**Great sorrow for a privileged people** Romans 9:1-5 *(Scripture quotes from the New King James Version unless otherwise indicated)*

The apostle Paul was a Jew. He was a Pharisee and zealous for the law; so much so that he persecuted Christians. But when Jesus revealed himself to Paul he became a follower of Christ. He became a preacher of Christ instead of a persecutor. Yet he maintained a deep concern for his brothers in Judaism. He desperately wanted them to see the light as he had, and believe in Jesus Christ. He did not turn his back on his Jewish brothers even though they hated and persecuted him as a blasphemer.

As we open Romans chapter 9 we find the apostle Paul speaking personally of his great concern for his brothers, his ‘countrymen according to the flesh’ (9:3). From this personal concern he turns to a historical and theological discussion about the Israelites relationship to God and to Christ. There are no words connecting Romans 8 to Romans 9. In fact we could jump from chapter 8 to chapter 12 without any difficulty. It would be moving from doctrine to practice, in the way found in Paul’s other letters. Chapters 9-11 form a distinct unit which some call a parenthesis, an appendix or even a separate sermon. But we should not consider this section in this way. It is central to Paul’s teaching in this letter. It contains doctrines that are fundamental to the faith.

While there is no verbal connection to chapter 8 there are connections in thought and theology. There are connections to earlier chapters, especially chapter 3 regarding the privileges given the Jews and then their unbelief. God gave them the law and circumcision but Paul said these were not the way of salvation. He went on in chapters 3-8 to explain the way of salvation, namely that all people, Jew and Gentile must be saved by grace through faith. He pointed out that this was the case for Abraham, as well as David.

At the end of chapter 8 Paul states that God’s elect are those whom God justifies through the cross of Christ. Where does this leave God’s special people, the Jews? What becomes of their special privileges, of which there were many? What becomes of God promises to them? ‘Does their unbelief make the faithfulness of God without effect?’ (3:3). In other words, can God be trusted. Certainly he can. Here in these chapters Paul explains the doctrines of sovereign grace and election, and ‘exonerates’ God from any charge of lying, impotence or injustice (the issue of theodicy).

**1. Great sorrow**

‘I tell the truth in Christ, I am not lying’ (9:1). Paul begins by stating that he is telling the truth. He does not actually take an oath but refers to Christ, to the Holy Spirit and to his conscience. He includes the negative ‘I am not lying’ for good measure. Those in the church at Rome are assured that Paul is totally sincere is what he says, and what he says is the truth and nothing but the truth.

There were Christians from Jewish as well as a Gentile backgrounds in this church. There may have been some misunderstandings in the relationship between those from these different backgrounds. Certainly there were Jewish converts who wanted to maintain obedience to the law and circumcision in the church. There may have been Gentile converts who reacted to this, wanting to throw out everything Jewish. We do not really see such misunderstandings in the church today, but there are some who misunderstand what Paul teaches in these chapters.

Paul was from a Jewish background. He was concerned for his countrymen according to the flesh- that is ethnic Jews or Israelites. He does not usually call them brothers, keeping this term for brothers in Christ- Jews were his brothers in the flesh. He had great sorrow and continual grief in his heart for these people (8:2). He does not exactly say why, but clearly it relates to Christ. He says, ‘I could wish myself accursed from Christ from my brothers’ (8:3).

To say you were willing to die if that meant a relative would be saved is one thing. It expresses deep concern for the soul of that relative. Spurgeon tells the story of a little girl who was sick and dying. She often invited her father to come to church but he persisted in his unbelief. She went to the pastor and said, ‘My father will have to come to my funeral and hear you speak, and you will speak the gospel. Please speak it clearly. I have prayed for him for a long time. I know God will save him’. According to Spurgeon the father came to her funeral and was converted. Her dying did not save him of course; it was Christ’s death that saved him, but this little girl was desperate for her father to be saved.

Paul does not say he was willing to die, but something even greater. He could wish that he was accursed from Christ for his brothers (9:3). To be willing to be accursed from Christ means more than being willing to die. It means to return to the curse and condemnation of sin. This is not possible of course, and Paul knew this- he had just spoken about God’s election. That is why he says, ‘I could wish’. But this does not lessen the deep personal sorrow he had for his Jewish countrymen. Nor does the fact that even his being accursed from Christ would not save them, lessen the impact of his sentiment.

Paul’s sincere and deep concern for his Israelite countrymen reflects the deep concern Moses had for them when God threatened to wipe them out. Paul was well aware of the sentiment and words of Moses who pleaded with the Lord not to destroy them. This was when Moses was on the mountain and the people made the golden calf to worship. God was very angry and told Moses he would destroy them and make him into a great nation. Moses went down and exacted punishment, and returned to the mountain pleading for the Lord to forgive them. He said to the Lord, ‘If you will forgive them- but if not, I pray, blot me out of your book which you have written’ (Exod 32:32).

Moses could wish that his name was blotted out of God’s book, and that he become an accursed sinner, if this meant God would forgive the Israelites their sin of making and worshipping an idol. Let us reflect on the deep concern of Moses and Paul for the souls of their countrymen. How concerned are you for the souls of people around you, be they relatives, friends or neighbours? Has this concern led you to pray for them or speak to them about Jesus Christ?

**2. Great advantages**

Earlier in this letter Paul briefly referred to the advantages of the Jew (3:1-2). He told them that circumcision in the flesh and boasting in the law was of no spiritual benefit, yet having the Scriptures was. The Scriptures speak of the righteousness of God which is not by the law but by grace through faith. They speak of the coming Messiah. Paul picks up on this matter of advantages, listing eight more here in chapter 9. Some of these are unexpected, but do relate to the blessings enjoyed by those who are in Christ, as detailed in chapter 8- the advantage of adoption, for example. All that God gave the Jews and promised them reached fulfilment in Jesus Christ. To the Jews ‘belongs the adoption’ (9:4). While God spoke of Israel as ‘My son’ (Exod 4:22), we do not find the word ‘adoption’ in the OT. But we do find it in chapter 8 where Jewish and Gentile believers are told they have received the Spirit of adoption (8:15). The true sons of God are those who believe in Jesus and receive the Holy Spirit.

To the Jews belonged the glory (9:4). God revealed his glory on Mt Sinai. They saw the glory of God as no other nation did. They saw his glory in the tabernacle and the temple- until God removed his glory before the destruction of the temple (Ezek 11:23). Why does Paul include glory in this list? Again we can look back to chapter 8 where he speaks of the glory to be revealed in believers and of their being glorified. Followers of Christ enjoy the blessings promised to the Israelites.

To the Jews belong the covenants (9:4). The Jews knew these advantages and clung to them. God made a covenant with Abraham. He made a covenant through Moses on Mt Sinai and another covenant with David. God related to his people in this way. He was faithful to his covenant promises even if his people were not. It was a great privilege to be adopted by God, shown His glory and be brought into a covenant relationship with God.

It was also a great privilege to be given the law (9:4, Deut 4:8). God gave the law so his people would know how to live as his people. The law is a major part of the oracles of God (3:2). God also gave instructions about serving or worshipping him (8:4). Knowing how to worship God is a great privilege. And then there were the promises (9:4). God promised great blessing to Abraham, and through him to his descendants. His promise to David was also wonderful. To the Israelites also belonged the fathers or patriarchs, men like Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Jacob gave his new name Israel to the people. The Israelites had received such great benefits; they knew more about God than any other people on the earth. God blessed them more than any other people (Deut 4:8, Psalm 147:19-20).

It is a bit like this with people who grow up in a Christian home and go to Sunday school. What a great blessing it is to learn about God and his Son, Jesus Christ. What a great blessing it is to see men and women living the Christian life. How tragic it is when those who have such advantages turn away to worship gods of their own making.

**3. God the Messiah**

I will explain this subtitle shortly. In verse 5 we come to another advantage which is the greatest advantage given the Israelites, yet one they would not acknowledge. They would agree with the seven already mentioned by Paul, but now he writes, ‘from whom, according to the flesh, Christ came’ (9:5). The title ‘Christ’ is the same as ‘Messiah’. It means ‘anointed one’. After meeting Jesus, Andrew went to his brother saying, ‘we have found Messiah (which is translated Christ)’ (John 1:41).

The Israelites were looking for the Christ, the anointed of God, but they failed to recognise Jesus of Nazareth as the One. The truth that Paul spoke was that this Jesus is the Christ of God. He was born into this world in the Jewish race. The saviour of the world became flesh, or became a man, as an Israelite. How wonderful is that. ‘The word of God is near you’ (10:8). God’s salvation was right there before them. As Paul wrote in his introduction, ‘He was descended from David according to the flesh’ (1:3). The Christ was born a Jew but the Jews did not recognise him. One commentator writes, ‘It is disastrous to be blind, but to be blind to the crowning glory of one’s own heritage is a tragedy which words alone cannot convey’.

The mention of Christ Jesus moves Paul to a doxology-like outburst; ‘who is over all, the eternally blessed God. Amen.’ There is debate as to whether Paul is speaking about God, or Christ as God, in this doxology. He does not refer to Christ as God anywhere else, at least not directly (see Col 1). But the mention of Christ as the descendant of David in chapter 1 is balanced by him being ‘the Son of God with power’ (1:4).

So here, having spoken of Christ according to the flesh, Paul goes on to say that he is the, ‘Eternally blessed God. Amen.’ Jesus is God the Son, the third person of the Trinity. In revealing his glory to the Israelites and giving them the covenants, the law, the worship and the promises, God prepared his people for the full and final revelation of his salvation. But, like many who grow up in Christian’s homes today, they turned a blind eye what they saw and heard. Blessed is the man or woman, boy or girl who not only hears but accepts the truth of the gospel.

**Jesus who is God** Romans 9:5

I borrow this title from Dr James Boice whose sermon on this verse caused me to pause and consider the great truths contained in Romans 9 verse 5. I do this even though there is dispute as to the correct translation. The truths are so fundamental that they must be highlighted, even if some do not clearly see them in this verse. We will seek to understand these truths based on the faithful translation that we have in the NKJV, and by the illumination of the Holy Spirit.

Paul is lamenting the fact that most Jews, most of his ‘countrymen according to the flesh’, did not believe in Jesus Christ for salvation. He went on to list eight huge advantages that these people had. The last of these was that Messiah or Christ was born in their race of people. Jesus of Nazareth is the promised Messiah. He is a ‘descendant of David according to the flesh’ (1:3). Our first point will be the humanity of Jesus. Verse 9 also points to the deity of Christ, the supremacy of Christ and the praise or worship of Jesus Christ.

**1. Humanity of Christ**

This verse, and many others, clearly teach that Jesus was fully human. The gospels tell us how the Holy Spirit came upon Mary, who like Joseph, her future husband, was a descendant of David. Her firstborn would be the Son of God (Luke 1:35). Jesus grew up in this family. He ate and drank because he felt hunger and thirst. He was tempted as we are but he did not sin (Heb 4:15). Jesus felt grief and he wept. He suffered bodily pain when beaten and when hung on the cross. Jesus was in every way human like us, except for sin.

In the early church some would not accept that Jesus was fully human. There was a teaching called Docetism- from the Greek word *‘dokeo’* meaning ‘to seem or appear’. Some said Jesus only seemed to be human; He was like a phantom. A related teaching was that the Spirit of God came upon Jesus at his baptism, and left before he went on the cross.

Denial of Christ’s humanity is not so common today, but there is a danger in some circles that overplay the mystical nature of Christ. Others speak of finding the real Jesus somewhere behind or beyond the Jesus presented in the Bible. As one scholar writes, ‘modern theology, by divorcing the Christ of faith from the Jesus of history, is in danger of initiating a new form of Docetism’

It is essential that Jesus be fully human if he is to be our representative. Paul refers to Jesus as the second Adam or man. As the great High Priest who offered up himself for our sins, he had to share in our flesh and blood, and be tempted as we are. Jesus had to be one of us in order to be our representative, as he was on the cross. He knew no sin but became sin for us, and died in order to reconcile us to God.

This is why Jesus was born into this world. This is why ‘the Word became flesh and dwelt among us’ (John 1:14). This is why Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary. This is why ‘In the fullness of time God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons’ (Gal 4:4-5). Note Paul’s subtle but significant change from, ‘those who were under the law’ to, ‘us’ being adopted as sons; he was writing to churches of believers from Jewish and Gentile backgrounds.

**2. Deity of Christ**

From the Israelites came Christ, according to the flesh. The mention of Christ moves the apostle to a doxology-like outburst. We say doxology-like because most doxologies are in praise of God; the name or title ‘God’ is usually reserved for God the Father, but not always. Most doxologies, like the one at the end of chapter 11, are of the form ‘God…to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.’ Here it is literally, ‘Christ… who is over all, God blessed for ever. Amen.’ Most of our translations have similar words.

It was Erasmus, at the time of the Reformation, who first proposed a different punctuation which makes the closing words a doxology to God rather than Christ- in the Greek there is no punctuation. Some liberal theologians have picked up on this; so the New English Bible has Messiah period and then, ‘May God, supreme over all, be blessed for ever. Amen.’ The NIV has an alternate reading like this, ‘Christ, who is over all. God be forever praised!’ These liberal scholars argue that neither Paul nor other NT writers explicitly refer to Christ as God. They refer to him as the Son of God, but not as God explicitly. This is not exactly true. Thomas said to the risen Jesus, ‘My Lord and my God’ (John 20:28).

In John 1:1 we read, ‘the Word was with God and the Word was God’. The Jehovah’s Witnesses, as you may know, translate this as, ‘The word was a god’. Moreover, Paul writes of, ‘The glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us’ (Titus 2:13). Clearly he is referring to Jesus in this context. So the reading we have in the NKJV is faithful to the original language. It also fits in with Paul’s earlier statement referring to Jesus as, ‘Born of the seed of David according to the flesh, and declared to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness’ (1:3-4).

We mentioned the Jehovah Witnesses as denying the deity of Christ, and some liberals who fail to uphold this fundamental doctrine. Many people will accept the humanity of Jesus, even call him a prophet of God, but refuse to accept his deity. The religions of Hinduism and Islam could be included here. They will accept Jesus as a great teacher or prophet, but not as the Son of God and equal with God in power and glory, as these verses in Romans teach.

Most ‘Christian’ cults depart from this fundamental truth in some way. If t people believed Jesus is God the Son, God’s full and final revelation to mankind, they would not be listening to men or women who claim to have additional divine revelation. This is the false teaching of Mormons, Seventh Day Adventists, and other cults.

We must stand firmly on these verses of Scripture, and understand our confession of faith which states, ‘In the unity of the Godhead there be three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity; God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit: the Father is of none, neither begotten, nor proceeding; the Son is eternally begotten of the Father; the Holy Spirit eternally proceeding from the Father and the Son’ (Westminster Confession of Faith 2.3).

This truth is fundamental because our salvation depends upon Jesus being God, just as it does upon his being man; fully God and fully man. Jesus was born without sin, unlike any other human. He did not sin. Being without sin he was qualified to be the ‘Lamb without blemish’ who takes away the sin of the world. That Jesus did die bearing our sin, as he said, is verified by his resurrection from the dead. Jesus is risen from the dead and ascended to the throne in heaven. A mere man, even a good man who was circumcised and kept the law, could not have taken away our sin, or the sin of anyone.

**3. Supremacy of Christ**

‘Who is over all’ (9:5).What do these words mean? Why did Paul include these words here? He is talking about Christ, the anointed One. Jesus is the Messiah, the anointed of God. He is from the Jews and is over the Jews. A sign on the cross read, ‘Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews’. But he is not King of the Jews only. He is the King of kings. He is King over all, over all human beings and over all creation. You will remember the great passage in Colossians 1 where we read that Jesus is not only, ‘The image of the invisible God and firstborn over all creation’ but that, ‘all things were created through him and for him’. ‘In him all things hold together’. He is ‘the firstborn from the dead, that in all things he may have the pre-eminence’.

Romans 8 ended on the note of Christ’s supremacy and our being conquerors through him who loved us (8:37). Jesus even conquered death and we share in his victory. Jesus conquered Satan and other angels and powers. Nothing in the universe is outside the rule and authority of Christ, Christ who was born into the Jewish race some 2000 years ago. Can you get your head around this? Can you get your heart to accept this? The apostle Paul was deeply moved by this truth. Are you? Do you find comfort in this truth? Do you understand that the rule and authority of Christ extends to your life? Do you know Jesus Christ as Lord?

