paul’s were. But setting out toward the things we are drawn to may be exactly the right thing for us to do.

15:24—whenever I go to Spain—for I hope to see you in passing and to be helped on my way there by you, when I have first enjoyed your company for a while—

Paul's vision was beyond Rome. His custom was to involve other churches in his pioneer missionary efforts. He wanted to enjoy the fellowship of the people in Rome, but then he wanted to push on from there. They would "help him on his way." This likely meant a financial contribution but also included a sharing in the work through prayer (see verse 30).

Paul's mission continued to be to preach Christ in regions where he was not known (verse 20). We do not know if the gospel had been taken yet to Spain. It is likely, given Paul's desire to go there, that there had not been an apostolic presence there.

15:25—but now, I'm going to Jerusalem serving the saints.

Paul was leaving on official church business to Jerusalem. The next verse will state the nature of that business. This verse helps us date this letter. It was likely written as he traveled through Macedonia as recorded in Acts 20:1-2, about 56 A.D.

Paul's mission was always that of serving the saints. But this phrase "serving the saints", is an interesting way of characterizing the actual activity he was involved in at the time. Clearly that work was the soliciting and gathering of funds. We can often view gathering funds as serving oneself, but Paul viewed it as serving the Saints.

15:26—for Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem.

We know something about a relief effort that Paul orchestrated in these churches in behalf of the Christians in Jerusalem from his letter to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 16:1-4; 2 Corinthians 8-9). It was an extensive undertaking that Paul himself coordinated. It was one that he felt was very strategic. His commentary in these verses show that he saw it as an opportunity to build a bond between Jews and Gentiles.

When our commitment begins to involve our money, our spiritual lives take on a deeper tone. That seems to be axiomatic in terms of how humanity functions (Luke 16:9-13; Matthew 6:19-21). Our hearts follow our treasures, where we are fully invested. Paul worked hard at bringing this about because he knew that the faith had to get beyond the boundaries of being a "Jewish thing." It had to become something that embraced all people rather than being an isolated sect among Jews.

This was God's plan and will. It took leadership from Paul to bring it about. Because it was God's won't mean that God took care of it without human instrument. There was hard conversations Paul had to have and hard letters to write in lieu of humanity's tendency to procrastinate on financial matters (see 2 Corinthians 9:1-5).

This is very instructive on the matter leadership. God orchestrates the conditions whereby His will can come about, but those conditions include the efforts and hard work of people and in the end their sacrifices. The churches of Macedonia and Achaia were "pleased" to make such a contribution. This does not mean they would have been pleased to do so apart from Paul's urgings and prayers, nor does it mean they were not vulnerable to second thoughts. The realities of the situation were such that they required Paul's steady and compelling hand.

15:27—Yes, they were pleased to do so, and they are indebted to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in their spiritual things, they are indebted to minister to them also in material things.

Despite his own mistreatment at the hands of unbelieving Jews and their great opposition to the gospel and to Christ everywhere, Paul still propagated the spirit of thanksgiving toward Jews wherever he went. This spirit was present even in the most Gentile congregations. There was a genuine belief on the part of Gentiles due to apostolic teaching, that they had a spiritual indebtedness to the Jews. It was a great tribute to Paul and the other apostles that they themselves embraced such a spirit and did not become bitter toward their own people.

It was a critical gesture by the mostly gentile churches of Macedonia to send aid to the mostly Jewish congregation of Jerusalem. It would do much to transition the fledgling faith from being seen as a sect of the Jews to being a movement by God among all people and for all people. It was a tribute to the people through whom God had spoken to the world, but also a demonstration of the love He had now spread abroad in the hearts of those once considered outsiders. It was a validation of the power of the gospel for all to see.

Paul lays out a clear linkage between spiritual things and material things. Greek culture was seeing the two as more and more distinct and unrelated. But Paul speaks of them both being instruments of ministry. This is what the gospel did. It related to the whole man, the whole of mankind, and the whole of life, and so brought harmony and consistency to the individual and corporate lives of all who embraced it. This linkage as it was taught to the churches of Achaia was clearly present in Paul's letter to the church in Corinth, a major city of that province (1 Corinthians 9:1-14, see verse one in particular).

15:28—Therefore, when I have finished this, and put my seal on this fruit of theirs, I will go on by way of you to Spain.

This verse captures Paul's intent, the plan he envisioned for himself over the next few years. We can see from his words that his heart was for the unreached people of Spain. The Romans would see him, and they would have opportunity to share in his ministry to Spain, but Spain was clearly the prize.

We don't know for certain if Paul ever saw Spain. On the trip to Jerusalem, he would be imprisoned, would appeal to Caesar and so go to Rome. There is widespread belief that he was released from Roman imprisonment. If that is true, he may have traveled on to Spain as per his original plan. But that is far from certain. We know he made the trip to Rome, though under different circumstances than he imagined here.

At this point Paul's project of gathering relief funds for the poor in Jerusalem was not completed. He wanted to gather it and deliver it. By placing his seal on it he is speaking of it being an official apostolic action. He calls it "fruit," and he calls the fruit "theirs." This is appropriate language. It is the fruit of the work of the Holy Spirit in people. It is "theirs" and this likely refers to the Jews in Jerusalem primarily, though it could refer to both parties. It is the Jerusalem saint's fruit in the sense that it was the result of their opening the church to the Gentiles, acknowledging what God wanted to do and investing in that (see Acts 11). They opened their hearts to the Gentiles and to God. Now they would receive back this offering from a gentile church of Spirit-led people far away, whom they did not know. It was a dramatic development that Paul wanted to officiate over, a monumental and landmark moment in the body of Christ. It was important to celebrate this momentous development and to preside over it rightly.

This is something leaders recognize and do because people tend to miss the full significance of such acts of God. They might enjoy them and even be very thankful, but with spiritual leadership they can become faith-builders and help the movement develop greater collective ability for ministry.

15:29—and I know that when I come to you, I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ.

This is a fascinating statement in view of the circumstances that would eventually take Paul to Rome. It is fascinating as well that there is a state of being in the "fullness of the blessing of Christ" out there for us. This can only mean that it is possible to be in a position where Christ is only partially blessing us. It may be that what we are doing is good, but we are perhaps doing it at the wrong time or in the wrong way. Paul desired to travel through Rome to Spain, but he knew that the time was not quite right. He was not interested in being in one place when the Lord wanted them somewhere else, even if he was doing something good.

The fullness of the blessing of Christ comes when we do right things at the right time and in the right place. That is the Lord's will. God, in His great grace, blesses good deeds wherever and whenever and by whomever they're done. But He longs for men and women to be so in touch with Him that they act with focus and precision in harmony with His heart for the moment. The blessing that is poured out on such deeds is powerful and it is full.

15:30—Now I urge you brethren, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God for me,

Paul desired people who would join him in intense prayer for ministry. He reveals something of the nature of prayer when he chooses to use the phrase "strive together with me." The word "strive" is used of competing for a prize or when used more in a figurative way, to contend with an adversary. This helps us understand why prayer can often be the last thing we are drawn to. We tend to choose activity over prayer. Prayer is engaging ourselves with the spiritual world. While there is a wonderful and tranquil fruit that is found in this, there is also conflict to be found in it. At times there is a disconcerting heaviness that must be prayed through. Often prayer involves interceding for that which cannot be easily ascertained, a kind of intellectual, emotional, and spiritual wrestling match that there is not an immediate explanation for. This was especially true in Paul's day when news travel so slow. Paul wanted the people to join with him and intercede according to the Spirit's prompting.

