

## Romans

### *New Testament Survey – Lesson 22*

My dear friend from childhood, Kevin contacted me recently. He is involved in a Bible study on Romans and was perplexed about a passage coming up in their study. The passage is Romans 2:5-10,

But because of 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. He will render to each one according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be tribulation and distress for every human being 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.

For my friend, and for many people, this passage seemed to fly in the face of the Biblical doctrine of salvation by grace through faith, not of works (lest any man should boast! See, e.g., Eph. 2:8-10). Kevin asked me if I had any thoughts on the passage, and I told him yes, and I would love to talk to him about it.

Two days later, we had a chance to sit down for a brief conversation. I told him that behind my view, was an approach to reading the New Testament epistles that Gordon Fee clearly set forward in his marvelous book, *How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth*. (Please note, I consider the book marvelous, but the title atrocious! No one is ever going to read the Bible for all it's worth, much less teach others to!)

Fee explains that if studying a passage from an epistle, one should first read through the whole epistle, making notes about the flow of thought. Along with this full read-through, one should also do a bit of research to better establish any cultural understanding of the events that might have surrounded the epistle.

The epistles of the New Testament are what scholars call, "occasional." By that the scholar means that the epistle was written for a specific occasion or reason. Unfortunately, we do not always know the reasons, but have to glean them through clues given by history as well as the letters themselves. At times, it can be a bit like listening to just one side of a telephone conversation, but it is not generally hard to put most passages into context.

***www.Biblical-literacy.com***

When many read the troublesome passage in Romans, they make the mistake of reading it in isolation. That frequently leads to trouble in Bible study, and it most certainly does here. We will put Romans into its historical context, and then be able to better understand not only this passage, but also others in the letter.

## BACKGROUND

Scripture does not tell us the origins of the church at Rome. We do know that there were Jews from Rome in Jerusalem during Pentecost. Acts 2:10 tells us that “visitors from Rome” were among those who heard the apostles speaking in tongues and heard Peter’s first sermon that first opened the kingdom of God to mankind on Pentecost when God added to his church “about three thousand souls” (Acts 2:41). We also know there was a thriving Christian community there at the time Paul wrote his letter to the Romans, even though Paul had never personally been to the Empire’s capital.

Secular history does not give us the church’s origins in Rome either. C. Suetonius Tranquillus (c.70AD – post 130) wrote a history of the lives of the Caesars around 119AD. Suetonius’s credentials give credence to the accuracy of his writings. Under Trajan, who ruled the Roman Empire from 98 to 117, Suetonius served as Director of the Imperial Archives. Later, Suetonius was the personal secretary to the Roman Emperor Hadrian in 119 – 121, and it was during this time that Suetonius finished his work on the lives of the Caesars.

We have the *Lives of the Caesars* still available today. Book five tells of Claudius, who ruled the Empire from 41 to 54AD. This was the stretch of time that included Paul’s second missionary journey. Suetonius has an important passage buried in the middle of Claudius’s actions while emperor (The Latin is important, so we add it here):

Since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he expelled them from Rome.

*Iudaeos impulsore Chresto assidue tumultuantis Roma expulit.*<sup>1</sup>

We have used the English translation of John Carew Rolfe, one of the top classical translators of the early to mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. Rolfe put the name “Chresto” into its basic Latin form as “Chrestus.” Rolfe then added in a footnote that this was “another form of *Christus*,” or “Christ” in English.

---

<sup>1</sup> Loeb Classical Library, *Suetonius II*, LCL vol. 38 (Harvard University Press 1997 ed.) translated by J. C. Rolfe at 25.4.

Most scholars understand this to be referencing Christ, although a small few think that there may have been another Jew in Rome by such a name at the time of Paul. “*Chrestus*” is not a typical Jewish name. For that matter, it is not a common Greek or Latin name either. It is a Latinized derivation of the Greek word for “anointed” (Christos - Χριστός), not the Hebrew word, which would be *Mashiach*. Instead, it seems to be an alternate spelling of *Christus*, or “Christ.”

The earlier Roman writer Tacitus (c.55AD – c.120) wrote of Jesus’ death and his followers, using the spelling *Christus* during the era of Nero, the emperor who followed after the death of Claudius in 54AD. Nero used the group as a scapegoat to quell the rumors that Nero himself had caused the great fires in Rome which were used to prepare the neighborhood for Nero’s new buildings.