**4. Praise and worship Christ**

To the words, ‘Christ…who is over all, the eternally blessed God’, Paul says, ‘Amen.’ Jesus is worthy of praise and worship into eternity because he not only died to save us, but rose from the dead and ever lives to intercede for us. We do not worship or pray to a man who is dead. We do not worship an angel. Only God is to be worshipped; we worship Jesus because he is God.

Jesus is our great High Priest, seated at the right hand of the Majesty in the heavens (Heb 8:1). In a vision John saw Jesus in the midst of the throne with all the host of heaven, angels, elders, and living creatures and the redeemed, falling down before him. They praised him day and night singing, ‘Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and riches and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and blessing’ for ever and ever (Rev 5:12). And then the living creatures said, ‘Amen!’ (Rev 5:14). Paul would say a loud Amen to these words, along with John. How amazing and how wonderful that the same Jesus who was born of the virgin Mary in Bethlehem in Judea is now on the throne in heaven being worshipped as God by all creatures.

It is incredible that anyone should think that Jesus Christ is a mere man or even a great teacher. It is tragic that his own people, the Israelites, actually rejected him when their Scriptures promised this very person, ‘our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ’ (Titus 2:13). It is just as tragic that people who have a Bible, or hear the Bible read and preached, reject the offer of forgiveness of sin and the gift of eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Not all Israel are Israel**  Romans 9:6-13

If you were born in Australia you enjoy many benefits, but among these benefits is not that of belonging to God. Being born into a prominent Christian family in Australia does not make you a child of God. Yet the Jews thought being born in the land of Israel made them a child of God. Being born a descendant of Abraham they thought made them a child of God. They still do, and some Christians agree with them.

I am reminded of a Hindu man proudly standing in his field telling me that this was the land of Hindus. In OT times it was true that each nation had its own god; this god helped them in time of war. Maybe this lead the Israelites to think that the God of Abraham was like these other nation’s gods; even though Moses and the prophets and the Psalmist told them he was the God of the whole world.

Paul began chapter 9 expressing deep sorrow and anguish for his countrymen according to the flesh, his Jewish brothers or Israelites. Why this sorrow? It was because most of them had rejected the gospel he preached, the good news that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah, the Saviour of the world. Samaritans, whom they despised, accepted Jesus (John 4:42) and many Gentiles were also accepting God’s salvation in Jesus Christ.

The Jews had so much going for them in terms of accepting Jesus but they did not do so. God chose them, showed his glory to them, gave them the law and made covenants with them. God promised them he would send Messiah to them, His anointed one through whom they could be saved. Jesus the Christ was born into their bosom as it were, but they rejected him.

This is what brought grief and sorrow to Paul. If he believed that all ethnic Israelites or Jews would one day be saved such sorrow would be rather hollow. Stuart Olyott writes, ‘the fact that Paul was in such agony clearly spells out the fact that there is to be no restoration of Israel. His agony was prophetic in nature. It is incapable of any other explanation. Israel, as an earthly nation, no longer figures in Gods purposes’.

As we come to this passage, as with any other passage of Scripture, we must not let our feelings prejudice our explanation. We must seek to understand what Paul is saying to the church in Rome before extending his teaching to today. Ellison’s book (‘The Mystery of Israel’) expounding Romans 9-11 begins with a reference to the holocaust and State of Israel being set up in 1948. This is not the place to begin an exposition of these chapters.

Not only was Paul grieved at the unbelief of Israel, he was perplexed at to what this meant with regard to the promises of God, promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and to David. The covenant promise was,‘I will be your God and you shall be my people’. The promise to David was fulfilled in Jesus Christ, ‘who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh’ (1:3). But what of the descendants of Abraham according to the flesh? Was God not being true to his promises (3:3)? Was it that the word of God had failed (9:6)? This was a very serious accusation that Paul had to deal with, whether it was put to him or not. It was serious for one who believes in the sovereignty of God and that God is wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth.

**1. Physical and spiritual Israel**

The answer to this question of God’s supposed failure comes in a very brief statment; ‘they are not all Israel who are of Israel’ (9:6). Another translation is, ‘Not all who descended from Israel belong to Israel’ (9:6 ESV). In other words, not all the biological or physical children of Abraham or Jacob are spiritual or covenant children. The claim and boast of the Jews was that ‘We have Abraham as our father’ (Luke 3:8).

Paul identifies two Israels; there is the earthly Israel and the true Israel. Not every member of the first is a member of the second. Moreover, before we reach the end of this chapter Paul will show that true Israel includes Gentiles as well as Jews. The promises of God are not for earthly Israel but for the true or spiritual Israel.

Paul can refer to the church, the true or invisible church, as the Israel of God (Gal 6:16). He can call men and women who are saved by grace through faith, the children of Abraham (4:12). He can say and he does say of the promise God gave to Abraham that, ‘the promise might be sure to all the seed, not only those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all (4:16).

They are not all Israel who are of Israel. Remember this as we move through this section of Romans. Remember it whenever Jews or Christians tell you that ethnic Jews or people who live in Palestine are the chosen people of God. Apart from Jesus Christ they have no special place in God’s sovereign purposes.

**2. Isaac promised**

The apostle Paul was not one to make statements without Scriptural support. These three chapters of Romans have more OT references than any other portion of the NT. Paul was an apostle and an inspired writer of Scripture, but he knew that everything he said must be in accordance with the Scriptures, which for him was the OT. He excelled in his study of the Scriptures- although after he met the risen Jesus his understanding of them completely changed.

The question is, ‘Has the word of God failed’. He could have said, ‘Certainly not!’ Instead he offers a profound analysis of Scripture which supports his statement that not all Israel are Israel. In doing so he outlines one of the most fundamental doctrines of Scripture, a doctrine he taught in the previous chapter, the doctrine of divine election.

The Lord God promised Abraham he would make him a great nation and through him he would bless all then nations. But his wife Sarah had no children. After waiting and waiting they got the idea of having a child through Hagar; and so Ishmael was born. He was Abraham’s son but God said he was not the one to inherit the promise. When it was humanly impossible to have children God gave them Isaac saying, ‘In Isaac shall your seed be called’ (9:7, Gen 21:12).

Isaac was born as a result of God’s word of promise. Ishmael was sent away with Hagar, and although God blessed him and made him into a nation, his descendants were not included in the promise given to Abraham. When the Jews call themselves the children of Abraham they do not include the children of Ishmael (Mohammed saw this and claims this title for his followers). Paul’s emphasis was that Isaac was a child of promise, not just a child of the flesh (cf John 1:12, 13). He makes the same distinction in his letter to the Galatians but there speaks of this as symbolic (Gal 4:23). Here he speaks of the difference as a reality.

**3. Jacob chosen**

Continuing with his answer to this accusation Paul imagines some saying that Ishmael was Abrahams’ son from a servant girl and not his wife- Abraham also had other sons later through his wife Keturah (Gen 25). But Paul has another string to his bow as it were. He had an even better example of God’s sovereign choice. He reminds us of Rebecca and her two sons, Esau and Jacob.

Isaac’s wife Rebecca was pregnant with twins. Even before they were born God said, ‘The older will serve the younger’ (9:12, Gen 25:23). Some argue that Esau did not exactly serve Jacob but the OT referred to the nations that would come from them. Scripture tells how Jacob, who was born second, deceived his father to get the blessing, according to God’s word to Rebecca. Esau became the father of the Edomites who were not included in the covenant promises. The line of Israel ran from Abraham thought Isaac and then through Jacob. In both these steps God’s electing grace is seen.

God’s sovereign purpose in election rules out human manipulation or merit. The future of the Isaac’s two boys was determined by God before they were born. It was determined by God before they had done good or evil. This is one of the clearest statements of divine election in the whole Bible. God elects individuals according to his sovereign will, not on the basis of works. It is the call of God that determines who will be his.

To seal the argument, Paul draws upon words from Malachi where it is written, ‘Jacob I have loved but Esau I have hated’ (Mal 1:2, 30). Hate here does not mean to love less by comparison as seen in Jesus challenge to his disciples to hate their families and their own life (Luke 14). Morris, with the support of Calvin, says we should understand the expression in the sense of ‘reject’ over against ‘accept’. God chose Jacob and rejected Esau before they were born.

How could the Jews argue with this conclusion? They knew the Edomites as enemies, not as people who shared in the covenant promises. How can anyone today argue with this conclusion? If you accept the Bible, and accept this story of Esau and Jacob, you cannot deny the doctrine of unconditional election. Note again the word ‘call’ in verse 7 and 11. This is a key word in this chapter. It is a word explained by Paul in the previous chapter where he spoke of ‘those who are called according to his (God’s) purpose’, and of ‘those he predestined, these he also called’ (8:28, 30). It is one thing for the Israelites to call themselves God’s elect but another for God to call them his elect.

These two examples from the history of God dealing with his people prove Paul’s statement that ‘not all Israel are of Israel’. He has answered the charge that because most of the Jews did not accept Jesus as the Christ of God that somehow God’s declared purpose had failed. Some Christians think like this. They think that God must save all ethnic Israel, or all the Jews, if his word is to be fulfilled. They are often those who do not understand the doctrine of divine election.

But these verses show that the call of God is not based on ethnicity any more than it is based on works. God does not show favouritism. Both Jew and Gentile are called, in the eternal purposes of God. If we hold to the sovereignty of God in all things then let us hold to his sovereignty in election.

**Sovereign in mercy** Romans 9:14-18

Paul was grieved that his fellow Jews did not accept Jesus as the Messiah. The Law and the Prophets and the Psalms told about the coming Messiah. Jesus of Nazareth, whom they crucified but whom God raised from the dead ticked all the boxes, as it were, for the Messiah. With all the advantages they had, their failure to believe in Jesus was a puzzle. It could even be seen as God failing to keep his promises to Abraham.

What could Paul say to the Jews who claimed to be children of Abraham, and indeed the children of God? He said that not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel. He showed how God chose Jacob but rejected Esau his brother. God’s election of Jacob proves that God elects and calls whom he will, independent of any works of the person.

If God’s election is not based on what a person does in life, then how can it be fair? Surely it is unjust for God to choose one person over the other, as he did with Jacob and Esau- and that even before they were born. Paul anticipates this question. It is a question that always comes up when the truth of divine election comes up.

Paul answers this accusation in these verses, pointing out that God is sovereign in mercy as well as in hardening, an even bigger difficulty for us to comprehend. In doing this, Paul goes on to argue that, ‘Israel’s present hardening does not defeat God’s purpose, but rather that it is God’s means of bringing the gospel to the Gentiles’ (Morris).

**1.Sovereign in mercy**

Paul answers the accusation of God being unjust with an emphatic, No! God is never unjust. Justice is one of his essential attributes. Keener writes, ‘The very question is misplaced, for as Paul shows, God is right to do as he pleases, and what he pleases to do is right. Humanity merits punishment, but God shows mercy and compassion where he wills (9:15).’

Paul could have referred to the words of Abraham in Genesis 18:25: ‘Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right’, but instead he moves ahead to what God says to Moses. One of the things he said was, ‘I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious and will have compassion on whom I will have compassion’ (Exod 33:19). God said this not long after threatening to destroy all the people he brought out of Egypt because of the golden calf they made and worshipped. They deserved to die but God had mercy. He had mercy on them because as sovereign judge he could. Destroying them would have been just judgment under the law. No Jew would have questioned God’s justice. But God chose to pardon them instead.

In some countries the sovereign ruler has power to grant a pardon. If a jury declares the prisoner guilty and the judge decides on the death penalty, the condemned person may appeal to the sovereign ruler and be granted a pardon. This is not seen as injustice. It is the right of the sovereign.

If God has mercy on whom he wills, as he says to Moses, then it does not depend on man’s desire or effort (9:16). God’s mercy, or maybe the ‘it’ refers to his salvation, is not based on what man wants or does. God does not consult an advisory panel before making his choice. His makes his own decisions because he is sovereign over all. God’s decision is not based on human effort or striving; the word ‘runs’ has this sense. Man can run at a great pace but death will overtake him in the end. God shows mercy because he chooses to show mercy. That is the beginning and end of the matter. Is that being unjust?

For all their advantages the Jews could not claim to be without sin. Having the law did not justify them; rather it gave them knowledge of sin. All have sinned, both Jew and Gentile (3:9). Both Jew and Gentile stand guilty before God because of sin. So it is that both Jew and Gentile are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus (3:24). Justification is by grace, as God has mercy on whom he wills. Who can bring a charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies (8:33). God’s mercy is not limited to any particular race or class of people.

**2. Sovereign in hardening**

‘For the Scripture says to Pharaoh’ (9:17). This is the second ‘For’ that comes in response to the accusation, actual or imagined, that God was being unjust in electing Jacob and rejecting Esau. It is not simply that God chose Jacob and had nothing to say about Esau. Esau was rejected. Sure he went on to despise his birthright, selling it for a bowl of soup; he is described as a profane person (Heb 12:16). Paul’s point is that God, who is sovereign in all things and over all people, rejected Esau before he was born. Keener writes, ‘Not only does God show mercy sovereignly but he also hardens sovereignly’.

Paul does not focus on Esau but turns to another man whose heart was hardened by God, namely the Pharaoh (Exod 7:3). God said this before we read about Pharaoh hardening his own heart. This he did of course, as Moses went to him with a message from the Lord God of the Hebrews. He kept refusing to let God’s people go, until his own son was killed. With each plague his heart was hardened more and more until the Lord brought him down. God’s purpose prevailed; his purpose in redemption and his purpose in judgement, his purpose in mercy and his purpose in wrath. God worked all things together for his own glory.

Paul once again pointed his Jewish friends to the Scriptures. They could not brush off what he said as the words of a renegade Jew. He was quoting their Scriptures. He actually uses the word ‘Scripture’ saying, ‘For Scripture says to the Pharaoh’ (9:17). This is the living and enduring word of God. In Exodus 9:16, Moses went to the Pharaoh and warned him of the seventh plague, the plague of hail. The destructive hail did not fall in Goshen because God said so. Egyptians who believed Moses brought their animals into shelter. But Pharaoh’s heart became yet harder. God could have struck Pharaoh with death there and then, or even earlier, and done is justly because of his sin. But he chose not to.

‘But for this purpose I have raised you up’ said Moses, the Lord’s messenger- or as ‘Scripture says to the Pharaoh’. Some understand this ‘raising up’ as keeping Pharaoh alive. God was keeping him alive to show his divine power. He would harden Pharaoh’s heart and show His mighty works in Egypt- to both Jew and Egyptian. Indeed, other nations, and cities like Jericho, would also hear and fear the Lord (Exod 15:14-15, Josh 2:9-10). Other commentators understand ‘raise up’ to mean God raised Pharaoh up to his place in history. In God’s purposes in the history of the world, he raised up Pharaoh in order to show His almighty power and bring glory to his holy name across the nations.

Paul’s conclusion from what is written in Scripture is, ‘Therefore He (God) has mercy on whom he wills, and whom he wills he hardens’ (9:18). That God has mercy on whom he chooses was concluded under the previous ‘For’ (9:15). God has the right to elect who he wants. He is not being unjust because his justice would mean all are rejected, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (3:23). God always acts for his own glory. He is always just, but mercy triumphs over judgment (James 2:13). Mercy, more than judgment, promotes his glory.

Yet judgment also promotes God’s glory, particularly when his judgment is upon proud, recalcitrant men like the Pharaoh. It is written of Esau that even though he later sought the blessing with tears, he refused to repent (Heb 12:17). Pharaoh again and again pleaded with Moses to remove the plague but his proud heart would not let him repent before Almighty God. Instead his heart grew hard. This was according to the sovereign purpose of God. God raised him up for this purpose.

It did not mean that Pharaoh was not responsible for his sin. Paul is not here dealing with human responsibility; he does that in other places. Here he is dealing with the accusation of God being unjust. He bases his answer on the absolute sovereignty of God, something many were not willing to acknowledge then, any more than they are today. His conclusion is clearly stated in verse 18. Let us not start watering it down as many do. Leon Morris writes of the second part of this verse, ‘This statement is a difficult one for modern readers’. Rather surprisingly, he then states that God is never said, ‘so to harden anyone who has not hardened himself’ and further that, ‘God does not harden people who do not go astray first’. Morris’ conclusion is not in keeping with the sovereignty of God in election and rejection. Was not Esau rejected before he was born? Was not Pharaoh raised up by God for this very purpose? Sure he hardened his own heart, but that is not why God hardened his heart, any more than God elects those who choose him.