There were two ideas on which Paul founded this desire for partnership in prayer with the Romans. The first was “by our Lord Jesus Christ.” Christ set the example in prayer (Matthew 14:23; Luke 6:12; 9:28; 5:16). He had summoned the apostles to this struggle (Mark 14:38). Paul summoned the Romans to it speaking for Christ as His apostle. He also summoned them to it “by the love of the Spirit”. This love of the Spirit likely refers to our love FOR the Spirit and HIS love that He puts in us for the things and people He loves. Prayer is what we do for those we care about.

Caring as opposed to disengaging oneself is a great activity carried out in the body of Christ through the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit prompts us with concern about people in faraway places, some we know and some whom we do not know. This is His way of orchestrating prayer, of engaging the forces of evil and of bringing about God’s will and plan. It is a fascinating and mysterious activity, Spirit orchestrated and directed prayer. The next verse will give the reader some information to get them started in their prayers for Paul.

15:31—that I may be delivered from those who are disobedient in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may prove acceptable to the saints.

We know that there was legitimate apprehension on everyone’s part about Paul’s trip to Jerusalem (see for example Acts 21:10–14). The unbelieving Jews in Jerusalem had proven in the case of Jesus that they would stop at nothing to squelch the truth. They were blinded to the truth and therefore could be counted on to have a skewed view of what was moral, just, and proper. They were very dangerous people.

Paul asks for prayer as he prepares to meet them in their home court. They would most certainly be hostile. This prayer was answered, but not in the way it was envisioned by Paul and all those praying for him. He was delivered in the sense that they could not carry out their desire to kill him (see Acts to 3:12–35). The trouble they orchestrated turned into an opportunity for the gospel to be declared to many influential people (Acts 25, 26).

Paul also requested prayer for the church of Jerusalem. Specifically, he was concerned about how they would receive the offering of the mixed Jew and Gentile churches of Macedonia to them. Any gift’s impact is regulated by the spirit in which it is given and that in which it is received. Gifts can be a good experience for both giver and receiver. But it can be an experience that takes a disastrous turn depending on perceptions. Would the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem be insulted by these Gentile upstarts? Would they view the gift as unclean? Would they accept it with anything less than an outpouring of gratitude? Paul had desired the churches of Macedonia to give it and to do so generously. Now he was concerned that the Jewish believers in Jerusalem receive it with gratefulness and with humility. He wanted certain barriers to collapse under an assault of love, and for a new era to emerge in the church in Jew/Gentile relationships. So there were critical things to bring about that would arouse many fleshly passions. Intercession is a resource in these kinds of battle.

15:32—so that I may come to you in joy by the will of God and find refreshing and rest in your company.

As these verses are read that describe Paul's plans, one is repeatedly struck by the irony of how it would all unfold. This verse is one in which that irony seems to be the starkest. A mysterious aside is to reflect on what God enables us to see in terms of our future when we are in tune with the promptings of the Spirit and what we are kept from seeing. Even a man of Paul's spiritual stature who was no stranger to prophetic vision, knew little of what God's plan held for him. The future remains largely veiled to us, even when our spiritual lives are fervent and properly consuming. The only exceptions come because of God's special revelation to us. This is as He has ordered it as a means of proving his own uniqueness (Isaiah 46:8-13).

It is certain that Paul experienced joy while being a prisoner (Philippians 1:12-14; 2 Timothy 1:16). It is also clear that he viewed himself as being in the center of God's will though in prison (Ephesians 4:1). As a prisoner, he was certainly released from the intense activity of his day-to-day ministry. In this sense he rested, but it was hardly the refreshing rest he envisioned. Perhaps we can see that God allows us to develop passions and dreams that in some way share common ground with His plans and intentions for us. Perhaps these areas of commonality involve places and people and such things while matters of timing and accompanying circumstances are known only to Him.

This is likely a grace on His part since knowledge of these things before their time might completely overwhelm us and paralyze our ability to act. It is also testimony to the importance of faith in His plan. It is faith that He seeks because in some ways it is what will bring Him the most honor by revealing the most about His goodness and His power. Paul was eerily right about what his future held, while being altogether wrong about it.

15:33—Now the God of peace be with you all. Amen.

There has already been in this letter a statement that seemed to be drawing the entire letter to a close (see 15:13). This is another one. It may not be that they were made with that intention, though one could easily envision that possibility in view of how letters were sent in that day. This letter may have been composed over a period and these closures could represent the end of certain "sittings."

There is no more appropriate desire or prayer to have for a church than for them to have a sense of God's presence. This is what Paul is asking for here because we know that God is always with us. We do not need to pray or asked for this is much as we need to pray for our own awareness of His presence. That awareness gives us peace. There are special times when God's presence with us is known to us. This is in a sense all His doing, but in another sense, it may be all ours, meaning that we have become by some act of His grace more perceptive and attentive to His voice. These words of Paul are a way of wishing or praying that experience into the lives of his readers.

Romans 16

16:1—I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea.

In chapter 16 Paul makes mention of twenty individuals that are known to him in the Roman church. We know very little about any of them with most being mentioned only here. Phoebe is the first person mentioned, a woman from Cenchrea, which was near Corinth. We do not know how she happened to be in Rome. She is called a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea. The word rendered servant is *διακονον*, and could be understood as conveying that she held the office of Deaconess. This is not unreasonable, but neither is it necessarily required, because the word still had wide use as a term for one who simply rendered service. That Paul commends her to the Romans could mean she was the one who carried a letter. The rest of Paul's instructions do seem to convey that she was to be received along with the letter. So Phoebe was only known to them because she had just arrived there with Paul's letter.

16:2—that you receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and that you help her in whatever matter she may have need of you; for she herself has also been a helper of many, and of myself as well.

Phoebe was highly regarded by Paul and his words here reflect that he considered her faithful, a high compliment coming from Paul. She was to be received in a manner "worthy of the saints." To be received with respect, dignity, love and the like are what Paul is referring to. There is to be an elevated hospitality and affection on the part of believers for each other. This was an expectation that the apostles cultivated in the early church (Galatians 6:10, 1 Peter 4:9, Hebrews 13:2).

Again, we do not know what took Phoebe to Rome. It is doubtful that it was just to carry this letter. But in whatever needs she had either in getting there, or in staying there temporarily, Paul wanted her to be cared for. Her track record of helping others, including Paul, made her worthy of this.

16:3—Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus,

This is the husband-and-wife team mentioned elsewhere as Priscilla and Aquila. They're mentioned more times in the New Testament than any of the others on this list (Acts 18:2, 1 Corinthians 16:19; 2 Timothy 4:19). Paul met them in Corinth (Acts 18:2), where they went when Emperor Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome. We learn from Acts 18:3 that they were tentmakers like Paul. When Paul speaks here of them being "fellow workers in Christ Jesus," we can imagine that they were engaged not only in ministry matters with Paul, but quite likely in business matters as well. There was likely a unique bond between the three because of this.

We know that when Paul left Corinth and made his way to Ephesus, this couple went with him (Acts 18:18). Then when he left Ephesus, it appears that Priscilla and Aquila remained there. When Apollos comes on the scene in Ephesus, it is Priscilla and Aquila who help shape his understanding of Scripture more accurately and so equip him for better service. This appears to have all gone on in Ephesus in Paul's absence. We do not know how long Priscilla and Aquila remained in Ephesus. Here we find them in Rome. Paul greets them as part of the Roman church. They were his fellow workers. There is something very special about the few who rise to share the load of ministry. They become forever special in one's mind.

