

Even though you may not come to the book of Romans with the author's scholarship, you can come with the same Spirit. The Holy Spirit of the living God wants to help us in our weakness. The Spirit won't duplicate in you (or me, the author's son) what Romans birthed in Bill Brownson. But perhaps each of us can hear in this book on Paul's letter some renewing and transforming gospel for our lives.

Dr. Jonathan Brownson, Pastor,
New Community Fourth Reformed Church, Holland, Michigan

The title of this book, "The Heart of the Christian Faith," describes beautifully Paul's epistle to the Romans. Dr. Brownson in his winsome and personal exploration finds the heart of the gospel beating in each verse of Paul's letter to the early Christians in Rome. In this teacher, we are shown the pulse of grace, the lifeblood of the church, the muscle that gives us life: Jesus Christ! If you are looking for a guide to explore the meaning and consequence of one of the most important Christian writings, you could do no better than Dr. Bill Brownson!

Rev. Trygve Johnson, Hinga-Boersma Dean of the Chapel,
Hope College, Holland, Michigan

Over the past 12 years, my life, and the life of our firm, CapTrust, has been touched in a deep way by Dr. Bill Brownson. Or should I say, the abiding presence of Christ within Bill. This book is a wonderful reflection of His presence that we all may enjoy.

Bruce H. Johnson, Founder/Consultant,
CapTrust, Holland, Michigan

The Heart of the Christian Faith
Reflections on Romans 1–8

Bill Brownson

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First Edition

I dedicate this book to the dear friends at Freedom Village who have shared in these Bible studies and encouraged me to put them in print.

Acknowledgments

For the bringing forth of this little book, I have many people to thank. What friends! Bruce Johnson, when he heard I was writing it, offered to pay the costs of publication—when he had never even read a word of it. Thanks, Bruce! Ruth Endean did endless typing and editing for me, liked the material, and encouraged me to make a book of it. For the way she did all this and seemed to enjoy it so much, I am very grateful.

My friend, Sir Miles, who has been an encourager to me in several things I've written and is one of my major book distributors. He liked this manuscript and wanted to see it published. Thanks, Sir!

And how can I ever be thankful enough to our sons, Jim and Jonathan, who were early readers of the text and wrote about it so lovingly?

And what about our friends at Words of Hope? President David Bast spent time editing this work. Sue Van Otteren, a helper to me in countless ways, did much to guide the work toward publication. Thanks, all of you faithful ones at Words of Hope!

I've presented much of this material in weekly Bible studies at Freedom Village in Holland, Michigan. For those who came and expressed appreciation, I offer my deep gratitude. You spurred me on!

For my wife, Helen, who has listened to this content read many times and has always been my chief encourager, I say, "Thank you, Sweetheart!"

If I knew a way to thank the apostle Paul for his magnificent letter to the Romans, I would surely do it. What a debt I (and the whole world) owe to him!

Yes, and thanks be to God, who inspired the apostle to write this letter and who guides us in our common search to understand and apply it! Praise and thanks to you, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit!

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Foreword

Here is a book to assist you in exploring Paul's letter to the Romans. Of course, there are many, many books on Paul's letter to the Romans—hundreds of commentaries, essays, meditations, sermons, and devotionals. So why one more? What is distinctive about this book in particular? I would suggest to you that there are three things that make this book distinctive and worth reading.

First, this book is the result of a long life of engagement with Romans. Bill Brownson started studying and memorizing the book of Romans while still in high school. He wrote his doctoral dissertation at Princeton Theological Seminary on Romans 8:26–27, exploring the entire history of the interpretation of these two critical verses. He has committed large chunks of the epistle to memory, publicly reciting the entire book with two of his friends. He has preached through its contents on multiple occasions both in local churches and in worldwide radio broadcasts on Words of Hope, the radio ministry of the Reformed Church in America. He has meditated on these texts in devotional engagement, analyzed them as a scholar, and proclaimed them as a preacher. In short, he has lived with Paul's letter to the Romans for most of his eighty-five years of life. When you read this book, you are reading the results of a lifelong engagement with the text.

Second, this book engages the text of Romans 1–8 with care and precision. Bill is entirely comfortable with in-depth study of the Greek text—the original language in which Paul's letter to the Romans is written, and he offers many insights that can only be derived through this kind of scholarly study. He has read widely in commentaries and secondary literature, and although this book doesn't always cite this material directly, anyone familiar with the literature will easily see the major figures of the Christian tradition who have influenced his reading. And he himself reads the text very closely at critical points, probing its nuances and themes with care and thoughtfulness. This is a book that flows from a lifetime of study.

But perhaps most important, this is a book that shows the sort of *difference* the book of Romans makes in terms of actual human experience. Over and over, Bill shares stories from his own life—ways in which Romans has changed him and those around him, and ways in which the presence and work of God, as narrated in the book of Romans, has manifested itself tangibly and concretely in his life and in the lives of those around him. In that sense, this is a book of practical interpretation, exploring the concrete way in which the book of Romans illumines and informs the specific shape and character of our lives.

This alone would be enough to commend Bill's book, but there is one more point that must be made. The book of Romans itself is centrally not about Paul, his mission, his personality, his labors, or his hopes and dreams; it is about *God*—God's righteousness and faithfulness and the marvelous things that God has done for us in Christ. And this book is centrally not about Bill's labors or life but about the God who is revealed to us in the pages of Romans. Bill Brownson reads Romans as a testament and witness to this great God. The book moves back and forth from doxology to experience and analysis, never forgetting the wonder of the gospel and the God who is its author. So read this book not first of all as an exploration of a human life (though it will give you that) or even as an exploration of the thought of a particular ancient biblical writer (though it will give you that too!). Instead, this book invites you to read Romans

again to reawaken in your own heart and life an exclamation of praise and thanksgiving to the God who has come to us in Jesus Christ. If it accomplishes that, it will fulfill Bill's deepest purpose in writing it.

James Brownson,
James and Jean Cook Professor of New Testament,
Western Theological Seminary

1
The Good News and Why We Need it
Romans 1

Welcome to this first chapter in our studies on Paul's letter to the Romans! I'm calling this little book *The Heart of the Christian Faith*. Now Jesus Christ himself is, of course, the heart of the faith, and the four Gospels that tell his story are clearly fundamental. But Paul was the great apostle to the wider Gentile world, then and now. Nowhere else in the Bible do we encounter a more brilliant exposition of what the gospel means and all it brings to those who believe—to Jews, to Gentiles, to all humankind.

So it is not surprising that this letter has had such profound effects in the lives of people all throughout history. Romans has again and again been a powerfully transforming message—awakening, life-giving, joy-bringing.

Think of the man we call St. Augustine, who lived in the fourth century. In his early life he was not at all saintly: a slave to passions, dissolute, consumed by sexual lust. But he had been brought up by a Christian mother, Monica. She was a praying woman and went one day, brokenhearted over her wayward son, to a faithful Christian leader, Bishop Ambrose. He heard her longings and pleas and then assured her, "Monica, it is impossible that a child of such tears would be lost."

One day Augustine, in the midst of his spiritual and moral struggles, was sitting in a garden and happened to hear a voice saying, "Take and read. Take and read." Nearby was a copy of the New Testament Scriptures. Thoughtfully, he opened it and read these words:

Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh. (Rom. 13:13–14)

Augustine was radically changed. He became a godly man, a teacher and preacher of the faith both in his time and for the ages. He wrote, among other works, the incomparable *Confessions*, the story of his spiritual pilgrimage. All Christian theologians, both Roman Catholic and Protestant, have learned from him and have been indebted to him ever since. You've probably heard one of the most famous prayers from his *Confessions*. "Lord, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."

Now fast-forward to the sixteenth century and a monk named Martin Luther. Luther longed for the assurance that he was accepted by God. He always sought to be holy and to beat down wandering desires, yet he felt at the same time self-condemned, never finding peace. In the midst of his struggles, he began to study and preach this letter of Paul to the Romans. He had always thought of God's righteousness as that which justly condemned him for his sins, but he learned in Romans that God's righteousness is God's way of making things right for us through Christ. His fears overcome, Luther entered into the joy of sins forgiven. He became a mighty witness in his time and the pioneer of a great spiritual awakening that we call the Protestant Reformation. He and his heritage have profoundly shaped the world ever since.

Think also of John Wesley, the founder of Methodism. Wesley was a university student, a member of the Holy Club, abounding in good works but lacking personal knowledge of Christ. He went across the Atlantic Ocean to be a missionary in the state of Georgia but returned to England discouraged, feeling his labors had been fruitless. One night, in a little meeting in Aldersgate Street, London, he heard a reading from Luther's *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* and wrote later that his heart had been "strangely warmed." He knew then that he was a man in Christ, totally forgiven. A tireless preacher afterward, Wesley was a key figure in the eighteenth-century revival in England and America known as the First Great Awakening. God used him as a world-changer.

Now one more Christian leader impacted by Romans—the great twentieth-century theologian Karl Barth. He lived through the heyday of early twentieth-century humanistic optimism ("every day in every way I'm getting better and better"). Theology on the European continent had become largely a matter of subjective feelings. Barth wrote his *Romerbrief*, a commentary on Romans that brought God's mighty action in Christ back to the forefront—a theology grounded in history and Christ-centered faith.

The story doesn't end there. I myself and many others I know have been powerfully affected by this letter. My whole doctoral dissertation was on just two verses from Romans 8! I am praying that this study of Romans will have significant effects on each of us. Let's prepare to be awakened, transformed, and renewed.

Paul Begins by Introducing Himself (Romans 1:1)

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

In introducing himself to the Christians of Rome, Paul calls himself a "servant" (literally, a "slave") of Jesus Christ. He's expressing a total belonging to Christ, the utmost allegiance. He's recognizing Jesus' ownership and absolute authority in his life. That's the essence of who Paul is: Christ's servant.

Now he relates what he is in the world to do: "called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel." Remember his questions to the risen Lord on the Damascus Road: "Who are you, Lord?" (Acts 9:5) and next, "What shall I do, Lord?" (Acts 22:10). Jesus told him "I am Jesus . . . I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness" (Acts 26:15–16). Paul is called. What he does is not by personal ambition or self-appointment. He is a man under orders, called *to* Christ and then sent *by* Christ. "Apostle" means "one sent forth." He is "set apart," removed from every other activity and involvement for the mission of spreading the gospel. Paul gives us his own reaction to this call: "I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the good news of God's grace" (Acts 20:24).

What Is the Gospel? (Romans 1:2–4)

—the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures

regarding his Son, who as to his earthly life was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord.

"Gospel" (*euangelion*) is "good news" of a public character—that is, it's the kind of news you could shout across the street. "The operation was a success!" "She gave birth—it's twins!" And this good news is "of God" (v. 1). It is both from God and about God. He is the source and content of it. All his authority is behind it. So Paul is urging us to listen!

Next, look at how Paul further describes it. The gospel was promised beforehand. When Paul states the basic gospel message in 1 Corinthians 15:3–4, he twice says it is "according to the Scriptures." This underlines its trustworthiness and continuity with the past. The Old Testament is seen as pointing forward to Christ. When you grasp what is in Romans, you also get a clearer sense of the central message and hope of the Old Testament.

So what is the gospel about? Paul says it is "concerning God's Son." Jesus is set forth here as the Son of the one, true, living God. There is a real community of nature, a shared identity between God and the incarnate Jesus.

Also, Jesus is "descended from David"—a key Old Testament concept. Jesus fulfills all that the prophets had envisioned the true King of God's people would be. This is a witness to Jesus' genuine humanity and his historical place in the human scene. But what declares him to be the Son of God with power is his rising from the dead. God's raising him from death shows that he is indeed the Son of God, that God has exalted him, made him Lord of all.

Paul's Purpose in Proclaiming the Gospel (Romans 1:5–14)

Through him we received grace and apostleship to call all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith for his name's sake. And you also are among those Gentiles who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.

To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be his holy people:

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

First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world. God, whom I serve in my spirit in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you in my prayers at all times; and I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you.

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

Gentiles.

I am obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish.

Don't you like to meet people who love their work? Paul is one of those. He says, "Although I am less than the least of all the Lord's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ" (Eph. 3:8). See how he feels about this great work. He feels unspeakably privileged and powerfully motivated. He also speaks of his sense of obligation (v. 14). There are two ways in which you become a debtor: by borrowing what you need to repay or by receiving something to be held in trust for others. Paul's is a sacred trust; this gospel has been delivered to him not just for his own benefit but also to be passed on to others.

And what does he hope to accomplish by sharing this good news everywhere? He desires to bring about what he calls "the obedience that comes from faith" (v. 5). He wants his hearers to obey God, to please God, and he knows this can only happen as they believe the good news of God's love in Christ. Jesus was asked the question in John 6:28, "What must we do to do the works God requires?" Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent" (v. 29).

The special emphasis in Christian obedience is the motivation behind it. It's not a slavish service out of fear but a glad, grateful obedience because of God's amazing love in Christ. Paul seeks obedience from happy, humble, thankful hearts. Isn't that the kind of obedience you would like to see from your children?

Then the final, crowning motivation—Paul does it all "for his name's sake" (v. 5). Paul's ultimate desire is for the name of Jesus to be everywhere known and worshiped.

The Gospel's Miraculous Power (Romans 1:16–17)

Now for the heart of this opening chapter:

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

The power of God's word is also expressed in Isaiah: 55:11: "my word that goes out from my mouth . . . will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it." The gospel not only *has* power—it *is* power. It is alive with the very life of God. It is a miracle message that accomplishes great things. We don't have to defend it. Charles Spurgeon said that trying to defend the gospel is like trying to defend a lion. You don't need to, the great preacher argued; "Just let him out of the cage." In other words, let the Bible do its mighty work. Send out the gospel and see what happens!

The gospel is a special kind of power—not a force to overwhelm and destroy but the power of God for salvation. Salvation means, on the one hand, rescue from danger and distress, but, on the other hand, it also means restoration, renewal, recovery of a lost fullness. God in

Christ rescues us from doom and renews us in Christ's image.

And it is a salvation freely given to everyone who believes, for all who trust in Jesus and his saving work. The Westminster Shorter Catechism describes faith in Jesus Christ as "Receiving and resting upon him alone for salvation as he is offered to us in the gospel." Here is shown God's righteousness, his way of making things right.