This is not to say Pharaoh was a mere puppet. He was fully responsible for his sin and its consequences. What Paul is saying is that God is sovereign over all things, even the human heart, and he is sovereign from eternity to eternity. Let us remember that God is rich in mercy, and also that he hardens some, not because they hardened their hearts first, and not because God is malicious and delights in men perishing, but in order to demonstrate his sovereign power and further his own glory.

Keener concludes regarding the argument of Paul in this chapter: ‘as God hardened the Gentile Pharaoh to deliver Israel and reveal his name among the nations, so God has hardened Israel to bring a chance for salvation among the Gentiles’ – we might say ‘opportunity’ rather than ‘chance’. Morris similarly concludes: ‘Paul is arguing that Israel’s present hardening does not defeat God’s purposes but rather it is God’s means of bringing the gospel to the Gentiles’. We agree that this is his purpose but also make the point that his argument and the fundamental doctrines he elucidates must not be diluted or disregarded. ‘God has mercy on whom he wills, and whom he wills he hardens’.

**Gentiles and the remnant** Romans 9:19-29

Have you ever been involved in a long, complicated argument? Put a bunch of lawyers around your table and you will find what it is like! An evangelist I know had studied and practiced law before his conversion. He was a very effective preacher. At times he reminded me of the apostle Paul as he carefully developed his arguments.

The passage before us today is part of Paul’s ongoing argument addressing the issue of why the Jews or Israelites did not accept Jesus as the promised Messiah. By the grace of God, Paul’s eyes were opened to this wonderful truth. He had to tell his privileged countrymen, who said they were the children of God, that this was not the case if they rejected God’s Son, Jesus Christ. But what then of the promises God made to their forefather Abraham? Was God going back on these? This was a serious accusation and Paul deals with it in detail. He deals with it from Scripture itself, careful not to allow his opponents to say that it was just his idea.

God is sovereign. He elects and calls whom he wills, as seen with Esau and Jacob. ‘But surely this is unjust’ some will say. ‘Certainly not’ says the apostle, as he goes on to declare that God is sovereign in mercy, and in hardening whom he wills; remembering that all are sinners deserving of God’s wrath.

**1. Potter and his clay**

Paul moves to address another objection: ‘You will say to me then’ (9:13). Here is the accusation that man is just a puppet in the hands of God. Here is the accusation that if God is ‘so sovereign’ human responsibility goes out the door.

Job had a similar problem. He felt God was not being just. He kept demanding answers from God about what was happening to him. He wanted his day in court with God, with God in the dock rather than as judge. But he forgot that God is in heaven and Job was on earth. In the end God did answer Job, asking him where he was when God created the universe. Who was Job to question God’s justice? Job was silenced before Almighty God (Job 40:4).

Paul answers those who want to delve into the mind of God. ‘O man, who are you to reply against God’ (9:20). Who are you to find fault with God’s sovereign purposes in election and rejection. Who has resisted the will of God? We must step back and see where we stand before God, God as he is revealed in the Bible and not as we imagine or reason him to be. Paul again draws on Scripture, this time indirectly, to make his point. Both Isaiah and Jeremiah use the illustration of a potter making a vessel on his wheel (Isa 45:9, Jer 17:6). God is the potter and we are the clay. Does the pot ask the potter, ‘Why have you made me like this?’ (9:20).

God is the creator of all creatures. Each has its place in his great plan and purpose for the world. God made man for his purpose also. He made us in his image. Someone has said this means that man will ask questions. That may be so, but to try to be like God is the ultimate rebellion or sin. Man must be humble before God. We must acknowledge that God ways are higher than our ways (Isa 55:9). We must acknowledge that the secret things belong to the Lord our God (Deut 29:29). Some people forget God’s ‘otherness’, and the fact that we are created by God and are answerable to him, not the other way around.

For Paul to conclude, ’Who are you, O man, to answer back to God’ is not a cop out. It is not that God has no reason for his sovereign choice, or that his choice is ‘arbitrary’ as Ellison writes. ‘It is not for man to demand to know the principles on which God bestows His grace, or that he should bestow it otherwise than he does’ writes Bruce. Men like Dodd can say, ‘But man is not a pot’, but this demonstrates an arrogance that Paul would condemn.

Continuing with the picture of the potter, Paul asserts, with a rhetorical question, that the potter has the authority or right to make a lump of clay into a vessel of honour or dishonour as he chooses- it is not simply ‘power’ in the sense of strength (9:21). He can make a beautiful vase or a pig trough.

‘The Lord has made all for himself, yes even the wicked for the day of doom’ is what we read in Proverbs 16:4. God is sovereign in creation. He can will a person for honour and another for dishonour. The accusation that God is unjust does not hold water. What Scripture says about Pharaoh is still in his mind. Was Pharaoh resisting the will of God? Who has resisted God’s will he asks?

**2. Prepared for glory**

Paul continues with the idea of God as the potter to pose a seemingly hypothetical question. In the Greek verse 22 begins with ‘if’; most translations have ‘what if’; we might understand it as ‘so what if’. The word ‘wanting’ in the NKJV should be ‘willed’, as in the previous verse, because it is not ‘wanting’ but ‘determining’.

If God has made vessels of wrath prepared for destruction in order to show his wrath and power, so what? If he endured with much patience these objects of his wrath, is that unjust? Pharaoh is still in mind, but soon the focus will turn to rebellious Israel whom God endured with much longsuffering. ‘The apostle has in view the unbelief of Israel and the longsuffering with which God endures their unbelief’ writes Murray.

God preparing vessels of wrath for destruction is not easy to understand. Because the text does not exactly say this, some conjecture that it is the people themselves who fit themselves for this fate, or maybe that Satan is responsible. Reformed men like Murray and Hodge maintain that God fitted them for this destruction.

In contrast are the vessels of honour or of mercy made by God (9:23). He had prepared them beforehand for glory, just as he prepared the vessels of wrath for destruction; here it is clearly stated that God prepared them beforehand for his glory. They are vessels that demonstrate his grace; they are sinners saved by grace through faith, which the following verse makes known as coming from both Jew and Gentile. In these God demonstrates the riches of his glory.

The argument of these verses comes to a conclusion in verse 24. The ‘what if’ question is not merely academic, but has a purpose in Paul’s argument. He brings this argument into the present saying, ‘even us whom he called’ (9:24). This also goes back to the question in verse 6 of the covenant promise failing. God who is sovereign in election and rejection, in mercy and in hardening, calls whom he wills. It is not a matter of which race we belong to, or the works that we have done, but a matter of God who effectually calls (cf. 9:11).

Paul was himself called by God. It was a powerful, irresistible call by the risen Jesus. He was a Jew or Israelite called by God. He was ‘of’ or ‘from’ the Jews or more correctly ‘out from’ the Jews. Paul is speaking here of the church. He was called out from the Jews and into the church, the family of those called to be saints (1:7). In the same way others were effectually called out by God from the Gentiles.

The church consisted of men and women called out from the Jews and out from the Gentiles. The church is neither a Jewish nor a Gentile community. When Paul said, ‘They are not all Israel who are of Israel’ (9:6) this is what he was alluding to. As Murray writes, ‘The covenant promise has not failed but comes to effect in the true Israel, the true children, the true seed’. Again we can refer back to Romans 4:16 where Paul writes that the promise is to those who are of the faith of Abraham.

Ellison says that Paul’s use of the word ‘Jews’ here is significant and that Paul means something different from the word ‘Israel’. It is true that ‘Israel’ can mean different things, as in verse 6, but that is not to say Paul is trying to make a point with the word ‘Jews’. Ellison says Paul in these chapters speaks of Israelites and Israel ‘not as ethnic but as a spiritual entity’, which is strange when ‘Israelite’ in 9:4 follows ‘my countrymen in the flesh’.

We can conclude that from Israel, that is, from the ethnic Jews, God called out Paul and numerous others to belong to him as the true Israel. God also called out numerous Gentiles to belong to the true Israel. It is not really a new community because to this community belong the covenant promises. What about the Jews or Israelites who do not believe? Paul will get to them eventually. Before this he establishes what he has just concluded with references from Scripture.

**3. Preserved remnant**

Paul quotes, in reverse order, two verses from Hosea: 2:23 and then 1:10. He then quotes from the prophet Isaiah. Although the Hosea verses are clear enough in themselves- ‘I will call them my people who were not my people’- it is not clear just who Paul is referring to. Hosea seems to be referring to the apostate northern tribes of Israel, although he could be referring to Gentiles. This verse from Hosea is also used by the apostle Peter to refer to the people of God, that is the church (1Peter 2:10). Since this question follows the word ‘Gentiles’, which would here come as a shock to his Jewish opponents, he is probably using these verses to refer to the Gentiles being called out by God. They certainly qualified as being ‘not my people’.

‘Isaiah also cries out concerning Israel’ (9:27). There is no question as to who these verses refer to. Isaiah prophesied to the rebellious nation of Israel, represented by the southern kingdom at the time. The northern tribes were destroyed in his early years. Ten tribes were gone; just two remained and even these were testing God’s patience. They were heading down the path of Sodom and Gomorrah (9:29, Isa 1:9).

But these were the people, the race of people, from whom the Messiah would come. God had to punish them for their rebellion but there was a remnant, a very small remnant, of faithful people that God preserved. Isaiah and Jeremiah were among the remnant. This remnant would survive the Babylonian exile. ‘A remnant of them will return’ said Isaiah (10:22); Paul puts it as, ‘A remnant will be saved’ (9:27). The Lord will ‘finish the work’ (9:28) may mean he will cut short the time he intended, for the sake of the remnant. It is the Lord of hosts, the Almighty God, who planned and executed this preservation of the remnant of his people Israel.

Paul faced a similar situation. The bulk of the Jews rejected Christ but that did not mean God’s promises had failed. It simply meant God had a remnant, vessels of mercy, whom he would call out from their midst. These faithful few or few survivors will be taken into the true Israel of God. This called out remnant will sit alongside the called out Gentiles, just as God had prepared beforehand for his glory.

**The stumbling stone** Romans 9:30-33

Many years ago I set out with our son and his friends to go to a small village in the Himalayan Mountains. This is what happened- with a little poetic licence. We packed our gear into what became heavy backpacks to cross the high mountains to this village. We thought it would be a four day trek. At the base station the driver of a jeep told us he could drive us to the village but we did not believe him, even though he had a number of people already sitting in the jeep. We began climbing the mountains in the direction of the village. We had a map and compass. We set out through the forest and came to the tree line. The grassy slopes were beautiful, although the climbing got tough. At one stage we were down on hands and knees because it was so steep. The second day we reached snow, deep snow. We trudged on slowly not sure which direction to go- but just kept going up.

 After a freezing night in the snow we reached the top. We were so glad. When we stopped patting ourselves on the back we started to look for the path down the other side- the path to the village. We could not find the way down. We ended up having to retrace out steps all the way back to the base station. We never did get to the village we were trying to reach. When we got back to the base station I noticed the jeep with the people in it was not there. Presumably the driver had taken them safely to the village.

Israel sought salvation or righteousness by following the law- in other words, by works. Gentiles did not have the law so were not striving to keep the law. Which one attained righteousness?

Who got to the Himalayan village? For all our effort we failed, but those who trusted the jeep driver to take them got there.

**1. Gentiles and faith**

This new section is given the heading, ‘Human responsibility’ by various commentators. They have this section going through to the end of chapter 10. Paul is still arguing to explain why not all Jews believed in Christ Jesus. A simple answer would that they failed to have faith in Jesus. From a purely NT viewpoint this might be adequate. Many in the church today would accept this explanation. Commentators seem to give a sigh of relief from here, after labouring through the doctrine of sovereign election.

To make the simple conclusion that the Jews failed to believe would not, of course, have dealt with the question of God’s promises to them. It is true that they were responsible for their failure to believe, but it is also true that, ‘God has mercy on whom he wills, and whom he wills he hardens’ (9:18). These are two sides of the one coin we might say. One truth does not cancel out the other.

What shall we say then? What is Paul responding to with this question? He has answered the question of 9:6 by explaining God’s sovereignty in election and rejection. God elects according to his sovereign purpose. But it is also true that the Jews had stumbled and the Gentiles were being brought in. What were these Gentiles doing in this community of ‘us who are called’? Bruce says this was a ‘hard lesson’ for the Jews to learn.

The Gentiles did not have all the advantages of the Jews- the Scriptures, the law, the covenants and so on. They were uncircumcised, ‘aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world’ (Eph 2:12). They did not pursue or strive after righteousness in any way (9:30). How then did they attain or get hold of this righteousness? These verses are loaded with the word ‘righteousness’. This word is related to the word ’justification’ that we came across in earlier chapters- e.g. 5:1: ‘Therefore having been justified by faith’. The basic meaning is being in the right, or of right standing before God. And as Paul established in 5:1, justification is by faith or by grace through faith (3:24).

God chose to include Gentiles as ‘vessels of mercy’ (9:23). When they heard the gospel of Jesus Christ they believed and were saved (10:13). ‘The vilest offender who truly believes, that moment for Jesus a pardon receives’, as the old hymn says. The gospel is good news because even vile, heathen Gentiles who believe in Jesus are saved. They make the righteousness of Christ their own by faith.

The lawyers and Pharisees could not understand Jesus welcoming tax collectors and sinners. He even let a prostitute touch his feet. He even made a tax collector an apostle. Moreover, in the beginning of his ministry when he reminded the people in the synagogue at Nazareth how God sent Elijah and Elisha to Gentiles rather than Israel, they got violent and threw him out. It was **all** those in the synagogue who got angry and reacted in this way, not just the Pharisees (Luke 4:28). I point this out because Ellison tries to tell us it was just the ‘establishment’ that rejected Jesus; ‘to say the Jews rejected Christ is not to pass any judgment on the majority of the people’.

Paul faced much the same reaction when he preached the gospel in the synagogue, and welcomed Gentiles into the fold. Some Jews also believed but most got together and threw him out. You would get the same reaction if you welcomed Gentiles into the synagogue today. Even some churches are not fond of welcoming sinners into their midst.

**2. Israel and law**

The Gentile, without pursuing righteousness, obtained righteousness because it comes by grace through faith. It is the gift of God. ‘But Israel’ pursuing the law of righteousness has not attained to the law (9:31). The vast majority of the Jews, led by the lawyers and Pharisees, were locked into pursuing the law as the way of being made right before God. It is pretty clear that the Law of Moses is meant here- at least as they interpreted Moses. Paul knew what he was talking about. He was a Pharisee who had been zealous for the law. After giving his pedigree he writes in Philippians 3, ‘concerning the law a Pharisee, concerning zeal persecuting the church, concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless’.

Paul was a legalistic zealot. If anyone was to attain righteousness by law then Paul was the man. If you want to get right before God by law-keeping or good works you have a long way to go to catch up to this zealot. But then he threw it all away. Yes, this learned man threw all his good works out the window; so why bother going down this path. Why not listen to what **this** expert has to say. Other Jews were still on the path that Paul was on. They were striving to keep then law. But they did not ‘attain to the law’, he writes (9:31). They did not succeed in their endeavour. They missed the whole point of the law. The law was not to blame. God was not to blame. They had become blind to the purpose of the law.

‘Why?’ asks the apostle. ‘Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works’ (9:32 ESV). The Gentiles obtained righteousness and the Jews would have obtained it also if they had sought it by faith rather than law-keeping. Faith was always the way. Faith was the way of Abraham as Paul showed in chapter 4. Abraham was declared righteous 430 years before the law was given to Moses. As Paul writes in Galatians 3:8; ’The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand’. The law was not given as the way to righteousness. It was given to reveal sin and bring the Jews, and all guilty sinners like us, to Christ.

**3. Stumbling stone**

‘For they stumbled at that stumbling stone’ (9:32). Once again Paul quotes Scripture to show that Israel’s failure to follow the way of faith was prophesied. He takes two verses from Isaiah and conflates, or brings them together, to prove what he has just said about stumbling. This may have been a common teaching in the NT church because Peter uses these very same verses (1Peter 2). He also takes up the picture of Jesus being the cornerstone or capstone. Paul focuses on ‘Christ crucified’ being a stumbling stone for the Jews (cf. 1Cor 1:23).

‘Thus says the Lord God; Behold, I lay in Zion a stone for a foundation’ is what we read in Isaiah 28:16. There is no mention of a stumbling stone, but this verse points to the stone being someone other than God. Then in Isaiah 8:14 we find reference to a stone of stumbling; this is in the context of God being a refuge during the Assyrian onslaught for those who will trust him. In their pride they found his offer offensive. They stumbled on the rock of offense. It would be a trap or snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem- which is the literal meaning of the word ‘offense’. The last line of Paul’s quote again comes from Isaiah 28:16 (cf.1Peter 2:6).

