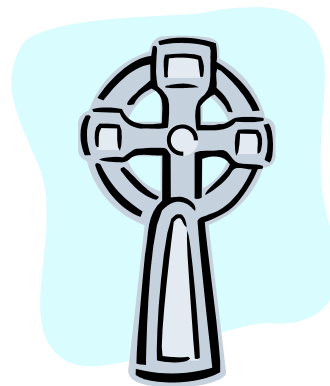


Romans:
Becoming the People of God
A Guide for Individual Study & Devotion

By Rev. Dr. Scott Jones



This summer we are exploring the Book of Romans in our worship. You are invited to journey through Romans in your personal devotional and bible study time using this guide.

Romans has always raised lots of questions for Christians. And in recent years this has continued as the interpretation of the book has undergone fundamental changes.

A good place to begin is by reading Romans through in one sitting to capture the scope of the letter. This guide will move topically through the letter, exploring some of the key questions and topics of St. Paul's letter to the churches at Rome.

Use this guide to develop your faith. Each week there are opportunities for study and discussion, something to consider, questions to reflect upon, prayers to meditate upon, and suggested acts to put your faith into practice. Through the week return to this guide.

Enjoy!

Pastor Scott Jones

Contents

I.	Why is Romans Important?	4
II.	To Whom Is It Written?	6
III.	Why Was It Written?	9
IV.	The Roman Context	13
V.	Sin & Death: Powers and Principalities	16
VI.	The Jewish Context	20
VII.	The Righteousness of God	24
VIII.	The Law	28
IX.	Justification	32
X.	Election and Salvation	37
XI.	Faith	41
XII.	Homosexuality	44
XIII.	Calling & Mission	47

I. Why is Romans Important?

May 19 – 25

From the time of the earliest church fathers and mothers, Romans has been central to the debates in Christian theology. Romans influenced Luther's actions in the Protestant Reformation. Karl Barth's early twentieth century commentary on the book forever altered Christian theology. And the fresh perspectives of contemporary thinkers have been altering our understanding of early Christianity and our own discipleship. Commentator Mark Reasoner calls Romans "a foundational text in Western civilization." Catholic scholar Luke Timothy Johnson records it this way:

Paul's letter to the Romans has had an obvious and powerful impact on the history of Christianity. From the time the New Testament was first collected, Romans held a distinctive importance for the shaping of Christian identity and self-understanding. Romans was as dear to the arch-heretic Marcion, who wanted to base all Christianity on Pauline theology, as it was to the arch-heresiologist Irenaeus, who used Romans to refute Marcion's dualistic, anti-Jewish, and anti-cosmic version of Christianity. Patristic authors such as Origen, Cyril of Alexandria, and Ambrose of Milan not only wrote extensive commentaries on Romans but used it extensively in their trinitarian and Christological treatises. It was upon the reading of Rom. 13:11-14 that Augustine redirected his life, and Augustine's highly personal appropriation of Romans was to prove decisive for the formation of theology in the Christian West. For Martin Luther, Romans was, together with Galatians, the supreme expression of the gospel and the catalyst for the reformation of the church. The letter's continuing capacity to reform and reshape consciousness was shown in the early twentieth century, when Karl Barth's *Commentary on Romans* (1918) declared a stunning no to any identification of God's rule with human progress and affirmed through a passionately directed engagement with Romans the sovereignty of God over all human effort, will, and even thought. From Marcion in the second century, then, to Ernst Kasemann in the twentieth century, the heart of Christianity has been located in Paul's theology, and the heart of Paul's theology has been found in Romans. (*Reading Romans: A Literary and Theological Commentary*, 2001).

Paul was the great innovator who turned Jesus' gospel into a global movement that changed world history. Romans is the fullest expression of his view of that gospel.

The Letter

Read Romans 1:1-17:

Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name, including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ, To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed throughout the world. For God, whom I serve with my spirit by announcing the gospel of his Son, is my witness that without ceasing I remember you always in my prayers, asking

that by God's will I may somehow at last succeed in coming to you. For I am longing to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you— or rather so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine. I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as I have among the rest of the Gentiles. I am a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish — hence my eagerness to proclaim the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, 'The one who is righteous will live by faith.'

Consider

Everyone who wishes to understand this letter more fully must recognize that it opens vistas that extend beyond the reach of human vision and generates tensions that defy easy resolution. – Mark Reasoner in *Romans in Full Circle: A History of Interpretation* (2005).

Reflect

- What impressions, if any, do you already have of the Book of Romans?
- What questions do you bring to a reading of the book?
- What does Paul mean by “the one who is righteous will live by faith”?
- What is faith? What is righteousness?

Meditate & Pray

We've A Story to Tell
By H. Ernest Nichol (1862-1926)

We've a story to tell to the nations,
That shall turn their hearts to the right,
A story of truth and mercy,
A story of peace and light.

For the darkness shall turn to dawning,
And the dawning to noon-day bright,
And Christ's great kingdom shall come on earth,
The kingdom of love and light.

We've a Savior to show to the nations,
Who the path of sorrow hath trod,
That all the world's great peoples
May come to the truth of God.

Act

Paul proclaims the gospel in order to bring about faith among the nations (the Gentiles). How has God called you to spread the good news? This week share your faith with someone else.

II. To Whom Is It Written?

May 26 – June 1

Paul's letters were usually written to churches he had founded, usually addressing a specific concern that had arisen in that congregation. Romans is unique in that not only had he not founded the church, he had never been there. But he was acquainted with a number of folk who were in the churches of Rome.

One of the major issues that scholars debate about the Book of Romans was the composition of the audience to whom it was written. Why is this important? Because it influences your interpretation of the text.

For instance, women leaders are prominent in the text, including the apostle Junia and the deacon Phoebe, who was the person delivering and reading Paul's letter to the churches at Rome. The recovery of these texts has been influential in the debates over the ordination of women.

The conversations over the audience of the letter largely focus around the number of ethnic Jews, Gentile converts to Judaism, or new Gentile converts in the congregation. Of more interest to many of us may be the argument of Thomas Hanks who points out that of the 38 people named in the letter, 32 were unmarried, 10 were women, and as many as 26 were slaves. Why is this important? Because these folk were not part of the social establishment. In fact we can go further. Hanks points out the following:

Since slaves (male and female) commonly were expected to satisfy their owners' sexual desires . . . the only homoerotic acts condemned [by Paul] are those characterized by exploitation, injustice and violence (rape), all especially experienced by slaves. – Thomas Hanks in *The Queer Bible Commentary* (2006).

The Letter

Read Romans 16:1-27:

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church at Cenchreae, so that you may welcome her in the Lord as is fitting for the saints, and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a benefactor of many and of myself as well.

Greet Prisca and Aquila, who work with me in Christ Jesus, and who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles. Greet also the church in their house. Greet my beloved Epaenetus, who was the first convert in Asia for Christ. Greet Mary, who has worked very hard among you. Greet Andronicus and Junia, my relatives who were in prison with me; they are prominent among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was. Greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord. Greet Urbanus, our co-worker in Christ, and my beloved Stachys. Greet Apelles, who is approved in Christ. Greet those who belong to the family of Aristobulus. Greet my relative Herodion. Greet those in the Lord who belong to the family of Narcissus. Greet those workers in the Lord, Tryphaena and Tryphosa. Greet the beloved Persis, who has worked hard in the Lord. Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; and greet his mother—a mother to me also. Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and the brothers and sisters who are with them. Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you.