What a gospel! Is it any wonder that Paul says, "I am not ashamed of the gospel." Why not? It is the only reality worth boasting in. What are you proudest of? Your nation? Your favorite team? Your family? Your personal achievements? Never! "May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (Gal. 6:14).

We Have Rejected God (Romans 1:18–20)

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

Now we focus on the second half of this chapter. I'm calling this part of Romans 1 "a world without excuse," desperately in need of the good news because of the bad news of sin.

The question for all of us is, "What is wrong with the world?" Look at the menace of Iran, the slaughter in Syria, and the threats by North Korea. Look at American culture—abortion by the millions, sexual license, corruption in literature and films, child abuse, disintegrating marriages, affluence together with unhappiness.

Suppose you asked people today, "What is wrong with the world?" There would be many answers. Everyone would point to something. Remember the line from the cartoon character Pogo? "We have met the enemy, and he is us!" That's the deepest truth. The problem is within our hearts. As Jesus said, "For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and defile a person" (Mark 7:21–23).

Here is the root of our problem as Paul sees it: we have rejected God. We have suppressed the truth about God that fairly shouts to us in all creation. God's almighty power and divine nature are evident everywhere. The psalmist tells us that the heavens are telling the glory of God; the firmament is showing his handiwork (see Ps. 19). Yet multitudes scarcely give God a thought. They do not recognize him, honor him, or thank him (Rom. 1:21). That's the heart of the human problem. We don't want to acknowledge God. We would prefer that there were no God so that we could be our own lords, make our own rules, and make ourselves the center of everything. What has possessed us that we should block out all awareness of God in spite of overwhelming evidence? God says the evidence is so vast and our resistance so stupid and stubborn that we are simply without excuse (v. 20).

The Tragic Consequences (Romans 1:21–23)

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

The consequence of not acknowledging God is to become false and futile in our thinking. Our hearts become darkened. When we reject the truth about God, we become self-deceived and vulnerable to everything false. Many well-educated people with advanced degrees claim to be eminently wise, but they end up with convictions that are simply senseless. They make fools of themselves. Rejecting the greatest reality in the universe, they make no sense at all. Out of that comes a descent into idolatry. We are created to be worshipers, and when we refuse to honor and adore our Maker, we always find something else to worship—to desire. We exchange God's glory for images of famous persons, birds, beasts, reptiles. We will worship our nation, our class, our athletic teams, and ultimately ourselves.

There is a God-shaped space in every human heart. If we don't fill it with God, we'll cram something else in there. And all those false gods are not only deceivers but they are also toxic. When we give our hearts to them, they always let us down. Tim Keller in *Counterfeit Gods* lists some prime examples, such as money, sex, and power. These promise much but deliver little.

The Mystery of God's Wrath (Romans 1:24–32)

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

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

Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done. They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy. Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.

In the last half of the chapter, we meet the mystery of God's wrath. Paul begins the section by teaching that the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and the wickedness of those who suppress the truth—who refuse to recognize and honor the God who made everything.

What is God's wrath? Not what we usually think of—anger that is irrational, raging, hate-filled. God is not a fuming tyrant. His wrath against moral evil is never petty or spiteful. It is just and right. In fact, we must wonder if God could be good and loving at all if he didn't react angrily to evil, ugly things.

Jesus' response in Mark 3:1–5 illustrates this:

Another time Jesus went into the synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there. Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath. Jesus said to the man with the shriveled hand, “Stand up in front of everyone.”

Then Jesus asked them, “Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?” But they remained silent.

He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored.

Indignation against wickedness is an essential element in being good. If we don't react against heartless cruelty, against the terrible abuse of women and children, we are monsters ourselves, failing to love and care for the victims who are horribly abused.

Here's how the wrath of God operates in this world. As we choose to reject him and to go our own way, he gives us over to our own unruly desires. (What a judgment that is!) He lets us give free rein to our rebellion. And when that happens, the results are not pretty. It all leads to impurity, the degrading of our bodies, the tyranny of our lusts.

And when we won't acknowledge God, won't have him in our thoughts, God gives us over to a "depraved mind." Our moral judgment becomes so twisted that we can call the most monstrous evils acceptable behavior.

They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy. (Rom. 1:29–31)

This can ultimately lead to our not only doing these things but also applauding others when they practice them. Think of how frequently dishonesty and infidelity are almost esteemed because they happen to be practiced by the wealthy or famous.

Now we need to look at God's design in all of this. What about this matter of God's giving us up, giving us over to our God-ignoring ways? In a sense, he punishes us by turning us over to more of it. Why would he do that? We choose to walk down a sinful path, and he lets us go. But

we need to see that God does it with a loving goal. The "giving up" is not necessarily permanent or hopeless.

When we go down that wrong path, perhaps he'll let us see that the way of the transgressor is hard, that it is a bitter thing to forsake the living God. Maybe then we, like the prodigal son in Jesus' parable, will come to our senses and head back home.

One of the things this letter makes clear is that the gospel is hugely needed. We've all wandered. We're all without excuse. When that becomes real to us, we'll be ready to welcome the Savior who gave himself for us.

Study Questions

1. How does Paul describe himself in this chapter? Is this the way you think of Paul?
2. How do you understand "the gospel" as Paul presents it?
3. What did Paul hope to accomplish in visiting Rome?
4. Why was Paul not ashamed of the gospel? What tends to make people ashamed of the gospel?
5. What does it mean that sinful people by their wickedness "suppress the truth" about God? Where do you see this happening today?
6. What happens when we refuse to honor God and give thanks to God?
7. What does it mean that God "gives us up"? Is this necessarily permanent?
8. How do you understand God's wrath? What is your reaction to this?
9. What does it mean that we not only practice wickedness but even applaud others who do these things? How do you see this happening in our time?

2

The Peril of Passing Judgment
Romans 2

When We Are Tempted to Judge (Romans 2:1–11)

You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge another, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things. Now we know that God's judgment against those who do such things is based on truth. So when you, a mere human being, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God's judgment? Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?

But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed. God "will repay each person according to what they have done." To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life. But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger. There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile; but glory, honor and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For God does not show favoritism.

The congregation in Rome seems to have consisted both of Jewish and Gentile believers. The Jewish group, who had long known the laws and promises of God in the Old Testament Scriptures, may have thought that Paul's gloomy picture of human sin and divine judgment in chapter one was all about the Gentiles. They may have been agreeing with Paul about the idolatrous worship and pagan lifestyle of "Gentile dogs." They may have been saying heartily, "Preach it, brother! Thank God, I'm not like them!" Perhaps even some Gentile converts may have shared this attitude.

In case that's how some of the Roman believers were thinking, Paul now launches into a kind of "sting" operation. He states: "You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge another, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things" (v. 1).

In other words, you are inexcusable too! When you pronounce them guilty, charge them with evil, feel superior to them, why does that leave you without an excuse? Because you, the judging one, are doing exactly the same things! Jewish people may not practice each of the evils mentioned in chapter 1, but the seeds of them are in every human heart. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, the Russian author, points out in his autobiography that the line between good and evil does not pass between nations and groups but through every human heart.

Do you see Paul's strategy? He says that the unbelieving Gentiles are without excuse because they are suppressing the truth about God in the created order, not honoring and thanking

him. Then he cries to the Jewish and Gentile converts, "Wait a minute! You who are coming down on them and judging them are guilty of the same things."

He's saying to the ones who are judging, "You know that God's judgment is on those who do these things, and rightly so. But that makes you doubly culpable simply because you know better. Yet you live in much the same way. Do you imagine that when you condemn them and then do the same things yourself you can escape God's judgment? Certainly not!"

I was speaking with a friend recently who was describing how during a long drive back home from a trip, he became conscious of many people toward whom he had felt critical. When we do that, Paul argues, we are despising the riches of God's kindness and forbearance and patience toward us. We are acting like we don't need his mercy. His goodness and kindness is not meant to make us feel superior and judgmental but to lead us to repentance. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus calls to us,

"Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

"Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye. (Matt. 7:1-5)

Jesus says that when we pass judgment on others and condemn them, we set ourselves up for judgment. We are often eager to take the speck out of our neighbor's eye when we have a log, a veritable tree trunk, in our own eye. We all need to keep that in mind, don't we? When we are highly critical of others, we are often guilty of the very wrongs we condemn in them. It is often said, "It takes one to know one."

Why do we criticize the person who always tries to be the "life of the party"? Because we would often like to play that role ourselves. Why were the other disciples angry when James and John asked for the chief seats in Jesus' kingdom? Because they craved those seats. I heard someone say recently, "Whenever I point the finger at someone else, I have three fingers pointing back at me, and a thumb pointing up to God—the only One worthy to judge."

Paul is saying to his Jewish countrymen, "If you are sneering at the Gentiles, you are in real trouble because you are acting as they do." Think about the way we church people today tend to criticize the corruptions of present-day American culture but often show in ourselves the same shallowness, materialism, and even mounting divorce rates of the unbelievers around us.

When we criticize the moral failings of others, we show hypocrisy and invite judgment on ourselves. We show ourselves actually worse, condemning things in others that we ourselves do, adding hypocrisy to our guilt.

In all of this, because judgment does not usually fall on us right away, we tend to feel secure. But the long patience of the Lord doesn't mean that he approves of our judgmental spirit. It only shows that he is giving us time to repent of our critical ways. When we continue in this path we are headed for certain judgment; for God shows no partiality. You don't get special allowances because you are a Jew or because you were brought up in a Christian home. Paul says

that if you do nothing but good, you'll be rewarded. But if you are self-seeking and self-righteous, you will face a fearful judgment. We will be repaid according to our deeds. God plays no favorites, shows no partiality.

Jews and Gentiles (Romans 2:12–16)

All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law. For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous. (Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts sometimes accusing them and at other times even defending them.) This will take place on the day when God judges people's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares.

Paul refers to Gentiles and then to Jews when he writes, "All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law" (v. 12). The Jews have the law, the revelation of God and his will; the Gentiles do not, though they have the revelation given in the created order. If the Gentiles, without the law, keep on sinning they will perish. If the Jews, who have the law, keep on sinning they will be judged by the law. The vital point here is this: "It is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous" (v. 13).

It's not having the Bible in your house that makes the difference; it's not even reading it that matters. What does matter is whether you do what God wants, whether you obey what the Bible says. In this way of looking at it, the heathen Gentiles may be better off than some orthodox Jews. Without the Gentiles even realizing that they are doing God's will, they may be more kind, honest, and faithful in marriage than those who are well instructed. Maybe, speculates Paul, the Gentiles will be better off on judgment day. On that day, God will judge actions, words, motives, even secret thoughts. Imagine that!

Profession without Performance (Romans 2:17–24)

Now you, if you call yourself a Jew; if you rely on the law and boast in God; if you know his will and approve of what is superior because you are instructed by the law; if you are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of little children, because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth—you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? As it is written: "God's name is

blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you."

Here Paul pictures the attitudes of Jewish people who are very much like he used to be before Christ appeared to him. He called himself a Jew, relied on the law, boasted of his relationship with God. He was well instructed in the law, felt capable to instruct others. He thought he had the truth down pat and was a genuine law-keeper and law-teacher. But he didn't realize then that he was actually opposing and persecuting the very God he professed to believe in and claimed to worship.

Now Paul challenges other self-righteous believers with the same inconsistency. They teach others but do not do what they teach. Remember Jesus' words about the Pharisees? "They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them" (Matt. 23:4).

Some of these Jewish people in Rome apparently preached against stealing, adultery, and idolatry but engaged in these evils themselves! What could be more hypocritical and wicked than that? And when prominent present-day ministers live that sort of double life, what heartbreak it is! What terrible damage it brings to the cause of Christ! That's the greatest tragedy, when the shameful conduct of those who profess to know God, who even presume to speak his word, cause God's name to be blasphemed by unbelievers (v. 24).

I remember when a young person in my first congregation committed a terrible crime. After he was arrested, two newspaper pictures showed him carrying a Bible. When the members of our congregation went to work the next morning, some colleagues jeered at them, "What do you think of your Jesus now?" This is why James warns us: "Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly" (James 3:1). Why would that be? Because the more we know about these things and the more we profess them, the more guilty we are when we fail to keep them.

What about Outward Signs? (Romans 2:25–29)

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

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

Jewish males often prided themselves on being circumcised, the outward sign of a covenant relationship with God. Many of the early Jewish believers insisted that new Gentile believers had to be circumcised to become real Christians. Paul knew that mentality. He had grown up in it. But listen to his words in verse 25, "Circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you

break the law, you have become as though you had not been circumcised." The covenant sign is a good thing if a person obeys God's will. But if he or she keeps on breaking the law, what then? It's as though the circumcision had never happened, as though such persons were never even numbered among God's people!

On the contrary, if uncircumcised Gentiles obey the law, they are really the faithful ones who belong to God's people, as verse 28 indicates: "A person is not a Jew who is one only outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical." A person is not a real Jew in God's eyes if he bears only an outward sign. Circumcision of the flesh is not magical, not life-transforming. It is meant to symbolize something: an inward change of the heart, transformed by God's Spirit.

We can apply this in our own time to the sacrament of baptism. Baptism is a gift from God, the covenant sign of entry into God's kingdom. It symbolizes our cleansing from sin, our dying and rising again with Christ. But if a baptized person doesn't live the life of a disciple, doesn't show the fruits of faith and love, what can that person's baptism really mean? Paul is implying that it counts for nothing with God.

Do we see that it is a matter of the heart? Paul says that a real Jew is one inwardly, and real circumcision (or real baptism) means a working of God within us. And a real Christian, similarly, is not one who bears only the name and the sign but one whose heart has been changed, who is transformed within, who has begun to live differently.

All Need God's Grace (Chapters 1–2)

Now where does this bring us as we look back over chapters 1 and 2? Suppose that one of us, Jew or Gentile, would keep the whole law of God perfectly, would obey and honor him always? What would our situation be?