16:4—who for my life risked their own necks, to whom not only do I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles.

Priscilla and Aquila had put their own lives on the line for Paul. This could be a reference to the trouble recorded in Acts 18 at Corinth, or it could involve other situations. Whatever it involved, Paul makes special note of it. They were Jews, and they stood with Paul against the Jews, and again with Apollos against the Jews, so that the Gentiles could hear the gospel. They had been key players in the effort to embrace the Gentiles, and so Paul wants to assure the gratitude of “all the Gentile churches.” He viewed their efforts as having been strategic.

Whenever God wants to do something new, he finds bold and entrepreneurial risk-takers who are willing to do the unconventional. Priscilla and Aquila were cut out of the right stuff to catch Paul's vision to impact the Gentiles. They rose to the moment that history placed before them and so served the Lord, Paul, and the church faithfully.

16:5—also greet the church that is in their house. Great Epeanetus, my beloved, who is the first convert to Christ from Asia.

Priscilla and Aquilla hosted the church in their home. This was normal for the times. The first buildings that were exclusively for church meetings appeared in the third century. Priscilla and Aquilla also had a church in their house when they lived in Corinth. In Colossians 4:15 it is said that one named Nympha had a church in her home and the same appears true of Philemon (Philemon 2). This does not mean the groups were small, but it would seem while they could not have been large.

We know nothing of Epeanetus except what is said here. This is a Greek name meaning praise. As with many, Paul had deep feelings for this person, referring to him as “my beloved.” This reveals the great relational nature and capacity of Paul. He was a man who became very attached to people and encouraged them to do the same (see 2 Corinthians 6:11-13). For all Paul's focus on doctrinal issues and matters of truth, he also cultivated deep relationships. All who are spiritual leaders should strive for such a balance.

Epeanetus is said to be the first convert to Christ in Asia. Literally it is said that he was the first fruits, and we should likely understand this as not necessarily the absolute first to believe the gospel, but that he was among the initial converts.

When the Emperor Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome (Acts 18:2), he may have unknowingly provided the occasion for the church to take root in Rome. He drove people out to where the gospel was being preached. Epeanetus may have been among those expelled, along with Priscilla and Aquila. Later on they return to Rome and brought Christianity with them.

This is a great example of God's sovereign workings in government and even through evil, to bring about his plan. There are host of faithful people whom Paul identifies in Rome though he had not been there. This core group may have composed Jews who had been forced for a time to reside in places like Macedonia, Achaia, and the Asian provinces. While there, their paths crossed with Paul and they embraced the gospel.

16:6—greet Mary, who has worked hard for you.

There is no reason to believe that this was Mary the mother of Christ, or any of the other persons by that name associated with Jesus' ministry in Israel. Miriam is the Hebrew name, a common Jewish name which meant obstinate or rebellious. It was an appropriate name given the meaning of Israel, "he fights with God."

Paul says of this woman that she has worked hard for the church of Rome. That is a great thing to have said about oneself on the pages of Scripture. Should the official epitaph for anyone say this, it is a life well-lived. To have worked hard for a particular church is as noble a mission as anyone can achieve. It does not demand great talent or exceptional gifting, only faithfulness and a proper sense of urgency. Such faithfulness seems always to have been noticed by Paul and he viewed it as noteworthy in both him and others. To expend great effort in the cause of Christ in His church is the greatest use of our years.

16:7—Greet Andronicus and Junius, my kinsman, and my fellow prisoners, who are outstanding among the apostles, who also were in Christ before me.

We know nothing about these individuals except what is stated here. It is likely that they are husband and wife, though the name Junius could be either male or female.

Paul makes four statements about them. First, he refers to them as his "kinsman." This term referred to blood relatives but was frequently used in the wider sense of fellow Jews. We are left with uncertainty about the nature of this relationship.

Second, he refers to them as his fellow prisoners. It is uncertain whether this is referring to time spent in the same prison together, or if Andronicus and Junius had simply been imprisoned at some time and so Paul identified in a special way with them. They could have been in prison in Rome at the time of the writing this letter. It seems most likely however that they had been imprisoned at some point together for the cause of the gospel.

Paul makes a third statement about these two individuals that is very significant one. He says that they are “outstanding among the apostles.” This phrase has been bantered about in Christian circles over the years. It could mean that they were considered apostles, occupying the specific office, and playing that important role in the early church. The phrase could also be describing their reputation, the fact that they were well respected by the apostles. If it is taken in the sense that they were apostles and distinguished themselves as such, it has rather significant implications. It would mean that the office of apostle spread beyond the band of the twelve, plus Paul. It could also imply that such a calling office could and should exist in the church today. There is no such provision among most evangelical groups. The apostolic authority is seen as vested in the Scriptures, which then become the sole authority in matters of faith and practice. If these two were considered apostles, and if Junius was a female, there are obvious and profound implications. Where that is believed, this does become a statement used as evidence for ordination of females. In much of the writing of those who propose female ordination, it is generally proposed that Junius was female and was considered an apostle. There is considerable doubt that this was true, based on everything written by the apostles and everything about Jewish traditions the church was built on.

A fourth statement made by Paul about Andronicus and Junius is that they were in Christ before Paul. So they had been in the faith a long time and there is inferred in Paul’s words, respect for their seasoned faith. At the very least Andronicus and Junius were very well-respected believers who had served the church and the apostles well. They were considered trustworthy and faithful, seasoned in the faith.

16:8—Greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord.

This individual is mentioned only here in the Scriptures. As in the case of several others in this account, Paul uses the term beloved. It speaks to the significance of certain relationships and their contribution to the life and health of those at the highest level of leadership in the early church. During one’s work as a Christian there are certain relationships that stand out, that were perhaps born in an opportune moment or in a moment of special need. The word “beloved” captures the special blessing of such friends and the gratitude associated with the memory of them.

16:9—Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ, and Stachys my beloved.

The name Urbanus means “city bred.” Paul identifies him as “our fellow worker.” He was one who was known as sharing in the work of the ministry. It is a great complement to be named by one such as Paul as a fellow worker. Many faithful Christian leaders have cried out to God for such fellow workers in Christ.

Stachys, whose name means “an ear of corn” is noted as a special friend, one of a number who had been there at some time in some place for Paul. That is all we know of this man, and it is commendable.

16:10—Greet Apelles, the approved in Christ. Greet those of the household of Aristobulus.

Apelles is a name of Latin origin. Paul says he is “approved in Christ.” This may have been a statement of some special significance to those who knew Apelles or perhaps it has to do with the origin of his name. At any rate there is no greater aspiration one could have than to be approved in Christ. The word approved is the rendering of the word δοκιμον, which implies that Apelles had been tested in some way and found to be genuine. There is undoubtedly a story to this person, as there is connected to any of us, that would shed more light in this greeting if it was known.

About the individual named Aristobulus, there has been a tradition that this man was the grandson of Herod the great. The greeting to his household is the rendering of the short phrase τουσ εκ των, which simply means “the one’s out of.” The actual term “household” is added by the translators. This could have referred simply to his own family. But it also could have referred to the large number of servants that such an individual would have. We know that many slaves came to the faith, and the references in this text to “households” could be a reflection of this. So our understanding of who is involved in this particular greeting is not precise.

16:11—greet Herodian, my kinsman. Greet those of the household of Narcissus, who are in the Lord.