Therefore to scotch the rumour, Nero substituted as culprits, and punished with the utmost refinements of cruelty, a class of men, loathed for their vices<sup>2</sup>, whom the crowd styled Christians [“*Christianos*”]. Christus [“*Christus*”], the founder of the name, had undergone the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius, by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilate, and the pernicious superstition was checked for a moment, only to break out once more, not merely in Judaea, the home of the disease, but in the capital itself, where all things horrible or shameful in the world collect and find a vogue.<sup>3</sup>

We should add here that there was no real dictionary at the time, and standardized spelling is much more a modern novelty than a historical fact. In the pre-dictionary days, spelling was often based on pronunciation. The African lawyer turned theologian Q. Septimius Florens Tertullian (c. 150AD – 222) recognized as much in his defense of the faith written less than 100 years later:

“Christian,” [“*Christianus*”] so far as translating goes, is derived from “anointing.” Yes, and when it is mispronounced by you

---

<sup>2</sup> A major indictment against Christians at the time included cannibalism, based upon the suggestion they consumed the body and blood of a person at closed feasts. This was a public misunderstanding of the concept of the Eucharist, which was celebrated in private by the church. The public just heard the rumors that associated the Lord’s Supper with the body and blood of Christ. For more, see the martyr lessons in the class’s church history series available at [www.Biblical-literacy.com](http://www.Biblical-literacy.com).

<sup>3</sup> Loeb Classical Library, *Tacitus Annals Books XIII-XVI*, LCL vol. 322 (Harvard University Press 1997 ed.) translated by John Jackson at 15.44.

“Chrestian” [“*Chrestianus*”] (for you have not even certain knowledge of the mere name)...<sup>4</sup>

In summation, here we have a nice set of historical writings that dovetail perfectly, and add some important context to the narrative provided by Luke in the book of Acts. Luke’s history recorded that Paul’s first encounter with Priscilla and Aquila in Corinth sometime during his stay there from 50 – 52AD came about because of the actions of Claudius.

And he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. And he went to see them” (Acts 18:2).

We also know that the Jews were later allowed to return to their homes in Rome, because by the time Paul writes his Roman letter, Priscilla and Aquila have returned and he sends them his greetings (Rom. 16:3).

This information tells us a great deal behind the situation at Rome that Paul addressed in his letter (we should add here that this is the first letter we have studied of Paul’s that he wrote to a church where he had never personally visited!<sup>5</sup>). Consider the likely situation at Rome:

- Jews from Rome hear Peter preach in Jerusalem and return to Rome, likely starting the church (Acts 2:10).
- The church grows to include a large number of both Jews and Gentiles.
- The Jews begin the church, and one may reasonably surmise, have the core leadership positions.
- The Jews are forced to leave Rome and the church.
- During the time the Jews are gone (likely several years), the converted Gentiles become the leaders that control and direct the congregation.

---

<sup>4</sup> Loeb Classical Library, *Tertullian Apology*, LCL vol. 250 (Harvard University Press 1997 ed.) translated by T.R. Glover, at 3.5.

<sup>5</sup> Paul did, however, know many people in the church in Rome. Reading Paul’s personal notes in chapter 16 of the letter impresses us with the number of people and church workers in Rome who were close to Paul. Some scholars are not so ready to attribute Paul’s letter as prompted by a need to address issues. They typically see it more as a treatise that Paul wrote as a way of Paul introducing himself more fully to a church he had never visited.

- After the death of Claudius (Oct. 13, 54AD), Jews were allowed back into Rome.
- The church's first members, the early authority and leadership, returned likely ready to resume their positions of leadership.
- Yet, the Gentile Christians no doubt recognized that God had continued working in the church while they were its leadership and core constituency.

One can readily understand how such a church could have issues that need answers and insight from the Lord.

Into this situation came this letter from Paul. Paul had left Ephesus and worked his way back to Corinth. Around 57AD, Paul wrote to the Romans from Corinth, a port city with a western harbor that constantly sent ships to the coast of Italy and the *via appia* road that led straight to the capital city. Paul wrote to set the church on its core foundations.