So this is what is written. How does Paul understand it? Jesus is the foundation stone. Whoever believes in him will not be put to shame, or they will be kept through the judgment. The Gentiles believed in Him. The Jews, who had the law God gave to Moses, stumbled at this very law. They thought the law was the rock on which they could stand at the judgment. But the law was not the foundation- it was the signpost to the foundation.

The law was for the purpose of revealing sin, and pointing the Jews to Jesus. Standing on the law they rejected Christ, even judging him for not keeping the law as they understood it. Remember their arguments over the Sabbath. The law is not the foundation because it does not deal with sin, but only reveals sin. The law condemns. It declares us guilty. The law drives us to the one who does deal with sin by forgiving us (Gal 3:24). God forgives sin through the sacrifice of Christ. In this way Christ is the end or fulfilment of the law (10:4).

How tragic that the Jews trusted in the signpost rather than going on to take hold of that to which it pointed. In their blindness they stumbled when ‘the end of the law’ came among them. There were a few exceptions, like Simeon, who saw God’s salvation in Jesus Christ even when he was a baby (Luke 2:30-32). John also saw it at the empty tomb (John 20:8), and Thomas saw it in the upper room (John 20:28). But the majority of the Jews stumbled.

Seeing the Gentiles obtaining righteousness apart from the law also caused the Jews to stumble. It made them jealous and more hardened. How could these pagans, these sinners, be entering in ahead of them? This caused them to stumble, but not that they should all fall (11:11). Salvation by grace alone through faith alone, as set forth in the gospel, not only caused the Jews to stumble- stumble even to this day. Many Gentiles also stumble on the message of the gospel? Lots of people are offended by this simple, lowly message. The reject the gospel that says all their works are as filthy rags, and that says ‘repent’ rather than ‘you have done well, considering’.

Lots of people, like the Jews, stumble at the claims of Jesus, his claim to be God. Even some churches, but especially the sects, reject the deity of Jesus. The cross is offense; it is a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks, but ‘Christ crucified’ is what Paul preached- ‘the wisdom and the power of God’ (1Cor 1:23). This is the way of salvation- the only way. Yet people persist in the works of the law. Jew, Roman Catholic and all manner of men and women refuse to let go of good works. They stumble at the glorious truth of faith. The only way to be made right before God is by faith; faith in Jesus Christ and his finished work of the cross. Do not stumble at this simple truth of the gospel. The Gentile prison officer pleaded, ‘What must I do to be saved?’ What was the answer? Look in Acts 16:31 now.

**The righteousness of God** Romans 10:1-3

One day in the bank the teller got into a discussion with a Muslim lady in front of me. It was during their month of fasting and the teller was praising this lady for her religious zeal. Zeal is there but is it based on truth? Jehovah’s’ Witnesses show their zeal in going from door to door even on a hot summers day or in the middle of winter. But is this zeal based on the truth? It is good to be actively enthusiastic in religion but only if it is based on knowledge of the truth. Sadly these people are ignorant of God’s righteousness just like the Jews.

In India some people believe in the healing power of cow dung. So midwives, after cutting the umbilical cord, smear it with cow dung. Needless to say many babies die of tetanus. Zeal without knowledge can be dangerous, physically and spiritually. Yet lots of people say it does not matter what you believe, as long as you are sincere. That is the modern mantra; ‘The truth is what I say it is’.

Paul begins chapter 10 with another heartfelt concern for his Jewish countrymen. In chapter 9 he expressed great sorrow for them because, despite all the privileges given them by God, they refused to believe in Jesus Christ, ‘the eternally blessed God’ (9:5). Did this mean God’s promise to Abraham had failed? No! God is sovereign and he sovereignly chooses whom he wills. God preserved a remnant from ethnic Israel and called out Gentiles to join them in the true Israel of God.

At the end of chapter 9 Paul proceeded to view the situation from a human perspective. God is sovereign but man is also responsible. Man is responsible to believe in Jesus Christ and so receive the righteousness of God. Righteousness refers to being in the right with God. It is a judicial term.

The Jews, along with people from all other religions make the grave mistake of thinking that by law-keeping or by good works they can be right before God. This is a great stumbling block. It is a blindness caused by sin itself. In this chapter Paul continues to examine this fundamental and fatal flaw in the thinking of his Jewish friends.

**1. My desire and prayer**

Paul’s expressed concern for the Jews seems to mark the chapter division in this section. As mentioned, he began chapter 9 with an expression of sorrow. This chapter begins with an expressed desire and prayer that they might be saved. The next chapter begins with an assurance that God has not cast away the Jews but still has a remnant chosen by grace.

After the terrible, even violent way in which the Jews treated Paul, he still expresses this concern for them. The ‘brethren’ to whom he expresses this concern are those in the church at Rome, a church predominantly Gentile in background. Paul did not want them thinking he had turned his back of the Jews, any more than he wanted the Jews to think this either. He did not want this church turning their backs on the Jews, despite the division they provoked in many churches. The Gentiles understood that salvation is by grace through faith. They were never proud law-keepers. The Jews must also understand that the only righteousness that counts before God is the righteousness of Christ that is given to those who confess their sin and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul sincerely desired his Jewish friends to be saved (10:1) – ‘Israel’ is understood but not actually in the Greek text. This desire led him to pray for them- or maybe it was the other way around. Maybe his prayer led to his desire that they be saved. Jesus said, ‘Pray for those who…persecute you’ (Matt 5:44). Is there someone who is hurting you at present? What are you doing about it? Do you want to pay them back or do you pray for them? Do you pray that God will punish them in some way, or do you pray for their salvation? When you do pray for them to be saved do you do so sincerely? Do you pray with heartfelt desire that they might be saved?

Paul took every opportunity to preach ‘Christ crucified’ to his Jewish friends. Like Jesus, Paul showed how the law and the prophets pointed to Christ and were fulfilled in him (Luke 24:44, Acts 13:16f). Like Jesus, he also knew the importance of prayer. Jesus would rise well before dawn to go out to a quiet place to pray (Mark 1:35). Paul prayed and kept on praying for the Jews to be saved. The doctrine of election did not stop him praying. He knew it was only by the power of the Holy Spirit that their hearts would be opened to understand and believe the truth.

Paul prayed for his Jewish friends that they might be saved. Is this what you pray for your friends and your family? It is right to pray for people when they are sick or when they have suffered loss, but do not forget to pray for their salvation. Do you pray for your children to be saved? A friend often told me how clever his children were and what good jobs they had, but he never spoke about their standing before the Lord. Pray that they might be saved.

**2. Misdirected zeal**

Paul was well aware of the zeal of the Jews. None was more zealous than him in the heyday of his zeal for the law. In his zeal he was blameless in law-keeping. In his zeal he persecuted the church. Paul topped the class in zeal for the law. He knew how the Pharisees thought and he knew that their thinking was fundamentally and fatally flawed. It was flawed because it was ‘not according to knowledge’ (10:2). The word is not ‘*ginosko*’, the usual word for knowledge. There is a lot of knowledge to be found in books or with ‘google’ searches. Sometimes this knowledge changes as more knowledge is added. We have to take on new facts. But the word that Paul uses here means a deeper knowledge (‘*epiginosko*’). This is knowledge of the truth, the unchanging truth. This is knowledge and understanding about our standing before the Almighty God. It is acknowledgement and recognition of the truth that is in Christ Jesus.

Paul called himself the chief of sinners (1Tim 1:15). He said this because he had been arrogant and violent. No one dared tell him his understanding of the law was fundamentally wrong. It took a vision, and the voice of the risen Jesus to break him. The arrogant Jew became the humble Christian. The violent Saul became the prisoner Paul. There is no place in the gospel for arrogance or violence, but there is a place for assurance and perseverance in the truth.

The Jewish leaders arrested the apostles and beat them and told them not to speak in the name of Jesus. But the apostles rejoiced and continued to preach the gospel. Zeal based on true knowledge is not arrogant or violent- nor is it quenched. It is ready to suffer and die because it is based on the truth about God and his salvation.

To be zealous for the truth of God is not popular today. It is okay to be zealous about a diet, about a sport, or a human cause or even a lie, but not for the truth of the Bible. The press and the crowd will try to silence you, just like they did the apostles. Will they silence you? The preaching of John, of Jesus, and of Paul was offensive to the Jews because it recognised sin and called for repentance- two words that are still offensive today. If you preach about sin or repentance you will offend people.

The Jews focussed on the law, on keeping a tally of their observance and good works. Good works and self-righteousness is the way most people seek to be right with God. Even in churches, it is popular with many. Observance of the sacraments and the rituals is seen as the way of getting right with God. The grace of God and faith in Jesus is not understood- especially when it is not preached. There is a great deal of ignorant zeal in the church today. The destiny of many souls is in peril because of this ignorance.

**3. Must submit**

My wife is having a birthday soon. I wonder what I should get her for her birthday. I was thinking of a lawnmower- or maybe the drop-saw that I saw on special. Do you think she would be pleased if I gave her a drop-saw? Well, what would please her? O yes, I could ask her what she would like. If I want her to be happy- and happy with me- I should ask what she likes, and get her that.

Are you trying to please God? Do you want Almighty God to be pleased with you? This is what many people want but they do not ask God, and do not listen to him. They think that what pleases them must please the Lord. This was the ignorance displayed by the Jews. They were ignorant of what God said in his word and were trying to gain righteousness through the law. They called themselves the children of Abraham, but Abraham was saved 430years before the law was given through Moses. How was Abraham saved? By faith!

What is written in the Law and the Prophets? They read in the Scriptures words like, ‘I do not delight in the blood of bulls’ and, ‘Even though you make many prayers I will not hear you’ (Isa 1:11,15). They read that their sins separate them from God, and that all their good works or righteousness’s were as filthy rags (Isa 59:2, 64:6). Still they went on believing that they could establish their own righteousness.

They thought they could justify themselves before Almighty God by bringing him a report card of their achievements. What foolishness! Even if they took the Laws of Moses and gave themselves 100% in all but one of these they would fail. ‘Whoever shall keep the whole law yet stumble in one point is guilty of all’ (James 2:10). He is a bold man, and a fool, who would give himself 100% in all. Remember Paul’s focus on covetousness in Romans 7. Besides, who marks their own exam papers? God is judge and he says you have failed. Paul concludes from Scripture that no one is righteous, no not one; all have sinned in the sight of God (Rom 3:10, 23).

God’s righteousness is what counts, and this is not found in keeping the law or in doing good works. God’s righteous is not to be found in the sacraments or religious ritual- no matter how zealous you are. God righteousness is found only in Jesus Christ. ‘For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes’ (10:4). The righteousness of God is through faith in Jesus Christ (3:22). This righteousness comes through faith or belief. It is not a matter of works on any such human effort.

Human effort appeals to proud human hearts. That is why so many go on in this ignorance. Self-righteousness breeds pride and arrogance- or is it the other way around? But the righteousness of God demands submission. It requires admission of sin and repentance. There are those two unpopular words again! Remission of sin comes only through the blood of Christ. The prophets called the Jews stiff-necked, as did Stephen. They refused to bow their heads before the Lord God or his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Will you humbly bow your head to Jesus, confessing your sin and believing in him, and him alone, for salvation? .

**Christ, the end of the law** Romans 10:4

Zeal is no excuse for ignorance. Zeal is good but only if it is based on knowledge- true knowledge. As I pointed out previously, midwives in village India zealously rub cow dung into the cut umbilical cord. If they will listen to medical knowledge they will understand that their actions are actually killing babies. Not only do they rub cow dung in umbilical cords; they also worship idols in the hope of salvation. Some are very zealous in their worship, lying on a bed of nails for days on end, or literally rolling along the roads for miles as they go on pilgrimage to some holy place.

Even Jews and Muslims with their fasting and their sacrifices are not as zealous as some Hindus. Thankfully some Hindus, like Paul the Pharisee, come to realise their zeal is misdirected. They realise that they lacked knowledge of the truth. The truth is that self-righteousness is different to God’s righteousness, and that God’s righteousness is what counts. They realise they must humble themselves before Almighty God, admitting their sin and submitting to the righteousness of God.

**1. Christ and the law**

What is true knowledge, and where is this righteousness of God to be found? Saul, the zealous Jew, met the risen Jesus on the Damascus road. He became Paul the preacher. He preached the gospel that other Jews and Gentiles might also be confronted by the risen Jesus. ‘For Christ’ he writes (10:4).

He previously confronted them with the truth that Jesus is the promised Messiah and ‘eternally blessed God’ (9:5). He now confronts them with the truth that Christ in the righteousness of God. They expected Messiah to deliver them from political oppression. Paul tells them the Christ or Messiah has come to deliver them from the oppression of sin. This is man’s greatest need- spiritual deliverance, not political deliverance. I am reminded of a saying, ‘Man’s greatest need is to know what is his greatest need’. I do not know when this was written but it is certainly true today. Do you know your greatest need? Is it to get a job, to pay the mortgage, or to get over a sickness? No! It is to get right with God because your sin cuts you off from God.

The Jews knew from Genesis 3 and Isaiah 59 that sin separated them from God. We must all know this. We must make this known to all people. It is no use preaching the gospel if people do not realise they are sinners- though some preachers try this. The Jews knew they were sinners but they were seeking to get right with God by law-keeping. Again, many people follow them in this endeavour. But the truth is we can only be made right with God through Jesus Christ. Christ is our righteousness (2Cor 5:21). ‘There is now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus’ (8:1), but the wrath of God remains on those who do not believe in God’s only begotten Son (John 3:36).

Jesus was born a Jew. He was ‘born of a woman, born under the law’ (Gal 4:4). Jesus is the eternally blessed God, the creator and the giver of the law. But he humbled himself to come into this sinful, fallen world and live under the law. He was obedient to the law of God, as given to Moses. He was obedient to his Father’s will, which was that he die on the cross (Phil 2:8, Heb 5:8).

Jesus had no need to be baptised with a baptism of repentance. Indeed, John did not want to baptise Jesus in the Jordan but Jesus insisted saying it was fitting to fulfil all righteousness (Mat 3:15). Even the most zealous Jews could not keep the law perfectly, but Jesus did. It was necessary for him to do so. He must be the ‘Lamb without blemish’ who offered himself as a sacrifice for sin. This is what was shown under the ceremonial law. Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness (Heb 9:22). The blood must be the blood of a lamb without blemish. The moral law and ceremonial law were seen as one by the Jews. ‘Law’ in out text cannot construed as ceremonial law only.

Jesus did not dismiss the law but kept it perfectly. He did not come to destroy the law but to fulfil it (Mat 5:17). Paul was not saying that the law is null and void but that it is upheld or established in Christ (Rom 3:31). He was not saying that the first plan failed so now we have God’s second plan. There is a vital link between the old covenant and the new. He is explaining this link in this verse. Christ is the end of the law for righteousness.

**2. Christ the end of the law**

Before we look at the word ‘end’ we should briefly comment on the word ‘law’. Commentators point out that law is a general term not limited the Mosaic Law. Ellison writes that this law is, ‘not merely the Mosaic law but all law that seeks to give man standing before God’. Morris says that we should see it as the Law of Moses in the first instance but that what Paul says rules out any other law. ‘Once we grasp the decisive nature of Christ’s saving work we see the irrelevance of all legalism’. The word translated ‘end’ can mean ‘goal’, ‘fulfilment’ or ’termination’. Some see it simply as termination but we must also see Christ as fulfilling the law, as he himself said (although he used a different word). Yet termination is included in this word. We should see it as a combination of all these meanings.

Jesus kept the law perfectly. He did this, not for his own salvation, but in order to be our representative- in order to redeem those under the law (Gal 4:5). His death was not simply a tragic miscarriage of justice. That it was, but it was much more. It was that ‘He who knew no sin became sin for us’ (2Cor 5:21). It was that he suffered the wrath of God upon sin, our sin. As law breakers, we stand guilty before God the judge. The law condemns us. We do not become righteous by dismissing or changing the law. The righteous demands of the law and of God’s wrath must be satisfied.

The law had a role, and still has a role, in revealing sin. ‘By the law is the knowledge of sin’ (Rom 3:20). The law rightly leads us to say with the apostle Paul, ‘O, wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from the body of death?’ (7:24). What is the answer to this question? Jesus Christ our Lord! Christ is the end of the law in that he is the goal of the law. Under conviction of sin because of God’s holy law, we cry out like the apostle Paul.