As in the case of Andronicus and Junius, whom Paul also referred to as “kinsmen,” we do not know in what sense he is using the term kinsmen. They could be immediate blood relatives or fellow Jews. We know nothing of Herodian except this.

We cannot say with absolute certainty who Narcissus was. Tradition says that this man was a distinguished freedman who had great influence with the emperor Claudius. Such a man named Narcissus did exist and is said to have written letters that influenced personal decisions of Claudius.

As in the case of Aristobulus, those of Narcissus’ household very likely included his household servants who would have come to faith. We see from such statements that the Christian church was grassroots, word-of-mouth movement that perpetuated itself rather naturally due to its simplicity and it’s living nature. It can be understood and articulated by common people. Through the Holy Spirit people were attracted, changed, and empowered. The gospel, Paul’s grand subject, made its mark in households.

16:12—Greet Tryphaena and Tryphosa, workers in the Lord. Greet Persis the beloved, who has worked hard in the Lord.

It is a blessed thing to be commended by one such as Paul as a hard worker. One has only to read of Paul’s own hardship and endurance (2 Corinthians 1:8-10; 11:23-33; 1 Thessalonians 2:9; 2 Thessalonians 3:8), and it becomes obvious that this is a great commendation. Tryphaena and Tryphosa are both female names and typical names among slaves. They may have been sisters.

16:13—Greet Rufus, a choice man in the Lord, also his mother and mine.

This person named Rufus may have been the son of Simon of Cyrene, who was pressed into service by the Romans to carry Christ's cross (Mark 15:21). Nothing is known of Rufus beyond this speculation. Paul calls him a "choice man." Everywhere else the term rendered "choice" in the NASB it is rendered "chosen", or "elect". It probably refers to that act of God's choice here. There was likely a string of events in Rufus past that spoke rather dramatically to Paul of God's choice of him. If his father was Simon of Cyrene, we can well imagine the string of incredible events that would have been forever associated with his name.

Paul speaks of Rufus' mother here and refers to her as his own. It seems certain that this is done figuratively. But it is an interesting personal note on Paul that bears witness once again to the personal relationships that supported his work in ministry. This unnamed woman had been like a mother to Paul, and Rufus likely had been like a brother to him.

16:14—Greet Asyneritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas and the brethren with them.

This is a group of people that are not mentioned anywhere else in Paul's writings. In a place where the slaves and freemen of Caesar's household are buried, an inscription from Nero's time includes many of these names. It could be they were members of Caesar's household (Philippians 4:22), who came to faith in Christ, and this could be why there are "brethren with them." On the other hand, these could simply be leaders in what we would call a house church, what was simply a normal local church in ancient Rome.

16:15—Greet Philologus and Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them.

Again, we find what is thought to be a group of believers who are associated with a larger unnamed group who appeared to be in some way under their care. This likely demonstrates that the Roman church was a group of smaller churches that Paul was addressing as one. We are not given any specifics about how leadership was exerted within these groups or from without. It was a transitional season and the exact order that would characterize the Church was developing. It seems that God may have viewed it as such, with no specific mandate given regarding things like size. Still the pattern that emerges from this letter of Paul, that of a large group consisting of smaller groups, is a good one from a pragmatic point of view. It allows for more meticulous and personal attention to be given to the growth of individuals.

16:16—Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you.

The normal greeting of close friends of this era was not a handshake or hug, but a kiss. This remains the pattern among many cultures of the world to this day. We know that this had been true of the ancient near East culture that Israel emerged from. Anthropologist could likely tell us if Christianity brought this to the later European culture or if it was common to all ancient cultures. The point here is likely not so much the practice of the kiss as it is to urge sincere and affectionate relationships.

Sincerity was important to Paul. It was an unholy kiss that Judas used in his betrayal of our Lord. Holy is the word Paul chooses to urge us to be undivided in our loyalties and pure in our thoughts and motives. It is holy this kiss that Paul urges, but it is a kiss. The kiss is not unimportant. An appropriate love and affection should be clearly demonstrated by us toward one another.

Our affection strengthens the faith of others and draws them into our fellowship where the Lord can speak to them and shape their lives. This affection was intentionally cultivated by Paul everywhere because it is so important to the growth of the faith and growth in the faith. This expression of greeting from all the churches of Christ reflects this. Paul simply expected and anticipated such warmth and personal regard to exist in the whole Christian community, across all cultural lines.

16:17—now I urge you, brothers, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them.

There are always those who come into churches that do not believe or live in accordance with sound doctrine. They do not leave and separate themselves from the church. They stay and try to attract a following. There are two things that Paul urges his readers to do with such people.

First, they are to watch them. They are not to be given free rein— allowed to move freely in various relationships selling their bad thoughts and others. They are to be watched for the purpose of protecting others. It is not simply a matter watching them do their evil work. We are to be on the lookout for them to stop them.

The second thing we are to do once we spot them is to turn away from them. This does not mean that we must become mean-spirited toward them, just that we deal with decisive and firm love. We are not to give them any influence or even an opportunity. We are to refuse dialogue with them on the subject and if necessary, physically leave their presence and avoid them.

This is a matter Paul urges obedience in. Now Paul was certainly a man after the heart of Christ who modeled the love of God. But he knew that in the case of some, they needed to be dealt with severely for the greater good of one's love for the church.

16:18—for such men are slaves. Not of our Lord Christ but of their own appetites; and by their smooth and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting.

We see here why Paul says that we must keep an eye on those who cause dissensions. If we are not alert our hearts can be deceived, totally taken in by their evil schemes. As they do their work, we can become convinced to the very core of our beings of what they're saying. We must not linger over their words and teachings.

Paul paints a picture of the hearts of such men that is not flattering. We should never say such men "have good hearts," and so soft sell what they do. Paul does not suggest for a minute that they are sincere or simply a little off-track. He says they are slaves of their own appetites. In words and terms, he uses elsewhere we could say they are slaves of the flesh. They are driven by natural appetites.

These appetites will vary. Some have appetite for adulation and praise. Others have an insatiable need for title and status. Still others desire influence or even control. Whatever the exact outworking of this, it is an ungodly need and desire within them that they seek to meet by involvement in the church. In the process of gaining what they need they must pass themselves off as good and useful Christian people and so they get very skilled at manipulation. Smooth speech, thoughts that are carefully and precisely worded, along with arguments that are logical and orderly are their specialty. Flattery, stimulating the appetites of the flesh in others, becomes another tool of choice.

The best way to prevent their destructive work is to be properly suspicious. The key is the teaching of the apostles. When we spot what goes against that teaching, we will likely also find smooth and flattering speech. We should never accept things just as they appear but be watching for the telltale signs of the flesh at work. These are the strings Satan pulls to do his work among us.

16:19—for the report of your obedience has reached to all; therefore I am rejoicing over you, but I want you to be wise in what is good, and innocent in what is evil.

Paul gives the reason here for the instruction he has just given regarding those who practice their trade of manipulation in the church. He is convinced of the genuineness and progress of the Romans and their faith. He is not wanting anyone or anything reversing that direction in them. He knows the most common instrument of spiritual lethargy in the church is dissension. It diverts people from everything that is noble and right and focuses them on what is earthly and fleshly, even devilish.

Paul is rejoicing over the progress of the Romans. At the same time, he is experienced enough to know exactly what lies ahead and he wants to prepare them so that they maintain their good health. The body of his letter gives them a standard by which they can judge sound words. Now they have only to make sure their movement doesn't waver in terms of these things. So he has told them to withdraw from those who advocate different ways of thinking and behaving. The standard for determining what is to be condemned was apostolic teaching, this "gospel" in the broad sense of that term.