To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life . . . but glory, honor and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. (Rom. 2:7, 10)

"God does not show favoritism," says the apostle (Rom. 2:11). He is not unfair. He won't condemn people for not believing the Bible if they never had it. Those who patiently, consistently do only what is good receive eternal life. Those who obey all the time will inherit glory, honor, and peace, whoever they are, whether Jew or Gentile. The problem is, as Paul goes on to show in chapter 3, there are *no such people*. No one measures up. Set the high jump bar at one hundred feet at an Olympic track meet. Some may jump four feet; good ones, five; the best perhaps seven, but no one comes even close to one hundred. All fall short of the goal.

Who has for a whole lifetime loved God with total heart, mind, soul, and strength, or always loved neighbors as one's self? Only one person in the history of the world—Jesus of Nazareth. Hear how the New Testament writer describes him: "holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners" (Heb. 7:26). The Father said of him from heaven, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:17).

All the rest of us are deeply flawed people who in one way or another have turned to our

own way (Isa. 53:6). In ourselves, and by our own performance, not one of us has any hope of ever being accepted by a holy, righteous God.

Do you see what Paul is doing in these opening chapters? He is "clearing the decks" as it were. He is sweeping away all our proud pretensions to be faultless, to be acceptable. He's destroying the myth that we can earn God's favor and the illusion that we can make it on our own.

And why would he want to do that? Not to demean us, put us down, discourage us, destroy us, but rather to help us see our true condition, our real need, so that we will be ready to receive his grace, his undeserved gift of forgiveness and a new heart. As long as you think you are not a sinner, you will have no interest in hearing about a Savior. As long as you think your heart and your inner life are pure, you won't care about the promise of a new heart and a new life.

We all recognize this in our experience with doctors. You won't go to one if you think your health is fine—only when you know you are sick and need help. With some of us, we have to be really sick before we will go or even think about it. But when you recognize the truth about your spiritual condition, your lostness before God, when you acknowledge your failure and unworthiness, then a marvelous promise awaits you. Listen! God, through the saving work of his Son, Jesus, will forgive all your sins and treat you as though you were completely righteous. Imagine that! He will deal with you as though you had never sinned. And what is more, by the gift of his Holy Spirit, he will begin to transform you on the inside so that more and more you become like Jesus! That's what Paul means by grace: God's totally unmerited kindness and mercy. It comes to us freely through Jesus.

God wants us to face our own sin and need honestly so that we will stop passing judgment on others and instead receive his pardoning grace for ourselves.

Study Questions

1. What might some Jewish readers have concluded about chapter 1?
2. What makes us inexcusable when we pass judgment on others?
3. What does Paul mean when he says that God "shows no partiality"?
4. How might some Gentiles show themselves more righteous than some Jews who have the law?
5. Why does Paul contend that the name of God is "blasphemed among the Gentiles" because of the conduct of some Jewish people?
6. When is circumcision of value, and when is it not? What about baptism?
7. According to Paul, what kind of person is truly "a Jew"?

3
God's Way of Making Things Right
Romans 3

In the first part of chapter 3, Paul continues to show that both Jews and Gentiles are guilty and without excuse. The Jews have enjoyed great advantages through God's self-revealing in the Old Testament. They have known the true, living God—his love, his promises, and his will for them. But they have proved themselves unfaithful. They have not trusted or obeyed. So Paul, speaking for himself and all the Jews, declares that they are no better than the Gentiles.

What shall we conclude then? Do we have any advantage? Not at all! For we have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under the power of sin. (Rom. 3:9)

Then comes a long series of quotations from the Old Testament (Ps. 14:1–3; 53:1–3; Eccles. 7:20), offering a devastating description of our common sinfulness. Here's how it starts:

As it is written: "There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one." (Rom. 3:10–12)

Paul sums up the whole case in verses 19 and 20:

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

The law of God, though it is holy, just, and good, has no power to save us. It spells out what we should do, but brings with it no enabling to obey. It does slay all our excuses and shows us accountable to God for our disobedience. Listen: "Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law" (Rom. 3:20). The law simply underlines the truth that we are all sinners with no hope of saving ourselves. We're all, in that sense, in the same boat.

This message, as we've seen, is Paul's "clearing the decks," whereby he destroys all false hopes. The law does what John the Baptist did, preparing the way of the Lord, removing all obstacles to our receiving the grace he brings. Now, in the next six verses, we come to the heart of Paul's message in Romans, the essence of God's provision for us in all our sin and need.

God's Right-Making Revealed from Heaven (Romans 3:21)

But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify.

I love the way verse 21 begins, "But now . . ." After all that had been said about our sin and lostness comes a great "But now" of glad tidings. This good news is "apart from the law." It has nothing to do with commands and is not brought about by any actions on our part. It is a reality that has now been revealed, shown, disclosed. The curtain has been drawn back. It is God's way of making things right, revealed from heaven. Something altogether amazing and wonderful has happened in our human history. It has been attested and promised in the Old Testament Scriptures. It is the fulfillment of God's rich promises, of all Israel's hopes. It has happened through a series of events here on Planet Earth in the blameless life, the horrible death, and the glorious resurrection of our Lord Jesus. These, in the apostle's mind (and in the minds of all the New Testament writers), are the pivotal happenings in all of human history, both in what they reveal about God and his purpose and what they accomplish for us.

I used to own a book called *The 100 Greatest Events in Human History*. As I began to read it, I was surprised that the author included the crucifixion of Jesus but not his resurrection. You may ask, "Why is that such a fundamental error?" Without the latter, the crucifixion would be only heartbreaking sadness, a tragic miscarriage of justice, the end of all hope. Think of what the disciples were like after Jesus died: fearful and hopeless. It is the resurrection, the life and victory of the risen Jesus that sent them out to change the world. This alone makes Good Friday good and Easter the best news ever.

In God's book, these happenings stand out incomparably above all others. They do not feature human exploits. They have to do entirely with God, with what he has done for us and for our everlasting good. That's what is revealed from heaven.

God's Right-Making Received by Faith (Romans 3:22–23)

This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

This way of our becoming right with God comes to us through faith in Jesus Christ. Let's look for a bit at faith, as Paul describes it here. What does it mean to believe in Jesus? First, it involves a certain amount of knowledge. We need to know something about who Jesus is. He was a true human being, of course, but he was so much more. He was more than a noble example and a wise teacher. We need to realize that Jesus is the Son of God—God present in a human life, God's promised Messiah. We need to know, also, about his life among us, his dying for our sins, his resurrection, his exaltation to God's right hand, his reign over all things, his abiding presence with his people, his future return. That's why the good news has to be shared and taught.

But faith is more than knowledge alone. Faith involves agreement with, and acceptance of, these claims about Jesus. One night long ago, standing under a streetlight with a friend, I heard these words about Jesus, and faith leaped up in my heart. I knew this was true. By believing, we receive the news about Jesus as God's faithful witness to his Son. So people need to hear or read or learn the good news of Jesus before they can exercise faith. Paul writes in Romans 10:17, "Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard

through the word about Christ." We hear, and we believe with agreement. We say, "YES, I believe."

Here is another vital element of faith: personal trust. You not only believe that Jesus is the Savior, you also actually depend on him. You rely on him to save you. It's like sitting down in a chair, resting all your weight on it. You trust that it will hold you up. Here's how the Westminster Shorter Catechism puts it, "Faith in Jesus Christ is a saving grace by which we receive and rest upon Christ alone for salvation as he is offered to us in the gospel."

The last dimension of faith, very close to trust, is commitment. Jesus is not only Savior but also is Lord. Philippians 2:9–11 tells us that God exalted Jesus "to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." In faith, you surrender your body, your life, your all to Christ. You worship, obey, and follow him. You may say you believe in Jesus and that you trust him, but do you venture to commit yourself?

So all of that is involved in what Paul calls "faith in Jesus Christ": knowledge, agreement, trust, and commitment. You are leaving behind all dependence on yourself, on a righteousness based upon your own efforts and merits, to rely completely on Jesus and what he has done for you. You enter into a personal relationship with the living Lord. You receive and rest on him.

Let me tell you about a dear friend named Eleanor from the state of Georgia. I had been teaching in her church about the great affirmations of the Protestant Reformation: Scripture alone, grace alone, Christ alone, faith alone. I asked her, "What if your salvation depended half on your efforts and half on Christ by faith. Could you be sure? What about 90 to 10? What about 99 to 1?" We agreed; there is no assurance if any of it depends on us. When Christ said, "It is finished," everything needed for our salvation had been determined, dared, and done. At that moment, Eleanor believed. She told me later that she knew then for the first time that she had been born anew.

God's Right-Making an Undeserved Gift (Romans 3:24)

... and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

Paul goes on to say here in verse 24 that those who believe "are justified by his grace as a gift" (NRSV) or "justified freely by his grace." Let us look at that word "justified." This is the language of the courtroom where the judge determines guilt or innocence. We get an idea of this process from Proverbs 17:15, which says, "Acquitting the guilty and condemning the innocent—the LORD detests them both."

So the function of a just judge is to condemn the wicked as guilty and to acquit the righteous as justified. Now here is the amazing thing. God is the supremely just Judge. He is the One of whom Abraham asks, "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" (Gen. 18:25 NRSV). This God whose justice is unfailing still pronounces human beings like us to be just, innocent, acquitted, justified. It means, as is sometimes said of those who are acquitted in a courtroom, that they "walk," they "go free." And God does this freely, without pressure from

anyone—no intimidation, no bribe. It's purely by God's grace, his totally undeserved favor. Imagine it—that the God of the universe would say of you or me, who are each of us guilty, red-handed offenders with the evidence of creation against us and God's law and our own consciences testifying against us, "These are in the right, justified at the bar of justice. These are forever acquitted!" What a verdict!

God's Right-Making Accomplished in Jesus (Romans 3:25–26)

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

How, we wonder, could this possibly be? Here is the apostle's inspired answer in verses 24–25: "and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement." God's just acquittal of the guilty happens through the redemption, the deliverance, the "buying back," that is in Christ Jesus.

In the ancient world, redemption meant the freeing of a slave or a prisoner by the paying of a price. In his redeeming and saving work, Jesus "bought us back" from enslavement and condemnation. He did this when he was put forward by God as a sacrifice of atonement. Remember what Jesus said about his death in Mark 10:45? "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." He was a ransom, a redemption price, a sacrifice of atonement.

The word translated "sacrifice of atonement" literally means "mercy seat." The writer to the Hebrews reminds us that God's people have always had a place to seek God's mercy. In the Old Testament, it was the Holy of Holies—the inner sanctuary of the tabernacle and later the temple. The high priest entered there once a year to seek mercy for the people by applying the blood of the atoning sacrifice to the cover of the ark of the covenant—the mercy seat. What is the New Testament mercy seat? It is Jesus himself in his atoning sacrifice. The cross is the mercy seat where sin is put away once for all. Paul emphasizes this when he describes Christian faith as "faith in his blood"—trust in his dying, in the redeeming sacrifice he offered for us. Faith in Jesus and devotion to him always clusters around his cross. Listen to Paul's adoring words about him: "The Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:20).

Now the question is sharpened. "How can God be a perfectly just, holy judge, and yet declare sinful people to be justified?" Their sin is real and cries out for condemnation. "The wages of sin," Paul writes later, "is death" (Rom. 6:23). Yet, these transgressors will be allowed to live eternally. How so? Only if God can find a way to bear sin's penalty himself. That's what he does in the person of Jesus, the suffering Savior. God pronounces the penalty and then—wonder of wonders—he steps down from the judgment seat and bears the punishment, the stroke of judgment, himself. As Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians 5:19, "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ." In Jesus, God takes upon himself our curse, our death, our doom. Marvelous, unimaginable love of God!

Paul goes on to say that in this mighty act of saving love, God shows his righteousness in not punishing past sins. In his divine forbearance, he had once "passed over" those past sins, not bringing them to justice at the time. And now, in the death and rising of Jesus, he has done the great saving deed once for all for every one of his believing people—past, present, and future.

John tells us that he, Jesus, is the atoning sacrifice for our sins and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:2)! All this was done when he cried from the cross, "It is finished!" (John 19:30). So God shows himself in Jesus to be both a just God and a merciful Savior. He judges sin but bears the judgment himself so that he can freely justify us. What good news!

God's Right-Making Rules Out Boasting (Romans 3:27)

Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. Because of what law? The law that requires works? No, because of the law that requires faith.

Then what becomes of all our tendencies to boast, to pride ourselves on thinking we have made it on our own? It is all empty, meaningless, self-deceiving, and profoundly wrong. No one will ever earn forgiveness and life eternal. No one has anything to be proud of when it comes to salvation.

So, if we are saved through faith in Jesus Christ alone, what room is left for any boasting? Paul has the perfect answer for that in his letter to the Galatians, "May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (6:14). The hymn "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross" says it beautifully, powerfully:

When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss
And pour contempt on all my pride.

Among my favorite hymns, one that I hope is sung at my funeral, is "The Sands of Time Are Sinking." It's a song about Immanuel's land. This verse especially moves me:

The bride eyes not her garment but her dear Bridegroom's face—
I will not gaze at glory but on my King of grace,
Not at the crown he giveth but on his pierced hand:
The Lamb is all the glory in Immanuel's land.

The vast multitude around the throne in Revelation 5 sings of worthiness—"You are worthy." But none of that is about us. It is all about Jesus. "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain," and "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power" (vv. 11, 13). All glory belongs to God and his Son for "making things right" through the life, death, and rising of Jesus. And we still here in this world want to sing in the words of Revelation 1:5–6: "To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen."

Study Questions

1. What advantages does Paul say Jewish people have over Gentiles?
2. In what sense are Jews and Gentiles "in the same boat"?
3. What is affirmed repeatedly in what Paul quotes from the Old Testament in verses 10-18?
4. What does Paul conclude from all this in verses 19–20?
5. How does Paul understand "the righteousness of God"?
6. According to Paul, what brings a person into a right relationship with God? How have you responded to this question?
7. What does it mean that God "had passed over the sins previously committed"?
8. How can God be both just and at the same time "justify" sinful persons?
9. What does all this do about our tendency to be boastful?

4
Faith of Our Fathers
Romans 4

Abraham's Faith (Romans 4:1–5)

What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, discovered in this matter? If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God. What does Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.”

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

Having set forth the good news of justification by faith, Paul goes on to say that trusting God's promise has always been the revealed way of salvation for God's people. He wants to show that the truth he has been proclaiming is not a novelty. In fact, faith has always been the way of acceptance with God, as proven by the example of Abraham.