Christ’s fulfilment of the law is in line with his being its goal and purpose. The law points to Christ. On the road to Emmaus Jesus explained to a couple of disciples all that the Scriptures said concerning him. How wonderful it would have been to hear all that he said. What Paul writes in these chapters of Romans may well parallel what Jesus said? ‘Christ is the end of the law for righteousness’.

Jesus came to fulfil the law; the ceremonial and the moral law. We no longer look at the law apart from Christ. We do not look to Jewish Rabbis to explain the law to us, as some Christians do because they fail to see Christ in the law. We always look back to the OT through the lens of the NT. Christ did not change the law, but he certainly changed the way we are to look at the law, whether we are Jew or Gentile- because he is the end of the law in that he fulfils the law.

In what way is the law terminated in Christ? Jesus announced a new covenant in his blood (Luke 22:20). ‘The old has gone and the new has come’ wrote Paul (2Cor 5:17). Jesus was not just another priest. All sacrifices pointed to and were fulfilled, in his perfect sacrifice on the cross. Jesus was not just another prophet; he is the very Son of God. He is the final, supreme prophet, priest and king. Moreover, Christ is the end of the law as far as righteousness is concerned. He brought an end to any and all attempts to attain righteousness by way of law.

Before the coming of Christ the ‘system’ in place was the law. The Jews were under law rather than grace. They were under the yoke of the law (Acts 15:10). They could not bear up under this yoke or bondage of the law (Gal 5:1). The law as a ‘system of righteousness’ was ended. Christ is the end of the law for righteousness. The law can never again be viewed as the way to be made right before God. It was not meant to be such in the first place, but that is how the Jews saw it. How differently they would have looked at Jesus if they had understood the purpose of the law, namely to make them see their sin and their inability to save themselves.

Christ came ‘to redeem those who were under the law, that they might receive the adoption as sons… Therefore you are no longer a slave but a son’ (Gal 4:5, 7). Here is another way of looking at this change of system. A slave is under law, not love or grace. But a son is under love and grace. In Christ we are transferred from being slaves to being sons. We are no longer under the bondage of the law but are in the liberty by which Christ has made us free (Gal 5:12). Christ has set us free. In this way Christ is the end of the law for righteousness. He revealed the righteousness that is by faith and faith alone.

**3. Christ and faith**

The law was given to the Jews. They understood- or misunderstood- that keeping the law was the way to get right before God. Faith were foreign to them. They failed to understand the nature of sin. Sin renders man powerless to keep the law. Paul writes of the law being ‘weak through the flesh’ (8:3). Clearly, laws in themselves do not change a person’s heart. How easy it would be for our society if simply making a law made everyone change their behaviour. We have to have police to enforce the law. And even then we break the law. God’s law is, of course, perfect but still it is powerless to change human hearts.

What is the answer? It is not more law, as the Jews thought. It is not living as a hermit away from temptation. It is not asceticism, ritualism or legalism. It is faith. What the law was powerless to do God did by sending his own Son (8:3). He did this that the righteous requirements of the law might be fulfilled in us (8:4) - in us who believe and receive the Holy Spirit and walk in the Spirit.

Paul has already established that God elects and calls individuals from the Jews, as well as the Gentiles (9:24). It follows that Gentiles, along with Jews, can believe. Because righteousness is by faith and not works of the law, the way is opened for the Gentiles who do not have the law. Everyone who believes is saved. ‘Whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved’ (10:13). The gospel will be preached to all nations, as Jesus said (Mat 24: 14). There is no human being outside the scope of the free offer of the gospel.

Moreover, this offer is to be made on the basis of faith and faith alone. When Peter went to the home of the Gentile called Cornelius he preached Christ- ‘that through his name, whoever believes in Him will receive forgiveness of sins’ (Acts 10:43). These Gentiles believed and the Holy Spirit fell on them. Peter immediately baptised them. He did not demand circumcision or evidence of law-keeping. It was the same with the Philippian jailer. ‘Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved’ Paul told him (Acts 16:31).

Still today, some people think they must become good in order to be a Christian. Others think that if they sin they are no longer a Christian. We must be aware of our sin – this is where the law comes in. We must also be sorry for our sin. But we cannot deal with this sin in our own strength. What we must do is repent before God and believe Jesus died bearing our sin- all our sin. We must believe that God forgives our sin and clothes us in the righteousness of Christ. Is this what you believe? Is this what you understand as you pray, asking God to forgive your sin in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ?

**The word of faith** Romans 10:5-9

Have you heard the word ‘righteous’ on the radio or TV lately? Have you read this word in the newspaper? Have you heard it in any conversations? Have you used the word ‘righteous’ yourself? Maybe you were in a situation where you were proved to be in the right. You would have said, ‘I told you so!’ We like to be in the right. Some people even go to court in order to show they are in the right. They get a judge to decide, and if they do not agree they appeal. If you are like Mr Clive Palmer you might then enter politics to try and change to law. The Bible is not really concerned about you being in the right before men (see Luke 12:14). It tells us the greatest concern we should have is being in the right before God. So the word ‘righteous’ is common in the Bible.

Paul began this letter to the Romans saying of the gospel he preached that, in it the righteousness of God is revealed (1:17). His greatest concern was being in the right before Almighty God, the ultimate judge of us all. Is this your greatest concern? Are you concerned at your ultimate and eternal destiny? Paul says this righteous of God is from faith to faith. It was this way under the Old Covenant as well as the New, as he shows from Hab 2:4; ‘The just shall live by faith’. He later showed how Abraham was saved by faith (4:11). Here in chapter 10 he is still contrasting this ‘righteousness of faith’ with the ‘righteousness of the law’ that was so ingrained into the thinking of the Jews- and indeed in the thinking of most people.

What must I do to be saved, with emphasis on the ‘I do’, is the question we ask. Day after day we hear of people who are doing good works-giving to the poor or even going to work among them. Doing good makes them feel good and they get praise in the press. But does this bring them merit before God? We saw back in Romans 8:8 that those who are in the flesh cannot please God. We learn in Ephesians 2 that we are saved unto good works, not by good works.

Good works takes different forms. Some, like the Jews, focus on law-keeping or legalism. Others focus on helping the poor, and still others on caring for nature. But the basic motivation is the same- ‘What must I do’. To believe or have faith is seen as too simple and too humiliating, especially when the word ‘repent’ is added- repent and believe.

**1. Righteousness of the law**

Paul continues to support his teaching from Scripture; ‘for Moses writes’. The Jews adored Moses the law-giver. They recalled how he went up on the mountain to get the law from God. They would not recall so readily how their fathers stood in fear at the foot of the mountain. The law was given as part of the divine covenant. The holy God gave holy laws for the people to obey- for their own good. ‘The man who does these things will live by them’ (10:5). Moses went up Mt Sinai, which is only 2,280m high. He had been on the mountain before. This was not a great feat, like going up Mt Everest would be. Everest is 8,850m high and climbing it a great feat. I mention this because verse 6 speaks of ascending to heaven in some amazing way.

Laws are not meant to be broken. In keeping God’s law there is great reward (Ps 19:11). Yet the people rebelled and broke God’s law even before Moses could get down off the mountain. The broke the law on their way to the Promised Land,yet God in his grace brought them to the land. In the context in which Moses spoke this word (Lev 18:5), live meant to live and prosper in the land. The law was largely about morals and ethics for the good of man and society. Obey God’s law and your will live an abundant life. Disobey, and you will bring calamity on yourself and others. Indeed God will bring curses on those who disobey.

But there is the added dimension of eternal life. Keener writes, ’We do in fact know that later Jewish teachers applied texts like those in 10:5 to eternal life, even though these passages originally meant just long life in the land; it is probable that Paul heard this proof text in his debates in the synagogues’. But it was a fundamental misunderstanding and wrong approach to the law to think that it was the way to be named right before God.

Righteousness of the law demands perfect obedience, which no human being can give. God knew this when he gave the law. He did not give the law for this purpose. Rather, it was a setting forth of his holy standards that we might see how we fall short. It was a tutor to bring us (and the Jews) to Christ that we might be justified by faith (Gal 3:24). The righteousness of the law does not operate to save anyone.

**2. Righteousness of faith- negative message**

Pursuing righteousness through the law is futile (9:32). The only way to be made right before God is through the righteousness of faith. ‘The righteousness of faith speaks this way’ (10:6). Paul refers to Scripture but interprets it in his apostolic authority. He does not say, ‘Scripture says’ or, ‘as Moses writes’, as he did in verse 5. He refers to words in Deuteronomy 30 where Moses is winding up his final sermon- before he dies and the rest enter Canaan. The law was not mysterious or beyond them. They were not to go searching for the truth of God in the heavens above or beyond the sea- which may mean in the depths of the sea. Boice comments on these verses calling the first (verse 5) the religion of works or legalism. Legalism speaks in this way- ‘do this and you will live’. The second (verse 6-7) he calls the religion of signs and wonders. The third (verse 8) is the religion of faith or how faith speaks. So faith does not speak about signs and wonders- it speaks about the revealed word of God.

The religion of sign and wonders includes pagans who search for truth and guidance in the stars. Astrology is the religion of millions. People you know are consulting their star chart in an effort to live a trouble free prosperous life. There are people like a flat mate I once had, who believe not only that life exists on other planets but that this life is superior and holds the key to our future. This belief, to some extent, drives the space missions today and even astronomy- which is not to be confused with astrology of course. The occult is the religion of millions. People, like Samuel, try contacting the dead for advice on how to live.

‘Signs and wonders’ is also the name given to a branch of the modern church. Before we get to this we ask why Paul was referring to, ‘ascending into heaven’. He adds his own comment as he applies the words of Moses to his day- namely, ‘that is to bring Christ down’ (10:6). To descend into the abyss is to bring Christ up from the dead (10:7).

Although the Jews had the law, this did not stop them from looking for signs. They asked Jesus for a sign from heaven, despite the wonderful words he spoke and the mighty works he did (Mat 12:38, Mat 16:1). Jesus said no sign would be given them because he knew it would make no difference to their unbelief. He reminded them of the preaching of Jonah and of Solomon. They spoke the word of God without any miracles and people believed God (Mat 12).

 Jesus told the Jews the only sign they would get was the sign of Jonah. Already they had witnessed the marvel of the incarnation, of God sending his only begotten Son into this world. The miracles of Jesus testified to his deity. But the greatest miracle of all was his resurrection. He would rise from the dead on the third day, as prophesied by Jonah’s experience in the great fish. The incarnation and the resurrection are alluded to in the words of Paul. We do not have to bring Christ down because God graciously sent him down.

The world has just seen the passing of another great leader of men. Many gathered at his funeral and he is now buried. He will stay in the grave till resurrection on the last day. We do not remember his birth as we do that of Jesus in Bethlehem. We do not remember his resurrection as we do that of Jesus, the only man ever to rise from the dead. The resurrection of Jesus is incontrovertible proof of the deity of Jesus, as it is of the atonement he accomplished for us at the cross.

But the Jews, like many today, deny the evidence. They turn their backs on the truth and propagate a lie. Do you believe in the depths of your heart that God sent his only begotten Son into this world and that Jesus died and rose again on the third day? The Apostle’s Creed says he descended into hell and rose on the third day. So do not think that there is some place in heaven above, or even in hell itself, which Christ has not conquered.

A religion of signs and wonders detracts from, and even destroys, the religion of faith in Jesus Christ and his finished work on the cross. We do not look for, nor do we accept, any additional revelation from Almighty God. Such additional ‘revelation’ is the foundation of many religions and sects, be it the book of Mohammed, of Mormon, of Joseph smith, of Ellen White or any other self-appointed prophet. Special ‘revelation’ in dreams or visions has led many to question, and even deny, the written word of God. We do not follow a religion of looking for signs and wonders. Like Jesus and Paul, we believe what is written. We believe in the One spoken of throughout all Scripture, Jesus Christ the Son of God.

As I pointed out earlier, Moses went up a mountain just over 2000m to get the law- the people did not go up at all. Yet some picture the Christian life as if it is like climbing Mt Everest. Climbing Everest is arduous and dangerous. I could not do it- could you? It is impossible for most people. Keeping the law is impossible for all people except Jesus. But the gospel is open to all, young or old, rich or poor. This is the wonder of the gospel- ‘let the children come to men for of such is the kingdom of heaven’ said Jesus (Mat 19:14).

**3. Righteousness of faith –positive message**

‘But what does it say?’ ‘The word of God is near you’ (10:8). God has spoken. In the past he spoke by the prophets, including Moses, and in these last day he has spoken to us by his Son (Heb 1:1-2). Moreover, God has spoken clearly, not in riddles- despite what the Church of Rome and some modern preachers say. We do not need ‘experts’ to interpret the Bible. All we need is the Holy Spirit.

Jeremiah spoke of the day God will put his law ‘in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God and they shall be my people, and they shall all know me’ (Jer 31:33-34). Paul could have taken this verse but he found similar teaching in the words of Moses, the revered law-giver. The righteousness of faith says, ‘the word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart’ (10:8). This is the word of faith that Paul preached. This is the ‘religion of faith’ as Boice calls it. Glance down to verse 17 where it says, ‘faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God’.

To be made right before God all you have to do is believe. This is a big ‘all’, but it is not an impossible ‘all’ for you or anyone else. It is a big ‘all’, but not one that necessities accomplishing great feats or enduring self-denial or self-discipline. You do not have to conquer Everest or go on a long pilgrimage. The word of the living God is near you. It is in your hand as you read God’s book. This word gives you life as you hear it with your heart. Do read it with your heart. Read it with humility and an open heart. Read it prayerfully, asking God to make this word come alive in your heart. There it is- the word of faith!

The word is in your mouth in the sense that you confess the Lord Jesus, and in your heart in the sense that you believe that God raised him from the dead (10:9). Because God’s word is the truth and is holy, it is for us to speak and recite – though not without thinking. We are told to speak the very words of God, to speak to one another in Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs (Col 3:16).

**Jesus is Lord** Romans 10:9-10

If no one is made right before God by works of law then how are we to be made righteous? Our most natural thinking is that by doing good we will be rewarded with righteousness. Recently I was at a school presentation night. Children who topped the class or won the races were given awards. This school also gave awards for effort and for trying hard. Soon we will have the Australia Day awards. Men and women who have worked hard or devoted themselves to some cause will be given awards. This is the way it is in the world: hard work, passion and zeal are rewarded. But it is not like this in the kingdom of God. Why?

Firstly, because the mark is perfection and no one reaches this mark. No matter how much effort you put into keeping the law you will never be perfect. You have already failed. Secondly, as we will see later in this chapter, the way to be made righteous before God is open to all without distinction. The person who has sinned greatly can still be saved- like the person who thinks they have been good law-keepers. ‘Who ever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved’ (10:13).

**1. Heart**

We have a heart pumping blood around our bodies to keep us alive. If our heart stops pumping we die. But the word ‘heart’ can also refer to our soul or spiritual being. It can refer to our emotion and will; to who we are inside. Love comes from the heart, as does faith and hope. This heart is not the same as intellect or knowledge although they do interact. The first command is, ‘Love the Lord with all your heart, all your soul and all your mind’.

‘With the heart one believes unto righteousness’ (10:10). Righteousness does not come through outward actions or through words that we say. You can be a law-keeper without any love for God. You can be a worshipper without any love for God. Isaiah spoke about people who ‘worship with their lips but their hearts are far from me’. Some people love the music and the fellowship. Did you hear about a new church that does not mention God or Jesus? They come to sing and have fellowship and a cup of tea.

Your heart is, of course, informed by your mind. Knowledge is not thrown out the door when you believe with your heart- despite the accusations of some. The thing is, knowledge must impact your heart. Knowledge does not remain in the mind but affects the heart. People do not suffer for the sake of knowledge, but they are ready to suffer for what they believe in their heart. Few people today are ready to suffer because they don’t believe in anything apart from their own existence. To be ready to suffer you must be convinced of what you believe. You must be certain of what you believe. You will not accept that what you believe can be false or can be changed. Your belief or your faith has an object outside yourself. You know you own heart is not a stable object of faith. See how people say they love someone and vow to stay with them till death, but they fail. People who believe only in themselves will stumble and fall.

What is the object of your faith? Who or what do you trust in? Is it you own strength? Is it your family? Is it your money? I hope Jesus Christ is the object of your faith. He is all powerful. His love will never fail. He will not die and leave you without an object of faith. Paul believed in Jesus when he saw him risen from the dead. The other disciples saw the risen Jesus and believed. You have not seen Jesus but you have their testimony, and you believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead- right?