In this verse Paul gives the reason for withdrawal and separation rather than engagement. He wants them to be innocent, or as the KJV says "simple," concerning what is evil. There is no need to know more of it and experiment with it. This is sound advice. There is no need on the part of the rank-and-file Christian to understand the intricacies of falsehood and evil. There is no future in supposing that those embracing it can be coddled back to obedience. Evil must be clearly defined and isolated as one would a bad disease.

16:20—And the God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you.

God always wants all believers to live in light of this truth and great hope that we will walk one day over our enemy. When an army walks over an enemy it is because they have destroyed them. The figure is interesting in that it implies that we are on the offensive and will prevail. There is no retreat, tactical or otherwise, in these words. They speak of the coming victory of Christ's kingdom over the evil one. It will be decisive and complete.

Now, why did the Holy Spirit inspire the use of the word “soon” here, given the fact that 2000 years have elapsed and there’s been no such “crushing” yet? Some explain this entire verse by suggesting that Paul was referring to the Roman church moving from being persecuted to dominating the city and the Empire. But one can hardly view that as having “crushed” Satan in view of the evil that was perpetrated through that church. It would also seem that Paul’s words here harmonize with the promise made in the wake of humanity’s fall, that the seed of the woman would crush Satan’s head. So the question remains, if this ultimate triumph is what the Holy Spirit was speaking of, why the words soon?

It can only be that the term “soon” is used from God’s frame of reference. No victory, including the exceptional influence of the Roman church, happened in the lives of the generation who received this letter. It happens “soon” in the sense of our human lives passing very quickly, the years flying by in a blur. It happens “soon” in terms of the great span of eternity which God as witness. God wants us to have this perspective and he has shaped his message diligently to convey to us the urgency of the matters of his kingdom compared to those things that relate to the brief eras of our present existence.

God is a God of peace, but there is a war that must be fought and won before that peace can be experienced. Peace has been taken from the earth. That is the reality God’s own people must live with. They follow a God of peace who is himself amid a war in which he justly and in love inflicts casualty and death and retribution and in which His own soldiers suffer the same. This is a mysterious idea that can confuse us. We tend to have a very wide range of rhetoric on the issue of war and peace in the Christian community. We tend to take up a position that reflects our individual personality, and this is because we see both war and peace in God. Evil, allowed by the will of God, has brought with it great complexity. We need the great grace of our Lord Jesus to find our way through the maze. One thing is certain. By his grace, his peace will prevail.

16:21—Timothy my fellow worker greets you, and so do Lucius and Jason and Sosipater, my kinsman.

These are individuals who were in Corinth with Paul at the time of the writing of this letter. Timothy is mentioned often as one who shared the ministry with Paul, so that we often refer to him as Paul’s assistant. We do know more about him than many of the figures in the early church. That knowledge is based on the inferences of the two letters addressed by Paul to him that are part of the New Testament. We can say emphatically that he was a faithful man who served well.

The other individuals named here we know nothing about though individuals by these names are mentioned in Acts (Acts 20:4; 17:5–9; 13:1). Whenever Paul got into this mode of sending greetings, we hear about the people he had gathered around him to share the work. Some undoubtedly disappointed him (2 Timothy 4:10). They likely came and went based on many factors, and Paul likely sought out continually people who worked with him in the daily routine of ministry.

The thing we should draw from this is that Paul recruited and drew people to work. He accomplished more because he passed responsibility to others who are trustworthy. He did not let their imperfections hinder them from being involved. That should inspire us in many ways.

16:22—I, Tertius, who write this letter, greet you in the Lord

It appears that Paul's letters were all written by others. We have generally speculated this has to do with some lingering issue of his eyesight. But this is speculation. One thing is certain, that in having someone else write what you dictate, you gain one more person who understands your thoughts and your heart, and that is a great asset for any leader. So at the very least this was a means of widening the circle of those who knew and understood the mission and the intricacies of the message. Most have concluded that in Paul's case it was a necessity related to the "thorn" in his flesh (2 Corinthians 12:7).

16:23—Gaius, host to me and to the whole church, greets you. Erastus, the city treasurer greets you, and Quartus, the brother.

The name Gaius occurs four other times in the New Testament (Acts 19:29; 20:4; 1 Corinthians 1:14; 3 John 1). Three of these four could be the same individual. It is impossible to determine if the Gaius to whom 3 John is addressed is the same person. Gaius is said to be of Derby (Acts 20:4) but is referred to as one of the Corinthian church (1 Corinthians 1:14), whom Paul baptized. It may be that he left Derby at some point, perhaps under Paul's influence (see Acts 14:21), and eventually settled in Corinth, where he hosted the church in his own home and was with Paul as this letter was written.

Erastus is mentioned as the city treasurer, a fact confirmed by an ancient inscription. An Erastus is mentioned with Timothy in association with Paul (Acts 19:22; 2 Timothy 4:20), but it may not be the same individual.

Quartus is mentioned only here but was somehow known to those in Rome. Perhaps in the expulsion of the Jews from Rome they encountered Quartus.

16:24—The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.

Many manuscripts do not contain this verse. It seems highly unlikely that it was part of the original text. It is the standard benediction of Paul. It likely was the end of the book in terms of using it for public reading, which then found its way into the text itself.

16:25—now to him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which has been kept secret for long ages past,

With these words Paul begins his lengthy benediction to his letter. His basic thought is contained in the first three words of this verse and the last five words of verse 27. That thought is, "now to him be the glory forever. Amen." Paul understood this to be the grand objective of God's plan and so dedicated himself and all his efforts to that important end. That being the grand end and purpose to which all things are moving, each life finds its greatest meaning in dedicating oneself to this purpose.

Paul describes God here as “the one who is able to establish.” That is an encouraging, strategic, and inspiring thought. The word is the same word used to convey something that God has “fixed” in time and place, something that cannot be altered (Luke 16:26). It was the word used by Jesus to describe the work Peter would do in providing stability to the faith of his fellow apostles and the church (Luke 22:32). It is the word used throughout the epistle to describe the process of God bringing us to belief and maturity so that we have an inheritance in the kingdom of God (2 Thessalonians 3:3, 1 Peter 5:10, 1 Thessalonians 3:13). It is a word that conveys security and that which cannot be altered. Throughout this letter Paul has maintained that in the gospel we find the truths that rescue us from the futile life and infuse us with the right and power to live right, by God’s personal direction.

This message of the gospel was not a cultish belief that Paul had concocted. The remaining verses show that the Old Testament writings, the proclamation of Jesus the Christ, and the gospel as proclaimed by Paul, are all in agreement on what is the great purpose and work of God in humankind. So Paul mentions here that his Gospel and the preaching of Christ agree. He uses the term “my gospel” not to suggest that his message is his own, as the context clearly shows. He uses this term to facilitate the important responsibility we all must judge the various messages we hear to make certain that they harmonize with revealed truth. Before we accept an individual’s messages as God’s, we are to view it by itself alongside what we know to be of God. Only when it is scrutinized in that light can any message be received as from God. Paul sought such scrutiny (Galatians 16-10).

