

COMMON SENSE COMMENTARY SERIES

WHO IS GOD AND WHAT DOES HE WANT (VOL 1)

● PHILIPPI

● GALATIA

● COLOSSAE

● EPHESUS

Optomistic, conversational,
thought-provoking commentary
on chapters 1-8 of Paul's
letter to the
Romans

C CLIFTON JONES

C Clifton Jones

Who Is God and What Does He Want

Vol. 1 (Romans 1-8)

An optimistic, conversational, thought-provoking commentary on Chapters 1-8 of Paul's letter to the Romans.

First Edition (1.0)

C Clifton Jones

Copyright © 2025 by C Clifton Jones

All Rights Reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by electronic or mechanical means, including photocopy, recording, information storage and retrieval system, or digital media without written permission from the publisher except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.



www.ccliftonjones.com

Alamy invoice for the right to use front cover satellite image.

- Invoice number: IY04012506
- Invoice date: 22 December 2023
- Order reference: OY88278837
- Image details Image ID: E4DTFX
- Image title: Mediterranean area. True color satellite image. Mediterranean Sea. True color satellite images showing the Mediterranean Sea.
- Alamy Stock Photo License details: Worldwide usage, Magazines, and books. Start date: 22 December 2023. Duration In perpetuity Additional details: Use in a single magazine or book (print and/or digital), inside use, 2,500 circulation, worldwide (excludes advertising).

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments.....	10
Preface	11
An imperfect commentary	11
A conversational commentary	11
A thought-provoking commentary	12
A verse-by-verse commentary	12
An optimistic commentary.....	13
Introduction	15
Part I: The Problem (Romans 1:1 – 3:20)	18
1. Introducing the Good News (Romans 1:1-5)	19
A chosen apostle (1:1).....	19
The promised Good News (1:2)	21
Glorifying God (1:5).....	22
2. A Sense of Obligation (Romans 1:6-15)	25
All are included (1:6)	25
Praying day and night (1:8)	27
True encouragement (1:9b)	28
3. The Power of God to Save (Romans 1:16-17)	31
Not ashamed of the Good News (1:16a)	31
The power of God at work (1:16b).....	33
By faith from start to finish (1:17)	36
A poem about Paul.....	38

4. Angry Love (Romans 1:18-19)	41
A quick review of verses 16-17	41
What makes God angry? (1:18)	45
5. Foolish Ideas About God (Romans 1:20-23)	50
God is clearly seen in nature (1:20)	50
Denying God (1:21)	52
Foolish thinking (1:21b)	54
6. Trading the Truth for a Lie (Romans 1:24-27)	57
What God allows (1:24)	57
Same-sex relationships (1:26b)	59
Two other same-sex passages	61
7. Paul's List of Sins (Romans 1:28-32)	67
Inventing new ways to sin (1:28)	67
How the New Testament came to us	69
8. You Do the Same Things (Romans 2:1-11)	76
Judging others (2:1)	76
The patience of God (2:2)	78
Judgement is coming (2:5)	82
God will judge everyone fairly (2:7)	84
9. Doing What is Right (Romans 2:12-16)	88
Hearing vs doing (2:12)	88
No law; no excuse (2:14)	91
My writing goals	93
10. Teach Yourself, Not Others (Romans 2:17-29)	96
A guide for the blind? (2:17)	96
Practice what you preach (2:21)	99

True Jews (2:25)	101
11. No One Is Righteous (Romans 3:1-20)	105
God is entirely fair (3:1)	105
Does our sin glorify God? (3:5)	107
No one is truly good and wise (3:9)	109
Tongues filled with lies (3:13)	111
The law shows us our need (3:19)	114
Part II: The Solution (Romans 3:21-31)	116
12. Freed From the Penalty of Sin (Romans 3:21-25a)	117
But now! (3:21)	117
All have sinned (3:23).....	121
13. Faith is the Key to Grace (Romans 3:25b-31).....	124
Looking ahead in time (3:25b)	124
No Bragging Rights (3:27).....	127
Fulfilling the law through faith (3:29)	128
Part III: The Explanation (Romans 4-11)	131
14. An Unearned Gift (Romans 4:1-10).....	132
Introduction	132
We can't work for it (4:1).....	133
Pre-ritual acceptance (4:9).....	136
15. Abraham, Father of Faith (Romans 4:11-15)	140
Views of the Old Testament.....	140
Faith is the key (4:11).....	145
God's promise (4:13).....	147
16. Believing God's Promise (Romans 4:16-25)	151
God's promise is received by faith (4:16)	151

A never-wavering faith? (4:18).....	154
Faith growing stronger (4:20b).....	157
17. Utterly Helpless (Romans 5:1-11).....	160
Undeserved privilege (5:1)	160
Rejoice in trials? (5:3)	162
While we were still sinners (5:6)	165
Friendship with God (5:9).....	169
18. Death Spread to Everyone (Romans 5:12-15).....	174
Sin entered the world (5:12a)	174
Creation account problems	175
Who was Adam?	177
Sin brought death (5:12b)	179
19. Triumph Over Sin and Death (Romans 5:16-21).....	183
Adam vs Christ for many (5:16)	183
Adam vs Christ for all (5:18)	186
More sin results in more grace (5:29)	188
20. Crucified with Christ (Romans 6:1-4).....	190
Sin more and receive more grace? (6:1)	190
New lives (6:4b)	193
21. United with Jesus in Death (Romans 6:5-14)	198
No longer slaves to sin (6:5)	198
Set free from the power of sin (6:6b).....	201
Consider yourself dead to sin (6:10).....	203
Your body is an instrument (6:14).....	206
22. The Free Gift of God (Romans 6:15-23).....	211
Slaves to whatever we choose (6:15).....	211

Becoming holy (6:19)	214
The wages of sin is death (6:20).....	217
23. Free from Requirements and Laws (Romans 7:1-6)	223
Introduction	223
Marriage as an example (7:1)	224
The letter of the law vs. the Spirit (7:5)	227
24. Sin Brought Spiritual Death (Romans 7:7-13)	232
Is the law bad? (7:7).....	232
The law is holy, right, and good (7:11).....	235
25. I Do What I Don't Want to Do (Romans 7:14-25)	239
A brief review	239
The problem is me (7:14).....	241
Who will free me from my sin? (7:18)	245
26. No Condemnation in Christ (Romans 8:1-4)	251
The life-giving Spirit (8:1)	251
Jesus is our sacrifice for sins (8:3)	253
Following the Spirit (8:4).....	255
27. The Spirit Gives Us Life (Romans 8:5-11)	258
Dominated by sin (8:5).....	258
Hostility toward God (8:7).....	260
Reading versus studying (8:10)	263
28. God's Spirit Joins Our Spirit (Romans 8:12-17)	267
We are all children of God (8:12)	267
Abba, Father, Papa, Daddy (8:15b)	270
Sharing His Glory and Suffering (8:17)	272
29. All Creation is Eagerly Waiting (Romans 8:18-30)	274

All creation groans (8:18)	274
Why God created this world.....	277
Believers groan, too (8:23)	278
God’s Spirit groans for us (8:24)	281
Everything works together for good (8:27)	286
God knew us in advance (8:29)	288
30. Never Separated from God’s Love (Romans 8:31-39)	290
God is for us, not against us (8:31)	290
Overwhelming victory (8:35)	292
About The Common Sense Commentary Series.....	296
About The Author	297

Acknowledgments

This commentary is based on transcripts from Zoom shows presented in 2021 to 2024. Many thanks to all who attended and made the shows interactive discussions, not just sterile lectures. Greg and Mary only missed a show when they were babysitting family donkeys! Thanks to Bill for sharing his insights and poems. Thanks to Donna, who brought perspective as a family and marriage counselor. And, thanks to Marcos for relating his journey into grace. Thanks, also, to Terri, Kim, Rhonda, and many others who attended and made these shows a success. Finally, a special thanks to Dino and other friends who have done some honest and thorough editing.

Preface

An imperfect commentary

This commentary leaves a lot to be desired. Of this, I am painfully aware. But at the same time, I hope it will encourage some people, especially those under the spiritual bondage of laws, rules, regulations, and control, which are widespread today.

I've spent the last fifty years carefully reading many systematic theologies, commentaries, and well-written books. So, I am very aware of how far I have fallen short of the high bar that's been set before me. My approach in this commentary differs from most of those I've read, admired, and benefited from over the years. My only complaint about most good commentaries is that they are difficult to get through. So, I've tried to write something anyone can read and relate to.

A conversational commentary

I've attempted to make this commentary conversational. That is, I want readers to feel they are having a *conversation* about the subject at hand. For me, this means saying things using common, informal language – even using folksy and slang terms at times – just as most people do when talking with their friends. This makes my commentary a bit wordy, but my goal is for the reader to relax, enjoy the ride, and settle in for a journey through one of Paul's letters which he writes so passionately.

However, I've also tried to include some background information and explain words used in the original language – Greek. But this is a *comment-ary*, so I have commented as I felt it might be helpful and appropriate. It is left to the reader to investigate things more carefully if so desired.

A thought-provoking commentary

I have also tried to be thought-provoking. This is more of my goal than having readers automatically accept what I write. I always encourage people to take Paul's advice and "Examine everything carefully." You are always better off doing that than blindly trusting anyone. Always take everything you hear and read directly to God for His take on what is true. Your ability to do this (as granted to everyone by God) is greater than most teachers and writers want you to believe. God will never fail you. Trust him.

A verse-by-verse commentary

At best, I am a rank amateur when it comes to the Greek language. I took my first year of Greek from Darell Bock at Dallas Theological Seminary in 1982. I also completed a video course by Bill Mounce (as a refresher) about 30 years later. Then, as an attempt to get my second year of Greek under my belt, I worked through Daniel Wallace's excellent and thorough book, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*. So, I depend on those who have dedicated their life to being experts in this ancient language, and so I learn from them.

However, I do know Greek well enough to understand what they are saying when they weigh in on the New Testament writings. Translation and interpretation of any language is both an art and a science. One big thing I learned from Wallace is that all translators interpret, to some degree, when they translate.

From Mounce, I learned that “common sense is your best friend” when translating any text.

So, though I depend on those who know Greek better than I do, I still check and double-check them against each other, use common sense, and do not just assume any translation is perfect. The Old Testament book of Proverbs says there is “safety in a multitude of counselors,” which certainly applies here.

Some translations are very literal renderings of the original New Testament text in an attempt to be as accurate as possible. Others are very loose and flexible, desiring to express the original author’s intent in English. There are disadvantages to each method, and there is no perfect way to translate anything from one language to another. So, I try to combine all these principles into the text I use in my commentaries. I want it both readable and accurate, and sometimes these two goals are at odds with each other. The translation I use is a combination of many. However, I am convinced that if readers use common sense, read with the full context in mind, and seek God for understanding, pretty much any popular translation will be sufficient.

In my commentaries, every time a new portion of the New Testament text is introduced, I use a different font so it will stand out. The font I use is a *handwriting font that looks like this*. When you see this, a new portion of the New Testament text is introduced, followed by the comments of this commentary.

An optimistic commentary

Finally, and perhaps this is the most important feature of my commentary, I try to present God, life, and eternity in the most optimistic perspective possible. I do this simply because this is how Paul and all the other New Testament writers present God. This is not to say there is never anything harsh or severe spoken about God. There is! But as Paul once wrote, “Behold the goodness and severity of God.” He presents a balance of how to

view God. Essentially, he is saying that God is *severe in His goodness* but also *good in His severity*. And this is the key. Despite any severity that He allows and brings, the goodness of God always represents who God is and how He operates. He always acts in goodness and wants the very best for all humanity that He so loves and created in His own image!

Introduction

Romans is the longest of Paul's 13 letters. Philippians is very heartfelt. Galatians is an in-your-face warning about never going back under the law. Ephesians is a high and lofty letter about God and all the good things He has in store for us. Romans is not only longer, but also more academic. It reads more like a short book. I like to call it *Christianity 101, 102, 103...* because it covers just about every aspect of the Christian faith, just like taking a sequence of college courses on a particular subject.

When I was a kid, we learned *the Romans Road*, which was a sequential selection of verses that presented the way of salvation. It consisted of Romans 3:23, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," followed by Romans 6:23, "The wages of sin is death," then Romans 10:9, "If you confess Jesus as Lord and believe God raised him from the dead, you'll be saved." There were probably a couple of other verses in there, but this was the gist of it. It's easy to see the progression: we're all sinners, resulting in death, but we can be saved by believing in Jesus. That's a nice summary of the plan of salvation consistently taught in the New Testament, but we are wise to be cautious about taking verses out of context, which can result in something different than what the original author intended. What about all the verses in between the Romans Road verses? How do they help us gain an accurate picture of who God is and what He wants?

This commentary (as I do in all my commentaries) goes through Paul's letter verse by verse, attempting to consider the immediate and greater context of what Paul is writing. To ignore

this is to miss what Paul is trying to say and, instead, interpret his letter by what someone else has imposed on the text, or through our own personal interpretation and preferences. Peter wrote in his first letter that sacred writings are not a matter of one's own personal interpretation. This is because each author in the New Testament has something he wants to say, and our job is to find out what that is and to guard against imposing some unintended meaning on what is written. We impose such misunderstandings to our own loss.

Many people today live under huge misunderstandings of the message of the New Testament writings. Make no mistake, my commentaries are no exception and undoubtedly have many places where inaccuracies exist. That is why it is ultimately the job of you, the reader, to do your own homework carefully and take everything to God for final approval. If you feel He is telling you that this commentary is wrong at some point, listen to Him. God is never wrong and will never lead you astray, even though it may take time, some trial and error for you to figure it out with Him. Never forget Paul's exhortation, "Examine everything carefully, and then cling to that which proves itself to be right and good." You can only do this with God's help!

There's a lot going on in this long letter, and it's quite different than what you will find in the Gospels (which were written many years after Paul's writings). This Roman letter is different from Paul's other letters. It's a little more academic, not quite as heartfelt as Second Corinthians or Philippians. It is quite comprehensive, covering all major aspects of the original Christian faith. Be careful not to mingle Paul's basic and clear message with all that came out of the Fourth Century, which became the substance of much that is believed in modern-day Christianity. At least five popular doctrinal positions today originated (or were popularized) during the Fourth Century,

turning the simple Christian *faith* into yet another world *religion*. These are:

1. The New Testament Canon (officially designated writings).
2. The doctrine of the trinity (three persons, each fully God, and yet only one God).
3. Hell and damnation (rendering God as one who eventually gives up on people and abandons His “desire for all to be saved”).
4. Total depravity of humanity (making all people unworthy of salvation instead of seeing them as infinitely valuable to God, who loves them unconditionally).
5. A violent view of Christ’s atonement (where the Father inflicts retaliating pain on His innocent Son rather than on humans who supposedly deserve it).

You will find none of these teachings in Paul’s writings nor in the rest of the New Testament – not in the advanced, refined forms that came out of the A.D. 300s. Keep this in mind as you work your way through this letter of Paul’s to the believers in Rome!

Part I:
The Problem
(Romans 1:1 – 3:20)

1. Introducing the Good News

(Romans 1:1-5)

A chosen apostle (1:1)

This letter is from Paul, and it was indeed a letter. It wasn't a typical letter like, "Dear Fred: How ya doing?" It was a letter in which Paul wrote down his ideas and sent them to the believers living in Rome. It's also different than the Gospel narratives that were written about twenty years later. They chronicled the life of Jesus and the teachings he imparted. Here, Paul presents who Jesus was (the Son of God) and what He did for humanity through His crucifixion and resurrection.

Most of the New Testament writings are letters to individuals or groups of people. They are not systematic theologies (although many have tried to present them in that manner); they are more personal and practical. However, this letter from Paul to the Romans is probably closer to a theological book than anything else in the New Testament. He lays out his thoughts and beliefs in logical order, but he does it in a way that is personal, practical, and passionate (more so than typical *theological* works). So, this letter may seem a little academic at times, but Paul offers some valuable insights into who God is and what He wants. Be patient with Paul and yourself as you read through this commentary. It will be worth it!

Paul continues his introduction. *Paul, a slave of Christ Jesus*. Gee, what kind of nonsense is it to call yourself a slave? This is even more curious in light of the fact that Paul presents Jesus as a Savior who brings freedom! But it turns out that Paul

uses the term *slave* a lot in his letters, and he does so in a really good way. It's more like what Bob Dylan once sang, "You gotta serve somebody. It can be the devil or the Lord, but you gotta serve somebody." Truer words were never sung. We all serve somebody, and we're all slaves, in either a good or bad way. One kind of slavery is actually spiritual freedom; the other is just religious bondage. So, Paul is playing on words here; it's an attention-getting way of making a point. He proudly claims to be a "slave of Christ Jesus" because he knows that when we're a slave to him (and to God), we experience a freedom like nothing else in life. We become truly free persons, free to do what's right and not be a slave to sin!

He continues his self-identification. *Chosen by God to be an apostle.* An apostle simply means someone who is sent. That's why he goes on to say, *and sent out to preach the Good News.* Some translations use the word "Gospel," but that word simply means "good news." And the Good News means just that; it's a new message that's inherently good. It's not a threat. It is not God saying, "You better do something, or I'm gonna send you to hell forever." It's also not an offer of any kind, saying, "Tell you what, you come and believe in me, and we'll make a deal whereby you can be saved."

The word *gospel* (good news) in Greek (which is the original language of the New Testament) means *announcement*. Back in those days, a good news message (the evangel) would be sent out by a runner on special occasions. It was an announcement of a victory that had been won. The messenger would come from the battlefield and yell, "Hey, everybody. We won the war!" He didn't come and say, "Hey, if you believe what I'm about to tell you, then you'll be free and we'll win the war. Otherwise, we're gonna lose." It was an unconditional declaration that was true regardless of the response from people. It wasn't a deal. It wasn't a threat. It was an announcement that the victory had *already* been won so that all could hear about it, believe it, and celebrate. The same is

true about the good news message presented by Paul (and other New Testament writers). They were announcing the Good News about Jesus and the victory he had *already* won on the cross for all humanity. People needed only to hear it, believe it, say “thank you,” and celebrate that God had saved them.

The promised Good News (1:2)

God promised this good news as an announcement long ago through His prophets in the holy scriptures. Actually, the word used here is “writings,” referring to the writings of the Old Testament. So, according to Paul, God promised this Good News message about Jesus long ago through the prophets, as recorded in the Jewish writings. Paul will soon make clear that the Good News is not a list of *dos and don'ts*, nor is it a list of propositional statements to be accepted or rejected. Instead, the Good News is a spiritual *declaration of independence* from laws and requirements, which are never able to save anyone.

Paul goes on and explains. The Good News is about a person, about God's son. In his earthly life, he was born into the family line of King David. You remember King David? He came right after King Saul. When Saul was king, David was young, gifted, popular, and a threat, which made Saul a little insecure. Jesus was born into King David's family line, fulfilling the prediction that the coming Messiah would be a descendant of David. Paul continues, *Jesus was shown to be the Son of God when he was raised from the dead by the power of the Holy Spirit*. That's quite a statement! Jesus was proven to be the Son of God by the fact of his resurrection. If Jesus did indeed rise from the dead (as all his followers are reported to have claimed), it would indeed be convincing proof. It was convincing enough for Paul, who claimed to have been visited by Jesus in his

resurrected body, many years after the initial event. Paul is essentially saying, “If you are wondering if Jesus really was the Son of God, this is proof. Since he rose from the dead, he had to be the Son of God. He had to be God, who became a human and called himself the *Son of God*. No dead person can raise themselves out of death. So, it could only have been God himself, through the power of His Holy Spirit, that raised Jesus from the dead.”

And, he is Jesus Christ, our Lord. Now that's something you'll see throughout the New Testament. The words Jesus, Christ, and Lord are used together in some combination. We know what *Jesus* is. That's the earthly, human name given to him at birth. Actually, Jesus is the Greek translation of the Hebrew name, Joshua, which means “God is savior.” But what does *Christ* mean? What do you know about the word Christ besides that people use it when they hit their thumb with a hammer? Christ is the Greek word for Messiah, or the *anointed one*, who was predicted to come and deliver Israel ... and the whole world. And what about *Lord*? Lord simply means master, the one we follow, look up to, and respect. So, *Jesus Christ our Lord* is quite a title. Sometimes, *Lord Jesus Christ* or *Christ Jesus* are also used throughout the New Testament.

Glorifying God (1:5)

Through Christ, God has given us the privilege and authority as apostles (sent ones) to go and tell Gentiles everywhere what God has done for them so they can believe, obey, and bring glory to His name. Paul is announcing that God has already done something for all people, including non-Jews (Gentiles). It was not an offer by God. It was something done, accomplished by Jesus on the cross, inviting all to hear, believe, and receive this message of Good News. That was Paul's

goal – to go tell people everywhere about what Jesus did on the cross, for them, on their behalf, so that it would result in them hearing it and saying, “Jesus died on the cross, 2000 years ago, for me! He already did that for me? I don't need to do anything? All I have to do is believe and receive it as a free gift from God, just because He loves me? Wow!” Paul will spend the rest of his letter explaining how this all works and why it is such Good News.

All of this brings glory to God and glory to His name. But don't misunderstand. God's not up there saying, “Alright. Bring me all that glory! Yeah. I'm the great God. Oh, how I love all this glory lavished on me.” He doesn't seek or need any of that. He doesn't even want it. He's not that puny. He only seeks to be glorified because it's what *we* need to do. We're all going to glorify somebody or something – it can be a guitar, another person, wealth, fame, or even ourselves. Scientists and astronomers sometimes fall into a worship of creation itself. They can easily glorify all the amazing things they observe and measure rather than the Creator who made everything. Now some of them, I'm sure, realize, “Wow. That's an amazing creation. God must have put it there.” But we are all going to glorify something or someone. And so, God is effectively saying, “You know what? If you focus on (glorify) me, it will result in really good things happening in your life. But if you glorify anything else, you're going to end up in a lot of self-made trouble.” God's not a glory hound. He is the most humble and loving being in the universe. He sets a supreme example for all His creation.

A friend recently told me that if *glorify* is seen as a verb, then it's something we are required to do by God. So perhaps we should see it as a noun, making us into God's glory, where we represent the love of Jesus. To my friend, that's what glorifying is really all about. However, it is still true that when we do what is right and obey God, we bring Him glory because it is proof that He is successfully living out His perfect life in us. We become that

“living sacrifice” that Paul will discuss later in this letter, where he introduces the *practical* part. Our glorifying God makes him shine, not for His sake but ours. It helps us see him as He really is, in all His goodness, perfection, love, and grace. In fact, all of creation (not just us) brings glory to God in the best possible way. Even “the heavens glorify God,” as David wrote in one of his Psalms. That's what happens when we obey and believe God; we bring him glory, other people see it, and they say, “Wow, God is great and wonderful. But stay aware that all of this can get twisted into a legalistic thing, just like everything else in the Bible and in life, empowering religious people to gain control over others through fear, guilt, requirements, and peer pressure.

So, God shines through us, in spite of the fact that we as humans tend to turn everything into some kind of a *work*, whereby we earn something with God. We do this partly because we have a distorted view of ourselves, and partly because we have an overly inflated view. We're a fickle bunch! Glorifying God is not even something we have to do consciously. We glorify God by just living our lives. Great figure skaters, awesomely talented musicians, amazing artists, talented athletes, and those who build successful businesses – they are all glorifying God, whether they realize it or not, by showcasing the amazing abilities and creativity He has so generously placed in all of us.

Glorifying God is a good thing that happens, but again, it's not always something we're actively trying to do. We can try to do it, but really, it's something that comes from instinctively living our lives in Christ.

2. A Sense of Obligation (Romans 1:6-15)

All are included (1:6)

You are included among the Gentiles who have been called to belong to Jesus Christ. Remember, Paul is writing to people in Rome. This is essentially a Gentile church. Rome is a long way from Galilee, where Jesus carried out his earthly ministry a couple of decades before Paul launched out on his missionary tours. Back then, in the days of Jesus, it was all Jewish followers. The church in Rome is a collection of people who became believers in Jesus, and so Paul is saying that they are included in this big Gentile (non-Jewish) movement that is spreading throughout the known Western world of that day.

I'm writing to all of you in Rome who are loved by God and are called to be His own holy people. We need to be cautious when interpreting passages like this. It can sound like Paul is saying that God only loves the people in Rome when he says, "I'm writing to all of you in Rome who are loved by God." Well, he's writing to people who are in Rome, and they are all loved by God. But that is because God loves everyone, everywhere – His whole world! He is writing to a particular group of people on planet Earth, and he wants them to know that God has called them (along with all other human beings) to be His own holy people. He is just making it personal for their benefit.

How many people are called by God? It's everyone. Jesus once said, "Come to me, all of you who labor and are heavy burdened, and I'll give you rest". He is inviting everyone to come to him, calling them to himself. Who among us is not burdened in some way by life? He also said that when he would someday be lifted up, on the cross, he would draw all people to himself. God's salvation plan is designed to save everyone. That's His goal. "Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners," Paul wrote in his first letter to Timothy. Jesus also once told the crowds, "The Son of Man (himself) came to seek and save those who are lost." The goal of Jesus was clear. It was to save the world – everyone. The only question is whether He succeeded or failed in His endeavor. I believe He didn't fail, won't, and can't. He will never give up on anyone until everyone is saved. That's what saviors do. Why would He ever give up? How could He ever say, "Oh, you know, I used to want everyone to be saved, but I've kind of gotten tired of that. I think I'll torment people in hell, forever, for not believing in me." I don't think this could ever be true about God or Jesus. However, many people disagree because they have been taught, repeatedly, to believe otherwise.

May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ give you grace and peace. May God give grace and peace? There are many words in English that, if we read them too literally, we might miss the true meaning of the writer. I doubt Paul is saying here that *maybe* God will give grace and peace, and maybe He won't. I think he's really saying, "May you experience the grace and peace God always gives in some very real and meaningful way." Or perhaps, "May we *allow* into our lives what God is doing, and has already done for us." The "maybe" aspect is on us, not God.

Praying day and night (1:8)

Paul goes on. Let me begin by saying that I thank God, through Jesus Christ, for all of you because your faith in him is being talked about all over the world. One thing Paul wants to establish before he focuses on grace and salvation topics is to let them know how thankful he is for them. It is hard for anyone in any kind of ministry when they don't see any results from their efforts. Paul, of all people, was not in it for his own gain and glory, but being human, he couldn't help but be encouraged when people responded to his Good News message as these folks did. So, he just wanted to tell them that he's thanking God for them, and it was because their faith is being talked about all over the Roman Empire which encompassed the entire region surrounding the Mediterranean Sea, extending from Spain and Britain in the west to Egypt in the south, the Black Sea in the East, and as far east as Persia – everything Alexander the Great conquered just a few centuries prior. His conquest became known as Hellenization. Everywhere he went, he established Greek culture and the Greek language, which became the trade language that unified the entire Western world, much like English has in our world today.

When I traveled to different countries, I saw billboards saying, "Learn English!" I always wondered how people who need to learn English could read those advertisements, but they must have been effective. It was clear to me that English was the ticket to success in China. Doors of opportunity opened up for those who were fluent in English. So, the Greek language and culture were widespread and common in Paul's day, which greatly enhanced his missionary efforts as a well-educated Jew.

God knows how often I pray for you. Day and night, I bring your needs in prayer to God. In other words, Paul prays

for them a lot, and God knows how often. It was probably constantly. Paul wrote in his first letter to the Thessalonians to “Pray without ceasing.” Why? What power did Paul find in prayer? Was it for others, himself, or both? Prayer changes the one who prays as much as it changes anything that is requested through prayer. What do you pray about when you pray? If you're mad at somebody, do you pray that God will really give it to them and straighten them out? Or do you pray *for* them, on their behalf, that God will bless them and work in their life in some good way? These are two very different ways of praying. But more importantly, do you pray that God will change you, knowing that all of us contribute in some way to any difficulties with others that we experience? Whenever people lose someone they love, I just pray that God will give them peace and comfort. I pray that God will make His presence known to them so they'll know He's there and will never leave or forsake them. It's not that their grief and struggle will magically go away, but that they can experience that “peace that passes understanding,” which Paul writes about elsewhere, and know that everything will eventually be made right by God in eternity. There is nothing in life more powerful and reassuring than knowing this!

So, Paul prays for them, day and night, bringing their needs before God – the only one who can be of real help. When I'm unable to sleep at night, I pray for others. I just had a good friend die about a week ago, so I thankfully crossed him off my prayer list and added someone else, since there is no need to pray for him anymore. He's made it into God's presence! Someday I will, too.

True encouragement (1:9b)

I serve God with all my heart by spreading the Good News about His Son. One of the things I always pray for is the

opportunity, God willing, to come at last to see you. Paul would love to visit these folks he is writing to in Rome. He had not traveled that far in any of his missionary journeys. For now, all he could do was send them a letter by snail mail. It was very slow, unlike our ability to communicate instantly over long distances today. It took months to receive a letter; it had to travel by ship and over land, which took a long time. No Internet!

I long to visit you so I can bring some spiritual gift that will help you grow strong in the Lord. I don't know what kind of spiritual gift Paul had in mind. Perhaps he intended to lay hands on them, empowering them to perform miraculous acts, manifest the presence of God's Spirit by speaking in tongues, or do something unusual. It's hard to say; I'm not sure. It might be something more practical. He might be saying, "I'm going to bring you the *complete* Good News message, and by bringing it, it will be like a gift to you. You'll be encouraged, and you'll do better in life. That might be the best spiritual gift he could give them. Too often we are dazzled by some kind of dramatic experience only to miss out on something more subtle that brings us something much better – peace, freedom, and calm assurance.

When we get together, I want to encourage you in your faith, but I also want to be encouraged by yours. It always works both ways – well, almost always. I don't know if this has ever happened to you, but I remember about twenty years ago, when I was a younger man, I believed I was really spiritual and went to visit an older man who was dying of cancer. My plan was to encourage him in his time of great need. So I got there, and we started talking, but after a short time, I found that I was more encouraged than he was. He was already encouraged. He was ready to go, and he knew where he was going. He was ministering to me, and here I'd gone to help him! Poor old guy, dying of

cancer, yet I found out he was the strong one. He was the one with ten times as much spiritual connection with God. I remember that to this day, and it was a bit humbling. It was a sick guy dying of cancer, knowing he only had a few weeks to live, yet he encouraged me ... and he wasn't even trying. Be ready for that. It can happen, and it's good when it does.

I want you to know, dear brothers and sisters, that I planned many times to visit you, but I was prevented until now. I want to work among you and see spiritual fruit, just as I have seen among other Gentiles. I have a great sense of obligation to people in both the civilized world and beyond, to the educated and uneducated alike. Therefore, I am eager to come to you in Rome, also, to preach the Good News there.

3. The Power of God to Save (Romans 1:16-17)

Not ashamed of the Good News (1:16a)

Paul concludes his introduction and proceeds to the main theme of his letter. In verse 16, he says. *I am not ashamed of this Good News about Christ.* I struggled with the gospel when I was a kid. Not only was it weird “religious” stuff, but as I got older, I always felt like I had a crazy uncle in the basement called hell and damnation that was embarrassing, in view of a supposedly loving God. I never wanted to talk about the crazy uncle in the basement; I just wanted it to stay down there. Many people today struggle with this. They want to share the Good News, but it contains an aspect that is the worst possible news anyone could hear. So, I was told, “If you’re gonna share the good news, you’re gotta share the bad news first to get people to accept the Good News.” And the bad news is that you must accept the Good News to alleviate yourself from God doing something terrible to you in eternity. It’s a message based on fear, insecurity, guilt, and ignorance. That’s a really tough message to get out.

However, many people are able to preach this kind of message, and people do respond to it. But are they turning to God for the right or wrong reasons? Paul spends the rest of his letter addressing this, contrasting the difference between law and grace. I have found that sharing the Good News by living my life and showing my love for others is the most effective. Eventually, the opportunity to explain all the details (as Paul does in this letter) emerges naturally. And it will manifest in various ways, in

different forms, and at different times throughout daily life. For me, it's very natural, and I'm not trying to put the whammy on anyone. I'm not trying to get them saved from a horrible, retaliating, angry god! I believe if they turn to Christ, and turn to God, and say, "Thank you so much for saving me 2000 years ago through Jesus on the cross, they're gonna have a great relationship with him, and things are gonna go well. That's it. That's the Good News. How could it be anything less?

We need not scare them into it or threaten them. That all comes out of the Middle Ages and the Roman Catholic Church, when they used to operate on that low-level approach. Unfortunately, it lingers today. Scare tactics and fear-mongering are used in many churches, but they are not productive. In fact, it's destructive. But people get stuck in that mode, and they really believe that's the real Gospel. When I visit assisted living centers to play music, I often end with "Somewhere Over the Rainbow." I reassure all these frail, dear folks who are facing their final years and months that "they will all make it!" I tell them that God's not gonna leave any of them behind because He does not make junk to be thrown away like a soiled, used garment. He loves them and they are precious in His sight (just like "all the little children of the world"). Some of them shake their head in agreement, and others are just not sure. But God is faithful, and salvation is something He does for us, no matter how doubtful we are. It can't be earned in any way. It is His gift to all humanity whom He loves and desires to save.

The point is that salvation is something God does for everyone, and so all will make it into God's safe presence in eternity where they belong. Now, for sure, there are a few rascals in this world of whom God will have to do extra works of grace. But He's going to do it. He's going to get the job done. He will end up drawing everybody to himself, just as Jesus claimed, even though it may take a lifetime for some people.

So, Paul wasn't ashamed of the Good News about Christ, and I think he wasn't because he knew how good it was. It was all good news. There wasn't any bad news in it. Sure, it's a bad experience for anyone who rebels against God, but don't we all to some degree? God is bigger than our sin – much bigger! It's certainly bad news if you reject the Good News because you're going to miss out on good things in life. God will have to work on you, which will be a bad experience. But ultimately, the Good News is good. It's all good. There's nothing ultimately bad in it, and so Paul was not ashamed of it in any way.

The power of God at work (1:16b)

The good news is the power of God at work. It's not so much that the Good News message itself is the power, but that this message about Jesus dying on the cross, when shared, becomes a powerful thing by which God works in people's lives. The real power lies within God and how He works through His Spirit in this world. God works in people's lives, so we too can say, "The Good News is the power of God at work," as long as we understand that it is God who does the work. This is a good example of how we need to allow human writings to be as flexible as any language requires, avoiding literal or figurative interpretations that can lead to misunderstanding the author's intent. Always read very carefully and use the common sense God has given you. There are many in religious circles who want you to misread things so that you will agree with them. My desire is for people to read everything as accurately as possible, using their common sense, always considering the context, and ultimately submitting it to God for His explanation in their thinking.

Paul continues his description of the Good News. It *saves everyone who believes*. Depending on your background and upbringing, this can be understood in different ways. It can look like God *only* saves those who believe, and that the power of God keeps people from going to hell forever. That's how many people are taught to read this verse. But not so fast! Let's take a careful look. A common logical error is to assume that the opposite of a statement is also true. Any course in logic will cure you of this and make you more cautious. Though it is true that God saves all who believe, it is *not* automatically true that He does not save those who *don't* believe. So, always be careful not to conclude more from any passage than it says.

Additionally, what you're going to find all the way through this letter of Paul's to the Romans is that Paul never mentions hell or damnation and never warns anybody about going to hell for lack of belief or any other reason! He never warns his readers, "You must believe, or you will go to hell." Never, not one time. It would be impossible for the Apostle Paul to write a lengthy letter (like Romans) teaching everything about salvation in Jesus, yet he never warns anyone about going to hell. If Paul believed God would act in horrible retaliation against people for any reason, he certainly would include it in a letter like this, where he presents all aspects of the Christian faith. But Paul never does; not in this letter or any of his other twelve New Testament letters!

What he is saying is that this Good News message is the power of God, at work in some way, saving everyone who believes. This is because there is a type of salvation that we gain when we believe. The word *salvation* in the Greek language (the language used in the New Testament writings) simply means "to deliver." It doesn't mean delivering people from anything in particular, like going to hell. And so, this Good News message of Paul's reveals how God is at work, delivering everyone who believes.

When you see the word salvation, ask yourself, “delivered from what?” What does Paul mean by *salvation*? Well, at least delivered from the sin in this life, the entanglement in terrible things that sin brings. There are several kinds of salvation (or deliverance) in the grand scheme of things. There's the aspect of salvation when Jesus died on the cross and saved the whole world from sin and death. That's one aspect of salvation. The whole human race was saved by Jesus, automatically, without anyone's consent. He just did this because it needed to be done. This is salvation from the *penalty* of sin.

Another aspect of salvation is to be delivered from the *entanglement* of sin in our daily lives. We all mess up, big or small, and we need to be freed from our own shortcomings and failures. And, sure enough, if you think about it, when we believe in Jesus, we're going to experience salvation (deliverance) from the *power* of sin in our lives. We still won't be perfect, but life will go better. That's deliverance and salvation, and it has nothing to do with any kind of eternal punishment. There is yet a third kind of salvation. It is deliverance from the very *presence* of sin. This will only happen someday when we slip out of this life and into the presence of God himself, where we all belong. Life will have been an essential learning experience.

So, I think what Paul's referring to in this Good News message (the Gospel) is that in trusting Jesus (our faith) we will be delivered from the penalty, power, and presence of sin, and that it is through faith (believing) that we experience it. It saves everyone who believes when they say, “Yes, I accept it, I believe,” and it changes their life forever!

It was given first to the Jews, then also to the Gentiles. Paul does not mean Jews are more important than non-Jews (Gentiles). He means that the gospel message (the Good News) came to the Jews first, and then later to Gentiles (non-Jews). Actually, it was first revealed to Abraham in a primitive form, as

recorded in the Old Testament. Even Jesus, when he walked the earth, said that he came to the “House of Israel.” Paul was really the one who took the gospel to the Gentiles. So, it originally came to the Jews, and then it spread to the whole world, which was God's intention from the beginning. Remember the promise He made to Abraham, when He said, “In your offspring (which was Christ), the whole world will be blessed.” All the nations of the earth were to be blessed, eventually. God always had this goal of saving the whole world in mind. Why wouldn't he? How could He not want to save everyone? That's gotta be in His heart. And how could He ever give it up? He couldn't and never will!

By faith from start to finish (1:17)

This Good News announces how God makes us right in His sight. In other words, God sees us; He sees our lives, and when we believe, we start living a life for Him. We do what's right, though imperfectly. He knows that. We'll get to this later in this commentary. Just keep all this in mind because, as we reach Romans 7, Paul will discuss the two aspects of our nature: the new and the old, and how we struggle with trying to do what's right while unable to do so. But the Good news tells us how God makes us right in His sight.

It is accomplished from start to finish by faith. Faith – believing – is the means by which we come into a right relationship with God, where He can work in us and make us right with Himself. How else could this happen? We can't have any kind of relationship with God without first believing in Him. Our journey starts with faith, and we will live in that faith until the end of our lives. However, our relationship with God will endure forever in an even more real and significant way!

Believing (our faith) is very important. It is our life in God. However, it doesn't earn us anything with God because it can't. Nothing can earn anything with God. He does all the *earning* for us. We need only to believe and engage with him. Faith is the only way we can engage with God. Think about it. How could you have a relationship with God if you don't believe in him? So that's why faith is so important. But once we believe, we can start interacting with God and engaging with Him in a very personal way. There is nothing sweeter in life. For many, it takes a long time to realize this, after the dazzle of the world proves to be temporary and worthless.

This idea of being right with God and doing what's right in His sight is accomplished from start to finish by faith. That's how it happens. No other way. How many people without faith in God are having a relationship with Him and doing better because of it? Well, none! However, it's true that some people do okay without knowing God, but this is because He has given everyone some ability to succeed and accomplish, which is a gift from Him. We are free to do what we want with it. Some people squander it; others use it wisely. But no one in creation is better off without knowing God; they just get by.

Paul continues. *As the scripture says, it is through faith that a righteous person has life.* When you start believing you start experiencing life in its fullness, in the best possible way. What did Jesus say? "I came to give you life and give it in abundance." It's an abundant life that God gives us. Once you experience it, you'll never give it up. Many religious people have concluded that without faith, we have no eternal life and will experience damnation and hell as punishment for not believing. They have the right to read this into this passage, but Paul mentions nothing about this here. When Paul gets into Romans Two, he will compare those who believe and obey with those who don't. For sure, there is a *judgment* by God, but it is ultimately a

good thing – something that is intended to correct, restore, heal, and redeem us from our lost state as floundering, needy human beings. God is the only one who can rescue us, and He does.

Don't read more into a passage like this than is warranted. We can miss the true meaning of the author when we do. Clearly, there's something good that happens when we hear and believe this Good News message. It comes into our lives by faith. We believe it, and our lives change forever. It is a new realization, and we are free from our sin and ourselves. Again, not perfectly free, but we experience a real sense of freedom and peace like never before.

There is a lot of stuff packed into just these last two verses (16 and 17). That's why they are famous and sometimes memorized (along with other memorable passages in the New Testament). In these two verses, Paul outlines a brief summary of what his letter is about. He is stating his theme: We become right with God by faith, where we experience a very real relationship with him.

A poem about Paul

I have a friend who wrote a poem revealing Paul, who was once called Saul, and what he became because of his faith in Jesus:

The letter kills and the spirit sets you free

*That on the Damascus road Saul sought men to kill
With persistence and vengeance, sure it was God's will
He had studied God's holy word every day from an early age
Under the great teachers of the times he had read every page*

*But the letter it had killed him and he didn't even know
That this Jesus whom he hated was the way he'd have to go
Only the spirit can reveal these wonderful words of life*

That in this man Christ Jesus was the answer for sin and strife

*The sting of God's holy words are as many as the sands of the sea
And the burden of pleasing God, man has placed on you and me
So the letter that was inspired by God but interpreted by fallen man
Becomes a message of sin and death and what God demands*

*For we're all just as ungodly as the letter states
We're all hopeless and helpless in our fallen state
So the spirit takes those very words and opens the letter that we may see
What man has used to condemn the world, the spirit used to set men free*

*And the letter used for condemnation will place the burden on fallen man
The Spirit uses to reveal God's Son and to reveal God's loving plan
Where God's love and mercy reside forever in Jesus His son
Where the bondage of sin is lifted and the condemnation is gone*

*Jesus on the cross is the answer for the letter written
It was for all of fallen man's sin that Jesus Christ was smitten
It was on that bloody cross that he died for the world's sin
It was from that very cross that our freedom first begins*

*As Saul was to learn on the Damascus road that day
Where he was transformed and we could hear him say
Jesus Christ and him crucified there's a message from above
When you read the letter remember God is love*

Good poem. Sums it up. I think we all tend to make bad trades in life. It comes very naturally. We trade something very important (the salvation that God brings) for something super dramatic. People love drama and scary stuff. Look at the movies we watch! But people can easily be controlled by fear, and many religious people take advantage of this in others whom they seek to control.

It's not that there's no harshness on God's part, but in such harsh actions, He always has a purpose grounded in His love, always desiring everyone to be saved, restored, and reconciled to himself for eternity. Whatever God has to do for those who are in really tough situations in life, that's what He will do. He's never giving up on the world He created and loves. All that He does must always be for some corrective purpose. To launch off into a realm of never-ending torment in our thinking and render God as a completely retaliating being that somehow gave up His desire for people to be saved seems like a bad trade. We're trading in a *saving* God for a *retaliating* one!

There are some who will say, "Well, you guys aren't going far enough. You're watering down the Good News message." No, actually, we're not. We're just not taking it way off in some direction that betrays who God must be – One who loves, redeems, restores, corrects, and saves without failing. If we don't see the Good News through the lens of love, which is through the eyes of Jesus because he *is* God's love, then we'll never understand the fullness of who God is.

4. Angry Love (Romans 1:18-19)

A quick review of verses 16-17

Before we jump into Paul's nuts and bolts presentation of the *problem*, I want to provide a quick review of the introduction he just completed. I want to tell people that Romans is so complete that it will answer *all* of their questions about the Christian faith. But, of course, that's not true because it can never be true about any subject in our amazingly complex world. However, Paul comes as close as possible in this ten-thousand-word letter. More importantly, I believe Paul answers all the *essential* questions anyone might have, and that's good enough to live a successful life in knowing God.

He'll answer all your essential questions about God saving humanity through Jesus. That's His main focus. Funny thing, though, after you read this letter (and this commentary on it), you'll end up with more questions than answers. But that's life. Right? The more you look into something, the more you wonder how it all works. When I was younger, it bothered me that the more I studied, the more questions I generated. But then I realized that I also knew more than I did before. I concluded that careful study was well worth my time.

The first part of Romans One was Paul's introduction. In it, he said he was praying for them, that the Gospel message was spreading throughout the Roman Empire, and that he was encouraged by their ongoing faith. So, he starts his letter out on

a personal note before he launches into the problem, solution, explanation, and results of the Good News about Jesus.

Then in verses 16 and 17, he gives a summary of all that will follow in this lengthy letter to these people in Rome. He first declared that he was not ashamed of this Good News about Jesus because it was the power of God at work, saving everyone who believes. Keep in mind that the word *gospel* (which is commonly used in many translations) simply means *good news*. He then added that this powerful Good News message came first to the Jews, then later to non-Jews (Gentiles). This doesn't mean Jews are more important; it's just that it came to them first, before the Gentiles heard it.

This Good News message goes out and does its work because it's an *announcement*. The Good News is not a threat. It doesn't mean, "You better believe or you're going to be forever tormented by God." It is also not an offer saying, "Hey, I'm offering you guys a deal here. Accept it or reject it; your choice." True, this Good News message can be either accepted or rejected, but the word itself in Greek (the language of the New Testament) is *to announce*. So, this Good News message of Paul's was an announcement, announcing the power of God at work through that message, saving everyone who believes.

It's very tempting, depending on how you were raised, to plug into that "gospel" the idea that it is a warning about people going to hell if they reject it. That is how many (including myself) were taught to think of salvation in the Good News message. The word salvation just means "to deliver" in Greek. It doesn't have an attachment to any particular situation now or later. It's the general word for deliverance. So, when this message goes out and tells about Jesus being the Messiah, the promised one who came to deliver everyone who believes, it's not a reward for believing. It's not a situation where if you don't believe God will do something terrible to you. Instead, what happens when we believe is that we can now engage with God. How else can we unless we believe?

And so when we engage with God by believing, we begin to be saved (delivered) from the entanglement of sin in this life. Whatever may or may not happen after this life is another question, and Paul addresses this topic of eternity later in this letter. But he never warns anyone about hell and damnation if they do not believe!

We really can't get any more out of this verse than just what it says – that this Good News message is at work delivering (saving) people who believe. The key is that Paul goes on to say it is an announcement (the meaning of “Good News”) and tells how God makes people “right in His sight.” In other words, how God views us and what He sees us doing. He sees us in an active relationship with him. Plus, this is accomplished from start to finish by faith. In other words, faith is the vehicle by which we know God, engage with him, trust him, and live for him. Note that we do not earn anything by our faith or any of the good things we do as a result. We *gain* from believing and doing good things because we're being delivered (saved) from a life void of knowing God, where we are lost in the entanglement of sin. So, God's work in our lives is “accomplished through faith from start to finish.”

Paul quoted from the Old Testament book of Habakuk to underscore the essence of how this works: “It is through faith that a righteous person has life.” And sure enough, faith is the only way we can experience life in abundance, have life go well for us, and experience a relationship with God. If we don't have any faith in God, we won't have anything going on with him. How could we? However, when we do exercise faith in God, it doesn't mean everything's going to be great and we'll never have any doubts or trouble. This cannot be avoided while living here on planet Earth. But at least, when we believe, we have something very real going on with God. What a great advantage over being out on our own!

So, faith is this great thing that lets us engage with God, be connected to him in some spiritual, mystical way. On one hand, this can appear so unreal, but on the other hand, it seems *more* real in the core of our being. Most people I talk to sense that the spiritual life is more than just a bunch of creeds and doctrinal statements to either affirm or deny. It's gotta be more than just, "I believe in God the Father, maker of heaven and Earth, and in Jesus Christ His Son ... etc." If the spiritual life is real, there's got to be something going on inside of you that you experience. I think all people who are believers experience some degree of this – something beyond mere creeds and dogmatic claims.