Abraham was a great servant of the Lord, called in Scripture "the friend of God." He received promises of worldwide scope. God said to him, "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Gen. 12:3). Heady stuff! But does Abraham as a result have grounds for boasting? Absolutely not. Jeremiah 9:23–24 tells us: "This is what the LORD says: 'Let not the wise boast of their wisdom or the strong boast of their strength or the rich boast of their riches, but let the one who boasts boast about this: that they have the understanding to know me, that I am the LORD, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight,' declares the LORD."

Abraham was no hero. He simply believed God, and it was reckoned to him—counted for him as righteousness. He was right with God simply because he trusted in what God had promised him.

Paul highlights here the difference between wages and a gift. Wages are pay for services rendered. If you work hard for forty hours during the week, you don't usually thank your employer for the paycheck you receive. He owes it to you for the work you have done. He has paid you the agreed amount for your services.

But when you simply trust in the God who freely accepts and justifies you through faith in Christ there is no question of wages. You haven't earned anything. It is all sheer gift. So boasting is laughably out of the question. Praise to God and glad gratitude—those are the appropriate responses. You are trusting in the one who justifies the ungodly. God's right-making is not a reward for goodness, for your merits or for your actions. It is God's great kindness to undeserving people, to sinners who really deserve judgment.

This is the central miracle of salvation. God does not declare righteous those who are good but those who are not good. Didn't Jesus say that? "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:32). Only those who know they are sick can be healed by the Great Physician. The question Paul raises in another context is appropriate, "What do you have

that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?" (1 Cor. 4:7). The old hymn "Our Blest Redeemer, Ere He Breathed" puts it well, "Every virtue we possess, and every victory won, and every thought of holiness, are His alone." So we sing with the psalmist in 115:1, "Not to us, O LORD, not to us but to your name be the glory, because of your love and faithfulness."

David's Faith (Romans 4:6–8)

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

*“Blessed are those
whose transgressions are forgiven,
whose sins are covered.
Blessed is the one
whose sin the Lord will never count against them.”*

Thus far Abraham. Next Paul appeals to the experience of another famed leader in the history of God's people, King David. You remember David's ugly, shameful sins—adultery and then murder in an attempt to cover it up. The courageous prophet, Nathan, told David a story. A rich man, when he had guests, didn't kill an animal from his own flocks but stole a poor man's only lamb to be slaughtered. When David condemned the man described who had taken away a poor man's only lamb, Nathan nailed him with the words, "You are the man!"

David repented of his evil-doing, and out of his repentance came two remarkable psalms—Psalm 51 and Psalm 32. Psalm 51 is a heartbroken personal confession of sin and an appeal for mercy and restoration. The other, Psalm 32, especially celebrates the marvelous forgiveness of God in words that Paul quotes in his letter.

Blessed is the one
whose transgressions are forgiven,
whose sins are covered.
Blessed is the one
whose sin the Lord does not count against them
and in whose spirit is no deceit. (Ps. 32:1–2)

Here is a beautiful picture of what God does with our sins. First, he forgives them; that is, he carries them away. He removes them from us as far as the east is from the west (Ps. 103:12). He buries them, as it were, in the depths of the seas (Mic. 7:19). (And as someone has said, he puts up a sign: "No Fishing.") Second, he covers them. He removes them from view. "Love covers over all wrongs" (Prov. 10:12). Instead of exposing our evils to view, God's atoning work shrouds them. Third, he doesn't count them against us. The sins are real; they are there, but he sees us as no longer guilty of them. For the sake of his Son, he treats us as though we had never sinned at all.

But central here, as in Psalm 51, is the place of confession. David says in Psalm 32:3–4, "When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer." Live yourself into that for a moment. David was utterly miserable, weighed down, withered, dried up within. But then comes the great change. "Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the LORD.' And you forgave the guilt of my sin" (Ps. 32:5).

All the wonder of God's forgiving grace waits for the honesty of confession. Confession literally means "speaking the same as" or "agreeing with." When we confess our sins we are saying, "You're right, Lord, about my sin. I agree."

Then, once David confessed, joy came sweeping over him. "Rejoice in the LORD and be glad, you righteous; sing, all you who are upright in heart!" (Ps. 32:11). David got back the joy he had pleaded for in Psalm 51:12: "Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me."

After we become believers, do we need to keep on confessing our sins? Yes! Why must we do that? Didn't Jesus die for all of them? Yes, he did. Aren't all of them covered by his sacrifice? Yes! Confession doesn't create forgiveness. Jesus did that by his saving work. But confession keeps on doing vital things for us. It relieves inner misery and brings us out of the shadows. Best of all, it restores our fellowship with God and renews our joy as it did with David. In writing about Jesus' foot-washing, John Calvin aptly says, "Christ always finds in us something to cleanse" (*Commentary by John Calvin on the Gospel According to John*, chapter 13, verse 8).

Abraham—Father of All the Faithful (Romans 4:16–22)

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

Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, "So shall your offspring be." Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah's womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. This is why "it was credited to him as righteousness."

In this section Paul returns to the story of Abraham to answer the question, "Will Gentiles be included in God's work of grace?" Verse 16 tells us, "Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring—not only to those who

are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham."

Paul deals here with how Gentile believers are related to Abraham. Jews, clearly, are his physical, racial descendants. But are they the only ones who can call him their ancestor? Not according to Paul. Abraham received the promise of God and believed it before he was circumcised, that is, before receiving the sign of the covenant. So Abraham was counted righteous before God before he had received the covenant sign. Thus, Paul concludes that Abraham is the ancestor of all who believe God's promise, whether circumcised or not. They all belong to the people of God.

In fact, the Jews, though circumcised, follow in Abraham's footsteps (that is, are truly like him) only when they follow the example of his faith. Every person in the world who believes God's promise of salvation in Christ is a covenant child, a son or daughter of faithful Abraham. That was God's promise to the patriarch—"I have made you a father of many nations" (Gen. 17:5).

Now, let's look more closely at Abraham's faith. He believed in "the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not" (v. 17). How do we know that Abraham believed that God could give life to the dead? We read this in Hebrews 11:17–19: "By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, 'It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.' Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death."

How did Abraham know that God can call into existence things that do not exist? Because of the generative power he was given to have a child in extreme old age. Sarah and he were incredibly aged. They had no power to produce a child until God called one forth.

Abraham had huge convictions about God. Picture this: he looked the situation over and weighed the possibilities. His own body was as good as dead—about one hundred years old. Next, he thought of Sarah, her lifelong barrenness and her age, well past child-bearing years. But with all of that, Abraham didn't weaken in faith, didn't refuse to trust God. No distrust made him waver. It seems incredible to us that he kept believing that Sarah would bear him a son. The basis for that confidence was one thing: simply and only God's promise. Because he had that promise his faith, instead of weakening and vanishing, grew. He became strong in his faith as he gave glory to God. This is the heart of it. Abraham was fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.

This is something supremely important to dwell on. Faith, as the Bible speaks of it, is vitally related to God's promises. Everything in the Bible is his revealed word, inspired and authoritative. As Paul says in 2 Timothy 3:16, all Scripture is "useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness." But not everything in the Bible produces faith with the assurance of what God will certainly do. Commandments don't do that. Moral lessons don't do that. Only God's promises can do that. You can "take that to the bank," as we say. You can do as Abraham and David did—bring the promises of God in faith and say, "Lord, here is your promise. I believe it. Now, do as you have said." So if you want to grow in your faith, focus especially on what God has committed himself to do. For example, claim 1 John 1:9–10 in praying for forgiveness and James 1:5 in asking for wisdom. And remember this amazing word in 2 Corinthians 1:20, "For no matter how many promises God has made, they are 'Yes' in

Christ."

Paul says that the kind of faith that trusts in God's promises gives glory to him. If you have friends, and you promise to do something for them, how would you feel if they said, "I don't believe you. I don't think you'll do that." You would be hurt and grieved. What have your friends done? In effect, they have called you a liar. But if they say, "You're my true friend. I know you'll come through for me," you are delighted. You are honored by that kind of trust. God is like that. He loves it, is honored by it when his children rely upon his promises. I have heard that David Livingstone once said of God, "He is a gentleman of the strictest honor. He always keeps his word."

And that kind of trust exhibited by Father Abraham "was credited to him as righteousness" (v. 22, quoting Gen. 15:6).

Just the Same Today (Romans 4:23–25)

The words "it was credited to him" were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.

Paul concludes his lesson from the life of Abraham by saying that those words spoken of Abraham—"it was credited to him"—are true for us as well. Our faith is of the same kind. Abraham believed in the God who gives life to the dead and calls into existence what did not exist. We believe the God who raised Jesus from the dead. In this case too the promise of God was involved. In Mark's Gospel, Jesus three times told the disciples that he would be rejected, killed, and would rise again (Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:32–34). When we believe in Jesus' resurrection, we are trusting in God's faithfulness to his promise. We are believing in God's creative, life-giving, miracle-working power and in the reliability of his promise-keeping.

Now in verse 25, the great closing verse of this grand chapter, Paul opens up the deepest meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection. Jesus was "delivered over to death." Who delivered him over? Judas had a part in betraying him. The crowd certainly had a part when they screamed for his blood. The high priest demanded his execution. Pilate handed him over to death—a man he knew was innocent. The soldiers did the grisly deed. But above all that and through all that, it was finally God who handed him over and did not spare his beloved Son. God so loved the world that he gave Jesus, delivered him up for us out of his amazing love. Here is fulfilled this mysterious word from Isaiah 53:6, "The LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all."

Jesus' death, Paul affirms, was "for our sins." Jesus had no sins of his own. He deserved nothing but glory and honor. He bore our sins. He stood in our place. He endured the judgment we deserve. As the writer to the Hebrews wrote, Jesus put away sin "by the sacrifice of himself" (Heb. 9:26).

But that wasn't the end. "Jesus was raised," continues Paul, "for our justification." His death was for our sins; his rising was for our salvation. That is why the resurrection is so absolutely central and vital for Christian faith. A dead Jesus cannot save anyone.

I once heard a preacher say, "Even if Jesus' bones were some day found, it wouldn't affect

my faith." That may sound spiritual, but it makes no sense. The resurrection was the sign that Jesus' death was more than a tragic martyrdom. It was the witness that Jesus' dying had accomplished God's saving purpose. We can be sure of forgiveness and eternal life only because Jesus is a risen, living, mighty Savior, not a dead figure of the past.

All those who will ever gather around God's throne will be there because Jesus both died and was raised, and because they have believed God's promise of salvation. Hallelujah!

Study Questions

1. How did Abraham come to be "justified"?
2. How are "wages" different from "gifts"?
3. Was Abraham justified by faith before he was circumcised or afterward? What significance does Paul see in this?
4. In what sense is Abraham the "ancestor" of all who believe in Jesus?
5. What does Paul see as especially noteworthy about Abraham's faith?
6. What is the connection between our faith and God's promises? What promises have especially fortified your faith?
7. In what ways is our faith like that of Father Abraham? How is it marvelously richer?

5

The Blessings of Justification by Faith
Romans 5

Since We Are Justified by Faith (Romans 5:1–4)

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.

Paul has declared that faith has always been the way to a right, saving relationship with God. He has also established the truth that we are justified, declared in the right, through faith in Jesus. In Romans 5 he shows the wonderful benefits that flow from being justified in this way.

The first great, overarching benefit of being justified is that we have "peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (v. 1). This may include, of course, what we call "peace of mind," a subjective feeling of contentment. But it embraces a great deal more. It means that the broken relationship we have experienced with God has been restored and that all distance and alienation because of our sin has been removed. We have friendly relations at last! If before we felt ourselves under God's frown, now we bask in his smile over us. The heart of Romans 5 is this amazing, heart-thrilling truth: God's undeserved love has, through Christ, transformed us from being God's enemies in rebellion against him into being at peace with him—as God's friends.

Since we now are right with God through Christ, several wonderful blessings are ours. For one, we have access to God's grace—that is, we enjoy the privilege of approaching him freely. Imagine what it is to be introduced into the presence of someone in a lofty position. Say you are given a personal interview with a king or a president or a pope through an influential friend. Or suppose you're a prisoner in a high-security prison, and through the influence of some highly respected official you get an interview with the governor of your state. That is access—what we could call improbable access.

For us, who are sinful people, to have an audience with the holy Lord of heaven and earth is more than improbable. It is truly astonishing. And this access is not just on rare occasions but whenever we may desire to come. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, the way to God's throne of grace is always open for us. Remember those words in Hebrews 4:16, "Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence." We are always welcome to draw near, confident that God will welcome us and listen to our prayers. That is marvelous!

And there is much more. Paul says we now exult or rejoice in the hope of God's glory (v. 2). We look forward in happy anticipation to having God's image in us fully restored, to beholding the glory of the Lord and being made fully like him. As God's beloved children, we know that a marvelous inheritance has been prepared for us. We are so sure of that grand future that we can celebrate it now, almost taste it already.

Further, believers can now even rejoice in their sufferings (v. 3). How is it possible, we wonder, to celebrate even in the worst things that befall us? Paul gives a threefold answer. First,

suffering produces perseverance, staying power, the mettle of a seasoned veteran. You never develop that without hard things to endure. You learn to hang in there without quitting, without giving up, without running away. Second, when you endure like that, you also build what Paul calls "character." You become in the depths a better, stronger, more mature person, one on whom others can depend. Yours is the precious, pure gold that remains after the refining fire. Third, out of that character-building crucible comes the miracle of hope. You see God's work in you, how he strengthens and sustains you in hard times, and that kindles fresh confidence that he will see you through and that you will make it to the finish line. Isn't that encouraging!

The Wonder of God's Love (Romans 5:5–8)

And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

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

Now Paul shows why this hope will never disappoint us, never let us down, and how those who have it will never be put to shame. The reason is that God's love has been poured out in our hearts. Imagine a small, closed room. Suddenly, someone pours out on the floor a vial of rare, expensive perfume. In seconds, the entire room is suffused with a heavenly fragrance. This, Paul suggests, is what the Holy Spirit brings about within us. He fills our hearts with a deep sense of confidence that we are loved by God. And when we are sure of God's love, we know in the depths of our lives that we have nothing to fear. It is truly well with our souls, and we have love to share with others.