Some years ago a leader in the Presbyterian Church said he did not believe Jesus rose from the dead. He said it was not necessary to believe this or any of the other miracles in order to be a Christian. He was a liberal theologian. He believed Jesus was crucified because this is not supernatural. The church assembly brought him to trial, found him guilty of heresy, and excommunicated him. They did this because a man cannot be a Christian if he does not believe in his heart that God raised Jesus from the dead. Some people do not believe this but for some reason still say they are Christians. If the church does not judge them, Jesus will.

It is not just belief in God that is necessary. Even the demons believe in God and tremble (James 2:19). Some people say, ‘I believe there is a God’. Tell them that the devil also believes this. A true Christian believes that Jesus died on the cross bearing our sin **and** that God raised him from the dead. ‘He was delivered up because of our sins and was raised for our justification’ (4:25).

‘With the heart one believes unto righteousness’ (10:10). This chapter is about righteousness or justification. It is about being made right before God. In verse 4 we read, ‘Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes’. Paul is saying the same thing here, but making the point that this belief is in the heart. This is the ‘word of faith’ that he preached. This belief is with your whole being. It cannot be half-hearted. Mind and heart- your whole being - is involved in this belief. Remember how Jesus loved you. Was it only half-hearted love that took him to the cross? Why do you think that half-hearted love will satisfy Jesus? Do you need to consider how you are loving Jesus at present? What do your words and actions say to him?

Before we look at the second element of the ‘word of faith’ that Paul preached, look again at the context of these verses. Paul was quoting from Deuteronomy 30: ‘the word is near you; in your mouth and in your heart (10:8). He follows the pattern of this quotation in verse 9, namely mouth then heart. You might say it should be the other way around, that you believe and then confess faith in Jesus. Well, in the next verse that is the way Paul puts it; not that he is doing so to satisfy your expectations because the truth is, these two cannot be separated. Morris writes, ‘Paul does not contemplate an inner state that is not reflected in outward conduct’. Spurgeon, in his own way, said, ‘faith and confession are joined together; let not man put them asunder’. If anyone truly believes they will openly confess Christ as Lord.

**2. Mouth**

I recently heard a joke about vegans. Do you know what a vegan is? Don’t worry, they will soon tell you! Vegans love to speak about what they eat and how their life has changed since they became a vegan. Maybe you love to tell people about your diet or exercise program. Do you love to tell them about Jesus Christ and the change he has made in your life? When you believe in Jesus the change in your life will be much greater that of a new diet or new job. You will be swept up in love and adoration at his grace and the gift of eternal life. How can you keep such a wonderful thing to yourself?

The confession in the early church was, ‘Jesus is Lord’. How simple. Do you say, ‘Jesus is Lord’ to people around you? Do you say ‘Jesus is Lord’ when you come to worship him? Actually, in the early church this confession often meant death. Firstly, the Jews would not even allow people to mention the name of Jesus. To say this name meant being thrown out of the synagogue, and even killed if Saul the Pharisee had his way. Secondly, the Romans forced people to say, ‘Caesar is lord’. Caesar took on a divine status- he was worshipped as god. Not to worship him was regarded as treason, for which the punishment was death. You may have heard about Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna. He refused to confess, ‘Caesar is lord’ because he could confess only one Lord and that was Jesus. He was threatened with death but still refused and so was burned at the stake in AD155. Some denied Jesus is Lord under such threats. Still others reasoned they could confess Caesar and Jesus also. Do you think this is possible? Polycarp did not. If Jesus is Lord you can confess no other.

The word ‘Lord’ in this confession is in effect calling Jesus God. In the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible the word ‘Yahweh’, the unique name of God, is translated *‘kurios’*, the word found in this confession. So this confession is of the divinity of Jesus. He is not just a great teacher - he is Lord and God. In making this confession you are saying Jesus is your Saviour and Master. You are acknowledging his Lordship over all your life. Paul says that this confession cannot be made except by the Holy Spirit (1Cor 12:3). The Holy Spirit changes ones heart and allows them to make this confession- which in the first instance is before God, but must also be before men.

What of Christians who will not confess before men? Some talk about ‘secret believers’. In India this was discussed among students because some who believed would face persecution and even death if they confessed Jesus in their home. Fathers would throw them out of the family and even try to kill them. Even in our own secular society some think they can be secret believers. Mentioning the name of Jesus may get you offside with the boss and you could lose your job- this is the fear of some but rarely the reality. This gets back to the matter of separating belief and confession- it is not possible.

There is another dangerous teaching that says you can have Jesus as Saviour but not as Lord; having him as Lord comes later. I had heard about this teaching, but from reading Dr Boice learned it came out of Dallas Seminary- he calls it the ‘Dallas doctrine’- the dangerous Dallas doctrine. These theologians talk about carnal Christians as those who are saved but have not accepted the Lordship of Christ. They say, believing that Jesus died for your sin, even if only by intellectual assent, is sufficient for salvation, regardless of any change in life. Charles Ryrie, of the Ryrie Study Bible, is one who gives place to carnal Christians. He says that to confess Jesus is Lord only means Jesus is God, not that he is master of one’s life. But if we confess Jesus is God it means he is sovereign as creator, judge and ruler over all. You cannot say Jesus is Lord and still say Caesar is lord, or say you are lord of your own life. Jesus demands repentance and total surrender from all his disciples.

What does this confession mean for us? The content is the same but the circumstances may differ for us. Some say this confession refers to baptism. This is a confession but the context does not specify baptism. It is interesting that baptism is regarded as the point of conversion by Hindus and others. With infant baptism the parents profess their faith in Christ. ‘Confess with your mouth’ must come later. Churches that have infant baptism have a place for profession of faith before the elders or the congregation. Boice lists a number of ways we confess Christ. By coming to worship you confess Christ- more so in the present day than the past. Unbelievers have, by and large, stopped coming to public worship. The sacraments are an outward confession - a repeated confession in the case of the Lord’s Supper. Association with God’s people, and conduct at work, are other ways of confessing Christ. How we respond to trials and temptations is another. A Christian who uses crude and blasphemous language or affirms such language in others is hardly confessing Christ. Confession includes what you do not say or do, but it must also include what you do say and do do.

Some think that witness by works is sufficient. Such witness is good and important but we cannot avoid the words in our text- ‘Confess with your mouth Jesus is Lord’. You must be ready to give an answer to any who ask about your faith. You must be ready to go and speak about Jesus. You cannot be a secret believer. ‘Lord open my lips that my mouth may show forth your praise’ prayed the Psalmist. Is this your prayer? Indian Christians often greet each other with the words like, ‘Jesus is victory’. Will you confess Jesus is Lord of your life to any and all you meet today?

**Salvation for all** Romans 10:11-13

The law-keeping Jew was a proud man. He boasted that God chose to give him the law and boasted in his works of the law. He despised the Gentiles who were not given the law. Yet the Gentiles were also proud men, boasting in their own system of righteousness. It was similarly based on works or merit according to their own law. Paul concluded that both were under sin- that ‘all are under sin’ (3:9), and no one is made righteous by works of law. None have reason to boast.

The clear teaching of the Bible is that there is no other name apart from Jesus whereby we must be saved (Acts 4:12). Jesus said, ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me’ (John 14:6). This is contrary to popular teaching in our pluralistic society. We told that all religions are equal and that all lead to heaven. We are told not to condemn other religions for false teaching. Some Christians accept this and agree that there is truth in other religions, and even that people can be saved in them. But this is not the truth of the Bible.

If the only righteousness that counts is that of Jesus Christ then this gospel must be open to all- all without distinction. God is not unjust. God does not show partiality. Christ is the end of the law for righteous to **everyone** who believes, not just the ethnic Jew. ‘Everyone’ is a key word in this section; it is a key word in the gospel. If Jesus is the only way then this way must be open to all. Jew and Gentile, slave and free, rich and poor, young and old, male and female- all must hear this gospel if they are to be saved. This doctrine of the free offer of the gospel may appear to contradict the doctrine of divine election so clearly taught in chapter 9. But this is not so. Here in these two chapters Paul teaches that ‘God has mercy on whom he wills’, and also ‘whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved’.

**1. Shame**

‘If you believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved’ (10:9). It is not a matter of having the law or not, or a matter of rituals like circumcision or baptism. It is through faith in the finished work of Christ. It is a matter of Christ dealing with our sin because we cannot deal with it ourselves. Sin clings to us and we cannot remove it ourselves. It is in our hearts. That is why Paul focuses on the heart- with your heart you believe unto righteousness. You must believe Jesus died and rose again to deal with your sin- that is to remove it.

Remember when sin entered the world? You were not there, of course, but we are told in the Bible. God made man male and female. He made man without sin but with the ability to sin - and so it was that Eve was tempted and they sinned. Their innocence suddenly turned to shame- namely their nakedness. As sinners they sewed fig leaves to cover themselves (Gen 3:7). They were filled with shame before God and other people. They wanted to hide from God.

As a sinner, man still tries to hide from God. Our sin causes us shame- even if we do all we can to deny this and cover our shame. People get offended if you read the Bible and remind them of sin. The word ‘sin’, you may have noticed, has almost gone from our vocabulary. Other words that are associated with sin are also on the outer- words like adultery, homosexual, stealing, lies. The new situational ethics being taught in our schools makes everything relative. These sins can be okay in some situations- even necessary- according to this new ethic. The objective of this new ethic is to remove the guilt and shame of sin. If we ignore sin or give it another name we might get over the shame. But this is a lie- if lies still exist! Calling homosexuality ‘gay’ does not change what God our creator says about this sin. Calling adultery ‘having an affair’ or ‘living together’ does not change what God says about this sin.

All this effort at relabeling sin to avoid the shame will make no difference in the end. Those who persist in what God calls sin will be brought to judgment and shame on the last day. They will be so ashamed that they will cry out to the mountains to hide them from the face of the Lord (Rev 6:16), but there will be no hiding from His wrath.

At the resurrection some will rise to shame and everlasting disgrace (Dan 12:2). They will rise to condemnation (John 5:29). But others will rise to everlasting life. These will be those who believe and confess Jesus is Lord. They will not be put to shame. They will not be in disgrace before the judge of all the earth. You will notice that Paul has already quoted this verse in chapter 9. Why does he quote it again? Actually, the emphasis he puts on the verse here is with the ‘whoever’. The ESV replaces this word with ‘everyone’ in 10:11. Some even say that Paul is misquoting the text. But if we look at the Greek text he simply adds the word ‘all’ before the quotation for emphasis. Literally it is ‘all, the one who believes’. So it is ‘everyone who believes’. It is not universal salvation of course, but it is the universal opportunity of salvation.

**2. Same Lord**

‘The same Lord over all’ (10:12). If there is one Lord over all creation then there is one way to be made right before him. He does not have different ways for different people- that would be unjust. He does not have the way of works- that would be impossible. The one way is by faith or belief. The title ‘Lord’ in this verse we understand as referring to Jesus since the confession is ‘Jesus is Lord’, although the title most often refers to God the Father.

Jesus is Lord over all. And he is rich to all who call on him. He richly blesses all who call upon him or take his name upon their heart and their lips. He will not run out of blessing because of the coming in of the Gentiles. The Lord is powerful to bless, just as he is powerful to save. Those who call upon him will not be let down. They will be saved to the uttermost because he always lives to intercede for them (Heb 7:25). You see, if Jesus is not risen then he is not interceding and he is not saving anyone in the end. How foolish to think you can be saved without believing Jesus is risen. As Paul wrote, ‘If Christ is not risen your faith is futile and you are still in your sins’ (1Cor 15:17).

We note this word ‘call’ again, but this time it is us calling on Jesus. Before we saw it as God calling his elect- ‘those he predestined he called and these justified’ (8:30). God’s call does not preclude our calling upon him. God’s call leads us by his Spirit to call upon his name for forgiveness and salvation. This is what happens when we hear the gospel. God’s call is essential and so is hearing the gospel. ‘Faith come by hearing and hearing by the word of God’ (10:17). The centrality of preaching is the lesson of the next section.

The radical nature of what Paul is preaching here about no distinction between Jew and Gentile is seen in the account of Peter going to the house of Cornelius in Acts 10. It was forbidden for Peter as a Jew to enter the house of a Gentile. It was against the law. Peter was surprised when Cornelius, knowing this, sent for him. But God is his sovereign power, the Lord who is over all, brought Peter to Cornelius that he might hear the gospel and be saved. Cornelius was a good man, a devout man who gave to the poor and prayed to God. But he did not know the way of salvation until Peter came and told him about Jesus’ death and resurrection. It is the same today. The lost, the unsaved, must hear the gospel in order to call upon the Lord and be saved.

**3. Saved**

Paul concludes this section with a verse from the prophet Joel. It is a familiar verse and an important one because Peter referred to it at Pentecost (Acts 2:21). It brings together the teaching of this section.

Firstly, it emphasises the universality of the gospel. ‘Whoever calls’ or ‘everyone who believes’. It must have been a shock for the Jew to hear this verse quoted. But it was not just the prophet Joel who preached this message- other prophets clearly spoke of the Gentiles hearing and believing (10:20, Isa 65:1).

Secondly, the word ‘call’ points to the essential response of men to the gospel. When you hear the gospel preached you must respond by calling on the name of the Lord. New Year’s resolutions are not enough. Going to church is not enough. Taking the sacrament is not enough. Your must believe in your heart that God raised Jesus from the dead. This is the substance if your calling upon him. You call upon the Lord because you see your sin for what it is- namely offending God- and call upon him to forgive your sin in the name of Jesus.

Thirdly, note there is only one name for us to call upon. We must call upon the name of Jesus. We must be clear as to who Jesus is. He is Jesus of Nazareth who lived in Galilee and Judea just over 2000 years ago. He is not some mythical or imaginary figure. We must believe all that Jesus said about himself and all that is said in the Bible. Do not be confounded by clever people who tell you we do not know the real Jesus, or the Jesus behind the gospels.

Finally, the outcome of believing in Jesus is salvation. If believe and confess ‘you will be saved’ (10:9). Confession ‘is made unto salvation (10:10). All who call on the name of the Lord ‘shall be saved’ (10:13). This salvation is future. It is salvation from sin and death which will be declared at the judgment. It is the same as justification or being made right before God. Though future, it is certain now. Paul does not say ‘may be saved’ but ‘will be saved’. This assurance goes back to the election and the call of God.

**Beautiful feet** Romans 10:14-15

There was a knock on the door. The lady went to open the door and found a policeman standing there. This was the experience of many people living in the Blue Mountains not so long ago. The policeman had come to tell her of the approaching bushfire. He had come to warn her and help her escape the fire. He had come with a message to save her life.

There are people even now, climbing mountain paths in Nepal and walking dusty tracks in Africa to tell people of the approaching Day of Judgment. They are going to tell people the lifesaving news of Jesus Christ. How beautiful are the feet of those bring good news, who preach the gospel of peace. Does Jesus have your feet in his troop of ambassadors, bringing this gospel of peace to the lost souls of this world? Such lost souls may be down the street from you.

The righteousness of God is the only righteousness that counts for salvation. This righteousness comes by grace through faith; it comes when you, as one of God’s elect, believe in your heart that God raised Jesus from the dead. Anyone who believes and confesses Christ will be saved. ‘Whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved’ (10:13). In the verse we are looking at the apostle Paul addresses the crucial matter of hearing the name of Jesus. In order to believe in Jesus they must first hear about him - about his death and resurrection. Such knowledge is not found in the creation or general revelation. It must come to the ears of a person.

Commentators title this section, ‘worldwide proclamation’, even though the word ‘world’ is not found here. But Paul has told us that Jesus is Lord over all (10:12), and salvation is only in his name. No matter if one is Jew or Gentile, black or white, rich or poor, Muslim or Hindu or Christian, the name of Jesus is the only way of salvation. Therefore this name must be proclaimed in all the earth. Paul strings together a series of rhetorical questions in these two verses. They appear in a ’backward’ form rather than the more familiar form of sending, preaching, believing and calling. This is because he is taking lead from the previous verse which refers to calling on his name.