Paul's letter addressed the equal standing of Gentile and Jew in the church, setting aright any lingering issues or doubts that might have arisen from the Jewish departure and return. Paul gave insight into the position of the Gentile and the Jew before God. Paul knew that as the believers understood their respective place before God, their personal interactions and church roles would logically follow.<sup>6</sup>

## THE LETTER

Paul's Roman letter is a good example of the necessity for the proper way to read a New Testament epistle. First, one should consider the information we know about the situation or circumstances of the epistle. We have done that above. Then one should read the letter start to finish, preferably in one sitting, making notes along the way. These notes should include common words and phrases used over and over. One should also try to note the flow of thought in the epistle, as

---

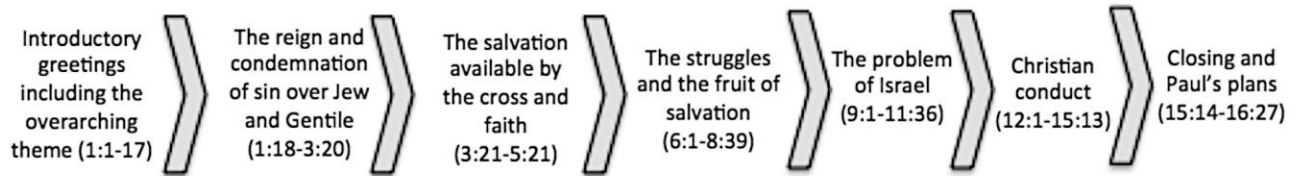
<sup>6</sup> Some scholars believe that Paul used the Greek word *parakaleo* (παρακαλέω) to signify his ultimate intent behind his letters. This word is generally translated "I appeal..." or "I urge..." It has been likened to a college student who writes home with a number of details before reaching his true purpose of, "please send money!" We do see this word used by Paul in ways that underscore his concerns. In Romans, it comes in 12:1 as Paul appealed for the Romans to all present themselves to God appropriately, each appreciating the gifts given each, which were never parceled out by the Spirit based upon ethnicity (Jew or Gentile). Paul again uses the word in Rom. 15:30 and 16:17 as Paul reiterates his appeal for unity. These indicate the importance of this letter in addressing the Jew Gentile issue that likely arose from the severance and then reunion of the Jewish believers.

one subject weaves into another. This enables one to put not only the entire letter into its historical context, but also the various passages and verses into the larger context of the writer’s frame of mind. It gives better meaning to the passages. This is what my friend Kevin and I discussed about the Romans 2:5-10 verses referenced in the introduction to this lesson.

The final step I recommend is *after* the previous steps, consult commentaries and scholastic works for their perceptions and to help understand particularly troublesome passages.

If we look at my notes from the flow of the book, they basically show the following:

**Notes of overall flow of Romans**



In this manner, we next approach the basic understanding of the entire text as I use the following pages to summarize and paraphrase Romans to give the letter a sensible (I hope) overview.

*Introductory greetings and the overarching theme (1:1-17)*

Paul began the letter as a “servant of Christ” whom God called into the role of an apostle. This expression, while Greek, has strong overtones to any Hebrew thinker, of which there would have been many in Rome. The Hebrew idea of “servant of God” (*ebed adonai*) denoted authority, as one who is an emissary of God. For Paul, he was *ebed mashiach*, or servant of the anointed, *i.e.*, of Christ. God had set Paul apart for His “gospel” (the proclamation of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ for the sins of mankind<sup>7</sup>). The death and resurrection of

---

<sup>7</sup> See the terms Paul used in reference to the “good news” or “gospel” as he set out in 1 Corinthians 15. Paul does not use the word “gospel” indiscriminately. We err if we think that Paul is referencing stories of the life of Christ when Paul uses “gospel.” While we rightly consider the first four books of the Bible “gospel accounts,” Paul means something very specific by his use of the term. Paul makes this clear in 1 Corinthians when he writes to remind the Corinthians of the terms in which he preached the “gospel.”

Christ were the fulfillment of centuries of God's work and promises. Jesus, who physically descended from King David, is at the same time the very Son of God as we witness by his resurrection. This is the truth that establishes the faith and obedience of Christians among *all* nations (Gentile or Jew!).

Paul thanked God for the Romans' faith that was proclaimed throughout the world! This especially makes sense in light of the size of disturbance that caused Claudius to evict them from Rome. They were also so significant that they would make a convenient scapegoat for Nero in just a few short years from Paul's letter. Paul wanted to visit the church at Rome badly. He wanted to bring them spiritual blessings as well as receive the encouragement of firsthand interaction with their faith.