I urge you, brothers and sisters, to keep an eye on those who cause dissensions and offences, in opposition to the teaching that you have learned; avoid them. For such people do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the simple-minded. For while your obedience is known to all, so that I rejoice over you, I want you to be wise in what is good, and guileless in what is evil. The God of peace will shortly crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

Timothy, my co-worker, greets you; so do Lucius and Jason and Sosipater, my relatives.

I Tertius, the writer of this letter, greet you in the Lord.

Gaius, who is host to me and to the whole church, greets you. Erastus, the city treasurer, and our brother Quartus, greet you.

Now to God who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed, and through the prophetic writings is made known to all the Gentiles, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith— to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory for ever! Amen.

Consider

[Stanley] Stowers maintained that Romans must be read primarily in light of Greco-Roman literature, especially the moral philosophy of the day. In this context, Paul offered gentiles, obsessed with gaining control over their passions and desires, the ultimate solution: the gospel of God's righteous action in Jesus Christ, an action that empowers a "disciplined and restored self." – A. Andrew Das in *Solving the Romans Debate* (2007).

Reflect

- How might the prominence of women and slaves in the original audience affect the reading of Romans?
- How might the mix of Jews or Gentiles in the audience affect the interpretation of the text?
- How might various contemporary oppressed groups read Romans as a text of liberation?

Meditate & Pray

Now Thank We All Our God
By Martin Rinkart (1586-1649)

Now thank we all our God
With heart and hands and voices
Who wondrous things hath done,
In whom his world rejoices;
Who, from our mother's arms
Hath blest us on our way
With countless gifts of love,
And still is ours today.

Act

Romans 16 demonstrates how community is created in practices of hospitality and gratitude. This week what are some ways that you can be hospitable? Show gratitude this week by mailing thank you notes.

III. Why Was It Written?

June 2 – 8

Unlike Paul's other letters, it is not clear why he wrote this one. The book is a presentation and defense of his view of the gospel. But why did he feel the need to write it? Was he addressing an issue of conflict in the church? Was he writing to defend himself against his opponents? Was he writing to address Jewish and Gentile relations? Or was it a fundraising letter for his upcoming mission trip? Or all of these?

Luke Timothy Johnson offers this view, rooted in what we know of Paul's own life story:

Paul needs above all to recommend himself by recommending his *gospel*. *Romans* completely transcends its immediate purpose as a fund-raising letter by providing Paul's most complete and ordered exposition of what he understood his ministry to be about, and therefore what he thought God was up to in the world by using him as an instrument. At this moment of transition, having responded to local fights in Galatia concerning circumcision, and having responded to local disputes in Corinth over issues of social practice, and above all having thought through the symbolism of his gift of money to Jerusalem, by which he hoped to reconcile Jews and Gentiles in the church, Paul worked all these concerns into a single magisterial argument to recommend his ministry to the church in Rome by recommending a good news in whose service he was expending his life. . . . Paul's concern was not 'theology' but the shaping of a certain kind of community ethos (Luke Timothy Johnson in *Reading Romans: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (2001).

Michael J. Gorman writes that we are in Paul's audience: "Paul speaks powerfully to the life-threatening, violent imperialism and tribalism of this century and any century."

The Letter

Read Romans 14:1-15:33:

Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions. Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand.

Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. Those who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honor of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honor of the Lord and give thanks to God.

We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. For it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God." So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another. I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. If your brother or sister is being injured by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. Do not let what you eat cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died. So do not let your good be spoken of as evil. For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. The one who thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and has human approval. Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding. Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for you to make others fall by what you eat; it is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that makes your brother or sister stumble. The faith that you have, have as your own conviction before God. Blessed are those who have no reason to condemn themselves because of what they approve. But those who have doubts are condemned if they eat, because they do not act from faith; for whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.

We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Each of us must please our neighbour for the good purpose of building up the neighbour. For Christ did not please himself; but, as it is written, 'The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.' For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written,

'Therefore I will confess you among the Gentiles,
and sing praises to your name';
and again he says,
'Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people';
and again,
'Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles,
and let all the peoples praise him';
and again Isaiah says,
'The root of Jesse shall come,
the one who rises to rule the Gentiles;
in him the Gentiles shall hope.'

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

I myself feel confident about you, my brothers and sisters, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and able to instruct one another. Nevertheless, on some points I have written to you rather boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given me by God to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. In Christ Jesus, then, I have reason to boast of my work for God. For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to win obedience from the Gentiles, by word and deed, by the power of signs and wonders, by

the power of the Spirit of God, so that from Jerusalem and as far around as Illyricum I have fully proclaimed the good news of Christ. Thus I make it my ambition to proclaim the good news, not where Christ has already been named, so that I do not build on someone else's foundation, but as it is written, 'Those who have never been told of him shall see, and those who have never heard of him shall understand.'

This is the reason that I have so often been hindered from coming to you. But now, with no further place for me in these regions, I desire, as I have for many years, to come to you when I go to Spain. For I do hope to see you on my journey and to be sent on by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a little while. At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem in a ministry to the saints; for Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to share their resources with the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. They were pleased to do this, and indeed they owe it to them; for if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material things. So, when I have completed this, and have delivered to them what has been collected, I will set out by way of you to Spain; and I know that when I come to you, I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ.

I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in earnest prayer to God on my behalf, that I may be rescued from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my ministry to Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints, so that by God's will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company. The God of peace be with all of you. Amen.

Consider

Beverly Roberts Gaventa guides our imaginations to picture the reading of this letter to its original audience:

[Phoebe] reads it to house churches across the residential areas of Trastevere and the Appian lowlands. . . . We know that the cities of the first Christian century were teeming with people, which means that they were also dense with the sounds and smells of food and disease and death. The early gatherings of Christians must also have been filled with birth and new life. In some gathering, a midwife was called out to attend a delivery. In another, she returned – with joyous news or somber? In other gatherings, wet nurses brought their charges, whose fussing and cooing sprinkled the reading of Paul's letter. – Beverly Roberts Gaventa in *Our Mother Saint Paul* (2007).

Reflect

- Can your imagination being in the house churches of Rome? Picture what that would be like.
- What is Paul's understanding of his mission?
- How is financial stewardship central to Paul's mission?
- How might Paul's letter address issues and topics in your own life or in our church?

Meditate & Pray

Because I Have Been Given Much
By Grace Noll Crowell (1877-1969)

Because I have been given much, I, too, must give;
Because of Thy great bounty, Lord, each day I live,
I shall divide my gifts from Thee
With ev'ry brother that I see
Who has the need of help from me.

Because love has been lavished so upon me, Lord,
A wealth I know that was not meant for me to hoard,
I shall give love to those in need,
Shall show that love by word and deed:
Thus shall my thanks be thanks indeed.

Act

This week spend some time finding out about the mission work of the United Church of Christ in spreading the gospel. How can the Cathedral of Hope participate in this work? How can you?

IV. The Roman Context

June 9 - 15

The following is from an inscription near the city of Ephesus. It gives us a sense of the connection between theology and politics in the Roman Empire.

The providence which has ordered the whole of our life, showing concern and zeal, has ordained the most perfect consummation for human life by giving it to Augustus, by filling him with virtue for doing the work of a benefactor among men, and by sending in him, as it were, a savior for us and those who come after us, to make war to cease, to create order everywhere. . . [S]ince the Caesar through his appearance has exceeded the hopes of all former gospels, surpassing not only the benefactors who came before him, but also leaving no hope that anyone in the future would surpass him, and since for the world the birthday of the god was the beginning of his gospel (quoted in *Reading Paul* by Michael J. Gorman).