My education was in engineering, so I don't get a lot of "spooky stuff" happening in my spiritual life. But others do, and I fully respect that. I believe God works in different ways with different people, exactly as He wants to, and in a way that is best for them. Most people have strong personal convictions. These are very real and dear to them simply because they feel them deeply. I'm a little more academic and logical, but that is not necessarily better; it's just who I am and how God made me. Everyone is rightly different. God loves the variety He has created in us, even though we struggle with other people being different from ourselves. I feel things very deeply, but I'm more on the *rationalist* end of the philosophical spectrum. Other people that I know are very charismatic. They experience all the spiritual gifts, speak in tongues, receive words of wisdom, miraculous healings, etc. And that's fine. It's who they are. Everybody's different, and rightly so. So when Paul says that the Good News is something we experience "from start to finish by faith," he is including all kinds of faith, from very academic to very mystical. Keep this in mind as you navigate through life, encountering all kinds of different people. Love them unconditionally, as God loves all of us!

What makes God angry? (1:18)

Verse 18 launches into a whole new set of discussions by Paul. Remember, this first part of his letter describes the *problem*, so that he can later provide the *solution* and then *explain* it in detail. It's a pretty simple journey that Paul takes his readers on as they read through his letter. The problem section really starts in verse 18. So far, he has only been introducing his letter and providing a brief overview of what the Good News is all about.

One big, controversial issue Paul will deal with is the whole area of same-sex relationships, which is a hot topic in our culture today. Although this is a highly controversial subject, Paul addresses it in a straightforward manner. Some churches today, like the Episcopal Church and American Baptists, don't make an issue about same-sex people. They welcome them to come and join the congregation. As long as they don't impose their lifestyle on others, they are encouraged to be part of the body of believers, learn more about who God is, and how to live their lives seeking Him. This is their invitation to *all* people, and therefore, this particular group of people is treated equally. No one should push their lifestyle on others, though everyone is free to express their values and preferences in a loving way. It's more of a, "We're going to love you for who you are, and what you work out with God is between you and him."

But there are others who believe this is too flexible and compromises the truth as presented in the New Testament. Here in the second half of Romans One, Paul presents same-sex relationships as a negative and unnatural behavior. Is Paul speaking from God, or is he expressing his own opinions and values? This commentary will attempt to take an honest look at this subject as Paul presents it, neither ignoring nor reading into anything he writes. These are two extremes that should be avoided when seeking to understand what is written.

Pul begins verse 18 with, *God shows His anger from heaven against all the sinful, wicked actions of people who suppress the truth by their wickedness.* Clearly, Paul presents God as angry. But what is He angry about? Anger, in and of itself, is not bad or wrong. There are things that should make people angry if they have any system of values. This is even more true for the God of the universe, who is the only one who exists in moral excellence.

However, note that in this verse, God's anger is not directed against people, but against their actions and behavior. One translation says, "God reveals His anger from heaven against the ungodliness and sinfulness of men." It is not against the people themselves. That's a big difference. Someone once said that "God hates the sin and loves the sinner." That seems to be an accurate assessment, in accordance with all the teachings of the New Testament. Do your own search and see if this is true.

On another level, though, it might be correct to say that God is angry with the sinners themselves to some degree and not just their sin. However, this anger stems from God's understanding of what sin is and the harm it causes. God's main focus is on sin itself because it is so destructive in the lives of human beings whom He loves. God might be mad at us in the same way we're mad at our child when they run out into the street. We're rightly upset and mad at them, telling them in perhaps an angry voice, "Don't ever run out in the street!" We're mad at them because we love them and we don't want them to get hurt. So, that's what I see here in this verse. God shows His anger from heaven against our sinfulness, our wickedness, and all the junk that's hurting and killing us. God is angry about our *behavior* because He loves us, not because He hates us. Do you see the difference? God is not saying, "I'm gonna give it to you in the form of pure retaliation for disobeying me, because I am almighty God!" He would be a puny God if He did, and He's not like that. He loves us, and He says, "I'm not going to sit back, do nothing, not caring what

happens to you.” He is neither complacent nor a tyrant. God cares about our sin and its impact on us. This is why He wants to do something about it... something good, something corrective, healing, and restoring.

At this point in Paul’s letter, he is identifying what the *problem* is in life so that when he gives the *solution* (and then *explains* it), his readers can have an *ah-ha* moment. So, he writes, “God shows His anger from heaven against all sinful, wicked actions of people who suppress the truth by their wickedness.” Have you ever seen evidence of this in yourself or others? People are so busy that they tend to block God out and think, “I’m really enjoying my life ... even though it may be killing me.” Isn’t it weird that we get lost in the very sins that are killing us? Sometimes people betray themselves without realizing it. This is why we so desperately need a savior who sees things as they really are and is willing to do something about it.

I have a counselling friend who has people come into her office and openly admit, “I don’t know why I do what I do. It keeps me miserable, but I keep doing it anyway.” We really don’t understand ourselves very well because we have a sinful nature that betrays us. And that’s what we need to get saved from – ourselves! And so, God might be angry with us the same way we are with a loved one who’s living a destructive life. This could be a friend, a child, or a spouse. We might say to them, “My child, I hate to see you living like this, and so I am rightly angry that you’re trafficking in such things. It’s your foolish behavior that truly angers me. I don’t hate you, just your destructive actions, simply because I love you and want the best for you.” And this, I believe, is God’s disposition toward all of us as needy, wayward people. So, Paul says that these people, whom God is rightly angry with (because He loves them!), are suppressing the truth in their sin and weakness – which we all do to some degree.

Paul continues, *They all know the truth about God, because He has made it obvious to them.* Everybody knows there's a God, even though some suppress that awareness in their rebellion and selfishness. They are constantly distracting themselves from hearing the *inner voice* that God has instilled in everyone – a voice that is calm and quiet, yet constant throughout life. Have you ever found yourself ignoring that calm, consistent voice, perhaps in your younger days or maybe even as you age? I sure have. It is always foolish and to our own disadvantage when we ignore it. Deep in our heart of hearts, in the stillness of our own soul, everybody knows who God is. We all sense that we have a Creator and are not just part of some cosmic and elaborate accident. We all have some sense of purpose and value. Where does this come from?

Even people who claim to be atheists, in the direst of situations, become believers of some sort. As they say, “There are no atheists in foxholes.” When the Twin Towers came down in New York City on 9-11, all those people who were trapped in the rubble – and there were many of them – didn't all die right away. Some of them had to lie, trapped, slowly dying. It was tragic and horrific. But I doubt anyone was crying out to philosophy or evolution, or anything else other than some kind of higher power, which is the only one who could possibly save them, and they knew it. The only one any of us can cry out to at that point is God. All of a sudden, they became (at least) agnostic, or a believer to some degree, or maybe just a *wanna-be* believer because denying God couldn't get them anywhere. There's something about slipping into the desperation of life that turns us around to the possibility of God (sometimes turns us directly to him), where we say, “Wow, God, I've always known you were there; I've been so busy doing stuff I didn't have time for you. But I do now, because I'm not going anywhere and I'm trapped in this rubble, so I'm calling out to you.” God always answers. In His infinite wisdom, He allowed some to be rescued, but others He took home to be

with himself. However, all were equally loved and forgiven. That's how God operates. He has no favorites ... except everyone! So, I think a lot of people cried out to God and took care of some business on that fateful day, dealing with things they had put off their whole life, unknowingly waiting for this day to come.

5. Foolish Ideas About God (Romans 1:20-23)

God is clearly seen in nature (1:20)

Ever since the world was created, people have seen the Earth and the sky. That's true! Don't we all view the earth and sky and say, "Wow, look at that stuff out there and up there!" The ancients saw what we see, but they didn't understand it. They thought the night sky was a big shell with little holes in it, allowing light to shine through from beyond. They didn't know these were gigantic stars at unimaginably far distances. All they knew was what they saw, a vast array of little twinkly lights. They also saw the moon and the sun. How could they not make these into gods of some sort, speculating out of their ignorance? So, we (and they) have the stars, moon, and sun. These are really spectacular. Paul concludes that because of all this creative stuff, we can't help but see evidence for the existence of some kind of God, Creator, or higher being. For Paul, this was so obvious (even without all that amazing additional knowledge we have today) that all who see these things are "without excuse" when choosing to deny God's existence.

There are very few true atheists in the world today, or in history. Read the great philosophers from Plato to the present day, and you will discover that most had some sense of a Creator. The vast majority of people today believe in some kind of God or higher power. Some are Muslim, some are Jewish, some are Christians, or Hindu. Others are some derivation of these groups.

They all believe there's a God of some kind. Buddhists do not believe in a *personal* God, but hold to some kind of *cosmic consciousness*, more in line with a pantheistic (God is everything) view. Even agnostics allow for the possibility of some kind of higher power. Why does all of this kind of thinking exist? Humans seem to be compelled by the overwhelming visual evidence that there must be something more out there than just what they see, simply because what they see is so amazing. Thus, people naturally speculate as to *who* is out there and *how* it all works. Very few people are *pure* atheists and believe there's *nothing* beyond this material world. That's a really tough lift for anyone, intellectually. However, there are a few who find a way to conclude this in spite of all the compelling evidence in favor of God's existence. But everyone gets to choose, and God allows them to do so.

Through everything God has made, they can clearly see His invisible qualities, His eternal power, and His divine nature. Therefore, they have no excuse for not knowing God. Now this is interesting. *Through* what God has created, people can *clearly* see what's invisible. How can we clearly see something that can't be seen? Well, it's because we see it indirectly, through what God has made. This seems to be how He has chosen to reveal himself. And, apparently, it is enough evidence for anyone to believe in God (and according to Paul, they should), but it is also indirect enough to deny God's existence. It is our choice, as set up by God. Choose carefully and honestly!

Obviously, we can't see God directly, but His qualities, power, and nature are on display for all to see. God's *eternal power* is that force that is always there, creating and sustaining our world and all of creation. What about His *divine nature*? Can we really understand this, except in a more general sense, having some idea about who God is based on all the good things we see in our world? According to Paul, we can rightly conclude that there's something about God that's above and beyond us. Though we

don't actually see God directly (and perhaps that is impossible), we do see the *effects* of His existence very clearly and can draw reasonable conclusions about him. In this way, and to this degree, we are all "without excuse" for not believing.

Perhaps you can see this at work in your own life. I sure do. It's hard to escape God's existence. However, sometimes, I look around and see so many evil and awful things in this world. I can't help but ask, "God, where are you?" But then I stop and say to myself, "Wait a minute. There's so much here in life that's good and beautiful – amazing things, miraculous things like childbirth, meaningful relationships, people who can figure skate with excellence, amazing artistic abilities – there is so much creativity that someone had to intentionally create all this and make it possible!" Life is a bit of a dilemma for all of us.

Denying God (1:21)

Deep in our hearts, we all know there's a God because we look around and what we see tips the scales. Therefore, it is at least sane and reasonable to conclude that God exists. No one knows exactly what He's like, but it's hard to conclude that this amazing world just happened by itself!

Paul then adds this: *They knew God, but they wouldn't worship him as God or even give him thanks.* This is quite typical. People basically know there's a God, but then they go about their lives as if there isn't one! They don't think about him all that much ... except when they need him. Perhaps this is God's ultimately good purpose in allowing evil. It directs us to him, which is always best for us. Love always does what is needed in a time of need, and we are all very needy people, much more than we realize. What better way for God to bring this to our attention than by allowing difficulty and evil? In the long run, it must be worth it to him.

God's not an egomaniac, as we often are. He doesn't get ticked off when we do not focus on him every minute. In fact, life is a precious gift from him, and He experiences joy in seeing us live life successfully. He just doesn't want us destroying ourselves. Remember Eric Liddell in *Chariots of Fire* who said, "When I run, I feel His pleasure." That's a good characterization of what life with God is all about. My little kids didn't adore me all the time. They were often selfishly playing with their toys and discovering life. That was okay; I didn't mind. They didn't need to be focused on me every second. I wanted them to enjoy life, and I experienced pleasure in seeing that happen.

But according to Paul, many human beings don't worship God as God. Few of them – all of us to some degree – ever thank him. We need only to say, "Hey God, Thanks! Thank you for all you have given me." Just thank him; I don't think He expects a lot from us. He is a giver, not a taker. That's what love does! However, He wants us to have a good life and a good eternity. Because of our guilt, fear, and insecurity, we place on ourselves the idea that God wants (or needs) formal and contrived attention all the time. For me, hanging out with God is a delight, not a requirement. If I had to do it by some divine edict, it would ruin the whole experience for me! I have learned to love God and just *commune* with him constantly, because it is the best possible experience in life. But I had to *unlearn* a lot of the indoctrination imposed on me growing up, and as an adult controlled by religion. God's not saying, "You gotta worship me every second, or else..." Instead, He's saying, "Hey, I want you to have a good life and abide with me forever. I'm here to help you do that to the fullest. Let me! I want to experience life with you, and you with me. It is the greatest thing you'll ever know. It is why I created you, and without me, you are incomplete. Just give me thanks. But even if you don't, I will still love you, never give up on you, or forsake you in any way. I know my love will win!" That's the kind of God He is. His love is unconditional!

Foolish thinking (1:21b)

*So, they began to think of foolish ideas about God. Boy, do we do that! And this is alive and well in the church today. We all have foolish ideas of what God is like. We're all off, somewhat, about who He is. We've been taught all kinds of things about God, and we think they're true simply because we've heard them so often and for so long. Familiarity breeds blind acceptance! Many things we were taught are correct, but we are wise to work through everything we believe and do some honest thinking. Yes, read the Bible, but also look at life. Look at what you experience, think it through, don't just blindly trust so-called experts; take everything to God and tell him, "Hey, I want to know who you are. Please talk to me. I'll listen. Talk to me through life. Talk to me through my feelings. Talk to me through the Bible and other reliable sources. I'm open." If you are sincere, follow the facts where they lead, and desire to know the truth at all costs. God will not let you down. Why would he? It might take time, but the pursuit of truth is never a waste of time. It might take a while, and it might come to you in unusual ways. It probably will not be a literal voice that you hear; it might be something stronger than a voice – that quiet, calm, inner voice of God. It will be more internal than external. Jesus said that the Kingdom of God is within us. This does not mean that *we* are that source, but that God (who is the ultimate source) is within us. So good to know!*

As a result of their thinking up foolish ideas of what God is like, their minds became dark and confused. Perhaps you can see Paul's progression. If you don't believe in God, you won't thank him, then you won't worship him, and never say, "Oh God, I want to know and love you." As a result, your mind will become dark and confused. You'll get into a state of confusion, and the more confused you get, the darker your thinking

becomes. Then the darker your thinking, the more confused you get, and you'll end up in a vicious cycle. That's why we need a savior. Any of us can slip into that downward cycle. However, many of us haven't fallen into it because we've had good backgrounds, we've had good homes, and God has given us a sound mind.

So, we need to be patient with others, just as God is patient with us. A lot of people are born with all kinds of problems, and it's really hard for them to think straight and behave well. I'm not saying it's okay for them to reject God, but it's understandable that they turn away from Him, get lost in confusion, and go wayward. God understands it, too, but He doesn't wait for them to save themselves, nor does He abandon them. Their denial of Him doesn't tick Him off (although He is rightly angry because He loves them.) Instead, it makes God want to do something to save them. Nothing less!

Claiming to be wise, they instead became fools. This is part of the deception ... foolishness. Many are lost in darkness and confusion, yet stimulated by chasing money, power, and everything else that dazzles them. Have you ever been caught up in any of this, or perhaps got too close for comfort and made a correction? I sure have. I doubt that anyone hasn't gone there to some degree. It may have seemed so *cool* at the time, but later in life, we conclude. "Man, oh man, I sure was chasing foolish stuff. What a waste of time." Even if you weren't out there doing really bad stuff, hurting people, robbing banks, etc., you were still dwindling your life away and going after things that really didn't matter. I think we've all done this to some degree, so be careful not to judge others; dig deep to find patience with them and yourself. God certainly does! And so, Paul rightly concludes, "Claiming to be wise, they instead became fools."

Instead of worshipping the glorious, ever-living God, they worshipped idols made to look like mere people, birds, animals, and reptiles. The ultimate result of people denying the existence of God is that they begin worshipping other things. The reason God wants us to worship Him is that we will worship *something*, and worshipping anything other than God will bring self-destruction. In ancient times, people and animals were worshipped because they were so marvelous and amazing. If you study zoology and the animal kingdom, or plants, or anything in life that God has created, you're seeing His creativity. But it's easy to get focused on the creativity itself rather than the God who produced it. After all, life around us is all we can see, so it's easy to do. Astronomers and mathematicians tend to do this – not all of the time, and not all of them. God's creation is so fascinating that it is tempting to focus on it because we can see it, but when we do, we miss out on the Creator whom we can't see directly. God understands this problem. He set it up this way for reasons both known and unknown. But it is a trap many fall into.

6. Trading the Truth for a Lie (Romans 1:24-27)

What God allows (1:24)

Paul further intensifies his identification of the *problem* that needs a *solution*. *God abandoned them to do whatever shameful things their hearts desired.* When it says, “God abandoned them,” many religious people will assume this is a reference to God someday sending people to hell forever. Yet there is nothing here in Romans Two, or anywhere else in this letter (or even in any of Paul’s 13 letters) where he gives such a warning. In Greek (the language in which the New Testament was written), it says that God “gave them over.” He gives them over to their sin for whatever purpose He has in doing so, but it must be an ultimately good purpose, one that has as its goal correction, instruction, saving, restoring, and healing. It cannot be a complete and forever abandonment with no correcting purpose whatsoever ... not by the God of the universe who so loves humanity who were made in His very own image!

So, according to Paul, God gives them over to their sin (allows them to live in it) until He works His will in their lives. Sometimes this takes a lifetime, or perhaps even into eternity. But God never gives up on anyone, abandoning His “desire for all to be saved.” He’s a teacher who saves people by teaching them, and sometimes this takes time and painful experiences. Isn’t this what life is really all about? Some religious people conclude that God’s done with unrepentant sinners, He’s giving up on them, and that they’re going to hell where He will abandon them forever. That’s

okay; they're free to conclude whatever they want. But the point I want to make is that this is not what's in the text of this passage. It's not what it says. But Paul is expressing God's displeasure about people's sin, and He takes action to let people know where He stands. Sometimes people have to be left to their own devices in order to realize the dire state they are in. So sometimes God permits people to do whatever shameful things their hearts desire in order to eventually bring about something better in their lives. Often, it is the only way to deal with strong-willed, independent, rebellious human beings, which we all are to some degree.

As a result, they did vile and degrading things with each other. They traded the truth about God for a lie. So, they worshipped and served the things God created instead of the creator himself, who is worthy of eternal praise. Amen. I don't think God wants us to glorify him because He's some kind of glory-hound. He's not up there saying, "Yeah, bring it. Oh man, I'm feeling it! Everybody's praising me and glorifying me, and look at all those church services out there going on." That seems like a puny God to me. I think He wants us to worship and glorify him for *our* benefit, not His.

We will all glorify and worship something. It can be a car, or a guitar; it can be a person or a lifestyle; it can be sex, money, or power. It can be any of these things that we worship and glorify. But God knows if we focus on anything other than him, we'll never be truly happy, free, or at peace. We need to focus on him, not because He needs it, but because when we focus on someone infinite, we'll never be dissatisfied. We can never get tired of him. We can never fully figure him out and say, "Okay, been there and done that. What else is out there?" That's the beauty of worshiping a God who's infinitely greater than we are. There is never any limit.

And so God knows if we focus on him and worship him, we're going to end up a lot happier and more satisfied. There are

many who are convinced that God *requires* worship, church attendance, performing rituals, reading the Bible, etc. But He doesn't. However, if these are things that work for you, feel free to do them. God will not mind ... unless these things become more important than just knowing him. Such things should only enhance a relationship with God, not replace it.

God created people and made them creative; we all benefit from their creativity. So if you ever focus on created things, it doesn't mean those things are bad. It just means you're turning your attention and attitude toward things that can never ultimately satisfy, instead of God, who always does. And so, God is a Creator who is worthy of eternal praise.

Paul adds, *That's why God gave them over to their shameful desires.* He gives people over to their sin, allowing them to remain foolish because He alone is worthy of praise. If they overly engage in things outside of God, they're going to miss out on what's really best for them.

Same-sex relationships (1:26b)

So now Paul gets into some specifics. *Even the women turned against the natural way to have sex and instead indulged in sex with each other.* The closest word for *sex* in the New Testament is *porneia* (in Greek), which means “any kind of immoral sexual activity,” like adultery and fornication. This is where we get our English word *pornography*. However, this particular Greek word (*porneia*) is not used in this passage. Instead, Paul *alludes* to sexual activity by using two Greek words, *unnatural* and *functioning* together. Translators use more explicit English wording to convey what they believe Paul had in mind, and it is rather obvious from the context of this passage what Paul intended. So, such translations are reasonable, but it seems to me

it is best to use the words Paul supplied and let each reader sort it out. In this passage, he is expressing his strong opposition to same-sex behavior – in this case, between women. In the following verse, he will address same-sex relationships between men and does so with the same strong disapproval.

He goes on and writes, *The men, also, instead of having normal sexual relations with women, burned with lust for each other; men doing shameful things with other men. As a result of this sin, they suffered within themselves the penalty they deserved.* These are very harsh words from Paul. He pulls none of his punches and states clearly what he thinks of same-sex relationships. He is in no way neutral on this subject and presents them as sinful and out of bounds for what is considered decent and natural.

But let me stop here to convey some facts and some conjectures. It is difficult to know to what degree Paul is bringing in his legalistic Pharisee background. In the Old Testament, same-sex relationships were viewed as an “abomination to God,” and people were stoned as punishment for such behavior. It was brutal. On the other end of the spectrum, there are churches today (Episcopal and others) that do not condemn same-sex relationships and let each person decide before God what is right for them. They just love these people unconditionally. And, of course, everything in between is believed out there by various religious groups.

Without question, Paul viewed same-sex relationships as something very negative and unnatural. However, interestingly, Jesus is a very different story. He never mentions same-sex relationships in any context that we are aware of. He neither supported nor condemned them, even though he undoubtedly was fully aware of these, since it was very prevalent in his day. Considering the great moral teachings by Jesus, sometimes

presented in fine detail, it is surprising that he was silent on such a dramatic alternative social lifestyle. People draw different conclusions from this, but no one can conclude that Jesus was adamantly against it. However, equally so, no one can conclude that he was in favor of it either. He just let it be what it was, and perhaps Paul's conclusion that "God gave them over" (allows it) three times in verses 24, 26, and 28 is not all that far off from what Jesus concluded. Neither extreme (for or against) seems warranted.

Two other same-sex passages

Paul is the only New Testament writer who deals with the subject of same-sex relationships. The Gospel writers, nor any other New Testament writer, ever deal with this subject – just Paul. We should not read too much into their silence, but we should also be cautious about taking their silence further (pro or con) than we should, assuming anything. Arguments based on silence are always the weakest arguments because they lack any real substance.

Paul deals with the subject of same-sex relationships in three of his letters. The first is here in Romans One, another in his first letter to the Corinthians, and the third occurrence is in his first letter to Timothy. Paul never uses the word *homosexual* and this word never occurs in the New Testament. It was translated into the English Bible for the first time in the Revised Standard Version of 1946. This Bible was an attempt to revise the outdated wording of the 1611 King James Bible.

In Romans, Paul alluded to same-sex relationships by using the words *unnatural* and *functioning* together (as was described above). In his other two letters, he uses two different words, neither of which is *homosexual*. This is yet another example of why we need to check into the accuracy of New Testament translations.

In his Corinthians passage (1 Cor 6:9), Paul gives a list of people who will not enter the Kingdom of God. And in that list, he includes those who are *effeminate*. This is not the word homosexual as many translators render it. It is a word that means “soft,” referring to those who are soft in their demeanor. In other words, more on the feminine side as compared to the masculine. Paul is not identifying any kind of behavior here, just a characteristic. This seems highly prejudicial on his part, but he may have inherited this view from his legalistic Pharisee days. We all bring into our new life in Christ some of our old values, bigotry, and indoctrinations. Paul was no different.

Some men are more *feminine* in their demeanor. Growing up, I noticed that there were a few, though not many. It didn’t seem to be something they chose as much as it was something that chose them. It was who they were; it came naturally to them. They gathered with the girls on the playground while most of us played ball and rough-housed with each other – doing the typical alpha-male thing, working out our pecking order before we realized what we were doing. This came as naturally to us as the soft, feminine characteristics did to those other few. So, for Paul to include a natural characteristic (unusual as it might be) in his list of those who “will not enter the kingdom of God” seems highly prejudicial and bigoted, focusing on temperament rather than behavior.

As an adult, I’ve encountered men who are very tender-hearted, softer in demeanor, and seem to have more feminine characteristics than most men. I once worked with a guy who was married and had kids, but he possessed those more feminine characteristics in how he carried himself. He was clearly on the *soft* end of the spectrum (as Paul described it). He was a very loving, caring person. He had planned to be a priest at one time in his earlier years. Paul is putting this kind of person on his list of those exempt from God’s kingdom, based on having certain inherent characteristics? Think this one through before blindly

jumping to any conclusions just because Paul did. Keep in mind that there exists a counterpart reality among women where a few of them are naturally very masculine.

It appears to me that such characteristics aren't always learned. Some characteristics and physical anatomy are just how God made them. About 2% of the population is born with both male and female reproductive organs and/or hormonal-chromosomal patterns. What are these people supposed to do with how God made them? Is God telling us something about being careful about overly distinguishing gender separation? Perhaps. You be the judge. But, again, why single out people with such rare characteristics as being unqualified to enter God's kingdom on that basis? There's a whole spectrum of people out there, and it is easy to discriminate against anyone who is not safely somewhere in the largely populated middle. Perhaps we need to be a little more careful, thoughtful, and love other people unconditionally as God loves us!

In that same list (1 Cor 6:9), Paul immediately includes another word that alludes to same-sex relationships, but this time it is one of human behavior rather than a human characteristic. There is a big difference between *who* we are and *how* we behave, and the New Testament is usually careful to make this distinction. However, who we are has a lot to do with how we behave. This second word in Paul's list, which also occurs in his first letter to Timothy (1Tim 1:10), is a Greek word that comes from two other words: *male* and *couch* (or bed). Paul seems to be referring to those who "go to bed with a male." Paul is obviously not referring to opposite-sex relationships since he was not opposed to these as long as they were within the confines of marriage, where sex is bound up with commitment and not just "sex for sex's sake." He seems to be targeting males who sexually function as females. "Male-bedder" is a very graphic description, but there is little doubt as to what Paul had in mind and believed that such

behavior belonged on his list of things that prevented entrance into God's kingdom.

So those are the only three places where Paul deals with same-sex relationships, but I wanted to give you some background so you can put it all in perspective and ask yourself, "Is this an *abomination* to God where such people should be stoned as they did in the Old Testament?" Many religious people would say, "Yes." Or, is this something that is unusual and even perhaps *unnatural* that God "gives people over to" (allows) for whatever purpose He has in it? Others would say yes to that. We all sin (literally, "to miss the mark" in Greek) in different ways. Most people gossip, something the New Testament identifies as sin simply because it is so destructive. How much of an issue do we make of gossip in the church and in society? Not much! Is this because it is so widespread that we don't really want to condemn ourselves, whereas the less practiced same-sex behavior is easily targeted by the majority who do not engage in it? This is something worth thinking through before we assume too much and side with Paul, ignoring the silence of Jesus and all other New Testament writers. However, keep in mind that silence cannot be taken as approval. So, don't deny what is clearly written in the New Testament, but do not overly read into it, either.

I leave all of this between each person and God, where it belongs. I don't judge anyone on it; I try to love same-sex oriented people unconditionally (as does God), not be opposed to them, yet I choose not to actively support them in it, either. I have several in my immediate and extended family who have chosen a same-sex lifestyle. One of them once invited me to their wedding. My answer was (as I put my arms around both of them), "You can put this on me, but I cannot attend. However, I do not judge you for what you decide between you and God." The answer from one of them was, "I've gotten this from some other people,

and I get it. I appreciate your honesty and love.” So that's kind of where I leave it.

There are people in church and society who are adamantly against same-sex relationships, treating them like it's the worst thing in the world. And, for them ... it might be! If this is their honest conclusion, I do not judge them for it, but neither do I join them in their harsh condemnations of it. I remind myself (and them) that Jesus was silent on this matter, and I am comfortable taking my cue from him. I'm not sure what all of Paul's motives were or what exactly was in his background that caused him to take a heavy hand against this (except that he was a high-ranking Pharisee and very much under the law). But for those who believe that the Bible is the “very word of God” and every word in it is perfect and inerrant, then they *must* view same-sex relationships as absolutely wrong, or they will violate their own conscience and values. They are being consistent with what they honestly believe. There are many churches today that take very strong stands against same-sex relationships. I attend one (and have for 43 years) that would say, “You can be a homosexual, but if you come into our church, you must not practice it.” Then, another church I attend occasionally, and fill in teaching there sometimes, they would say, “If you're in a same-sex relationship, you're welcome to attend our church, and be a part of it. If you love God, want to learn from the New Testament, and grow in your relationship with him, we will support you in seeking that and will love you unconditionally. We're not going to promote your lifestyle, and we'll leave it up to you and God.” Obviously, they're much more tolerant. Episcopal and American Baptist churches are two that hold this position. So, there is quite a spectrum within Christianity; perhaps you can see why it's so controversial.

I have taken the time to go through all of this very carefully, and hopefully very objectively, so that you can think it through

C Clifton Jones

and decide for yourself where you land and how to relate to same-sex people.

7. Paul's List of Sins (Romans 1:28-32)

Inventing new ways to sin (1:28)

Paul continues, *Since they thought it foolish to acknowledge God, He gave them over to their foolish thinking and let them do things that should never be done.* Paul is adamant that same-sex relationships are forbidden. *Their lives became full of every kind of wickedness...* Okay, now he's giving a more complete list of sins. It is not just about same-sex relationships, which he includes, but every kind of sin and "missing the mark" of perfection ...*sin, greed, hate, envy, murder, quarrelling, deception, malicious behavior, and gossip. These are all really destructive behaviors! They are backstabbers, haters of God. Insolent, proud, and boastful.* He includes everybody, and hey, this gets close to home because we all do some of these things, at least in our hearts and our minds, where the essence of sin exists. Maybe we don't do all of it every day, all day, but we can often fall into many of these sins listed by Paul.

They invent new ways of sinning. As if they didn't have enough, people seem to always find more trouble and difficulty. Have you ever caught yourself in some kind of foolish, self-destructive behavior? Paul adds this to his list. *They disobey their parents.* I assume he is focusing on younger people here,

but his list applies to people of all ages. Now, Paul does not mean to say that everything your parents tell you, especially as an adult child, that you're supposed to just blindly do it. It is okay to disagree with them, but there's also an honor that is due to your parents, even if they are wrong. The Ten Commandments say to "honor your mother and father." This was not a command to little kids; it was for adults with aging parents, taking care of them when they get old. However, in principle, it does apply to little kids. They are wise to obey their parents because they're watching over them.

Paul adds more items to his list of sins. *They refuse to understand, break their promises, are heartless, and have no mercy.* Sadly, this describes all of us to some degree, and perhaps in different stages of life. Think back! I hate to admit it, but some of these applied to me in my younger days. It sure is good that we wise up as we age! *They know God's justice requires that those who do such things deserve to die.* Well, at least, they may deserve to die at the time they're doing them. Sometimes we do dangerous and foolish things. But notice Paul is not saying they deserved to go to hell forever. A long list of sins is a perfect opportunity for Paul to warn about hell if he believed it to be true. But he doesn't, and he never does here, in this longest and most complete of all his letters, nor does he in any other letter he wrote!

Yet, they do them anyway. When will we ever learn? We tend to do foolish things in spite of knowing the consequences. Perhaps this is why God doesn't always stop us. He knows that our only shot at correction is to go through consequences multiple times, until we finally get it – if ever!

Here is Paul's final word on his long list of sins. *Worse yet, they encourage others to do the same things.* Misery loves

company, and people cover their sins by enlisting others to join them. Do you ever see this in society? People instinctively do what's wrong, and then they want other people to join them in it, knowing that if enough people do what's wrong, it will start looking right, or at least okay. This is what peer pressure is all about, and adults experience it as much or more than kids do. We're all trying to soothe our consciences by any means possible.

How the New Testament came to us

One very interesting thing to always keep in mind is how these New Testament writings came to us and, therefore, how they are to be viewed and accepted. Let me start on *our* end of the chain. When we read the New Testament (like we're doing in this commentary), we all have to decide, "What does it mean?" That's called *interpretation*, and everyone is entitled to their own, right or wrong. However, we are also wise to ask, "Are we going beyond what it says, beyond what is written, reading into it in some way?" This is easy to do. Be a disciplined reader, for your own sake, discovering the intent of the author (unless you are happy with whatever you manage to impose on the text). On the other hand, we are wise not to leave out or ignore anything just because it is uncomfortable or unfamiliar to us. Keep these two extremes in mind when you interpret what you read, and you will do well in discovering what the author intended you to know. Isn't this our ultimate goal in anything we read? It certainly is mine, so I stay disciplined and focused. Much can be lost in interpretation if we are not careful. And ... never blindly trust other people's interpretations. Check them out thoroughly!

The next identifiable stage in this chain, which comes right before interpretation, is *translation*. Since the original New Testament was written in ancient Greek, it needs to be translated into English so we can read it. Translators rewrite the New Testament from Greek into English, but this is not an exact

science. They do their best to capture the original meaning, but this process requires a few “judgment calls” on their part as to which English wording is best. In other words, they are interpreters to some degree. Thus, their translations are somewhat *subjective* and are partly a result of the translator's opinions and biases.

The form of Greek used to write the New Testament is no longer in use. It is known as Koine Greek. It was the trade language most commonly used back in those days. It was a less formal version of classical Greek, which dated back to the days of Plato and Aristotle. Can anyone really understand all the finer nuances of a language that is no longer spoken or in use? How much has been lost in the modern-day version of Greek? Modern Greek is quite different, yet it's basically the same. So, how much gets lost in translation? Some things, undoubtedly. We don't know for sure, and all translators can do today is translate the New Testament as accurately as possible. It doesn't mean all is lost; just be aware that reading a translation is not as accurate as reading the original language.

The fact that all translations of the New Testament read differently is proof that this is a problem we should all be aware of. To the degree that you can do word studies in Greek and get help from various Greek-oriented study aides, is the degree to which you will have a clearer understanding of the New Testament writings.

Have you noticed that the various English translations are all different? They're all different because the translators are all using different English words. When they read the original Greek text, they conclude. “I think it means this in English,” and they do some *interpreting* in their translation. It's hard for them to get away from doing this. Let me give you an example. Throughout the New Testament, there's a Greek word for *destroy*, to destroy something. Some English translators will take that Greek word and translate it as “perish” in John 3:16. Though the word destroy

is used in the Greek, *perish* is chosen as the best English word to be used. But why? Why not just use the word “destroy” as is used in other places in the New Testament? This is the prerogative of each translator, but it is also our prerogative to ask why. My best guess is that they have a belief that has already been instilled in their thinking (some since childhood) that must render John 3:16 in the most dramatic manner. Thus, *perish* is chosen rather than *destroy*. So it reads, “whoever believes will not *perish* but have eternal life.” If the word destroy is used (“whoever believes won't be destroyed...”), it is less dramatic and less apt to make John 3:16 convey some kind of never-ending punishment. Perhaps you can see where a translator might be tempted to use a different word to render a different (desired) meaning. So that's where *translation* can become *interpretation*. Watch out for this kind of thing. It happens a lot to unsuspecting readers.

So, the last stage in the chain of how the New Testament came to us is *interpretation*, and the one just before it is *translation*. The previous stage is *transmission*, which is the repeated copying process over the past 2000 years. It was copies of copies of copies, especially for the first 200 years. And over that period of time, only about five copies from the New Testament survived; they were not complete copies. So, the New Testament is not a perfectly documented historical source, so it's okay to ask good questions about how reliable the copies are that we have today. However, the New Testament is the *best* documented of all ancient writings, but this does not mean we should ignore the problems that exist. Copies in any significant numbers did not emerge until after 200 AD (99% of all copies we have today); 80% came after 800 AD. So, when experts tell you that we have over 5000 copies of the New Testament (which is true), keep in mind that the vast majority came to us after the first millennium. Always do your homework and make sure you get *all* the facts before drawing any firm conclusions.

There is a pretty big gap between the time when the New Testament documents were written (around 70 AD) and when any significant number of copies were discovered (after 200 AD). It is reasonable to ask, "What happened in that gap of time, and did anyone make changes that we don't know about?" The truth is that we just don't know; no one knows for sure. Many assume that God oversaw the process and kept all the New Testament writings accurate; it's certainly not something too difficult for Him. But accuracy and inerrancy are clearly not what we see. God seemed to allow human writings to follow their natural course, at least to some degree, by those who wrote them and passed them down through the ages. It could be that God wanted good, reasonably reliable documents, but not perfect ones, so that people would not worship any writings. He wants us to depend on him, who is always there, in real-time. That has to be God's ultimate goal of any human writings!

This doesn't mean we can't trust the New Testament at all. It doesn't mean it's all screwed up and worthless. But, clearly, how the New Testament came to us is at least problematic. The real question is, "Why is there a problem, and how are we to view these writings?" What I've discovered for myself is that this problem steers me away from dependence on any ancient writing and makes me turn to God Himself for my truth. This is a good thing. I view the New Testament as a set of very good historical writings that God had some hand in producing to let us know what happened in the days of Jesus and his followers. so we can consider such things, take everything to God, and find the right conclusions from him. This way, God becomes the Ultimate source of authority, rather than a mere set of ancient writings, helpful as they are. Remember, Jesus didn't promise to send the Holy Bible; he promised to send the Holy Spirit, a person! So don't ever trade in your relationship with God (through the Holy Spirit) for reading and studying a bunch of ancient writings. I made that mistake in my earlier years, not realizing that to know

God, directly, was the goal of all such writings. I think this is why God didn't give us the original manuscripts. We'd have them in glass cases, worshipping them in some way. Many today are already way too close to doing that!

So, there is *transmission*, *translation*, and then *interpretation* in the path of the New Testament coming to us, allowing us to read, study, and gain from it. What we have received may have changed somewhat over the centuries, especially in the first 200 years. But as it stands among ancient writings, it is reasonably reliable, having a few problems that introduce a degree of uncertainty. This is why we are wise not to completely depend on any ancient writings, no matter how lofty the *claims* about them tend to be.

But one additional stage exists in the chain of how the New Testament came to us, and that is *authorship*. It precedes transmission. Who wrote the letters, Gospel accounts, and historical narratives we possess today? Was it Paul? Probably, but did he write all the letters ascribed to him? Sometimes people wrote using other, more famous people's names. There are many examples of this in ancient history. Some of the New Testament writings are anonymous, like the book of Hebrews and (technically) all four Gospels. The gospels have strong traditional evidence that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were the authors, but none of them actually ascribed their names – unlike Paul, who always identified himself. Plus, the Gospels are written in third-person, making them technically *bearsay*, which would be inadmissible in any court of law as evidence. Paul was better; he wrote his letters as first-person accounts, making him an eyewitness fully admissible in court. Paul also wrote contemporaneously with activities in the churches to which he wrote. The Gospels were written about 40 years after the events they describe. So keep all of this in mind when people tell you to blindly trust any set of ancient writings. There are always some problems to be aware of, which means your best and most reliable (final) source of authority is God himself, who is there in real

time. There are many out there who do not want you to take such a view of the New Testament, but this is often because it takes away their control of people's minds and hearts through an overly pervasive view of ancient writings, in spite of their many problems.

However, also keep in mind that there are many who have gone straight to God and asked him if the writings of the New Testament can be fully trusted as *inerrant scripture*. For some of them, the answer is "yes!" and I do not want to, in any way, negate what they honestly believe to be true. Whatever people believe they receive directly from God is important and belongs to them alone. Paul engaged in some of this. There were no witnesses or any kind of verification that he received direct revelation from God. But he was adamant that he did. I, personally, don't know because I was not there, but I allow him to have his testimony and try to evaluate what he wrote on the merits of its relevance and practicality. And it is here that I find Paul's letters interesting and highly instructive – enough so that I have written this six-volume commentary series and use them as a source of spiritual guidance in my life.

But all of this begs the question of, "Were Paul and the gospel writers really authoritative as they are claimed to be today, as we look back upon what they wrote? This is a matter of faith, and many people believe that these authors were in some way special, above and beyond other ancient writers, producing what is now considered to be the *very word of God*! But was Paul writing accurately? Was God guiding him in some way, or was Paul just giving his opinion? I'm not pushing one way or the other because there are good arguments either way. God seems to be content in allowing this dilemma to exist; I will leave that up to His infinite wisdom.

These four stages of how the New Testament came to us, with all their evidence and problems, should always be kept in mind: authorship, transmission, translation, and interpretation. It

is quite a journey for any set of ancient writings. Gain from these writings as God leads you, but also be very careful assuming that what you read, based on someone's interpretation, is the absolute truth without considering the many limitations and problems in the way they came to us. As a result, I find that I must ask reasonable questions like, "Did Paul bring with him his bias of being a Pharisee, exhibited in that Old Testament law where same-sex people are stoned, being an abomination to God? Did he bring some of that with him in his perspective, whereas Jesus never did? It's rather amazing that Jesus never discusses same-sex relationships as being either good or bad. And he knew about them; they were all around, for sure, in his day, yet his disciples never asked any questions about this after Jesus made it clear that marriage is between a man and a woman. Why? No one knows for sure, but perhaps we are wise to treat it as Jesus did and love all people unconditionally.

8. You Do the Same Things (Romans 2:1-11)

Judging others (2:1)

After reading through Romans One, it is easy for readers to feel high and lofty, knowing they are not like all those “dirty, rotten sinners” out there that Paul so completely identified in his long list of sins. Oh, but wait! Paul has only set us up to be humbled as he sticks a mirror up in front of our faces. *You may think you can condemn such people, but you are just as bad, and you have no excuse. When you say they are wicked and should be punished, you're condemning yourself, for you who judge others, do these very same things!* Maybe not to the same degree, but most of the same things on his list we at least dabble in. Later on in this letter, Paul will declare, “All have sinned and fall short of God’s perfection.” That's what he's previewing here. So, Paul is putting everyone on the same level before God. This is an essential part of presenting the *problem*, so that when he gets to the *solution*, we will appreciate it and be able to humbly accept it, rather than getting trapped in thinking we are better than others, which would only lead to missing out on the solution. But the solution is not revealed until Romans Three; until then, Paul has much more to say about the problem.

My to all this is that I need to realize this problem of sin applies to me. I need to be patient with myself, as well as others,

and love them as God loves me, especially when *their* sin comes my way! God doesn't respond to our sin with, "Man, I can't wait to wail on these sinners; how dare they disobey me!" It's more like, "How can I help these people become free from their sin? I'm going to do whatever it takes. I'll never give up on them." Sure, God *condemns* sin, but only because it destroys us, desiring all to be saved from it. He brings *judgment*, too, but this is always an "accurate assessment" of who we are, so that we can recognize our need and turn to him who alone provides the solution. God brings punishment in a *corrective* way, in whatever way is needed. If He has to allow or inflict pain on us in this life (or even in the one to come) to get us to realize our need and that He alone is our savior, then that's what He'll do. But the point is that God always acts with a *corrective* purpose, not in pure retaliation. How could He act any differently and still be God? If He acts in pure retaliation, there's no love in it because there is no corrective, healing, or restoring element.

God is rightly angry, too, but anger can be rooted in love! You can be angry because you love the person you're angry with; it just depends on why. It can be selfish or loving anger. For God, it is always based on His love. How many people have been married to an alcoholic? They love them, but man, they're angry with them because of their behavior, and they want the best for them. But when that behavior is messing everything up, it is annoying. It's not hatred. It may be hating what they're doing, but not necessarily hatred for them. Such anger may be completely rooted in love for the other person. This is how it always is with God; it's never about himself. This is where God's heart is.

There is a time for judgment, making an "accurate assessment" (which is what this word means in Greek), and we condemn certain behavior like molesting children. We're not condemning the person as much as we're condemning their behavior because it's not good for them or those they harm. That kind of judgment and condemnation says, "I'm declaring that

behavior to be incorrect, out of bounds, and unworthy of anything good. This is what the word *condemnation* means in Greek. Condemning behavior is different than condemning a person overall. The person rejecting them would rightly say, “What you're doing is wrong, and we're going to stop you as a society. We're going to put you in jail because we're not going to tolerate it, but it doesn't mean we hate you and want you to go to hell forever.” That's why we call such places penitentiaries – a place to do penance. We also call them Correctional Facilities. The goal is to correct. That's always God's goal, not to retaliate just because He's mad at someone, or because He feels dishonored. We tend to retaliate against others when they've embarrassed us or harmed us in some way. But the difference between retaliation and correction is huge. Correction, healing, and restoration should be our attitude toward others, just as God always holds for us.

The patience of God (2:2)

We know that God, in His justice, will punish anyone who does such behavior. The word *justice* in Greek means “to make things right.” And God will, someday, make everything right; He's not going to keep things wrong or make them worse. Pure retaliation and sending people to hell forever accomplishes nothing by way of correction, healing, and restoration, which is what everyone needs! So, God, in His highest moral excellence and grand magnanimity, is infinitely beyond such self-serving, petty actions. Remember, God is love and love always acts in the very best interest of those who are loved. God's kind of punishment is always corrective in nature; nothing less will do.

When I punished my kids (and that's what we called it), it was always done in love and for their best interest. It was never done to satisfy myself, to fulfill some unmet psychological need I had, or restore some sense of security. This is infinitely true of God. I

hated punishing (correcting) them, but it needed to be done, and if I really loved them, I had to fulfill my role as a good parent. God is the ultimate, loving parent, and so He loves enough to correct (punish) us and not goof off doing His job. I didn't beat my kids bloody, I didn't hate them in any way, and I didn't send them to the orphanage. Instead, I disciplined in a way that was severe enough to match the circumstances. But then I'd give them a hug when it was over and tell them, "I love you and I just want you to be a better person." It was always corrective on my part, even as a puny, fallen man. Certainly then, God can do no less when He punishes (corrects); it's always for a good purpose.

Often God acts in a way that seems very harsh to us, and from our limited perspective, it is! Most of us are quite stubborn people who require serious correction that can take a long time. But God is never in a hurry to make things right in our lives. His slowness is actually patience and determination at work. He is involved in our lives for the long haul and always for our improvement. I'm plenty stubborn, but man oh man, there are some people out there that must have been born smoking a cigar! They're really tough cases. However, there's no case too tough for God, and these people are often used by God in greater ways than the rest of us, who tend to be more compliant. So, don't ever judge others and remember that God made each person with a unique temperament, personality, and strength of will. He knows what He is doing, and this whole jumbled-up mess of diversity that we call the *human race* is God's lab where He does His best work, crafting masterpieces fashioned in His own perfect image. And so Paul says, "We know that God in His justice will punish (correct) anyone who does such things." Always give God the benefit of the doubt in all He does.

Paul continues his thoughts about the *problem*. *Since you judge others for doing these things, why do you think you can avoid God's judgment when you do the same things?*

And the point is that we can't. When we judge others, we are really judging ourselves. About seven times in the New Testament, it says that God will judge everyone someday and that He has no favorites (exemptions). Well, it could be said that all of us are His "favorites" since He loves everyone the same and loves them infinitely. One phrase that was used multiple times in the best-selling book *The Shack* was, "God is especially fond of you!" The author's point was that God is especially fond of everyone! How could He not be?

Someday there will be a judgment of everybody, but *judgment* is just "making an accurate assessment." How could God ever do anything less than accurately assess everyone so they can all know where they stand with him? So, everybody's going to get a scorecard (so to speak), not so much to size us up and let us know if we *made the cut* or not, but simply to let us know the truth about who we are and how amazing God's saving grace is. We only learn anything by contrast. If we do not know how awful and destructive sin is, we can also never really know how great and wonderful God's grace is. Think about it. So, God's act of judgment turns out to be a blessing in disguise, just like everything else He does. Someday we'll be able to look at others and say, "Gee, I'm so sorry about what I did. I didn't even realize it at the time. Please forgive me," They will quickly forgive because they, too, will have the same realization. It's going to be a good kind of judgment, an accurate one.

As finite human beings, we need closure, we need finality, we need to understand, and we need perspective. But when we're in eternity, we're not going to be on God's level. We'll still be limited beings. However, we'll be free from all sin. We will then fully appreciate an accurate assessment from God (judgement) of ourselves so that we can put everything in perspective. It will be the great *ab-ha* moment of realization. Everything that happened in life will fall into place and will make sense. It will be like a huge jigsaw puzzle coming together and seeing clearly the beautiful

picture it makes. I'm just guessing, but I think it will be something like this. Otherwise, why have life in the first place? God has to have some ultimately good purpose in life, and its got to be something along these lines.