Paul’s message agreed with the preaching of Christ. It also was in harmony with what had been a mystery. This refers to many statements in the Old Testament concerning the salvation of Gentiles and the inclusion of “all people” in the family of God (Romans 11:25; Ephesians 3:1-7; Colossians 1:24-27). This mystery includes the numerous statements of the new covenant, the new heart to replace Israel’s heart of stone, and the forgiveness of sin. These things were all spoken of in the Old Testament writings. But through the thought of Paul, they are unveiled so that we understand their detail. We can see that several lines of thought running concurrently through the Old Testament come together through the sacrifice of Christ and the ensuing gift of the Holy Spirit.

This mystery was kept secret. This does not mean there was no mention of it. That means that it was not fully comprehended, but there were pieces of the truth missing so that the whole thing could not be completely grasped. Paul’s thought harmonized with what is now known about many mysterious things that were part of the Old Testament era.

16:26—but now is manifested, and by the Scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the eternal God, has been made known to all the nations, leading to obedience of faith;

Paul statement here “and by the Scriptures of the prophets” goes with the statements of the previous verse. It is meant to show that Paul’s gospel, the preaching of Christ, the relation of the “mystery,” and the Scriptures of the prophets are all in agreement on the message about Christ’s great work of redemption. The mystery of the breadth of the family of God, of Christ, and of the indwelling Holy Spirit, had become fully known in Paul’s day, Paul being a key figure in its unveiling (Ephesians 3:1-7). This mystery was spoken of by the prophets. This was a key element in the apostles’ message, to link the phenomenon they were witnessing among both Jews and Gentiles to the statements of the Old Testament. The statements were mysteries to the Old Testament saints.

But the mysterious words on the pages of the Old Testament became crystal clear once the events of the New Testament had occurred. The apostles spoke often of this linkage— Paul had recently in this letter (15:9-12). All these things were mysteries, not because they were entirely unknown, but because they were not fully known and understood. We find mystery where a result is known, and the process by which it came about is unknown. Paul says it is now known. To the life and ministry of Christ and of the apostles, both of which came because of the command of God, the great news of the gospel with all its implications was spreading rapidly among all people. Again, this was the sovereign plan of God, brought about by his command. It was not just the normal spread of news by word-of-mouth that characterizes things like wars and natural events. The spreading of this news was intentional and precise so that the facts did not become altered or distorted.

The end to which this proliferation of the truth was instigated by God was occurring, the obedience that was characterized by faith. Paul understood his own calling and ministry as being defined by this great purpose, to bring about the obedience that was characterized by faith. That had been clearly stated at the start of the letter (Romans 1:5).

The truth of God has the great capacity to alter lives. Truth does that because it transforms thoughts which in turn orchestrate deeds. Every deed is a result of a thought or thought pattern. And so the key to changing actions is to change thoughts. Obedience is us acting based on thoughts God orchestrates in us. We must believe and trust in these things He does within us. The resultant acts then are acts of faith, or trust. All God has asked of humankind is that they believe Him. If they will trust what He Himself has said about Himself, about life, and about humanity, they freely receive the gift of God which is rescue from all the consequences of evil. This trust is the obedience that God seeks.

Other obedience to religious routine and to moral Law may not be accompanied by faith. If that is the case, it has no merit at all with God. Faith is entrusting one’s welfare to God. That is the obedience He seeks. The gospel, with its central figure Jesus Christ, and its central fact, His death burial and resurrection, is the basis upon which we can trust God. He has made the move toward us. His love has motivated Him to do so. He asked only that we admit our inability to earn His favor except through the work of Christ on our behalf. That is the work of faith, the only obedience He absolutely demands. It is trust of the truth and it sets us free.

16:27—to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, the glory forever, Amen.

The gospel is God's provision for the redemption of man, whereby man can be restored to the role he was made for in the program of God. The gospel restores man's true glory. But where any created thing's glory is enhanced, its Creator's glory is magnified even more. In examining the gospel and seemingly meticulous attention God has given to the rescue of humanity, we grow increasingly silent in the presence of the wisdom of God, the weightiness of Him, and the matters of His heart. On His part, He longs for us to understand this—the utter insignificance of most of what occupies us in our natural state.

God's intentions and plans for us reach far beyond the scope of this planet and likely include the far-flung corners of the universe. Even the most critical of those things that we normally become preoccupied with in this life, are not worthy of any mention at all compared to the things of our God. He is unique in His understanding of all that is. The sum of it all is so vast that the wisdom of any other being shrinks to nothing in the light of all He routinely occupies Himself with.

Having pondered this and having arrived at the only logical conclusion one could arrive at, that of abandoning personal pursuits for the surpassing value of being occupied by His business, Paul refers to God as the only wise God. We could easily capture Paul's thought by saying, "to the only wise one." The wisdom of God stands unique by every imaginable dimension. It is through Jesus Christ that we can become those who function within the scope of all that this wise One is doing and so add to His glory. So Paul acknowledges what his treatises clearly has shown, that we can work for the advance of this weightiness or glory of God, this uniquely significant business that He is engaged with. We can do so because through Jesus Christ, God has opened His door to us. Through Jesus Christ, God's own spirit can and will empower us for the "otherly," the consummate work of the universe. Through Christ the work of evil, the enemy's work, will be undone. The glory of God will have only been augmented by evil on the day when God reveals all things as they truly are.

This glory of God comes about at the final establishment of the true order of all things. All things, once restored in this way, are the consummate exhibit of His greatness. That, Paul clearly understands, is the true purpose of all that has come to exist. This theme is clear in Paul's other writings (see 1 Corinthians 15:2-8).

Paul's final thought for the Romans shows that even the salvation of man and the enormity of its value to us, must be seen in the larger context. God's plan is not what we would call "redemptocentric," centered on redemption. Nor is it "anthropocentric," centered on humanity. It is theocentric, aimed at all things in the creation being properly centered in the Creator, Yahweh. All things find their own glory in taking their place in the order that the Glorious One has ordained. And so, so may it be. Several times during his letter Paul has said, "May it never be!" He now ends with that which will be, and because it will be, it is grand news for men—the glory of God.

Appendix 1

The suppression of truth as the universal problem of humankind

Paul reports on the suppression of truth by humanity to provide the backdrop that makes the story of Jesus the unparalleled good news. The suppression of truth is a terribly tragic course of thinking we fall into. Interestingly, Israel themselves had shown this same instinct and were in this way representative of humanity. This is a danger for all people, Christian and non-Christian alike and would be eternally catastrophic were it not for the gospel.

The writer of Hebrews warns his readers against the danger of suppressing the truth. He utilizes the words of Psalm 95, and says to them:

Therefore, just as the Holy Spirit says, “Today if you hear His voice, Do not harden your hearts as when they provoked me, as in the day of trial in the wilderness, Where your fathers tried Me by testing Me, and saw My works for forty years. Therefore, I was angry with this generation, and said, ‘They always go astray in their heart; and they did not know my ways;’ as I swore my wrath, they shall not enter My rest.” (Hebrews 3:8-11 utilizing Psalm 95:8-11).

This Scripture from Psalm 95 is referring to a series of incidences in which the Israelites squelched the clear witness of their conscience and their concrete experience that God was good. They did not chose in those times to Trust in His witness of Himself, or in their experience of deliverance experienced to that date (15 such incidents are reported: Exodus 14:10-15; 15:22-26; 16:1-12; 16:17-28; 17:2; 32:1-6; Numbers 11:1-3; 11:4-12; 12:1-15; 14:1-12; 16:1-11; 16:41; 20:2; 21:4; 25:1). These incidences began just hours after they had been released from bondage in Egypt because of Yahweh’s judgment of the Egyptians through the plagues (Exodus 14:10-12). Their distrust of Yahweh’s character reared its head again just three days after they had walked through the parted Red Sea and seen the entire army of Pharaoh destroyed by the hand of God (Exodus 15:22-26). A total of 5 are recorded before the incident when they see the fire and smoke on the mountain and are afraid to meet Yahweh. Five more are recorded from the giving of the 10 commandments until the moment in Numbers 14:20-25, when God bans that generation from entering the promised land due to their unbelief.