Contemporary Christianity often views the church's teaching on salvation to have nothing to do with politics, economics, or social justice. Sometimes you hear that churches are too political and need to focus more on evangelism or devotion.

However, whenever Paul writes about the gospel of Jesus Christ, his writing is inherently political. Even his writing about God's righteousness or human salvation is subversive, counter-cultural, and anti-imperial. For Paul, salvation, the gospel, came not from Caesar but in the crucifixion of a Jewish peasant viewed as a criminal by the empire. This Jesus is Lord, not Caesar. There is no way to divorce Paul's theology from his political views.

The church, then, becomes the alternative to the empire, as Michael Gorman writes:

The small communities of believers in Jesus as Messiah and Lord were called "assemblies," the Greek word *ekklesia* meaning originally the assembly of a city's (or a civic group's) leaders for discussion and decision making. A Pauline *ekklesia* was thus an *alternative* assembly, a political or civic body with a different agenda – allegiance to the lordship of Jesus.

Another aspect of the Roman context of Paul's writing is that he uses literary genre and forms of rhetoric that were common among Roman writers of his time. Some of these issues become important in interpreting key texts.

The Letter

Read Romans 12:9-13:14:

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I

will repay, says the Lord.' No, 'if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; for it is God's servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience. For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, busy with this very thing. Pay to all what is due them—taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due.

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet"; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Consider

The early Christian use of the cross as a symbol was not simply a creation out of nothing. It took genius to see that the symbol which had spoken of Caesar's naked might now spoke of God's naked love. And I think that the genius in question belonged to Paul. – N. T. Wright in *Paul in Fresh Perspective* (2005).

Reflect

- Paul encouraged obedience to law while at the same time advocating a subversive gospel. What do you make of this paradox?
- How does the ethic of love in Romans 13 fit with the statements about obedience to government?
- What does it mean for the church to be a subversive, counter-cultural assembly?
- What does the cross symbolize for you?
- What symbolizes the "naked might" of imperial power in 2008?

Meditate & Pray

Be Thou My Vision
Ancient Irish Hymn

Be Thou my vision, O Lord of my heart;

Naught be all else to me, save that Thou art:
Thou my best thought, by day or by night,
Waking or sleeping, Thy presence my light.

Riches I heed not, or man's empty praise,
Thou mine inheritance, now and always:
Thou and Thou only, first in my heart,
High King of heaven, my treasure Thou art.

High King of heaven, my victory won,
May I reach heaven's joys, O bright heaven's Sun!
Heart of my own heart, whatever befall,
Still be my vision, O Ruler of all.

Act

Take some action this week that both respects and challenges government authority by engaging in the democratic process, advocating for some policy that you believe fits with the gospel of Jesus.

V. Sin & Death: Powers and Principalities

June 16 - 22

The Doctrine of Sin has been central in debates over the interpretation of Romans. Recent scholars have emphasized that Paul's language about sin in Romans should be viewed as "apocalyptic." Apocalyptic is the genre of ancient literature that we are most familiar with in the Book of Revelation – it is highly symbolic and charged with the idea of a contest in which God defeats evil within human history.

What are the "power and principalities"? Paul and his contemporaries viewed the powers as demonic forces that enslaved humanity. Some of the powers, however, were intended by God for good and had been overtaken by Sin and Death. Human government is one example. God's law is another. The powers must be defeated and a new creation birthed.

Paul posits a startling and creative explanation for this moral chaos, this carnival of sins in the world. Behind and within all the sins (plural) is a power that Paul calls Sin (singular, Rom. 3:9), a force within the human person and the human family that fundamentally enslaves us (Rom. 6:6-7), such that we habitually cannot do what is right, even if and when we want to (Rom. 7:7-24). Our situation is like that of the addict, and Sin is our drug of choice – or, better said, our Master. That we are addicted does not excuse our behavior, but it does suggest in no uncertain terms that we cannot cure ourselves. We are, so to speak, *covenantally dysfunctional*, neither loyal to God nor loving to neighbor. – Michael Gorman in *Reading Paul* (2008).

The Letter

Read Romans 6:15-7:25:

What then? Should we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God that you, having once been slaves of sin, have become obedient from the heart to the form of teaching to which you were entrusted, and that you, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. I am speaking in human terms because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to greater and greater iniquity, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness for sanctification.

When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. So what advantage did you then get from the things of which you now are ashamed? The end of those things is death. But now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification. The end is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Do you not know, brothers and sisters—for I am speaking to those who know the law—that the law is binding on a person only during that person's lifetime? Thus a married woman is bound by the law to her husband as long as he lives; but if her husband dies, she is discharged from the law concerning the husband. Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies, she is free from that law, and if she marries another man, she is not an adulteress.

In the same way, my friends, you have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead in order that we

may bear fruit for God. While we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. But now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we are slaves not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit.

What then should we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet, if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, "You shall not covet." But sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. Apart from the law sin lies dead. I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died, and the very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. For sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good.

Did what is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, working death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure.

For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.

So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

So then, with my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin.

Consider

Popular writer and preacher Brian McLaren's newest book is entitled *Everything Must Change: Jesus, Global Crises, and a Revolution of Hope*. In his review, Todd Friesen of Lombard Mennonite Church writes:

This book's most significant contribution is its incisive look at the competing "framing stories" of our world and of Jesus Christ. McLaren argues that the world's crises are being driven by a powerfully destructive and covert narrative. This story tells us that we are godlike creatures who are free to live without moral or ecological limits and that we exist merely to consume products and experience maximum pleasure. The devastating consequences of this story are becoming increasingly evident in our families, communities and environment. – *The Christian Century*, 22 April 2008.

Reflect

- How do you characterize sin?
- Have you ever considered the image of Sin as a powerful master that enslaves?
- What about as a destructive "framing story"?
- How might these other images of sin change one's views on sin and salvation?
- Have you ever considered the environmental impact of sin?

Meditate & Pray

A Mighty Fortress is Our God
By Martin Luther (1483-1546)

A mighty fortress is our God,
A bulwark never failing;
Our helper He, amid the flood
Of mortal ills prevailing:
For still our ancient foe
Doth seek to work us woe;
His craft and power are great
And, armed with cruel hate,
On earth is not His equal.

And tho' this world, with devils filled,
Should threaten to undo us,
We will not fear, for God hath willed
His truth to triumph thro' us:
The Prince of Darkness grim,
We tremble not for him;
His rage we can endure,
For lo, his doom is sure,
On little word shall fell him.

That word above all earthly powers,
No thanks to them, abideth;
The Spirit and the gifts are ours
Thro' Him who with us sideth:
Let goods and kindred go,
This mortal life also;
The body they may kill:
God's truth abideth still,
His kingdom is forever.

Act

Make a list of the various ways that Sin still dominates your life. Are you enslaved to various powers? Do you participate in any institutions or systems that inflict harm or oppress other people?

Once you have your list, pray to God for forgiveness and liberation. Try working on at least one area of your life that needs healing and liberation.

VI. The Jewish Context

June 23 - 29

In the last generation there has been a recovery of the Jewish context of Paul. Everyone has always known that Romans talked about Jew-Gentile relations. In the past these were viewed as a secondary issue. Now, you are more likely to read a scholar say that Jew-Gentile relations are central to understanding the book.

Christians long perpetrated a mistaken picture of first century Judaism, assuming that it was legalistic and contrasting it with Paul's views of grace. We now know that this picture of Judaism was false:

Since the publication of E. P. Sanders's landmark study of Palestinian Judaism, old dogmas about Jewish legalism have become difficult to sustain. . . He found a pattern of religion in which obedience to the law was of undeniable importance, but this obedience was framed, defined, and sustained by initiatives of divine grace. Israel's covenant relationship with God was, after all, established not by merit but through election, an act of pure grace, and salvation was assured to those within the covenant. – Jouette M. Bassler in *Navigating Paul: An Introduction to Key Theological Concepts* (2007).