Paul wrote to the Philippians, and also later in this letter to the Romans, that "Every knee should/will bow and every tongue should/will confess that Jesus is Lord." There will be an instantaneous, "Wow. I get it! Thank you, God. I had no idea." It won't be God putting His foot on their throat and saying, "You will bow down, you dirty, rotten sinner." It will instead be, "Welcome home, child. I love you and I ensured that this day would happen by working every day in your life on earth." Our response? We will instinctively and thankfully bow and confess who God is in a very good way. Don't let anyone turn God into the meanest being in the universe in your mind by misrepresenting who He is. His love and grace will turn out to be greater than we could ever have imagined.

We already have some assessment (judgement) of who we are. When we read in the New Testament that we're *without spot or blemish* and that it is because of the cross, we catch a glimpse of what God's saving work is all about. When we are there, in eternity, we're going to see clearly, for the first time, what God has seen all along. Once we are in God's presence, the veil will be removed and a perfect perspective will be gained. So Paul warns his readers that, "Since you judge others for doing these things, why do you think you can avoid God's judgment when you do the same things?" Well, we can't, and God's judgement is a perfect view of us – the good, the bad, and the ugly. But, ultimately, God will make it all good because this is the essential meaning of *justice*. How could God possibly ever settle for anything less? He is the only person in the universe who *can*, and *will*, make things right (bring justice). God's perfect judgment will not be too harsh or too slack; it will be exactly what we need.

Paul then asks a question. *Don't you see how wonderfully kind, tolerant, and patient God is with you?* This is Paul's conclusion about judgement and justice. He's reinforcing this idea that judgment is a good thing and justice is making things right. If you really understand God, you know He is kind, He is tolerant, and He is patient. However, He is not tolerant of sin. That's good! He wants it out of our lives. That's one thing He does something about; He saves us from it – ongoing in this life and completely in eternity. But He is tolerant of the *fact* that we are sinners, just as Paul indicated previously that God “gives them over.” But He only does so for a season. He has a plan for everyone, to totally eradicate sin from our lives. He is that kind of God – not some other kind that forever tolerates sin and gives up on saving people.

Two more questions from Paul. *Does this mean nothing to you? Can't you see that His kindness is intended to turn you from your sin?* When we turn to God and away from sin (and this is what the word *repent* means in Greek, not to *feel sorry*), we enter into a wonderful, peaceful, joyous, freeing relationship. But then we wonder why we waited so long, only to realize that our sin and foolishness blinded us from seeing the kindness of God and how much we needed His saving grace.

Judgement is coming (2:5)

Now Paul brings out the other side of this issue of kindness, salvation, and grace. *But because you are stubborn and refuse to turn from your sin, you are storing up terrible punishment for yourself.* And this applies to everyone to some degree. He's dealing with the *problem* of sin and the characteristics of sin in all of us, allowing for the whole spectrum of who we are as a human race. We can always find somebody who's more sinful than we are, and we can always find somebody doing better. But

that isn't really the issue. The grand spectrum of sin and sinners is out there, for sure, and as a result, we are all storing up what will result in terrible punishment for ourselves. This punishment is not so much from God as it is from life itself. God is kind and is always at work, saving us from sin that does the punishing. But we are also storing up wonderful kindness, tolerance, and patience from God that will turn us away from our sin. This is how God responds, not in pure retaliation with no corrective purpose whatsoever! We are wise to consider the entire package of what God is doing, based on who He is.

A day of anger is coming when God's righteous judgment will be revealed. A lot of people see the word anger associated with God and think, "Oh boy, God's really pissed-off at me. He's really gonna give it to me!" That is our natural, insecure, guilt-ridden response to God, which gets exploited by some religious people who want to control others (and who were, in turn, controlled by others in the past). Sin makes God angry, but not hateful, because of what it does to *us*. He concludes, "I am all the more determined to save these sinners whom I so love." He is angry about sin because, if you think about it, genuine anger is rooted in love; the opposite of love is complacency. God is not complacent about sin. It thrusts him into action, not *against* us but *for* us. It's okay for Love to get angry. In fact, it *must* get angry if it really loves and is saying, "I'm not going to settle for defeat, failure, and misery in you. I want better for you." So, for God to be angry about our sin, and even angry with us for choosing self-destruction, is really an act of His love. He effectively says, "I love you enough that I'm not gonna just stand back and do nothing. I'm going to take action and save you from yourself." So, Paul says that "a day of anger is coming," but it's a good kind of anger, a loving anger, but it is very real anger where "God's righteous judgment, (a correct, accurate assessment, a completely perfect one) will be revealed."

He will judge everyone according to what they've done. Everyone's going to get a scorecard, a judgment, an accurate assessment of what happened here in life. Please understand that on that day, through the lens of love and grace, we will all realize everything is now okay and made right. This is so good to know! You might not even have to say *I'm sorry* to somebody else because they will already understand that you, themselves, and everyone else have already been forgiven because God has “reconciled everything and everyone to himself,” forever.

God will judge everyone fairly (2:7)

He will give eternal life to those who keep on doing good, seeking after the glory and honor and immortality that God offers. But He will pour out His anger on those who live for themselves, who refuse to obey the truth and instead live lives of wickedness. Wow, what a contrast. Notice that Paul says nothing about anyone going to hell forever, and this would be a perfect opportunity to do so. But he doesn't; he never does in any of his writings. This passage is not a contrast about God being *for* or *against* people; it is about God being for people in two different ways, giving to each person what is needed to get them right with Himself. Those who are already doing good, as a result of God's grace in their lives, need to keep on doing good. But, in contrast, those who do wrong as a result of their rebellion against God need to be corrected by him – and that's exactly what He plans to do.

Remember, everyone's a Sinner. Paul started out this *problem* part of his letter by saying that God has “revealed His anger against all sin and ungodliness” because people are destroying themselves through their sin, and so he'll pour out His anger on those who live for themselves. But He does this because He loves

them. A severe problem needs a severe solution, and often God acts in severity when He needs to bring correction. When He pours out His anger on them, it's for the purpose of His kind intention to cause them to repent and turn to him, just as Paul stated previously.

Those who seek the glory, honor, and immortality that God offers are those who continue to do good in this life, and they will receive good things. That's just the consequence of our mindset and attitude in this life, here and now, today. Paul talks in terms of the consequences of sin and God's constant action to address it, because He's not a complacent God who does nothing. Obviously, if you're living for him, you're going to do well, but if you don't, He will pour out an anger rooted in love on those who live for themselves, but only because He loves them and has a plan to save them. Paul will get into this plan of salvation (the *solution*) later in this letter. However, for now, he wants his readers to thoroughly understand the *problem*.

There will be trouble and calamity for everyone who keeps doing what is evil. Duh! But this is not God piling on. He's just saying if you keep doing what's wrong, there will be trouble and calamity for you in life. *This is true for the Jews first and also for the Gentiles.* This *Jew and Gentile* thing has always been Paul's focus, and it will continue as a theme throughout this letter: that the Gospel (Good News) message of what God is doing to save humanity starts with the Jews but extends to non-Jews (Gentiles) as God's plan to save the whole world. Perhaps this is why Jesus is called "Savior of the World" by John, a disciple of Jesus and another New Testament writer. The Jewish nation was predicted to bring a Messiah who would save people from sin. But it does not stop there. God's clear intention, from the beginning, was to save the whole world. He told Abraham that "all the nations of the world will be blessed" in the coming of this Messiah. Paul

describes this in detail in his letter to the Galatians. (*Never Going Back!* is the title of my commentary that presents this Galatian letter.) Here, Paul is not saying that one group is more important than the other, only that the Jews received the Good News message first, then it came to the Gentiles via Paul.

Paul now restates all he has said in the framework of Jews and Gentiles. *There will be glory and honor and peace from God for all who do good, to the Jew first and also for the Gentile. For God does not show favoritism.* God doesn't have favorites, except that everyone is equally favored by him. He doesn't say, "Well, I'll give you a pass on this, and then I'll go do an accurate assessment about the other people out there." No matter who you are, no matter what's been going on in your life, you're gonna be judged by God and receive an *accurate assessment*. But that's what a loving God does. He says, "Let's get real about who you are and what's been going on so that you can deal with it now, and in eternity. I will take care of it."

It's easy to see how some religious people read *hell vs. heaven* into this passage (and others) because there is a clear contrast and distinction being made by Paul. But such a contrast need not be the most extreme imaginable, especially when it tags God with doing the very worst thing anyone could ever do to anyone else ... never-ending torment. Paul doesn't mention anything like this here, so why go there in our conclusions? We shouldn't; it's not warranted. However, Paul is clearly stressing the importance of the day of judgment and the finality of life. But He's not marching off into eternity with two groups of people going to two different places. There are, indeed, two groups of people: those who seek God and those who don't; those who do right and those who do wrong. Actually, it's not really two groups as much as one humanity that falls in various locations along a wide spectrum of attitudes and behaviors. There is no magic line where one person is barely good enough, and another person is barely bad enough.

We all have good and bad in us, but some are more oriented toward good, and others more toward evil. The goal is for everyone to figure out where they stand before God so they can seek him and find correction, healing, and salvation.

If you're a *new man* (new person) in Christ, you still have an old nature with both good and bad going on in your life. It's always a struggle, and it always will be until the day we die. So, we need not become arrogant about our knowing and following Jesus; others just aren't there yet, and we are only there by God's grace (just as someday they will be also). Sin is resident in everybody to differing degrees. Paul's just saying that everybody, starting with the Jews and finishing with the Gentiles, is going to be judged because God doesn't have favorites. He treats everybody equally according to what they've done or haven't done.

9. Doing What is Right (Romans 2:12-16)

I don't know about you as a reader, but I, as an author, am growing just a bit weary of Paul's lengthy presentation on the *problem* of sin in humanity. I have tried to present this section as optimistically as possible, without in any way violating what Paul has written. This is definitely negative stuff and can become discouraging if dwelt on too long. We are about halfway through this *problem* part of Paul's letter, so hang in there and try to appreciate all that Paul is presenting so that you can even more appreciate the wonderful *solution* he will soon present. It will be worth it!

Hearing vs doing (2:12)

When the Gentiles sin, they will be destroyed even though they never had God's written law. It's easy to see a word like *destroy* and conclude, "It must be talking about going to hell." But that's because so many people have become accustomed to thinking this when they see such words in the Bible. Always ask yourself what it *doesn't* say before you assume anything. The word *destroy* means just that, to destroy, and it has no inherent eternal orientation. It can mean "to destroy someone's reputation," or destroy their life. It can also mean to *completely* destroy or annihilate, but this meaning is not required. Context is always the key. However, if someone modifies this

word by adding “never-ending”, then you could rightly conclude some eternal aspect.

According to Paul, when Gentiles sin, destruction of some kind follows. Of course, this is true of the Jews also, but Paul is focusing on Gentiles here. The key is in what he adds, “Even though they never had God's written law.” And that's one of Paul's big points. Gentiles sin without the law and Jews sin under it. Either way, all have sinned. It's not really disobeying the law that destroys us; it's sinning. The act of sinning (missing the mark) is destructive for anyone. Even if you don't have a law hanging over you, which was true of the Gentiles, and even if you didn't know what you were doing was wrong, sin still destroys you. That's what sin does, not because somebody wrote down some law and said not to disobey it.

Paul now applies this same principle to the Jews. *The Jews who have God's law will be judged by that law when they fail to obey it.* All the law does is point out our sin, the sin that's going to destroy us. But whether you have the law or not, sin will destroy you either way. The Jews had the law and the Gentiles did not, yet the result of sin was the same for both. Paul emphasizes this point as he continues. *Merely listening to the law doesn't make us right with God.* Knowing about the law, being able to talk about it, and quoting the Ten Commandments doesn't make anyone right with God. Paul then clarifies, *It's obeying the law that makes you right in His sight.* So, it's what you do (not what you know) that makes you right in His sight. When someone obeys the law, it can't save them from dying, but it will give them a better life. In this way, we are “right” with God.

How does this square with what Paul said above that we are “made right with God” by our faith? Is Paul's memory that short? Of course not. We are made right with God in two different ways. By faith, we enter into a relationship with God; in a very personal

way, we are “right with God,” experiencing a right relationship with him. There is no earning when we do this. But then by obeying, we are also made right with God,” but in a different way. It is less personal and more performative. Again, we earn nothing by obeying, but by doing what is right (as opposed to wrong), we are aligning ourselves with God’s standard, and in that more objective way we are “right with God.” By faith (mostly), but also by obeying, we enter into a better relationship with God, knowing him personally and conforming to what He tells us we need to do to have a better life. But, as we will see later in this letter, keeping the law cannot earn us anything with God. However, Paul is clear that obedience leads to a better life, living in a way that puts us in a *better relationship* with God, which we experience by faith.

I had a good friend once who was so grace-oriented and anti-law that he said he “never keeps the law” for fear that he might be earning salvation with God. However, I told him that it was okay to keep the law; just know that in doing so, you earn nothing with God. I asked him once, “You don’t cheat on your wife, do you?” “Certainly not!” was his reply. Then I said, “Don’t look now, but you are keeping the law by not committing adultery!” The point is that we can do what is right, even keep the law, and yet realize that in doing so, we earn nothing with God because salvation is completely His work on our behalf and is an act of His grace.

So by sinning, the Gentiles are destroyed *without* the law, and the Jews are destroyed while *under* the law. This is because hearing the law and knowing about it accomplishes nothing. Only when a person obeys it do they benefit. If you do what's right, things are gonna go well. If you do what's wrong, you're gonna be destroyed. Paul's saying that the real essence is in what you do and what's going on in your life, not what you know, who you know, or what church you attend. It doesn't even matter whether you're a Jew or a Gentile. Everybody is on an equal level before God as sinners.

No law; no excuse (2:14)

To further make his point, he writes, *even the Gentiles who do not have God's written law show that they know His law when they instinctively obey it*. Even people without law, who don't have a strong sense of conscience, who don't always know right from wrong, have something inside guiding them. It's like the little devil and angel sitting on the shoulders of cartoon characters, whispering in their ear, soliciting good or bad behavior in them. There's always something telling us, "Maybe I shouldn't do this." And so, everybody has a conscience. Everybody has the law written on their heart.

Paul goes on. *Even without having heard it, they demonstrate that God's law is written in their hearts – in their own conscience and thoughts – either accusing them or telling them they are doing what's right*. We all experience conscience conflicts from time to time, either a calm assurance that we are doing the right thing or that little voice that asks. "Are you sure you want to do this? Be careful, it could mean danger ahead." How many times have we ignored such warnings only to launch into something stupid that we end up regretting? Some people make this a lifestyle, and their lives are always in turmoil. Others are extremely cautious, almost too much so at times, mistakenly missing out on some otherwise good things in life. It is hard to find a perfect balance, but this is what life is all about – learning the difference. However, I would say that generally, erring on the side of caution is usually best. Though my upbringing was a little more legalistic than it needed to be, it was also a great protector, and as a result, I have fared well in life after over 75 years. Some people are thankful for how they were raised, others are resentful for too much restraint or too little good guidance. But the bottom line is: what will you do with what

you've been given and who you are? No matter where you are on this spectrum, God has a purpose in allowing it and bringing it about. Go find that purpose; it is there to be discovered, and it will be the best thing for you as one person in 8 billion!

When we do what's right, we think, "Hey, I did well!" It's okay to do what's right and conclude, "I'm glad I did that. I don't have to feel bad and have my life messed up." So those without the law (Gentiles) had a form of law in their conscience and in their heart, resulting in a sense of guilt (accusation) or validation and confirmation. This was an instinctive thing and is something God has built into all of us.

Paul sums it all up this way. *And this is the message I proclaim to you: the day is coming when God, through Christ Jesus, will judge everyone's secret life.* So an accurate assessment (judgement) will happen to everybody because God doesn't have favorites and He wants everyone to know where they stand with him, what they did in this life (right and wrong), but all in the context of His saving grace. That huge *grace* context is important because it puts into proper perspective everything God does. And this greater context of grace is what Paul will be presenting in the *solution*, *explanation*, and *result* parts of his letter, still to come. We have a long way to go; we're just getting started here in this *problem* part of the letter!

What's hard, as you're reading all this *problem* stuff, is that Paul hasn't gotten into the grace stuff yet. Keep all this in mind as we finish working through the *problem*. If you've already read through Romans, perhaps you already know that all this "judging" that God's going to bring is always in the context of grace and forgiveness, and that He wants all people to be saved. God's judgment is actually an act of His love! God is not complacent about our sin and how it destroys us. He is well aware. He doesn't have an attitude of, "I don't care. I won't bother with taking the time to judge you, even though it's the best thing I can do under

these terrible circumstances of sin that destroys you.” It's nothing like that. Instead, God really does it right. He doesn't wink at sin and conclude, “Oh, no big deal.” But on the other hand, He doesn't overreact and get all huffy and puffy and puny, saying, “I'm going to retaliate against people who have the wrong attitude and disobey me. I'm gonna give up on saving them.” God strikes a perfect balance between two extremes. Neither extreme is who God is. He is neither a way too permissive, tolerant God who never does anything about sin, nor is He some kind of monstrous God who acts in pure retaliation with no corrective purpose whatsoever. That's what I see here. Paul's trying to bring us into that balance.

My writing goals

In my commentaries, I try to give *all* the facts and not just cherry-pick them (or passages) in an attempt to take readers in a certain direction. My job as a writer is to give it straight, give all the facts I can, good, bad, and ugly, even when they challenge established, traditional Christianity, which has many very real problems. All religions have problems, and Christianity is no different. But this just calls attention to the fact that God alone is perfect, inerrant, and fully trustworthy. Traditions, institutions, churches, pastors, and even parents are all flawed to some degree. So keep your focus where it belongs, on God himself, nothing less.

I like to give all the factual information possible, but not everyone does that. Most people in religious leadership kind of *rig* their presentation to the masses simply because they must. They are not hired or selected to “seek the truth at all costs.” Instead, they are required to protect what is *already assumed* to be true, consistent with the group of like-minded people they are leading. I'm okay with this since it represents a form of free speech. Not only are we free (or should be) to think and say what we honestly

believe to be true, we also have the right to control the flow of information in any assembly of people who choose to live under such limitations.

I also like to ask good questions. There are a lot of questions you can't ask at church – well, you can ask them as long as you accept their answer once you hear it. If that's not good enough, you'd better not keep asking. That's okay, too, because that's just the way it needs to work in any organization that has decided on a particular set of absolutes to follow. Churches have an agenda. They have conclusions they've drawn. That's why they gather together! There are a few churches that honestly attempt to be as open as possible, seeking the truth and following the facts wherever they lead. They are few in number because they never attract very many people.

So I try to give all the factual information I can and ask good questions in an attempt to help people think things through for themselves. I believe this is what God wants, too! Hopefully, they turn to God and seek His perspective on everything and then establish their own sincerely held beliefs. Though many do not realize it, people have everything they need to go to God, think things through, and come up with their own conclusions. I am always happy when I see this happen, even if they disagree with me. I offer my opinions, as I do in my commentaries, whenever asked. But I never take on the mindset of, “Well, God told me to tell you this because I received special revelation from Him.” Nor do I think, “This is the absolute truth; you need to believe it.” I'm not in the business of *truth*. I leave that up to God, where it belongs. I just try to be in the business of giving information as carefully and accurately as I can, and encourage people in their daily living. Doing this, I am always happy and fulfilled.

Some people won't find what I do to be sufficient because they believe we must bring unwavering dogma and sway people into agreement. They often do this to ensure for themselves a *validation* of their beliefs. You will never direct people to God by

doing this. However, if you work hard enough at it, you can gather for yourself a decent-sized following. This seems like following the wrong person for the wrong reason, so I take no part in it. I want people to follow God for the right reasons. At best, I am a presenter, facilitator, resource, and encourager.

10. Teach Yourself, Not Others (Romans 2:17-29)

A guide for the blind? (2:17)

Paul now shifts his focus to Jewish believers. *You who call yourselves Jews are relying on God's law, and you brag about your special relationship with him.* Jewish people have a huge history in the Old Testament writings, including the law of Moses. Then there are Gentiles who are non-Jews. These two groups make up all of humanity from a New Testament perspective. Paul just spent time talking about Jews and Gentiles and how both are targets of God's judgment and salvation. But always in the order of Jews first, then the Gentiles. The point is that God's plan of salvation is for everyone.

At this point in his letter, Paul is saying, "After focusing on Gentiles, I'm going to give you a new subject, because you're probably wondering about the Jews. So, let me tell you about them and how they fit into God's plan." (He will do this again in Romans Nine, near the end of the *explanation* part of his letter.) The Jews had something special going on with God. God dealt in a special way with the Jewish nation for the purpose of bringing a Messiah to save the world. This was His ultimate goal; it wasn't to make the Jews more important than everybody else, which was often how they viewed themselves. They got themselves a bit puffed up, but God said, "No, My goal is to save the world through the Good News message going out by the followers of Jesus." Well, the Jews kind of blew it. Most Jews rejected this

Messiah, and they didn't go tell the whole world about it as they should have. So, God sent His Son, and by doing so, He said, "I'm sending my only begotten Son because he's perfect and he'll bring the Good News in a very special way by dying on the cross." However, the Jews were quite proud of their special relationship with God, and never seemed to see past it into the worldwide purpose God had for humanity

You know what God wants, and you know what is right because you have been taught His law. Think about the law. It's not bad. Paul affirms this later in his letter by saying, "The law is righteous, holy, and good." Think about it: not murdering, not stealing, and not committing adultery are all good commands. These are intended to keep us out of trouble. That's a good thing. So also, honoring and worshiping God while forsaking all others is good too. However, the law cannot save us; only God can do that. The simple reason for this is that we'll never be able to keep the law, try as we might. We don't get right with God; He gets right with us, and then we benefit from what He has done. The law just shows us our need for God.

Frankly, once you've broken the law, you can't unbreak it. At that point (and everyone is there), we need to be redeemed, restored, healed, corrected, improved, saved, and made whole. Only God can accomplish this, and He is at work in everyone to bring it about. We need to be saved; we need to be changed; we need to become a *new person* in Christ. Ultimately, we need to die, rise from the dead (someday), and be a completely new and perfect version of ourselves. God gave us caterpillars (butterflies) and seeds (trees) to illustrate this to us. That's God's *real* salvation plan: death, resurrection, and new life forever! But for now, we get to experience this in a limited way as we trust God and experience him in this life. His ultimate plan is not just to come and change us in this life (which He does). We do change, but as you know, we don't *fully* change. We still have a problem, and we

struggle in life, no matter how much faith we have or how close we are to God. His ultimate solution is to go ahead and let us die, which we all will someday.

A neighbor lady who is dying of pancreatic cancer told me that we all have an *expiration date*. I told her that I agreed. But God does not *just* let us die; He comes in the person of His Son and dies with us. We all die together *with* him and *in* him. (Paul will go into detail about this later in Romans Six.) Jesus became the new representative of the whole human race, died *for* us, *with* us, and even *as* us. What happens to us also happens to him. (Paul will give this in detail in Romans Five.) To complete His mission to save the world, Jesus rose from the dead, winning victory over death for all, and someday will bring us all with him in our own resurrection, because what happens to him happens to us. We are indelibly linked to him as Savior of the World.

This is an amazing and wonderful salvation plan by God. It cannot and will not fail. He's gonna give us a new body, new soul, new mind, all perfect as it was originally intended. So the Jews had a special purpose by God, but it was to bring the Savior of the world (the Messiah) and not just to elevate the Jewish nation above all others in some kind of arrogant exclusivism. Paul implies that they should have known all of this if they really understood the law of God and its purpose.

You are convinced that you are a guide for the blind and a light for people who were lost in darkness. And that's true. They were *supposed* to be all of that. They just weren't very good at it because they were too self-centered, not seeing the worldwide purpose of God for all humanity. They had all the information; they just weren't seeing things clearly. Perhaps they couldn't accept being mere humans, in need of salvation like everyone else. They had more and better information than the other nations around them, who were going around killing each other. However, the Jews did their share of that, too. They were guilty

of the worst kind of genocide, slaughtering women and children (“all that lives” was supposedly the command from God through Samuel) as they took over land they believed God had promised them. But at least they had *some* conscience and some guidance from God that they listened to. This is evident in their writings that composed the Old Testament. “You are a guide for the blind and a light for people who were lost in darkness,” Paul wrote to them, even though they, too, were lost in darkness to a great degree.

Paul continues. *You think you can instruct the ignorant and teach children the ways of God, for you are certain that God's law gives you complete knowledge of truth?* That is how they viewed themselves, even though they fell far short of any such commendation. They had the whole law and many had it memorized, yet they still didn't have the truth. They had some of it and understood it somewhat, but not all of it. They knew just enough to be pompous and arrogant, but not enough to fit in successfully into God's greater purpose. Do we sometimes fall into this trap in our lives? We think we really have it all figured out, attending the right church and doing all the right things, pleasing God in all we do. But do we really? Is it possible we are sometimes just as blind as these Jews were way back then? They did not just keep the law that was given to them; they added to it and hung it around the spiritual necks of those they ruled over, controlling them for their own gain and purposes.

Practice what you preach (2:21)

Well then, if you teach others, why don't you teach yourself? Paul's conceding that they have the law, that they are supposed to guide people, and that they think they're really great. So, he rightly asks them why they're not teaching themselves to

do what is right. You tell others not to steal, but do you steal? He's not just asking. He's implying. You say it is wrong to commit adultery, but do you commit adultery? And they did. One thing they would do (and Jesus called them on it) is give their wife a "certificate of divorce" when they got tired of her and found some exciting new woman to marry. This is just legalized adultery. Marriage is about making a commitment and keeping it (except in rare circumstances). They legally issued a certificate of divorce because they had the legal system locked up under their control. Leaders of all sorts (politicians, pastors, policemen, etc.) do this kind of thing today. We have all seen it, and they give a bad name to the many good ones out there.

You can condemn idolatry, but do you use items stolen from Pagan temples? You are so proud of knowing the law, but you dishonor God by breaking it? Claiming it isn't the same as doing it. No wonder scriptures say, "the Gentiles blaspheme the name of God because of you." If they're not living up to what they claim, they're hypocrites. Then the Gentiles out there who are supposed to be looking to the Jews as a guide see them messing up, and as a result, they want nothing to do with God. The church I attended for the past 45 years has a checkered past, at best. Two of the six senior pastors and two highly respected layman leaders were all discovered to be living hidden lives of immorality. Publicly, they presented themselves as men of God while engaging in sexual misconduct that violated what they taught. This is the kind of hypocrisy many Jewish leaders engaged in, and Paul is calling them out for it. Have you ever lived some kind of inconsistent life, presenting yourself one way while living another way in secret? Everyone has to some degree, even if just in small ways. Paul is being hard on them because they really believed they were God's gift to mankind, which they were supposed to be, but were incapable of living up

to it. No one ever does, and that's why we all need God to save us from our sin and ourselves.

Here is where it gets ironic today. Jesus came and brought correction for Judaism (which had gone off track), providing a new covenant and relationship with God. But then, the Christian Church that received this great freedom from Jesus fell into the same trap as the Jews. Over the last 2000 years, we have perverted the original things we inherited from Jesus. We've added many new and foolish practices, and sometimes have lived in hypocrisy. We're no better than the Jews in many ways, demonstrating that we need God's saving work as much as they did. This just proves that the only solution is in knowing God himself, not in an institutionalized church or traditions that follow from it. In and of themselves, church and traditions are not bad things. People can enjoy the fellowship and services provided, but *real* salvation is not in any church; it's not even in the Bible. Even Jesus said, "You've got these writings, these scriptures, but there's no salvation in them. There's only salvation in me, a person!" Those Old Testament writings could not save them any more than our New Testament writings can save us. They're just writings. They might be special writings, but only Jesus can save, as a person who dies on the cross, taking action on our behalf.

Paul is essentially saying, "Okay, great, you're a Jew. You think you've got it all together. I already addressed the Gentiles (non-Jews) in the first part of this letter, and now I'm telling you Jews that you don't have your act together either." His conclusion is going to be that everyone is in bondage under sin and needs to be saved from it. This is the *solution* that he will soon reveal in this letter.

True Jews (2:25)

Paul now uses the ritual of circumcision as an example of the danger of elevating something symbolic over the reality it

represents. You can plug in any required ritual or practice because they are all subject to this important principle that Paul is teaching. *The Jewish ceremony of circumcision* (or any ritual) *has value only if you obey God's law*. So, if you're going out, living any way you want, while claiming some religious ritual has great value, you're just fooling yourself. The ritual becomes a cover for wrongdoing rather than truly representing something good. Doing what is right (obeying the law) is what counts and will serve you well in life. Rituals are only intended to encourage you to live this way. Doing some ritual accomplishes nothing of any real substance in your life. You are better off skipping the rituals and doing what's right, rather than doing what's wrong and covering it up with some ritual. Never get this backward. God's love is never about Himself; it's always about our well-being. We are taught that God is pleased by our ritual practices, but really, He is not. He wants us to do what is right because it is best for us.

If you don't obey God's law, you're no better off than an uncircumcised Gentile. While circumcision doesn't cover a multitude of sins, the blood of Christ does. There is no power in rituals, just feelings. If you do communion, baptism, Advent, or any other ritual, there is nothing wrong with any of these, but none can save you from anything. Neither will circumcision. Paul then presents this contrast. *If the Gentiles obey God's law, won't God declare them to be His own people?* Yes! If they get to the point where they do what's right, for whatever reason, God is pleased because they are so much better off. They have been saved (delivered) from all the consequences that would have come had they done what was wrong. But, according to Paul in this letter (as well as elsewhere in the New Testament), it is very hard, if not impossible, for people to break out of sin and wrongdoing without turning to God by faith and experiencing

him. By faith, we start to engage with God and have a relationship with him, and then it becomes an “instinctive life” of walking with him daily instead of trying to keep the law and prove to God that we really mean business. The more we try not to sin, the more we will because we're so focused on it. But as we turn to God by faith, our lives will be connected with him and we'll be more *instinctively* doing what's right, doing good things, and “keeping the law.” This is very different from trying to keep the law so you can earn something from God.

Being *God's own people* (as Paul said above) isn't being part of a certain race. It's not about circumcision. It's not about Bible knowledge. It's not about going to seminary. It's not about being in an institutionalized church. It's about getting into a relationship with God, where you are free to do what's right. *In fact, uncircumcised Gentiles who keep God's law will condemn you Jews who are circumcised and possess God's law, but don't obey it.* Paul's turning the tables on the Jews. He's telling them, “Before you think you can go do a ritual and be okay with God, think again.” It doesn't work that way. *You are not a true Jew just because you were born of Jewish parents or because you have gone through the ceremony of circumcision. No, a true Jew is one whose heart is right with God.* A person's heart is right with God when they believe in him and begin to engage in a relationship with him. So, Paul's really coming back to faith as the key to life (as he always does) concerning what's going on inside people, in their hearts. You can do all the rituals you want, but if the reality of what the ritual is supposed to be pointing to is ignored, it gains us nothing. Whether it's circumcision, or baptism, or communion, or lent, or anything else, if the reality of what these point to isn't happening in your life, then the ritual itself is meaningless. So, a *true Jew* is one whose heart is right with God.

True circumcision is not merely obeying the letter of the law. Rather, it's a change of heart produced by God's spirit. That's how anyone's heart will ever change. You can try to change your heart, but it's almost impossible without God's help. But you can also stop God from doing it. You can grieve him, and you can thwart him. He allows this so that we will learn, even if it takes a long time. But eventually, God is the one who changes your heart. At some point, you allow it. But more often than not, it is through difficulties and struggles that He accomplishes this.

Finally, Paul writes, *A person with a changed heart seeks praise from God, not from people.* Once you get focused on that, you realize it's all about you and God, no one else. My security, my faith, my future, my peace, my joy, my living is all wrapped up in knowing God. I'm free to know people, talk to them, and have relationships with them, and even more than I ever did when I was trying to make it all about me and my rituals! Can you see the freedom that God's bringing to people, saying, "Get unglued from the rituals, they're just symbolic of something more important." If you get lost in the symbolism, lost in the act of the ritual itself, thinking that's gonna gain you something with God, man oh man, you're really missing out!

11. No One Is Righteous (Romans 3:1-20)

God is entirely fair (3:1)

Paul logically asks next, *what's the advantage of being a Jew?* Remember, the Jews really thought they had their act together because they considered themselves to be “God’s chosen people.” And they were, in a sense, chosen by God but only to bring a Messiah out of a historical framework. They took it in a way that made them condescend to all other people. God chose them, Abraham and all his descendants, to be the race of people who would bring the Messiah, which was their main job. It was not to be one up on everybody else, be in the *in crowd*, excluding all others. But isn't that what human beings tend to do in any circumstance, in 8th grade, in kindergarten, in politics, and in churches? The cry is, “We’re in the in crowd; you guys are close, but no cigar.” But God's attitude is, “I’m out to save the whole world and I’m gonna do it through the Jews.” And so, Paul is now asking what advantage, if any, there is in being a Jew.

Paul adds this question: *Is there any value in the ceremony of circumcision?* His answer is: *yes, there are great benefits. First of all, the Jews were entrusted with the whole revelation of God.* They viewed their Old Testament writings as God revealing himself to them, and they were entrusted with this revelation. The other nations didn't seem to get anything directly from God. He brought it all through the Jews, and they were to

be an example nation, taking God's message out to the whole world so that everyone would know who God is. But they were so messed up and self-centered, the message never got out. Even if it did, who would believe them with all the problems they had?

Paul now qualifies his answer a little. *True, some of them were unfaithful. But just because they were, does that mean God will be unfaithful, too?* God never lets anyone mess up His plan. His attitude seems to be, "If you mess up, I'm not going to let that stop me. I'm going on with my plan. If you want to be part of it, get on board; if you don't, get out of the way. I know what my mission is, and I will not fail." Jesus knew his mission that God had for him, and he accomplished it on the cross. It was to come and die and save humanity from sin. So, their unfaithfulness (nor ours) can ever affect what God does. It just affects the degree to which we will be a part of what He is doing. It's our choice.

Paul's answer to his question is, *Of course not! Even if everyone else is a liar, God remains true.* As the writings (Old Testament) say about God: "You will be proven right in what you say, and you will win your case in court." This is a quote from Psalms 51. Sometimes the writers of the New Testament find a quote in the Psalms or elsewhere in the Old Testament that supports what they're trying to teach. David was using this kind of language about God, saying He would win His case in court. Of course, God does not go to court where He would be judged – who would judge him? David's just using language that people understand. Everyone knows that a court is where decisions are made regarding who is right or wrong. So, David is just saying that God will eventually be proven right in the courtroom of the world, of life in the universe.

Does our sin glorify God? (3:5)

Now Paul presents a hypothetical. *But some might say our sinfulness serves a good purpose, for it helps people see how righteous God is.* On the one hand, this is true. Our sinfulness does indeed point out how perfect God is and how far we fall short of His glory. But Paul may be objecting to the fact that some might use this as an excuse to justify their own sinfulness. *Isn't it unfair, then, for God to punish us? (This is merely a human point of view.)* Hey, if our being sinful makes God look better, why is He punishing us for our sin? I'm surprised that Paul felt the need to bring this up. But people's reasoning can get really convoluted as they try to find excuses for sinning. So perhaps his questions are in order. We know so much more today, and we forget how ignorant and basic the ancients were. However, keep in mind that we have our own set of blind spots and short-sightedness in our modern age.

Paul again answers his own question (he does this a lot) to lead his readers where he wants them to go. *Of course not!* It is never wrong for God to punish sin with the goal of correcting us and saving us from it. In fact, it is very right that He does, and it would be wrong if He didn't. But Paul further asks, *If God were not entirely fair, how could He be qualified to judge the world?* We say life's unfair, and from our perspective, it is because some people seem to go through much harder things than we do. I helped a lady today who's got a ton of problems going on in her life. I have no idea how she bears it. Some, but not all of her problems, she brings on herself. Isn't this true of all of us to some degree? So, I helped her where I could. I put a new battery in her car and sent her on her way. I figured that transportation is essential to almost everything else in life, and it was the best way for me to help. But I often think that it's not fair that she has to live the way she does, while I live in relative ease. However, life is

what it is, and somehow in God's economy, He is *fair*, in that He loves everyone the same and treats everybody (ultimately) the same. He may test some people more than others to increase their faith, and He may discipline some people more because they need it. He may let some people get away with things, only to be judged (accurately assessed) for their choices. You know what happens when people get away with things? It eventually catches up with them.

I once told my kids that the reason most people get caught is because they got away with it in the past, which made it appear so easy. They could not help but try it again, and they did so until they got caught. So don't think that if you get away with wrongdoing and God doesn't do anything about it right now, that you've gotten away with it. He's doing something by not doing anything! He knows what you're going to do to yourself, and he'll be there for you when you fall on your face. So, all of these things work in the economy of God's type of *fairness*. This is why Paul's answer was a big fat "of course not!" when he asked if it is unfair for God to punish (correct) us.

Paul restates his question in another way. *Someone might still argue: How can God condemn me as a sinner if my dishonesty highlights His truthfulness and brings Him more glory?* But then he answers this new question in a new way, making a new point. *Some people slander us by claiming that we say that the more we sin, the better it is. Those who say such things deserve to be condemned.* They didn't have the Internet or social media, but they did have word-of-mouth communication. And, perhaps, this is always the most effective form of propaganda in any age or generation. There are always some people who purposely speak falsehood or unwittingly pass it on as a result of being persuaded. Paul had to fight this a lot. On one occasion, he had people trying to cause him grief by

preaching the Good News in competition with him, perhaps wanting to create their own following or start a church of their own. His response was not jealousy, but elation that the Good News message was going out, regardless of the motive. He knew that the Good News, as a message, was very powerful and would change lives no matter who was spreading it or why.

So Paul gets these false ideas out of the way about how we make God look good, by contrast, when we sin as an excuse to cover our sin. Perhaps there were some telling people to go ahead and sin in order to make God look better. But to Paul, that was nonsense.

No one is truly good and wise (3:9)

Paul is about to wrap up this lengthy part of his letter, which deals with the *problem*. This is kind of a summary of all he has written up to this point in preparation for the solution, which will follow. *Well, then, should we conclude that Jews are better than others? Nope, not at all. For we've already shown that all people, whether Jews or Gentiles, are under the power of sin.* His readers are remembering the list of sins he gave, the judgment (accurate assessment) God will bring on them as a result, and the repentance He has granted them in His kindness that they are wise to seek.

Paul then quotes Psalms 14 to make his case for everyone being under the bondage of their own sin, weakness, failure, and flaws. *As the writings say: No one is righteous; not even one.* So, according to Paul, everybody's in the same boat. They might be on different ends of the boat, they might be in their own little boat, or they might be sinking quicker than others. But we're all sinking! He continues on, *No one is truly wise.* There are, for sure, some people who are wiser than others, but nobody is *truly*

wise universally. In my younger years, I remember some people whom I really looked up to and admired. My thoughts were, “Man, they are so wise. They seem to always do and think what is right.” Well, compared to me, they were indeed wiser, and I still appreciate them to this day. However, I found out later in life that they were all flawed to various degrees. I saw their blind spots, and I realized they're just as human as the rest of us. Some were better off than others in the wisdom department, but none were *truly* and completely wise. This, I think, is Paul's point.

Paul has more to say. *No one is seeking God*. Actually, there are many who seek God in their own way and time. But generally, the majority of humanity is just too busy. They are seeking more for the things only God can bring (joy, peace, freedom, true love, etc.) rather than God himself. When we do finally seek God (often after a lot of seeking other things and being repeatedly disappointed), we seek him because He is seeking us and is doing things in our lives to draw us to himself. But left to ourselves, we don't seek God. We're just too self-centered.

Next, he writes, *All have turned away and become useless*. All of us have ultimately turned from God. Even those who have been raised to believe in God have turned away from him to some degree. It's our nature to do so, but God understands this and wants to correct us. There are even times when we say, “God, I want you out of my life,” or “I'm gonna go do this wrong thing anyway, because I'm enjoying the temporary benefits of it.” It can be something immoral, it can be chasing money, or it can be getting back at someone. We've all turned away from God to some degree at some time in our lives and have, in effect, become *useless* (to ourselves and those around us). Have you ever seen this in others or in yourself? Now, this doesn't mean we have no value whatsoever with God; we are of infinite value to him, having been made in His own image and likeness. But functionally, we're kind

of useless to ourselves and others. *No one does good, not a single one.* Of course, people do good things, but he's saying that overall, we are not good people, and everyone's in the same category, no exceptions.

Tongues filled with lies (3:13)

Their talk is foul like the stench from an open grave. Oh, yuck. Ever smelled something that's dead? You don't want to. I've never smelled a dead human, but I've smelled dead rats and a dead deer. There's something really, really foul about it. Paul uses this extreme language to wake us up and realize we are in real trouble and in need of a savior.

He continues his long description. This list is similar to the list of sins he gave earlier in this letter. *Their tongues are filled with lies. Snake venom drips from their lips. Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.* Paul is referring here to our speech and how we use our tongue. This is perhaps the most destructive and vile part of our being. It's not literally our tongue that is corrupt, but who we are in our corrupt mind and soul that uses our tongue. James, in his letter, gave a sharp rebuke about how people misuse their tongues. He wrote that "the fires of *Gehenna* set our tongues on fire." Some translations use the word "hell" instead of the Greek word *Gehenna*, which is a proper noun. *Gehenna* was a location south of Jerusalem where trash was burned back in the days of Jesus. Of course, James did not mean this literally, but metaphorically; the destructive nature of fire is true of our tongue, which only reveals our state of mind and the heart behind it.

They rush to commit murder. Now, of course, everybody doesn't rush to commit murder, but as Jesus said, if we hate

others, we murder them in our hearts. It is amazing watching crime shows on TV and how some murders are so horrific. How can anyone do such things? Sometimes it's just senseless, or they get some joy out of it. Sometimes it's for money or out of jealousy. But before we judge, remember what Paul wrote earlier in this letter, "You do the same things!" Maybe not to the same degree, but sin, anger, jealousy, revenge, and lusts of various kinds are common among humans.

As a kid, I remember reading the Proverbs, and it said there are those who "lie in wait to shed blood." I remember thinking, "Who would wait over on the side of the road to kill somebody?" But now I realize there really are people who, for political purposes, for money, for jealousy, in selfishness, or just some kind of sick pleasure, enjoy killing other people. All kinds of things come out of mental illness and evil desires. There is always a little of this in everyone, so the shoe always fits.

Destruction and misery always follow them. But, eventually, it catches up with them. *They don't know where to find peace.* They really don't. A lot of them aren't even looking for. Some are looking in the wrong places for the wrong reasons. But eventually, many finally get around to looking into who God is out of desperation. Some of them sought God early on in life and had a bad experience. Perhaps some annoying evangelical or Catholic (or whoever) got a hold of them only to scare them away from God, when in reality they were escaping over-aggressive and possessive people. However, none of this ever disables God in any way; He just uses whatever bad experiences people encounter to work in their lives. He's that big!

They have No Fear of God at all. For some humans, there's no respect for God. However, most of humanity, now and in history, holds some kind of belief in God, a higher power, or even

a cosmic consciousness. But much of this is fear-based. God is often seen as a vengeful supreme being who, if you do not submit to, obey, or believe in correctly, will bring some kind of unbelievably horrific harm upon you. Judaism, modern-day Christianity, and Islam all hold such beliefs to differing degrees. But I believe, as did the early church before the Fourth Century, that God's plan is to save the whole world and that any anger, vengeance, or punishment is always done in the best interest of people, whom He so loves and will eventually save in totality. Getting there by trusting God is nearly impossible for many. But God will do whatever it takes to redeem, restore, reconcile, and save His world.

When we believe and turn to God, realizing His love, grace, and entirely good intentions, all fear is removed. He is no longer to be feared (though reverently respected) because we come to know him and realize His love is what will win in the end. All other religions are fear and guilt-based, controlling people in the name of doing what is best for them. Proverbs says, "The beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord." And that's how we start, all of us, instinctively. When we realize for the first time that there is a God, we instinctively fear him. However, after we come to know Him, understand how He works to save everyone, and experience His love and grace, we end up in John's first letter (near the end of the New Testament) where he writes, "Perfect love casts out fear." This is the journey everyone is on, and God will see to it that we arrive at His intended destination, safely in His presence.

When we're walking with God, we don't have any fear. But those who do not know God also have no fear (according to Paul), but for a different reason. They are fooled into thinking God does not exist, or thinking they don't need him even if He does. So, they fall into a false sense of security, not realizing that the journey they need to take starts with fear but ends with love!

The law shows us our need (3:19)

Paul closes this *problem* part of his letter in this way: Obviously, the law applies to those to whom it was given, and it would be the Jews. But its purpose is to keep people from having excuses and to show that the entire world is guilty before God. That's the main purpose of the law; it is not to save anyone. Only God can (and will) do that. Nobody can perfectly keep it. It identifies all our weaknesses, and even if you don't go around murdering people and robbing banks, there are plenty of other sins that keep us busy. So obviously, the law applies to the Jews, but its purpose is to remove everyone's excuse for sinning and to show that the entire world is guilty before God.

For no one can ever be made right with God by doing what the law commands. We can all do some good things, such as not cheating on your spouse, not robbing banks, telling the truth, and honoring your parents. That's all good, but it'll never make you right with God because you'll never do it all perfectly. God requires perfection of us, but not in a threatening way. It is His *standard* because it's also His *goal* for us, and He will settle for nothing less. I'm always amazed how religious people turn God's desire for perfection in us into a requirement whereby He will do something horrible if we fail. He sees our need to be perfect and sets out to bring this about in us for our own good, not his. This is how love operates.

And besides, doing good and keeping some rules is not how we're ultimately made right with God, because there's something higher, more intimate, and more important than just our mere actions. God seeks a perfection in us that is much more real than simple compliance. He desires a relationship with us, and He will never fail in achieving this with every human being. He will not give up until He succeeds.

The law simply shows us how sinful we are. Okay, the law is a measuring stick. And if you take it seriously, it can become very discouraging because we all soon find out we cannot keep it, no matter how hard we try. The more we try (if indeed we ever get around to it, and many never do), the more we realize we only fail. So go ahead, try to keep the law, any law, and the standard of always doing what's right. Such an attempt is the greatest tutor in the world, showing us how sinful we really are.

So, what is the solution? Try harder? Give up? Fortunately, Paul is about to tell us what God's solution is. It's not complicated, and we are not required to do anything because everything is already taken care of. If anything, the solution is for us to quit trying! This solution is all about Jesus, who he was, and what he did for humanity. Paul will spend just half a chapter of his letter presenting it. It is very simple and to the point. But keep in mind that explaining all the details and answering all the questions people have about this *solution* will take considerable time. And that's what the *explanation* part of Paul's letter is all about. After he gives the short, sweet, simple, powerful solution, he will launch into the longest part of his letter: from Romans 4 through 11 (8 chapters). After that, he will logically present the *results* of the *solution* that he has *explained*, things we can count on happening as we place our trust in God, Jesus, and all He has done on our behalf.

Part II:
The Solution
(Romans 3:21-31)

12. Freed From the Penalty of Sin (Romans 3:21-25a)

But now! (3:21)

Paul shifts gears in verse 21 by using these words: “But now.” These are two big, significant words! Circle these two words in your mind. This is a huge turning point for Paul. I can't overemphasize this. Up to this point, he concluded that “all are sinful and nobody seeks God.” And so now he will start presenting the *solution* to the problem that he described previously in his letter.

It's kind of like how the Bible begins in Genesis, “In the beginning, God...” Somebody once said that the rest of the Bible is just footnotes on those first four words. Well, this is Paul's starting point of the solution: *But now God has shown us a way to be made right with him, without keeping the requirements of the law.* This is a big deal to the Jews because they believe the more you keep the law, the more God accepts you. It makes sense from a human perspective, but it isn't true. If you can keep it fully – and the Pharisees went around with the illusion that they did – you are fully right with God. But they didn't keep it; they were fooling themselves and others.

This *but now* solution was also Good News to the non-Jews (Gentiles) because all human beings live with guilt, knowing very well that they fall short of perfection. The Jews were just more arrogant and hypocritical about it. They were sneaking around behind the scenes, sinning as much (or more) than those they looked down on. Even those Jews who were fairly moral still

weren't keeping the law perfectly. And the few who were really moral and kept most of the law, they were guilty of the biggest sin ... pride! That's *pride*, with a big "I" in the middle of it. So, while they were legalistically keeping the law, they were also committing probably the biggest sin (pride) and condescending to others.