After they are so banned, five more incidents are recorded as if to confirm the judgment of God. So in their minds Israel suppressed what they had concretely experienced of God’s goodness, in favor of a course of distrust and fear. This pattern of thought they continually allowed themselves to revert to despite the continued patience of God and proof of His goodness.

In the account of Moses then, a great and important irony is presented on this subject. Pharaoh hardens his heart against the clear voice of Yahweh and seeks to prevent the Israelites to leave Egypt. Against the backdrop of Yahweh’s miraculous deliverance of them, Yahweh’s covenant people harden their hearts and so miss out on experiencing the promised land. Israel’s history is a profound demonstrate that this is the great human problem and dilemma. It demonstrates to us an important idea. It is that hardening the heart can happen to the Christian as easily as the non-Christian. This is exactly the point the author to the Hebrews is bringing out through Psalm 95.

The whole experience of the Exodus for Yahweh is described in interesting emotional terms. It is important that we understand and guard against being as the Israelites were if we wish to have a full experience of Yahweh.

The author of Hebrews uses Psalm 95 to show that the events in the wilderness were a season of time in which Israel “provoked” Yahweh. The text in the original language is strong in 3:8 and 3:15, where the entire string of incidences are referred to as “the provocation.” From the point of view of the author, whose choice of words is being orchestrated by the Holy Spirit, the period we refer to as “the Exodus,” God refers to as “the provocation.” The idea of the word rendered provocation is to be in the company of and so repeatedly experience that which prods and irritates.

The Exodus is also referred to as “the day of testing.” The testimony of Moses regarding the entire period spent in the wilderness is that it involved a series of tests Yahweh allowed to strengthen the trust of Israel in Him. The purpose of these can be illustrated by the routine a personal trainer might prescribe for a person whose goal was participation in a marathon or a triathlon. These were experiences God provided so that Israel could experience His saving intervention and have a memory that would strengthen them for the greater things He had. At times He revealed the terror of His presence so that Israel would develop reverence for His power (Exodus 20:18-20). They could trust it above all other powers. At other times He tested them to reveal to them what was in their own hearts (Exodus 16:4; Deuteronomy 8:2). His tests were meant as a means of humbling them and helping them grow in trust in Him, and from there grow in character and so inherit blessing (Deuteronomy 8:16; 13:3).

Their distrust overwhelmed them in these tests. Rather than forging ahead and believing Yahweh would intervene and provide, they distrusted His goodness. He was in their minds deceptive and out to get them. They wished to turn back to Egypt and slavery. The generation that had been rescued from Egypt was not allowed to enter the good land because of this (Numbers 14:20-25). But Israel’s history proved that such unbelief was not the unique to that generation. It resided in subsequent generations. It became characteristic of the nation.

To study the history of Israel once they were in the land is to see only short periods of time when the worship of Yahweh was vibrant. Their hearts tracked best under David’s rule. Under David the nation was not without its troubles, but Yahweh speaks well of David despite his various lapses. In fact, the promised place where Yahweh “put His name” was revealed to David in the wake of one of his lapses (1 Chron. 21:1-22:16). He prepared plans for the house of Yahweh and gathered materials (1 Chron. 28:19). He likely wrote an entire liturgy for the worship of Israel in this house (the first of the five books of Psalms may be this). This was all done as the forty-year period that David was Israel’s king was coming to an end.

When David died, Solomon His son became King. Solomon accomplished the agenda his father had established for building the temple. He too reigned for forty years. It took twenty years to build the temple and establish the worship routines for Israel. At some time toward the end of the last twenty years of Solomon’s reign it is said that his foreign wives turned his heart from Yahweh, and he built shrines and worshipped false gods (1 Kings 11:1-13). The nation never recovered from Solomon’s sin. That means that the glory of Israel when Yahweh was held high and the place where He had put His name was exclusively revered lasted from ten to twenty years! The history of Israel demonstrates humanity’s propensity to trust in all that is false, even when Yahweh’s presence is remarkably present. It demonstrates that to harden their hearts and suppress truth is what makes salvation impossible for us to accomplish on our own.

Hardness of heart, the inner choice to resist truth because it speaks against a preferred course of action, is different from what could be called legitimate unbelief. Legitimate unbelief occurs where there is no knowledge of the truth, a genuine lack of information. This situation is not as common as might be thought, but it does exist. Hardness of heart occurs when the information is available, absorbed and understood and a deliberate choice is made not to implement it. That choice is usually due to truth's implications, not its actual content.

This is the great root of evil present in all of us that we must resist through the Holy Spirit. It is the force that all the information in revelation and all the activity of the Spirit and the Angels is equipping us to overcome. The authors of Scripture appeal for this work in us. We are fully supported in it by all the effort expended by heaven since the fall.

Appendix 2

There is an important and interesting observation we should make about Paul's argument at several points in his writing. He is willing to have his argument rest on one word in Scripture. It is also important that his argument rests on the precise, normal meaning of that word. This is not just true with Paul. It can be seen in the words of Jesus as well.

Scripture is that kind of book. Its words are inspired and there is authority in them. Not only that, but the message of Scripture is more clearly grasped when its individual words are pondered and pondered according to normal rules of usage and grammar. The wealth of Scripture lies not in some hidden meaning, as many have proposed over the centuries. It lies in its plain and ordinary meaning. This is how it should be read, interpreted, and applied. It is the kind of writing that is not just true in its general, overall thought. It is the kind of writing that can be broken down and its individual words and their grammar analyzed for more thorough understanding. Scripture is deep and its depth defies us in some ways. But that depth is exposed by applying the rules of normal communication, not looking for secret codes or supposing the real words are mere allegory.

Scripture is communication from God in human language. It is His effort to make known thought which we otherwise would not have known. It should be approached as a work by Him aimed at making truth clear to us. It is precise and it covers complex subjects, and it leaves some truth unexplained. But it is revelation and can be approached as one would approach all other written communication. In the end, we embrace the perspicuity of revelation—that it is clear, and its meaning is readily available to us.

Appendix 3

Here is a curious thing. Were it not for the imputation of Adam's sin, which resulted in our own spiritual death, the presence of the evil one, Satan, would likely demand that we pass a similar test as Adam's ourselves. Like Adam we would find we were overmatched by the enemy of all that is holy. It is not too big a leap to say that the imputation of Adam's sin might in the end be found to be how many more could be saved from the enemy's grasp. Even in human courts if someone is incapable of standing trial, they do not face the consequences of their behavior. In rendering us helpless God could justify responding in grace to rescue us and give us a greater glory than the glory Adam lost.

Appendix 4

This passage has influence with respect to the discussion of whether the atonement was limited or unlimited. While most would agree that atonement only applies to those who believe, it seems this passage would add weight to the argument that Christ died for all men and that His sacrifice is sufficient for all men. The offer to all men of salvation is legitimate even though some are specially drawn along so that they will accept the offer. This universal availability of salvation is surely important to embrace and particularly so considering this passage. If Christ did not die for all, but only for the elect, then the series of comparisons between Adam and Christ are somewhat hollow. In that case Adam's sin certainly brought death and condemnation to all. Throughout this passage the message is that Christ went beyond restoring what Adam lost. He did "much more" (verse 15, 17). How do we dare say, "just as in Adam God condemned all, so through Christ He offered to save a few of His choosing." That thinking would lead to a series of contrasts not a series of comparisons, as have appeared here.