Then in a moving passage (vv. 6–8), Paul shows how vast and amazing is this mighty love of God.

He loved us "when we were still powerless." We had no power within us to help or change ourselves. You've heard the saying, "God helps those who help themselves." That is not in the Bible! It is from Ben Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanac*. God, we are grateful to say, did not wait for us to start helping ourselves. He came to our aid and our rescue just at the right time, when we were helpless to help ourselves. Moreover, Christ died for the "ungodly"—the undeserving people who were not at all like him, who had badly marred the image of God in their lives, who were as loveless and ugly as he was beautiful and loving.

Then, Paul measures God's love by the best in human caring. Who among us would be willing to lay down their life for someone else? Would you? If a person was law-abiding, would you? Hardly. If he or she was a good person, a real friend, a family member, would you? Perhaps you would. But here is how surpassingly great God's love is: he demonstrated his love for us while we were yet sinners—actually in the process of rebelling against him, breaking his commands, hating his rule, deeply ungrateful.

Picture Jesus again on the cross. The soldiers have mocked and tortured him. The religious officials are jeering at him. Those who had screamed for his blood are looking on.

Everywhere there is cruel taunting. As he is enduring all that, he prays, "Father forgive them" (Luke 23:34). While they are putting him to death, he loves them and seeks their salvation. Instead of shouting and cursing their vileness, he prays blessing. How amazing!

And for the Father not to spare his beloved Son but to give him up to suffer unimaginably and die, all that we might receive mercy—that is by far the greatest miracle of love this world has ever seen.

Paul has one more word to describe what we are like: "enemies" (v. 10). The horrible scene on Golgotha shows in a shocking way human hostility toward God. When he came to us in a blameless human life, we treated him like this! But in the midst of that venomous hatred, God's love never wavered. This is the astonishing mercy of God—dying for his enemies, determining to save his murderers. That's how he shows to all the world how deeply and passionately he loves.

We believers sing about it:

What language shall I borrow
To thank thee, dearest friend,
For this, thy dying sorrow,
Thy pity without end?

~"O Sacred Head, Now Wounded," Bernard of Clairvaux

And can it be that I should gain
An interest in the Savior's blood?
Died he for me, who caused his pain?
For me, who him to death pursued?
Amazing love! How can it be
That thou, my God, shouldst die for me?

~"And Can it Be That I Should Gain," Charles Wesley

The love of God is greater far
than tongue or pen can ever tell.
It goes beyond the highest star;
And reaches to the lowest hell.

~"The Love of God," Frederick M. Lehman

How Much More . . . (Romans 5:9–10)

Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been

reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!

Now, having opened up the riches of God's love for us, Paul returns to the matter of our hope, our confidence in what God will yet do for us. He has already shown that his love will never disappoint us because the Spirit within us assures us of God's love. Now, he shows that God's mighty love in Jesus Christ guarantees to us a blessed future.

"How much more . . ." here is a ground of great assurance and solid confidence. "Since we have been justified by his blood" (that is, by his atoning sacrifice and his poured out life) much more surely then, we will be saved through him from the wrath of God.

We have seen already in Romans 1 how Paul speaks of God's wrath, his holy reaction against moral evil. There are some who would like to eliminate all mention of God's wrath in the Bible and speak only of his love. That sounds compassionate, but when people do that they tend to diminish the awesome wonder of God's love and reduce it to mere sentimentality. There is a real wrath of God impending over a sinful world. There is a judgment day ahead, a final separation coming between the saved ones and the lost. There is a heaven of God's presence and a hell of being willfully separated from him. Only Jesus Christ, by his sacrificial dying and rising, makes the difference.

Through Jesus' mighty saving work we are fully and freely justified by faith and will be saved through him. Salvation in the Bible has three tenses. We have been saved . . . we are being saved . . . we shall be saved forever. The miracle of God's salvation is that in Jesus the judgment of God upon us and our sin has already happened! The wrath of God against sin has been poured out—not on us but on his sinless Son. He, Jesus, took the terrible stroke in our place, for our sake. And because he did, all who trust in him are saved eternally from judgment and the wrath of God. No wonder the hosts of heaven sing, "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain" (Rev. 5:12). "You are worthy" (Rev. 5:9). Our certain hope for life in the Father's house rests on Jesus' sin-bearing sacrifice.

Verse 10 tells us, "While we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him [God] through the death of his Son." God reconciled us to himself. He bridged the gap and destroyed the enmity. He brought us back. Remember the prodigal son coming home with his speech all prepared? He thought he would kneel at his father's feet and beg to be a hired servant. But the father came running to meet him, embraced him, and threw a party for him. From the father's side, by the father's love, they were reconciled and brought together.

Paul says that having been reconciled by Jesus' death, we will most surely be saved by his life. How much more! For this one who died for us has conquered death and lives forever to be our advocate. We are united with him, the risen Lord. As the song "O Tell Me No More of This World's Vain Store" puts it, "This I do know, we two are so joined; He'll not be in heaven and leave me behind." Jesus said as much, didn't he? "Because I live, you also will live" (John 14:19).

We Boast through Christ (Romans 5:11)

Not only is this so, but we also boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

The final verse in this thrilling paragraph expresses what for believers is the highest boast, our greatest satisfaction and joy. We boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ. I recently read this verse, "Some boast of chariots, and some of horses; but we will boast of the name of the LORD our God" (Ps. 20:7 RSV). Here is our ultimate reason for boasting: we have received reconciliation with God through Christ. We have seen that justification is the language of the courtroom, the bar of justice where we are condemned or acquitted. Reconciliation is rather the language of the family and home where we are close together or distant. Father and son may be estranged, or wife and husband may be at odds with divorce looming. God works in both to humble and renew love. Resentments are given up, barriers go down. They move toward each other and are reconciled. What could be sweeter and more to celebrate than that!

God has done all that was needed and given it to us. Do you remember C. S. Lewis's book, *The Lion, the Witch and Wardrobe*? Young Edmund has become a traitor, a betrayer. The evil witch, therefore, demands his death, but Aslan, the loving lion (who is a picture of Jesus), is willing to die in his place. Edmund's life is forever changed as the lion conquers death. God welcomes all "Edmunds" to enter the blessedness and forgiving love of his family. Because of Jesus, God has thrown open the door of welcome and brought us home at last to be with him and with each other.

Adam and Christ (Romans 5:12–21)

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

To be sure, sin was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not charged against anyone's account where there is no law. Nevertheless, death reigned from the time of Adam to the time of Moses, even over those who did not sin by breaking a command, as did Adam, who is a pattern of the one to come.

But the gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many! Nor can the gift of God be compared with the result of one man's sin: The judgment followed one sin and brought condemnation, but the gift followed many trespasses and brought justification. For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ!

Consequently, just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people, so also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all people. For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.

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

Now Paul underscores the greatness of what Christ has done by comparing the first man, Adam, and the second, the true man, Jesus Christ. He contrasts the effects of Adam's sin on the one hand and of Jesus' perfect obedience and righteousness on the other.

Sin came into the world through one man, and thus death came through sin (v. 12). The judgment upon that trespass brought condemnation. Because of that, death exercised dominion over Adam's progeny and led to condemnation for us all. To sum it up, by one man's disobedience many were made sinners (v. 19). All were constituted as sinful people. David in Psalm 51:5 confirms this, "Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me."

We now look at one man's lifelong acts of righteousness: Jesus in his blameless life of obedience. Through his righteousness, the grace of God and the free gift of his grace abounded for the many. Further, those who receive this abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness now exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus. They reign—the ones who before were slaves. Thus, one man's righteous life leads to justification and life for all who believe in him. By one man's obeying, succeeding, and triumphing many are made righteous.

Then Paul speaks about the role of God's law (v. 20). When the law came in, trespasses were multiplied and sin increased. Not because the law wasn't holy, just, and good but because human evil and rebellion were so deep-seated, pervasive, and controlling. Sin took the good, God-given law and used it to stir up rebellion.

Now for the great, good news in Christ. Where sin had tragically increased, grace abounded all the more! The more sin that appeared, the more grace there was in Christ to overcome it.

Here is the end result of it all. Where sin had exercised dominion in death, now grace exercises dominion through God's justifying work, leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Thanks be to God! How vast and wonderful are the benefits, the blessings of being justified through simple trust in Jesus Christ. How rich, how blessed, how glad we are to belong forever to him! Amen and amen!

Study Questions

1. What does it mean to have "peace with God"? Is this the same as peace of mind?
2. How can we possibly "boast in our sufferings"?
3. Why does our Christian hope "not disappoint us"?
4. How is God's love for us vastly greater than the best in human love?
5. How does God's love in having Christ die for us give us assurance about the future?
6. What does Paul see as the greatest of all "boasting"?
7. Explain how sin came into the world and brought death as its result.
8. Explain how God's grace came to us in the one man Jesus and brought the free gift of righteousness.
9. Paul writes that once "death exercised dominion" over us. Now, he continues, we "exercise dominion in life" (see Rom. 5:17 NRSV). What has made the difference?

6
Crucified and Risen with Christ
Romans 6

In chapter 6, we move from the good news of God's forgiving our sins—justification by faith in Jesus—to another dimension of the gospel: how God through Christ, by the Spirit, delivers us from sin's power. This idea of sin's ruling power over us is fully understood, I believe, only in the biblical faith. We find it hinted at in Genesis 4:6–7: "Then the Lord said to Cain, 'Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it.'" Sin is described here as a quasi-personal power that seeks to capture and enslave us. We've seen the same idea in Romans 3:9 where Paul says that both Jews and Greeks are under the power of sin. Jesus too spoke of sin's enslaving force in John 8:31–36.

To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

They answered him, "We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?"

Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

When we keep on committing sin, Jesus is saying, we become more and more in bondage to it. The Jewish leaders bristled at this word from Jesus. They said, "We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone" (v. 33). They didn't see this at all about themselves. And think of how many contemporary Americans would object also. "Me, a slave? Impossible! I'm an American. This is the land of the free, the home of the brave!"

Most people admit that tobacco, alcohol, and drugs can take hold of people and make them addicts, but many don't realize that every kind of selfish or ungodly behavior inevitably works in the same way. Any evil we keep on committing gets a grip on us, gains enslaving power over us, and can often be harder to break free from than even drug addiction. Jesus says that only he and his truth can really set us free. "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:32). This has to do not only with personal sin but also with systemic evil. Sin's power is also corporate, entrenched in unjust systems.

The Facts We Need to Know (Romans 6:1–5)

What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of

the Father, we too may live a new life.

For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his.

Romans 6:1 asks us an arresting question, "What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?" This looks back to the previous chapter: "The law was brought in so that the trespass might increase. But where sin increased, grace increased all the more" (5:20). That leads to this perverse question, as though someone said mockingly, "I enjoy committing sins. God enjoys forgiving them. So the more I sin, the greater God's enjoyment! Really, the world is admirably arranged." Or to put it another way, "Since wherever sin abounds, grace abounds much more, why not keep sinning so that there will be more and more grace?" Paul rejects those sly questions forcefully in the first sentence of verse 2, "By no means!" (or in the King James translation, "God forbid!"). To agree with those mocking queries would be a perversion of God's loving purpose.

The last part of verse 2 through verse 4 yields some marvelous facts we need to know, realities we need to grasp and appropriate. The first one, central to all the others, is this stupendous truth: We who believe have been united with our living Lord, Jesus Christ. We have been joined to him in a living bond—"baptized into Christ" (v. 3). Here's how that comes about: "For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink" (1 Cor. 12:13). The church, the fellowship of believers, is described here as a body, the body of Christ. All of us, as individual believers, are joined to that one body. We become members through faith in Jesus and baptism in his name. The one who brings about this miraculous unifying work is the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the one who joins us to Christ and to all other believers in this one living organism.

Think of it this way: Christ is like a dynamo of electric power. We, apart from him, have no light or power of our own. The Holy Spirit is the one who makes the connection so that the power of the risen Jesus is communicated to us. Or think of Jesus as the reservoir of living water. We are the parched and thirsty ones, craving refreshment. The Holy Spirit is like an aqueduct who brings the living water of Christ into our dry and barren lives. This idea of our vital union with Christ is so central in the Christian faith that the phrase "in Christ" occurs over and over in the New Testament. Jesus not only died and rose again so that we could be forgiven, he also conquered death, ascended, and sent the Holy Spirit so that he might personally live within each of us and that we might together live in him bearing rich fruit. Isn't that amazing and wonderful? Remember the chorus: "Christ liveth in me, Christ liveth in me. O, what a salvation this—that Christ liveth in me!" ("Christ Liveth in Me," Daniel W. Whittle).

Now let us see how Paul builds on this to answer the sinister question, "Should we continue in sin that grace may abound?" Absolutely not! That's unthinkable! "How can we, who died to sin, keep on living in it?" Here's a second part of the picture. Being joined to Christ means being joined to him in his death. In his dying, we somehow died. Remember the song, "Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?" In at least two senses, we were. First, our sins were laid on him; our transgressions caused him to die. But we were also there in this sense: in God's eye, all of us who believe in Jesus were crucified with him. Our old, sinful self was put to death there. That's a fact we need to know. Further, when we were baptized, we were baptized

into his death. We share in it with him. More, we have been buried with him. And, most gloriously, when he rose from the dead, we rose with him. So in his dying, burial, and resurrection we were there. In the purpose of God, we were identified with Jesus. Those are the facts we need to know. We are a people joined to Christ.

The Faith We Need to Exercise (Romans 6:6–11)

For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin—because anyone who has died has been set free from sin.

Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God.

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

Here is God's purpose in our being joined to Christ in his death—"that we might no longer be slaves to sin" (v. 6). Isn't that remarkable? God sees us as being gripped and controlled by sin's power. He joins us to Christ in his dying and rising so that we can be freed from this bondage. Grace upon grace! Christ dies for our sins so that we can be free from sin's guilt. God joins us to Christ in his death so that we can be saved from sin's power.