Paul also wanted to come to Rome and preach Christ's death and resurrection as God's means of forgiveness for Paul's sins as well as those of others. This message was not one that shamed Paul in any way. Paul knew that through the death and resurrection of Christ came God's power to save everyone! It came first to Jews, but it is the same gospel, the same death and resurrection, the same power that God had to save the Gentiles. The cross of Christ and the empty tomb revealed God's own righteousness. In it, we see a fresh aspect to the prophet Habakkuk's revelation that "the righteous shall live by faith" (Hab. 2:4).

*The reign and condemnation of sin over Jew and Gentile (1:18-3:20)*

Humanity has a problem. The ungodliness and unrighteousness of mankind is properly subject to God's wrath. God did not make man, nor did he make the world, for evil and destructive behavior. One can clearly discern God and "right" merely by reflecting on the world and humanity. No one has an excuse for behaving as man has. The evidence of God is in us as well as the world, but rather than honor God, man gave, and continues to give, himself over to futile thinking and foolish hearts. Man exchanged the incomparable glory of the Creator for sorry images of animals or humans.

God let man's choices take man to the logical ends. Man walked in impurity and darkness worshipping created things rather than the Creator. It is most clearly seen in the basest of perversions and sins. Mankind practices all types of sin, and approves those who do likewise. Think about it: Practicing homosexuality, evil, envy, malice, murder, strife, deceit, insolence, arrogance, boasting, disobedience to parents, foolishness, faithlessness, and ruthlessness. These sins are worthy of death! This is not what God intended for his most precious creation – for man made in His image!

This fact of sin allows us to point out God's righteous judgment on others, but it also places each of us under God's judgment as well! Just because we have tasted

God's kindness and know of his patience does not make us any less culpable for our sins! God has a principle of judgment that is clean and simple. You do right, you live eternally in his care. But if you sin, you are condemned. This is true whether you are a Jew or a Gentile; it really does not matter! Gentiles may not have God's law, the Torah, but God has made clear right and wrong through nature and the conscience of man. Barring someone living perfectly her or his entire life, all Gentiles are condemned before God.

Now Jews, just because they received God's holy law, his Torah, should never think themselves better off than Gentiles! They may have had the light of scripture, a guide for the blind, and God's very embodiment of truth, but it was never what you *have*, it is what you do! Even circumcision is no magic cure for all sin. The law sets out God's holiness, and failure to live it 100 percent is failure.

Does this mean there is no difference at all between Jew and Gentile? Of course not! The Jews were blessed with something special in the Scriptures. These are the very words of God. These words show God's faithfulness even though the Jews were unfaithful in following it. The key is understanding that while God has always been faithful, mankind has not! So, in terms of our standing before God, there really is no difference between Jews and Gentiles.

We read this in the Holy Scriptures. We read that *no one* is righteous; no one understands God or seeks for Him. There is not anyone who even manages to do one pure good deed! (See Psalms 14:1-3 and 53:1-3).

While God has a principle of judgment, salvation for the pure, and damnation for the sinner, we can readily see that Jews and Gentiles alike are in trouble if left to their own devices.

*The salvation available by the cross and faith (3:21-5:21)*

Because under God's principles of judgment and because of God's character, no one is achieving righteousness based on one's actions. But here is the great news:

*Righteous God has set out righteousness for mankind that is  
found apart from following God's law perfectly!*

The Old Testament testifies to this. It is God's righteousness that comes through faith in Christ to all who believe, whether Jew or Gentile. Just as everyone has sinned and failed to measure up to God's standards, so everyone has a gift of redemption by the blood of Christ. To use legal terms, the blood of Christ was satisfaction as a penalty for our sin. By faith, we receive a redemption that satisfies God's character and righteousness.



By the way, God had to offer Christ up on Calvary as an atonement of sin whether there would ever be a Christian believer or not! God had passed over sins in the Old Testament times with his divine understanding that Christ would die and cover those sins! The death of Christ is God's power to save people *before* Christ died just as much as it is the power to save *after* Christ died.

As a result, we have salvation that comes apart from works of law. God has another equally righteous principle of judgment beyond rewarding purity and condemning evil. But in this righteousness, there is no longer any reason for people to boast! This is a common salvation to Jew and Gentile. It is not one that destroys the law or makes it superfluous; however, it is one that makes it possible to uphold the law!