Remember the guy that Jesus asked, "Have you kept the law?" and he answered, "Indeed I have!" Jesus did not fight him on this; he just told him, "Go sell everything and follow me." Funny thing, the guy balked and said, "Oh, wait a minute. That will affect my lifestyle too much," and he went away sad. But there are other people who say, "Look, I've tried really hard to keep the law, but I've failed." At least there is a degree of humility in them, which is perhaps their first step to discovering and receiving the *solution* Paul is about to present. We need only to acknowledge our sin and our need for someone to save us, saying, "Okay, God, I'm a sinner. I'm listening. Please help me." So simple, but so very hard for people to do. Even in our act of turning to God, we need help from Him. This is what grace is all about: God saving us from start to finish.

So now, what are we going to do about it? Well, Paul's saying, "But now God has shown us a way to be made right with Him without keeping the requirements of the law." Hallelujah! We can't do it anyway. Oh, Paul. Tell us more. *This was promised in the writings of Moses and the prophets long ago.* What? Do you mean the way to be made right with God, without keeping the law, was promised by Moses and the prophets? Whoa. Which book was that in? It seems like a whole bunch of legal stuff in the Old Testament.

Well, let's read on: *We are made right with God by placing our faith in Jesus Christ.* Now, some caution is in order here. Believing (faith) never earns us anything with God. Someone

once called faith a “non-meritorious work.” Faith is certainly something we do, so in that sense it is a “work” on our part. But it is more like a “proper response” to what has *already* been done for us by God, through Jesus. It earns us nothing with God because it can’t. Nothing can. This is what grace is all about, and that is about the best news anyone could ever hear. God does it all for us, and we contribute nothing. We just accept it by faith, which is all we can do. What a huge load is taken off of us, no longer believing we must always earn something with God? This may be true in life as we interact with other people (bosses, spouses, authorities, and friends), but not with God. We need not earn anything with him simply because we can’t! We’re made right with God by placing our faith in him and in Jesus Christ. When we do this, we come into alignment with him by saying, “God, I want to know you. I believe in you. I believe what Jesus did for me,” and then we enter into a right relationship with God (we are “made right” with God). However, keep in mind that there is not an ounce of earning on our part.

This is altogether different from the popular idea that when we believe, it earns us something with God, causing God to say, “Oh, good; you’re a believer. I’m going to think highly of you now.” He already thinks highly of us. What our faith does is to change us; it doesn’t change God; He never changes. When we believe we change, and we start seeking God, engaging with him, instinctively wanting to pray and walk with him daily.

So, we’re made right with God by placing our faith in Jesus Christ. *And this is True for everyone who believes, no matter who we are.* Okay, it works for everyone. Frankly, I think a Buddhist, Muslim, Hindu, or a pagan in the darkest reaches of Africa can all be believers. They may not have heard about Jesus, or may have only heard distortions about him, but that does not change who He is and what He did for all humanity. God recognizes faith wherever He finds it, imperfect as it is in all of

us, even in those who have some distorted or incomplete view of God. Don't Christians all have inaccurate ideas about God? Is there anyone who has completely figured it all out and does not err in their thinking in any way? I don't think so. God's goal is not to condemn and abandon people. Rather, He "desires all to be saved." Can He ever abandon that desire and decide to give up on anyone? What kind of God would ever do that? God loves unconditionally and saves unconditionally. This is what grace is all about. However, to the degree that we can know him better with more accurate information about him, the closer we will be to him and the more we will benefit from being "right with him" by faith. Would God (could God) ever abandon anyone for having too little or incomplete faith? I don't think so.

There are many valuable teachings in Buddhism. It's not all junk as some Christians think. They hold many good and practical principles about life. In some ways, Buddhism is "Christianity without Jesus." This is not entirely accurate, but there is some validity to this idea. There are many principles stated in the New Testament that are also stated by Buddha and his followers, just in a different time and place. Good and true principles are valid, no matter their source, because they are, ultimately, all God's principles and truths. They do not belong exclusively to institutionalized Christianity. This is also true about Plato. How did both of these thinkers (Buddha and Plato) come up with so many good and helpful ideas 500 years before Jesus? God had to be involved. He does not work in isolation, nor exclusively through Jesus and the New Testament (though this may be His best and most complete sources of revelation). The truth is the *truth*, no matter where it is found, and God graciously reveals it to anyone who seeks it.

When people believe in God, inaccurate as it may be (and remember, we all hold some inaccuracies about God), they are still engaging with him to some degree, perhaps only in the best way they can. In this way, through their faith, limited as it might

be, they are “made right” with God, more so than if they did not believe at all. Eventually, God will bring them fully to himself, in this life or the one to come. He is that big, loving, and successful. Love never fails!

All have sinned (3:23)

Everyone has sinned. This is a famous verse, memorized by millions over the past 2000 years. It is Romans 3:23, which is part of the *Romans Road* that I was taught as a kid. It starts here in 3:23, then goes to 6:23 (we'll get there in a while), then on to Romans 10, and we'll get there in quite a while. The *Romans Road* probably ends in 12:1. That's where Paul begins the *results* part of this letter.

Paul then adds, *we all fall short of God's perfection*, or His *glory* in some translations. Some translate this as His *glorious standard*. That captures Paul's thought pretty well. I think every sane person would agree that they are sinful (to “miss the target”) to some degree. Get into any relationship, and this will become obvious very quickly, not just about the other person but about you, too. Most people would say, “Well, if there's a God and He's perfect, that's sure beyond me, and so He must be up there somewhere.” Others will conclude, “Yep, I'm imperfect, but I doubt there is some kind of god out there that I can't see. So, I'm not worried about it.” However, the idea that we are all sinners and fall short of perfection is widely understood. People instinctively realize who they are, what they're made of, and their limitations.

Yet God, with kindness we do not deserve, declares that we are righteous. In other words, kindness that comes from God that we didn't in any way earn. We don't deserve it, regardless of any actions on our part. God is rich in kindness because it's who

He is; it's His nature to be kind. Even in His anger, there is love and kindness because He is responding to our foolish, self-destructive behavior and only wants the very best for us. This is what love always does and focuses on. Since God loves us and we need His kindness, in this sense, we *deserve* it. But how can He possibly declare us righteous (perfect) when in reality we are not? Is He fooling himself and not facing reality? Hardly! Here is Paul's explanation. *He did this through Christ Jesus, when he freed us from the penalty of our sins.* It is a freedom that comes through Christ's dying on the cross for us. Paul goes on and explains that *God presented Jesus as the sacrifice for sin.* In other words, God sent Jesus to take our sins away from us and onto himself. He bore them on the cross; all of them.

Now, keep in mind that sin is our enemy, not God. When Jesus died on the cross for us, he took the *bullet of our sin* that was being shot at us and destroying us. All Jesus did was get in the way and take that bullet for us. It's never a bullet that God's shooting at us in His wrath, saying, "I want to do something awful to you as a result of your sin." That's a whole different view of God. The enemy is not God; it is our sin. He is never our enemy (except in the minds of some who do not fully realize His love). He is the one who loves us. The Father, through Jesus, together with the Holy Spirit, is saying, "We've got this plan to come die on the cross, take the sin upon us, taking away the sin that's killing you. We're going to take sin on ourselves, away from all of you." As the one who is the central focus of this saving mission by God, Jesus says, "I'm going to step up and take away your sins through my death on the cross."

So, we are freed from our sin because God, in His undeserved kindness, declares that we are free from sin (righteous). "He did this, declaring us righteous through Christ Jesus when he freed us from the penalty of our sin." It's easy for some religious people to think, "Well, the penalty of sin is God retaliating, wanting to do something horrific to people for

sinning.” But in reality, in the grace of God, He for sure wants to do something about our sin. But what He wants to do is take it away from us, correct us, and free us to have a wonderful, never-ending relationship with him (which has always been His only goal, even far before He even created us). God is effectively saying, “I don't want you sinning anymore. I want to get that crap out of your life.” The real *penalty* of sin is the sin itself in our lives that destroys us. So, what is God removing when He frees us from the penalty of our sins? He's removing the effects of it and the consequence of being a sinner. Sin, uncorrected, will kill you, literally, physically, mentally, and emotionally, and in every other sense. It is a very destructive force that we bring on ourselves. Often, when we fall into sin, missing the mark, we fall into a vicious cycle where we sin, leading us into more sin as we get fooled and confused by it. The more we sin, the more we continue to sin because we lose our perspective; we get lost in the enjoyment and the stimulation of “sin for a season,” for a short time. It's easy to fall into that spiral, and it really takes God to help us get out of it.

13. Faith is the Key to Grace (Romans 3:25b-31)

Looking ahead in time (3:25b)

After Paul stated that “God presented Jesus as a sacrifice for sin,” he goes on and says, *People are made right with God when they believe that Jesus sacrificed his life, shedding his blood.* Now, this phrase “made right” is the word for *justification* in Greek. Some translations use that English word, but I prefer (as do many translators) to spell out the meaning so that everyone can understand clearly. Too many translations use overly complex words, leaving readers to wonder what they mean. However, even the word 'justification' is easy to understand with a few examples of usage. When we *justify* the margins in a word-processing document, we are making them right, placing them within defined limits. To *justify* financial accounting books is to make all the numbers add up correctly. So, that's the same sense of this word Paul is using to say that God *makes us right* with himself.

When we believe, that's what happens. We come into a right relationship with God. But did we earn anything by doing this? No. God doesn't say, “Finally, you're believing. I'll start loving you now and thinking highly of you.” No, no, no. He has always loved us and will never quit doing so. But it does change *us*. And it does make us more right (more rightly connected) with God in His sight and in our experience with him.

So, people are *made right* with God when they believe. Belief is very powerful. It's very important. It just doesn't earn us

anything with God. However, it certainly brings us closer to him in our fellowship. If you can figure out the difference between *earning* something (by doing something) and *gaining* something (through a relationship), you have found one of the big keys to life. The distinction I would make is that when you believe you gain a lot in walking with God daily, which greatly improves all your relationships with people, not to mention all the peace, freedom, and joy you will experience. None of this is a result of some kind of earning. This is the essence of what God's grace is all about. Grace is *unmerited favor*, so God favors us based on nothing we do or don't do. It is a favor (kindness) that is resident in himself. It's just who He is.

This sacrifice shows that God was being fair when He held back and did not punish those who sinned in the past. Back then, He was looking ahead and including everyone in what He has done in this present time. God did all this to demonstrate His righteousness. Part of the cross is just a demonstration that God already loves us and forgives us. It's not like He waited until Jesus died on the cross to love and forgive. He always did. The cross was a *demonstration* that we're already good with him. The problem is, we don't believe it. It is our minds that need to change. God does not need to change because He never does!

God is always fair and just. Those are two different things. *Just* (justice) is "making things right." True justice in our court system is when everything is made right, people are compensated, or receive some kind of correction. This is why we refer to certain places as "correction facilities" and "penitentiaries." The goal is to bring corrective punishment, not retaliation. This is even more true on God's part; we got this idea from him! *Fairness* is about treating everybody equally, and not allowing favoritism or giving

some offenders an undue advantage. God *declares sinners to be right in His sight when they believe in Jesus*. This is true. It is a declaration on the part of God. He sees us being *right* because we're believing, we're acting better, we're engaging with him because we now believe in him. We're close to him, and He sees us as people of faith. However, note that Paul previously stated that God accomplished this through Jesus Christ when He freed us from the penalty of sin. God was in Christ, who sacrificed his life by shedding his blood and dying. So, really, the power of salvation in the gospel message is what Jesus did, not what we do in responding properly by believing (important as that is).

God saves us from our sin, and then we respond with, "Oh wow, 2000 years ago, Jesus saved me, long before I was even born. Thank you, God. I believe it." And now good things start to happen in our lives. But keep in mind that the moment you believe isn't when you're saved from the *penalty* of sin. That happened back when *you* were on the cross, in Christ as your representative. Do you see the difference? Many shift the focus of salvation from God doing something good *for* us, to God doing something horrible *to* us, for the rest of eternity because we have sinned or failed to believe. When this happens, salvation becomes a work (the work of believing), qualifying us for it. That is completely backward, and many want you to believe this because it gives them control over your life via fear and guilt. It comes out like this: if you believe you are alleviated from experiencing something horrible, like hell, damnation, or whatever. If you don't believe, that horrible thing will remain pending. It turns out to be "salvation by works", the work of believing, which exempts you from God's angry retaliation. But this is not the case. God has freed us from sin and its penalty (of keeping us in its destructive bondage) by what He did through Jesus on the cross. We each can believe it or not, but either way, it does not change what He did. If you don't believe it, you're going to go through all kinds of horrible trouble and judgment in this life (as Paul said in the

previous *problem* section). He told his readers that there would be struggle and strife in this life for those who don't believe and those who do what is wrong. But he never mentions anything about eternal punishment or annihilation.

No Bragging Rights (3:27)

Can we boast, thinking we have done anything to earn God's acceptance? No, because our acquittal is not based on obeying the law. It is based on faith. So we are made right with God through faith and not by obeying the law. It's not that we *shouldn't* boast; it's that we *can't* boast, since we played no part in our salvation accomplished by God. Sure, we believe, but this is our proper response to what God has already done for us in Christ. Remember what Paul wrote in chapter 2 of his letter to the Ephesians? (see my commentary titled, *The Mysterious Plan Revealed*.) He told them they were saved *by* grace, *through* faith, not of themselves, and that it was a gift from God, resulting in an inability to boast. There's nothing to brag about, folks! We didn't do anything. Even when we believe we can't brag about it, it earns us nothing. Our faith is just admitting that we could never save ourselves. That's all it is. It's just saying, "God, you did it all." Isn't that great? It takes such a big load off of us.

This *solution* portion of Paul's letter consists of only half of Romans Three. It is brief, but packed with essential information, even though the solution is simple and straightforward. We started in verse 21, we're about to launch into verse 28, and we will end in verse 31. That's just 10 verses. Paul will write about 16 times more to *explain* this solution. You will find all of this very interesting and helpful. But for now, Paul will continue to present God's *solution* to the *problem*.

Fulfilling the law through faith (3:29)

Is God the God of the Jews only? Paul asks many questions throughout his letter where the answer is obviously “no.” This is one of those occasions. There was a special thing going on with the Jews, which they recorded in their Old Testament writings. They believed they were God’s chosen people that He would use to bring a Messiah, Savior of the World. They saw themselves playing a special role in what God was doing. Good for them! Most Christians generally honor this about the Jews. But God didn’t make them more saved, more important, or into some kind of exclusive group, ultimately favored by God over all other people. It was a temporary status that served its purpose in God’s big plan to save the world. So Paul asks, “Is God the God of the Jews only?” Good question, but one that he answers with a big “No!”

He continued in his thinking. Isn’t He also the God of the Gentiles? Of course He is! Hey, He’s the God of everyone! There’s only one God, and He makes people right with himself by faith, whether they’re Jews or Gentiles. Faith is the big equalizer that places everyone on equal standing before God. Faith lets us (anyone) enter into a relationship with him in a way where everyone is equal, and no one has earned anything. It is very humbling, but that is good for us. All we can do is say, “Thank you,” and enjoy a wonderful experience with our creator who so loves us.

Some of his readers, at this point, may very well be asking the following question Paul poses. Well, then, if we emphasize faith, does that mean we can disregard the law? Good question, Paul. Is it a matter of *faith vs law*? Paul answers, Of course not. In fact, it is only when we have faith that we truly fulfill the law. Now, this is interesting. First, Paul tells us that keeping the law can’t do anything for us because we can’t keep it.

However, even if we could maintain it, our standing with God never depends on us, but solely on God. That is so good to know. Yet, Paul says when we exercise faith, we're fulfilling the law. How does that work? How does our faith enable us to fulfill the law when we obviously haven't?

God's purpose in the law is two-fold. One part didn't and couldn't happen, but it represents God's ideal for us. Had we been able to keep the law perfectly (not lie, not steal, not kill, stay faithful in marriage, honor our parents, focus on God alone without being distracted, and not want things we do not possess), it would have carved out a very good life for us. But none of us did or even could. So, God's second purpose in the law was to demonstrate the reality of our inability to do what is right, saving ourselves from destruction. Our faith fulfills the law (even though we haven't actually kept it) by giving us something even better: a relationship with God that is more fulfilling, more successful, and more protective than merely keeping a bunch of rules ever could. God jumped all of us way past mere law (good as it was in many ways) and landed us squarely in His presence, where we are safe, loved, and at peace.

When we realize that it's not the belief itself that saves us or perfects us, but rather the *object* of our faith: Jesus. God through Jesus saves us from great loss in this life and in eternity, but this was God's plan from the beginning, so it should be no surprise. He knew the law would fail, but He also knew what we would learn in failing. In reality, Jesus kept the law perfectly (I'm sure glad someone did); he fulfilled it. He once said, "I did not come to do away with the law, I came to fulfill it." He came and kept it perfectly, not just as an example, but so that when we believe, we too begin to experience that sense of fulfillment (even though we have not actually done this ourselves). It is a mysterious yet very real thing.

Our faith doesn't do it; our faith just recognizes that he did it for us! I recall reading this in Karl Barth's massive, 14-volume

work titled *Church Dogmatics*. In it, he claimed that faith doesn't earn us anything. The only thing it does is make us realize that there's nothing we can do to save ourselves, not even our act of faith! Once we realize this, we're home free! We can't add anything to what God has done for us. Faith is realizing Jesus did it all; it's such a wonderful thing. It's a realization that changes us and changes our lives, but it doesn't earn us anything with God. This is a crucial distinction; don't miss it. God doesn't conclude, "Okay, finally you have faith. I'll be nice to you now and will not retaliate against you after you die." If that were the case, then faith would be the one work (requirement) that we must do to earn some kind of exemption from eternal torment. But this is not the case. Faith is how we experience God's grace, which is pure, and how God saves us in a way we never could.

So, Paul asks, "If we emphasize faith, does this mean that we can forget about the law? Paul's answer was, "No, of course not." He goes on and explains, "In fact, only when we have faith do we truly fulfill the law," by trusting Jesus, who fulfilled it for us.

Part III:

The Explanation

(Romans 4-11)

14. An Unearned Gift (Romans 4:1-10)

Introduction

This brings Paul's short and sweet *solution* to a close. It is not complicated because it is all about what God has done for us, something we could never do for ourselves. This is what grace is all about, and Paul will contrast *law and grace* throughout the rest of his letter. He now starts the *explanation* part of this letter. This is much longer because it is harder to explain something than to simply state it. He can't possibly explain everything fully, but he can (and will) deal with the most important aspects of the *solution* that God brings to humanity. Paul is always pointing to Jesus and the grace he brings to us from God.

Interestingly, soon into this *explanation* section, he quits mentioning faith for about five chapters (Romans 5 through 9). Then, in Romans 10, he brings faith back into the picture. Why did he do this? Perhaps it's because even our faith has nothing to do with the explanation of how God saves us. Here in Romans Four, it's tempting to think that Paul's saying that faith earns us something, since he repeats that we are "made right" by faith and offers some examples to support it. But I think you will find, after careful reading, that Paul never violates his grand theme of God's grace, saving us completely, allowing not even our faith to be something we can in any way boast about.

We can't work for it (4:1)

Abraham was, humanly speaking, the founder of our Jewish nation. From a human point of view, the Jewish nation and religion started with Abraham, not Moses, not the law. God called a nobody named Abram from the land of Ur, telling him, "I want you to go live in a different place." God had a lot of work to do on this poor fellow before his name was changed to Abraham. Check out this great story of faith in the Old Testament book of Genesis.

What did he (Abraham) discover about being made right with God? If his good deeds had made him acceptable to God, he would have had something to boast about. But they didn't. He had nothing to boast about. His good deeds didn't make him right with God, even though they are a better way to live, just as it is for us today. *That was not God's way of accomplishing this.* True, doing good things (good as that is) is not how God gets us right with Himself. Doing good is not a relationship with a person; it's just actions. But we instinctively think that doing good things satisfies God in some way, earning our way into His acceptance (getting us right with Him), but it doesn't. Since the beginning of time, people have tried to *appease the gods*; this idea has been around forever.

The Old Testament writings tell us that Abraham believed God, and God considered him to be righteous because of his faith. How can this be? Believing something (or in someone, like God) does not change the fact that we sin and do wrong things. Yet God saw Abraham as being perfect and righteous. Why? Obviously, Abraham didn't earn anything by believing. It was just his proper response to God, his Creator.

Maybe it prompted God to just ignore Abraham's sin. Is He allowed to do such a thing? Or maybe Abe's sin was not really an issue for God, except that He did not want to see Abe further destroyed and disadvantaged by it. Or maybe his faith appeased God in some way, causing Him to conclude, "Okay, you have the right attitude toward me. You have calmed my indignation, and so now I won't need to torment you forever." I doubt it. I think God was just saying, "Hey, you're on board with me now and have entered into a relationship with me that is so close we are best friends." (Abraham was once called "the friend of God." Wow!)

But also, Abraham was right with God through his faith because one day in the future, a savior would come who was one of his own descendants! This, of course, would be Jesus. Though Abraham did not believe in Jesus directly, he did believe God enough to uproot his family and move to a strange new land. That's a lot of faith. But more than just "having faith," Abe engaged with God in a personal way. It was a relationship, much more than a mere act of obedience to a deity. We become right with God by exercising faith and relating with him, not in some *earning* way, but by getting on board and saying, "Hey, God, I get it. I'm trusting you." That's what Abraham did.

Paul will first define what working and earning are all about, distinguishing them from faith. *When people work, their wages are not a gift but something they have earned.* That makes sense. We've all had jobs. You work, and then they need to pay you. In fact, they must pay you; you earned it, you deserve it. It's not a gift. *However, God sees people as perfect, not because of working to earn something, but because of their faith in God, who forgives sinners.* Be careful not to just plug in faith as some kind of work, some way for people to earn something with God. This is the main point of what Paul is saying by contrasting work

and faith. One involves earning what is due; the other does not. If, when you believe, you feel like you've earned something with God, caused him to love you more, then you're not understanding the role of faith in your life. You have turned it into some kind of work. You're discounting the cross and what God did there through Jesus, completely by grace. There can't be any works if grace is to be what it is ... unmerited favor from God.

David, too, spoke of this when he described the happiness of those who realize they are declared righteous without working for it. David is Paul's second example in his attempt to convince readers that faith is not in any way a *work*. These happy people are declared righteous by God's grace, through Christ on the cross, and their faith in him, which becomes an engaged experience with God.

If you don't believe, you can't engage in any way with God because you don't even know him. You won't be praying or thinking about God, and you won't be walking with him daily through life. Faith is the key to everything that we experience with God. But again, it's not what we do for God, it's what He has done for us. Our faith is just our way of experiencing him without earning anything.

Paul then quotes what David wrote in the Psalms: *Oh, what joy is in store for those whose disobedience is forgiven, whose sins are put out of sight. Yes, what joy is experienced by those whose record of wrongdoing the Lord has cleared.* These are great word pictures by David. He was a very articulate, heartfelt writer in the Old Testament. Probably the greatest. Jesus quoted the Psalms more than any other Old Testament book. Incidentally, he never quoted from any of the historical books (Joshua through Esther), nor from Job or Proverbs! But in this Psalm, David describes forgiveness as a clearing of our account.

Have you ever been forgiven some kind of debt you incurred, or finally paid one off? Oh, what a great feeling of freedom and *happiness* in David's words. With God, our account has been cleared. We owe nothing. Forgiveness is "releasing somebody from any obligation." If we choose to reject God's forgiveness or choose to believe it is not true, we all have that choice. But God has forgiven us, nonetheless, and when we ignore, deny, or reject it, we simply miss out on a better life.

Pre-ritual acceptance (4:9)

Is this blessing only for the Jews? Or is it also for uncircumcised Gentiles? This is another one of Paul's "of course not" questions. Now, the Jews assumed God's blessings were exclusively or mostly for them. In their tabernacle (place of worship), they had an area outside called *The Court of the Gentiles*. Nice guys, huh? We will let you hang out near us, but you can't come in and participate. God never thinks that way. His plan was always to save the whole world, Jew and Gentile, and work in everybody's life until all are redeemed. However, God did do something special through the Jewish nation, but what He did was for everyone. His promise to Abraham was that the whole world would be blessed through his descendant, Jesus! But this special privilege God gave them to be His instrument in saving the world (what a privilege!) went to their heads, and they thought they were better than everybody else. Careful ... there's a little bit of this in all of us, Christians included, maybe even more so in many cases.

Jesus came and said to his followers, "Hey folks, I'm freeing you from the bondage of Jewish Law. But in due time, in just a couple of hundred years, Christians started making it all about ourselves, just as the Jews had done, making faith an exclusive thing using Creeds, doctrinal statements, and required rituals. They weaponized beautiful things that should have remained

symbolic. Circumcision is just a symbol. Rituals are just symbols. They don't earn us anything, not any more than our faith can. So, Paul asks, "Is this only for the Jews, or is it also for the Gentiles?"

Well, I've been saying that Abraham was considered righteous by God because of his faith. But how did this happen? Was he considered righteous after he was circumcised, or was it before? Clearly, God accepted Abraham before he was circumcised. Paul is warning us not to fall into the trap of thinking we can earn anything with God. He uses Abe's life as an example by identifying the point in his life when God saw him as perfect (righteous). Paul's main point is that it was long *before* Abe had done any ritual (like circumcision, which was really important to Jews). By faith, Abraham was good with God long before he did anything ritualistic. Even his faith was just something recognized by God, not some kind of meritorious act. Faith effectively says, "I'm not earning anything; I'm just trusting God. I admit that I can't do anything to save myself, so I'm going to totally trust you, God. I'm not even going to trust my act of faith, only you!"

I was on Facebook with the guy this week who was saying, "You gotta repent in order to be saved." I responded with, "Repentance doesn't save us; Jesus does! We believe because we're saved; we don't get saved because we believe. This is the essence of God's grace." But in one sense, we are saved by our faith. If we mean by "saved" that we are "delivered" (and that's the meaning of the word *saved* in Greek) from the *entanglement* of sin in this life, then sure ... we are saved (delivered) when we believe. But even that kind of salvation is the working of God in our lives by grace. Unfortunately, what my friend meant by "saved" was that by believing we exempt ourselves from being tormented by God in hell, forever. He was making faith the one

requirement God has for us that must be added to what Jesus did on the cross.

In the story of Abraham in the Old Testament, you can see grace at work. Once I saw grace in the New Testament, then I could go back to the Old Testament and see it clearly there, too. This was Paul's intention in presenting this chapter in the life of Abraham. Once we understand God's grace, we will see it all over the Old Testament, despite all the disgusting violence and legalism that we also find there. I became convinced, many years ago, after reading and studying the Old Testament for forty years, that it is a *conflicted view of God* by the Jews, rendering both wonderful, high, and lofty truths about God alongside many distortions that were projected on God as they tried to understand what they saw and experienced in life. This is why Jesus had to come – to reveal the Father as He truly is. Jesus became the *gold standard* for discovering God. Now, whenever I read something in the Old Testament that does not seem right (like God commanding genocide of all that lives, including women and children), I go to Jesus and the New Testament for answers. Someone once said, "The Old Testament is the New Testament *concealed*, and the New Testament is the Old Testament *revealed*" (and often corrected). I agree with them.

A great deal of harshness and violence exists in the Old Testament writings. It has been estimated that there are over 1000 incidents of violence. 250 of these involve God, directly, or have His approval/tolerance in some way. There are several ways to deal with this. You can conclude that God is really gracious and wonderful, but He's also harsh, with no purpose other than to retaliate. This is what I call the yin-yang view of God. Others call it *dualism*. It's when God is seen as really good and really bad at the same time. Or, you can conclude that God is good, only good, and always good ... even in His judgments and condemnations. In Him, there is always an ultimately good purpose in everything He does, never selfish, always loving, acting in the very best

interest of those He loves (which is everyone). This view is the one I cannot help but to choose.

15. Abraham, Father of Faith (Romans 4:11-15)

Views of the Old Testament

After over 50 years of studying the Bible, including graduating from Dallas Seminary in 2010, I concluded that the Old Testament is, at least, a “conflicted view of God.” It is more than that in many ways, as it contains some great, illustrative stories (plausible accounts) of real-life situations that people can learn important spiritual lessons from. The creation account, the Great Flood, the call of Abraham, the Exodus, and the taking of the promised land are on the short list. Also, the book of Job, Proverbs, and the Psalms bring philosophy, wisdom, and heartfelt experiences for people to ponder for millennia. God is often presented as gracious and loving, always giving the wayward Israelites another chance to know him when they repent.

But the OT also presents God as a harsh, self-centered being who constantly threatens utter and complete destruction, yet never quite brings it. He seems to be kind for a season, then gets so angry that He seems almost out of control, needing “anger management” classes. His anger is often cruel and uncaring about the masses of people who are not part of the Nation of Israel, as if they are just unimportant pawns on some cosmic chessboard. God is reported to have commanded Samuel to tell Saul to have his army kill everything that breathes, including women and innocent children, seemingly to cleanse the land of those less

worthy of His consideration. These are not accusations against God; instead, these are facts about what the Old Testament records that cannot be ignored, presenting a huge contrast between it and how Jesus revealed his Father in the Gospel accounts. He presented Him as a loving, kind father, always acting in the best interest of all people whom He so loves and sent His Son to save. Justice, judgment, condemnation, and punishment in the New Testament are all based in God's infinite love, designed to correct, redeem, restore, heal, and save everyone for a wonderful, never-ending future with him. This is when God (the Father) will finally "reconcile all things to himself in heaven and earth." This is a huge contrast that cannot be ignored. However, how people interpret this dichotomy is each person's choice. I cannot help but view the New Testament writings (and Jesus as the *gold standard* on how to correctly view the Old Testament, the law, and all the violence recorded by the Jews in their attempt to explain the God they encountered.

My concern about all this grew over the years as I read more and more of the Old Testament and got past the few cherry-picked passages that are preached on in most churches. Even those who "preach through the whole Bible," verse by verse, as I was taught to do in seminary, often skirt around and explain away the obvious when faced with the multitude of problematic passages. This does not mean there are no helpful and insightful passages in the Old Testament. There are many; they are preached on often, and people gain greatly from the insights about life and spiritual things that they bring. But this is exactly why I concluded that it seemed like the Jews had a *conflicted view of God*. At one moment, God is forgiving and tender-hearted, but the next minute, He's flying off the handle and commanding full-scale genocide! What gives? How can this be? Most people who study the Bible just accept this as okay without ever asking any important questions about God. I believe God does not mind when we ask good questions, if we do it respectfully and honestly.

Many people are afraid to do this because religious leaders have made them afraid to go against what they passionately teach from their own convictions. But aren't everyone's honestly held convictions just as important as anyone else's (teacher or student)? Asking good questions, examining everything carefully (as Paul exhorted us to do), thinking things through, and seeking God's perspective are how we learn and figure things out. I was taught in seminary (and in my church upbringing) that God never changes and remains consistent in who He is and the values He proposes to us. It's okay for God to use a range of approaches in dealing with humanity, but it must always reflect the highest moral excellence, reflecting who He is, always acting in the best interest of those He loves, which is all of His creation.

I'm actually trying to be respectful of God here, not falling into the Old Testament trap of presenting him as an inconsistent, conflicted being who is extremely hard to trust. God's not impetuous, nor is He a retaliator. That's more of who *we* are, and we project that back onto God in our fallen, sinful state of mind. We tend to (and so did the Jews) describe God in such terms because, as one person once said, "God made humanity in His own image, and then we returned the favor!" Give that one some thought.

I think probably that God, in His wisdom and long-term plan, allowed the Old Testament to be written, recorded, and reasonably well preserved to give us an account of man's conflicted view of God. There's plenty of good contained in it, but there are also many horrible things said about God, presenting him as an extremely violent being who orders the killing of everything that lives, including little kids.

Concerning the harsh, cold Old Testament Law, in contrast to the love and grace that came through Jesus (and this is a contrast Paul often makes), sometimes I wonder if God looked into the heart of humans and said, "You guys are so law-oriented, thinking you need to *appease* me in some way. The only way I'm

going to get this law-obsession out of your mind and heart is to give you the law, let it run its course, and then contrast it to the New Covenant in Jesus when he comes to fully and accurately reveal me.” And so I went back, starting in Genesis, and read through until I reached the giving of the law and the sacrificial system in Exodus. I wanted to find out when God first told anyone to do a sacrifice of some sort. But I couldn't find any place where God ever said, “go do a sacrifice.” Now, for sure, they did them: Cane and Abel offered sacrifices in the garden, Abraham stacked up rocks and did a sacrifice commemorating special events, and the Jews developed a very detailed sacrificial system (see the book of Leviticus). But I never saw God saying, “You need to sacrifice something.” It seemed to only stem from our human tendency to believe that we must *appease* God (or the gods) in some way. The thinking was, “I've got to make a little alter here and stack up some rocks, or kill something to demonstrate the seriousness of my appeasement. I need to sacrifice something of value in order to keep God from becoming angry.” But this thinking is so void of knowing what love and grace are.

Even when Abraham took his son, Isaac, up the hill to kill him, look at what happened. First, why is he doing such a horrific thing? What kind of distorted, sick view of God did Abraham instinctively have that made him think this would in any way please God? I think God was saying, “What you believe about me is false, so I'm going to run this experiment of yours all the way to the end, until you lift the knife, ready to slay your precious son.” However, God stopped him at the last moment, saying effectively, “No. I don't require that kind of nonsense. I don't solve my problems by violence, nor should you, and I certainly don't require you to sacrifice something of such great value as your own son. This is far from the love and grace that I am all about; I want you to learn this lesson.” I don't think God ever intended for Abraham to kill his son, but Abraham mistakenly thought he needed to. He thought he had to *appease* God by giving

him something of great value, sacrificing his own son, whom he so loved. God knew that the only way to communicate this perversion was to let him act it out, almost fully, then stop him in the last moment. Life is full of situations where God allows us to do (or almost do) wrong things in order for us to fully learn what is right. Just *telling* people what is wrong does not seem to stick with them, but *showing* them does!

This kind of thinking is still very much alive in modern-day religion because it is instinctively inside all of us: that we must *appease the gods* (God) in some way. We believe we must sacrifice, or that we need to place ourselves in some degree of pain. However, understand there are times to “sacrifice” something for the sake of and benefit of others. But this is a very different kind of sacrifice. This is the kind that love does and what God did. Our guilt, fear, shame, and insecurity are often played upon by ourselves and by *some* religious leaders who had it done to them, causing them to believe it is right and passing it on to others. The result is the control over people, usually in the name of “doing it for their own good.” It has been very effective *crowd control* since it loomed large in the Fourth Century, launching the monstrous Roman Catholic church of the brutal Middle Ages. It secures people’s loyalty and their money.

Have you ever felt caught up in this kind of legalistic hamster wheel? If so, there is a wonderful escape for you, if you have not already discovered it. It is embodied in the person of Jesus, who revealed the Father for who He really is, full of love and grace, in stark contrast to the OT Law. Yes, God is also *holy and just* (as so many people tell me whenever I rightly highlight God’s love and grace). But keep in mind that *holy* means “set apart,” and God is set apart and altogether far above all forms of evil, cruelty, and retaliation, void of any corrective purpose. And, *justice* means “to make things right;” it does not mean “to get back at someone.” God will, for sure, bring *ultimate* justice because He will make

everything *ultimately* right in eternity. There is no way He is going to keep things defeating bad (or make them worse) forever!

Faith is the key (4:11)

Circumcision was a sign that Abraham already had faith and that God had already accepted him and declared him to be righteous—all before he was circumcised. Paul just wants to make sure that his readers understand that rituals (like circumcision) are of no value in getting right with God. Rituals don't make it happen, though sometimes they can enhance a relationship with God in the heart and mind of a believer. Rituals can also easily become a hindrance that separates us from God when we allow them to play a role in *earning* something with Him. In this case, rituals usually separate us from God because we are focused on trying to appease Him rather than to draw close to and know Him. Only when we step away from rituals and from trying to work for our salvation do we see grace for what it truly is: no requirement by God, only love and acceptance from Him. His actions to correct us are not some kind of rejection; instead, they are drawing us closer to him. Many people misunderstand God's work in their lives as some kind of retaliation, rather than loving correction. But this is easy to do since corrective action can seem very harsh when some kind of pain (physical or emotional) is involved. We always do well to assume the best motives about God and embrace what He is doing in our lives as something good and only good!

Doing rituals does not cause God to conclude, "Oh wow, you sure are doing the right thing down there. You're really appeasing me." No way. Rituals are only a sign, symbolic of some greater spiritual reality. They are for our reassurance – not because we perform them, but because they illustrate something important about God and our relationship with him. Baptism and

the Lord's Table (also known as Communion or the Eucharist) are other rituals that should be viewed in the same way.

For Abraham, circumcision was simply a sign to him that he belonged to God in a very good way, safe from all harm, experiencing God's love and grace that will go on forever. Rituals can work this way for us if we let them. However, we are not required by God to do any rituals, and if experiencing the reality of who God is satisfies us, we can skip the rituals altogether and just enjoy knowing God, which is the great reality that all these rituals are meant to convey!

Some religious people get this all backwards. They turn rituals into burdensome requirements instead of enjoyable experiences. Often, rituals are weaponized by churches, used to try to control people through fear if they do not conform. Baptism can be weaponized by telling people that if they do not engage in this practice, they will be rejected by God and lost forever. It becomes a *work* that people must do to get saved by God. Communion (the eucharist) is sometimes also used to scare people into loyalty and submission. If you don't get the elements of bread and wine administered to you by some official person, perhaps even placed on your tongue by them, then you can miss out on some blessings by God, or something worse. This all seems very superstitious and something required by man, not by God. God is gracious, loving, just wants us to fellowship with him and stay out of harm's way, which we tend to bring on ourselves when we are distant from Him. Rituals can help you feel close to God because of the spiritual realities they portray. Or, they can keep you away from God as they cause you to believe He is a mean, picky, puny, self-centered being who we need to fear.

So, Abraham is the spiritual father of those who have faith, even though they have not been circumcised. This was a hard pill for the Jews to swallow. Paul is saying that Abraham is the spiritual father of those who have faith, despite not being

circumcised. They are counted as righteous because of their faith. Even if they're not circumcised, even if they don't do rituals, even if they don't keep the law, they are good to go with God because they have simply entered into a faith relationship with Him that earns them nothing. The Jews could not in any way allow this because they were sure that God had to be satisfied in some way, proving their loyalty and obedience. What a horrible way to live – a long way from enjoying a loving relationship with God. But Paul is doing away with all this stuff because it has no value other than to symbolize something good about us and God in a love relationship.

But Abraham is also the spiritual father of those who have been circumcised... okay, it includes them too ... but only if they have the same kind of faith Abraham had before he was circumcised. So the key is our faith, turning to God, recognizing that He has saved us, and that we can't save ourselves. That is what faith is all about, and it “gets us right” with God because it does away with any chance that rituals, or our puny works, can ever make us right with God.

God's promise (4:13)

Clearly, God's promise to give the whole earth to Abraham and his descendants was not based on his obedience to God's law. God promised the world to Abe. But it wasn't because he earned it in any way; it was a gift based on God's grace, just as the salvation of all humanity is. Instead, it was based on a right relationship with God that comes by faith. It is having a relationship with God that is key, not some attempt to impress him or even obey in some way (even though obedience is a good thing to do and benefits us greatly). Faith is so good, it's so sweet.

But our relationship with God can only be by faith because we can't see God in any material way. However, we can see His awesome power through creation, as Paul stated earlier in this letter. I think we all know God's there, even those who say they believe He is not. Secretly, in their heart of hearts, they know God exists, and in times of need, they ever so quietly reach out to Him in their own way, limited as it might be. Faith results in the good things that God brings into our lives, not because we've earned them but because He is inherently good and we've engaged with him in our own way, the best we can. Life is a journey of getting to know God better. It takes time, but this is what life is really all about!

If God's promise is only for those who obey the law, then faith is not necessary and the promise is pointless. That is a really good statement. If you've got to keep the law, then you better do just that – keep it! Faith is just a nice thing to do, if keeping some law is how we get right with God. Any kind of promise from God is just a kind gesture if some kind of law or requirement is on us. On the other hand, if we don't have to keep the law or any other requirement in order to know God and walk with him in life, then we need only to recognize that Jesus kept the law for us and we're already forgiven, rendering any aspect of law as worthless. However, keep in mind that obeying the law (which is a good list of how to live successfully) is a smart thing to do. It just can't put us into the right relationship with God. This can only happen by faith, apart from keeping the law. Then, as we know God and live in communion with Him, we instinctively keep the law and do what is right, not perfectly, but so much better than we ever could by just trying harder to obey a set of rules by some deity whom we really do not know!

For the law always brings punishment on those who try to obey it. The only way to avoid breaking the law is to have no law to break! Breaking the law brings punishment, but mostly in our own minds. Any kind of “punishment” from God is corrective in nature, designed to help us learn, become more like Him, and live a more peaceful and fulfilled life. He has no other desire – certainly not to act in pure retaliation, with no healing or betterment in mind for us! Besides, most “punishment” that results from our sins are just the consequences of doing what is wrong that are built into life. We try to obey it, but we always fail. This is why some people give up and just go live a life of reckless abandonment and self-destruction. But strange as this may seem, it is the first step toward discovering grace. We all need to try, fail, and give *up* before we give *in* to God. This can take a lifetime (and beyond) for some people. Others figure it out right away. This is one of the great mysteries in life. I'm just thankful that I finally figured this out at age 60, after about 40 years of living under the bondage of religion, all in the name of serving God.

If you're told over and over, all your life, like the Jews in ancient Israel or many Christians in this modern age, that you gotta do something to *appease* God, you will believe it. I had a brief discussion with some ladies in the coffee shop recently, and one of them was saying that people must believe in God or He will send them to hell. I replied. “No, He’s bigger than that. He's a lot bigger than that. He came to save the world, and He succeeded. We can't do anything to earn it. This is the essence of God's grace.” We went back and forth a few times, and we actually had a pretty good discussion. This is always possible when we are mutually respectful. I do not always get this from many religious people, including Christians like myself. As I was going through all this with her, she was agreeing, “Oh, I believe God's big. I believe He'll never give up on anybody. I believe He loves His world, but ...” and that is where she made everything about God conditional. She went on to say, “But He's going to

judge everybody who doesn't do whatever it is He's requiring them to do." By *judge* she did not mean "give an accurate assessment." She meant some kind of retaliation with no corrective purpose, resulting in some kind of never-ending torment. I always wonder if people ever really think through what they are saying, or if they just restate all they have been taught, never questioning it. But it showed me how hard it is for people to get unglued from whatever they've been taught all their lives. It was hard for me, too; it took me about 60 years! Once someone has been taught an idea, and only that idea, even when you tell them all the facts they did not know and never considered, they still don't listen to any of it simply because it does not match what they already believe. Anything that does not match, whether right or wrong, is automatically rejected. However, I have found that any progress toward openness and objectivity must start this way. Then, over time, the dam begins to crack, and eventually it breaks. That's when they discover the wonderful grace of God, often for the first time in their lives. So, this helps me to be patient, plant seeds, and wait for God to help them grow in their lives in His proper time.

This is often what happens when people read the New Testament. They plug in all the stuff they've been told about it, instead of just letting it say what it says at face value, not adding or subtracting from it, and asking good questions about it with a more objective frame of mind. We are not taught to do this. Instead, we are often given a carefully crafted narrative design to take us down a particular path, assumed to be the truth by those who teach us. Sometimes they are right and should be listened to, but sometimes they are wrong and should be scrutinized.

16. Believing God's Promise (Romans 4:16-25)

God's promise is received by faith (4:16)

Paul goes on in verse 16 and says, *So the promise is received by faith*. God's promises, like all things He does, are issued out of His own wisdom and authority. He doesn't consult with anyone because what He decides is always perfect. This is so good to know in this crazy world of trial and error and learning from our mistakes. But there is an aspect of God's promise that requires accepting it and receiving it. Lack of reception does not void the promise in any way, but it can leave us floundering unnecessarily when we could be enjoying the realization of all the benefits that come from God's promises to us. It is much like forgiveness and reconciliation. Both of these must be "received" in order to *fully* benefit from them. We can fully forgive someone, but they must accept it to live in the peace it will bring them. Rejecting forgiveness, either out of pride or ignorance, does not change the fullness of forgiveness on the part of the forgiver. This is why, in the New Testament, it says that God will forgive us if we confess our sins, etc. But this is because forgiveness has two parts: it must be given *and* received. However, just because a sinner needs to accept God's forgiveness does not mean that God waits until sinners repent before forgiving them. He has already forgiven everyone of their sins, proven to be true by the death and resurrection of Jesus. Lack of repentance and failing to realize

God's love and kindness only causes a person to miss out on experiencing all that God has *already* done for them!

The same is true of God's promises. He makes promises (like He did when He promised Abraham that He would someday send a savior into the world) and will never break them, no matter how people respond. So, Paul says that the promise is "received by faith," and indeed it is. How else can we receive and experience anything from God? It always requires faith and believing in Him. The promise that God made, that He will provide for us, is unilateral and unconditional on His part. But to fully gain from it, we must accept it and receive it. This is not some kind of threat on the part of God; it is simply the way promises (and forgiveness, reconciliation, etc.) operate. If you don't believe, accept, and receive from God, you're going to miss out on good things from him. He is not so puny that He gets offended by our rejection. He's not going to pile on and torment people for foolishly choosing to miss out on something good that He's provided. He doesn't transform himself from Doctor Jekyll (the loving healer) into Mr. Hyde (the mean, angry tyrant). Never!

Paul continues and says, *This promise is given as a free gift, and we are all certain to receive it whether or not we live according to the law of Moses, but only if we have faith like Abraham.* Faith is the way we receive God's promise, accept it, understand it, and experience it. It is the only way. It's not how we earn it. It was earned by Christ on the cross. In actuality, we are "made right" with God by the blood of Christ; yet, experientially, we're "made right" with God by our faith. If we get these two mixed up (actuality and experience), we're taking away from God what He alone can do, attributing to ourselves what we can never do, which is earning something. *Abraham is the father of all who believe, when God told them in the writings, "I have made you the father of many nations."* God said to

Abraham, way back then, “You're going to be the father of many nations. You're going to have more descendants than all the stars in the sky that you see.” And it was a lot. They could see them a lot better back then, before pollution and city lighting. I wish I could go back and see the Milky Way in all its glory. Actually, we can, but we gotta get up on a high mountain, in total darkness, when there is no moon out. It is still spectacular!

This happened because Abraham believed in God, who brings the dead back to life and who creates new things out of nothing. God makes us new out of nothing and brings people back from the dead. That's what He's going to do with us when we rise from the dead someday; we're going to be brought back from being dead. We're all getting out of here at some point. I keep getting closer every day, and at my age, it is a wonderful realization. It's not that I'm anxious to go, nor do I have a death wish, but God gets us ready as we age, showing us that we don't really belong here. All that we accomplished in life (good as some of it is) is nothing compared to the unimaginable glories we will experience in eternity. We really haven't a clue, and it's probably better that we don't; otherwise, we might be tempted to force the issue now, not wanting to wait. But instead, God gives us all the *will to live* and pursue our dreams, accomplish meaningful things, and enjoy this precious gift of life (despite all the struggles).

There's an interesting thing about getting older. When we're younger, we all know we're going to die someday. But when we get older, and our friends start dying, we can't help but conclude, “Oh, I might be next!” We just lost a long-time friend. She fell down the stairs and never woke up, went into a coma, and eventually passed on. I lost two good friends last year: one to a stroke and one to bone cancer. I remember when my parents' friends started to die, but now it's *my* friends. Part of me thinks, “Wow, that's a little scary.” But then a bigger part of me gets excited and I think, “Wow, I've been waiting for this my whole

life!” So when my day comes, I’ll be thinking (if I am conscious), “Okay, let’s do this. I’m ready. I do not want to stay here forever, I’ve done about everything I wanted to do (including writing this six-volume commentary set), and I know I really don’t belong here.” So, it will be okay. I hope all of you have reached (or will reach) this wonderful, peaceful conclusion someday.

If you are a younger person reading this commentary, you need not let any of this derail you in any way. Just keep all this stuff in mind and tuck it away for a day in the distant future, which will come quicker than you think! For now, live your life to the fullest. This is what God wants; it’s His gift to you. But live it honestly and gratefully. Chase your dreams, ambitions, and plans. Make some good memories because they will be one of your most prized possessions when you are old.

So, Paul concluded that all this happened because Abraham believed in God, who “brings the dead back to life and who creates new things out of nothing.” That is us; we are that new creation in Christ! We realize we are a *new person*, someone whom God made us, and that we also still have that *old nature* kicking around and bothering us. But that’s who we are, for now, and Paul will address all of this later in this *explanation* part of his letter.