**1. Call**

‘How shall they call on him in whom they have not believed?’ (10:14). We might think that believing is the final outcome- believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved (Acts 16:31). But Paul has already taught that confession with the mouth is essential. ‘Call’ is like a verbal response. When the Philippian jailer was convicted of sin by the Holy Spirit he called out, ‘What must I do to be saved?’ (Acts 16:30). This was not all. After hearing the gospel he called on the Lord Jesus to forgive his sin, and he confessed the name of Jesus. He was baptised and rejoiced into the Lord. He continued calling on the name of the Lord within the context of the new covenant relationship into which he was brought by grace through faith.

**2. Believe**

‘How shall they believe on Him of whom they have not heard?’ (10:14). The literal translation is, ‘believe in him whom they have not heard’- as in the NASB. Morris makes the point that, ‘Christ is present in the preachers; to hear them is to hear him (cf. Luke 10:16), and people ought to believe when they hear him’. Boice makes a similar point saying, ‘It is Christ himself who speaks to the individual’. He points to John 10:27 where Christ says, ‘My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me’. He knows them because they are his elect who he is calling. Jesus goes on say, ‘and other sheep I have which are not of this fold: them also I must bring and they will hear my voice and there will be one flock and one shepherd’ (John 10:16). This is exactly what Paul is teaching in this chapter.

Belief is not just intellectual assent, though it does not happen apart from the mind or intellect. Many people believe Jesus died, but it makes no difference to their lives. ‘So what’, they will say. This knowledge, and even knowledge that God raised him from the dead, can be in the head without being in the heart. This is why Paul specifies, ‘With the heart one believes unto righteousness’- as well as confession with the mouth (10:10). If you believe in your heart and confess with your mouth you will be saved.

On the other hand, there are people who think believing in Jesus has nothing to do with the intellect. They do not bother reading the Bible- except for a few select parts. They depend upon experience, upon the voice of the Lord apart from the Bible. When we speak of hearing the voice of Jesus we mean through the words of the Bible. This is the way Jesus speaks today. He does not give special revelation to individuals, despite what the various sects, and some popular preachers tell you.

**3. Hear**

The Bible is God’s special revelation. It is the inspired and infallible and complete word of God for today, just as for previous generations. Remember what Jesus said in the parable- ‘they have Moses and the prophets, let them hear them’ (Luke 16:29). The OT is fulfilled in Jesus and in the NT. Peter links Paul’s writing with ‘the rest of the Scriptures’ as being, ‘wisdom given to him’ (2Peter 3:16). These men were apostles, eyewitness of the Lord Jesus and men called and sent by Jesus himself.

God’s power and majesty are revealed in the creation or general revelation. But it is only through calling on the name of Jesus that men can be saved. They must hear what we call ‘special revelation’. God will call his elect; he chooses for the elect to hear the gospel through human agency, namely preaching. He calls his people to make known the name of Jesus in all the earth. He first sent Jesus himself to live in this world and preach the gospel of the kingdom. He now sends the disciples of Jesus.

I often said to people when I was home on leave from mission work in India that there were villages in India where people had not heard the name of Jesus. For millions of people there was no church within reach. But here in Australia there is a church within reach of everyone- a church on every corner in some parts of the city. Most people have heard the name of Jesus- although we cannot take this for granted these days. We are a nation that has heard the gospel of Jesus Christ- unlike some other people groups. You have heard the gospel so are certainly are without excuse.

**4. Preach**

In order to believe in Jesus they must hear. In order to hear there must be a preacher (10:14). We live in a day when preaching is discarded, if not despised. It is seen as an outdated mode of communication, particularly if not accompanied by high-tech visuals or music. This is because preaching is not understood. Since the advent of TV some expect the preacher to be an entertainer. Indeed some rely on celebrities to attract the crowds to their church. Some apologise if they have no joke to tell in the sermon. Some simply tell stories without any reference to Scripture. The preacher is not meant to be an entertainer. J. I. Packer wrote, ‘A true sermon is an act of God and not a mere performance by man. In real preaching the speaker is the servant of the word, and God speaks and works by the word through his servant’s lips’. Paul warned Timothy of the time when people will simply want to hear pleasing things because of their itching ears, and will reject sound doctrine. We live in such a day.

This does not mean the preacher can be dull and dry, but his first concern is to correctly handle the word of God. He has the solemn duty to preach the word of the living God. He does so ‘in season and out of season’- meaning he does so in all ‘spiritual weather’. With this word he convinces, rebukes and encourages with great patience (2Tim 4:2) - or rather it is the Holy Spirit who uses the preached word for these purposes. This is why the preacher does not go out in his own strength but in the strength of the Holy Spirit. He must have the gift of preaching and teaching, but this does not mean the gift of the gab, or the ability to tell stories and jokes.

**5. Sent**

The final step - or the first step if we look in a forward manner- is that of being sent. Sent, preach, hear, believe, and call. Morris says the word preached should not be confused with ‘the modern Sunday morning sermon’. I am not sure why he says this, unless the emphasis is on the word ‘modern’. The preacher, as he says, is a herald. He is given a message and sent forth with this message by a higher authority.

The meaning of the term ‘apostle’ is ‘sent one’. Jesus appointed twelve apostles, gave them power and authority, and sent them to preach the kingdom of God (Luke 9:1). He later appointed seventy others and sent them out two by two (Luke 10:1). After his resurrection and ascension the Holy Spirit sent Saul and Barnabas to preach the word of God. It is also written that the leaders of the church laid hands on them and sent them away (Acts 13:3, 4).

And so the Lord continues to call and appoint his servants to go and preach the gospel. The Lord continues to send labourers into his harvest field (Luke 10:20). It is not for men to appoint themselves. A ‘self-appointed herald is a contradiction in terms’ says Morris. Yet this is not uncommon. It is very common in India. Many young men, some trained and others not, go off to establish their own ministry; this usually includes an orphanage, a school, a clinic and a church. They are answerable to no one, and often preach themselves rather than Christ. We do not hold to apostolic authority as the Roman Catholic Church does, but we do hold to the elders of the church sending men out to preach the gospel, and women to undertake other ministries.

**6. Beautiful feet**

We rarely have a six point sermon but here is the final point from this passage. As the apostle’s focus remains on the unbelief of the Jews, so he continues to make reference to the Scriptures. He once again finds words in Isaiah which inform and support his teaching. Isaiah was referring to the future downfall of Babylon and the end of Israel’s captivity. The watchmen in Jerusalem would see a man running through the hills with the good news- ‘Our bondage is over and we are free!’ Isaiah also said, ‘The ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God’ (Isa 52:10). He understood the message of the gospel and foresaw its proclamation to all the nations of the world.

We do not normally think of feet being beautiful- faces, yes, but feet, no! The point is that it was the feet that enabled the messenger to run with the good news. Boice writes, ‘The image is the same as that of the well-known story of the Greek runner who made his way from the battlefields of Marathon to Athens to announce the Greek victory over the Persians in 490BC. The route was generally uphill for a distance of more than twenty six miles and as soon as he arrived in the city and had gasped the word ‘victory’ the runner fell dead from his effort’. From this story we get the modern marathon.

We are not concerned with that victory or any victory except the victory of Jesus Christ. We are not concerned about running a marathon except that of bringing the gospel to all nations. We give thanks for those who brought the gospel to us. We say, ‘how beautiful are the feet of the parents, preachers or missionaries who came to us proclaiming the name of Christ’. How thankful the Indian people are that William Carey did not heed the words of misguided men telling him, ‘Sit down young man; when God pleases to convert the heathen, he will do it without your aid or mine’. He went and preached the gospel to the lost in India, men and women who had not yet heard the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ.

**Faith and the word of God** Romans 10:16-17

The other day I received an email from a missionary friend. He had been back to India and to a village we worked in. He wrote that a young girl came up to him saying, ‘I am a Christian’. For years I had gone to this village with a student from the University to teach Sunday school. We did not see any response to the gospel at that time. When I went back after six years they still had the NT we gave them, but no one confessed Christ. It was wonderful to hear this news from Dr Makino.

We lived on the border of the Indian state of Bihar which has a population of over 100 million, mainly Hindu, people. Missionaries called this state, ‘the graveyard of missions’. Since the time of William Carey, over 200 years ago, missionaries have gone to this place of poverty and caste warfare. Many came away without seeing a single convert. But the work goes on. A new generation of mainly Indian Christians are going, and they are seeing a great harvest of souls.

Paul the missionary, went to many towns preaching the gospel. He was set apart and sent out by the Holy Spirit and the church at Antioch. He went to synagogues in these towns, if there was one, and might have expected the Jews, with all their advantages, to welcome him and his message with open arms. But this was not the case. In most places they violently threw him out. For instance, for three Sabbaths at Thessalonica he preached from the Scriptures that Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead. But the Jews were not persuaded and became envious (Acts 17).

Paul did not experience total rejection of the gospel, as Jesus did at Nazareth. We read that in the synagogue at Nazareth they listened to his gracious words, but in the end they all rose up out of jealousy and cast him out of the city (Luke 4:29). Jesus then went on his way to the next town.

**1. Some not obey**

Jesus did not stop preaching when his message, and he himself, was rejected. Paul did not stop preaching when the Jews in particular, rejected the gospel he preached. He knew they treated Jesus in the same way. He knew they treated the prophets in the same way. He writes, ‘But they have not all obeyed the gospel’ (10:16).

Paul does not exactly point the finger at the Jews, although the NIV as a ‘dynamic translation’ inserts the word ‘Israelites’. The word Paul uses is ‘all’, which may include Gentiles- although his focus is on the Jews and their unbelief. His begins this chapter saying his heart’s desire was that ethnic Israel be saved. The majority had rejected Jesus and the gospel. Even so, he was not discouraged in his ministry. He was encouraged by the Scriptures because the prophets got the same response. Paul was planning to go to Rome, and from there to Spain to preach the gospel.

Why does Paul refer to this verse from Isaiah 53? He had just referred to the verse about the beautiful feet of those who bring good news from Isaiah 52. He was rejoicing in the wonderful means that God has ordained for men and women to hear and believe and be saved. He appoints people who believe, and sends them out to tell others that they might hear and believe, and so on. In this way God ordained the gospel to be preached to all nations.

This is what William Carey understood. Is it what you understand? Are you ready to be sent out to preach the gospel to all nations? You have a wonderful message, a message of peace with God through the Lord Jesus Christ. It is a reasonable and rational message, as well as a life changing and lifesaving message. Yet sadly it is not accepted or obeyed by all. Looking down the page of Isaiah, Paul read the words, ‘Who has believed our report?’ (Isa 53:1). These words come at the beginning of the great gospel passage about the Suffering Servant. Saul, the Pharisee, would have skipped over this chapter as being beyond comprehension, but Paul, the believer, understood and loved this chapter about the Messiah, Jesus Christ of Nazareth.

The task of the preacher is not that of a salesman- any more than the church is a business. Even though Paul did everything he could to persuade people, especially the Jews, he knew it was not within his power to change a person’s heart in any fundamental and permanent way. That is the task of the Spirit of God. His task was that of a preacher, sent by the Holy Spirit.

Paul was an ambassador who preached the word given him by God. If he changed the message he might be able to fill his church, but then he would have failed his duty as an ambassador. If the preacher tells the people what they want to hear he is merely tickling their ears. If he tells them how wonderful they are and how God wants them to be beautiful and happy and even rich people, the people will love the preacher and his message. Low self-esteem is such a problem, we are told; so some preachers make this their focus. Not long ago I heard of a mega church conducting beauty classes for women. Mega churches often preach the prosperity gospel. If they preached, ‘all have sinned and fall short of the glory for God’, the people would stop coming.

If the people love everything the preacher says he has reason to be concerned. The truth of the Bible bites the heart. I have a book called ‘Bible bites’- meaning small readings from the Bible. I have yet to see a book on how the Bible bites at a person’s heart. The word of God is ‘sharper than a two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, joints and marrow’ (Heb 4:12).

**2. Sow the seed**

Verse 17 seems to be out of place. It is like a summary of verses 14 and 15 - and that it is. Verse 16 began with a ‘but’. Paul digressed briefly to state the truth that not all obeyed, or will obey, the gospel. As glorious and precious as the gospel is, even when freely offered some do not believe. God has his elect and his unelect. No matter how eloquent or persuasive the preacher is, not all who hear will believe.

Some years ago I visited a tribal village in NE India. Wonderfully these former head hunters believed, and called upon the name of Jesus, when they heard the gospel preached. I was glad they received me and our daughter peacefully! I was able to worship with them in the huge building they were just completing in the centre of the village. But there were two old men who did not believe. There was a mass movement under the preaching of the word and the power of the Holy Spirit, but not all obeyed. It was wonderful that this ‘all’ was but a few, unlike the Jewish ‘all’.

The word ‘hear’ is a key word in verse 17 and in verse 16, where the word ‘report’ is the same Greek word. Even the word ‘obey’ comes from the root ‘to hear’ or ‘to listen’. It links hearing with acting. If you hear a knock on the door you open the door. If you do not open the door you have not made the appropriate response. It could be said you did not hear. So Paul’s summary of the means by which people are saved is that faith comes by hearing. Faith is the same as believing.

I once asked the head of the mission called MERF what he thought about Muslims needing a dream or vision in order to believe in Jesus- this is what some Christians think. He pointed me to this verse. Even if they have a vision, they must hear the word of God. The Lord sent Ananias to Paul to baptise him and tell him the word of the Lord.

If we look at the parable of the sower in Matthew 13, our task is to sow the seed. ‘Behold the sower went out to sow’ (Mat13:3). What that seed brings forth depends upon the type of soil it lands on. It depends upon how the word of God is heard. It depends upon the work of the Holy Spirit in a person’s heart.

**2. Spirit work**

As we have said, verse 17 is a summary of the ordinary means by which the Lord saves people. The Westminster Confession chapter 14 (WCF XIV) reminds us that, ‘the grace of faith, whereby the elect are enabled to believe to the saving of their souls, is the work of the Spirit of Christ in their hearts, and is ordinarily wrought by the ministry of the word’.

You might ask why Paul did not simply say, ‘Faith comes by hearing the word of Christ’. Why does he repeat the word ‘hearing’? Does he simply mean hearing with the ears? It is difficult to get people to even do this these days as they go about plugged into some electronic device. If you go to visit them you have to shout over the TV, like they are doing. You go to a café and the music is blasting and people are shouting. In some churches the drums are banging so loudly the message does not even get to the ears of the people.

But assuming the word gets to the ears, what then? Jesus tells about this in the parable of the sower, sometimes called the parable of the soils. The preacher sows the seed - what then? Some falls on the hard road and is quickly snatched away by the birds. The word may fall on hard hearts, hearts that are distracted such that they do not really hear the word. ‘In one ear and the out the other’ we say. Satan is very active in such distractions - in ways I have just pointed out.

Some seed falls on shallow soil. Such people are overjoyed when they hear the word, but the word does not sink to the depths of their heart. With shallow roots they wither when trouble comes their way. Paul saw men leave him when trouble came. Have you seen people leave when trouble comes? With sadness, I have to say, yes.

Some seed falls on weedy ground. This may be good ground but it is filled with other things- weeds. These others things, like worries of the world or riches of the world, quickly take over and choke the word of life. Jesus saw a man leave him for just thirty pieces of silver. Have you seen anyone choked by the things of this world? Please don’t say ‘all the time’!

Finally, there is the good soil, representing those who hear and understand and bear fruit. They bear fruit because the word has taken over their whole life. They believe and confess with their mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord’. If you are like the good soil, you will open your mouth and praise the name of the Lord. You will praise him for his amazing grace and the new life he has given you - even eternal life.

Remember, the word that is preached comes in the power of the Holy Spirit. Every time I prepare a sermon I pray for the Holy Spirit to help me, and help you to understand and receive this word. I pray when I come to preach the word that your heart will be open; that you will be in heart to heart communication, not with me but with Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Israel heard and understood**  Romans 10:18:21

It is a joy for preachers and missionaries to read the latter part of Romans 10. The words here show the place of evangelism in God’s sovereign plan for the gospel to go to all the nations of the earth. They should be a joy to every believer as they understand their place in this great plan of God. ‘Mans’ chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever’ (Shorter Catechism, Question 1). Part of glorifying God is seeing an increasing number of souls calling on the name of the Lord. Just as it was Paul’s desire for the Jews to be saved, so it was his desire, and should be ours also, for Jew and Gentile to be saved. There is a special desire for loved ones and friends to be saved, but also for lost souls, wherever they may be, to be saved.