This is really not a new idea. Think about Abraham. Was Abraham justified by what he did or by his faith? In Genesis 15:6 we read, Abram "believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness." Now, this was two chapters *before* Abraham was circumcised and it was 400 years before the Law was given to Moses. Abraham did not get this because he deserved it; it was a gift. This is the same idea behind David's Psalm 32 where he writes:

Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.

Righteousness was never for the one who lived perfectly. Even circumcision served as a seal of the righteousness that came from trusting in faith, God, and his promises. God promised Abraham to be the father not only of Jews, but also of the faithful, Jew and Gentile alike.

If we could ever get our righteousness through our own merit in following God's rules, then there is no point to faith and God's interaction with Abraham. God made Abraham a promise through faith, and Abraham lived in trust on that promise, fully convinced that God would follow through. God was not only faithful to Abraham in giving offspring through Sarah, but even more faithful in delivering Jesus as an atonement making Abraham the father of all who have faith, Jew and Gentile alike. God secured his interaction with Abraham in scripture for our benefit!

This is where our peace before God comes from. We have been justified by faith. Through Jesus Christ and his death, we have access by faith into this wonderful grace in which we stand. This gives us joy even in suffering because we know in the end God's Holy Spirit pours his love into our lives in ways that produce perseverance, character and hope (taking ultimate care of us).

Think about it...it is very, very rare that one will die for someone, especially someone who is vile and seemingly unlovable. Yet, Christ did this very thing. At a time when we were *not* seeking him, not asking for help, not standing up for goodness or God, Christ came and gave his life on our behalf. God saved us while we were his enemies! Now that we have this blessing, how much more must we understand his love and caring for us as his saved children!

God has worked this salvation in ways that are profoundly mirrored in history. Our sin itself came into the world through one man, Adam. Death came to us through that same sin and has reigned since. In a mirrored opposite sense, we see the work of Christ. Through the one man Jesus, salvation and life have come into the world. Through the obedience and sacrifice of Christ, this righteousness has spread freely to all who have faith. The sin of one led to the condemnation of man; yet, the righteousness of Christ led to man's justification and eternal life.

*The struggles and the fruit of salvation (6:1-8:39)*

Some might say, "Wow! We might as well live in sin! If anything, it makes God's forgiveness even a greater deed!" Such an idea is preposterous! A major point behind the cross is that we are joined in the death of Christ, and we die to the sin that put Jesus there. That is a major significance of baptism. When we were baptized into Christ, we were baptized into his death. In the same sense, we were raised from baptismal waters as Christ was raised from the dead, into a new life!

This has eternal implications of our sharing his eternity, but it also has earthly implications. We have died to sin! We should never let sin rule or control our lives! We should live as God's instruments for righteousness. That we have no law over us frees us to live without sin. It is not a license to sin! We are bound to righteousness and we see God at work bringing sanctification and purity into our lives! Sin is death; the gift of Christ Jesus is life!

Think about the law for a moment. It applies to people who are alive. For example, a woman married, under the law, has obligations to her husband. But should her husband die, she is released from those obligations. She cannot go live with another man while her husband is alive without becoming an adulteress. But if her husband should die, she is free to remarry and live with another man.

In the same way, once we have died to the law, we may then belong to someone else! In that sense, we are free from the law; but the key here is to understand that we are free to live holy in the Spirit of God!

That is not to say that there was a problem with the Law. The Law was never sinful. In fact, the law served a wonderful purpose of showing our sin so we

understood the need for a Savior! It was through the law that we most clearly understood we were inadequate before God.

The sin was already there; the law just highlighted it. This is our continuing frustration over our former slavery to sin! We still find ourselves doing things we do not want to do. We similarly find ourselves unable to do the things we want to do. It happens over and over. For all the wonderful things God can do in us and through us, we find evil is always close by. It is a war going on deep inside us as we struggle constantly to live according to the calling he has placed on us! How wretched! Where can there be deliverance from this internal civil war? From God in Jesus! We can serve God in our minds and hearts, even as we find ourselves still in constant struggle with the sin that comes as part of our lives in this still fallen body.