A never-wavering faith? (4:18)

Even when there was no reason for hope, Abraham kept hoping, believing he would become the father of many nations. God showed him the stars and said, “That’s how many descendants you will have.” But Abe kind of chuckled and said, “Hey, I’m an old dude; my wife’s old too. How’s this gonna work?” God changed his name to *Abraham* (father of many) from *Abram* (exalted father). Notice that his name changed from something that reflected who God is (“exalted father”) to something that Abraham became (“father of many”).

This tells us a lot about God. He's not into making it all about himself. He delights in seeing people succeed in life and improve, because He makes it all about us! That's what love always does. Who do you make your life all about? You or others?

Abraham's faith did not waver, even though at about 100 years of age, he feared his body was as good as dead as far as producing children, and so was Sarah's womb. Abe knew the upper limits on child-bearing ages. But he had a God who was bigger than that. Abraham never wavered, believing God's promise. That's amazing to me. Because this is way back when he first got started with God and had very little experience with him. But, perhaps, it was a no-brainer (just as it should be for everyone, especially today when we know so much). Maybe that gaze into the sky put things into perspective. Somehow, in some way, God spoke to him, and Abe decided, "I'm going to believe." Faith is kind of a mysterious thing. Do you sometimes wonder why you believe? You know, there is a lot out there that challenges our faith. There are so many bad things going on. How come, deep down inside, we believe anyway? It's almost when things get tougher that we believe the most!

I've got a theory about belief. We don't really make much of a choice. Faith is the *result* of whatever we experience, realize, think about, and pray about. To some degree, we can't help but believe. Personally, I couldn't decide *not* to believe because there is too much evidence favoring God's existence. So, in that sense, I have no choice. Yet, in other situations that are really difficult, I can't help but have some doubts. But, eventually, that bigger perspective in life wins, and I realize there's got to be more going on than meets the eye. There was a football game on the other night, when a player went down hard, bringing out all the medics who found his vitals to be very weak. The game was stopped for quite a while. I noticed that all of a sudden, everybody was praying

or saying things with that intention. Why? Because they were all helpless. That was about all anyone could do, and at that moment God became very real because they all needed him to be there. Perhaps this is the whole point of God allowing evil and difficulty in the world! He must have some good purpose in it, eventually, beyond what we can see. Sometimes it is realizing our smallness that renders God so big and certain.

It seems a bit strange that Paul would write, “Abraham never wavered when he was told that he would have a child,” yet he took matters into his own hands and got his handmaiden pregnant, assuming his wife, Sara, was too old to bear children. Plus, Abe did not want to miss out on God’s promise, so he felt he needed to help God out a bit. God accepted the child (Ishmael), but he didn’t accept him as the one who would fulfill His promise. That could only be Isaac, who would be miraculously born to Sara.

When it said that Abe *never wavered* in his faith, it could be referring to his initial response to God. But then, after living with the promise for a while, not seeing it fulfilled, Abe may have started to doubt. It was not rejecting God or fully turning away from him, just some doubt. Have you ever done this? You start out trusting God, but then, in due time, doubts creep in. I think everyone has. It is actually a good thing for us to know that Abraham, the *father of faith*, doubted and even took matters into his own hands. This means any of us can be persons of faith, still have doubts, and fail in some way. The act of belief does not qualify us for anything with God (any more than it did for Abraham). Faith is about a relationship with God, no matter how little faith we have. We are made right with God by faith, not based on its *amount*, but based on its *existence*! That is always good enough for God; He just takes us from there and helps us grow spiritually.

Faith growing stronger (4:20b)

But his faith grew stronger, which brought glory to God. This is another explanation of how Abe could be the *father of faith* and not waver in it, yet he was also one who had some doubts and took matters into his own hands. His faith grew! Though he wavered in the short run, he became a great man of unwavering faith in the long run. God always has the big, eternal picture in mind. Though He allows us to flounder and grow, He will see to it that we will, eventually, be the fully new creation He wants us to be in Christ! The ultimate end result has already been destined for us. God is just working out the details in this process known as *life*.

Abraham believed what God promised him. It was going to happen. He was just helping Him out a little bit. We all do this from time to time. But God just says, "Okay, go ahead. I'll show you that's not necessary." But, you know, I think He gets a little chuckle out of it, seeing us as we did our little kids who were clumsily finding their way.

He was fully convinced that God was able to do whatever He promised. And because of Abraham's faith, God counted him as righteous. It wasn't just for Abraham's benefit that this happened; it was recorded for our benefit, too. This story of Abraham was for us! We need to read it and ponder it because it is an excellent illustration of how God works with people through their faith, rather than by demanding some kind of cold obedience. It assures us that God will also count us as righteous if we believe in him (and engage with him).

After Jesus was handed over to die for our sins, God raised him from the dead to make us right with Him. God brings salvation through Jesus. All we do is acknowledge it, get

on board, and say, “I want to be a part of what you’re doing for me because I can’t do anything to earn it.” *He was handed over to die because of our sins, and then he was raised to life to make us right with God.* That’s the bottom line for Paul, and it’s the last thing he will say before launching into Romans Five. We’re “made right” with God because of what Jesus did. That’s the ultimate truth. But we’re also “made right” with God (experientially) by our faith. One does some earning (Jesus on the cross); one does not (our act of faith). Understand this distinction, and you will understand everything you need to know about yourself in relation to God! Believing just moves us into the realm of understanding and experiencing who God is. But the bottom line is what Jesus did for us to make us right with God is something we could never do for ourselves, and that’s what grace is all about!

Well, that ends Romans Four. Perhaps you can see how thorny a chapter it is, and how readers can easily conclude, “I’d better have faith like Abraham or something horrible is going to happen to me.” Certainly, this chapter is about faith, but it does not present it as something we *must* do in order to prevent some kind of retaliation by God. Paul never says that. In fact, quite the opposite. Faith is how we come into a wonderful, loving relationship with God, and if we fail to believe, we miss out. Never forget Paul’s example of Abraham and David, both of whom illustrate that faith is never some kind of *work* whereby we earn something with God. Yet so many people have been taught this, totally dismissing the essence of God’s grace, which is His love and favor, unmerited in any way by us. They are so bombarded with the idea that if they don’t believe, God is going to retaliate in some terrible way, and it will not have any corrective, redeeming purpose. It is a fear-based Gospel, and it does not present God as He really is. It presents him as a being who’s gonna pile on with pure retaliation because you didn’t

respond to the doctor, and you refused His healing. Instead, God always says, “I’m never giving up on you. We’ll get there. Do you want to go the long way? Go ahead. You want to do it the hard way? Go ahead, if that’s what it takes for you to learn who I am and how much I love you. But you will never be able to stop me from accomplishing something good and perfect in your life!”

I want to preview the first verse in Romans Five because it is an excellent conclusion of Romans Four. “Since we have been made right in God’s sight by faith, we have peace with God because of what Jesus Christ our lord has done for us.” There’s the whole explanation of what faith accomplishes. We *earn* nothing by our faith, but we *gain* a great deal, namely, peace. Don’t turn your faith into a work. There are many out there who want you to do this because it’s what they have done. Jesus brought the solution.

In Romans Five, Paul is pretty much done talking about faith, not because it is unimportant, but because what Jesus did (not us) is the central focus in *explaining* the details of God’s *solution*. Paul will begin answering all kinds of questions, explaining different aspects of salvation through Christ on the cross. It’s really rich! When he gets into Romans Six, Paul will explain how we have died with Christ, then were buried and raised with him, obviously not literally, but perhaps in a more real way than we realize. In Romans Seven, Paul will deal with the conflicted life we all experience, struggling with our old and new natures that we now have. Finally, in Romans Eight, Paul will assure us that there is “no condemnation in Christ,” spending the rest of that chapter encouraging the socks off of everyone who reads it. This chapter may very well be at the very heart of the New Testament. It is really good stuff; you’re gonna enjoy it thoroughly.

17. Utterly Helpless (Romans 5:1-11)

Undeserved privilege (5:1)

Paul begins Romans Five with, “therefore.” I think he's saying, “Based on everything I've said so far, giving you the problem, the solution, and the essence of what faith is all about, I'm ready to launch into a lot of detail about God's solution in the person of Jesus. *Therefore, since we have been made right in God's sight by faith, we have peace with God because of what Jesus Christ our Lord has done for us.* That's the bottom line, folks. Good summary of the Good News, Paul. It's about Jesus and the peace he brings us. Isn't peace the main thing everyone seeks in life? Well, almost everyone. Some people traffic in and enjoy chaos.

Through our exercise of faith (believing in things beyond our mere five senses), we enter into a right relationship with God and have been *made right* in His sight. He sees us as righteous (perfect) even though in the limited reality of this life, we are not. We now live close to him (from His point of view) and are so connected to Jesus that He sees us as something very good and sees us living a correct life, at least, mostly. God is much more into relationships than He is actions (obedience). Obedience is good and important and is always better than disobeying, but God knows that the solution does not lie in hard, cold doing what is right. The solution is in knowing him, through Jesus (his provision), which results in more obedience than we could ever

do on our own! This is why we have peace with God, because of our faith and all the wonderful relational aspects that only faith can bring. By the way, this is the last you're going to hear about faith until Romans Ten.

Because of our faith, Christ has brought us into this place of undeserved privilege where we now stand. We didn't deserve what God has done for us. Well, we deserve it because we need to be saved. But we didn't earn it in any way. This undeserved privilege is where we now stand before God. So we confidently and joyfully look forward to sharing God's glory. Whoa, really? We're gonna share God's glory? He would do that for us? I'm not fully sure what that means, but whatever it is, it's gonna be good because God is sharing with us *glory* that He alone experienced in the past! Love shares; it does not hoard. Sometimes God is presented as a glory hound, but He's not. Just the opposite. He shares as much as possible with us, and someday that will be maximized. This is yet another good reason why God could never create a place like hell and send people there forever, unmercifully.

The fact that Paul cuts off his discussions about faith for about five chapters in his letter tells us a lot about the role of faith, what it is, and what it is not. This will become abundantly clear by the time we enter Romans Ten, where Paul re-establishes faith as the important, but unearned activity that it is. I think he got our faith out of the way in Romans Four so he could focus exclusively on what Jesus Christ did on the cross and how it all works. Paul was preventing his readers from asking, "What about faith? Is it required? What happens if we don't believe or believe in completely? His answer is, "I'm not even gonna talk about faith because that is not the basis of the solution God brings. It is only the vehicle by which we apprehend the solution God has already brought!"

Rejoice in trials? (5:3)

Paul now shifts gears a little. *We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop endurance.* I don't like that program. Do I really have to go through difficulty to become a better person? Can't I just stay where I am? Normal living, playing music, having friends, even working a job, all of these things are okay. But why the problems, struggles, and difficulties on top of the rigors of life? But God says, "Sorry. I've signed you up for an improvement program, teaching you how to endure." My response is that I didn't ask for this! "No, you didn't," answers God. "I decided for you. I know it is the best way for you to learn and become a better person. That's my goal for you, and I will not give up on you until I fully succeed!"

Sometimes life seems like an endurance game. I have had a good life, for which I am very thankful to God, but I still get weary of it. A lot of my friends and other people I know are really struggling. When my wife and I were younger, we had a lot of serious, debilitating health problems in our family. Those can be very frustrating; they fully tested my faith, far beyond what I ever imagined. I learned just to keep on trusting and keep on going, putting one foot in front of the other, and say, "God help me to get through this!" I look back and wonder how I ever did it. It lasted a very long time... decades. But I did, one day and one step at a time. One big result that I never expected (nor cared about at the time) was that it taught me to be compassionate toward others who are hurting, even when they brought it on themselves. Don't we all do this to some degree?

Once we get through some huge, overwhelming challenge (and usually we just muddle through it, involuntarily enduring it all the way), we conclude, "I don't ever want to do that again, but man, I'm glad for what I learned. And thank you, God, thank you

for taking me through it, because what I gained is priceless.” I’ve had friends whose parents made them learn the piano. One person who became a very talented singer-songwriter was angry and resentful as a kid, but later in life was so thankful. Others stayed resentful, determined to never impose such torment on their own kids. Ha! But what God forces on us, without our consent, is always the best for us and those around us. Many will not be able to see even a glimpse of the wisdom in this until they are safely in the presence of God in eternity. At that time, everything will be revealed and made clear. Others are blessed to get just a minimal view, just enough to peacefully hold them over until eternity!

God invests in us throughout our whole lives. At best, we can look back and say, “Thank you, Lord. Thank you for taking me through it and never giving up. I could never have done it, nor would I have been wise enough to even choose it.”

When you’re forty, you can’t see how much you are learning. It all looks like a waste of time with a horrible sense of loss. But we are learning, and someday we will all look back on a whole lifetime of learning in spite of many regrets. It is never a waste, and God never errs. However, looking back with God’s perspective (slowly attained) is very satisfying, and we cannot help but conclude, “Wow, I learned so much. I thank you, God, for bringing me to where I am today!”

Endurance, which comes from trials, develops strength of character, and then character strengthens our confident hope of salvation. Oh, hope is such a wonderful thing to possess, but it comes with the high price of trials. And this hope will not lead to disappointment. We have a confident hope of salvation, and this hope will not end in disappointment, though we will, for sure, experience many disappointments along the way. There is no alternate or easy path. But ultimately, there's not going to be

any disappointment, folks. And that is what *hope* is all about. You're not going to be disappointed. Sometimes we don't know if things will work out, and often it does not look like it at the time! But we will all get there, and we'll look back and ask, "Why did I doubt?" Well, because we are all human and in need of a savior who will carry us through in the power of *His* strength. We look around and we see all this crap coming our way: in politics, personal problems, and in all kinds of disappointing difficulties. It's a messed-up world (if you haven't noticed), but this is exactly what God is saving us from, eventually. This is our *confident hope*!

We know how dearly God loves us because He has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with His love. The way in which we know how much God loves us is by the presence of His Spirit. It is not by reading the Bible (good as that can be), nor by attending church and doing various rituals (good as those are, too). It is not by hearing a good sermon, reading some great book, or following in the footsteps of your parent who loved you and always wanted the best for you. These are all good and helpful things, but it is only in the unmistakable presence of God's Spirit in our lives that causes us to *know* that God loves us!

He gave us His Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with His love. That seems so strange at first, because it is so *spiritual*. But there is a reality about it that seems more real than the life we experience in our limited five senses. It's not physical. We can't touch it or even prove it in any kind of objective sense. Yet, God's Spirit is more real than anything else in life, it's just in a very different way. The whole faith realm is mysterious to me, but it's nonetheless very real. History bears this out in the testimonies of millions of people! Sometimes we read about them, and even when we disagree with them, we can't help but conclude that they *get it*. We know they have tapped into what we presently experience, but in their own way and in their own time. It's very real to me, but it's not real in the same way that a computer screen

sitting in front of me is. That's a different kind of *real*. So, Paul concludes, "We know how dearly God loves us *because* He has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with His love."

While we were still sinners (5:6)

While we were utterly helpless sinners... This statement is a huge illustration of grace. God did not wait for us to get our act together, or make ourselves good enough, or even improve ourselves in some way. He came and met us in our fallen state, in our lost condition. That is the essence of grace. The view of salvation by modern-day Christianity is that it is one big *transaction* on the part of God. "If you do something, then I'll do something," is their view of God. "And if you don't, there will be hell to pay!" It is a fear-based salvation rather than being love-based. What they don't realize is that love is infinitely more powerful and successful than fear could ever be. Fear only exists in the absence of love. As John wrote in his first letter, "Perfect love casts out fear." It always does.

We can't save ourselves, and we don't even want to in our fallen state of sin. We're never really going that direction, and it always takes God to turn us around. He is always the initiator; we are the responders. Most people are more interested in, and get more excited about a sports event than their relationship with God (or lack thereof). Sporting events are good, entertaining, instructive about life, and give us something passionate to shout about. God does not mind and knows this is healthy. But when such things crowd God out of our lives, it is unhealthy. God just wants us to eventually have a good, healthy, enjoyable, satisfying, meaningful life. However, He knows that bringing this about requires correction and training. So He never fails to bring this about in our lives. Yet, He also knows we need breaks and vacations. He allows this, too.

Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners. It was just the right time. It wasn't too soon. It wasn't too late. I wish he'd come when video cameras existed, so it could have been well documented. But it was not what God wanted; it would not have been the wisest time for Jesus to come. We have a reasonable and reliable record of his coming, teaching, serving, inspiring, dying, and rising from the dead. That was quite a unique life, unlike any other. Do a quick assessment of all the great figures in history in your mind. Is there anyone who even comes close to Jesus? Is he not head and shoulders above all others (Moses, Buddha, Plato, Mohamad, Gandhi, and Mother Teresa)? However, I am sometimes bothered by all the problems in the history of Christianity and the Bible. These are largely ignored by most Christians, though they should not be. But I have come to the conclusion that God had a purpose in allowing even these many problems, knowing that they would serve to direct people's attention to God, rather than ancient writings, institutions, human leaders, and rituals. It is God that we need to know, not other stuff (though everything is helpful and has its place).

Perhaps if God sent Jesus today, in the age of high tech, things would be more muddled and confused, allowing a less reliable record of events to be recorded. There would be photoshopping of recordings and pictures that would make everything more questionable. The first century leaves us only with eye-witness testimonies and a written record. It is not a perfect answer, but the presence of the Holy Spirit is real-time, right now, presently experienced. God, perhaps, wanted humanity to be forced to depend on that rather than our own clever technology. So, I assume Jesus came at the right time in history. Remember what Paul wrote above: we know the love of God by the presence of His Spirit.

The New Testament writings tell a story, and a compelling one. Is there any other story or account in history more effective and successful than the rise of Christianity, in spite of all its

problems and unlikelihood to succeed from a small band of believers in the obscurity of early First Century Palestine? It's a compelling enough story (account of events) to cause billions of people to say, "You know, when I look around in life and consider Buddhism, philosophy, Islam, Hinduism, New Age thinking, and everything else, they all seem to have a piece of the action because God is always at work in all humanity. But there's something substantial about Jesus, his life, his resurrection, and who he was that is worth putting my trust in. I can't prove any of it; no one can. But this explanation of life rings true in a way that all other options do not! I feel confident trusting the claim that "God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself," including me!

Next, Paul puts this all into perspective. *Most people would not die for a good person. However, someone might be willing to die for a near-perfect one.* A really good person, I might be willing to die for, if they seem worth keeping around. However, I was always willing to die for my kids. I think most parents would. I told them that I would take a bullet for them and would risk drowning to save them. It's that kind of love.

God showed His great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners. Wow. What a contrast. Only Jesus was willing to die for sinners – those who are annoying, cause trouble in the world, the arrogant, and those who offend and hurt us. And that is all of us in varying degrees!, We're all rebels claiming in some manner, "I ain't got time for you, God, because it's all about me!" Who wants to come and die for a bunch of people like that? But this demonstrates the great love God has for all of us, that "while we were still sinners," helpless and not seeking him, not earning salvation, acting like we don't want any of it ... God did something; He took action.

God did not conclude, “Away with all of you. I got this wonderful salvation, and you're not even interested?” Instead, He says, “That's exactly why I'm going to save you, because your biggest part of being lost is your own attitude toward yourself, life, and me. You're so desperately in need of a savior, it only makes me want to come and save you all the more!” A guy recently wrote and told me that the wrath of God will someday come down on unrepentant sinners. I wrote back, “Sure, God gets angry about sin, but when He does, what does it make him want to do to us? When He sees us sinning in the worst possible way, what does it invoke in him? Does it make him want to do something horrible to us in pure retaliation with no corrective purpose whatsoever? Or, does it make him want to save us all the more, knowing this is what we need the most? What kind of God is he?” Paul answers that question quite clearly. “While we were still sinners, God sent Jesus to die for us.”

Deep in the heart of God, there is a love beyond what we can ever appreciate. His response to sinners is always (and only), “Your sin makes me want all the more to save all of you, to redeem you, restore, correct, and heal you! I want you to fully experience my love.” Our sin just makes God double down, triple down, and quadruple down to do whatever it takes to save us. That's what's in His heart. He “desires all to be saved,” and I don't see any reason why that desire would ever leave him. He doesn't see us in our sin and concludes, “I'm kind of tired of trying to save people. I've been doing this for a long time, and I don't think it's working. So, I think I'll give up that desire I have to save everyone. Dumb idea. I'll just save the willing few, the cream of the crop.”

And so, Paul's contrast between humans who might save a really good person and God, who is willing to save the worst sinner. This is a shining example of what His grace is all about.

Friendship with God (5:9)

And since we have been made right in God's sight by the blood of Christ... Notice there are two different aspects of how to be “made right” with God (“justification” is the theological term). Previously, in verse 1, Paul said, “We’ve been made right in God's sight by our faith.” That's true. There is a sense in which we're “made right” by our faith, because as soon as we get to know God, we enter into a “right” relationship with him. That's one aspect.

But there is another aspect of being “made right” with God (justification), and Paul presents it in verse 9 above. Here, Paul says we are “made right” by the blood of Christ. One aspect is what God does through Jesus, and the other is how we rightly respond to what God has done. Both make us right with God, but what we do (our faith) never earns us anything with God. It is just our proper response and has no effect on what God has already done for us! This is a very important and helpful distinction to make. One is God's grace, the other is man's faith. One action secures our salvation, the other makes us realize it.

But keep in mind that the *big* “making right” is what God does through Jesus. This is why Paul emphasizes here what Jesus has done on the cross (shedding his blood for us). James, in his New Testament letter, said almost the opposite thing from Paul. I am convinced that these two followers of Jesus had a bit of a friendly feud going on. Paul wrote his letter to the Galatians early on, before 50 AD, about the time James wrote his letter. In it, Paul emphasized how faith makes us right (justifies) us with God. James emphasizes a third aspect of “being made right with God by emphasizing the role of works in our lives. He goes so far as to say that we are not made right by faith alone and that some kind of good works (doing what is right) is required for salvation to be complete. Is James contradicting Paul, or is he using the same word to talk about a different *aspect* of “getting right” with

God? Well, it's true that we become more right (a closer right relationship) with God when we do what is right. Wasn't this true for us with our parents when we were kids? It did not make them love us more, but when we obeyed them, we were in a closer relationship with them. Can this be any different for us and God? Take, for example, when we do something good instead of something bad, aren't we made more right with God, in that we are walking closer to him? Sure! We're not earning anything with Him, but we're coming more in line with God because we're doing what is right. In that way, we are "made right" with God by our good works and obedience. But, again, no earning on our part is involved. Ultimately, we're made right with God because of the blood of Christ, and the other two aspects (faith and works) are simply the result.

Paul adds, ... *He certainly will save us from God's condemnation.* This is the kind of verse that can be taken to mean that God will someday do something horrible to people in response to their sin or unbelief. But I have learned to apply several principles before jumping to conclusions that are based on my past experience and urgings by others. One principle is to let any passage say all it does, but no more than that. Two big mistakes that many readers of the New Testament fall into are the two extremes away from reading accurately. Some will ignore what is there because it is uncomfortable or not what they want to hear. Others will read into the text what they want it to say or what they have previously been told. Both extremes should be avoided if a reader honestly desires to know the intentions of the original writer. Many people do not desire this.

Another principle (and there are many more) is to make sure you know the meanings of the words used in the text. Words by themselves have very basic and limited meanings. They are usually not very specific. But words take on more specific meanings by how writers use them with other words (in context). Words are

more like brushstrokes in a painting. We need to sit back and notice the part each word plays in the larger picture that the author is painting for us.

This word, condemnation, is a good example. It is obviously negative in nature, so that should not be ignored. But negative in what way? To condemn something literally means to set it apart and call attention to the bankruptcy of its value. When a building is condemned, it is declared to be deteriorated and dangerous. It is a warning to all who might want to enter it. In the same way, *condemnation* is negative because it reveals the nature of an object, person, or idea. But in another way, condemnation is very positive because it is a warning and points out a problem. And this is how I believe Paul is using this negative word in a positive way. It is a good thing that God *condemns* people because He is accurately assessing their situation (judging them). This must first be done in order to save people, which Paul indicates is God's ultimate goal.

As for context, notice Paul does not here (or in any of his letters) speak of God acting in pure retaliation, void of all corrective purpose, sending people into some kind of never-ending torment! The lesson here, and throughout the New Testament, is to let passages say what they mean, but no more, seeking the most accurate meaning of the writer.

Does God just *condemn* across the board, saying, "I'm done with you. You're worthless. You need to be abandoned or forever tormented." Or is he saying, "You know what? I've looked at you and concluded that you're like an old building that needs to be torn down. You are a danger to yourself and those around you. Your whole being is corrupt and needs to be *condemned*, declared unfit. So, I'm going to do something about it and save you!" When God sees our sin, what does He want to do about it? His love motivates him to correct, restore, redeem, and save us from ourselves and our sin – nothing less. When we get to Romans Eight, Paul will say that God "condemns sin in the flesh," in the

old person that we were, causing the new person we now are in Christ to emerge. Christ will save us from God's condemnation by making us no longer condemned! In Christ, we're no longer unfit. We've got a new soul, new body, new life, new everything. Right now, we experience this by faith, but someday we're going to get the whole package. But we have to die first. Sorry, folks, that's the only way to get to our new body and soul. We gotta leave this body and be resurrected into a new one. Does anyone in their right mind want to stick around in a condemned body and soul forever? I don't think so.

Here is a great summary of all Paul has said. *Since our friendship with God was restored by the death of His Son while we were still His enemies, we will certainly be saved through the life of His Son.* Oh, wow! We have a friendship with God? Amazing. Remember, Abraham was called the "friend of God." You can be friends with God. It doesn't mean you're disrespecting him in some way or placing yourself equal with him. However, God can come down on our level and be friends with us. This does not change the Creator-creature relationship we have with him. Quite the contrary, it actually enhances it. Wow, could it ever get sweeter than to be friends with our Creator! We need not be afraid of God once we have entered into a loving faith relationship with him. He wants all fear cast out so we can enjoy a deep and meaningful relationship with him forever. You don't have to be shivering and bow before Him, like the Wizard of Oz blowing out smoke and fire. Instead, God says, "Enough already. Get up off your knees and come give me a big hug; sit on my lap and just abide with me." And what do we do? We run and hide just like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. They felt guilty for their sin, and so they tried to cover themselves with some rinky-dink fig leaves. They were trying to fix their own problem. But God said, "No, I love you. You don't need to run

away from me. Be my friend!” So He gave them a better covering of animal skins, saying, “I’ll do a better job than you, and it’ll keep meeting your needs until you are healed and whole.”

And so, Paul told his readers, “Our friendship with God was restored by the death of His Son while we were still His enemies.” God does not see us as His enemies; we see him as ours from within our fallen behavior and mindset. We’re at enmity with God, yet He’s always looking at us and saying, “I love you just the way you are. But I also want sin out of you because I want you to improve, grow, learn, and become more like me. I don’t hate you. I don’t want to throw you away. I don’t think you’re a worthless piece of junk. I love you, but you are at enmity with me. You’re the one who hides in your mind and heart. You need to be restored, and that’s just what I’m going to do.”

Paul also added, “We will certainly be saved through the life of His son.” So by Christ dying and living, we will be saved (delivered) through his life. This is all going to get explained more throughout the rest of Paul’s letter. He can only explain so much at a time, and he can’t tell us everything in one paragraph. So be patient and enjoy the journey Paul is taking us on. Here in Romans Five, He’s laying some groundwork. In Romans Six, he will get into more detail by saying that what happened to Jesus also happened to us, putting us in really good shape. So he closes this half of Romans Five with this: *So now we can rejoice in our wonderful new relationship with God, because our Lord Jesus Christ has made us Friends of God.*

18. Death Spread to Everyone (Romans 5:12-15)

Sin entered the world (5:12a)

The first half of Romans Five was pretty clear and very encouraging. This second half is a little harder to work through. However, it is very foundational: what Jesus did on the cross was for all humanity, and Paul explains this in detail. He starts out, *When Adam sinned, sin entered the world*. Sounds reasonable; it had to get here somehow. Apparently, before Adam and Eve sinned, there was no sin in the world, assuming Adam was a real, historical person, and there really was a Garden of Eden. Like many things in the Bible, there are problems with the creation account in Genesis. This does not mean it did not happen; it could have. But people have rightly been suspicious because of some inconsistencies, apparent contradictions with modern-day science, and a few rather odd situations (like talking snakes and fruit laced with DNA-altering poison). However, many will argue that God can do anything, any way He chooses. And of course, that is true. But this fact does not guarantee that every peculiar event portrayed in the Bible *must* be true; it just says it *can* be true.

Paul seemed to believe that Adam was a real historical figure. As a Jew, he was taught this all his life, accepted it, and carried it over into Christianity that he helped establish, despite knowing that the creation account was written down by Moses at least 2,500 years before it supposedly occurred. He also had to know

that it all came down to us by word-of-mouth transmission. This is known as “oral tradition,” and it is not clear how reliable that process is. The only way to know for sure is if someone wrote down the *original* events so they could be compared to what was handed down orally. But then it wouldn’t be an oral tradition because there would be a set of writings! Therefore, many people assume that God guided the process, and what we have today is accurate. Others are more skeptical, citing the many problems and inconsistencies as reasons not to assume anything. But even if Adam was not a real historical figure, the principle of what Paul is teaching by contrasting Christ to Adam can still be *spiritually* true.

Creation account problems

One interesting problem is that if people want to take the creation account as literally true and as historically accurate, then the genealogies (also recorded in Genesis) should also be taken as literally true and not just figurative. These genealogies may very well be the clearest passages in the Bible. They are very specific and seem to be written so that the reader can do some math and know the date of the creation of the world. It is very easy to work through the genealogies from Abraham back to Adam. When this is done, the creation date comes out to be about 4000 BC. The problem comes when this bumps up against science, where the world and the universe seem to be a whole lot older. Perhaps this is why the “gap theory” was introduced in the Scofield Reference Bible (early 20th century) to offset the mounting scientific evidence that emerged from the Enlightenment and the scientific revolution of Copernicus and Galileo. The gap theory is the idea that there is an infinitely long gap of time between verses 1 and 2 in Genesis One. But this hardly solves the scientific problem since the sun, moon, and stars were all created in seven literal days after the earth was created. There is no shortage of explanations for

this, too, but it should be clear that problems exist, enough for some to reasonably doubt.

I don't think science is something that's anti-faith. It's just in a different realm from spiritual things. Science is based on our five senses, where measurements are taken, facts are established, and reasonable conclusions are drawn. I think God wants us to discover His world. When the ancients looked up at the sky, they concluded, "Well, there's that thing up there we call the moon, and there's a thing called the Sun, and they look somewhat alike, both round but one too bright to look at. They seem to be about the same distance away from us, except the moon is closer because it occasionally gets in front of the sun. The sun goes around the Earth once a day, but the Moon goes around very slowly, taking about 30 days. Then there are these little twinkly things we call stars." They thought the sky was a big dome with holes in it, and some kind of light behind it shone through. All they could do was guess based on what they observed. We would do the same thing.

Imagine trying to understand how this all works; it was difficult for them. That's all they had to look at. Well, now we have telescopes and we've sent probes to the edges of our solar system and beyond (like Voyager I, sent out in 1977). So God has given us a way to observe the universe around us, and it's good for us to do this. But sometimes we reject what we see because we are too stuck on the past conclusions we have made based on false data. When the Catholic Church leaders, in Galileo's days, looked through his telescope and saw moons around Jupiter, they rejected what they saw because they were stuck in their own self-indoctrination about the world around them. They concluded that the telescope was an instrument of the devil designed to deceive people. This is what religious bigotry brings. It took a long time, but the truth prevailed. It wasn't until 1992, 350 years after the Roman Catholic Church condemned Galileo, that they declared he was right! This is how strong religious bondage and

bigotry are, keeping people from simply observing what God has created. David wrote in the Psalms, "The heavens declare the glory of God."

Observing the universe doesn't violate anything. In fact, for me and maybe some of you, it enhances who God is. I can conclude (more than the ancients ever could), "Wow, God is really big. Our sun and moon are really small, and the stars are enormously huge and very far away. The sun dwarfs the earth, and the earth dwarfs me. And there are bigger stars that dwarf the stars that dwarf the sun! it staggers the imagination.

Who was Adam?

So, it's okay to look at and observe what God has made out there. That's a good thing. But is that consistent with the Biblical genealogies that place creation around 4000 BC? Was there a garden where two original humans were specially created? You be the judge. Maybe. God can do whatever He wants whenever He wants, but did He do this? Many honestly believe He did and that He distributed the light coming from the stars, making them look very old. Perhaps it does not matter that much since no one was there to observe creation, and no experiment can be run today to prove or disprove it. At this point, it is a matter of faith either way. Adam and Eve may very well have been real people. Jesus seemed to talk like they were, and so did Paul, that they weren't just a fictional story or mythology. The way Paul uses Adam in comparison to Jesus indicates he believed Adam was a real person. How can Jesus become the second (and final) Adam if Adam was not real? Then again, perhaps Paul is just using the *Adam story* to make a point about who Jesus was in relation to "all humanity." You decide. But either way, what Paul says about who Jesus was cannot be misunderstood. The point is that it is about Jesus, not Adam; It's about what God has done for humanity, not what we do for ourselves!

I bring all of this up simply because the Bible and Christianity have problems that should not be ignored. For whatever reason, God has allowed this uncertainty, and my speculation is that He wants people to focus on him today, now, as the ultimate and only source of truth for each person. The Bible, the New Testament, Paul's writings, churches, and pastors are all helpful in our journey toward fellowship with God, which is our ultimate destination. Never take an off-ramp along the way, down the path of any of these temporary but helpful aspects of faith that God has provided. Perhaps God doesn't want us to get too focused on a book or on stories and only wants those to lead us to him. So, make your dependence, your belief, and your faith in God, a person, not a book that you read or a church you attend. I'm not putting the Bible down or saying it's worthless. I'm just saying it is designed for us to read and tell us about God and people in the Old and New Testaments. We talk about God and say we believe in the Holy Spirit and many other things, but at some point, we need to close the book and say, "God, I need to know if what these people are talking about is real. You alone can show me." Reading the book doesn't show us it is real; it just tells us something and gives us information. Hope you see the distinction. So hopefully you will occasionally close the Bible, put it down, and say, "God. I need to know you." Once you know God and walk with him in this amazing, mysterious faith thing, you will discover it to be something way beyond studying the Bible, as good as that is! Don't miss out on a relationship with God through the Holy Spirit. Remember, Jesus didn't promise to send the Holy Bible; he promised to send the Holy Spirit, a person. The official Bible came about in 387 AD by a group of guys who all decided on 66 books that should be considered authoritative. Perhaps they got it right. But there's some legitimate controversy and questions about it.

And so, according to Paul, when Adam sinned (whoever he was, whenever he was, however that works), that's when sin

entered into the world. I'm sure you know the story about eating the forbidden fruit offered by a talking snake that was possessed by Satan, and that it was an act of disobedience by Eve and then Adam. God said, "Don't eat it," but they chose to disobey and eat it anyway. Have you ever caught yourself doing something like this in life, big or small? It is in all of us, and Paul is saying that this tendency came from Adam, who introduced sin into the world. As soon as they ate, rebelled against God, and thought for themselves, everything changed. Their eyes were opened, and for the first time, they understood the difference between right and wrong. But this is not all bad, which may be why God allowed it to happen. But it also set things up for a long and painful journey on which humanity would travel. However, God saw through it, had a purpose in it, and it is something He is still working through today. It was to eventually save all humanity from sin and themselves. But why allow it at all? I can only guess, but I believe there was no other way for God's amazing creation to become like him, perfect in every way and able to appreciate such a journey, forever thankful for the eternal result of living with him forever. As they say, "No pain, no gain," and this is true concerning the plight of mankind since the beginning. When "I'm going to do my own thing" entered the world, we were all infected with it in some mysterious way. The evidence for this, Paul has already stated clearly in Romans Three, "All have sinned." Here in Romans Five, he is explaining *how* this happened (sin entered the world through Adam) and what it means for humanity, which he will develop in the rest of Romans Five, then in Romans Six, Seven, and Eight.

Sin brought death (5:12b)

Adam's sin brought death. And so, death spread to everyone because everyone sinned. So apparently, when Adam sinned, it began a process whereby we all eventually die. No one

lives forever on this earth. I'm proof of it; I'm getting old and tired, I've got prostate cancer, and all of this is just part of the dying process we inherited from Adam. It's not wrong and it's not bad. It's not terrible. But it is hard and difficult. Still, it's a normal process that is part of God's grand purpose, culminating in the death of every person. Anyone want to live forever here in this crazy, messed-up world? I don't think so. Consider this life to be a *learning experience*, preparing you for something much greater.

So, sin entered the world and death spread to everyone, including me, you, and everybody else. When we were twenty, we thought we were invincible because we knew death was (probably) a long way off. That's good. When we are young, we still have a lot of living to do. God wants us to go make something of our lives. This is why we are given about seventy-five years to live (some more, some less). Make the most of it if you are young; you'll learn. A pastor once told me, "Life is like a coin. You can spend it any way you want, but you can only spend it once!" Go spend your *coin of life* well, and make it count. That's what I did.

Paul continues. *People sinned even before the law was given.* So it wasn't just about breaking the law that made us die. There was a time when there was no official law, just people's consciousness of wrongdoing. But sin goes all the way back to the beginning of humanity. It's part of who we are and always has been. It's just in us. *But it was not counted as sin because there was not yet any law to break.* The word sin (in Greek) means to "miss the mark." The law became the mark to miss in Jewish thinking. So in that sense, when there was no law (before the law was given), there was no sin (missing the mark of the law). However, in another sense (the important one), we all miss the big mark of perfection. Cain killed Abel long before there was any law given, but it was still wrong. Remember, in Paul's *problem* part of this letter, he said that people know, by their consciences, right

and wrong apart from any law. So people sinned and died from the beginning, right after Adam and Eve disobeyed God. Though this was sin, it was not formally considered sin in the sense of breaking the law. Paul is about to make this clear.

Yet, everyone died from the time of Adam to the time of Moses, even those who descended from Adam and did not disobey a specific command from God. So, somehow, sin was passed down to those who did not break that original command from God, as Adam and Eve did. They all died because they all sinned in their own way and by their own choice. They somehow inherited a sinful nature from Adam and exercised it in new and different ways. They all decided, "I'm gonna do my own thing," and we all know what that means. We all do it. We've all done it. We've all been selfish. We've all said and thought things we shouldn't. So Paul is just saying that before the law was officially in place (in Judaism), sin was already happening, and people died, even those who didn't sin exactly the way Adam did. The proof that the whole world is sinful is that everybody I know has sinned, and I have never found any exceptions. Have you?

Paul shifts gears here and begins to compare Adam to Christ. This is one of the most foundational passages in the New Testament. As he develops this idea, it will become obvious as to why. *Adam is a symbol, a representation of Christ who was yet to come.* Wow, way back in the very beginning of humanity, Adam, as the founder and representative of all humanity, somehow symbolically represented Jesus, who would come much later. It looks like God was planning ahead, even in a big disaster like the fall of Adam and Eve. You would think it might be the other way around, that Jesus would somehow be symbolic of Adam. But he was not. Paul wants us to see Christ as the central one. The focus needs to be on him, and Adam must take a back

seat. Adam is symbolic of Christ, and Christ is the real deal. Adam was the first person who sinned (and began to die), creating a very real problem that could only be fixed by Jesus.

But there's a great difference between Adam's *sin* and God's gracious *gift*, that gift being Jesus, who was God's gift as the savior of the world. The *sin* of this one man, Adam, brought death to many. He did indeed, and it was not just some; he brought death to everyone (as Paul made so clear previously). But even greater is God's wonderful grace and His gift of forgiveness to many through this other man, Jesus Christ. Don't be misled by the word *many* here. In Greek, it means "an indefinite number." This is pretty much what *many* means in English, too. "Many" can be a few, some, most, or all, because it does not reveal the amount. Greeks used this kind of thinking (also in their aorist verb tense) to cause a reader to focus on the *quality* (fact) of something, not the *quantity*. Paul will clarify this further along when he uses the word *all* in additional comparisons of Adam and Christ. But whether he uses *many* or *all*, he is referring to the same group of people: all humanity!

19. Triumph Over Sin and Death (Romans 5:16-21)

Adam vs Christ for many (5:16)

The result of God's gracious gift is very different from the result of that one man's sin. So not only did Adam bring death, and Christ brought forgiveness, but the *result* of Adam bringing death is different from the *result* that Christ brings by bringing forgiveness. *Adam's sin led to condemnation.* Remember, condemnation is declaring something unfit, unworthy, needing to be torn down and gotten rid of. And I believe that's how God sees our old, sinful selves. It needs to go. But He doesn't see that new self, that He's made us in Christ, as condemned in any way. Quite opposite, He sees us redeemed, restored, renewed, and whole. The condemned building we once were has been rebuilt in Christ. No wonder this is all called "Good News". We are now perfect, and this is the contrast Paul is making.

So, the result of God's gracious gift is very different from the result of one man's sin. Adam's sin led to condemnation. *But God's free gift leads to our being made right with God, even though we are guilty of many sins.* Wow. Even though we're guilty of the sins we commit, what Christ did leads us to being *made right* with God. What a deal. As we look elsewhere in the New Testament, we find that Jesus "took away the sins of the world," according to John in his Gospel account. And "He is the

atoning sacrifice, not just for our sins, but for the whole world,” according to John in his first letter. Many other such passages exist; Paul can't say everything here in Romans Five, but what he is saying is very foundational and the key to everything else.

Paul now says the same thing in a little different way. For the sin of this one man, Adam, caused death to rule over many (an indefinite number of people), but even greater is God's wonderful grace and His gift of righteousness. All who receive it will live in triumph over sin and death through this one man, Jesus Christ. There is a *receiving* of what God did that is required to fully enjoy all the benefits. But it is not a requirement in the sense that if rejected, God will do something horrible in retaliation, never again to work correctly in your life. It's a change of the mind and heart. A human mother or father loves their child, even before they can communicate. But over time, they begin to communicate, resulting in a better relationship. But that's not when the relationship really began; that's when it began two ways, going back and forth. This same thing is true about us and God. He loved us long before we loved him in return, and He never gives up on drawing us to himself. It always takes time; it just takes longer for some than others.

So Paul concludes that God's wonderful grace and His gift of righteousness are a much greater thing than what we received from Adam. Christ made us right before God, and all who receive this will live victorious over sin and death. However, understand that we all sin and we all die, but we are in Christ, and someday such victory will be fully experienced. We only catch a glimpse of it now, here in this life, but much more so than when we were in Adam and not in Christ! So Paul's talking about what happens in this life. When we, by faith, receive what God has done. In other words, our understanding of it and agreeing with it has a huge impact on our lives. We do not start earning something with God

when we decide to receive His gift of grace in Jesus. Quite the contrary, this is when all earning ends because Jesus, as the second and final Adam, has done all earning with God for us.

When you believe, it's not some kind of magic; it is very real. God does not say, "Okay, I'm going to apply the atonement of Christ to you now." He already did this, at the time of the cross, and Paul will spell this out in detail in Romans Six. But for now, he wants us to know that what Jesus brings is infinitely better than what Adam brought. We were transferred from being *in Adam* to being *in Christ*. That is huge! God has already applied what Jesus did on the cross to everybody, as we will see as we continue working through Paul's letter. When we believe, it is when we come into an *experiential* understanding of what it means to be *in Christ*. We were already there without realizing or understanding it. So for us, experientially, it's all new. We mistakenly think, "This wasn't true before." Oh, but it was; we just didn't know it. We hadn't experienced it. That can't happen until we receive it. This is why people are called "born again" in the New Testament. It's because we feel like we're brand new, and in some ways we are. We are *spiritually* born for the first time. In time and in life, we are new creations, yet in God's eyes, we always were, and nothing has changed. God does not all of a sudden say, "Oh, good. You finally believe. I'm gonna like you more." He doesn't need to do this because He already loves us as much as He possibly can, and that's infinitely. So there's no way for us to improve on His love by our behavior. That's really important to know, because it will change your life if you know that bad behavior will not make God love you any less, and good behavior will not make him love you any more. However, behaving badly will change how God deals with us, but only because He wants us to do better. He is always committed to this, but His love never changes. This is a very powerful thing to understand, and many people struggle with it. I think we all do a little bit. We can't help but wonder, "I've sinned, God, do you still love me?" His answer is always, "Yes, I still love

you and always will, but let's do something together about that nasty, destructive sin in your life. It's gotta go!"

So, Paul has concluded that "the sin of this one man, Adam, caused death to rule over many, but even greater is God's wonderful grace and His gift of righteousness. For all who receive it and will live in triumph over sin and death through this one man, Jesus Christ." You might need to read this amazing passage a few times and let it sink in. I wish Paul had written a commentary because I have a whole bunch of questions. However, just taking it at face value, letting it say what it does, pondering it, and glean what is there will be more than sufficient. Paul has communicated quite well what's going on and what the score is for us in life, if we let him. This difference between Adam and Christ (what Adam brought to all humanity and how Christ brought the opposite) will turn out to be the key that unlocks the door to all Paul will present in the remaining parts of this letter.

Adam vs Christ for all (5:18)

Now, Paul will restate his contrast between Adam and Christ, but he will underscore the fact that this was done for *all* humanity. *Adam's one sin brought condemnation for everyone, whereas Christ's one act of righteousness brought a right relationship with God and new life for everyone.* In the previous passages, Paul wanted to emphasize the *fact* of what Christ did for humanity and how much better it was compared to Adam, and so he used the word *many* to communicate this idea. Here, in this passage, he gets more specific and uses *everyone* (or *all* in some translations). However, not everyone actively experiences this new life, even though they all inherently have it. It lies dormant in them until awakened someday when they realize what God has already done for them. This is something people can only do in cooperation with the Holy Spirit, who is always at work in everyone's life. So,

when he says “everyone,” he does not mean experientially equal in everyone’s life. But he does mean equal in everyone’s life in actuality, from God’s perspective! Everyone is in Christ, but everyone does not experience it in exactly the same way or to the same degree. This new life is brought to everyone equally, the same number of people that Adam brought into condemnation and ruin. It is potentially in everyone, though they do not all know or understand it. But that new life is there, and that’s what counts. Eventually, in God’s good time, it will emerge and be fully experienced. This is because God loves His whole world and will never fail anyone when it comes to salvation.

God’s working in everybody. He worked in my life before I began walking with him. I was just a kid growing up in a church. I didn’t care about spiritual things too much. I wasn’t ready, and God knew this, but He kept on working in my life even though I did not realize it at the time. It’s amazing now when I look back. Perhaps you have seen this in your own life! I wanted to go out and play and have fun, but He was at work, slowly and surely. God is never in a hurry to do things right. He was preparing me in ways I could never have imagined. I was in the right church, at the right time, for me to learn the things I needed to learn. So, He’s always at work in people’s lives. But then it all changes when we receive what God has done for us and start working *with* him rather than against him. I’m sure you have experienced some of this yourself.

Because one person disobeyed God, many became sinners. Of course, that one person was Adam. *But because one other person (obviously Christ) obeyed God, many were made righteous.* Paul has gone back to using *many* here. But don’t let that distract you from the fact that God did what He did for all humanity, every single person. How could He not? One thing that Jesus emphasized was that he obeyed the Father. “I do what the

Father tells me to do; I do what I see him doing.” His obedience to the Father was essentially something he was doing for us. We have all obeyed the Father perfectly, in God’s eyes, because we are now in Christ and no longer in Adam.

More sin results in more grace (5:29)

Paul again shifts gears as he concludes this very important second half of Romans Five. *God's law was given so that people could see how sinful they were.* He made this point back in the *problem* part of the letter. The law wasn't given to save people; we're never gonna keep it perfectly and get saved by the law. Only Jesus can keep the law perfectly and save us all in that way. *However, as people sinned more and more, God's wonderful grace became even more abundant!* God doesn't say, “Oh no, you guys are sinning more. I'm gonna give up on you. This is too hard. You’ve gotten me out of the mood of saving you.” He never does that. Instead, our sin causes him to double down on saving us. This is what grace is all about. He is saying, “If you sin more, my grace is going to become even more abundant because I'm not giving up on anybody!”

Here is Paul's conclusion: *Just as sin ruled over all people and brought death, now God's wonderful grace rules instead. This gives us a right standing with God, resulting in eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.* So that's the whole picture of Romans Five, and if you don't get anything else out of it, Adam brought ruin, condemnation, and death to all humanity, whereas Jesus brought to the same group of people salvation, righteousness, and forgiveness. This is so basic and foundational for the rest of this *explanation* part of Paul’s letter, which will continue through Romans Eleven. So keep all of this in mind as you continue reading.