Paul does not abandon Jewish concepts, but develops existing concepts by reinterpreting them in light of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. Paul interprets Jesus as the fulfillment of Jewish concepts and calls on many of the ancient stories in his writings.

In Galatians Paul argued against those who thought that Christians should follow Jewish laws and rituals. Many have long thought Paul argued the same thing in Romans. Yet, fresh interpretations suggest that in Romans Paul's target are new Gentile converts who are prejudiced against the Jews and those Gentiles who had converted to Judaism before converting to Christianity. In Romans Paul seems to be arguing in defense of Judaism – not advocating that all Christians follow Jewish laws, but arguing that the Christian church should be a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural assembly.

The Letter

Read Romans 9:1-11:2:

I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit—I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh. They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed for ever. Amen.

It is not as though the word of God had failed. For not all Israelites truly belong to Israel, and not all of Abraham's children are his true descendants; but 'It is through Isaac that descendants shall be named after you.' This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as descendants. For this is what the promise said, 'About this time I will return and Sarah shall have a son.' Nor is that all; something similar happened to Rebecca when she had conceived children by one husband, our ancestor Isaac. Even before they had been born or had done anything good or bad (so that God's purpose of election might continue, not

by works but by his call) she was told, 'The elder shall serve the younger.' As it is written,

'I have loved Jacob,
but I have hated Esau.'

What then are we to say? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! For he says to Moses,

'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy,
and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.'

So it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who shows mercy. For the scripture says to Pharaoh, 'I have raised you up for the very purpose of showing my power in you, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth.' So then he has mercy on whomsoever he chooses, and he hardens the heart of whomsoever he chooses.

You will say to me then, 'Why then does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?' But who indeed are you, a human being, to argue with God? Will what is moulded say to the one who moulds it, 'Why have you made me like this?' Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one object for special use and another for ordinary use? What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience the objects of wrath that are made for destruction; and what if he has done so in order to make known the riches of his glory for the objects of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory— including us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles? As indeed he says in Hosea,

'Those who were not my people I will call "my people",
and her who was not beloved I will call "beloved".'

'And in the very place where it was said to them, "You are not my people",
there they shall be called children of the living God.'

And Isaiah cries out concerning Israel, 'Though the number of the children of Israel were like the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved; for the Lord will execute his sentence on the earth quickly and decisively.' And as Isaiah predicted,

'If the Lord of hosts had not left survivors to us,
we would have fared like Sodom
and been made like Gomorrah.'

What then are we to say? Gentiles, who did not strive for righteousness, have attained it, that is, righteousness through faith; but Israel, who did strive for the righteousness that is based on the law, did not succeed in fulfilling that law. Why not? Because they did not strive for it on the basis of faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling-stone, as it is written,

'See, I am laying in Zion a stone that will make people stumble, a rock that will make them fall,
and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.'

Brothers and sisters, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. I can testify that they have a zeal for God, but it is not enlightened. For, being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, they have not submitted to God's righteousness. For Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.

Moses writes concerning the righteousness that comes from the law, that 'the person who does these things will live by them.' But the righteousness that comes from faith says, 'Do not say in your heart, "Who will ascend into heaven?"' (that is, to bring Christ down) 'or "Who will descend into the abyss?"' (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say?

'The word is near you,
on your lips and in your heart'

(that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. The scripture says, 'No one who believes in him will be put to shame.' For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. For, 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!' But not all have obeyed the good news; for Isaiah says, 'Lord, who has believed our message?' So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ.

But I ask, have they not heard? Indeed they have; for

'Their voice has gone out to all the earth,
and their words to the ends of the world.'
Again I ask, did Israel not understand? First Moses says,
'I will make you jealous of those who are not a nation;
with a foolish nation I will make you angry.'

Then Isaiah is so bold as to say,
'I have been found by those who did not seek me;
I have shown myself to those who did not ask for me.'

But of Israel he says, 'All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people.'

I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. Do you not know what the scripture says of Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel?

Consider

Within the original Exodus-story, of course, the people were given the tabernacling presence of God, despite their rebellion and sin, as their guide and companion. In Paul's retelling of the story, the Spirit takes the places of the Shekinah, leading the people to the promised land, which turns out to be, not 'heaven' as in much Christian mistelling of the story, but the new, or rather the renewed, creation, the cosmos which is to be liberated

from its own slavery, to experience its own 'exodus.' – N. T. Wright in *Paul in Fresh Perspective* (2005)

Reflect

- What's one place in Romans where you have noticed Paul using an Old Testament story to make his point?
- What do you think is the relationship between Judaism and Christianity?
- How might Paul's message of a multi-cultural assembly be applied to the church today?

Meditate & Pray

Joy to the World!
By Isaac Watts (1674-1748)

Joy to the world! the Lord is come; let earth receive her King;
Let every heart prepare Christ room, and heaven and nature sing.

No more let sins and sorrows grow, nor thorns infest the ground;
He comes to make his blessings flow far as the curse is found.

He rules the world with truth and grace, and makes the nations prove
The glories of his righteousness, and wonders of his love.

Act

In Oklahoma City there are routinely opportunities for multi-cultural engagement – cultural festivals and events, conferences and workshops, restaurants of different ethnic groups, etc. Do some research and make plans to experience a different culture that you are not used to experiencing. Reflect on how you might experience the Christ in that different culture.

VII. The Righteousness of God

June 30 – July 5

Romans is a sustained argument for the righteousness of God that is identified with and demonstrated by the faithfulness of Jesus Christ, understood primarily as his willing obedience to suffer death on the cross. -- Katherine Grieb in *The Story of Romans: A Narrative Defense of God's Righteousness* (2002).

Romans addresses a crisis of faith. Here's the problem:

- God has made promises to the people of Israel.
- At the moment these promises do not appear to be fulfilled and, at worst, after the formation of the church, has God abandoned Israel?
- God has also made promises to the church regarding faith in Jesus.
- But, if God has not been faithful to one set of promises made to the Jewish people, can we trust God to be faithful to us?

Core to Hebrew/Jewish faith is the idea of covenant – the relationship based upon faithful love between God and God's people. When God first made covenant with Abraham, the story records that God pledged God's very being (existence) on fulfilling God's covenant obligations.

If the Jews have been abandoned, as many have argued, then God's faithfulness and trustworthiness are in question. In essence, then, the issue at hand is the very character of God!

In Romans Paul's main point is that God can in fact be trusted because the good news of Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of God's covenant with the Jews, all humanity, and even all of creation.

This letter, then, is importantly about pastoral care – a pastor caring for people whose faith in the trustworthiness of God might be in crisis.

The Letter

Read Romans 8:1-39:

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. 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. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law—indeed it cannot, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh— for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written,

‘For your sake we are being killed all day long;
we are accounted 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, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Consider

In Paul’s view, then, the cross actually tells us something about God’s character, God’s attributes as God. . . The cross reveals the way God *is* by revealing the way God works in the world: through foolishness and weakness, at least as they are normally measured, rather than through wisdom and might, at least as they are normally measured. . . In [the

cross] we see the face of God – the face of sacrificial love, powerful weakness, and wise folly that redeems the world. – Michael J. Gorman in *Reading Paul* (2008).