In Christ, there is no condemnation! Through Jesus, the law of the Spirit has set us free from the vicious cycle of sin and death. God is working out our sanctification (holiness) even as he worked out our salvation! God has found us righteous in Christ for eternity, something the law could never give. In this same act of atonement in Christ, God has given us his Spirit so that we are no longer enslaved to sin, but are free to follow God's leading. God frees us to cry out to him as our dear Father. He offers the earthly care, protection, and guidance a Father should, just as he ensures our eternal inheritance.

The sufferings we endure today are small compared to what glory God will unfold in our lives in eternity. We long for that; we groan for that. We eagerly wait for that day when our struggles with sin and its effects are over (not just us, but the whole earth struggles for the day of its restoration to the condition God intended!).

Until then, we are not left alone. We have God's Spirit helping us. Even as we pray, God's Spirit intervenes with groaning too deep for words. As the Spirit intercedes on our behalf, we are confident that God's hand is on us for good. No matter what happens in this life, we confidently know God is at work to bring ultimate good to his children. God has known us from before time. God has always intended us to bear the image of his Son. He has called us to himself and justified us. He will not now leave us helpless. He will bring us into his glory.

In light of this, what real obstacles are there? With God fighting for us, how can we lose? God has shown he will pay the ultimate price for us (Jesus); will he now fail to tend to our needs? Will he let anyone condemn us for imperfections (Jew or Gentile)? No! Will he let anything separate us from his love for us? Of course not! Nothing at all – tribulation, distress, persecution, physical needs, or danger – nothing can ever remove us from His love! We are more than conquerors; we are His children and inheritance! Not even an angel, a ruler, not death, not life, no

height, no depth, nothing here, nothing coming, nothing at all will ever be able to pull us from God's love for us in Jesus!

*The problem of Israel (9:1-11:36)*

This brings up an agonizing issue that many Jews were rejecting Christ. If only the Jews would en masse receive Jesus as Lord, it would almost be worth Paul personally being cut off from Christ. As Israelites, they have so much promise. They received God's promised adoption and care, the glory and covenant from Sinai, the Law, the Temple and worship, the promises and prophecies, the history of direct interaction with Almighty God.

We should never think, however, that in some way, God or his word failed the Jews. The promises never came to all Abraham's physical offspring anyway. God directed the promises through Isaac, rather than Ishmael. Similarly, God selected Jacob as the child of promise, not Esau. This shows that the true offspring of Abraham, for the sake of God's promises, are not simply the genetic offspring. What is more, God made the choice of Jacob over Esau before either child was born, before they had done anything either good or bad. This is the same issue we see today. God's people are not those who earned it, they are those to whom God has promised eternal life.

Now, some may raise issue over God making choices as if God is unjust. God is not unjust! God has always had mercy and compassion where he chooses. That God has chosen to extend mercy to those who have faith in Jesus, rather than those who hope to achieve it on their own merit or their own choice, has always been God's *modus operandi*. God raised up Pharaoh, hardened his heart, so that God could show mercy and power in the Israelites.

While this explains God's placement of the faithful in his eternity, some may challenge the idea by claiming God has no right to find fault with those who refuse Christ. For who can resist God's will? This is not really the right question to be asking! God is the potter. He makes the pots for his purposes. Those that show his glory are the faithful, whether Gentile or Jew. God has patiently waited to destroy those that do not choose Jesus, those destined for destruction.

As Jews and Gentiles try to understand their places in the church, they should remember that God has said all along that he would choose not only from Jews but also from Gentiles. Through Hosea, God said,

Those who were not my people I will call 'my people' (Hos. 2:23).

Isaiah also indicated that among the innumerable Jews, God would only save a remnant.

The bottom line? This means that the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have attained it by faith. But Jews, who have tried to attain righteousness through their own merit, have not found God's righteousness. They have stumbled over the very plan of God for their eternal souls – the cross.

This truth moved Paul in prayer. Paul's desire was for the Jews to be saved en masse. There are those with true zeal for God who are ignorant of God's righteousness in Christ. These are people who seek to make themselves righteous before God. Rather than live freed from the law, these people live seeking to meet the law's requirements and set their own deeds before God as their righteousness.

By faith, the righteous do not seek to command Christ down from heaven or back from the dead. The righteous are content with confessing Jesus as Lord with faith in their hearts. These are righteous people who will not be put to shame. They will call on the name of the Lord and be saved.