The second half of Romans Five is one of many passages in the New Testament that reveal the *new person* we are in Christ, compared to the *old person* we once were in the flesh (our human nature inherited from Adam). We have both natures embedded within us in this life, yet we are a new person in Christ who is perfect. But we are also, to a limited degree, the old person who still wants to sin and always will. It is a spiritual battle that Paul will elaborate on in Romans Seven. It will help you to keep three things in mind. First is that you will live with this struggle between these two natures (old and new, in Adam and Christ) until the day you die. But second, this does not need to defeat you, and we can choose to live in the new person we now are in Christ. Paul will elaborate on this in Romans Six. And third, you can't improve the *new* person that you are in Christ because it's already perfect. But you also can't improve the *old* person that you still have hanging around because it's totally corrupt and can never be perfected. So never waste your time trying to perfect your old nature: it is impossible. Instead, "Walk in the Spirit," as Paul wrote elsewhere, "and you will not fulfill the desires of the flesh." That is good advice, and it works, not perfectly, but successfully! Now this, of course, doesn't mean go ahead and sin since you will, to some degree, sin anyway. Giving in to sin is not the answer, but fighting it all the time is not either. If you focus on your sin, trying ever so hard not to, you will sin all the more. You'll get lost in it. But if you focus on your relationship with God, walking in the spirit like Jesus did (he fellowshiped with the Father), that will be your best shot at solving this dilemma of being a new and old person simultaneously.

20. Crucified with Christ (Romans 6:1-4)

Sin more and receive more grace? (6:1)

If you have never gone through Romans Six, you're going to like it. This is the favorite passage in the New Testament for a long-time, older friend of mine who spent his life traveling the world and starting prayer groups with international leaders. I agree with him that it is a gem because in it Paul demonstrates how we can become free from sin by realizing what Jesus did on the cross and how we are participants in it.

Paul starts many portions of his letter with the words, "What shall we say, then..." followed by a question. Some translators reduce it to "Well then..." It seems to be Paul's way of getting his readers ready for some provocative aspect of God's salvation as he continues to present his *explanation* of how it all works. *Well then, should we keep on sinning so that God can show us more and more of His wonderful grace?* He's playing off of what he just said at the end of Romans Five, above. If, when we sin, grace increases, it is logical to conclude that perhaps we should sin more to get more grace. Yet, there's obviously something wrong with such thinking. Paul's answer to his own question is: *Of course not!* I think he is saying, "Come on, get serious, use the brain God gave you. That's a really twisted thing to think." However, some people may have been asking Paul this, so he addresses it here. Some may have been genuinely confused,

but others may have genuinely thought, “Oh boy. I get to send more because I'm gonna get more grace. Woohoo.” Well, you're gonna get more discipline and correction from God, too. And, actually, that is a form of grace because it is God loving you and acting in your best interest. That's what love always does, either positively or negatively. It's God saying. “Okay. Looks like you need some correction. I'll bring it. That's part of my grace.”

Since we have died to sin, how can we continue to live in it? Good question, Paul. Obviously, we can't. Well, we can, but it is not wise to do so. God will not allow us to do this unchecked by him. Obviously, after what he just said about being transferred from Adam into Christ, which made us righteous (perfect) from God's perspective, how could we ever think about trying to go back and live in bondage to sin? Paul says we've somehow died to sin. How is this possible? Well, he continues on to further explain. *Have you forgotten that when we were joined with Christ Jesus in baptism, we also joined him in his death?* Some people think this is referring to when they were baptized with water, as a ritual. But in the New Testament, baptism means a lot more than just pouring water on somebody or immersing them in it. Real baptism is of the Holy Spirit. Remember, John said, “I baptize with water. But there's one that's going to come and baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” The real thing, being baptized in the Spirit, is something that Christ did when he came. Being baptized in the Spirit is not necessarily about speaking in tongues or other dramatic manifestations. It *can* include these, but these are not the essence of it. Baptism is about a *new identity* in Christ; you're indwelt with the Holy Spirit, and your life has changed.

We died and were buried with Christ by baptism. This is how we are joined with Christ. But did we really die? Were we

physically buried like he was? No, but we're fully *identified* with that event, so much so that Paul can say we died and were buried with him. We weren't, yet we were! In some spiritual way, what happened to Jesus happened to us. We died with him in a very real spiritual sense so that we can be raised from the dead someday in a very actual reality. That resurrection event, someday in our future, will be very physical!

So, Paul's doing an analogy here, and yet I think there's a lot of reality in it. If we were joined with Christ in baptism (identification), were joined with him in his death, and we died and were buried with him ... uh, this could not have happened to me 2000 years ago because I was not even born yet! Still, something deeply spiritual happened on that Easter weekend. How could I be there? Well, in a sense, at least figuratively, we were all there. God made it happen in some mighty, mysterious way. I am very sympathetic to those who scoff at this idea because it does not seem rationally possible. But how many things in life press against the boundaries of reality, and we just have to admit that we're not sure? This seems to be one of those, so I allow for it in my heart and mind. Besides, what alternative do I have out there to take refuge in, other than this amazing historical figure and all his followers down through the ages?

Certainly, there are some, but not many. Hinduism is the oldest alternative, then came Buddhism (and Plato on the secular philosophy side, at about the same time). Judaism predates Buddha and Plato, but was a relatively small religious community. Then came Christianity, which started out small but grew very large, especially during and after the Fourth Century, and not always for the betterment of it. Finally, Islam came along, using the coattails of medieval Christianity, but provided what they believe is the *final word* from God, through the prophet, Mohamad. Those are the choices. Despite all the flaws in modern-day Christianity (which became *yet another religion* in the AD 300s), choosing Jesus and the early church he inspired is a

no-brainer for me. Here in Romans Six, Paul is getting at the very heart of the Gospel (Good News) message, that we all died and were raised in some mysterious way with Jesus back on that Easter day when he did! But we only realize it by our faith in Jesus.

Tie all this in with Romans Five, where Jesus is identified as the new head of the human race, and our identification with him (baptism) in his death and resurrection is revolutionary. This has got to be one reason, if not the main reason, that Christianity survived in spite of the odds against it, starting out as a small, obscure cult in the First Century. Jesus is presented as the Second (and last) Adam who represents all of humanity. Yes, someone needed to do this to save this fallen world on its way to self-destruction. And just like Adam threw the whole race into condemnation and ruin, so Jesus in the same way, carried the whole human race into righteousness, success, freedom, and peace. True, it does not fully look like it, but this is an ongoing work by God in which He will not fail. If you are any kind of student of history, you will see the tremendous improvements in humanity and the world since those brutal days of “might makes right” before Jesus came and changed everything! That's what being the head of a race brings about.

New lives (6:4b)

And just as Christ was raised from the dead, by the glorious power of the Father, we may also now live new lives. We *died* in a sense, and were *raised* in a sense. We didn't physically die and get physically raised like Jesus did (although that's going to happen to all of us someday). But this is why Jesus is called “the first fruits” of this whole resurrection process. (That was an agricultural reference to the crops that emerged early in the harvesting season.) Jesus physically died and physically came back to life (the first fruits), and someday we will all do the same thing (the latter harvest) in the resurrection, at the end of time.

According to Jesus, “everyone in the graves will arise again on the *last day*.” So, everyone who has ever lived will rise from the dead (just as Jesus did), and all who are still alive (on that *last day* of this world) will go through an immediate transformation into the eternal state. This is how Paul described it in his letters to the Thessalonians. It could be that in one instant, people die and are raised, or maybe they just transition directly into their new resurrected bodies. No one knows for sure, but it doesn’t really matter. Either way, it’s pretty remarkable.

Sometimes I scratch my head and think, “Are you sure?” Well, I just leave it all with God, where it belongs. I can’t prove it, but it’s by far the best and most credible thing around to believe. I can go with Mohammad, Buddha, and Gandhi, Mother Teresa, or a host of others. But for me, Jesus stands head and shoulders above everyone else. I’ll go with the guy who seems to have the most credibility and has dramatically changed the world over the past 2000 years, one life at a time. I am one of these! And so Paul says, “Just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glorious power of the Father, now we may live new lives.” I can testify to that. My life has certainly changed for the better over my brief 75 years. Wow, what a journey it has been! Paul wrote about thirty years after Jesus lived. But he wants his readers to know they can experience a new life in Jesus, just as we, too, can today. This is what makes the Good News message about Jesus so timeless. We can all live new lives in him, no matter when or where we live! When we believe, we have a sense of, “Wow, I feel born again. I’ve risen from the dead, so to speak, from my old life.” Right? Have you experienced this? There is nothing better in life. So I think Paul’s referring to this as a spiritual reality more than anything actual. Hey, which one is more important?

We all have the gift of faith to some degree, which can not be taken away. Some people experience faith, not realizing that God is behind it. Often God has been so poorly presented to them as a mean, retaliating being to be feared. Thus, they avoid

that awful image of God. But they actually embrace the true God who knows and loves all of us, even if they do so with mustard-seed-sized faith and very little realization of its reality. God knows and is at work in everyone. Who knows, maybe God is more real (minimal as it might be) in some who instinctively reject the traditional (and sometimes perverted) view of God, than He is to so many who are actively believing some inherited view of God that they never question or seek to verify! Many things in life are not the way they appear on the surface.

Many times in my life, I've sat there and thought, "How come I believe this? I mean, come on. I'm an engineer and I've been schooled in science and rational thinking, focusing on things I can prove, not just someone's speculative claims. How come I believe all this stuff? I can't see, touch, or measure any of it." Well, I think it's because something tells me there's more going on than just what I can see, touch, and measure ... and I'm not alone. I immensely enjoyed all my engineering classes, where I learned that *force equals mass times acceleration*, etc. I could go into a lab and prove things like this, but I also knew there had to be something more out there, and that it was something *spiritual* in its nature. I think everyone knows this in the core of their being. There are very few pure atheists. Almost everyone, today and in history, can't help but think, at least occasionally, "there's got to be a God or some higher power." Or they may choose to be agnostic (no knowledge), thinking, "It seems like there's got to be somebody, something bigger, but I just don't know for sure." But either way, everyone experiences some aspect of spirituality.

Life kinda teaches us this. The physical world, real as it is to us in our five senses, falls far short of answering all our questions or meeting all our needs. We know this tangible world will someday end. It has to. It is temporary. There was a popular song in the 60s titled *Is That All There Is?* by Peggy Lee. It is a very thought-provoking song, much like what I desire for my commentaries. This song asks good questions, perhaps the best

question of all, but it offers no answers. I try to offer an optimistic view of life by commenting on the writings of Paul. However, I see my home, my car, and my body decaying, along with experiencing strife and struggling in every corner of life. And so, like the song, I can't help but ask, "Is that all there is?" I believe everyone instinctively knows the answer is: No! Can't be!

This is all part of the object lesson that life is for all of us. God is saying, loud and clear, "Look around, folks, it's all going down. It's all decaying, everything; nothing is permanent." Yet we all have a sense that there has to be some kind of *permanency* somewhere. There has to be something that doesn't fade away, something that serves as an ultimate anchor. Otherwise, we are forever floating aimlessly. Well, that anchor is God, and the spiritual realities that we can't see but know must be there.

Even Plato, a secular philosopher, concluded that there's gotta be some kind of *forms*, that are the true reality in some spiritual realm behind all that we see. His idea was that the physical world is just a manifestation of these forms that are the ultimate perfection. He compared this life to the shadows on a cave wall that are projected by real objects placed in front of light entering the cave. But then Aristotle, his greatest student, went on to present a very opposite view of reality, one that sees the material world as essentially all there is. What you see is what you get? Philosophies and world views have been the extended battle between Plato and Aristotle ever since!

Everyone has some sense that there must be more, or at least has some reasonable doubts about their pure atheism. So never be ashamed of being a *person of faith*. Every philosopher I've ever read falls into this larger category of thinking. They are all *persons of faith* to some degree. They just believe a different set of ideas, but they can't prove their conclusions either. So God has kind of put everybody on the same level before him. We're all people of faith; we all believe in something, and just have to say, "I'm gonna trust that." For those of us who believe in God, we say, "God,

I'm gonna just trust you.” There's a book out titled “The Sin of Certainty,” by Peter Enns. His premise is that God hasn't asked us to be *certain* because we really can't be certain about anything (though some claim they are without any objective proof). Instead, according to Enns, God is asking us to just *trust* him, because that is something we *can* do (hard as that is at times).

Even John the Baptist, who was the official announcer of Jesus' coming, struggled in his faith. He asked his fellow believers who were visiting him in prison, “Are you sure that Jesus is the Messiah? I'm about to get my head cut off, and I need some reassurance.” They took John's question to Jesus, who replied, “Tell John the sick are healed, the dead are raised, and I'm the one doing it. I'm bringing the Kingdom of God to earth.” I think we all struggle with faith; it is normal, and God knows all about it. It's the way He made us, so never apologize for being a *person of faith*. We all are. However, keep in mind that your faith can grow. You will experience this the longer you live. The more you trust God, the more you grow in knowing him. I call this, “faith begets faith!”

21. United with Jesus in Death (Romans 6:5-14)

No longer slaves to sin (6:5)

Since we have been united with him in his death, we will also be raised to life as he was. Someday we're all to go through what Jesus went through. He resurrected about 60 hours after he died. The rest of us will have to wait. Some have been waiting for thousands of years, in their graves, probably unconsciously so. Many people believe the soul separates from the body at death and is consciously waiting for the resurrection. This idea originated with Plato, who greatly influenced the Christian church in the first few centuries. However, Jewish thinking and the Old Testament writings seem to know nothing of this and claim the soul and body are never separated. When the body dies, so does the soul. For the Jews, Hades was the *grave* and the *place of the dead*. Those who are now alive, and those still to be born in future generations, they too must wait. Resurrection Day might be next week, another hundred years, or perhaps thousands. It has always been popular for religious people to believe that they are living in the *last days*, but it might not happen for another thousand years. Who knows!

What happened to Jesus in rising from the dead and gaining a resurrected body? It's reported that he could still eat; he ate fish on the shores of Galilee when he met with his disciples. Yet, he

seemed to transcend through walls and just appear. Was he living in the heavenly and earthly realms at the same time? No one knows, and no explanation is ever offered. Life is full of mysteries. But don't let this cause you to believe every claim made, now or in history. However, don't automatically dismiss them either.

Life here on Earth got messed up. So, God came and said, "I'm going to fix it. I'll raise you all up from the dead someday, and you're going to have perfect bodies." Hey, if you don't like the way you look now, someday you will look a lot better. No flaws! You're gonna look like you, but you're gonna look terrific. We'll have a good hair day every day. So, Paul says, "Since we've been united with him in his death, we will also be raised to life as he was." What happened to Jesus will happen to us because we are united with him as the new head of the human race. What an improvement over Adam, who blew it. However, don't get too critical of him; had it been any of us, we would have blown it too!

I recently got the results on my prostate cancer. They did a bone scan and a CAT scan. I went in, and when the doctor came into the room, I immediately asked him, "Well, doc, how long do I have? I was half kidding, but it seemed like a good question. He answered, "You've got six months..." then he paused, and continued, "... until you come see me again!" He was extending my time between visits because they did not find anything. Sick joke on his part, but I appreciated it. So, I'm good for a while, and for me it was God's way of saying, "Carl, what you're doing is okay with me, for now. It may not be perfect, and you are mistaken in some ways, but I'm good with you still living and doing what you're doing." So, it gave me some confidence about who I am and what I do as a person, friend, husband, father, grandfather, writer, and podcaster. However, included in God's message is, "Someday something will take you out of here. Everyone has an expiration date that I have set. It might be cancer, or it might be something else. Make the best of each day,

honor me, love unconditionally, and stay ever ready to depart at a moment's notice." I am satisfied with that. I hope you are, too, because that is God's message to everyone.

My dad is 96. He has slowed down over the years and is sputtering out. He was once a vibrant WWII bombardier who flew 65 missions over France to help defeat Nazi Germany and maintain our freedom. But now he is old and trusts God one day at a time, waiting patiently for God's timing in his life. I once calculated how many heartbeats he'd done his whole life. At 96, it's a lot! It's amazing that a heart can pump blood through its arteries and veins, every second, for 96 years. Our bodies keep rebuilding themselves; it's really miraculous. But for him, as for all of us, "since we've been united with Christ and his death, we'll also be raised to life just as he was."

We know that our old sinful selves were crucified with Christ. Yes, our "old sinful selves" died when Christ died (however that works), yet we still have that old nature lingering in our hearts and minds. It need not dominate us (as Paul has already stated and will keep on telling us), and we can now experience a wonderful, peaceful, joyous relationship with our Creator, which is what we were made for. Don't miss out on this! Do you still struggle with traces of that old nature that is ever-present in the shadows of life? We all do. For whatever reason, God has allowed this, perhaps so we will never forget in this life how far we've come, always re-appreciating where we are now. We're going to find that Paul struggles with the old nature, too, when we get to Romans Seven. Yet, here in Romans Six, he tells us that our old self has been crucified... dead! In one sense, it is gone; in another, we still battle it. It will be like this till the day we die, so discover the degree of victory (which is mostly) that you can have in Christ.

Above, Paul wrote, "Our old sinful selves were crucified with Christ," and then he adds this: *So that sin might lose its power*

in our lives. Maybe it won't be totally gone, but it loses its power. You can start being victorious over sin at any time. Maybe not every sin, maybe not every moment, but you will do a lot better than you ever did before. This is the kind of victory God gives us in this life, not perfection (that comes much later in time) but success, to the degree that we can live in peace, free from worry, stress, insecurity, fear, and regret. Knowing and walking with God, spiritually, takes care of all of this.

Many Christians you talked to might say, “Ya know, I'm not as good as Joe over there. And Suzie, she is quite the spiritual giant.” Keep in mind that appearances can be deceiving. Everyone puts on a good show and seldom lets down their guard. In fact, sometimes the people putting on the best show are struggling the most. That's why they work so hard to hide it. The most contented among us might be those who live quiet, unimpressive lives. Their peace and freedom are within! Instead, we can say to ourselves, “Well, I'm sure better than I used to be. I do not need to compare myself with someone who appears better (or worse) than I am. I need only compare the *new me* with the *old me* that I used to be. Thank you, God, for all you've done in my life!” It's about that simple. And that's the real proof: comparing yourself, now, with who you used to be, not with anyone else.

Set free from the power of sin (6:6b)

And so Paul tells us that sin loses its power in our lives. *We're no longer slaves to sin.* Notice he did not say that we no longer sin. We're just not a *slave* to it; It's not our master, and it no longer owns us. And that's good news. *For when we died with Christ, we were set free from the power of sin, and since we died with Christ, we know we will also live with him.* Paul is trying to say the same thing in a dozen different ways, but it all revolves around

the idea that “what happened to Christ happened to us,” and that this is a very good thing. We are so much better off since sin no longer has power over us. We need only to know this and cash in on it by choosing to live our lives in Christ. *we are sure of this because Christ was raised from the dead.* That's where our assurance is. It is in Jesus' raising from the dead, nowhere else. Wow, that's very powerful. Think about it. What can someone who is victorious over death do for us? Unlimited! Though the human being, Jesus, is the one who rose from death, it is really God who is behind it. Is this too difficult for him? He is telling humanity, “I love you and I will prove it by doing whatever it takes to save you so you can spend forever with me.” Who would not want this? But this is hard for all of us puny, insecure humans to receive.

If he rose from the dead and whatever happens to him happens to us, we can be sure that we're gonna rise from the dead, too. We can now face death, difficult as that is, unafraid, even looking forward to it (without having some kind of *death wish*) because we know that it is ultimately where we belong and that this life is temporary. This is for everyone. We can all say, “God, I'm trusting you. Jesus raised from the dead, and you're gonna raise me, too. So I'm just gonna give in to this death process to you, knowing you've got me covered. There's nothing I *can* do about it because there's nothing I *need* to do about it. I just need to leave it all in your capable hands.” They say taxes and death are unavoidable, but at least God's done something about death! Ha! Perhaps He will tackle taxes soon. Jesus had a simple solution: “Render to Ceaser what is Caesar's and render to God what is God's.” That works.

Paul then adds, *And he will never die again.* Jesus will not, and needs not ever die again. Jesus, nor any New Testament writer, ever mentions anything about reincarnation. I have some very good and loving friends who believe this is possible. I cannot

affirm or deny it (like most things in life), but I, personally, do not believe it. The completeness of God's salvation renders any kind of reincarnation unnecessary. But as always, I can be wrong. Only God owns all truth, and so I trust him to work things as He wills. I trust him to save me once and someday take me home to be with him forever. Life will end up being one big *learning curve* in preparation for eternity. As finite beings, created by God, learning is what we need to fully love God, receive His love back from Him, and love others. There is no other way than the one trip through life, ordained by God for each one of us.

Death no longer has power over him. I am glad he was so successful. It was for us! He can't die again. God came as a human, in the form of His only begotten son. This is very mysterious; no one has figured it out, including those who claim they have. He let humans crucify him without retaliating in return. Perhaps He was saying, "I don't solve my problems using violence, and so I'll let you kill me in order to prove it!" In that way, Jesus became *our* sacrifice to God. We wanted to sacrifice something because of our guilt, insecurity, and distorted view of God, thinking He needed to be appeased. So, God says. "Okay, you want to sacrifice something? Let it be me. Go ahead, kill my Son if that's what you want to do. But then I will be victorious over the death that you brought upon me. I will rise from the dead and someday bring you all with me." What a plan ... a loving plan. This is the greatest Good News story ever told.

Consider yourself dead to sin (6:10)

When he died, he died once to break the power of sin. But now that he lives, he lives for the glory of God. So you also should consider yourselves to be dead to the power of sin and alive to God through Christ Jesus. Paul once more renews his

main idea in Romans Six. It's really quite simple: Jesus did something for us, and we need to respond. He broke the power of sin in our lives, and we need to see ourselves apart from sin. Jesus physically lived, then died, then lived again. We were spiritually dead, then became spiritually alive. Paul didn't say there's no more sin. He just said we need to, in our self-assessment, see ourselves dead (inactive) with regard to sin, even though we all still sin somewhat. When we get into Romans Seven, Paul's going to lay out how all this works, along with the many human struggles and limitations that come with it. I struggle with this. I struggle with my sin. Sometimes I do what I want. Sometimes I don't. I think everyone experiences this. Right? But for now, Paul's laying the groundwork that we first need to (and should) consider ourselves as dead to the power of sin. Though it can creep into our lives, it need not have any lasting power over us. That's freedom, as good as it gets in this life!

We can all have negative thoughts about people; relationships are among the most difficult of all human activities. But when we know that everything has already been taken care of for us, in what Jesus did on the cross, sin no longer has the power it once had before we heard, understood, and accepted this Good News. It is amazing how just *knowing* something changes our perspective and gives us new strength to do what is right, and then gain from it. This is why Paul, at the beginning of this letter, said that the Good News message had power. But that power is not unleashed until we hear what it says and take it to heart. Countless people, throughout history and today, have changed their lives after hearing and receiving this message about Jesus dying on the cross, enabling them to be "alive to God."

In case we missed what Paul is saying, he states it one more way. *Don't let sin control the way you live. Do not give in to sinful desires.* He is now emphasizing our role in all of this. We have a part in what God is doing; make no mistake. We are not

supposed to be passive, but rather to act with the amount of will and decision-making that God has given us. He never makes people do or decide anything. This should be obvious by looking at the world around us. It seems God would rather take longer, not force things, and live with all the fallout and chaos that comes with it, than to hurry and not have us really learn what it all means. He knows that until we choose to do what we can (limited as that might be), we will never grow or become strong in doing what's right and becoming truly free. So be patient with yourself and those around you. Growing, learning, and deciding to make good choices takes time. God knows this.

And so, Paul tells us not to let sin control us, nor give in to it. This is not easy, but it is doable over time and with God's essential help. He always wants us to succeed, even if it takes a long time. For Paul to tell us to do these things implies that we have some say in what happens to us. However, don't focus on your sin; that's not what Paul is saying. He first tells his readers to "consider themselves dead to sin," and then, once that is understood, he instructs them to *resist* sin. Don't get these backward. First see yourself in Christ, then set out (with that strength and perspective) to do something about it. There is a time to stare sin in the face and just say, "No!" — hard as that may be when we are weak or tempted. Stopping and remembering where you stand in Christ will give you the greatest strength. That perspective will help you see how useless and destructive the sin is that you are facing. This disarms sin in us because its strength lies in our ignorance or loss of perspective. Always step back and get the big picture of who God is and how you fit into it. This is invaluable!

Sometimes we want to be angry at somebody, or we want to be selfish, etc., but we do have a choice, and that's what Paul is saying here. I don't think he's saying to dwell on your sin every minute and try really hard not to sin. That seldom works, and when it does, it is temporary. Any long-term solution requires a

newer, bigger, and better perspective. He's effectively saying, "Don't let sin control you now that you live in Christ because you now have the power to resist it." And even when you fail, you can always come back and gain that new perspective of being *in Christ* all over again. It often takes many rounds of failure to learn this important lesson. But the point is that this is what works, nothing else! Eventually, it will work because God (and love) never fails.

Live in who Christ is and live in that new person you are in Him; walk in the Spirit, and you won't fulfill the desires of the flesh. The solution is in going after this new life in Christ; we can never tame our old nature. The new man can't sin because it's perfect, and the old man *must* sin because that's all it knows to do. So, you can't *perfect* the new man that you are in Christ, because there's nothing to perfect. You're already there. But also, you can't *perfect* the old nature because it's not perfectible. It's a lost cause; don't waste time there. Consider yourself "dead to sin." Don't spend your time dwelling on your sin. Yes, acknowledge that you're a sinner, as John says to do in his first letter. But then move on in your walk with Christ, and that will take care of most of it, but not all of it. Paul will deal with this in Romans Seven. I am very thankful that Paul was not a perfect person; otherwise, I'm not sure I would believe what he is saying. None of his words would really mean anything if it were all easy for him and hard for me. But then in Romans Eight, he gives the grand finale. He starts out in Eight with, "There is now no condemnation for those in Christ." Oh, what a great chapter it is! We will be there soon.

Your body is an instrument (6:14)

Paul continues his warnings. *Don't let any part of your body become an instrument of evil to serve sin.* According to Paul, we have *some* control over sin, not completely or perfectly, but enough to make us responsible for our choices. Let's face it, none of us is all that good at resisting sin, even when we know

giving in is not best for us. Why are we like this? Well, God gave us this freedom, and it is a constant challenge. But He also gave us strong wills that can work for us or against us. That part is up to us, but still, we always need help from God. Hope you see the balance in all of this.

I think it's more about what we focus on than any raw determination. What are you dwelling on? Understanding this will be more powerful than you realize. If you are focused on sin and trying really hard to avoid it, you will eventually fail. Perhaps not completely, but fundamentally. This is because it puts sin in the center of your thinking and of yourself. We are making it all about ourselves and how we will save ourselves from our sin. It can become a vicious cycle. But when we focus on Jesus, who he is and what he has done, it centers us outside of ourselves and onto something bigger... much bigger. We gain a big perspective and see things from God's view. It is never a quick fix, but it gets us going in the right direction, where we will grow and slowly become more like Jesus and God. Turn away from sin as much as you can and focus on who God is and your relationship with Him; that will be your strongest path to real, lasting success in your life.

So, after Paul tells us, "Don't let any part of your body become an instrument of evil to serve sin," then he gives the real solution: *Instead, give yourselves completely to God. For you were dead, but now you have new life.* Do you see the contrast? Trying not to sin is very different from giving yourselves completely to God! Dwell on that, and on the fact that you are a *new creation* in Christ, and when you do sin, just say, "Forgive me, Father," and He will say, "I've already forgiven you, but it is good that you are receiving the forgiveness you already have because it restores your fellowship with me!" We are wise to realize how stupid it is to dwell on our sin and try harder not to, as if we can somehow earn something with God. We can't. "Instead," says

Paul, “give yourselves completely to God.” This is the solution, and really the *only* solution. Trust him completely. That is the only way you can give yourself *completely* to God. Rest in him and all He has done for you. This is all God asks of us. To whatever degree you quit sinning (and it will never be 100%) is the degree to which you will find peace, freedom, and a better life. But the key is giving yourself completely to God.

Here is yet another grand conclusion from Paul. *So, use your whole body as an instrument to do what is right for the glory of God.* Again, focus on what you can be in Christ, not on trying really hard not to sin. However, we can choose how we will live our lives, and this is part of the solution. It is really a partnership with God, where He does most of the work and we tag along, which makes it all happen sooner rather than later. This is a far cry from the popular idea in religion that we better shape up before it's too late, or else God will do something horrible to us after we die (when our time is up to respond), as pure retaliation with no more corrective intentions on the part of God!

Sin is no longer your master. Hey, if you're human, you might feel like it is. You might even say. “The devil made me do it,” as the comedian Flip Wilson famously once joked about. But no, if you are in Christ (and everyone is, though they don't all realize it ... yet), sin is no longer your master. However, you can give in to temptation, and it will look and act like it's your master. Paul's just saying. “Don't give in to sin, because ultimately it's not your master, and therefore you don't need to.” Sin as our master is an illusion we all live under, but it is a very real one that fools us every day. It fools some people all the time; others who realize they are in Christ only get fooled occasionally. But everyone is susceptible.

You no longer live under the requirements of the law. Instead, you live under the freedom of God's grace. That's a really key verse. You're no longer under the law. You're under grace. The law (all law, any law from God or man) has been *fulfilled* by Jesus. He once said, "I did not come to do away with the law but to fulfill it!" Big difference. Fulfilling the requirements of the law for us is the only way we can become truly free. It no longer has power over us. But like I said, sometimes it feels like it does. We can become overwhelmed with grief, jealousy, or anger. Don't give in to any of that. You do have a choice. But also, do not focus on those sins and spend all your effort and energy trying not to do any of them. The solution is in realizing that we no longer live under any law (because Jesus took care of it) and now we live under the freedom of God's grace. This is probably the most prominent and recurring theme in all of Paul's writings: the contrast between law and grace. Just turn your attention to God and say, "I want to live in the *new person* I am in Christ." That actually works very well.

Many people don't even consider doing this. They're trying so hard not to sin (perhaps a noble effort, but one destined to fail), doing good works, reading their Bible, and going to church. These are all good things, but they distract our attention away from God and toward the very things we mistakenly think will direct us toward Him. Don't look for success and confidence in those things; good as they are, they can become distractions. This is why they are potentially so dangerous. They can become ways in which we place ourselves back under some kind of laws and requirements, trying to get right with God to be saved. However, there is an aspect of "salvation" in doing good things, reading the Bible, and going to church. These *can* help us not to become entangled in sin and the foolish things of this world. But if we ever let these things replace knowing God and walking in His Spirit daily, we end up missing the real solution. The solution is not as hard and as far away as many people think. Later in this

letter, Paul will tell his readers, “The Good News message is right in front of you; it’s on your lips and in your heart.” It’s all about a relationship with God; it’s not about religious activity. Big, big difference!

22. The Free Gift of God (Romans 6:15-23)

Slaves to whatever we choose (6:15)

What then, since God's grace has set us free from the law, does that mean we can go on sinning? This is yet another of Paul's "What then ..." passages. He does this to introduce a new topic, allowing himself to answer the question he poses. He always answers "no" or "of course not." In this case, he is asking almost the same question he asked in verse one above, when he started Romans Six. Also, he just stated that the grace of God has set us free from the law. So, this question is logical, and some people might have been honestly asking it. But his answer is an emphatic, "Of course not!" We're not under law anymore, folks. Only the Jews were under it in a formal way. But even then, were they really? Knowing now that God loves His world, always has had a plan from the beginning of time to come and save it, how ultimate can a temporary set of rules be?

Many religious people today will say, "The Ten Commandments and the law of Moses are all from God." That could very well be, but for what purpose? According to Paul, the ultimate purpose of the law was not to have people obey it and get saved. Quite the opposite. The law was given to demonstrate to everyone who tries to keep it that they can't; it was a *tutor* that pointed people to God alone for any kind of salvation. Paul repeats this theme throughout his thirteen New Testament letters. Few of us today are Jews, and so we were never under the Jewish law of Moses. I would even argue that the Jews today are not

under the law because of Jesus! But, of course, most Jews would disagree with this since the Tora is central to all they believe. I respect that. But I know I was never under that law, and I never will be. For me, the law is just part of the historical record. However, this does not mean that the Ten Commandments, as they're stated, are not good, universal principles that apply to all humanity for their own good. But that whole legal system, with all the multitudes of commands, requirements, regulations, statutes, and rules, none of us today has ever been under it in any way. Right or wrong, good or bad, from God or man, these were for a particular group of people at a particular time in history.

Paul is clearly telling his readers (those who are Jewish believers in Jesus) that they are not under law anymore; instead, they are under grace. They (and all of us who have man-made and self-imposed laws) are freed from The law (and all laws), which brings self-condemnation and guilt. Most people don't fully realize how free they are. They talk about being free, enjoying the Lord, etc., yet they live like they've gotta do rituals, go to church, read the Bible, and take a hard stand against anyone who disagrees with them. But they don't need to.

We all tend to think we need to *appease the gods* (or God) even though God is telling us we are free, and freed by Him. We are not free to do what's wrong; we're free to do what's right! God says. "You're free. Knock it off. Just come and live in me and enjoy my fellowship. Sure, you've got some things to do and learn, but let's get going so you can live a life of abundance, no longer under stress, guilt, fear, and insecurity." God always wants the very best for us, and He is determined to bring it about no matter what it takes! It's good to go to church and worship with other people, but God doesn't require any of that. You will learn more living life than you ever will at church. Church is just supplementary."

And so, Paul starts this section by asking, "Since God's grace has set us free from the law, does that mean we can go on sinning?" *Of course not*, is his answer. I have had people ask me Paul's question when they want to challenge God's grace in some way. I never mind them doing this because it is a good and instructive question. Paul knew this, too. Their argument is that if God has completely forgiven, and there is no hell to hang over people's heads as an incentive to do what is right, then why can't they just go sin and do whatever they want? But my answer is, always, "They can! But which awful, terrible, destructive sin that harms you and others did you want to get away with?" Do you want to steal things, hurt or kill people you don't like, cheat on your wife or husband, and destroy your family? Yeah, you can do that. You're forgiven. But it's not gonna turn out well. Sin has its own built-in concourses. And that's exactly what God is saving us from; He's not saving us from himself, preventing him from retaliating against us in eternity. Sin is our enemy, not God. He is our savior!"

Paul explains more. *Don't you realize that you become the slave of whatever you choose to obey? You can be a slave to sin, which leads to death, or you can choose to obey God, which leads to righteous living. Thank God! Once you were a slave of sin, but now you wholeheartedly obey His teaching that we have given you. Now you are free from your slavery to sin, and you have become slaves to righteous living. We're not really slaves to righteous living, not in a bad way. We're free, but in the slave analogy Paul often uses, we can all be slaves to sin (real slavery), or slaves to doing what is right (which is really freedom). Paul means by slavery being controlled by something. To be controlled by sin is horrible; to be controlled by God is wonderful because He only wants us to be truly free. Falling into some kind of slavery (good or bad) is what we naturally do. So*

Paul rightly concludes, “Once you were slaves to sin, but now you're slaves to righteous living.”

Becoming holy (6:19)

Because of the weakness of your human nature, I am using the illustration of slavery to help you understand all this. Paul finally tells us why he uses the illustration of slavery. It is because we are weak people, and perhaps, one of the most basic negative institutions known to man (slavery) is what is needed to get our attention. No one wants to be enslaved and completely owned by other human beings, not even those who were slave owners. That is why it is amazing that they could so easily enslave others, but greed and laziness are powerful incentives. So, when Paul uses slavery to illustrate spiritual realities, it resonates with everyone. Paul even addresses slave owners in several of his other letters, appealing to their consciences, reminding them that they all have a *master in heaven* who is loving, kind, and benevolent.

Paul has made a good point, identifying all of us as humanly weak and slaves to either good or evil (or some combination in between). This side of eternity, both kinds of slavery are always true in everyone's life. It is just a matter of which *master* dominates. He tells us in verse 7 above that “when we died with Christ we were set free from the power of sin,” yet he also tells us in verse 12, “do not let sin control the way you live.” What gives? Can these both be true? Apparently so, according to Paul, unless he is schizophrenic or has a very short memory when he writes. He tells us two opposite things because they are both true in our lives. We possess a new nature in Christ and an old nature in our humanity. Once the new person in Christ comes alive, there is a huge conflict; they are at odds with each other, battling for control. Even non-believers experience this conflict to some degree. We all have a conscience and a sense of right and wrong.

Both natures are present in everyone; it's just a matter of which one will reign supreme in your life. We have some say in this by choosing to deny one and enable the other. Yet, ultimately it is God who brings victory in our lives by His grace, in His way, and in His time.

Previously, you let yourselves be slaves to impurity and lawlessness, which led ever deeper into sin. Before realizing we are in Christ and cashing in on it, we all *let ourselves* be slaves to sin. Often, this seemed normal and was not viewed as any kind of problem in our lives. However, this was precisely the biggest part of our problem: our lack of perspective, and how destructive our sin was to ourselves and those around us. Such a realization can only come from God and is not fully realized until we get away from it long enough to see it for what it is. Sometimes, *perspective is everything*, and that's what God brings when He enters our lives. We tend to go deeper into sin when we're unaware of its danger, living our lives in a very natural, fallen fashion. The more we sin, the more we want to, and then the more we become accustomed to it. We so easily get lost in this tangled, weird mess that we call life; we see it all around us, people getting lost in things that are destroying them, and they think they're having a great time. But often, later in life, they realize, "Man oh man, that really ruined my life. That wasn't smart. How do I get out of this?" Who will break this cycle of ignorance? Not us! It takes the gracious intervention of God, and this is what Jesus and the Good News about him is all about!

God doesn't always rescue people right away because sometimes they need to experience the full consequences of their sin so that when He rescues them, they don't want to go back. Only then are they finally ready to say, "No way, I'm done." If He takes us out too soon – and He could take people out of bad situations any time – we would just go back to it and be more stuck in it than we were before. God knows just the right time,

not too soon and not too late. In His wisdom, He knows when to deliver people, when to temporarily *give them over* to their sin (see Romans Two), and when to correct them because they are ready to learn. It seems that God often lets people exercise their free will and let their choices play out so that they can fully experience the awfulness of sin. Only then will they conclude, “Wow, I don’t want any more of that stuff!” Have you gone through anything like this? Have you ever gone through something, only to look back and say, “I wish I hadn’t done that. Boy, was I stupid. I messed myself over, and God didn’t rescue me from it immediately. God, thank you for letting me stay in it long enough to see my sin as worthless!”

Now you must *give yourselves over to be slaves to right living so that you will become holy*. This is Paul’s bottom line on the dilemma of the struggle between good and bad slavery that we are all so susceptible to. There is a way to be victorious in our struggle, even though it might not always be a perfect solution. I get the feeling that Paul, with all his wonderful ideals about God and Jesus, is also a realist. He always brings balance and fairness in his discussions, which is lacking in many other great writings. But, for sure, Paul believed there was a clear path to success in our lives. We are wise to follow it and discover in what way God leads us, each of us as one person in 8 billion on this planet!

The word *holy* that Paul uses means (in Greek) “to be set apart.” It does mean spooky or something somber. God is said to be holy, and this simply means He is altogether set apart from flaw, evil, failure, foolishness, and sin. That’s good; someone needs to be! We have such a wonderful being in God, who is the creator of all things. How could He not be? And so, we can fully expect God to always act in love, and in the very best interest of all His creation, even when He must act in severity for our own good, correcting us, teaching us, and drawing us to himself, which is always His never-ending goal.

Paul says we will become *holy* when we give ourselves over to (enslave ourselves in) righteous living. And, sure enough, doing this *sets us apart* from all that is flawed, bad, destructive, and unproductive. It does not make us perfect, not with our old nature still hanging around, but it does make us perfect *in Christ* because we are now identified with him (baptized) in his death and resurrection. This is what the first part of Romans Six was all about. This second part is what we gain from it when we choose to cash in on who Jesus is and what he did for us. You have to want to be free (set apart) from all that nonsense, even though other people don't. You just sit back and say, "Go for it, you guys. I love you anyway, but you can go pursue that stuff if you want. I want and love this better life of knowing God and walking in His Spirit. I sincerely hope you, someday, will taste of what wonderful things I experience. Your life will never be the same, and you'll be glad."

The wages of sin is death (6:20)

Paul now states the opposite of what he just said. If you didn't see the beauty of seeking God (completely giving yourself over to him, as he previously said), perhaps this negative perspective will help. *When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the obligation to do what's right.* See how he's still playing off the slavery idea? Hey, when you were slaves to sin, you didn't have to do what was right. And that's kind of how it felt for most people. They got to go be sinful and do what they want. Plus ... they didn't have to go to church, read the Bible, or do any other religious activity. And this is actually true! Unfortunately, people associate religious activity with God. God sure doesn't, but He allows people to do so if it in some way helps them to seek God. However, God never requires it. If and when we come to God, we come as we are, sinful, foolish, broken, and rebellious. Is there any other way to come? We can't clean

ourselves up; that's God's job. So, it's true that we were free to do what's wrong, it destroyed our lives, caused failed relationships, and left us lonely, hurt, and frustrated. God lets us become sick and tired of being sick and tired, for as long as it took. This is what being a "slave to sin and free from obligation to do what's right" is all about.

Paul then asks the obvious question: *What was the result?* You are now ashamed of the things you used to do, things that end in eternal doom. The word *eternal* that Paul uses and is used throughout the New Testament is *not* the word for *never-ending*. That would be *aidios* in Greek. This word that Paul uses (much more common) is *aionios*, which means "indefinite period of time," or "age." So, *aionios* doom would not be never-ending doom (punishment) but doom associated with eternal things (age to come). Translators tend to use the word *eternal*, perhaps to give their theology about hell and damnation more support. But we know that God's never going to give up on anybody. He's never going to quit desiring people to be saved, and He's going to do whatever it takes through judgment, condemnation, and corrective punishment to save His world. How could He do anything less? Why would he? He will always roll up His sleeves and say, "I'm going to do the tough work of getting you redeemed, restored, saved, and purified." And it may be a tough slug-out battle to do this, but that's what God's gonna do, and that's why Paul talks about the doom associated with the end of life and beyond, because until we come into a right relationship with God (and it may take some people a long time), it is *doom* for them. It certainly is "doom" when we're not walking with God, not enjoying life, and our sins are destroying us.

But now you are free from the power of sin and have become slaves of God. What a contrast. Paul always brings one,

and it is the same one, just stated in many different ways. The Gospel (Good News) message is not complicated. It's just hard for people to accept, partly because we are too proud to accept help and partly because we love our sin (bad as it ultimately is for us). Paul's message is always one of contrasting freedom versus bondage, spirit versus flesh, new versus old natures, and a host of other comparisons. But they all demonstrate our *need* and God's *solution* because of His never-ending love for us.

And so now you do those things that lead to holiness and result in eternal life. This is the same word, *aionios* (eternal), used here by Paul. Though it is true that our life with God will be never-ending, that is not his main focus here. If he wanted to emphasize the *duration* of our life in God, he would have used *aidios* (never-ending). But he didn't. Only two places in all the New Testament writings use the word *aidios* (never-ending). All others use *aionios* (age) because it is a word about orientation, not duration. What is important is not the duration of things like life, punishment, doom, etc., but the orientation these have in God's plan to save the world that He so loves! Young's literal translation of the Bible always makes this distinction. He always translates *aionios* as "age-during" (during an age or indefinite time period). So it's a little misleading when translators use the word *eternal* when they could be more literal (like Young) and let the readers decide. It is just too tempting for translators to interpret and decide for the readers who know no better. However, it is okay to call life associated with an age *eternal*, as long as it is understood that orientation is the focus, not duration.

I mentioned the *Romans Road* and the beginning of this commentary. Romans 3:23 was stop number one on that road, and Romans 6:23 is the second. The progression is obvious: "All have sinned and fall short of God's perfection," followed by "the wages of sin is death." Here is Paul's full verse: *The wages of sin*

is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. This verse is probably the best summary of the many contrasts that Paul uses throughout his letters. The payoff (result) of our sin is that we die, but the free gift that God gives us in salvation is eternal (God oriented) life, and it comes to us through Jesus. I don't think it could be stated any clearer or better.

That ends Romans Six. Isn't that a great chapter? I think this is Paul's point in this whole chapter: "Quit dwelling on your sin; it no longer has mastery over you. Yet, there is a part you play in this by choosing to do what is right. However, the only successful way to do this is to become a slave to right-doing by giving yourself over, completely to God!" In Chapter 7, he's going to talk about the struggle he's had with sin. He wants us to know that this is a very real struggle for all of us. As you will see, his solution will be to realize what Jesus has done for us. Enhancing your life with Christ will always be your best defense and your most successful path to freedom and peace.

Here is a poem I received from a friend that puts all of this in perspective:

Grace, grace, amazing Grace

*He must increase, but I must decrease
That's what was said that day
For John beheld the Lamb of God
Who would take the world's sins away*

*Salvation is not what I believe
Salvation was God's plan
Salvation is not what I do
Salvation is a man – Jesus*

*He alone should be my joy
For this man of seventy-three
It's not what I do for God
It's what God has done for me*

*But surely there's something I can do
to help God's plan succeed
This man Jesus can do no wrong
I know he died for me*

*Surely my faith, my permission is required
Before God's plan can take effect
Or can the finished work of the cross
Be stopped simply through my neglect?*

*But I fell when Adam fell
An ungodly sinner I became
My salvation came through a virgin birth
Jesus was his saving name*

*He came not because I asked him to
Nor because I sought him out
It was because God, who is love
Saw my need and sought me out*

*Two thousand years before I appeared
He died for my sins and grief
He came to seek to save the lost
His mercy and grace brought relief*

*The whole world had fallen
And creation was undone
His plan was to create it all anew
And He did it in His son*

*But we are saved by grace through faith
And that faith is not our own
For it's the faithfulness of Jesus himself
He's now seated with God on His throne*

*Accepted in the beloved
For he totally paid the bill
Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ
And nothing ever will*

*Grace, grace, marvelous grace
So wonderful to watch it unfold
The glorious, precious love of God
The greatest story ever told*

*The good news of the gospel
Is our savior, and our friend
He dwells within all mankind
And his love will never end*

23. Free from Requirements and Laws

(Romans 7:1-6)

Introduction

We now start Romans Seven. We just finished Romans Six and are now about a third of the way through Paul's letter. However, we are less than halfway through this *explanation* part of his letter, which extends through Romans Eleven. Romans Five was very foundational in Paul's explanation of God's solution because Jesus is identified as the new and better head of the human race, replacing Adam, who plunged us all into sin and ruin. Romans Six is also very foundational because Paul explains that what happened to Christ happened to us, and we can put our full trust in him, knowing that we died and rose with him, spiritually, and will someday be raised into new bodies to live forever with God.

But here in Romans Seven, Paul shifts gears and gets real about our new life in Christ. I think this chapter is important because, after all the idealistic presentations in the past two chapters, readers might be thinking, "But I still experience a lot of struggle in my life. What gives?" And so, Paul will address this in a very personal way before he proceeds in Romans Eight to present his grand conclusion, which is even more idealistic yet wonderfully real nonetheless. I used to wonder why Paul placed Romans Seven where he did in his letter, but after years of pondering, I concluded that he thought it through and believed it was in the right location in his letter, bringing about the effect it

would have on his readers at just the right time. As you read through Romans Seven, see if you see the wisdom in what Paul has presented and when he chose to do it.

Marriage as an example (7:1)

Paul starts Romans Seven in this way: *Dear brothers and sisters, you who are familiar with the law...* and that would be a lot of his readers, because most of the early followers of Jesus were Jews. They came out of Judaism. And there were a lot of Gentiles also coming to Christ, but they didn't know anything about the law. He continues with, ... *don't you know that the law applies only while a person is living?* That makes sense. If you're dead, you're not under any law; you can't obey it or disobey it.

He continues with a real-life illustration. *For example, when a woman marries, the law of marriage binds her to her husband as long as he is alive. That's the way it works. You marry somebody, make a commitment, and you are bound to them for life (if you stay married). But if he dies, the law of marriage no longer applies to her. So, while her husband is alive, she would be committing adultery if she married another man. But if her husband dies, she's free from that law and does not commit adultery if she remarries.* This makes sense, too. If you're married, be faithful to that person "for as long as you both shall live." However, marriages are very difficult. They can be really hard; all marriages are hard to some degree. Ninety-five percent of the people out there have struggled in their marriage. And the other five percent? Liars! They're pretending; they have trouble too. However, there are different levels of difficulty. Some people have a pretty darn good marriage; others are tormented daily. Sometimes they have to get out of

such marriages for their own safety and sanity (or that of their kids. It is not an ideal solution, but in a few extreme cases, it is the only solution. It's legitimate to get out of a marriage. Even Jesus said that Moses allowed for divorce because of the hardness of people's hearts. This shows where the real problem is: it's with each one of us! We can't control the other person, so we do the best we can in a marriage to make it work. If there is any possibility of success, we're always better off not giving up and looking at how much of the fault is our own. The fault is never exclusively on the other person.