Reflect

- Upon what do you rest your faith in God?
- What does the cross reveal about God? What about the resurrection?
- How do the cross and the resurrection connect with God's covenant promises to the children of Israel?
- How do the cross and the resurrection apply to your pastoral care needs?
- How does God respond to the needs of creation?
- What role does creation play in your spirituality and discipleship?
- Reflect upon the feminine and child birth language in this passage. How is feminine imagery connected to these other concepts: creation, covenant, righteousness, cross, and resurrection?

Meditate & Pray

Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing
By Robert Robinson (1735-1790)

Come, Thou Fount of every blessing,
Tune my heart to sing Thy grace;
Streams of mercy, never ceasing,
Call for songs of loudest praise:
Teach me some melodious sonnet,
Sung by flaming tongues above;
Praise the mount! I'm fixed upon it,
Mount of Thy redeeming love.

O to grace how great a debtor
Daily I'm constrained to be!
Let thy grace, Lord, like a fetter,
Bind my wandering heart to Thee:
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
Prone to leave the God I love;
Here's my heart, Lord, take and seal it,
Seal it for Thy courts above.

Act

This week spend some time in nature – go on a hike, take a walk, garden, etc. – as a spiritual experience. Then, separately, spend some time responding to the suffering of creation – recycle, pick up trash, advocate for the environment, bike instead of driving, etc.

VIII. The Law

July 6 – 12

What, then, about the Jewish law? If God is fulfilling God's covenant with the Jewish people, then what is the status of the Jewish law? Are we to obey it or not?

In Galatians Paul dealt with the specific situation of a group of people who were successfully persuading the Galatians that they needed to be circumcised in order to become followers of Christ. Paul argued vehemently against these folk, claiming that welcome into the Christian church is not connected with any status or merit. Jouette M. Bassler writes, "Upon one issue there is agreement: Paul understood his apostolic call to be a commission to bring a *law-free* gospel to the Gentiles" (*Navigating Paul: An Introduction to Key Theological Concepts*, 2007). Under this understanding, what Paul objected to was the use of obedience to the law (and its symbols such as circumcision) as identity-badges that gave one status above others. Some feminist scholars have even pointed out the liberation of women in Paul's views that removed the special status associated with penile circumcision.

Traditional understandings have said that the law existed in order to educate humanity in how sinful humanity was, because no one could live up to the law. "To live by grace for Luther meant that one should not find one's Christian identity in good works or ascetic practices, but only in conscious dependence on divine grace made available in Christ" (Mark Reasoner in *Romans in Full Circle: A History of Interpretation*, 2005). Karl Barth pointed out that the faithfulness which is revealed when we observe the law is not our own, but is the faithfulness of God.

Jewish scholars have argued that Paul (or, at least, the traditional understanding of Paul) misunderstood the role of the law (*mitzvot*) for the Jewish people. Emil Fackenheim, in his book *What is Judaism? An Interpretation for the Present Age* writes that it is true that we are humanly incapable of keeping the law, but that the keeping of the law "restores the soul." In other words, the keeping of the law manifests the grace of God, bringing about the ability to further keep the law, and also peace and great joy. Fackenheim also contends that Judaism is neither exclusive nor particularistic; rather, it is pluralistic and universalistic in that it holds that anyone, regardless of nation, race, or class, can fulfill the law.

Much work has been done in the last two decades to demonstrate that Paul's views on the law fit within one understanding of Judaism shared by his contemporaries. This has been part of the effort of recovering the Jewishness of Paul. His views on the law were not radically new, he simply reinterpreted them in light of Christ. According to E. P. Sanders (who initiated this new perspective on Paul), "Paul's real problem with the Mosaic law is simply that it is not faith in Christ" (Reasoner).

We are invited to an interesting understanding by Beverly Roberts Gaventa -- the Law is one of the intended-for-good-but-now-fallen powers that has become enslaved to Sin and Death.

The Letter

Read Romans 2:17-3:31:

But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast of your relation to God and know his will and determine what is best because you are instructed in the law, and if you are sure that you are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth, you, then, that teach others, will you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? You that forbid adultery, do you commit adultery?

You that abhor idols, do you rob temples? You that boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? For, as it is written, “The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.”

Circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law; but if you break the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. So, if those who are uncircumcised keep the requirements of the law, will not their uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? Then those who are physically uncircumcised but keep the law will condemn you that have the written code and circumcision but break the law. For a person is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is true circumcision something external and physical. Rather, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart—it is spiritual and not literal. Such a person receives praise not from others but from God.

Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? Much, in every way. For in the first place the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God. What if some were unfaithful? Will their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? By no means! Although everyone is a liar, let God be proved true, as it is written,

“So that you may be justified in your words, and prevail in your judging.”

But if our injustice serves to confirm the justice of God, what should we say? That God is unjust to inflict wrath on us? (I speak in a human way.) By no means! For then how could God judge the world? But if through my falsehood God’s truthfulness abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner? And why not say (as some people slander us by saying that we say), “Let us do evil so that good may come”? Their condemnation is deserved!

What then? Are we any better off? No, not at all; for we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin, as it is written:

“There is no one who is righteous, not even one; there is no one who has understanding, there is no one who seeks God. All have turned aside, together they have become worthless; there is no one who shows kindness, there is not even one.” “Their throats are opened graves; they use their tongues to deceive.” “The venom of vipers is under their lips.” “Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.” “Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery are in their paths, and the way of peace they have not known.” “There is no fear of God before their eyes.”

Now we know that whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For “no human being will be justified in his sight” by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin.

But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ [OR, “through the faith of Jesus Christ”] for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus [OR, “who has the faith of Jesus”].

Then what becomes of boasting? It is excluded. By what law? By that of works? No, but by the law of faith. For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law. Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since God is one; and he will justify the circumcised on the ground of faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith. Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.

Consider

Whatever it means for these communities to be “one body in Christ,” then, it does not mean isolation from the world. I find that a fairly remarkable point, since it would presumably have been easier to consolidate congregations theologically and socially by drawing more sharply the line around the community. (Paul seems to be able to build up without also tearing down, something lost on a number of contemporary voices.)

. . . One of Paul’s concerns about the congregations at Rome has to do with their grasp of the gospel (as Paul perceives it). Especially if many Roman Christians are Gentiles who come via the synagogue, Paul may know or fear that they understand the gospel largely as a way of gaining admission into Israel without undergoing circumcision. The gospel affords them a means to social alignment with Israel and its tradition, a way previously available to them only through circumcision. And he may know or fear that some, at the other extreme, have come to disdain Israel because most Jews in Rome have rejected the gospel. While Paul affirms the permanence of God’s calling to Israel, he also wants the Romans to understand that the gospel concerns humankind as a whole; indeed, it concerns the entirety of creation. The church, then, rightly knows that God has acted in Jesus Christ for the whole of creation, even as the church lives out its own vocation as the body of Christ. – Beverly Roberts Gaventa in *Our Mother Saint Paul* (2007).

Reflect

- What are some symbols of status and merit in your life? Do you use those to separate yourself from others?
- The relationship between faith and works was one of the crucial theological issues of the Protestant Reformation and this passage in Romans was the center of that debate. Do you believe that this is what the passage is about?
- What are your own views about the relationships between faith, works, and the grace of God?
- The great 20th century rabbi, Abraham Joshua Heschel, said, “Pluralism is the will of God.” How might Paul’s treatment of the law agree or disagree with Rabbi Heschel?
- Notice in the passage that there were two possible translations of one phrase to mean either “faith in Christ” or “faith of Christ.” Both translations are valid. What differences of meaning are there in the two translations?
- Also, the translation can be crucial in how one understands the salvation of God. For two thousand years interpreters have argued for one or the other interpretation or for some shading of meaning that captures both. What might be the different ways one would understand the salvation of God, suggested by the various translations/interpretations?