Appendix 5

Of the 109 occurrences of the word salvation in the New Testament, 55 verses seem to be speaking to being restored to wholeness with Yahweh.

31 of these can be understood as focusing on no particular aspect of salvation (neither justification, sanctification or glorification), simply viewing it in its entirety (Matthew 1:21 is typical of these).

8 seem to be focusing on its entry point, belief leading to forgiveness and right standing with God—justification (Mark 15:31; Luke 8:12; Acts 16:31 are examples).

10 seem to be focusing on its ongoing aspect whereby we are being saved from godless patterns and habits that grow in us due to our fallen state—sanctification (Luke 13:23; John 10:9; Romans 5:10; 1 Timothy 4:16 are examples).

6 seem to be focusing on its future aspect, the future when we will be saved fully—restored to a sinless state—glorification (Romans 5:9; 1 Corinthians 3:17; 5:5; 2 Timothy 4:18).

20 verses speak to rescue or safe keeping in terms of some physical danger, of which Matthew 8:25 is typical.

18 verses speak to healing from some physical malady, of which Matthew 9:21 is typical.

8 verses are somewhat vague in their precise sense, of which Matthew 10:22 is typical.

A Summary of Old Testament Usages

When we use the term “save” today as Christians it is the term for God’s act of saving us from the penalty of Sin so that we will go to heaven instead of hell once we die. In its usage in the Old Testament, the term rarely has this meaning. The verb “to save” occurs first in the Bible in Exodus 2:17. There it describes Moses, act of help in watering the sheep belonging to Jethro, tended by his daughters. This usage is typical of the way it is used in the Old Testament. It describes acts that rescue another from danger or defeat (Deuteronomy 22:27; Joshua 10:6; Judges 12:2). The noun form occurs first in Genesis 49:18, where the salvation of Yahweh is spoken of. This idea of Yahweh’s saving acts becomes a frequent theme of Old Testament writers. These saving acts are related to rescue from oppression, from enemies in war, from disease, from bondage of various forms.

It is used very rarely in the Old Testament in the way we use it in the Church today. Yahweh’s salvation was seen very broadly, as his entire activity that grew out of a relational bond (covenantal) He formed, which then related to all aspects of our lives in an evil world. It referred to all that His children experienced daily to be rescued from myriads of emotional, spiritual, and physical dangers.

Conclusion

Yahweh's salvation is certainly about rescue from hell. It is equally about rescue from sinful habits, and perils of every other sort. Yahweh's salvation simply flows out of who He is, and so encompasses virtually every area of the human experience.

Yahweh's salvation of us began in a series of decisions made by Him before the creation of the world (Ephesians 1:3-4; 1 Pet. 1:20; Rev. 13:8; 17:8). Yahweh's salvation will culminate in His new creation when we live with Him on the new earth (Rev. 21:1-8). It is always happening in between. So it is proper to speak of ourselves as having been saved, of being saved, and of one day getting saved. This is the conceptual idea we must have in hand when we observe the English word "saved" or "save" in the text. This is an overwhelming challenge for us.

Appendix 6

Text of notes from 4:18-20 that sometimes disappears

4:18—in hope against hope he believed, in order that he might become a father of many nations, according to that which had been spoken, “so shall your descendants be.

In hope against hope is a great expression of the power of faith. Literally the phrase is “beside hope and upon hope he believed.” Faith enabled Abraham to embrace the hope that the thing Yahweh said raised in him and to build on that a certain expectation. In that moment when Yahweh spoke Abraham came to believe he would have a descendant when there was no hope of it happening. He believed because of who was speaking.

Now consider these things. Abraham was 75 when the Lord called him to leave Heron (Genesis 12: 4), 86 years old when he had Ishmael (Genesis 16:16). Somewhere between these events this promise of having descendants was made to him. At 90 Abraham was circumcised (Genesis 17:24). He was 100 when Isaac was finally born (Genesis 21:5). His wife gave birth at 90. This was hoping against hope! It was embracing the hope aroused by Yahweh’s promise that he spoke and daring, allowing Himself to expect it to become a reality.

That is what faith enables us to do. It goes beyond hoping in normal human process. It is hoping that which is beyond what is normal and reasonable to expect because God has promised to do a thing, in this case give Sarah a son. We know that this hope of Abraham’s was so unreasonable that both himself and Sarah had lapses along the way. We know that the promise was so unreasonable that on one occasion when Sarah overheard the promise reiterated to Abraham, she laughed (Genesis 18:12).

Faith is hope placed in God. There was no thing and no person able to bring this promise about. Faith led us to hope in that which is utterly unthinkable. Abraham’s faith was in the simple statement of God after He had instructed Abraham to look up into the night sky of Palestine at the stars. God said, “so shall your descendants be.” Faith enabled a childless couple who were somewhere between 75 and 85 years old to believe those words. And when they did, God credited it to their account as righteousness.

4:19—And without becoming weak in faith he contemplated his own body, now as good as dead since he was about 100 years old, and the deadness of Sarah’s womb,

Scripture uses both language that is absolute in describing humanity’s behavior and language that is general. This is an example of the latter. Earlier Paul had used absolute language when he quoted the words of David, “there is none righteous, not even one (3:10, Psalm 14:1). He chooses here to commend the overall consistency of Abraham’s faith, which was remarkable. He does not dwell on the momentary lapses of faith that are evident in the Genesis account.

Abraham contemplated the weaknesses of his own body, the utter impossibility of the whole promise of God. It is not that he had his head in the sand ignoring reality and so enabled his faith. He faced reality squarely without becoming weak in the faith. The words of Paul are very definitive on this. Abraham considered His own body “already having died.” He contemplated the death of Sarah’s womb. It had been infertile and remained so for 90 years. Yet his faith did not weaken. Abraham’s faith was remarkable because he thought through these things and still believed. His faith remained over the 25 years that he waited for Isaac to be born.

4:20—Yet, with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief, but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God,

Though there was ample reason to get weaker in faith as the 25 years past, we are told that the opposite happened in the case of Abraham. He grew strong in the faith. The promise of God was to him too profound and serious to be relegated to a “wait and see” status in his mind. He did three things with respect to that promise.

First, he did not waver. We must so embrace God’s word on matters that we weather doubt each moment it arises. We must in those times answer two questions, “Who is God to me right now? Am I shrinking Him?”

Second, he grew strong in faith. Faith is something we should get better at as time passes. And we should be able to get stronger in our belief as the promises are delayed. The more human thing would be to start excited and strong, but as time passes believe increasingly that something had gone wrong or that the word from the Lord had been misunderstood. Walking with the Lord enables the opposite to occur

Third Abraham gave glory to God. We do this when we exercise faith. When we remain faithful and do the things, we must do in order for God to do His essential work, we give Him glory. When we trust that He can do it and that His time of doing it is best and so rest from our normal human anxiety, we bring Him glory. It is clearly seen that He is our God that we are allowing Him to be God.

Remember, Paul is citing this faith of Abraham to show us what Abraham “found” (verse 1), with respect to the matter of justification. Clearly, Abraham found that faith in God is warranted, and he found that such faith is nurtured and strengthened by Yahweh Himself in the process of walking with Him.