But that's not all. Just as Christ rose from the dead, God's purpose is that we may be risen ones and may walk in newness of life. Imagine it: we are raised up with Christ to live in a new way. Those are the great truths we need to believe. Verse 11 is a key verse here, "In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus." This is to be our new self-image. All of us have come to see ourselves in some way. We all have an inward picture of ourselves, some understanding of who we are. It may be largely positive or negative. It may be cheering or shaming and saddening. Whatever our self-image is will affect profoundly the way we live.

As you see it, what are the factors that contribute to a person's self-image? To make it more personal and practical, what has most shaped your self-image? Aren't they the experiences you've had, the way others have treated you, whether your parents have loved or rejected you, affirmed you or put you down?

We probably have picked up our self-image most from what significant people have said to or about us. You may have heard something like this from the time you were very young, "Isn't she an adorable little girl?" Or maybe it was different, "She's rather plain, not the beauty her sister is." Whatever they said, you took it in, probably took it to heart. In matters of your mental abilities, you may have been told that you were "bright" or you were "slow." From then on, you kept that in mind about your intellectual powers. Or maybe they spoke about your character. Someone important said about you, "What a fine boy he is!" Or maybe they said, "That kid is a liar, a compulsive liar." That either built up or tore down your feelings of self-worth. Maybe they said, "He or she will be a great success." Or sadly, "They'll never amount to anything!" That may

have shaped your view about your future more than you would ever imagine.

But happily, those negative evaluations can sometimes be overcome. You believed as a young woman you were unattractive, but some man came along who thought you were lovely and told you so. You began to feel differently about your appearance. "Maybe I'm not so bad-looking after all!" Or when you thought of yourself as a poor student, a teacher once praised you for having a keen, alert mind. You had felt worthless, but someone saw you as a person of great value. You thought your future was a dead end until a significant person told you what great potential you had. You began to see yourself differently, and that began to change the way you lived. It's wonderful when that happens, isn't it? Think about the power words have for good or for ill, to encourage or depress.

Here's the vital lesson from all of this. Take this to heart. Let your self-image be shaped by the people who genuinely love you. They are the ones who see the real you; others simply do not. Now, bring this over to the one who loves you supremely. We heard this song recently in our church, "You say I'm clean; you say I'm forgiven. You say I'm free. Let your words wash over me." That's what God says about you in his word in verse 11: "Count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus." Take that as your self-image and live accordingly. This is who you really are in Christ; you are a person who has died to sin's ruling power. It doesn't hold you in its grip any more. You're a free man, a free woman.

And on the other side, see yourself this way, "I am now alive to God. I'm in relationship with him. I am his servant, his beloved child." Then, with that awareness of who you are, get up each morning, go out into God's world and live that way! Learn to see yourself as God sees you, getting that focus again and again, and that will be a huge aid to your happy, godly living. This is something wonderful, friends. Take hold of it!

The Fight We Need to Win (Romans 6:12–14)

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

Now, we've seen the facts we need to know about our union with Christ and the faith that we need to exercise. Next comes the fight, the struggle involved, the needed action. The apostle says, "Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires" (v. 12). That is, "Don't let sin have dominion over you." It will still try to. And the devil will still tempt you sorely, cleverly. But you don't need to give in any more. You may, but you can also now resist evil. As a man or woman in Christ, you can now say, "No" to those old, besetting sins—that impatience, that pride, those mean words. You need to stay alert and active in this battle.

Paul goes on to tell us not to yield our members ("any part of yourself," v. 13) to sin's power. "Members" are not only arms and legs but every part of your being. Don't yield your eyes to watching what is sordid and filthy. Don't give your ears to listen to gossip or slander. Don't give your sexuality to what is immoral and shameful. Don't give your time, energy, and money to petty,

worthless things.

On the contrary, here's the great emphasis: present yourself to God and every part of who you are to be his instruments. As Romans 12:1 tells us, "I urge you . . . in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God." That's something to be done not just once but again and again, like a daily burnt offering. And here is God's great promise as you do, sin will not have dominion over you. "Sin shall no longer be your master" (v. 14). You are in Christ; sin cannot crack the whip over you anymore. You are not under the law, condemned. You are under grace, forgiven in Christ. You are on the victory side! Don't forget that. Hold on to that!

The Future We Need to Choose (Romans 6:15–23)

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

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

Now, in the final verses of this chapter, Paul talks about the future we need to choose. He sketches the results of two very different choices. When you yield yourself and your powers to sin, you will become more and more sin's slave. Think, for example, about the pattern of telling lies. If you start to lie, you often have to lie pretty soon again to cover it up. That leads to another and another until you're so enmeshed in a web of deceit that you cannot get free.

But when you keep on yielding yourself and your powers to God, you increasingly become his loving bondservant. His reign over your life will grow, setting you free more and more from sin's entanglement, and this results in great joy. I love the words of this magnificent hymn verse, "My chains fell off; my heart was free. I rose, went forth and followed Thee."

These choices lead to two very different futures. If you keep on serving sin, yielding yourself to what you know is wrong, you will finally receive the grim wages it pays: death—physical death, spiritual death, death to the utmost. That is "the broad way" that Jesus spoke about in Matthew 7:13, the way that leads to destruction.

But when you keep on yielding yourself in worship and surrender to the Lord, you are on the way that leads to life eternal, to blessedness beyond imagining. That will not be a wage that

you earn but the unspeakable gift of God's love. "The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (v. 23).

So you see, God is setting before us in his word two ways: the way of death and the way of life; the way of sin and the way of glad service to God. Remember Joshua's challenge at the end of the book that bears his name. "Choose you this day whom you will serve!" Let's answer with him today as Joshua did: "As for me and my household, we will serve the LORD!" (Josh. 24:15).

Study Questions

1. Should we go on sinning so that God's grace may abound in forgiving? If not, why not?
2. In what sense have we "died to sin"?
3. How can we now "walk in newness of life"?
4. How has your self-image been formed? How could living by verse 11 change it?
5. We have died and been raised with Christ. Does that mean we cannot sin any longer? What does it mean to you?
6. Does this dying and rising with Christ mean then that we don't *have to* go on sinning? What's the new alternative?
7. If we keep on yielding ourselves to sin, what happens to us?
8. If we keep yielding ourselves to God, what will the result be? What life-choice are you making?

7
Our Inner Struggle
Romans 7

Freed from the Law's Condemnation (Romans 7:1–6)

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

So, my brothers and sisters, you also died to the law through the body of Christ, that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit for God. For when we were in the realm of the flesh, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in us, so that we bore fruit for death. But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code.

Romans 7 opens with an explanation of how we are freed from the condemning power of the law. How is that accomplished? The law is binding on a person only during that person's lifetime, as Paul illustrates from marriage. Now we have died to the condemning power of the law because we have died with Christ, as we noted in chapter 6. It is almost as though we were bound to the law but then died with Christ in order to be joined instead to the risen Christ, so that out of this spiritual union we may bring forth fruit for God (v. 4). In other words, our union with Jesus in his death and resurrection is meant to be life-giving and fruitful, both in Christian character and in bringing others to the Lord.

The Law Is Good but Shows Sin's Radical Evil (Romans 7:7–13)

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

Did that which is good, then, become death to me? By no means!

Nevertheless, in order that sin might be recognized as sin, it used what is good to bring about my death, so that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful.

Next, Paul looks at the relationship between God's law and our sinfulness. Paul wants to make it clear that there is no fault with God's law. Far from it! The law has come from God and is holy, just, and good. As the Scriptures show again and again, the law is God's gift for our well-being, not just an arbitrary rule or sheer authority. Think of how the psalmist says, "Oh, how I love your law!" (Ps. 119:97).

I deeply feel that way. When I think of the Ten Commandments one by one, I sense their great value as pointers to the good life, the happy life. You honor God. You observe his day. You obey your parents. You never harm others. You keep your marriage vows. You never steal or lie. You are content with what you have. How much better life is when we observe these commandments! What a mess it is if we don't! I cherish what Jesus called the "greatest commandment" among all the 612 recorded in the Old Testament law. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart.' . . . And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (Matt. 22:37–39).

Verse 7 shows us that the law gives us an awareness of sin. Think about this in connection with chapters 2 and 3 of Genesis—God's command and our disobedience. Suppose God had never given the command against eating from this one tree. Would Adam and Eve have done anything wrong by eating it? No. The law, the command, brought the possibility of either obedience or sin in our relationship with God. Paul illustrates this point by using the tenth commandment. Before this command, if he had wanted or craved what belonged to someone else, would it have mattered? If there was no command against coveting, there would be no disobedience in it.

Now notice verse 8. Sin as a kind of power, almost personified, takes the good command of God and uses it to stir up evil within us. Think again of our first parents, Adam and Eve. The serpent, the tempter, takes the good and wise command of God and tries to use it for his evil purposes. "Did God really say . . . ?" (Gen. 3:1). The serpent questions the command, impugns God's motives in issuing it, and then flat out contradicts God's warning. In effect, he calls God a liar. Adam and Eve succumb, and thus sin enters the world.

Ever since then all of us struggle with our sinful nature. So when the law comes to us, something within us wants to disobey. We see it early in little children, don't we? Tell them not to step across a line, and what happens? After a while, they steal a glance at you and then take that first step. That's a hint about sin. Think, for example, of how many people take God's name in vain and speak profanely. Why, we wonder, do they do that? There's no imaginable personal gain, is there? They aren't thereby any better, wiser, or richer. They do it out of habit, perhaps, but at the root don't they use profanity because they know it is forbidden and to show that they don't have to obey? Sin takes the command and stirs up within us all kinds of disobedience. It takes the life-giving word from God, meant for our good always, and makes it the occasion of something which leads us away from God to death. That's how sin is shown to be sinful (v. 13); as Paul puts it, "utterly sinful." And, as we've seen, sin is ultimately anti-God, resisting, throwing off God's authority and saying "NO!" to his revealed will.

What's behind the present attitude in our culture against the Ten Commandments? No one is urging that they be given legal status. But some say, "Don't let them be posted in public places—please not where they are now—in the Supreme Court!" This is a sharply anti-God frame of mind. In much of American culture, people resist any authority for behavior beyond present-day public opinion. If most people think a way of acting is acceptable, there is pressure to reject any higher authority that expresses a different view. That's why such people want prayer or any mention of God or any posting of commandments banished from our schools. "We," they say in effect, "will decide what is right and wrong. Don't give us this God stuff!"

The supreme expression of this anti-God attitude is in the crucifixion of Jesus. As John writes in his gospel, "He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him" (John 1:11). When God came to us in person, in Jesus, what did we do? How did we treat him? We rejected him, maligned him, mocked him, flogged him, and nailed him to a cross. That's how ugly and God-rejecting sin is.

Our Inner Dividedness (Romans 7:14–24)

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

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

In verses 14–24, Paul shows how big a problem sin continues to be even in the lives of genuinely religious people. The big question here is, who is speaking? Is this an unconverted person being described in these verses or a true Christian? Some verses sound like the former: "I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. . . . For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do . . . the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. . . . I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me."

But on the other side, some parts of this text seem to speak of the experience of the genuine Christian. "For in my inner being I delight in God's law." What unconverted person would say that? Or look ahead to verse 25, "I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law." This all sounds like a conflict in someone genuinely touched by God but still struggling with indwelling sin.

Do those of us who have been following Jesus for years ever experience this kind of inner dividedness? Definitely. In my college years, I knew how vital it was for my Christian life to keep

up a daily practice of Bible study and prayer. Yet again and again, I neglected it. I grieved at that, confessed it, started again, and again failed. There are real believers who get involved in some kind of addiction. They hate it, are ashamed of it, promise to stop it but keep coming back to it. They come to realize what a powerful grip sin can gain on us.

When we experience this inner dividedness and defeat, it can sometimes almost drive us to despair. We are ready to cry out as the apostle did, "What a wretched man [or woman] I am!" (v. 24). Or we identify with Isaiah's lament, "Woe is me! . . . For I am a man of unclean lips" (Isa. 6:5). In effect, we're saying, "I can't get myself out of this mess! Who will deliver me from this torment, this body of death?"

From my own struggles and those of many I know, I believe that Paul's agonizing description here comes out of the experience of a true follower of Christ, longing and struggling to be delivered fully from sin's power. It perhaps illustrates a humbling reality—the closer we get to God, the more aware we become of our continuing sinfulness. The nearer we come to the light, the more we see how soiled and bound we are and how helpless to cleanse and free ourselves.

Our Hope of Rescue (Romans 7:25)

The last verse of this chapter, verse 25, gives us hope:

Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in my sinful nature a slave to the law of sin.

This verse supports the view we have been taking that a true Christian is speaking in chapter 7. Paul cries out in answer to his own question, "Who can deliver me?" with the triumphant answer, "Thanks be to God!" He knows that God can and will deliver him. The answer, the rescue in which he is confident, is "through Jesus Christ our Lord." He is the Rescuer, the Savior from sin—from both its guilt and its power.

The last part of verse 25 sums up this conflict within God's people. "I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in my sinful nature a slave to the law of sin." I am divided; part of me bound to God's good law and part a slave to the law (or rule) of sin. That is the way things stand as we prepare for the thrilling message of chapter 8, which tells us the full story of deliverance and how it happens. The key there, as we shall see, is the Holy Spirit.

Study Questions

1. When a woman's husband dies, in what sense is she set free from the law?
2. We have died to the law through Christ's death. To whom do we now belong?
3. What is God's purpose for this new union?
4. God's law is good and holy. How does the power of sin try to use the law against us? Have you experienced this?
5. What does Paul mean when he says, "I do not understand my own actions"? Can you identify with these words?
6. Do you think real Christians have these inner struggles? Explain your answer. How does this show itself in your life?
7. Paul holds out a hope of deliverance toward the end of the chapter. What is the hope?

8 Led by the Spirit *Romans 8:1–17*

The eighth chapter of Romans is one of the most pivotal, profound, and inspiring chapters in the entire Bible. For a number of years, this marvelous passage has been in my morning thoughts and prayers day after day.

As we move from chapter 7, with its arduous inner struggle, into chapter 8, we sense a sudden gust of fresh air, a wind both refreshing and exciting. We discover what an enormous difference the Holy Spirit makes! The key word in this chapter is the Greek word *pneuma*, which means "spirit." It occurs five times in chapters 1–7 and eight times in chapters 9–16; that is, thirteen times in those fifteen chapters. But here in chapter 8, *pneuma* occurs over twenty times! This is a dramatic turning point in Paul's letter.