Meditate & Pray

Amazing Grace
By John Newton (1725-1807)

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me!

I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind but now I see.

Through many dangers, toils, and snares
I have already come;
'Tis grace that brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.

Act

Pick a new discipline to engage in this week. Something you do not normally do. Maybe set a goal to walk so many miles every day. Or to be a vegetarian for one week. Or to write a letter every day. Or to fast one meal each day. Anything that is not a normal discipline for you. During the week and at the end of the week reflect on how that discipline has been a burden and how that discipline has been a grace.

IX. Justification

July 13 -- 19

Now for one of those big theological words!

Paul uses many metaphors to discuss the salvation of God – redemption, reconciliation, adoption, atonement, rescue, justification, propitiation, even salvation itself, which is a medical term in the original Greek, etc.

Much theological energy has been focused on the doctrine of justification, wherein the righteousness (justice, faithfulness) of God is imputed to humankind.

For example, it was central in the debates of the Protestant Reformation, wherein the focus was on personal guilt being atoned by the death of Christ. For example, here is Martin Luther in his *Commentary on Romans*:

God from eternity has ordained and set forth Christ as the propitiation for our sins, but that only for those who believe in Him. . . He first had to make amends for us through the shedding of His blood. And all this God did “to declare His righteousness,” that is, to make it known that all men are sinners and in need of His righteousness. . . God forgives our sins through Christ’s propitiation and so justifieth us by faith.

This doctrine has been central to the spirituality of many people. For example, John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, wrote the following about his conversion experience on May 24, 1738:

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther’s Preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation, and an assurance was given me that he had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death.

Yet, this view which many still think is *the* biblical view did not develop fully until 1000 years into Christian history and always had its detractors, such as the Medieval theologian Peter Abelard who raised questions that recent scholars have raised as well, such as “If redemption from God’s own punishment is the model, why did God set the price of redemption to be the death of an innocent son? How could accepting this outrageous arrangement bring our redemption or righteousness?” (in Mark Reasoner’s *Romans in Full Circle: A History of Interpretation*, 2005). In fact Abelard thought that

love is the driving force of the justification God effects, so that his love is displayed to us or reaches out to us, bringing us into debt to love God, who did not spare the Son for us. . . divine love spreads through us as God in Christ unites with our nature (Reasoner).

Needless to say, there is a new perspective on this aspect of Paul’s teaching as well. As one reviewer in *The Christian Century* wrote, “Paul’s gospel is not about a narcissistic preoccupation with individual salvation” (22 April 2008).

What then is it about?

According to Anglican Bishop N. T. Wright, “we see the meaning of ‘justified’, not as a statement about how someone becomes a Christian, but as a statement about *who belongs to the people of*

God, and how you can tell that in the present (Paul in Fresh Perspective, 2005). Jouette M. Bassler agrees and argues that justification must be understood within the context of God's covenant with creation made through the Jewish people. The issue, then, is not how to be saved, but how God is including everyone else in the covenant. Justification, then, is really about the formation of the pluralistic people of God.

Romans 5:18-19 has generated much debate: "Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous."

One of the earliest commentators on Romans was the third century church father Origen of Alexandria. Origen held that a benevolent God would work with free humans to secure the salvation of all. Origen held that all creation was to be reconciled ultimately to God, even Satan and the demons. Other scholars like Augustine, Aquinas, and Luther have contended that the second "all" in the quote does not mean "all humanity" like the first use of "all," but simply all those who are spiritually reborn (whether predestined or out of free choice, they disagree).

In the twentieth century Karl Barth wrote, "In the light of this act of obedience there is no man who is not – in Christ. All are renewed and clothed with righteousness, all are become a new subject, and are therefore set at liberty and placed under the affirmation of God." Barth qualifies by claiming that the ultimate salvation of all remains only a hope, not a certainty (Reasoner).

Richard Bell points out that the "much more" in 5:15b would not make sense if the grace that comes through Christ's obedience has fewer people as its object than the sin that comes about through Adam's disobedience" (Reasoner).

The Letter

Read Romans 5:1-6:14:

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned— sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law. Yet death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who is a type of the one who was to come.

But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died through the one man's trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many. And the free gift is not like the effect of the one man's sin. For the judgement following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification. If, because of the one man's trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.

Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous. But law came in, with the result that the trespass multiplied; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, just as sin exercised dominion in death, so grace might also exercise dominion through justification leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For whoever has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

Consider

Judaism teaches that the righteous of all nations have a share in the world to come. Christians have often found it hard to avoid the doctrine that only those within the church are among the saved. Never was that doctrine applied more scandalously than when in 1961 a Baptist missionary traveled all the way from Canada to Jerusalem. He had come to convert Adolf Eichmann, then on trial for his life. When asked by reporters whether a last-minute conversion would get the Nazi arch-criminal into heaven, the missionary replied in the affirmative. When asked whether his unconverted Jewish victims, among them the children, were in heaven, he replied in the negative. – Emil Fackenheim in *What is Judaism? An Interpretation for the Present Age*, 1987.

Reflect

- What covenants have you entered into in your life?
- What do you think of the story Fackenheim tells? What feelings does it elicit in you? What thoughts?

- How might your understanding of the Christian faith and the church change if you adopt the new perspective of Paul's doctrine of justification?
- Are profound spiritual experiences like the one Wesley recorded really a form of "narcissism?"
- Do you believe in universal salvation? Why or why not?

Meditate & Pray

Jesus, Thy Blood and Righteousness
Nicolaus L. von Zinzendorf (1700 - 1760)

Jesus, Thy blood and righteousness
My beauty are, my glorious dress;
'Midst flaming worlds, in these arrayed,
With joy shall I lift up my head.

Bold shall I stand in Thy great day;
For who aught to my charge shall lay?
Fully absolved through these I am
From sin and fear, from guilt and shame.

The holy, meek, unspotted Lamb,
Who from the Father's bosom came,
Who died for me, e'en me to atone,
Now for my Lord and God I own.

Lord, I believe Thy precious blood,
Which, at the mercy seat of God,
Forever doth for sinners plead,
For me, e'en for my soul, was shed.

Lord, I believe were sinners more
Than sands upon the ocean shore,
Thou hast for all a ransom paid,
For all a full atonement made.

When from the dust of death I rise
To claim my mansion in the skies,
Ev'n then this shall be all my plea,
Jesus hath lived, hath died, for me.

This spotless robe the same appears,
When ruined nature sinks in years;
No age can change its glorious hue,
The robe of Christ is ever new.

Jesus, the endless praise to Thee,
Whose boundless mercy hath for me—
For me a full atonement made,
An everlasting ransom paid.

O let the dead now hear Thy voice;
Now bid Thy banished ones rejoice;

Their beauty this, their glorious dress,
Jesus, Thy blood and righteousness.

Act

What are your favourite hymns? Sing them to yourself while driving, cleaning house, or taking a shower. Then, reflect on what it is that you like about those hymns. Next, consider the lyrics of those hymns. What theological messages do they convey? In what ways do they focus on the individual? In what ways do they focus on the community? In what ways do they focus on God?

X. Election and Salvation

July 20 - 26

Romans has been the source of debates about election, predestination, free-will, and universal salvation that have animated Christianity for two millennia. We cannot begin to discuss all these issues, but we are aware that the various views people have on these issues affect their reading of Romans.