I've seen many who honestly believe they had to divorce. They moved on in their life, and that's okay: God always goes with them. Divorce is never a life-long curse that some religious people make it out to be. But there are always scars. It's okay (in fact, very right) to move on and say, "I'm going to trust God and walk with him now, either in a new marriage or alone." Some people never get remarried. That's okay, too; perhaps they are wise not to. They just trust God and see what He has for them on their new journey. That's what really counts.

So, according to Paul, a woman (or a man) is under the law of marriage, and they need to be committed to each other while they're alive. But if one of them dies, the other one is free from that marriage. Or if you get a divorce, you're also free from it.

Paul now explains why he used marriage as an example. *So, my dear brothers and sisters, here is the point. You died to the power of the law when you died with Christ.* Do you see how he ties this in with Romans Six? Remember, he said that when Christ died, you died; when he was buried, you were buried; when he rose, you were also raised from the dead. We all rose from the dead, at least symbolically, and someday we will literally! Someday, we will all literally rise from the dead and live forever with God. We'll all live again with a new body, soul, and mind. If you don't like the body you have now, just wait; you're going to

get a new one. You're going to love it. It's going to be the greatest thing ever.

I have a young friend who is almost completely blind. She says it's like seeing life through a pinhole or through fogged glass. I told her she will someday see everything clearly. But I also told her that her *spiritual eyes* are clearer than most people her age who have twenty-twenty vision. She replied, "Yeah, that's what my mom told me." My response was, "She's right! She sees what I see in you. Though you can't see it, physically, it's actually a blessing in disguise. Maybe you wouldn't choose it, but it's what God has asked of you." She answered, "Yes, mom told me that, too." I told her that her mom was way ahead of me! On Resurrection Day, other people will be able to walk, perhaps for the first time, and others will hear as they never have before. Bipolar people will be free from their never-ending, extreme mood swings, and some will be free from addictions that control their lives. What Jesus did 2000 years ago, by way of healing, was just a sample of how it will be in eternity when God has fully saved this fallen world, just as He planned way back before He created anything.

After telling his readers, "You died to the power of the law when you died with Christ," he added this, *And now you are united with the one who was raised from the dead*. As he said in Romans Six, that what happened to Jesus happens to us, he now emphasizes our unity with him. *As a result, we can produce a harvest of good deeds for God*. This is what happens when we are unified with Christ, living *in* him. It results in a kind of spiritual harvest that glorifies God and yields fruit in our lives that benefits ourselves and those around us. We get this back from them, too, as they unify with Jesus. But keep in mind that a *harvest* is the result of something that has grown. This takes time, watering, fertilization, trimming, and loving care. Be patient with yourself

and others. It all starts when we are “united with the one who was raised from the dead.” This is new. This is better. We're united with him, and we have gained a new strength and ability. Of course, this is not something that happens every moment of every day, in the most dramatic way. We all get discouraged and slip back into old habits. We are still united with Christ, but we're not fully experiencing it. Some people call this a *dry season* or a *desert experience*. We all go through this occasionally, but then we spring back and realize we have learned something new. This is why we can “give thanks in all things,” as Paul exhorted his readers in his first letter to the Thessalonians. But sometimes we feel guilty after a setback. God just says, “Welcome back! It's always better if you can consistently walk with me, but even when you don't, get in a bad mood, fall down, and make mistakes, it's okay. When you come to your senses, you are always welcome home, even if it is your one-thousandth time!”

The point is that we died to the power of the law when we died with Christ, and now we are united with Christ, as the one who was raised from the dead. As a result, we can produce a harvest of good deeds for ourselves and others, to the glory of God.

The letter of the law vs. the Spirit (7:5)

When we were controlled by our old nature... That *old nature* of ours, we still have it. The question is whether we're controlled by it or not. However, we don't have to be controlled by it because we're a *new person* in Christ, which is perfect. And that's the conflict that goes on in us, between these two. Paul will address this more in the second half of Romans Seven.

Paul finishes his sentence, “When we were controlled by our old nature...” ...*sinful desires were at work within us, and*

the law aroused these evil desires to produce a harvest of sinful deeds resulting in death. That's quite a mouthful. When we're controlled by our old nature, our sinful desires are very much alive. It does not have to be the worst possible sins. It can be selfishness, dishonesty, short-sightedness, or mistreating other people. These are so easy to slip into, yet so destructive in our lives. You don't have to rob banks or be sexually foolish. It includes such things, but it doesn't have to be. It can be simple things that are often just as harmful.

If we place ourselves back under the law in an attempt to save ourselves, what happens? It does something to us and makes us want to break free, becoming even more sinful. Remember what Paul said at the end of Romans Five? "Where sin abounds more, so does God's grace." God always compensates for our sin by striving all the more to save us from it. This is love and grace in action. And so, Paul says, "The law arouses evil desires that produce a harvest of sinful deeds resulting in death." Previously, Paul said that uniting with Christ in his death produces a harvest of good in our lives. He uses the same word, harvest, about our choosing to go in the wrong direction. Harvest implies the passing of time and waiting. It takes time for us to get into trouble, and it takes time to get out of it. God allows this because it is how we learn best. If He brings a solution too soon, we are apt to say, "No big deal," and plunge ourselves right back into it. So keep this in mind as God slowly works in your life. We tend to think He is too slow, but He is not.

Paul makes it clear that it is a harvest of "sinful deeds, resulting in death," both physically and spiritually. Spiritual death can affect us emotionally when we're not doing well in life. Have you ever felt dead to life? It's when things are not going well (usually due to some immaturity or foolishness on our part) and we're just getting through it ... surviving. That's a type of death; it's not being fully engaged in life. But God wants us fully engaged in life, in the right way. Many people are fully engaged, but in a

way where they live from one stimulating distraction to the next. This is not really living in the purest sense of the word. It is not the abundant life that Jesus spoke of. That is only gained by living in Christ and in all that he is. Fulfillment flows out of that, and real peace and freedom abound. The proof is when you can be still and know God is there, with you and for you, and realizing you need to do nothing but trust Him. Then ... you are ready to take on life and engage fully in it, in the right way and for the right reasons. This is what God wants for everyone. He has made it available to everyone and will, someday, save all people to this full extent. For many, this will not happen until eternity. But God and His love will never fail.

*We have been released from the law. For we died to it and are no longer captive to its power. Oh, thank you, God! And, keep in mind that the law's power is actually in how we respond to it, in guilt and trying to earn something with God, which cannot be done. The law itself is not powerful, except in how much we let it be. If we take it as, "You better not; You can't; You shouldn't," it just makes us want to rebel and go do the worst kinds of things. Then we feel guilty, condemn ourselves, and go further under the law. It can become a vicious cycle. This is why the law can never save us. Paul often refers to the law as *weak*. But it is we who are weak. Not only can we not keep it, but the more the law is imposed on people, the more they want to bust out and do what's wrong. It's just human nature. That's the power of the law; it arouses evil desires in us.*

*But now we can serve God, not in the old way of obeying the letter of the law, but in a new way of living in the spirit. This is one of my favorite passages. What a contrast between the *letter* of the law and the *spirit* of the law. One (the letter) represents legalism, which is just blind, cold, thoughtless obedience. The other (the spirit) represents the intention of the law, for us to*

learn, stay out of trouble, and have a better life. This is also a comparison between the old person (letter) and the new person (spirit) that we experience in this life. Paul is about to embark on spelling out this difference and struggle in the next passage of his letter. There is an old way of trying harder and harder to keep the law, obey, and appease God in some way. This is where most religious people live because it is natural to our thinking and mindset. We're never going to do what's right because we were told we should. But there is a better way, a new way, and that is the Spirit, which is altogether different from obeying just to obey. It matters to God *why* we obey, not just *that* we do! He wants us to understand who He is, how much He loves us, and that His goal is for us to be truly free and experience real peace that lasts and runs deep within us. But now we can do what's right in this *new way* of living in the spirit. We do what's right because we want to, based on a very real and wonderful relationship with God. What could be better?

God is essentially saying, "Live in the new and better way of the Spirit. You'll be more successful. However, you won't be perfect. You won't be sinless, but you will *sin less*." We don't even have to worry about any kind of law. What did Jesus say? Love God and love other people, and you will be keeping the law! Love sums up the whole law. The real question is: "How do we love God and others?" Well, it's pretty simple. Paul repeatedly tells his readers in all his letters pretty much the same thing in many different ways, and that message is *not* to try harder to love God and people. Loving God results from something else that we do, which is accepting and resting in what God has *already* done for us in Jesus on the cross. We need not try to save ourselves by keeping some law in an attempt to appease God in some way.

I have a friend who is writing a book titled "The Instinctive Life in Christ." His premise (and it's a good one) is that Jesus invites us to become *one* with him just as he is one with the Father, and that when we do this, the rest of life falls into place. We no

longer have to appease God by our effort and works, but instead walk with him daily, and we will instinctively do what is right. This is a far cry from trying really hard to do what's right in order to get God to love us and not do something horrible to us in eternity. However, God knows, and we are wise if we also know, that even in doing this instinctive walk with God by faith, we will still not be perfect. And this is when we can so easily fall back under some kind of laws and rules (in our guilt and fear) and try again to appease God in some way. But God does not want this. He wants unity and fellowship with us, even though we fail sometimes and have to restore it. This is the disposition Love has toward those who are loved. Just bask in it and enjoy knowing God and fully trusting him rather than yourself!

24. Sin Brought Spiritual Death (Romans 7:7-13)

Is the law bad? (7:7)

Here is yet another of Paul's many "well then..." openers that he uses in his letter. *Well, then, am I suggesting that the law of God is sinful?* A reader could easily come to this conclusion after all Paul has said about the law and how it is powerless to save anyone by keeping it. I think Paul is asking if the proper view of the law is to respond negatively against it, and that it is something inherently bad. Some people could easily conclude that the law must be horrible and worthless, and that there's no good in it whatsoever. But his answer, as it always is to his "what then..." questions, is: *Of course not!* Look at what he wrote previously, "Now we can serve God, not in the old way of obeying the letter of the law, but in a new way of living in the spirit." Perhaps that is the best answer. The law represents the old way of trying to serve God; the Spirit represents the new and better way. It's not that the law itself is so bad; it is that it was not a solution to our big problem of sin in our lives.

Paul continues on to make this clear. *In fact, it was the law that showed me my sin.* So, the law has a useful purpose. It's not good at getting us right with God or making us sinless. Only Jesus can do that on the cross. It's not good for any of that, but it is good for showing us that we're sinful and we're in need of a savior. He explains this using a personal illustration. *I would*

never have known that coveting is wrong if the law had not said, “You must not covet.” It is very natural and very human to look at life with all its flaws and think it is all normal. But it’s not. It takes God to come along with a law, or sometimes just in the quiet of our own hearts, to show us what is right and wrong. Without this, we tend to travel down life’s path thinking all is well, even though something in the back of our mind knows that something is wrong. That little voice in us, often called our conscience, needs to be awakened, and that’s the job of the law – to open our eyes to good and evil. Isn’t this what happened to Adam and Eve in the Garden? By eating the forbidden fruit, their eyes were opened, and for the first time, they saw the difference between good and evil, obeying and disobeying, right and wrong, better and worse. Ultimately, this was not a tragedy for them any more than what the law does for us. It opens our eyes, shows us our need, and eventually (and for some it takes a very long time) we see that turning to God and knowing him through Jesus is the only real solution!

Notice this is not God retaliating in anger, saying, “How dare you covet other people’s possessions. I’m going to do something horrible to you forever if you don’t knock it off!” Instead, God is acting in love and says, “Hey, my friend, you are an essentially (and potentially) good human being that I created. I love so much, don’t covet because it’s just going to hurt you and result in a very unhappy life, focusing on what you do not possess. Find your fulfillment in me, and do not let other things in life distract you. Be happy with what you got, all I have given you. It is enough and exactly what you need in order to know me and enjoy knowing me forever!” So, when God says don’t covet (or any other law, rule, or commandment), He’s not doing it to be mean. He’s doing it to help us. The problem with a law like, “don’t covet” is you’ll never be successful by trying not to covet. You’ll only benefit from it by Jesus keeping it for you and entering into a relationship with him. That’s how you’ll succeed.

Remember, Paul previously said in verse five, “the law aroused these evil desires to produce a harvest of sinful deeds resulting in death.” This only underscores the fact that all the law can successfully do is point out to us the difference between right and wrong, steering us to Jesus as our only real, lasting solution. The law is intended to demonstrate this to us, and it does, but it also causes us to go headlong into sin and destroy ourselves. Just look at the world around you, and even yourself. Doesn't life bear this out clearly? I think maybe God chuckles at us, in a good way, just like I did with my two-year-old who stuck his feet over the line I had drawn for him, while eating his ice cream. My law for him instinctively caused him to break it ... at two years old! That tells us all a lot about ourselves and our fallen nature, from which we so badly need to be saved.

But sin used the command to arouse covetous desires in me. If there were no law, sin would not have that power. At one time, I lived without understanding the law. But when I learned about the command not to covet, the power of sin came to life, and I died. I discovered that the law's commands, which were intended to bring life, actually brought spiritual death instead. So, sin took advantage of those commands and deceived me; it used the commands to kill me. Our sinful nature will always twist and use the law wrongly instead of using it as it was intended: to show us wrong from right and cause us to turn to God and be saved from our sin. It's the sin in us, our sinful nature, that's really the enemy. It's not the law itself, and it's not God. It is human beings reacting to any law imposed on them (even when done with good intentions) that becomes a problem.

The law is holy, right, and good (7:11)

But even though the law gets used improperly by us because of our sinful nature, it is not the law itself that is at fault. Paul puts it this way: *The law itself is holy, and the commands are holy and right and good.* The law itself is not the problem. It's when we read it, hear it, and either reject it or try to obey it ... that's the problem. Rejecting it leads to more ignorant sinning. Trying to keep it also makes us sin more, but for a different reason. Either way, we fail. The law will never make us right with God. It's only good for showing us that we're in trouble and need God's help. That's the bottom line.

But the law itself is a good thing, when its good intention is understood. It teaches us to turn to Christ. Look at the Pharisees; they tried to keep the law, but they weren't really keeping it. They put on a good show, but were breaking it just as badly, if not worse, than the sinners they condemned. So, according to Paul, the law itself is not the problem. Its commands are holy, righteous, and good because of the good purpose God had in it for us to gain a better perspective of ourselves.

Paul then asks, *But how can that be? Did the law, which is good, cause my death? Of course not!* The law didn't cause our death; our incorrect reaction to the law did by either rejecting it or trying to keep it. All we needed to do was recognize we are sinners and turn to God for help. It is that simple. *Sin used what was good in the law to bring about my condemnation and death. So, we can see how terrible sin really is. It uses God's good commands for its own evil purposes.* Now Paul's talking like sin is a person, or that it has its own mind. But he's really talking about us, our sinful nature, our conscious and subconscious decisions, and our own ability to make choices.

A friend recently told me, “I gotta say that the law makes me want to keep it because I want to get into heaven when I die. I don't want to sin, but I do, and it's annoying.” My response was, “Yeah, I get the sentiment, but keeping the law won't get you into heaven. It doesn't matter if you keep it or not. That's not what gets you there. What gets you there is Jesus, and *His* keeping of the law *for* you! Now, this doesn't mean you should conclude that it doesn't matter if you keep it or not. It still matters because it will determine a lot of whether you have a good life or a bad one. But the way to keep it is not to try hard to keep it in order to win favor with God, so you can go to heaven. That is really just *working* for your salvation, and it never works simply because you will ultimately fail. I think what you're really saying is that you want to please God, and that is good. But as Paul has made clear in this letter (and in all his letters), only your faith, trusting what God has done in Jesus (not your own good works), gets you into a right relationship with God. That's His goal, not to get you to do good things and earn some favor with him.”

We cannot influence God in any way. Nothing we do, good or bad, will make him love us any more or less. His love for us is infinite; it's always been there, even before He created us, and it will always be there throughout eternity. There is nothing conceivably better than this. My friend then responded with, “I depend on both Jesus and the law, combined!” I responded with, “Well. You can do that if you want. God will let you. But only your faith in Jesus is what God recognizes. Depending on keeping the law in any way will only distract you from your faith in Jesus. Your allegiance, and your dependence, will be divided, and you will always be wondering if you have kept the law good enough to supplement your faith.”

In Paul's letter to the Ephesians, he put it this way, “It is by God's grace that you have been saved and not by anything you have done. This is because salvation is a gift from God and, therefore, you have nothing to boast about or take credit for.”

God does the saving work, and faith is how we receive and experience it. But even if we don't respond correctly, it has no effect on what God has *already* done for us in Jesus on the cross! It is natural for humans to believe that we need to do something to win God over or prove our loyalty to him in some way. Working to get something is all we know, whether at home, school, work, driving down the road, or even at church. Life is always *transactional*. That is, if we do something, then God will do something in return, completing the transaction. Donald Trump is a person who always thinks and acts transactionally. His businesses and his presidency are always based on some kind of tit for tat, let's make a deal, transnationalism. There is little or no grace in the things he does and the decisions he makes. My theory is that this is why some Christians like and support Donald Trump; he operates *transactionally*, and this matches their view of God, who (in their mind) is also transactional in how He saves people. But God is the one being in the universe who does *not* operate this way. There are no transactions in grace! It is always God giving freely with no strings attached, no earning, and nothing for humans to do to complete their salvation. This is because salvation is fully completed by God, for us, as His gift, proving His unconditional love for us.

So don't get it backwards. God saves us by grace, and *then* we believe in response to God. This results in good works because our lives have changed. Many Christians see it this way: first we believe, then God saves us as a result, and then the Good works come out of our changed lives. I believe that is backward from grace because it is essentially working for salvation through our act of believing. Think about it. In this alternative plan of salvation, belief is required. That makes it a work that must be performed to get saved. This is the opposite of what grace is. When this important distinction is understood, it can result in peace, freedom, and security (grace) or in fear, stress, and religious bondage (works).

However, never forget that it is always right when we want to do good things instead of bad things. It is better for us, and God is pleased – just as we are pleased when our kids want to please us. But we never see them earning our love in any way, and this is true of God. It is when we turn our desire to do what is right and please God into something that earns His love, favor, and acceptance. That is when we cross a line that disadvantages us and makes God say, “No need, my child. I love you just as you are. Come, trust me, and enter into a wonderful relationship with me, whereby we will work together to bring growth, joy, freedom, and peace into your life. This is all I desire for you.” This takes a huge load off of us. We can now say, “Wow, I’m right with God because He first made me right with himself in Jesus. He declared me right in spite of my sin. So, now I’m free to *not* sin. I’m free to walk with him, love him, and experience him fully.” But we’re still going to struggle, and that’s what Paul’s gonna get into in the next part of his letter, in verse 14.

25. I Do What I Don't Want to Do (Romans 7:14-25)

A brief review

Previously, Paul presented the analogy of a woman bound to her husband in marriage as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is no longer under an obligation to him. His point is that we, too, were under law until we died to it, which was accomplished by the death and resurrection of Jesus. Then he goes on to discuss how the law aroused all kinds of covetous desires in him, and that once he learned about the command not to covet, the power of sin became alive, and he died (spiritually). His conclusion was that the laws and commands that were supposed to bring life (by keeping them) actually brought him spiritual death instead. The reason this problem is so powerful is that as soon as we're told we shouldn't do something, it invokes a rebellion in us where we say, "Yeah, I'm gonna do it anyway." However, Paul further concludes that although the law prompts us to sin, it's not the law itself that is bad; rather, it is that we're bad. We have something wrong within us that makes us react to any kind of laws, rules, and requirements, even when they are intended to save us from harm.

He also concluded this. "Sin took advantage of those commands and deceived me." Paul talks like sin is a person. Well, it is; it's us! It's our sinful nature. It's the bad side of us. "It used

the commands to kill me. However, the law itself is holy, right, and good.” The law was intended to show us our needy situation and guide us to Christ. The law is a good thing when rightly understood and rightly utilized. Plus, when we keep the law, for whatever reason, our lives go better because it keeps us out of trouble. But when we try to use it to save ourselves, to appease God in some way, to win His favor, or to prove to Him how good we are, it doesn't work. In fact, it turns on us and causes us to sin all the more!

And so, in verse 13, Paul asks, “How can this be? Did the law, which is good, cause my death? Of course not! Sin used what was good to bring about my condemnation and spiritual death. So we can see how terrible sin really is, that it uses God's good commands for its own evil purposes.” We need to be careful not to betray ourselves by trying to earn something with God, saying, “Please, God. Look at how good I am. I'm doing all these good things, and I hope this appeases you in some way, quieting your anger toward me for sinning.” But that doesn't cut it. Instead, God says, “I love you as a sinner and I've come to save you from yourself and from your sin, and to change your nature, give you the Holy Spirit so you can live a better life hidden in me!” That's always what God wants. He never gets tired of bringing that about in us. He never says, “Oh, ya know, I used to want everyone to be saved, but that was yesteryear. I'm coming back someday, and if you don't have the right attitude toward me, if you're too sinful, I'll just have to torment you forever in an attempt to even the score.” I think that's nonsense and a very far cry, even opposite from who God is. But there are many religious people who believe this about God. They live in fear and are rather far away from God, relationally, even though they believe He exists.

So now we are ready to move on to verse 14. Here, Paul shares his very personal struggle with sin, salvation, forgiveness, and God, which I think we can all relate to in our own lives. I am really glad Paul shared this because it is easy to think he was some

kind of spiritual giant. And he was, but only in Christ, which he would gladly admit. And, we too are spiritual giants in the same way, in Christ. To me, it's really interesting that he put this pouring out of his soul, concerning his personal struggles, at this point in his letter. It is sandwiched between Romans Six and Romans Eight, two of the greatest and most positively significant passages in all the New Testament. Why place something so negative and potentially discouraging here? Well, I think he is helping his readers to keep it real and to let them know that it is okay when they struggle in their daily living.

Remember, Romans Five was all about Christ as the second (and final) Adam, and that “while we were sinners,” Jesus came to save us. Then in Romans Six, what happened to Jesus happened to us when he died and rose from the dead. We were there, in a sense, dying and rising up out of death with him, spiritually now and someday for real. And then in Romans Seven, Paul lets us know it’s okay to struggle (as we shall soon see), followed by Romans Eight, perhaps the very heart of the New Testament, packed with a ton of encouragement that brings about half of his letter to a midpoint conclusion.

The problem is me (7:14)

Paul now shifts gears into a highly personal confession of how he struggles in his faith, in spite of all the wonderful truths he knows and believes. *So, the trouble is not with the law, for it is spiritual and good. The trouble is with me, for I am all too human, a slave to sin.* This is the apostle Paul talking. Wow, I thought he was like a Super Christian. No. In fact, he once called himself “the chief of all sinners.” I don't know if that's because he was dragging Christians out and killing them, or his awareness of his own sinful heart, limitations, and failings. But he's saying he is all too human and a slave to sin. Remember. He just wrote

in Romans Six that we are to consider ourselves dead to sin and alive to a victorious Christian life. How can this be? Which of these characterizations is correct? Well, perhaps both at the same time, or more likely, both alternately. Either way, there is a silver lining in Paul's confession, for us as well as himself. He gives the answer at the end of his confession, right before he launches into Romans Eight. You will like it, but first, Paul must prepare us to fully appreciate the solution he will soon disclose.

I don't really understand myself, for I want to do what is right, but I don't do it. Have you ever experienced this? I sure have, and when I do, I look at myself and what I am doing and ask myself, "Why? What is wrong with me? I know better, but I do it (or don't do it) anyway. I think we spend most of our lives trying to understand ourselves. And then, about the time we think we understand, bam! We blow it in some new way, never seeing it coming. Perhaps this is a lot of what life is all about, and one of the many purposes God has for us. Notice that Paul is speaking in the present tense. Some have suggested that Paul is remembering his life before he knew and trusted Jesus. But it does not seem that way, and we should be glad because if Paul is some kind of successful, spiritual giant in and of himself, then we are all in trouble. I do not believe many people have the audacity to claim they never experience what Paul is describing here. The few that do are kidding themselves and are not seeing themselves realistically. I rode to work with a Mormon friend when I was young, married, and just starting out. He once told me that he goes days without sinning. I looked at him and simply said, "Can I ask your wife about it?" His answer was emphatically, No!" That question put things into perspective for him. Seeing himself through the eyes of his wife, whom he lived with every day, helped him to get real about himself.

Instead, I do what I hate. God hates bad stuff we do, too, because it ruins us. But He doesn't hate us; He hates the wrong we do because He loves us and wants the very best for us in life. If I know that what I am doing is wrong, this shows that I agree that the law is good. Okay. This makes sense. Once I realize what I am doing is wrong, it validates the good warnings that the law brings, proving it to be a good influence in my life. Otherwise, I go merrily along the way, destroying myself in ways I don't even realize. The law itself is good and keeping it is good, but trying to keep the law in order to get God on our side is fruitless. He's already there. It is trying to do the right thing in the wrong way and for the wrong reason.

So, I am not the one doing wrong. It is sin living in me that does it. That sounds like the comedian, Flip Wilson, who very effectively used the laugh line, "The devil made me do it!" in the early 1970s. However, I don't think Paul is passing blame to some inanimate object like sin. Previously, in verse 7, he personified sin when he wrote. "Sin used this command to arouse all kinds of covetous desires within me!" I think he presents sin in this way because sin is really us. We are the ones who decide to do what is wrong to our own destruction. It is really us, betraying ourselves. So he is actually putting the blame where it belongs, on us, but he does this hoping we will wake up and realize where the problem is. It is in our sinful nature that we are stuck with until we turn to God and become free of it. This is the only real solution.

This second half of Romans Seven is yet another distinction between the *old* and *new* persons; the old one we were in the flesh, and the new one we now are in Christ. You will see this distinction everywhere in the New Testament (in various forms such as Spirit and flesh, in Adam and in Christ, law and grace, etc.) and especially in Paul's letters. This is very helpful in

understanding God. Salvation, faith, and ourselves. We find ourselves stuck in the flesh (our human nature) and can't seem to correct it on our own, try as we might to do so. But we will never be able to, and when we realize this, we are free to seek God and discover freedom, peace, and release from worry, fear, and stress. We are not free from all difficulties in life, but we now have the spiritual ability to endure them successfully, knowing that eventually everything will be made right by God. This takes a huge load off of us. Are you experiencing this daily? If not, you easily can by fully trusting the God who is fully trustworthy.

Someday God will get sin out of us forever, never again to struggle with it, but not in this life. I think this is what Paul is trying to tell us, so that we can live hopefully but realistically. We can, more often than not, be a person who lives in the Spirit and avoids most sin. But occasionally, we will fall back to some degree and hopefully return to that mindset quickly. And if not, we will eventually learn something new and helpful, but so far, I haven't found anybody who can just stay there and never do anything wrong. Obviously, Paul is saying that he cannot either, even though he wants to. So, in a strange way, we should be encouraged by this even though it appears negative. This struggle (with the ability to mostly win) will be our fate for the remainder of our lives. I have bad days. I have bad attitudes. I experience discouragement. I think things I shouldn't. I get mad at people. I've got all this going on, but not as seriously as before I began living in Christ. I'm doing a lot better than I used to, and it's probably as good as I can do for where I am on my journey through life with God. I'm not sinless, but I *sin less* than I used to. I might not even sin any less than somebody else, and there may be people out there who have me beat hands down in their walk with God. But that doesn't matter. I always, and only, compare myself to who I used to be, and not against anyone else. I only look at who I am in Christ. Paul wrote in one of his other letters, "We no longer view others in the flesh; we only see them in

Christ.” This is a really smart thing to do, to see yourself and others in Christ, no longer focusing on their flaws or your own. This does not mean we pretend that we are perfect or that they are. There are times to recognize the obvious, if some kind of action needs to be taken. But, generally, if you can always choose to see yourself and others as the new person you are in Christ, life will go so much better for you and them. “Love covers a multitude of sins.” Let love do this as much as you can!

Who will free me from my sin? (7:18)

I know that *nothing* good lives in me, that is, in my *sinful nature*. It is important to notice that Paul qualified his self-assessment. He is right that *nothing* good lives in our sinful nature. This is probably the kind of verse that caused Augustine to conclude his idea that all humanity is totally depraved. And looking at ourselves from a totally human point of view, outside of who we are in Christ, this idea has merit. It shows how greatly in need we are of salvation and how badly we need a savior. In that sense, it shows us our need; this is a good thing. However, this doctrine of *total depravity* has also been weaponized by many religious people (as they do many other religious ideas and rituals), playing on people’s ignorance, fear, insecurity, and low self-esteem, all of which come naturally to us. This seems to be done in order to control people, often because they have had this done to them and therefore believe it is the correct way to carry out their religion. Not everyone does this, but way too many do. I will let each person look and see this for themselves for verification. Don’t forget to take a careful look at your own religious affiliation because you might find some of this there. I sure did.

This idea of total depravity can be very powerful in both good and bad ways. On one hand it can turn people to God for salvation after realizing how much they need to be saved. But, on the other hand, it can cause people to slip deeper into their

sin and misery if this idea is presented to them as something that renders them worthless and worthy of being eternally punished for their sin and unbelief, discarded by God who has somehow forsaken them. God will never do such a thing; He can't because He loves His world infinitely and unconditionally, desiring all to be saved, and never giving up that good desire.

Though in one sense, Paul is right that nothing good lies in his fallen nature, yet we are all made in God's image, and there is so much in us that is good and always will be because He put it there. This is exactly why God has to save every last person, because He does not make junk to be thrown away like an old, soiled garment or a used piece of toilet paper. He knows and loves the tremendous value He built into us, enough to send His Son to save us, and never gives up until the job is completely done. God does not just *attempt* to save, only to fail because He ran out of time or got tired of trying. He also doesn't just *offer* salvation, leaving it up to totally messed-up people to somehow find their way to do what is needed to qualify for it. Instead, God saves us simply because we *need* to be saved, cannot save ourselves, and loves us enough not to fail in completing His plan.

Paul goes on with his confession of how much he struggles in his faith and his daily living, even though he knows he is in Christ by God's grace. *I want to do what is good, but I don't. I don't want to do what is wrong, but I do it anyway. I do what I don't want to do, but I am not really the one doing wrong. It is sin living in me that does it.* So, Paul kind of repeats everything he has already said as a grand conclusion. It's the sin nature in him that is the problem and not the new person he is in Jesus, whereby he is perfect in God's sight. He lives in a big dilemma, just as we do today. We all experience this conflict to some degree. Some people walk with God very successfully after growing in him and learning what the spiritual life is all about. They experience this conflict minimally. This is God's goal for all

of us in this life. But then, there are others so lost in sin that they don't even experience or realize this conflict, thinking all is well. Until they someday realize how short they fall from being all they can be in Christ, they will stay in this state, missing out on a much better life that they know nothing about.

Paul's personal conflict is an interesting and key distinction to make. We really need to think it through. It can take a while. On one hand, you're a new person in Christ, and you're perfect in him; you don't sin in your *new nature* when you're living in it. That's how God sees you. Yet, you have an *old nature* that does sin and always will. And so, you live in conflict. It's just a matter of how much you're going to live in one person or the other, in the old or the new. Some people live in their sinful nature. Obviously, when a person shoots a bunch of people, at that moment, they are fully dominated by their old, sinful self. Still, there is good in all of us, lying dormant, because God put this in everyone, having made us all in His own image and likeness. Because of the cross of Christ, there is already a new person in everyone, no matter how evil they behave. The cross is the most important event in history, where everything changed for everyone. However, for a person totally controlled by the flesh (old nature), all the good God has placed in him or her stays dormant. For many of them, all they experience is hate and selfishness, and they're totally lost in that. But even this will be made right by God someday. He's not going to leave them in that state. It would be insane and terribly cruel if He did. However, it might take their lifetime and beyond for all this to happen.

I have discovered this principle of life: that when I want to do what is right, I inevitably do what's wrong. That's the principle that I've seen in my life, too. Have you? If you haven't, perhaps you are not paying attention. Or, maybe you see the same thing a little differently. That is for you to work out with God. I am doing better with it. Maybe you are, too. But that's just how

we are in this life. We want to do what's right, but we eventually fail to some degree, at least some of the time.

Paul repeats his confession, but does so from a slightly different angle. *I love God's law with all my heart, but there is another power within me that is at war with my mind.* This conflict we all experience is not just in the realm of feelings and choices (will). It is in our minds too. I think Paul is saying, if we love God, we will also love His law (when rightly understood and utilized). I'm sure he means the good aspects of the law that he has made clear previously. I do not think he is referring to all the detailed instructions about all the animal sacrifices that were required by Israel. He must mean the moral law, the Ten Commandments, etc. These are universal moral standards that include being faithful to people and loving God. Jesus said that loving God and others is the essence of the whole law. So this is probably the aspect of God's law that Paul loved. How about you?

When we get to Romans Twelve, Paul will say that our minds need to be *renewed*: how we think and how we look at life. That's really the problem. The new person in Christ is good in their mind. We think God's kind of thoughts, instinctively. This grows as we mature in Christ. Paul wrote to the believers in Corinth and told them that they have "the mind of Christ."

This power makes me a slave to the sin that is still within me. There's that slavery analogy again that Paul loves to use. *Oh, what a miserable person I am.* Yep, that's a pretty miserable way to live. When we're really living under such slavery and struggling, it's very miserable. But when we're walking in the Spirit, as much as it is humanly possible, any misery is kept to a minimum. And even when we are miserable, which can be imposed on us by other people's actions, we still have a deep, inward peace that

passes understanding, and assures us that eventually everything will be alright.

Then he asks a big, important question, one that everyone living in misery asks: *Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin and death?* Thank God the answer is in *Jesus Christ our Lord*. As expected, this is always Paul's bottom-line solution to all of humanity's ills. He will elaborate on this fully in Romans Eight, which is right around the corner in this letter. *So you see how it is in my mind: I really want to obey God's law, but because of my sinful nature, I'm a slave to sin.* This is his summary of all he has confessed concerning his conflicted struggle in life between his old and new person that he experiences. He leaves his readers with this struggle on their mind, setting them up for the wonderful solution he is about to explain. "Thank God." He says, "The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord." It's in a person. It's not in the Bible. It's not in doing good works. It's not even in exercising faith, although that is how we experience this solution found only in Jesus. The solution, the one that will free us from this body dominated by sin and death, is in Jesus.

If you think back to Romans Six, he was laying the groundwork for understanding this struggle and understanding the solution he is about to disclose. In Romans Six, God raised Jesus from the dead, and so we shall be, spiritually now and literally someday in the future. What happened to him happened to us. And that's where the solution is. This is why Paul always emphasizes the resurrection. The ultimate solution isn't really in this life, even though we're a new creation in Christ. We can do really well here and now by considering ourselves dead to sin and going to live in complete dependence on God through Jesus. But the *ultimate* solution will be in the resurrection, the raising of the dead, with the new body, a new soul, when our old, sinful nature

C Clifton Jones

will be annihilated forever. We'll be free from that forever, but for now, we can only wait for that day.

26. No Condemnation in Christ (Romans 8:1-4)

The life-giving Spirit (8:1)

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus. And who would that be? Well, it would be everyone! Remember what Paul wrote back in Romans Five? “Adam’s one sin brings condemnation for everyone, but Christ’s one act of righteousness brings a right relationship with God and new life for everyone.” He’s the second and final Adam that came in place of the first Adam, saying, “I’m going to rescue humanity from the clutches of sin and death.” And so, Paul rightly concludes that there is no longer any condemnation in Christ. However, as we will soon discover here in Romans Eight, God does “condemn sin in the flesh,” in our fallen human state, but He does this to redeem us from the sin that is destroying us. It is a good kind of condemnation, one that acts in our best interest, which is what love does.

And because you belong to him, the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you from the power of sin that leads to death. Paul just spent two chapters of his letter (Roman Six and Seven) making a big deal about the “power of sin” in our lives, and the struggle we all have with it, so he can now contrast this to another power, a greater one, that is found in the “life-giving Spirit.” When Paul says, “The Spirit has freed *you* from the power of sin,” it is easy to conclude that only these people he is writing to are the ones who are freed, or that only those who

believe are free. Well, this is true in one sense. Although Jesus undid the ruin Adam brought for all humanity, this freedom is not experienced by everyone. Obviously, without believing in God and Jesus, a person cannot engage with God (since there is no faith), and they miss out on all the good things that have already been done *for* them by Jesus on the cross, “reconciling the world to himself,” as Paul describes it in his second letter to the Corinthians. But because they choose not to believe (and most people can't help it in their lost state, needing God to open their eyes, which He will do someday), it does not mean God has, or will, abandon them or send them to hell forever.

When Paul addresses a particular group of people and says “you” or “us,” he is not being ultimately exclusive. It is, rather, a temporary and limited exclusion until God finishes His salvation of the whole world, just as He planned. You will see this kind of language (e.g., *you*, *we*, *us*, etc.) throughout the New Testament, especially in the writings of Paul. But there is no reason to conclude that God is ultimately rejecting the majority of humanity, based on their current status of unbelief and sin, as many Christians do. We're not the only ones who have this life-giving spirit and freedom from the power of sin that leads to death. We're the only ones who *experience* what we already have from God. The rest do not because they do not believe, which is the very thing that places us in a right relationship with God (“made right by faith,” Paul often calls it). When he uses *you*, *us*, and *we*, he's just getting personal and essentially saying, “Because *you* belong to Christ, you will experience the power of the life-giving Spirit.” However, you do not experience this at the expense, loss, and exclusion of the rest of humanity, who do not yet believe. God works in their lives and never gives up on them!

Notice that there are two kinds of powers at work. There's the “power of sin that leads to death,” and we all experience it. And that's what Paul was bemoaning in Romans Seven. But there is also the “power of the life-giving Spirit” that only those who

believe experience, waiting to be experienced by all someday. This is yet another illustration of one of Paul's great themes in his writings: the contrast between the old (power of death) and the new (power of life) persons that we are in this life. Whether they realize it or not, and whether they have experienced it or not, all people have been freed from the power of sin and death; they just don't know it. But someday they. Too, will experience such freedom because God sent His Son to save the world, not to ultimately condemn some or all of it (John 3:17). And this is exactly why the Good News message needs to go out for all to hear. Paul will elaborate on this more in Romans Ten.

Jesus is our sacrifice for sins (8.3)

It gets interesting as Paul continues. *The law of Moses was unable to save us because of the weakness of our sinful nature.* That is pretty much what he concluded repeatedly in previous chapters of his letter. In fact, he several times stated that the law actually prompted us to sin even more, though its real purpose was to show us our desperate need for salvation. Most people do not want to cheat on their spouse, steal things, tell lies, or abandon their parents in their old age. We all occasionally cross such lines in some ways due to our weaknesses, impatience, and lack of wisdom. But when these become some kind of law, demanded by someone else (man or God), we instinctively rebel against it. That's just our nature.

So God did what the law couldn't do. Ah, this is great. God comes along and says, "Hey, the law can never save you because of your inability to keep it." *Therefore, God sent His Son in a body like ours to declare an end to sin's control by giving His Son as a sacrifice for sins.* In effect, Paul is saying, "The Son of God didn't just come to earth, walk around to be seen,

and do some good teaching. He became a human, just like us, able to hurt, struggle, and strive to accomplish things in life. But he was also some kind of sacrifice for our sins! How does this work? God, through Jesus, declared an end to sin's control over us. How does this work? I think the atonement thing gets a bit distorted in the thinking of a lot of people. They've been told that God sacrificed His Son in a very severe, mean, and horrible way, pouring out His wrath on him instead of us, who were His original target. That is not true.

When I first started looking into the atonement of Christ so I could better understand it, I went looking for the verse that says, "God poured His wrath out on His Son." this is because I heard these very words repeatedly in many sermons as a kid growing up in a big Baptist church in Sacramento, California. Though I had heard this all my life, it was nowhere to be found in the New Testament. There is no such verse; that's just something that we inherited from the Catholic Church, from the history of the Church, and from Augustine. This violent view of God inflicting emotional and physical pain on His Son, rather than us, brings drama, trauma, fear, and guilt on us. The atonement of Christ was something where God was effectively saying to humanity, "I'm going to come and be *your* sacrifice. You're going to sacrifice me in your anger and rebellion. You always want sacrifices; you're always trying to *appease the gods*. Hey, I got a solution for you that will put an end to this nonsense. I'll be *your* sacrifice, and when you sacrifice and kill me, I'm not going to retaliate, in order to show you that I don't solve my problems with violence; I solve them with love, by far the most powerful force in the universe." So, he let us kill him. Do you see what's going on? Jesus, as God's Son, took the bullet (of sin) for us. He didn't take a bullet shot at him from the Father, wanting to shoot us but turning His gun on His innocent Son instead. What kind of justice (injustice?) is that? Jesus took the bullet of sin that was coming toward us, got in the way, and said, "I'll take on all the sin, damage, and crap that sin

brings. I'll take it; I'll make things right for all of you. You're offering me up as a "sacrifice" without fully realizing what you're doing. But I'll turn my dying, at your hands, into something amazingly good. I will rise from the dead and set in motion the resurrection of everybody at the end of time. Everyone will be resurrected to newness of life, just as the Father and I planned to do from all eternity past." So, Jesus was indeed a sacrifice for sins, but he was *our* sacrifice, and he turned *our* anger into something good for us, forever. This is what love does; it eventually makes everything right, which is what the word "justice" means in Greek.

Following the Spirit (8:4)

He did this so that the just requirement of the law would be fully satisfied for us, who no longer follow our sinful nature, but instead follow the spirit. That's the big takeaway. We don't (and can't) keep the law, any law. Jesus kept and fulfilled it *for* us. This point is key and cannot be overstated. He did for us something we could never do for ourselves. He made us holy and acceptable in God's sight. Remember, "holy" means to be set apart, and God has (through Jesus) set us apart from sin, rendering us perfect in Christ. As a result, we no longer need to follow our sinful nature; we no longer need to be "slaves to sin." It doesn't make us completely free from it in this life (as Paul confessed to Romans Seven), but we *sin less*, and we can walk in the Spirit and avoid fulfilling sinful desires that bring us harm and destroy us. What a difference; what a contrast. And so, the solution is not in trying harder not to sin, but understanding and focusing on who we now are in Christ, because of what Jesus did on the cross for us. Living in the Spirit is where we will find success, and Paul will elaborate on this more here in Romans Eight as we work our way through it

Here is a short letter that a good friend of mine sent to his kids (10), grandchildren (32), and great-grandchildren (24):

There will be times in your life when you will experience what I have experienced and have written about. God's love never wavers. Just open your eyes; He will always be there for you. That's the message of His love. Sometimes I hold my breath and slightly close my eyes as unbelief tries to flood my very being. But then, much to my surprise, when I finally gasped for air and cautiously looked around again, God was still present with me in spite of all my unbelief and pain. He whispers to me, "I know everything about you," which sometimes makes me so ashamed. What can I do? The fact that you love me overwhelms me every day. "I love you, Jesus." That's all I can say.

I want you to know that in this life, we have some magic words, where we say, "Believe in Jesus and all your troubles will be over, because you got Jesus on your side, and everything's gonna be fine," but it often isn't. You will have days, just as Paul did when he wanted to do what was right but couldn't, and wanted not to do something, but he ended up doing it anyway. This happens in every one of our lives. However, we need to know that as you go through all of that, open your eyes; He's still there. Jesus said, "I'll never leave you nor forsake you. I will be there through everything that you go through." If that doesn't give you the courage to face life, whether you're eight years old, going on nine, or 19 going on 20, that's the thing that you need to know: that God's always going to be there, with you and for you!

Good and encouraging as my friend's words are for anyone to read, still, it is sometimes hard for people to believe they are really loved by God. Often, the answer in our head is, "It does not seem like God loves me, the way life is going." We tend to get stuck on the idea that we must do something to prove our allegiance to God so that He will love us and grant us His favor (grace). The idea of *unconditional love* is a difficult one for most people because not all of us in this life ever experience such a

thing from fellow human beings. Parental love, followed by the love of good friends and spouses, is the closest thing to *unconditional* love that we experience. the answer in your head is no, it's not difficult to know you're loved. Knowing we are loved without conditions is a heavy lift, but it is possible as we walk with God and learn to trust him. This tends to take a long time in life, but it is a worthy pursuit. Once we get there, or as close as we can get in this life, we realize it was better and closer to us than we imagined all along. When we get to Romans Ten, Paul will tell his readers that this Good News message (including the unconditional love of God through Jesus) is on their lips and in their hearts,” Much closer than they realize.

None of us enjoys being miserable, insecure, fearful, and doubtful, yet in some strange way we all seem to wallow in such awful stuff and do very little to find a way out. Have you ever seen this in yourself or others? Perhaps this is part of our lost condition and exactly why we need a savior outside of ourselves to “rescue us from this body of death,” as Paul said in his conclusion of Romans Seven. That rescuer can only be God.

27. The Spirit Gives Us Life (Romans 8:5-11)

Dominated by sin (8:5)

Those who are dominated by the sinful nature think about sinful things. Yep. If you're living in the flesh, you're gonna think about sinful things. It won't always be sexual in nature; it can be anger, jealousy, or good old-fashioned selfishness. It can be seeing someone incorrectly, with bias, prejudice, and mistreating them. If you're dominated by a sinful nature, you'll think about sinful things! But those who are controlled by the Holy Spirit think about things that please the Spirit. Notice the contrast between Spirit and flesh (sinful nature). This is more of Paul's ongoing contrast between the old and new persons that we are. These are echoes from Romans Six and Seven, except he will soon tell us how we can win this battle, and even more important, that we will eventually be "more than conquerors" at the end of Romans Eight, because "nothing can ever separate us from the love of God." But for now, he wants to remind us that we can either be dominated by sin or controlled by the Spirit. It is our choice to a high degree, but we need God in our lives (another choice) to help us make it. It is hard in this life to choose wisely, even with God's help, because we go back into the flesh, especially when we grow tired and lose perspective. But just being aware of this so that you stay prepared is half the battle. When we get into Romans Twelve, Paul will discuss the importance of *renewing* our minds. Sometimes we need a spiritual refresher course, and this can happen in a moment as we gain the

right state of mind. Sometimes we are just one thought away from success. As we age, in years and in our time of knowing Christ, we do a little bit better each day, we grow, and we never want to go back. But the transition can be tough. Never give in to discouragement or give up. God never does!

So letting your sinful nature control your mind leads to death, but letting the spirit control your mind leads to life and peace. This is almost what Paul stated above, but worded differently. Mostly, Paul is repetitive because he knows that we need to hear something many times before we even begin to understand it. And then when we finally do, we often say, “Why didn’t you tell me this before?” Ever done this? Ever had it happen to you?” It is exasperating, but until the light comes on in our mind, we *can’t* understand, even when something is clearly explained. I have seen the frustration in my wife’s face when I tell her some great revelation about life that I just heard from someone else. Her response is always, “I told you that a few months ago!” Either I wasn’t listening (something we are both guilty of from time to time), or what she told me did not compute in my brain to the point that I didn’t even remember hearing it. Either way, shame on me. But this illustrates it takes time, concentration, the right context, and enough past experience before we can understand even the most simple and basic ideas that are presented to us.

Here in this passage, Paul is emphasizing what controls our mind, our sinful nature (internal influence) or the Spirit (eternal). In the previous passage, Paul focused on our thinking and what we dwell on. It is two aspects of the same problem. Thinking is what we do; our mind is what does our thinking. When our sinful nature dominates our thinking and controls our mind, it results in death, spiritually, and sometimes even physically. Death is separation and inactivity, and this can be physical, emotional, intellectual, or psychological. There are many kinds of death, and

it's always a miserable place to be. This is why Paul warns us about it and offers a solution. How we think and what we think about matters. When I was a young man, serving my country in Vietnam, an older friend of the family took an interest in me and spent some time writing to me many times during my year there. One thing he told me was, "You can't help thinking, but you can help what you think about." This turned out to be key advice that I have never forgotten. If you don't like what is in your mind, replace it. We have the power to do this, though sometimes it's an ongoing battle.