The word *pneuma* can mean "breath, wind, or spirit," but in almost every instance in chapter 8 it means not only "spirit" but God's Spirit, the Holy Spirit of God. It is important to remember when we think about the Holy Spirit that we are not considering a mere force, fluid, or influence (like "the Christmas spirit") but the living God. So it never seems appropriate to refer to the Holy Spirit as "it." The Spirit is personal, just as personal as the Father and the Son, and worthy along with them of our highest worship.

The Spirit Liberates Us (Romans 8:1–7)

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

Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace. The mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so.

The chapter begins with this gladdening word: "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (v. 1). NO CONDEMNATION! What overwhelmingly good news that is! The world is full of condemnation for us. Voices from everywhere are crying, "You're not good enough, not smart enough, not talented enough." It often seems like the hand that wrote on the wall of Belshazzar's palace in the book of Daniel is writing about us: "You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting" (Dan. 5:27). That is, "you don't cut it; you don't measure up."

Remember the tension of chapter 7? All of us are prone at times to condemn ourselves. We get into self-reproach, blame ourselves, and feel guilty. But here we learn what God says

about us and all who trust in Jesus. There is no condemnation against us, no charges pending, no looming threat of judgment. That remains true even when we go through those agonizing times we looked at in Romans 7 when we experience struggles against sin. We are, as we've already seen—in spite of all those feelings—fully forgiven and freely justified through faith in Jesus. There is no condemnation, now or ever, for all who trust in Jesus.

How, we wonder, can that possibly be? In verse 3, Paul reminds us that our sin has already been condemned: "For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in the flesh." God has done something marvelous—something the law couldn't do because of our sinful nature. God sent his beloved Son, Jesus. He sent him as a real human ("in the likeness of sinful flesh," but with no sin of his own) to deal with our sin problem. On the cross, where Jesus died for us, God condemned our sin in the person of his own Son. The judgment was carried out, the stroke fell, the storm passed over. But all of that happened not to you and me but to the sinless Jesus. Now, because we belong to Jesus, we are seen by God as blameless, accepted, justified, forgiven freely and forever. Isn't that amazing and wonderful?

But there is more! "Through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death" (v. 2). The rule (or law) of the Holy Spirit, who brings life in Christ Jesus, frees us also from the remaining rule of sin in our lives. Now we can be freed not only from guilt and condemnation but also from bondage to sin. What does God do in us to free us? The Holy Spirit works in us so that we sinners, we lawbreakers, begin to do in our everyday living what God requires. We begin to have power to love God and others, to be what we are meant to be and to do what we are called do. We do that by what Paul calls walking (living) "according to the Spirit" (v. 4).

Verse 5 tells us, "For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit" (ESV). We still have in us the bent toward sinning, the drive to go our own way and to follow our own desires. But now we have also the Holy Spirit bringing to mind God's desires and goals for us. If we continue to focus our minds and hearts on going our own way, that's a dead end; we're on the path toward death. But if we focus mind and heart on what the Spirit desires for us, we find a road to life and peace.

The Spirit Lives Within Us (Romans 8:8–11)

Those who are in the realm of the flesh cannot please God. You, however, are not in the realm of the flesh but are in the realm of the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, they do not belong to Christ. But if Christ is in you, then even though your body is subject to death because of sin, the Spirit gives life because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you.

Here Paul is saying, in effect, "You used to be in the flesh only, bent on your own way. But a

marvelous change has come. Now, through faith in Jesus, you are in the Spirit." God's own Spirit, God's own life, is living in us and we in him! Imagine that! The very heart and Spirit of the God of the universe resides in your heart and mine, in your body and mine. A new way of life has opened before us. We don't have to go our own way any longer. We can choose to go God's way because his Spirit is there to move and empower us. We can set our hearts on what God wants for us.

That is the heart of what it means to be a Christian. It is not just to belong to an organization, not just to believe certain things and try to do what is right. It is to have God's own Spirit living inside us (and all God's people). Paul says that if we don't have the Spirit, we are not really Christians at all. And that presence of the Spirit within us is our new freedom and our new power. This body of ours is in the process of dying, but the Spirit within us is eternally alive. That means that one day the same resurrection power that brought Jesus from the grave will raise up our bodies too!

The Spirit Leads Us (Romans 8:12–14)

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

Paul continues to show the implications of being indwelt by the Holy Spirit in verses 12 through 14. Paul tells us we have an obligation: we owe something. We don't have any debt to our fleshly nature. That's what gets us into real trouble and leads us only to death. But we have an obligation to the Holy Spirit. We are to give ourselves to the Spirit who lives within us, to the One who has given us new life. As we've seen, if we keep on going our own way it leads to death. But if, by the Spirit's power, we resist that downward pull, and if we leave behind our self-centered ways, the Spirit will empower us to put these old ways of living to death. And the more we renounce the old, the more the Spirit will breathe into us new life. We owe this debt to the life-giving Spirit of God to give ourselves over to be guided and governed by him. That's what it means to live as one of God's children—to be led by God's Spirit.

The Spirit Lets Us Know We are God's Children (Romans 8:15–17)

The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.

The Spirit, we are now told, is the very opposite of fearfulness. The Spirit doesn't enslave us to dread the way sin does. The Spirit is the bringer of confidence and joy who makes us truly free.

Here we come to a great moment in this passage. Paul says that the Holy Spirit is the very opposite of cringing fear. He, the Spirit, is the spirit of *adoption*.

Let's reflect on that for a bit. I have believed for many years that adopting children is one of the most beautiful, God-like things that human beings can do. I heard a story about adoption some time ago that moved me deeply. A well-known musician named Thomas Lee was speaking on the theme of "going across the street"—extending ourselves to minister to those in need and going beyond our comfort zone to do it. He told about a tiny baby boy in the mountains of Peru who was abandoned on the steps of a Roman Catholic Church. He was found there and placed in a very primitive orphanage, laid in a crib with only a wooden base. His eyes seemed to look in different directions. His tiny head was severely flattened from lying on the wooden base of his crib. He seemed a completely abandoned child without any hope. Somehow, a woman in America heard about this little boy. She went to Peru, found him, loved him, took him up in her arms, and launched an effort to adopt him. In seeking to do that, she ran into incredible legal difficulties, had to pay exorbitant sums of money, was detained in Peru for months, often in personal danger. Finally, she was able to bring the baby to the United States. After numerous surgeries, the boy regained health and began to develop. In his early years, he was found to have genius-level intelligence. While still in his mid-teens, he enrolled at Harvard and was on his way to becoming a medical doctor, seeking a cure for cancer. At this point, the speaker handed out a picture of the young man, bright and smiling. Then he said, "This is my son, and the woman who went to Peru for him is my wife."

That's just one story. You and I know of many others like it. Sometimes the orphans are adopted as infants, sometimes as older children, often much scarred. Sometimes they have frightening disabilities. But the adopting parents see these children through eyes of accepting love. They take them to their hearts and homes whatever their problems or their past. A friend of mine and his wife have adopted two sons from the Caribbean and three daughters from Africa. Some have brought them much joy, some untold pain—rejection, imprisonment, tragedy. Those are the loving risks of adopting.

Now let's think again of the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of adoption. Here we learn something marvelous about the heart of God, the source of the compassion we see in the hearts of human adoptive parents. We have already seen in chapter 5 how God shows his love for us—"while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (v. 8). Now comes this further astonishing wonder—he chooses to adopt us sinful, unworthy people as his own dear children! He has all the love and assumes all the risks of taking us in as an adopting parent. He welcomes us, "warts and all," to his "forever family" as beloved children.

Remember how Jesus taught us in the Lord's Prayer to call God *Abba*, that is, "Father"? This is not something we in any way deserve. It is an unimaginable privilege that comes to us only through Jesus. It is because he came among us, lived a life of loving obedience and gave himself to die for our sins that we can call God our Father, "*Abba!*" Jesus used that very word *Abba* in his prayers to God. With him, it expressed freedom, joy, affection, and confidence. In teaching us to pray in this way, Jesus gives us a share in his relationship to the Father. And he pictures for us in his life and teaching what a wonderful, kind, generous Father our *Abba* is. See him in the father running to embrace the prodigal son and welcoming that renegade back home. As Jesus said, "Your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:32).

One of the blessed ministries of the Holy Spirit is to give us a deep sense of God's fatherly goodness toward us. When we cry "*Abba*, Father" it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirits that we are children of God. When you feel deep in your heart that God is your loving Father through Jesus, that is the Holy Spirit's wonderful work. You are praying *Abba*, and the Holy Spirit is assuring you, "Yes, that's right! God is your marvelously gracious Father!"

Sometimes we have a hard time with this idea that God is "Father." With some, their earthly fathers may have abandoned them or been otherwise absent in their lives. They may have had fathers who seemed to care little about them and showed little affection. Some never received acceptance and affirmation from their fathers. Worst of all, some have had fathers who even abused them. We can understand why, in such cases, the word "father" has a negative and unpleasant ring.

But in such cases, many children growing up have had someone else who was a father-figure to them, who played that role even though he wasn't a relative. One of my best friends, Steve Mitchell, was an orphan from birth. He was placed in several foster homes where he could remember very little affection. But one day, a coach saw in Steve great athletic ability, believed in him, and encouraged him to develop his gifts. That made a huge difference. When Steve in his late twenties became a Christian, he remembered a father-figure in that coach who had helped him grasp what *Abba* is like.

So if you want to know what God is like as a father, think of the most caring, supportive, encouraging person you know. Remembering that person will give you a glimpse. But far better, look especially at Jesus! He said it, didn't he? "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). See how Jesus treated people, how he took up children in his arms and blessed them, and how he had a heart for everyone: helping, healing, feeding, and rescuing. See how he suffered and died for people like us. Oh, believe it—God your heavenly Father, your *Abba*, is like that. You who are believers in Jesus are dearer to God's heart than you can ever dream! Take it in. This is the glad music, the joy of the gospel. You are God's well-loved child and the apple of his eye! Savor that. Live in the light of it. When you begin to feel that connection, even a hint of it, thank the Holy Spirit for bringing you this blessed assurance!

But there's even more to celebrate. Paul says that since you are God's children, you are also "heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ" (v. 17). It is the Father's loving purpose to give you the kingdom. Everything God has he delights to bestow on his beloved Son and on all his other dear children, including us. It will take us an eternity to realize fully what all that means. In Christ, all things are ultimately ours!

Study Questions

1. Why is there "no condemnation" for those who are in Christ Jesus? What has God done to remove all condemnation?
2. What is it for a Christian to "keep walking according to the flesh"? Can we sometimes do that?
3. What is it for us to "keep walking according to the Spirit"? Is that possible for us?
4. Does every true Christian have the Spirit living within him or her? How can you be sure this is true of you?
5. In what sense are we debtors? What do we owe to the Holy Spirit?
6. What does it mean to be "led by the Spirit of God"?
7. What does the Holy Spirit do as the Spirit of adoption? Discuss your experience of this.
8. What does it mean that we who believe in Jesus are "heirs of God"?

9

Joy-filled Certainty
Romans 8:18–39

Many believers in Jesus see the conclusion to the eighth chapter of Romans as perhaps the grandest passage in the entire Bible. I have lived much in this celebration ever since I became a believer at age 16, and I still go over many of the words in my prayers almost every day. I memorized them while still in my teens, and I focused my entire doctoral dissertation on just two of these verses, Romans 8:26–27.

One of the great experiences in my life came in Hope College's Dimnent Chapel some years ago. Ben Patterson, then dean of the chapel; Tim Brown, then Western Seminary's professor of preaching; and I, then retired, recited together in tag-team fashion the entire letter of Paul to the Romans. I was blessed to be given this section of the letter as part of my recitation. As I moved toward its thrilling and triumphant conclusion, something remarkable happened. Over to my left, a large section of Dimnent Chapel was occupied by Hope students. As I neared the end of the chapter, the students en masse stood to their feet, clapping and cheering. I had never seen anything like that in my life—college students transported, bursting with enthusiasm over simply hearing God's word quoted! I'll never forget those moments. The memory of them thrills me still at the dynamism of the good news.

These stirring words express the triumphant hope of all who believe in Jesus. Ringing assurance is one of the distinguishing marks of New Testament Christianity. As Peter writes in his first letter, "he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade—kept in heaven for you (1 Pet. 1:3–4). It's a thrilling confidence. That's what we are anticipating now.

I have been reflecting lately on how few are the things in our present world that we can be absolutely sure about. Certainly not that our favorite sports teams will win. (Mine seem to get upset regularly!) Not that our favorite candidates will be elected—politics is full of surprises. Not that our economy will thrive again—who can predict that? We are not sure of America's continuing leadership in the world. We cannot be fully confident about our continued health or how long we will live. When spring finally came this year, I asked myself for the first time, "Will I ever see another springtime in this world?" How much is uncertain!

You sometimes hear people say, "Nothing is certain except death and taxes." That is a bleak outlook, isn't it? Neither one is very pleasant to consider. I am glad that the saying is foolishly false. Romans 8:18–39 rings and sings with exuberant certainties, none of which have to do with death or taxes.

Present Sufferings Aren't Worth Comparing (Romans 8:18–27)

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

of the children of God.

We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

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

This section opens with a great conviction. Paul begins, "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us." Now as you think about that, remember the varied kinds of suffering Paul had to endure. Second Corinthians 11:24–28 tells us:

Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea, and in danger from false believers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.

Paul is convinced that none of that suffering and trouble (far worse than most of us will ever face) is even worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.

With a kind of inspired poetic vision, Paul sees the whole universe as longing, expecting, and groaning for some marvelous fulfillment yet to come (verses 19–22). The whole creation: galaxies, stars, planets, oceans, mountains, forests, animal and plant life—all are waiting expectantly. This creation, Paul writes, has been subjected to futility, unable to fulfill its true destiny. One day the whole cosmos will be delivered from its bondage to decay. We can sense that in the vision of the prophet Isaiah.

The wolf will live with the lamb,
 the leopard will lie down with the goat,
 the calf and the lion and the yearling together;
 and a little child will lead them.
 The cow will feed with the bear,
 their young will lie down together,
 and the lion will eat straw like the ox.
 The infant will play near the cobra's den,
 and the young child will put its hand into the viper's nest.