In Romans Paul addresses election and salvation in discussing the relationship between Jews and Gentiles. Yale Divinity School professor Leander Keck writes that in order to understand what Paul is saying “most Christian Gentiles [have] to flush out of their minds what they assume Paul is talking about” (*Romans*, 2005).

Why? Because the interpretations of Paul on this issue have led to views of Christian superiority in relation to Jews (called “supersessionism”). This theological view easily descends into anti-Semitism and violence. Karl Barth claimed that instead of interpreting Paul through the lens of anti-Semitism, Paul’s teaching should have led the church to oppose the Nazis. And post-Holocaust Christian scholars are leery of anything that hints at supersessionism.

This time let’s read the passage first before further discussing the issues.

The Lesson

Read Romans 11:1-12:8:

I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. Do you not know what the scripture says of Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel? “Lord, they have killed your prophets, they have demolished your altars; I alone am left, and they are seeking my life.” But what is the divine reply to him? “I have kept for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal.” So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace. But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace would no longer be grace.

What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened, as it is written,

“God gave them a sluggish spirit, eyes that would not see and ears that would not hear, down to this very day.” And David says, “Let their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a retribution for them; let their eyes be darkened so that they cannot see, and keep their backs forever bent.”

So I ask, have they stumbled so as to fall? By no means! But through their stumbling salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous. Now if their stumbling means riches for the world, and if their defeat means riches for Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean!

Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I glorify my ministry in order to make my own people jealous, and thus save some of them. For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead! If the part of the dough offered as first fruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy; and if the root is holy, then the branches also are holy.

But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, a wild olive shoot, were grafted in their place to share the rich root of the olive tree, do not boast over the branches. If you do boast, remember that it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you. You will say, "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in." That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand only through faith. So do not become proud, but stand in awe. For if God did not spare the natural branches, perhaps he will not spare you. Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness toward you, provided you continue in his kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off. And even those of Israel, if they do not persist in unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again. For if you have been cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these natural branches be grafted back into their own olive tree.

So that you may not claim to be wiser than you are, brothers and sisters, I want you to understand this mystery: a hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved; as it is written,

"Out of Zion will come the Deliverer; he will banish ungodliness from Jacob." "And this is my covenant with them, when I take away their sins."

As regards the gospel they are enemies of God for your sake; but as regards election they are beloved, for the sake of their ancestors; for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. Just as you were once disobedient to God but have now received mercy because of their disobedience, so they have now been disobedient in order that, by the mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy. For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

"For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?" "Or who has given a gift to him, to receive a gift in return?"

For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen.

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

Discussion

Underlying this passage are a number of Old Testament references. Use your study bible to follow some of those connections. The overall theme is that of the remnant. Throughout the Hebrew prophets the remnant was the small group of faithful Israel which served as a bridge to the future and a sign of hope whenever Israel was in exile or enduring judgment. The remnant was always a sign that God would be faithful in restoring the people. For Paul, the elect are this faithful remnant.

To what are the elect called? N. T. Wright reminds us that “election was never about Israel being called for its own sake, but always about God’s call of Israel to be the light of the world” (*Paul in Fresh Perspective*, 2005). The purpose of election, then, whether of Israel or the church is never for its own benefit but for what benefit it brings to the whole world.

Paul offers himself as the paradigm example, what Keck calls “an ‘entrepreneur of identity’ demonstrating that he is an exemplar of the new identity in Christ.” That identity is based upon participation in the crucifixion and resurrection, what is called “cruciformity.”

Consider

Popular writer and preacher Brian McLaren’s newest book is entitled *Everything Must Change: Jesus, Global Crises, and a Revolution of Hope*. In his review, Todd Friesen of Lombard Mennonite Church writes:

[Jesus’] new framing story tells us that we have been created not “to shop” but to live in loving relationship with our Creator, one another and creation. This new narrative gathers us into faith communities that proclaim and embody God’s liberating and nonviolent love. It leads us not to escape our troubled world but to engage its crises so God’s will may be done on earth as it is in heaven. Evoking September 11, McLaren provocatively writes that the followers of Jesus are called to “fly airplanes of generosity into towers of need and plant improvised encouragement devices (IEDs) by roadsides and in neighborhoods everywhere” (in *The Christian Century*, 22 April 2008).

Reflect

- What do terms like election, predestination, free-will, and universal salvation mean to you? How were they interpreted in your religious heritage?
- How might Christian views of election lead to violence against Jews?
- In this passage, Paul says that “all Israel” will be saved. How do you interpret that?
- How might a faithful remnant lead to the salvation of all?
- Who is someone you consider to be a paradigm example of what it means to be a Christian?
- What is your spiritual gift?

Meditate & Pray

Have Thine Own Way, Lord
By Adelaide A. Pollard (1862-1934)

Have Thine own way, Lord! Have Thine own way!
Thou art the potter, I am the clay!
Mold me and make me after Thy will,
While I am waiting, yielded and still.

Have Thine own way, Lord! Have Thine own way!
Hold o’er my being absolute sway!

Fill with Thy Spirit till all shall see
Christ only, always, living in me.

Act

This week get in touch with a mentor or exemplar who has influenced your understanding of what it means to be a Christian. Spend time talking with that person. Ask them to share stories about the people who influenced them on their Christian journey.

XI. Faith

July 27 – August 2

For the early church father Origen, having faith in Christ meant living the virtuous life, so for Origen faith and works were not opposites, but complements of one another. Having faith in Christ means living as Christ did (Reasoner).

Contrary to that notion is Martin Luther, of whom Mark Reasoner writes,

The innovation that Luther brings in the interpretation of justification is that he considers it an instantaneous transaction that brings passive righteousness, not actual righteousness, to the believer. This breaks from the pattern of over a millennium, dating at least back to Origen, of viewing justification as a discipleship process that calls one to cultivate and practice righteous living.

In his recent study of Paul, Michael J. Gorman presents faith as participation in the life of Christ: “Paul sees faith as a *sharing* in the death of Jesus that is so real, so vivid, that it can be described as being crucified with Christ or co-crucified. . . Faith, then, is a death experience that leads to a resurrection experience – that is, to life, to justification” (*Reading Paul*, 2008).

No matter how they nuance it, all agree that Christian faith calls for a new way of living. Faith is the way we participate in the story of God presented throughout this book, the story of God’s righteousness, of forming a new multi-cultural community, of challenging the powers, of Christ’s death and resurrection.

The Letter

Read Romans 4:1-25:

What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.” Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness. So also David speaks of the blessedness of those to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works: “Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the one against whom the Lord will not reckon sin.”

Is this blessedness, then, pronounced only on the circumcised, or also on the uncircumcised? We say, “Faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness.” How then was it reckoned to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the ancestor of all who believe without being circumcised and who thus have righteousness reckoned to them, and likewise the ancestor of the circumcised who are not only circumcised but who also follow the example of the faith that our ancestor Abraham had before he was circumcised.

For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation.

For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations") —in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become "the father of many nations," according to what was said, "So numerous shall your descendants be." He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. Therefore his faith "was reckoned to him as righteousness." Now the words, "it was reckoned to him," were written not for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.

Consider

Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate. – Dietrich Bonhoeffer in *The Cost of Discipleship*, 1937.

Reflect

- What do you think "faith" means?
- What is the relationship between faith and works?
- Have you ever considered faith to be participation in a way of life? How might that view of faith affect your life and participation in the church?
- What would discipleship *with* the cross, *with* Jesus Christ living and incarnate look like? Can you think of any exemplars of this way of life?
- What actions/rituals do you perform each week which are expressions of your faith?