Hostility toward God (8:7)

Our sinful nature is always hostile to God. Paul's employing a bit of hyperbole here to make a point. He doesn't mean we're *always* hostile to God, every minute of our lives. Even unbelievers are not guilty of this. But when we live in that sinful nature apart from God, it dominates our thinking, and we live in hostility toward God, often without fully realizing it. Paul goes on, *It never did obey God's laws, and it never will.* He's not talking about obeying in a slavish way, trying to appease God or earn favor with him, but instead a lack of desire to obey God in gratitude for all He has done for us. That is a different kind of obedience that has a different motive, and that kind of obedience is missing when we are controlled by our sinful nature. Funny thing, our old, sinful nature is terribly immature and foolish and doesn't want to do what's right. Worse, it seems not to mind being miserable and is self-destructive. This is the very kind of thing God sent His Son to save us from, not from himself as some kind of vengeful retaliator who punishes without a corrective purpose.

That's why those who are still under the control of their sinful nature can never please God. More hyperbole, but very

effective. By saying “never,” Paul emphasizes the problem we all experience. Of course, we please God in many different ways, just by being who we are, having been made in His image, breathing, exercising our will, feeling things deeply, and doing creative things. We please God much more than we realize, just as our little kids pleased us by just being who they are. We loved them and delighted in all they did ... well, most of it! The same is true of God, who is easily pleased, and when He is not, it motivates him to do something in our lives to make us better beings, which pleases him all the more. But Paul is focusing on our actions that are not pleasing to God, which we bring about by our foolish choices. God is not the one who needs to change; we do, and Paul is pointing this out. God always stays the same and keeps on working in our lives to help *us* change!

Paul now contrasts those who are not controlled by sin. *But you are not controlled by your sinful nature. You are controlled by the Spirit if you have the Spirit of God living in you.* This should be obvious, but it needs to be said. We cannot be controlled by the Spirit if that Spirit is not actively living in us. The Spirit is in everyone, technically, but not fully active in some. God allows us to grieve and thwart His Spirit if we choose to do so. He allows this because He knows this is the only way some people will learn, even though it can take a long time. But make no mistake, God’s Spirit is working in everyone to some degree. How else could anyone ever turn to God and enter into a faith relationship with Him? No one does this on their own. But the Spirit also does not force itself on people in an active way. This requires our invitation and conscious choice. Consider verses from the gospel of John, like, “The Holy Spirit convicts the world of sin, judgment, and righteousness.” This can only happen if God’s Spirit resides in everyone, and so Paul conveys this idea that we are controlled by the Spirit if we have the Spirit

of God living in us. In other words, the Spirit must be living and active, alive and well, not just present.

Remember that those who do not have the spirit of Christ living in them do not belong to him at all. That's a pretty strong statement, but I don't think he's negating what he said in Romans Five about Adam plunging all humanity into ruin and Christ rescuing all humanity from death. It is easy to read a verse like this and conclude that some people do not have the Spirit of Christ living in them at all, and therefore, they do not belong to Christ in any way. Many conclude this, and I am in no position to say they are wrong. Everyone must decide for themselves how it all works with God and mankind. However, I can say that I do not draw such a conclusion because of the overwhelming evidence in the New Testament that God is much bigger, better, more loving, gracious, and successful than engaging in such petty and non-corrective behavior.

For sure, in some way, to some degree, if the Spirit of God is not fully dwelling within a person, in a deliberately active way, then there is also a sense that such a person does not fully belong to God. As we have seen before, and you will find this throughout all of the New Testament writings, extreme language is used to make a point, even though the writer is not being completely literal to the degree that it appears. We are wise to allow language (English, Hebrew, or Greek) some flexibility in how it is used. Even Jesus used extreme language to get his hearers' attention by saying such extreme things as, "You must hate your mother and father if you want to truly follow me!" I think any hearer or reader of Jesus' words knows what he is saying, that it is very important to follow him first, even above strong family ties. It could not have been to literally hate your mother and father; that could not have been his main point. He was just slamming an idea to an extreme to get our attention and make a more important point.

So here, Paul, as he has done previously, uses extreme words (do not have, do not belong, not at all) to emphasize the importance of fully living in the Spirit and fully belonging to Christ. He knows everyone already has the Spirit living in them because the Spirit is everywhere present. This is how he is able to convict people of their sin and draw them into knowing Jesus. He also knows that everyone, ultimately, belongs to Christ, because God made everyone in His own image, loves His world unconditionally, and will never forsake or abandon anyone. However, He also knows that people can and do choose to live in Christ and choose a life of sin instead. So he wants his readers to seriously consider that if they do not *experience* the Spirit of Christ in them in an active, submitting, participating way, they also will not experience belonging to Christ, even though they already belong to him because of what he did for all of us on the cross. I think that's more of what Paul's saying; otherwise, some people are completely without the Holy Spirit, and they're totally shut off from God. That just doesn't fit with all the other amazing things we are told about God, His great love for all humanity, His plan to save the world, and His promise to eventually reconcile all things to himself, everything in heaven and earth." As Paul wrote in his letters to the Ephesians and the Colossians.

Reading versus studying (8:10)

Christ lives within you, and so even though your body will die because of sin, the Spirit gives you life because you have been made right with God. The spirit of God who raised Jesus from the dead lives in you. And just as God raised Christ from the dead, He will give life to your mortal bodies through this same Spirit living within you. That's a lot to digest. Sometimes I like to break a complex thing down into simpler parts. This makes it easier to understand because if I don't

understand each part, I can't really understand the whole. I suppose this comes from my engineering education and lifelong career. It is amazing how many material-world ideas, aptitudes, and skills are helpful in the spiritual realm. I assume this is all part of God's great plan for us and how we might best come to know him, living better lives!

Here is how I would break down, by listing each part to be examined carefully:

1. Christ lives within us.
2. Our bodies will die.
3. Sin is the cause.
4. The Spirit gives us life.
5. Being made right with God is the cause.
6. The Spirit of God raised Jesus from the dead.
7. The Spirit lives in us.
8. God raised Jesus from the dead.
9. God will give life to our mortal bodies.
10. Items 8 and 9 above are done in the same way.
11. This is done through the Spirit living in us.

That is an impressive list. I hope you can see how doing this helps to understand what Paul is saying. You may have to read the list several times, thinking about each item while remembering the items that came before and after. Notice that you can only do this by reading it repeatedly! This is what reading a passage in context is all about. It is the only real way to understand (as fully as possible) what any writer is trying to say. They cannot say everything in one sentence, so it is up to each reader to make all the connections, and this is only possible when all the various things being said are kept in mind.

Take any one of those eleven statements; each one alone is interesting and helpful. But if you begin to connect them, truths greater than any one statement emerge. This is key. If you begin to read this way, in context, keeping all ideas in mind and

connecting them together, you will gain so much more from your reading. But keep in mind that this takes time and respect. There is no other way. This is the essence of why studying is better than just reading. Both are important. You must read in order to study, but you can't study without repeated reading. However, you can read without studying, and this is a totally appropriate thing to do. Just keep in mind that you will not get as much out of it.

For example, items 1 through 3 can be grouped together, as can items 4 through 7, as well as 8 through 11. Take a look again at the list and see if this grouping makes sense. Maybe, and maybe not. Each person perceives differently, and this is where the guidance of God's Spirit is key. The Spirit is alive and well, right now, present within each one of us. We can tap into it or ignore it. I would argue that seeking God through His Spirit is far superior to trusting any set of ancient writings, good as they might be, like the New Testament, because these are not a real person whom we can interact with and get direct, personal revelation. This is what I have learned over the past 53 years of study.

So, according to Paul, the Spirit of God who raised Jesus from the dead also lives in us, and just as God raised Christ Jesus from the dead, he will also give us life in our temporary state of mortality. Wow! That is so good to know. These are words to live by and to base our lives on. God gives life to us right now and obviously in eternity. There is, for sure, an eternal life waiting for us, but even right now, we get a taste of that eternal life. Bask in it, be thankful for it each day. It is a gift from God and a daily experience like nothing else, carrying you through the most difficult of circumstances. Life can get *very* difficult. This is why we need all the more what only God can bring us. We are all very hungry for a meaningful relationship with our Creator. Without this, we are the loneliest possible creatures, always looking to distract ourselves from the emptiness we can't seem to escape. The only escape is knowing God! When we know God, we feel alive and we do well, not perfect, but essentially well, where deep

down inside we are at peace with ourselves, others, and the universe in which we live. The alternative is to be harangued, chased around by life, depressed, and discouraged. But when we move past all that and live in the Spirit, it's very freeing.

28. God's Spirit Joins Our Spirit (Romans 8:12-17)

We are all children of God (8:12)

Dear brothers and sisters, you have no obligation to do what your sinful nature urges you to do. If you live by its dictates, you will die. But if, instead, you live through the power of the Spirit, you put to death the deeds of your sinful nature, and you will live. All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. Once again, Paul gives the same message in a different way. There are two main themes in all of Paul's writings. One is what God has done by grace, totally unmerited by anything we do or think, because He did it before we ever had a chance to hear about it and respond. The other is on the other side of the coin, and it is our response to God and how we choose to live. These two themes are related, but they are not equal. What God does is by far the most important of these two, because He initiates our salvation "while we were still sinners" (see Romans Five), and brings it about apart from any response we choose. However, our choice (Paul's other main theme) matters. It just does not earn us anything with God by choosing wisely, nor does it cause God to retaliate in some way for choosing poorly. Yet there are natural consequences in life when we make such choices, and this is exactly what God is saving us from. He does not save us *from* himself; He saves us *for* himself, to enjoy fellowship with Him forever.

You have not received a spirit that makes you fearful slaves. Instead, you've received God's Spirit when He adopted you as His own. Children. We haven't received a spirit that brings fear. Why would he? We do enough fear and worry on our own. God gave us His Spirit as a comforter. However, there is one aspect in which the Spirit brings to us a severe message: He convicts the world of sin, the importance of doing what is right (for our own sake), and the eventual judgement of God, whereby He will *accurately assess* (judge) everything we have done in life, but again for our own good. Even when God, through His Spirit, brings some kind of severity into our lives, it is always for our best, to correct us, and make us better human beings. This is always His goal, and only His goal. It is never to retaliate against us in pure vengeance with no corrective purpose whatsoever. It is not who He is; it's who we are, and we tend to project that back onto God. But from this, too, He has come to save us.

God is in the business of taking away our fear by drawing us into a wonderful relationship with Him by faith. God is the end of our fears, not the source of them. However, He allows us to experience fears of various kinds to differing degrees. This is part of our learning in life: learning what is wrong in our life, so we will seek God, but also learning to appreciate being free from fear when we arrive there. One problem is that our fears are so prevalent that we get used to them. We think it's normal and unavoidable. Then, if somebody comes along and says, "Hey, you can have freedom and joy and peace by turning to God who loves you, and fully trust Him," often the response is, "That's too good to be true."

We received God's Spirit when He adopted us as children. Did God adopt us because we took the initiative and received His Spirit, or did we receive His Spirit as a result of him adopting us as His children? Or, perhaps, this happens simultaneously. Read this passage for yourself and interpret it in the full context of all that Paul has written so far in this letter, but also in the context

of all Paul's letters. He is quite emphatic about God being the one who saves through His grace (unmerited favor), and that we are the ones who can only respond in some way without taking credit for any ultimate accomplishment.

Then there is the sense that we (humanity) are all God's children, via the fact that He is our Creator, loves us, and wants the best for each one of us, just as we do for our children. But there is a special sense of *adoption*, whereby we consciously receive God's Spirit who already resides within us, entering into a personal relationship with God, interacting and engaging with him in the closest possible way. Most of us have had multiple children, whom we loved equally, yet they all relate to us differently. Some are more compliant and helpful, resulting in a closer relationship. Others are more independent and rebellious, distancing themselves from us. We love them the same, and pretty much raise them the same, teaching them all the same values, yet they can choose very different journeys in life, where some are closer and some farther. This is a limited analogy from how it is with us and God, but the basic truth is there. When we choose to turn to God by faith and trust him, we have a closer and better relationship. Others, whom He loves just as much, choose to ignore God and not engage with him. We are all God's children, but only some are adopted by God in a special and closer relationship that is available to all.

The event of Jesus on the cross is not when God started loving us or started saving us. Love and salvation are extensions by God from eternity past. The cross is when God made an issue of His love and salvation, brought it into history by providing an event that we could look at and identify clearly what God is doing and why. God didn't change His mind at the time of the cross and say, "I think I'll start loving you now." He always did and always will – all of us. He was just saying, "Let me prove my love for you. I'll come down, let you sacrifice me, and even kill me. But I'm going to love you anyway because I don't solve my

problems with violence. I'm not going to do anything bad to you in retaliation. I'm just gonna love you. I've already forgiven you, and I'm gonna do whatever it takes in judgment and condemnation to bring you to myself. That's what I want. That's my goal: to improve you, to correct you, to save you, to redeem you. I want to do something *for* you, not something *to* you." God is always for us, never against us, though it looks that way when He brings severity into our lives to correct us. And so Paul wrote, "You've not received a spirit that makes you fearful slaves. Instead, you've received God's Spirit when He adopted you as His own children."

Abba, Father, Papa, Daddy (8:15b)

Now we call him *Abba, Father*. That's what *Abba* means. Actually, it is more like *Daddy*; it's a very affectionate way of addressing God. Daddy, Father, Papa ... not God. The word "God" is actually a very cold, generic way of referring to Him. , True, He is the big, mighty creator of the universe and beyond, more importantly, He is a wonderful father who takes us in His arms, puts us on His knee, and says, "I love you. Give me a hug." This is how Jesus presented God, because he came to reveal who God really is. The Jews had, at best, a conflicted view of God. Just read the Old Testament writings, and this will become clear. Jesus came to set the record straight about who God really is: a loving heavenly Father. When I read the Old Testament and find horrible things said about and attributed to God, I always consult Jesus, who is the gold standard in telling me who God really is.

For His spirit joins with our spirit to affirm that we are God's children. And that's how we know it. I don't believe we know "because the Bible tells us so," although it indeed does. Some have claimed, "God said it; I believe it; that settles it!"

When this claim is made, they are referring to the Bible because they believe it to be “the very Word of God, inerrant right down to every jot and tittle.” Jots and tittles are small vowel markings in the Hebrew language. In other words, the Bible is without error, including each comma, period, and verb tense. They are stating their complete confidence and trust in the Bible that they possess and read. Perhaps many of them are really saying, “I trust everything that God personally reveals to me in the copy of the Bible that I possess, read, and study. I have no problem with that because it is ultimately God whom they trust, not a set of ancient writings.

On the other hand, if they are ultimately trusting a translation of the Bible that was created from a specific set of manuscripts and copied repeatedly as they came to us in history, with all the problems that come with that cumbersome process, then that is a different point of view. But even if some do this, it is okay. Each person gets to decide what they trust and why. My only concern is whether they have been told *all* the facts about how the Bible came to us, when, by whom, and the circumstances that prevailed. This is, essentially, Fourth Century church history of which most people know little or nothing about.

The bottom line key idea is what Paul wrote: that God’s Spirit joins ours to let us know that we belong to Him. If you think about it, this is really the *only* way we can know for sure. Trusting our parents and upbringing, our pastor, our church of choice, or any set of ancient writings (good and helpful as all these things are) will never be able to affirm who we are in relation to God like the Spirit of God is able to do. I love Paul’s idea that the Spirit joins with our spirit. There’s a spiritual connection with a person that can’t be denied, and it’s bigger than reading a mere book. It’s bigger than academics. It’s bigger than anything we can explain, and the Spirit affirms that we are God’s children. All people are God’s children; it’s just that they don’t know it because they don’t have that spiritual connection in an active way.

Sharing His Glory and Suffering (8:17)

And since we are His children, we are His heirs. In fact, together with Christ, we are heirs of God's glory. However, if we are to share his glory, we must also share his suffering. Uh, I knew there was a catch. We never get something for nothing in this life. Looks like the eventual payment for all the good things we get from God is suffering. Actually, this is a good thing. Everything God causes or allows, and He seems to do both, always has a good purpose. God also probably prevents certain things from happening, but we have no idea how many or how few. It could be nearly everything or almost nothing. Sometimes I am tempted to conclude that God prevents very little in life when I look around and see all the absolutely horrible things that take place, not just murder and theft, but rape, child abuse, and terrorism. Then I think maybe God prevents most evil from happening, and what we see is a very small part of what could have happened, letting just enough through to accomplish His goal of getting us to see our need and turn to Him, where we can be safe. But since whatever He prevents is also what we never see, it is impossible to know how many or few things God prevents. I just assume it is the right amount.

Though we must suffer to share His glory, it does not mean that we have earned anything or that God is acting transactionally in some way. However, according to Paul, it seems to follow that our suffering (which is usually beyond our control) will result in some kind of glory (something much better than the suffering we have endured). God's not saying, "Okay, folks, if you want some glory, you gotta suffer for it." That would be a transactional rather than a consequential action. God operates in grace, motivated by His love. He always does what will bring the greatest good for everyone, eventually. Most suffering comes as a result of our own foolishness or that of those around us. Occasionally, it comes

from something more remote, like a leader deciding to go to war. However, Paul is probably referring more to the suffering that comes as a result of us doing what is right.

When this happens, we need to just keep on walking in love. They hated Jesus because love meant accepting the Gentiles along with the Jews. They hated this more than anything because they believed they were a *chosen nation*, beyond that of bringing a messiah to save the world.

29. All Creation is Eagerly Waiting (Romans 8:18-30)

All creation groans (8:18)

Paul just told his readers that suffering will result in sharing God's glory. That shouldn't make anyone to seek a life of suffering, but it does encourage people that when they do suffer, especially when it comes as a result of doing what is right, that there will be a good purpose in it, and that good purpose is sharing God's glory, which means to be highly exalted (to an appropriate level) having endured the result of doing what is right. He elaborates on this. *Yet, what we suffer now is nothing compared to the glory He will reveal to us later.* Notice that Paul does not say that God will always rescue us from our suffering. He could, ya know, but He usually lets it happen because somehow, hard as it is to endure, it all fits into His grand plan to save the world and make us more like Himself. This is a big part of "sharing His glory." Peter wrote in his second letter that we are "partakers of God's divine nature" when we escape the corruption of this world. In other words, as God works in our lives, often through the suffering He allows, we become more like God. Moving away from wrongdoing, sin, and failure, into a perfection that we will someday fully experience in eternity. In this way, we share His glory.

It helps us to know this, even though it doesn't always fix everything in this life. Some degree of suffering is the fate and plan for all people, but God uses it mightily, just as He does

everything that happens in life, whether He causes or allows it. I've got friends who are suffering right now. And I have to be careful not to say, "Oh, it's all going to work out in the end. God's going to eventually fix it." True as that is, they're not into that right now, nor am I when I am suffering. They're just hurting, struggling, and want it to end. All they can do is endure and wait for God to bring relief in His good time and perhaps give them a glimpse of what purpose He has in it for them. They need someone to just say, "Hey, I feel it with you. Let's pray, and I'm always available if I can help in any way." Then, all we can do is let them experience their own suffering, just as we often have to when we are in our season of it. It is the Journey they are on with God, custom-made for each one of us. We cannot journey *for* others, but we can journey *with* them. Paul said at the end of his letter to the Galatians, "Bear one another's burdens, and yet each person must bear their own burdens." There is a line we cannot cross for others, nor can they cross it for us. The bottom line in life is that it is each one of us interacting with God, by faith, slowly learning more about Him and ourselves, with the great expectation of someday fully sharing His glory. Tuck all of this away in your mind and retrieve it someday in your season of suffering when you will need it the most.

Paul further elaborates on this theme of suffering. *For all creation is waiting eagerly for that future day when God will reveal who His children really are.* It is interesting to me that *all creation* is waiting eagerly, not just all people. He's extending this requirement of waiting beyond just human beings. We see animals suffering, and the whole world in turmoil. It's really a messy mess for everybody and everything. *Against its will, all creation was subjected to God's curse.* One translation uses the word *futility* rather than *curse*. But either way, the idea of *curse* here is not some kind of voodoo or even swearing at someone to

humiliate them. It is related to God's judgment, His accurate assessment, and His decision to add a consequence to our sin for our own good, to prompt us to turn to Him for help. God cursed Adam and Eve after they had sinned in the garden, but this was really a blessing in disguise. The Genesis account reports that "their eyes were opened and they understood for the first time the difference between good and evil." We cannot really understand what evil is and how bad it is for us until we experience it for ourselves. God could have protected Adam and Eve and all of us from ever sinning, but it would result in terribly ignorant creatures who have no clue as to what love, grace, mercy, forgiveness, kindness, and really caring about someone else are all about. We would have just remained in our state of innocent bliss, never suffering, but also never discovering things of infinitely greater meaning and purpose.

But with eager hope, all creation looks forward to the day when it will join God's Children in glorious freedom from death and decay, for we know that all creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. I observed the birth of both of my children firsthand. I concluded that miracles do not need to be something that happens out of the ordinary. They can be something that happens every day, and childbirth is one of these miracles. The whole long process of conception, pregnancy, and delivery is astonishing. I still ponder how this can possibly be, knowing we all got here the same way. There is only one word that fits: miracle. I also decided that if men had to have every other baby, my wife and I would only have had one. My wife is an amazingly brave lady to have done it twice, and the second time naturally! Never say that women are weak. They may generally not be able to lift as much weight, but the patience and endurance they experience in giving birth render them stronger, by far, than most men.

Why God created this world

I find the above verses (20 and 21) to be about the only place in the New Testament that reveals *why* God created the world the way He did and let it fall into sin, knowing He could have avoided this problem altogether. This is one of the greatest questions ever asked by human beings, yet there seems to be very little explanation in the Bible, which is supposed to be the full revelation about God. Why is this so missing? For me, these verses are the closest thing to explaining why God created us and the world we live in. "Against its will, all creation was subjected to God's curse (*futility* is the word chosen by some translators). But with eager hope, the creation looks forward to the day when it will join God's children in glorious freedom from death and decay." This does not tell us everything we want to know as to why God created this world, but it does give a reason: He created and subjected us to futility so that someday we could experience all the great things that result from such subjection. In other words, God had a plan, difficult as it is; He knows what He's doing and what He wants to bring about.

For me, it gives a *reason* for life, rather than just existing. I go to work, I try to help people, I play music, and love my wife and kids, just as all of you do. We live our daily lives as a gift from God, but there's more to life than just living and doing things. It is God working in us to help us understand, learn, and grow closer to Him, where we experience the greatest of all joys, and will do so forever! This life, at its best, is just a taste of all the good things to come, "things that our eyes have not seen, nor ears have heard, nor even entered our hearts," as Paul once wrote to the church in Corinth. I believe we're going to remember everything in this life, even though some people, when they get old, can't remember much of anything. But it will all come back when we are all in new bodies with new souls. We'll be so delighted to have gone through what we went through and will love God so much more than we

ever could have if He hadn't subjected us to this pain and suffering (futility) with a greater purpose in mind. Had He not done this, He could only pat us on the head and say, "Nice little perfect innocent being, I love you!" But all we could do was look up and say, "I love you, too, God, whatever that means." Instead, because of what He so wisely subjected us to against our wills, we will get an eternity of knowing what love is, for ourselves, others, and God. We will know what *real* love is because it was demonstrated to us in life, in a way we cannot possibly misunderstand after all is said and done. The worst sinners will understand what real love is, and perhaps with a greater understanding and appreciation because of all they went through, realizing what a great salvation they have received. On that first day in eternity, they may be busting their way through to the front of the crowd to fall at the feet of Jesus when "every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus is indeed Lord." We're all going to know what loving God, and Him loving us, really means. I think that's what comes out of how and why God, in His wisdom, decided to subject all creation to futility in order to reveal who His children are; it is all of creation that eagerly waits with confident hope. God has declared, "I'm going to do it this way, not some other way, and it's the way that is ultimately the best for everyone."

Believers groan, too (8:23)

We believers also groan, even though we have the Holy Spirit within us as a foretaste of future glory. We long for our bodies to be released from sin and suffering. That's really true. We can't help but groan, experiencing aches and pains, frustrations, failures, and watching other people struggle. Some days I ask, "Can't we just end this now? I'm not gonna shoot myself, but anytime is okay with me, God." But, as always, God

does what is ultimately best, and deep down inside I want what He wants, in spite of all the suffering. Eventually, I get around to realizing, “I can do this. I can do another day of it. I can get through my own struggles and still help others the best I can.” Some people get to travel, pursue their dreams and ambitions. But that is okay, their time will come, no matter who they are and how well it is going. Doing well and being free from suffering in this season of life, they are enjoying, will run its course, and God will use it to prepare them for future learning. Sometimes God allows people good fortune so they will experience it to the point where they can't help but ask, “Is that all there is?” God knows this takes time, and people are seldom aware of how God is preparing them for things they cannot ever imagine. So never get jealous of such people. Pray for them in every good way that they will learn everything they need to learn on the journey God has for them, good and bad, easy and hard, blessings and disciplines.

When we work through our sufferings of various kinds, it teaches us to be more compassionate and caring, in a way we can never learn from a book, not even the Bible. There is something about life experiences that cannot be replaced by anything else. And then, remember, that other people also will learn the same kinds of things in due time. So be patient with them and with yourself! God is at work; sit back and let him. I look back at all I have gone through in 75 years with my wife, my kids, and even by myself. It is all good, though also quite painful at times. It often pushed me to the edge, or perhaps, what was perceived as the edge. But it doesn't matter; it accomplished God's purpose in my life, and now I understand the plight of others so much better than I would have. I understand because I know what some of them are going through, which really helps them when I compassionately share this with them, just as it is a huge encouragement to me when others share what they have been through. Nothing is more ineffective than a person who makes empty claims or gives advice based on nothing that they have

personally experienced. Many teachers are great articulators, but they are full of head knowledge with little real experience, and zeal without wisdom. I know, because I have been one of these in days gone by. Funny thing, you don't realize it when you are there. Life can easily blind us, and it takes time, experiences, suffering, and God's help to begin to see clearly. But isn't this what life is really all about? I think it is.

Paul says, "We long for our bodies to be released from sin and death." Interesting. He doesn't talk about our spirit being released from our bodies. It's our bodies that will be released. Hmm... how does that work? Well. This is what the resurrection is all about. You may remember that this was the main theme in Romans Six, that what happened to Jesus happened to us: death and resurrection; for Jesus then and for us someday in the future. I think the soul and the body are very much connected, more so than many religious people are taught to believe. One proof of this is that we all experienced a connection between our bodies and our immaterial soul. What we think and feel can affect us physically, and our physical struggles and strengths affect us spiritually, in our mind, and in our heart. So there's a lot of very real connection between body and soul, and to what degree we can exist with these two apart from each other is anyone's guess. Paul once wrote, "To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord." That is pretty hard evidence, so anyone who believes our souls are separate from our bodies between the time of death and the resurrection has a good basis. On the other hand, the Old Testament Jewish writings seem to favor the idea that when our body dies, we are completely dead, in the grave, without consciousness. Plato seems to have been the first to suggest the separation of body and soul at death. It is also interesting that the writers of the New Testament and the early church Fathers who came after them were greatly influenced by Plato. The author of the Book of Hebrews describes an earthly tabernacle that is only a replica of the real one in some heavenly

realm. This could very well be, but this kind of thinking is very much in line with Plato's *forms* that ideally exist non-materially, from which all material objects are fashioned.

We, too, wait with eager hope for the day when God will give us our full rights as His adopted children, including our new bodies, just as He promised. Now, to me, that's God's real goal in salvation. There is, for sure, a limited salvation in this life as we trust God and exercise faith. We gain greatly from it and are saved (delivered) from the entanglement of sin in this life, but not completely, as Paul has made clear in his letter so far. Walking with God and doing better in this life is a wonderful blessing, but our ultimate salvation is on "the day when God will give us our full rights," according to Paul. It will be a full salvation through our resurrection, when we all have a new body. I think we will have new minds, wills, and emotions that are perfect in every way, designed for an eternity with God. We'll be done with this life, whatever it is about, whatever we're supposed to learn, we will have learned it and moved on to so much better things that we intended for "from before the foundation of the world." And, good news, we won't ever have to do it again. We'll have arrived home where we belong. This is why Paul says we are "eager with hope," because God will give us "full rights as adopted children, including our new bodies, just as He promised."

God's Spirit groans for us (8:24)

We were given this hope when we were saved. If we already have something, we don't need to hope for it. But if we look forward to something, even though we don't have it yet, we must wait patiently and confidently. Paul is elaborating on what *hope* we have is all about and how it works for us, having to wait for it. We were given hope when we were saved. Hope has

to do with not yet possessing what we are expecting someday to gain. And our kind of hoping and waiting is the kind that includes confidence. In other words, we need not see our future resurrection as a long shot. It is not. It is as certain as Christ's resurrection was, and it has passed successfully, as the first one of many who are all of us.

The word *hope* in the Greek is not like us sheepishly saying, "I *ho-ho-hope* I get a good grade on that test I took, even though I didn't study, I hope, somehow, I guessed right." That is how we see and use the word hope in our language and lives. In Greek, hope means nothing less than overwhelming confidence. With this kind of hope, we are confident about the future because of who we know (God and Jesus) and what we know about them. Also, hope is one of Paul's three things that Paul places at the end of his list of attributes defining what real love is in his famous 1 Corinthians 13 passage. He lists faith, hope, and love as key elements in life, but adds this caveat: "The greatest of these is love!" He said this because he knew that the ultimate motivation for everything God does (grace, mercy, salvation, creation, etc.) is love. It is always the reason *why* God does what He does.

Paul emphasizes the importance of hope by pointing out the obvious fact that if we already have something, we don't need to hope for it. But if we look forward to something that we don't have, we must wait patiently and confidently. What a contrast. It is great to possess things, but perhaps greater to look forward to something greater in the future. And to confidently know we're going to get it is all the more sweet. Have you ever looked forward to something good that you knew was going to happen? Maybe getting married to the love of your life, as I did, or going on a once-in-a-lifetime vacation that you've always wanted to do. I have found that sometimes, hope and anticipation loom larger in our minds than the event or item we eventually gained. This is the power of confident hoping, and it serves us well when we cling to it during our pursuit of God and all He plans to give us. That's

the state we're in today, one of hope. We do not presently possess everything we are looking forward to. Good anticipations are among the greatest joys in life. Sometimes we are patient without being confident, other times we are confident without being patient. But if we choose to embrace difficulties, we can have both confidence and patience. There is no sweeter place to be in life, resting in it.

And the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness because we don't always know how to pray. There have been times in my life when I did not know how to pray or what to say. When I was you, single, and looking for a wife in all the right places, I got involved in a college-career group at a Baptist church in Sacramento – the one I grew up in. I was fresh out of the Army, home from Vietnam, and had very few friends. On one occasion, they were ending a meeting and the leader said, “Carl, will you close in prayer?” Everyone bowed their heads. I answered rather sheepishly, “No thanks.” Without skipping a beat, the leader took over and did a brief prayer. As I listened, I remember thinking, “Why didn’t I think of that?” But even if I had, it would not have been much of a real prayer because it would have been just something I thought up to perform a needed task.

Then, as I got older and had done a lot of studying, I found myself preaching mini-sermons to God, especially in public. I suppose God laughed a bit as He listened, knowing I was misunderstanding what prayer was, but performing from out of a good and faithful heart. Since then, I have learned that prayer is just talking to God. It need not be formal, public, or spoken out loud. It can be a quick cry for help or just thinking about others out of my genuine concern for them. I also learned that prayer can be a very natural lifestyle activity, almost 24/7. God is always there, He loves me, wants to hang out with me, always listens, always cares, and never rejects me, no matter how foolish or misguided my prayers are! Paul once wrote, “Pray without

ceasing.” I do not believe he meant formal prayer, on my knees, opening with, “Dear Lord...” and ending with “...in Jesus' name, amen.” Nothing wrong with any of that, but it is not required. That’s way too much work and can be distracting from *real* prayer that is more spontaneous and from the heart.

To struggle with prayer is to be human. But mostly it is a result of being told that prayer is some kind of formula, hard work, and something that needs to be performed as some kind of duty whereby we earn favor with God. Paul seems to be saying that he realizes we are weak and do not know what to say or how to say it. Perhaps he knows we all tend to try way too hard and burn ourselves out. His solution? Very simple: let the Holy Spirit help. Let him take the load and, perhaps, even learn how to pray from resting in him.

How did Jesus pray? The Gospels record what is known as “The Lord’s Prayer,” but really this is *The People’s Prayer*. Look at how he starts out: “Our Father, who art in heaven...” *Our* father, not *My* Father! If you want the real *lord’s prayer*, it is recorded in John’s Gospel, chapter 17. There, Jesus pours his heart out to his Father and reveals many wonderful things about God, himself, and us! Look it up and read it sometime; you will be amazed. I think God just wants to hear from us and have us share our hearts with him. Many years ago, I went through a season of great difficulty and frustration over a long-term illness in our family. It wore on and on, wearing me out. I used to go in the back yard, beat the tree with a stick, and yell at God, “What do you want?” I wasn’t mad at God; just frustrated. I believed He knew what He was doing, but I didn’t, and I wanted in on the great secret. But He never told me until years later, gradually, as I grew in my faith and could begin to understand. I discovered that I didn’t really *need* to know; I just *wanted* to know, which was very human of me. However, I learned that as long as God knew and had a good purpose, I didn’t need to know, and I could rest in that. But this did not come easily, and it took a long time. I think this is why

most people live a long time: it takes time to learn what is really important in life. But when we do, oh, the “peace that passes understanding” is ours. There is nothing sweeter or more freeing in life!

So just talk to God and share your heart with Him in sweet, personal fellowship. Prayer can include a list of requests, but mostly it is just communing with God, honestly sharing your heart with Him, and saying, “I’m struggling with this. Help me. I’m listening.” He will never let you down, but answers can take time, and for good reason. Prayer is probably more about changing us than it is about changing the world around us that we don’t like. Our tendency is to pray, “Hey, God, change this, fix that, rearrange things for me, and make everything easier.” He will always answer, I hear you, but that’s not what I’ve got for you. I have something else, something better. Be patient, trust me, and wait. It will be more than worth it. Keep talking to me and remain in fellowship with me.” Once you do that, and your prayers become more than just asking God to change things (rather than yourself), it won’t matter how He answers and when. This is what maturity in knowing God is all about. Some gain it at a young age, but for most of us, it takes a lifetime. Let prayer become a lifestyle of constant fellowship with God. It is effortless, really!

So we don’t always know what or how to pray, and so Paul goes on and says, *But the Holy Spirit prays for us with groanings that cannot be expressed in words.* Wow! Really? When God steps in through His Spirit and prays for us, even *groans* for us, that’s gotta work. I’m so glad he does that. And maybe he does this when we need it the most, when we have no words, are frustrated, and in a state of confusion, turning to prayer as a last resort. I have done this many times, and I always know He is there interceding for me. What a friend; what a prayer partner God is. I have a friend who told me this about their prayer life: “I sometimes wonder when the Holy Spirit steps in and prays

for me, what good does it do? But then I realize that this groaning thing is something I am a part of. He prays and groans *with* me, and I experience it. Sometimes, when I feel a deep fellowship in prayer with God, I realize that must be the Holy Spirit doing something actively in concert with me. It's a very mysterious thing, but also very real."

Everything works together for good (8:27)

And the father, who knows all hearts, knows what the Spirit is saying, for the Spirit pleads for us believers in harmony with God's will. Oh, what a deal. He doesn't just pray for us; He prays the right stuff, and He always prays in harmony with God's will so that we're connecting with God in the very best way, in spite of our selfish requests. I don't think God gets mad when we pray selfishly or foolishly. Instead, He jumps in, through His Spirit, and makes it right. God just decides, "You know, you don't really need that. You just think you do. I'm not going to grant you that right now, but stick around, I've got plenty of good things for you coming down the pipe."

Here's a famous passage from Paul that you've probably heard before: *And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to His purpose for them.* Two thoughts come to mind. First, God also works everything for the good purpose of those who *don't* love Him. That's how big and loving He is. This is hard for us to understand because it is not the way we would treat others who don't love us. Remember what Paul wrote in the first half of Romans Five? "While we were still sinners (not loving God), Christ died for us." God does not wait for people to get their act together and love Him before He takes needed action. Love never waits, unless there is a better outcome by doing so.

Love also never gives up. How could it and still be what love is? Love always acts in the best interest of the one loved. That's what God always does, whether we love him back or not.

What Paul is doing here is calling attention to how God operates. He causes all things to work together for good. Justice is not getting back at someone for some wrongdoing; this is not what it is for God either. The word *justice* in Greek means "to make things right." And as George McDonald, mentor of C.S. Lewis, once wrote, "God brings *ultimate* justice and so eventually He must make everything *ultimately* right." I don't think Paul's implying that God does not work in the best interest of other people. We were once one of those *other people* at some point in life. God is the "hound of heaven" (according to C.S. Lewis) who never gives up on pursuing us, no matter how long it takes, even those who do not love him in response. God knows that eventually they will love him back because His love will win. Paul famously ended his love chapter in his letter to the Corinthians with, "Love never fails!"

Paul is writing to believers in Rome, informing them how God will work all things together for those who love Him," knowing they are people who love God. Notice that Paul does not say, "*only* for those who love him." He just wants these folks to know how God works things out for them, as people who love God. I have no doubt that if we could ask Paul today what he meant (and oh, do I wish I could!), he would say, "Of course God will work all things for good for even those who do not love Him. I just wanted to let this group of people know that God will do this for them simply because it's what He does." We can all count on God working everything together for the good purpose that He has for all of us and all humanity. How could He ever do anything less?

The other thought that comes to mind is when Paul says, "All things work together for *good*," it must include all *bad* things. In reality, they can't really be bad things – not ultimately – simply

because God has caused or allowed them. Otherwise, He would prevent them! But often He does not. Why would God ever let anything happen that does not work together for good if He has the power to prevent them? This tells us a lot about how God operates and why we can completely trust him, even when we do not know what good purpose He is bringing about. Eventually, we will find out. Live long enough and you will find this to be true. It is one of the silver linings in old age.

God knew us in advance (8:29)

This is another famous passage written by Paul: *God knew His people in advance, and He chose them to become like His Son, Jesus, so that he would be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. Having chosen them, He also called them to come to him; and having called them, He gave them right standing with himself. Finally, having given them right standing, He gave them His glory.* If you read a more strict translation, it'll say "all those that He *knew* He chose, and all He *chose* He also called, and all whom He *called*, He *sanctified*, and all of them He then *glorified*." There is an obvious chain of progression that follows these actions: Knowing, choosing, calling, sanctifying, and glorifying. The main idea here is that everyone who starts in this chain makes it to the end. No one is lost along the way. Who did God know? He knew everyone, intimately, and in perfect detail. After all, He created everybody. Who did He call? Again, He called everyone. Jesus said, "Come unto me, all of you who are heavy burdened, and I will give you rest." Isn't that everyone? The way this chain of events is worded proves that everyone will make it to the end, in glory. It is a process that all people go through at different times and in different ways. Notice this passage comes right after Paul reveals that all things work together for Good. Notice also that it is God

who is doing all the action in each chain of events. Salvation is His work for humanity. Faith is never mentioned, just as it has not been mentioned by Paul since Romans Five, and it will not be mentioned until Romans Ten. I don't mean to imply that faith is not important; it's very important and is a major theme of Paul's and that of the New Testament. The main theme for Paul is always what God has done for us, rather than how we respond, whether in faith or unbelief. God is always his main focus.

30. Never Separated from God's Love (Romans 8:31-39)

God is for us, not against us (8:31)

What shall we say about such wonderful things as these? In Romans Seven, Paul painted a rather miserable picture of how much we all struggle to do what is right and experience real freedom through knowing God. But then at the end of that chapter, he reveals the solution in Christ Jesus as the only one who can deliver us from this "body of death." So far, here in Romans Eight, he has spelled out that solution in many different ways: No condemnation, power in the life-giving Spirit, freedom from sin and death, life given to our mortal bodies, adopted as God's own children calling him Abba Father, eagerly waiting for a glorious future, God's Spirit groaning with and for us in prayer, all thing working together for good, and knowing God has chosen, called, and glorified us! That is an impressive and encouraging list, and it is not a complete one.

Now Paul begins his grand conclusion of this part of his letter, answering his own question of "What should we conclude about all these wonderful things?" *If God is for us, who can ever be against us!* God is always for people, all people, everyone, all humanity. He always has been and always will be. It is just who

God has to be because He is what love is in every way possible. God is never against us, never against anyone, even though sometimes He has to act in severity to accomplish His saving restoration of a human race that is rebellious and bent against Him. None of this stops Him from always acting in our best interest, no matter what it takes to do so. When God acts in judgment, condemnation, or some kind of discipline, it is always *for* us and never *against* us.

There are many people who believe God only works in favor of one group of people and against all others, and is determined to bring about their destruction as pure retaliation, totally void of any correction whatsoever. But this just can't be. Paul is talking *about* all humanity here, even though he's talking *to* people who are believers. He is encouraging them in particular by describing the high moral character and excellence of God as one who loves and saves His world, never giving up on it or abandoning anyone. When he tells them, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" he's not saying that all others are left out in some way. It just means he's writing to this particular group of believers in Rome and wants them to personalize this truth about who God is and how He works in the lives of all people, so they can know this and be encouraged by it. What should we say about such wonderful things? What is the answer to Paul's question? "If God is for us, who can be against us?" The answer is that nobody can! People can be against us, but not successfully when we have a wonderful, saving God on our side.

Paul provides more explanation. *Since God did not spare even His own son, but gave him up for all of us, won't He also give us everything else?* Yes, if God gives us His all, His own Son, himself, is there anything He won't give us? Is there anything He won't do? Will He ever quit, give up, or say, "Ya know, I'm tired of doing this saving thing. It's not working all that well with this human race that I created, and so I don't want to try to save

any more people; it's taking too long. It's too much work." No, instead, He will eventually give us everything.

Who will dare accuse us, whom God has chosen for His own? No one will be able to, because God has given us a right standing with Himself. Somebody in life will try to accuse us. Often, we accuse ourselves in our self-degradation, not fully realizing how complete and successful God's salvation really is. Once we're placed in a right relationship with God because of Christ and the cross, nobody can really accuse us of anything. Now, they can make accusations, but those words coming out of their mouths mean nothing because there is no truth in them in comparison to God's declarations about who we are in Christ. These are never true accusations, even when they come from us. Not really. Not ultimately.

Who then will condemn us? You can see the progression here. Who's going to condemn us if nobody can really accuse us? Paul's answer is, *No one! For Christ Jesus died for us, was raised to life for us, and is sitting in the place of honor at God's right hand, pleading for us!* Wow! we can't lose, folks. No matter what we think or how we feel, misguided and mistaken as we so often are in our limited human state, we're never going to lose, and God will never lose us to some awful fate. God's doing something that will never fail.

Overwhelming victory (8:35)

Here are Paul's final words of this closing part of his letter. This is his bottom line about who God is and how we will all benefit from it forever, not just maybe ... but with certainty. *Can anything ever separate us from Christ's love?* I don't think so, and neither does Paul. How about you? So, he gives us a list of

possible separating forces, and just in case we were wondering he asks this: Does it mean God no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted or hungry, destitute or endangered, or threatened with death? No, no, no! The trouble we all experience in this life can never mean that. His love doesn't end. He's just using such things to bring us closer to himself, simply because He loves us.

As scriptures say, "For your sake, God, we are killed every day and are being slaughtered like sheep." And that's kind of what they were going through in the early days of Christianity. Many were martyred, persecuted, and killed. But it didn't stop them; they just kept going, trusting God, knowing that no one could successfully accuse them of anything because God had made them right with Himself. Despite all these terrible things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loves us. I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, angels or demons, nor our fears of today or our worries about tomorrow – Not even other spiritual powers can separate us from God's love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below, indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord. We see God's love in this person, Jesus, his life, his death, his resurrection, his teaching, everything is in him. And once that's revealed to us and we experience it, we realize that nothing can separate us from God and His love, even if we don't believe it. Paul, just as he has done over the past four chapters of his letter, does not mention faith here either. It is not that our faith is not important, only that it does not play any determining role in our salvation by God. However, it plays a huge role in whether or not we experience the

salvation that we *already* possess. Paul will address this in Romans Ten, (found in “Who Is God and What Does He Want, Vol 2.”)

If we love God and trust Him, we will realize that nothing can separate us from His love. But what if we don't? It is still true that nothing can separate us from God, including our own rejection of Him and lack of belief. He is that big and good; nothing less. Many religious people have been indoctrinated into believing a horrible view of God. This came out in the Fourth and Fifth centuries, championed by Augustine. But prior to him, the earlier church believed God would eventually save His world and restore all humanity to a good and wonderful relationship with their Creator, forever. If such hell and eternal damnation were true, this would be a great opportunity for Paul to warn unbelievers and unrepentant sinners about an eternity in hell that awaits them. But he doesn't; He never does in this letter or any of his others. Why? Because he knew, better than anyone, the enormous love God has for His creation, always wanting to save it, never giving up (even into eternity itself). He knew God was always *for* humanity in every way and never *against* it. The same was true in Romans Two, when Paul laid out the *problem* we all have as humans, desperately in need of a savior. There, he never warned about hell and damnation or anything about God acting in any kind of retaliating manner.

When we get to Romans Nine (in Vol 2 of this commentary), he doesn't warn of damnation and hell there either, even though many read such things into it because of Paul's harsh tone and descriptions of God's severity when dealing with some people in the Old Testament writings. That's one of the harshest passages in all the Bible to deal with, as we shall see. It's going to be a challenge, but we will also discover God's grace and His overall intention of saving His world as an act of His wonderful grace.

So, this ends Romans Eight; what a grand conclusion of encouragement that brings us freedom and peace. Keep this

chapter handy because it can be a wonderful escape from all the craziness you see constantly in the world around you. And like I said previously, I think this chapter is certainly a candidate for being at the very heart of the New Testament. I can't think of anything that encapsulates and describes the love and grace of God better than Romans Eight. And this chapter is needed before we go on to Romans Nine, which is a challenge. But then Paul's letter turns positive again in Romans Ten and Eleven. In Nine through Eleven, Paul deals with the question of, "What about the Jews? Where and how do they fit in?" Then, in Romans Twelve, Paul begins the *Results* section of his letter. There, Paul gets very practical and tells his readers what the *result* should be (in Romans 12-16) after giving the *explanation* (Romans 4 -11) of the *solution* (Romans 3) to the *problem* (Romans 1-2) that we all have as humans made in God's very own image. Romans Twelve is really the first time in this letter where Paul tells us what to do. Up until this point (before Romans Twelve), he had been providing information to *prepare* us to learn how to make good decisions and live better lives in Christ.

One final thought: When I first taught Romans, I was about 32 years old. I was new at teaching because somebody at church decided I could teach. They wanted me to teach Romans, even though I had never taught any book of the Bible before. I guess they were desperate. Talk about getting thrown into the deep end of the pool! (That literally happened to me once as a kid. It took me many years to get over it.) So, I read through Romans several times, took a big breath, stepped out on faith, and gave it my best shot. However, I didn't have a clue what to do with Romans Nine, so I just taught Romans 1 through 8, closed the book, and said, "You're on your own from here on." I won't do that to you in Vol 2. So, we'll dig into Romans Nine (through Sixteen) in "Who is God and What Does He Want, Vol 2."

About The Common Sense Commentary Series

Conversational, optimistic, thought-provoking commentaries on five of Paul's New Testament letters.

- *The Peace of God from the God of Peace*
Paul's Letter to the Philippians
- *Life Hidden with Christ in God*
Paul's Letter to the Colossians
- *Who Is God and What Does He Want*
Paul's Letter to the Romans (Vol. 1 & 2)
- *The Mysterious Plan Revealed*
Paul's Letter to the Ephesians
- *Never Going Back!*
Paul's Letter to the Galatians

The Common Sense Commentary Series airs on Roku internet TV (the GAN network). and as YouTube Podcasts. All books and shows can be viewed at: www.CCliftonJones.com

About The Author

C Clifton Jones (Carl) is a retired Sr. Technical Writer living in Grass Valley, California. Prior to this, he was a Hardware/Software Engineer for thirty years. He has been married for fifty years to the only true love of his life. He has two adult children and one beautiful granddaughter, all of whom he loves more than life itself.

Carl earned a Bachelor of Science Degree in Electrical Engineering (1979) at California State University in Sacramento, California. He earned a California Community College Teaching Credential in 1984 and has taught technology classes at two California colleges. He also graduated from Dallas Theological Seminary with a Certificate of Graduate Studies in 2010. Carl has studied in the *Master's in History* program at American Public University in W. Virginia.

Carl is an Army veteran and served in Vietnam in 1970. He plays music publicly and in about a dozen assisted living centers. He is also the host of *Common Sense Commentary*, and co-host of *Conversations in Christ*, both of which air on radio, local TV, YouTube podcast, and Roku internet TV.