They will neither harm nor destroy
 on all my holy mountain,
 for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord
 as the waters cover the sea.

(Isaiah 11:6–9)

Can you sense that? All creation is somehow waiting on tiptoe, longing and groaning for release and fulfillment.

Not only is the creation groaning in this way—we are too! We already have the first-fruits of the Spirit, a down payment on the glory to come, but we still struggle and still lack the complete releasing and fulfillment we long for. Even the Holy Spirit who lives within us groans and prays for this, deep inside us, in sighs too deep for words. What is all this groaning and longing looking toward? It anticipates what Paul calls "the glorious liberty of the children of God" (v. 21). All creation apparently waits for that. Human sin and our turning from God have somehow had limiting effects on the whole cosmos. Only as we human beings are fully restored and finally redeemed will the rest of creation celebrate its release. What we are groaning for and the Holy Spirit is yearning for with us is this same powerful reality—the redemption of our bodies, the completion of God's saving work in us when in the resurrection we enter into the new heaven and the new earth. We long for it and know it is coming because we have already received the down payment of the Spirit. We are absolutely sure that, though we cannot see it now, the glorious liberty of the children of God is out ahead for us and for the whole creation. That will be marvelous. The worst sufferings of this present life will be seen as nothing compared with it. That is the first great certainty.

God Working in Everything for Good (Romans 8:28–30)

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

Again, "we know," writes Paul. Our second great certainty is that in everything God is working for good for all who love him. This is in answer to the mighty prayers the Spirit is offering within us (v. 27). Notice that Paul is not saying that everything that happens to us is good. Some things are terribly bad, destructive, and heartbreaking. Many devastating experiences come to God's people. But this is Paul's conviction: God is working in and through all of that for our highest good—not necessarily to make us prosperous or successful, but to further our salvation and to make us all that we are meant to be. We cannot always see how that is happening. Most often, it is hidden from our view. Sometimes, we may even lament because we can't see the good.

Have you ever watched the weaving of a rug or tapestry? If you see it from underneath, it seems a meaningless jumble of colors and strands. But if you look at it from above, over the shoulder of the weaver, you can see a beautiful pattern emerging. All we can see now is the

underside, and often it makes no sense. But faith assures us that God is weaving together a masterpiece that one day we'll be able to recognize at last from his perspective. In the worst that befalls us now, God in his wisdom and love is putting together something beautiful for our good and blessing always. What a joy to know that!

But we cannot forget that this marvelous assurance is for those who love God and are "called according to his purpose." A person who has no interest in God, no trust in his mercy, and no gratitude for his gifts would never claim a promise like this. But our love for God referred to here is far from a human achievement. It is a response to God's loving call in Christ Jesus, saying, "Come to me . . . rest" (Matt. 11:28). Therefore, "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

We can see the background for all this in God's mighty plan for his people. From all eternity, he knew us and destined us to be his people and to be conformed to the image of his Son. Think of that! He destined us to be like Jesus, made perfect in love, and to bear at last the family likeness! What a destiny! Then, in time and space, here on earth, he called us through the gospel, justified us, accepted us freely when we trusted in Jesus, even glorified us. The final reality of that part is still ahead for us, but it is so certain that Paul can speak of it in the past tense as already in existence. Let the power of all that sink in for you. God in his love has taken hold of your life in a purpose that spans eternity! And along the way, he is working all things together for your good and for your salvation. Hallelujah! Thanks be to God!

Questions With Sure Answers (Romans 8:31–34)

What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.

In verses 31–34 we read several questions with sure, heartwarming answers—words that give us the assurance of still more certainties. "If God is for us who can be against us?" It is not really "if" as though there were some doubt, but rather *since* God is for us. God is for us. This is a kind of blessed shorthand for the entire book of Romans, for the entire gospel for that matter. God is never against us; not sometimes for, sometimes against. He is never neutral or indifferent toward us. He is fully and forever for us. He is on our side as our Maker, Keeper, Savior, Lord, Guide, and Friend. Amazingly, we sinners, saved by his grace, are his treasure, "the apple of his eye." And since he is the sovereign Lord of everything, who can withstand him? Who can pit themselves against his beloved people? Evil spirits and hostile men may try to oppose and even destroy us, but they cannot succeed. In John Bunyan's vision in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, they are like lions on God's leash with no power finally to overcome or harm us. God's standing with us is triumphantly effective. No one's opposition to us can possibly prevail.

Here is the grand, overwhelming evidence for that: "He . . . did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all" (v. 32). If God gave us the best and most costly of all gifts, if our salvation

and well-being was worth to him the supreme sacrifice of his well-loved Son, surely he won't withhold from us anything we truly need. All his riches are freely ours.

The next question is, "Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen?" (v. 33). God has already declared us to be fully and forever cleared of all charges. No accusation against us can ever stand, no matter how much the devil, our accuser, may try to trouble our minds with his charges.

Another question is raised: "Who then is the one who condemns?" (v. 34). We certainly deserve condemnation in ourselves, but the only one who could condemn us is the One who has suffered so much in our place and who was condemned for our sins. But he, Jesus, not only forgives all our offenses against him but also lives forever to pray for us and to secure our acceptance. No condemnation against us can possibly stand. He is our Advocate, always pleading on our behalf.

So these questions are all answered with joy-filled assurance. Who can be against us? Who can bring a charge against us or condemn us? No one, ever, since God is everlastingly for us.

The Final Certainty: No Separation (Romans 8:35–39)

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written:

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

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

Now we come to one huge final question and answer: could we finally be cut off from God and his love? Paul lists several experiences that seemingly might threaten to separate us from Christ's love. How much trouble and hardship Paul had known in his life as Jesus' servant! He says, "No, that can't do it." What about distress—being in a cramped, confined situation? Paul had often been there, in "tight spots," hemmed in on every side. "No," he says, "distress can't do it." What about persecution? Paul had known that almost every day. What about famine? The apostle had gone hungry for many days. What about nakedness? Paul knew what it was to be publicly stripped and beaten. What about danger and even deadly force? Paul was no stranger to all of that. He says, "I face death every day" (1 Cor. 15:31). He feels that dread possibility every day he lives. Weighing all this, he agrees with the psalmist, "Yet for your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered" (Ps. 44:22).

Well, what about all of that? Can it ever tear us away from Jesus' love and care? Never! On the contrary, in all these things, we not only survive but we are also "more than conquerors through him who loved us" (v. 37). We come through the worst, the most vicious and vile, with

flying colors! Thanks be to God!

Now comes the final expression of joy-filled certainty. This is where the whole passage is heading. This is what got those Hope College students on their feet, cheering. "I am convinced"—that is, I am certain, I am sure—that nothing will ever separate us from God's love in Christ. Indeed, nothing can. Paul exults, almost as if to say, "Bring it on!" Not all the sufferings of this present life and not even the last enemy death can tear us away from the One who loves us and gave himself for us.

In Old Testament times many feared that death would land the faithful in Sheol, away from life in this world, away from people and from God. But because of Jesus' victory over death Paul can sing, "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" (1 Cor. 15:55). What about angels, rulers, spirit-beings in heaven or hell, supernatural powers hostile to us? What about time or distance? No way! Then he gathers up everything else in creation and says a final triumphant "NO!" Nothing can separate us from God's love in Christ. Nothing can snatch us from the Father's hand or tear us from his heart.

So this glorious chapter that began with the exultant cry, "no condemnation" for those in Christ, ends with the jubilant "no separation." God is for us forever!

This is what we celebrate in what is perhaps the most moving of all Christian confessions, the *Heidelberg Catechism*, born in the midst of opposition and persecution in the sixteenth century. Here is the memorable first question, "What is your only comfort in life and in death?"

And the answer:

My only comfort in life and death is that I belong, body and soul, not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, who with his precious blood has fully satisfied for all my sins and delivered me from all the power of the devil, and so preserves me that without the will of my Father not a hair can fall from my head. Wherefore, by his Holy Spirit, he assures me of eternal life and makes me heartily willing henceforth to live for him.

This is our only comfort, our great, all-sufficient confidence. God wants each of us to have the blessed assurance of 1 John 5:13, "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life." If you believe in Jesus, if you have invited him to be your Savior, if you have committed your life to him, the whole Bible is written for you so that you may know that you have eternal life. And this eighth chapter of Romans sums it up, tops it off, brings it home to the heart.

You might be surprised at how many Christians do not realize this and do not enjoy it. I can scarcely count the number of people—many of them professed believers—who, when I asked, "Do you expect to be with God in heaven when you die?" have responded, "I hope so." Sometimes it seems for them a slender, tenuous hope.

Often, when I explore that with them we find the root reason. Their anxiety is, "I'm not good enough," or "I haven't measured up." Maybe they will criticize people who have assurance about this as being proud and claiming to be better than others. In both cases, they don't see the real foundation of Christian assurance. The plain truth, which this letter to the Romans sounds out loud and clear, is this: "No one is good enough!" If we think we can make it on our own, we are dead wrong and ridiculously proud. Real confidence is based not on what we have done or not

done but on what God has done for us in Jesus Christ.

We can be sure of life eternal in God's presence because of Jesus—his coming, his life of obedience, his atoning death, his rising from the grave, his glorious reign. Christians can identify with what John Wesley said on his deathbed, "I, the chief of sinners am, but Jesus died for me."

When Jesus cried out on the cross "It is finished" (John 19:30), the work of saving us had been fully and beautifully accomplished forever. That, friends, is the heart of the Christian faith.

Think again of those Hope College students who clapped and cheered as they heard the closing words of Romans 8. Something like that can happen for you. You can celebrate these joy-filled truths. Present sufferings cannot compare with the glory that will be revealed in us. God is working in everything for the good of those who love and trust him. Nothing will ever be able to separate us from God's love. All that radiant assurance can be yours—through our Lord Jesus Christ!

Study Questions

1. What does Paul say about "the sufferings of the present time"?
2. How did the entire creation become "subjected to futility"?
3. What will set the creation free?
4. Why are believers "groaning inwardly"?
5. How does the Holy Spirit help us in our weakness?
6. For what glorious future has God predestined us?
7. Since God is so wonderfully "for us," who can possibly be against us?
8. What can possibly happen to us in this life that could separate us from Christ's love? What, in your experience, has threatened to do this?
9. With what magnificent assurance does Paul conclude this chapter? What is your response to all of this?

Epilogue

As I wrote this, I reflected on my almost lifelong love for Paul's letter to the Romans. It began when I became a believer at age 16 (almost seven decades ago!) when I started in earnest to study the Bible. The first eight chapters of Romans, on which this little book is based, were among the first that I pored over and memorized in my teenage years. They have shaped my thinking and life ever since.

There, I learned what the gospel is—the message of God, promised beforehand in the Holy Scriptures, centering in Jesus Christ, God's risen Son, our Lord. I came to see that this gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.

There, I was moved by God, as Paul was, to feel myself obligated to pass on this gospel to others as a sacred trust and never to be ashamed of it.

There, I saw the tragedy of our suppressing the truth about God that shines in all creation and how our failure to honor God and to be thankful to him has spawned all manner of foolishness, degradation, and idolatry. All of us have sinned and fallen short of God's glory. All of us alike find ourselves under the power of sin.

I learned there what God has done to make things right between God and humankind: how all who believe are justified freely by God's grace through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

I saw that faith, specifically trusting God's promises, has always been the way to a right relationship with our Maker. I learned that all who trust in Jesus are Abraham's true descendants, members of the people of God.

I learned with great joy how faith in Christ leads us to peace with God, access to God's presence and grace, and hope of beholding God's glory. I saw that it was possible to exult even in sufferings, knowing that suffering leads to perseverance, perseverance to the building of character, and character to the quickening of hope, all because the Holy Spirit fills our hearts with confidence in God's love.

I celebrated with Paul the vastness and wonder of God's love, shown toward us in Christ's dying for us when we were helpless, sinful, and hostile, confirming our hope that we are saved forever.

I rejoiced when it dawned on me, some years later, that all believers are joined to Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection. We have died with him to sin's power and have been raised with him to walk in newness of life. We can see ourselves now as dead to sin and alive to God. We can renounce the old service of sin and yield ourselves gladly now as bondslaves to Christ.

Yet I also learned from Romans, and from my own experience, that sin dies hard in us and struggles for continuing mastery. We can sometimes become almost desperate because we keep failing to do what we know is right and continue in the very evils we hate. But I learned that Jesus, Jesus only, is our Rescuer.

Then I came to Romans, chapter 8. What a difference that has made in my life! I learned that there is no condemnation for me since Christ has been condemned in my place. The Holy Spirit now lives in me to give me a new mind and heart and a new power to resist sin. The Spirit assures me that God is my gracious Father and I am God's beloved child, an heir of God and a fellow-heir with Christ.

Along with Paul, after a good deal of suffering in our long lives together, including the early death of two beloved sons, Helen and I also consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing to the glory ahead, the "glorious liberty of the children of God."

With the creation yearning for deliverance, we also groan, longing for the redemption of our bodies, even more so as our bodies weaken with age! And imagine it—even the Holy Spirit of God groans within us, offering perfect prayers on our behalf. We rejoice in that. In answer to those groans, God is working in everything for our good to see us conformed at last to the image of Christ.

The most wonderful reality in the universe to us is this: *God is for us*. So great is God's love that he did not hold back his beloved Son but gave him up to suffer unimaginably, to die on our behalf, to rise and reign. So we know beyond all doubting that nothing in the universe can ever tear us away from God's mighty love in Christ Jesus our Lord.

In my lifetime of ministry, I have preached more sermons on Romans 1–8 than I can remember. I have used individual verses from them in many efforts to lead others to Christ. I have preached from these chapters by radio through Words of Hope; taught them at the Hope Academy of Senior Professionals (HASP); and in many Bible studies at our present home in Freedom Village, Holland, Michigan. I have already mentioned quoting Romans with friends and focusing on just two verses from Romans 8 in my dissertation. In my morning prayers for several years, I have gone over and rejoiced every day in the final verses of Romans 8.

So what I share in this slender volume are not only my reflections on the text but also a great deal of my own life story. I thank God for these marvelous words in Paul's letter to the Romans!