A logical implication of this is the need for people to hear about Christ. This means people need to be out preaching the good news. It is a beautiful thing to spend time and energies taking the gospel out to the ends of the world. This gospel goes beyond the boundaries of Israel, politically and socially.

God never did this as an explicit rejection of Israel as his people. Paul himself was an example. Paul was a Jew. In spite of appearances, God has always had his people among Israel. Remember when Elijah thought he was the only Jew faithful to God? God told Elijah,

I have kept for myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal (1 Kings 19:18).

Similarly, there is a remnant of believers among the Jews, but it is a remnant justified by grace, not works!

The Jews that refused God's righteousness were turned over to a spirit of stupor, but God was not simply responding to their disbelief. Through God's actions and their hard hearts, God came into the hearts of many Gentiles. So many, in fact, that a number of Jews grew jealous over God's choosing of Gentiles. Of course, if the Jews' exclusion brings about such blessings, then would not their inclusion be even more wonderful?

The Gentiles need to consider this, to think about the importance of the Jews. Paul, a missionary to the Gentiles, wants ever so much more to see Jews saved also. Jews were like an olive tree. Some of the branches were alive and fruitful. Others were dead. Gentiles were like grafted branches onto the tree. Grafted branches should never ignore the original tree! No Gentile should consider

himself (or herself) the end all for God. Just because some Jews had their branches snapped off the tree because of their disbelief, should not make the grafted Gentile limbs arrogant! God can snap the grafted limbs off just as easily!

No one should assume God is finished harvesting Jews, either. If Jews turn in faith to Jesus, God will reattach them to the tree! There is a mystery here that few understand. God has a love for the Jews. While the Jews are partially hardened toward God, once the fullness of the Gentiles comes into the church, God will reach out with salvation to Israel. While the Jews are enemies of the gospel, they are still loved by God as descendants of some very godly faithful people. The Jews are in a time of disobedience, but a time of mercy is coming.

We must pause and recognize there are immeasurable depths to the riches of God's wisdom and knowledge! Glory to God forever!

*Christian conduct (12:1-15:13)*

Because of all this, the Jews and Gentiles in Rome who were wondering about who has what right in the kingdom and church needed to come together and all present themselves to God as a living sacrifice. Instead of thinking like the world thinks, instead of acting like the world acts, the body of believers should be different, be changed! Rather than simply muddling through life, believers should look at things, think about them and measure them out by what they know is right and good. Decide what God's will is. Paul gave some practical examples.

Do not get arrogant and start thinking too highly of yourself. As you see others, do not measure your gifts against theirs. It is not for one to see themselves in a more prestigious role in the body of Christ than another. God has placed all where they need to be, giving them the gifts he needs them to use for his purposes.

This should be the way we act and treat each other: Love genuinely, hating evil; care for each other; work hard to serve God; rejoice in hope; be patient with tribulation; rejoice with the joyful; weep with the saddened. Do not deal in the currency of evil, even when dealing with evil people. Let God be your defender and avenger. Feed your enemies; do not abuse them. Do not let evil take charge of your life or heart. Overcome evil with good.

As the Empire's capital church, the church in the Emperor's home city, Paul urged the Romans to remember that God has instituted authority. The believer should not resist it. Instead the believer should do good, and pray for the governing officials. (This is the same reason, Paul added, that believers should pay their taxes!)

Believers should not be borrowing from each other. The only thing to owe a neighbor is love! Paul wrote that this was so powerful; it actually is a synopsis of all the commandments! If you love your neighbor, you will not take his wife (or her husband), you will not murder, steal or covet!

Paul urged the believers to wake up from their slumber. Time is passing moment by moment. Gone is the time of blindly sleeping through darkness. We should put on the light of God's armor and walk in ways that are appropriate for all to see.

Some are still going to be weak in their faith now. Those people need to be loved tenderly, not abusing their weakness by flaunting your freedoms (like in the area of dietary laws). Whether some see certain days as more holy than others is another issue of which to be mindful. The core here is to honor the Lord with your own life by honoring his children around you. Christ died out of his love for us; we should similarly give of ourselves out of love for others.

This is really true Christianity, true Christ-likeness. Christ lived to take care of others, not himself. We should do likewise. That will certainly come easier as God gives endurance and encouragement, and the hope that comes with it. May God give that as well as the unity that brings Him glory.