Meditate & Pray

Make Me a Captive, Lord
By George Matheson (1842-1906)

Make me a captive, Lord,
And then I shall be free;
Force me to render up my sword,
And I shall conqueror be.

I sink in life's alarms
When by myself I stand;
Imprison me within Thine arms,
And strong shall be my hand.
My heart is weak and poor
Until its master finds;
It has no spring of action sure,
It varies with the wind.

It cannot freely move
Till Thou hast wrought its chain;
Enslave it with Thy matchless love,
And deathless it shall reign.

Act

Every day this week take time to worship God, what Marva Dawn calls “the royal waste of time.” Worship of God is a sign that your life is ordered differently. Each day what is an act of worship you can perform? Make certain to worship with our church family this week.

XII. Homosexuality

August 3 - 9

Well, I wanted to save this for near the end, despite the fact that many of you would be interested and despite the fact that the relevant passage comes at the beginning of the letter. I wanted you to have the full context of the letter before we turned to this passage.

First, we've looked at the congregation to which the letter was written. This congregation is filled with those who are on the marginalized and powerless side of the social spectrum, particularly slaves. A particular feature to keep in mind is that slaves were fully owned by their masters, which in ancient Rome meant that they could be used sexually by their owners.

Second, we've seen that the letter seeks to bridge division and form community by demonstrating that all people have been enslaved to sin, judged by God, and set free in the death and resurrection of Christ.

Third, we should be aware that Paul makes use of various rhetorical devices familiar in the literature of his contemporaries. Occasionally he imagines an interlocutor who presents an argument that Paul can then argue against. Sometimes he uses a familiar argument from the period in order to later subvert it (like the prophet Amos did in the sermon that opens his book).

A fourth thing to keep in mind, the sexual ethics common in ancient writers of this period is the problem of passions. Rarely is the object of one's passions the issue; the issue is an excess of any passion. This too seems to be Paul's concern.

Keeping those things in mind, what to make of this passage?

- 1) This is not a passage in which Paul is giving ethical instruction. He is describing the state of humanity *before* the redemption of God.
- 2) The sin primarily at issue in this passage is idolatry.
- 3) Whatever actions the people are engaging in, it is something that God "handed them over" to.
- 4) Paul is using a rhetorical device to arouse a negative response in his readers, before turning the argument of non-judgmentalism upon them in the very next section of the letter (!!!!!), which is his main point.
- 5) The language about passions is similar to that used by other Roman ethicists who otherwise supported or were ambivalent about same-sex relationships. The issue here is that the passions give evidence of the fallen nature of creation, another reference to the enslavement of humanity by the powers of Sin and Death.
- 6) Unnatural is not a moral category for Paul. To read the passage this way is to read St. Thomas Aquinas' philosophy back into it. In fact, Paul describes the salvation offered by God to the Gentiles as "unnatural" in Romans 11:24 (the phrase in the Greek is *para physin*). "Unnatural" for Paul means "unexpected" or "uncommon."
- 7) When you look at the list of sins two things are apparent. First, they result from disordered passions (covetousness, malice, strife, etc.). Second, they generally reveal actions of violence, abuse, or harm to another person. Using this analysis, it looks as if the "shameless acts" discussed in the third paragraph also result from disordered passions and are abusive or harmful of another person. Could it be that the sexual abuse of slaves is in question, given Paul's audience? It is possible.

This passage, then, does not speak to the same-sex loving (not abusive or violent) followers of Christ (the redeemed, non-idolatrous).

The Letter

Read Romans 1:18-2:16:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse; for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools; and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles.

Therefore God handed them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

For this reason God handed them over to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.

And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God handed them over to a debased mind and to things that should not be done. They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. They know God's decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die—yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practice them.

Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things. You say, "We know that God's judgment on those who do such things is in accordance with truth." Do you imagine, whoever you are, that when you judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself, you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you despise the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not realize that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But by your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath, when God's righteous judgment will be revealed. For he will repay according to each one's deeds: to those who by patiently doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; while for those who are self-seeking and who obey not the truth but wickedness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be anguish and distress for everyone who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. For God shows no partiality.

All who have sinned apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God's sight, but the doers of the law who will be justified. When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves. They show that what the law

requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them on the day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all.

Consider

For Paul, the cross is the point at which the “handing over” to the anti-God powers reaches its undoing, since it is here that “God handed over his own Son” (Rom 8:31-32), which is not victory for the powers but their unmasking and the sure sign of their defeat. . . God has signaled in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ that the time of handing over, of confining all to sin, is past. God has condemned not only Sin (8:3) but also all the anti-God powers (8:31-39) in this definitive action to reclaim the world for God’s own self. – Beverly Roberts Gaventa in *Our Mother Saint Paul*, 2007.

Reflect

- How have you heard this passage used for abuse and violence? How often did folk go on to consider what Paul says in the second chapter of the letter about not judging?
- Does the consideration that the audience included male slaves raped by their male masters affect the interpretation of the passage?
- Do you think that placed within the context of the larger letter that this text, in fact, becomes one of liberation?
- If our passions are no longer enslaved to Sin, but rather to Christ, what does that mean for us sexually? How can our erotic life be Christ-centered?

Meditate & Pray

When Love is Found
By Brian Wren (1936 -)

When love is found and hope comes home,
Sing and be glad that two are one.
When love explodes and fills the sky,
Praise God, and share our Maker’s joy.

When love has flowered in trust and care,
Build both each day, that love may dare
To reach beyond home’s warmth and light,
To serve and strive for truth and right.

Act

Practice Christ-centered eroticism this week, however that looks for you.

XIII. Calling & Mission

August 10 - 16

Let's go back to the beginning.

Paul is writing to share the gospel as he has experienced it and now lives it. The whole of Romans is a description of his calling and his mission, as he seeks participation with the Roman churches in fulfilling his calling and his mission.

The letter, then, invites us to reflect on our calling and mission as God's church in this time and place.

The Letter

Read Romans 1:1-17:

Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name, including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ, To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed throughout the world. For God, whom I serve with my spirit by announcing the gospel of his Son, is my witness that without ceasing I remember you always in my prayers, asking that by God's will I may somehow at last succeed in coming to you. For I am longing to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you— or rather so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine. I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as I have among the rest of the Gentiles. I am a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish — hence my eagerness to proclaim the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, 'The one who is righteous will live by faith.'

Consider

Notice that everything Paul has said so far [in verses 1-6], in this one very long sentence in Greek, is in apposition to the name Paul. He is describing himself . . . the first thing we notice is that Paul cannot introduce himself without referencing a story. Not just any story but the story that is so central to Paul's life that it is in a sense what makes him "Paul." The gospel of God invaded Paul's life and changed his way of seeing reality so powerfully that, in a way, he is telling his own story whenever he preaches the gospel of God. – Katherine Grieb, *The Story of Romans: A Narrative Defense of God's Righteousness*, 2002

Reflect

- What is your calling?
- How does your calling participate in the mission of the church?
- How does the Christ story change the way you see reality?
- How does the Christ story become your story?

Meditate & Pray

God of Grace and God of Glory
By Harry Emerson Fosdick (1878-1969)

God of grace and God of glory, on your people pour your power;
Crown your ancient Church's story, bring its bud to glorious flower.
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage for the facing of this hour.

Set our feet on lofty places; gird our lives that they may be
Armored with all Christ-like graces in the fight to set men free.
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage, that we fail not man nor Thee!

Act

Whatever it is that God has called you to do as your participation in the church, do it this week, with the renewed sense that you are living out the story of Jesus Christ in your own life.

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