As Jew and Gentile sought to live in a reconstituted church, with Jews back in Rome, there must be acceptance of each other. Christ became a servant for the Jews, to whom God made promises thousands of years earlier to the Patriarchs. This has come to mean praise for God from the Gentiles as well. So all Christians, Jew and Gentile alike, are ready for God to fill them with joy and peace, ready to overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. May God make it so!

#### *Closing and Paul's plans (15:14-16:27)*

Even though this letter was bold, Paul wrote it simply out of duty to proclaim the gospel, something Paul had done from Jerusalem all the way around Asia Minor into Macedonia and Greece. Even though Paul generally wrote and ministered in churches he started, he was still hopeful to come into Rome, where a strong community already thrived so he could join in the work for God.

Before Paul could come, he needed to get back to Jerusalem with the contribution the Greeks have set aside for the needy there. Then, hopefully there would be time for Rome, and even Spain!

Before Paul closed, he added a number of personal notes reflecting individual needs and recognition of others. In so doing, Paul made a subtle point that reinforced his message on the Jew/Gentile issue. Paul wrote of the gratitude of the "churches of the Gentiles" toward Priscilla and Aquilla (Jews). He gave a final

warning against following the smooth talk of any who try to divide the church on a Jew/Gentile basis.

We see in Paul's personal notes the great number of people in the Roman church Paul already knows, along with the interaction between the Roman church and other Christian communities. Paul closes with the assurance that God will eventually crush Satan. Glory to God through Jesus, the source and object of our faith!

## CONCLUSION

After working through the context, noting the book's entire flow, one is more readily able to understand the smaller passages. This brings us back to my conversation with Kevin.

The passage in Romans 2:5-10 is a most important key to understanding the book. In fact, it is a key to understanding the entire Bible. It is a simple truth that God's standards are perfection. He is, after all, God. For anyone wanting eternity in God's presence they can get it one of two ways. They can (1) live up to God's standards of perfection or (2) embrace the substitutionary sacrifice of Jesus. Paul gives the first option in Romans 2:5-10, explaining that God will reward the righteous and punish the evil. Those are God's principles of judgment. They are as true and constant as the laws of nature that dictate that if you stick your finger in fire, you will get burned.

Paul followed that by pointing out in excruciating detail, and with multiple references to Old Testament Scriptures, that no one – NO ONE — by their own efforts will ever achieve the righteousness that leads to life. That is why the gospel is not simply good news, but is GREAT news.

## POINTS FOR HOME

1. The gospel "*is the power of God for salvation of everyone*" (1:16).

That is the truth, the gospel truth! It is a fact that anyone saved—anyone—is saved because Jesus Christ paid the price for their sins. This is simple, and yet most profound. It applies to people under the old covenant that lived before Jesus. It applies to people today. It applies to the tragic death of an infant. It applies to the death of a stalwart believer. No one may come to the Father unless his or her sins are forgiven through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus.



2. *“But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify” (3:21).*

We miss something if we do not carefully read this passage (it is much easier to get this point if directly reading from the Greek!). God’s righteousness is apart from “*law*.” The translators do not capitalize “law” the first time it is used in this verse because Paul means *any law*, not just the Old Testament/Torah. There is no principle of meriting before God. There is no righteousness that comes from fulfilling a list of do’s and don’ts. There is righteousness only through faith in Jesus Christ. This is a truth testified to by “*the Law and the Prophets*.” Here, the translators capitalize *Law* and *Prophets* because Paul is referring to the Old Testament Law and Prophets bearing witness to the salvation through faith.<sup>8</sup>

3. *“Offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God” (12:1).*

God did not save us to have us run around as slaves to sin. Sin is most serious. Only the sacrifice of Jesus is adequate to atone for sin’s curse. How foolish of us not to take seriously this horrendous power that had us enslaved before the Spirit set us free. What sane person should be resubmitting to such bondage? We must reckon ourselves dead to sin, and let God’s Spirit work through our lives the daily victory over the matters we struggle against. This is our devotion and worship to God our Father.

---

<sup>8</sup> In Greek, this is accomplished through the use of the definite article and its absence. When Paul speaks generally of “law,” the construction is termed “anarthrous.” This means there is no definite article and we might translate it “*a law*.” In the second usage, Paul inserts a definite article because he is referring to *the Law*, as opposed to just any law.