Jesus said, ‘This gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to the nations and then the end will come’ (Mat 24:14). Has this happened yet? Yes and no. We live in the days of amazing communication. People in remote villages of India were getting TV when we were there. Now they have mobile phones with internet connections. The name of Jesus is being made known by radio, TV and internet. This does not mean there is no need for preachers – there is a great need for preachers – but it does mean the end is near according to the words of Jesus. Jesus did not mean, and Paul did not mean, that every individual had to hear the gospel but that every nation or every ‘people group’ must hear. This is the term used by missiologists who study such groups- but only the Lord really knows where the gospel is heard. He is sovereign in mission, as in everything.

The closing words of Roman 10 focus on the Jews- as with most of these three chapters. In these verses all Paul does is quote the OT. He asks brief rhetorical questions, and answers with a passage of Scripture- which the Jews would have known. In fact, he quotes from Moses, the Psalms and the Prophets- the Jews were not so fond of the prophets but did read them.

His focus on the Jews was because of his initial question; why did Israel, the special people of God, not believe the gospel? Did God fail to keep his promise to Abraham? Certainly not! From the beginning, God’s electing grace was evident. He would have mercy on whom he wills. Not all Israel are the true Israel. But this did not exonerate the Jews – they were responsible for their unbelief. They were responsible for not submitting to the righteousness of God in Jesus Christ. Everyone who is saved is saved by God’s righteousness- by grace through faith.

**1.Not heard?**

In this context the question arises, ‘Have they not heard?’ (10:18). Hearing is essential, as we have seen. Is it that the Jews have not heard? Indeed they have, says Paul. They cannot make this excuse. He takes a verse from Psalm 19 to make this clear. This Psalm speaks of God’s revelation in the creation- ‘The heavens declare the glory of God’- and in his word-‘The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul’. Theologians call this ‘general revelation’ and ‘special revelation’ respectively. There is some difficulty with the fact that this quote comes from the first part of the Psalm referring to general revelation. The gospel is not proclaimed in the general revelation, but seeing the creation all people under the sun should understand God’s power and majesty (Rom 1:20). Paul is probably emphasising the idea of God’s word going to the ends of the earth, and extending this to the Scriptures. Bruce speaks of ‘representative universalism’ in the sense that the gospel has become widely enough preached for it to be said that representatives of Judaism throughout the known world had heard it. We might compare what Paul says in Colossians 1:6 about the gospel having been heard in all the earth. Certainly the Jews, who had the very oracles of God, had heard the gospel; their forefather Abraham saw the day of Jesus and was glad (John 8:56).

We do not agree with a declaratory statement attached to the Westminster Confession of Faith by the PCA stating, ‘It is not required to be held… that God may not extend his grace to any who are without the pale of ordinary means’. This is akin to what the leaders of William Carey’s church told him, although I suspect from a different theological perspective. The words of verse 17 must not be overlooked- ‘Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God’ and, ‘how shall they hear without a preacher’.

Before we go to the next point, please take this first point to heart. You have heard the gospel. What excuses will your give on Judgment Day if you have not responded in faith? We live in a day when people want to blame their parents, their teachers, their poverty or their riches, or even God, for their unbelief. Blame who you will, but no excuse will hold water on that Day. You are responsible for your sin and your unbelief. You have heard the way of salvation- have you taken it? Have you been down on your knees, believing what you heard, and calling on the name of the Lord?

**2. Not understand?**

The word ‘know’ in verse 19 means understand. Could it be that the Jews- here referred to as ‘Israel’- did not understand the gospel? Many of them lived before the day of Jesus but Paul is writing to those among whom Jesus walked and talked, prayed and healed, died and rose again. Yet Paul does not use this evidence. He once again refers to their own Scriptures.

First, he refers to Moses the law-giver. In Deuteronomy 32:21 Moses spoke of how the Jews had provoked God to jealousy with their idols. He went as the mouthpiece of God saying God would provoke them to jealousy by ‘those who are not a nation’ (10:19). Ignorant and foolish pagans would provoke the proud, religious Jews to anger and rage. These were men who loved to boast in the law and in God (Rom 2:17, 23)

How could this be? It could only be if they saw such people being blessed by the God of Israel. If all they saw was pagans worshipping a new god called Jesus they would not have turned a head. What they saw and understood was God blessing these pagan people who believed in Jesus Christ- the Jesus who came to the Jews preaching the kingdom of God,and whom they crucified.

Jesus said he was sent from God and that he must be raised from the dead. Paul and some other Jews believed, but most simply became jealous. They understood the claims of Jesus. They understood the gospel, but stubbornly refused to surrender to the way of righteousness that is not by law but by faith in Jesus.

It is interesting that even within Christianity a sense of pride can be found –especially in those who tend towards legalism. It is not unknown for preachers to become jealous when new believers outshine them in some way. It is not unknown for missionaries to react with jealousy towards local converts who grow in knowledge and mature in their faith. Some cling to their position of leadership, refusing to share it with local believers. Too often this has brought the downfall of the particular ministry. The day is coming, and is already here, when men from the old mission fields in India and Africa are provoking theologians and church leaders in the west.

**3. Not seek**

The apostle goes on to explain how the Gentiles came to be so blessed by God. He senses a boldness in the prophet’s words in Isaiah 65:1. Isaiah was at pains to bring boastful Israel to a position of humility. They refused to listen to the word of God. They spurned the word of the prophet and even persecuted men like Jeremiah. But God will not be mocked. He will have the last word.

The Lord said he would be found by those who did not seek him (10:20) - Paul actually reverses the parallel lines of Isaiah 65:10. The Jews made out they were seeking the Lord and following his commands, when in fact they were disobedient and obstinate (10:21). They were going through the motions with the rituals. They were fasting and sacrificing with great zeal- but they were not trusting in the Lord.

The Gentiles did not have the law and did not seek after God. But when the word of the God came to them they heard and believed and called on the name of the Lord. Morris writes, ‘The Gentiles did not consciously look for God as the Jews did. But in the end they found him because he revealed himself to people of faith. It is a mark of God’s sovereignty, on which Paul is insisting throughout this whole argument’.

It is God who holds out life for us to freely take. Jesus stretched out his hand and took hold of the drowning Peter. It is sometimes said that religion is man seeking after God, but in the gospel God seeks after man. It is by God’s grace, through faith, that we are saved. As the Reformers reminded us, we are lost and helpless- they called it total depravity. In our own strength we cannot take even one step towards God. Rather, He reaches out to us in the preached word, and is pleased to save his elect by grace, grace alone.

**4. Not obey**

This gospel of free grace is offensive to the Jews- and lots of other people. The proud sinful heart is offended when told it can do nothing towards salvation except believe. As told by Isaiah once again, Israel was a disobedient and obstinate people (10:21, Isa 65:2). They walked according to their own thoughts. Many people do this; they have their own ideas about salvation. They think they contribute something. They believe in a gospel of ‘Jesus plus works’. Pelagius was such a man. He said we are not totally depraved but that the ability to do good works resides in man. Augustine refuted his teaching. Yet many still believe it is ‘me and God together’ that worked my salvation, and together continue to do great things.

Although Paul ends this chapter telling the Jews they are disobedient and obstinate people, he also tells of God’s compassion for Israel. ‘All day long I have stretched out my hands’ (10:21). God’s love is amazing. Despite their rejection of God, he continued to take them back when, from captivity, they cried out to him. After sending prophet after prophet, he finally sent his own Son to them- as the parable of the vineyard reminds us. Even on the cross Jesus said, ‘Father forgive them’.

Jesus held out his hands to Thomas - his nailed pierced hands that said, ‘I died and am now risen’. Thomas did nothing but confess, ‘My Lord and my God’. Jesus holds out his hands to you saying, ‘Believe in me- I died and am risen from the dead’. All your have to do is bow your knee and say, ‘Yes Lord, I believe’.

What is truly amazing about the love of Jesus is that he still reaches out to the Jews who rejected him. Paul will explain this amazing truth in the next chapter. As Morris reminds us in his commentary; this chapter is about human responsibility. But Paul does not retreat one step from what he said about predestination or election in the previous chapter. Moreover, it is not a new teaching but is found in the OT. As Paul held these two truths of divine election and human responsibility together, so must we.

**The remnant of Israel**  Romans 11:1-6

We come to the last of the three chapters in which the apostle Paul examines, with a heavy heart, the failure of the Jews to believe in Jesus Christ. These were the people through whom God chose to reveal himself to mankind. These were the people God prepared to receive his only begotten Son into this world- and into their hearts. But they did not receive him; they rejected the Lord Jesus Christ.

Did their failure to receive God’s anointed mean God’s plan failed in some way? Did it mean God was not keeping his promise to Israel, his covenant promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob? These were serious allegations for the apostle. Such allegations attacked the credibility of God’s covenant promises. So how does the apostle answer these allegations? Not for a moment does Paul allow that God has failed or changed his mind.

Paul had every reason to hate the Jews who persecuted Jesus, and were now persecuting him- even though he was a Jew himself. But he speaks of his great love and desire that his ‘countrymen according to the flesh’ be saved. The first point he makes is that, ‘they are not all Israel who are of Israel’ (9:6). He proves from Scripture that God elects people according to his grace; not by works and not by race. So not all the children of Abraham or of Israel are God’s elect.

Paul also insists on human responsibility. The Jews had heard and understood the gospel of the kingdom, but in their sinful pride they were locked into legalism and self-righteousness. They rejected the Messiah. The Gentiles however, submitted themselves to Christ when he was preached to them in the gospel. This provoked the Jews to jealousy and shameful violence.

Paul comes back to the question ‘What about the Jews?’ Each of these chapters begins with Paul expressing his desire and prayer for his Jewish countrymen to be saved. He will not have anyone conclude that God has rejected them fully or finally. Paul was himself a Jew who was saved, and he did not renounce his heritage. He said that, ‘Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes’, ‘end’ meaning ‘goal’ or ‘fulfilment’ (10:4). Paul was a true Jew who upheld all the Scriptures.

Boice writes of a Christian of Jewish background attending a Bar Mitzvah service with his family. The men of the family went to read the Scriptures but the Rabbi stopped this Christian, saying he was no longer a Jew. This man replied, ‘How can you say I am not a Jew? God made me a Jew. My mother and father were Jews. I am a son of Abraham’. Paul would have said, ‘I am a true Jew. I am not only a son of Abraham in the flesh, but also a ‘faith child’ of Abraham through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

**1. Rejection of Israel**

Paul deals with a question which may have arisen in his own mind, and which probably arose in predominantly Gentile churches: ‘Has God rejected His people’ (11:1). The Jews on the whole had rejected Christ and gone on to reject the gospel. Paul was preaching the gospel to the Gentiles, as God commanded him, and they were hearing and believing. The Jews were provoked to jealousy. They were trying to destroy the church.

The Jews had turned their backs on God in the past. God sent them into exile as punishment, but he always left the door open for them to repent and return (Deut 30). The words of Isaiah, quoted at the end of the previous chapter, would have reminded Paul of God’s patience and compassion; ‘All day long I have stretched out my hands to a disobedient and obstinate people’ (10:21).

‘Certainly not!’ is the informed and inspired answer to the question, ‘Has God rejected his people?’ Paul initially looks at himself to prove that this is not true. He said, ‘I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin’ (11:1). All Jews were physically descended from Abraham- as were many non- Jews. They were proud of this ancestry, even boasting to Jesus that, ‘Abraham is our father’ (John 8:39).

Paul was also an Israelite, a descendant of Jacob or Israel. When God gave Jacob a new name he made a covenant with him (Gen 32:28). Israel was a covenant name. Benjamin was a small tribe, but an important one. Only Benjamin was born in Canaan. Jerusalem was in Benjamin territory. They maintained faithful temple worship when the ten tribes broke away. The first king of Israel, whose name Paul once shared, was from Benjamin.

Without question Paul was a Jew; he was also a believer in Jesus Christ. He was one of the elect of God. He was living proof that God had not totally rejected his people but remained true to his covenant promise. There were other Jews who believed of course, but Paul needed just one example to say, ‘Certainly not!’

**2. Remnant of faithful ones**

Paul uses another argument to reinforce his answer. He points to Biblical history which shows that God has always reserved a remnant of faithful Jews. In verse 2 he qualifies who are God's people with the words, ‘whom he foreknew’. These words have generated a lot of debate as people ask who he is referring to by this qualification. Some say he is referring to the nation or ethnic Israel; others to spiritual or true Israel. Hodge and Haldane are for the latter on the basis of what Paul says in 9:6 - ‘They are not all Israel who are of Israel’. Morris insists, ‘it is the nation that is being discussed’, but goes on to say, ‘None of this ever meant that the entire nation would be saved’. Boice sometimes forgets about 9:6 as he jumps ahead to 11:26 and asserts, 'Paul maintains that in the end the fullness of God’s blessing will be extended to the Jewish people nationally, and so all Israel will be saved’.

‘Whom he foreknew, he also predestined’ is what we read in Romans 8:29. To foreknow means to be ‘intimately loved beforehand’. The two words mean much the same thing. Not all ethnic Israel will be saved – if this was the case why was Paul filled with grief. What he tells us here is that a remnant will be saved, a remnant of God’s elect (11:5, 7), a faithful group within ethnic Israel.

Elijah lived during some of the darkest days in Israel- the northern branch that is. King Ahab took a pagan wife called Jezebel who led him to set up an altar to Baal, one of the Canaanite gods. He totally rejected the worship of the Lord God of Israel and gave himself over to idol worship. God sent Elijah to speak to Ahab about this apostasy. This led to their showdown on Mt Carmel and to Elijah executing the 450 prophets of Baal. Jezebel got angry and vowed to kill him. Elijah fled to the desert of Sinai saying he was the only one left. But God spoke to him in a ‘Still small voice’, informing him that, ‘I have reserved seven thousand in Israel, all whose knees have not bowed to Baal’ (1Kings 19:18). Seven in the Bible is symbolic of completeness. God kept for himself a full number of faithful Jews. They were not those left by Ahab in his pogrom, but those kept by God according to his will and purpose.

The Lord preserved a remnant again during the Babylonian exile- already referred by Paul in 9:27. God had to judge his rebellious people when they refused to repent. He destroyed many, but not all. He never rejected his people in total. He always preserved a believing remnant, and he was doing this even as Paul preached the gospel to Jew and Gentile.

So Paul’s own testimony, and the existence of a faithful remnant, were proof that God had not abandoned Israel. Paul may have found comfort in reading about Elijah. Did he ever ask if he was the only faithful Jew left? This was not the case of course, any more than it was for Elijah. God always had, and always will preserve a faithful remnant to himself. He has his elect among the Jews, as well as the Gentiles.

We should not be discouraged when it seems only a few are left worshipping God. It is disappointing when just a handful gather for prayer or worship, but we are not discouraged. Sadly some are discouraged and turn away to follow the crowd. But God still has his elect. There is ‘at this present time a remnant according to the election of grace’ (11:5). The church has been through dark days, and it may yet go through dark days, even in this country, but God will bring his church through. Think of the church in Russia and in China. God ‘will build his church and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it ‘(Mat 16:18).

**3. Remnant elected by grace**

As Paul brings the lesson from Elijah and the remnant into the present, he reminds us that salvation is by grace and grace alone. ‘Even so then, at this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace’ (11:5). God had not rejected ethnic Israel in total. He has reserved a group from among them who will believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. There is, of course, no other way of salvation for Jew or Gentile. ‘No one comes to the Father except through me’ Jesus said. Do not think, as some people do, that the Jews will be saved without believing in Jesus Christ.

Some commentators see verse 6 as superfluous, as an intrusion into the argument. They say Paul has already told us that salvation is by grace apart from works (3:21, 5:2). This is true, but the apostle thought it important to reiterate this truth. It was not easy for Jews to give up trusting in their heritage and in the law (2:17). It was not easy to say, ‘I count all things loss’ and, ‘All things rubbish that I may gain Christ’ (Phil 3:8). It was not easy to submit to the righteousness of God (10:3). Some well-meaning Christians will try to tell you otherwise, but Scripture is clear- grace and grace alone.

The Jews have many advantages but they have made these into disadvantages, as we will see in the next section. They have become hardened to the gospel. But even the hardest of hearts can be broken by the God’s electing grace. The Reformers call it ‘irresistible grace’. Paul met with the irresistible grace of God, and other Jews have also.

The remnant consists of Jews elected by God in his grace. They do not belong because of any works of the law or rituals, like circumcision. If they think that their works in any way save them, or add to their salvation by grace, then they nullify grace. Calvin says that if we establish one we destroy the other. They are incompatible opposites. Morris concludes that it is important, ‘To take grace seriously and not let works creep in by some back door’. This is a danger for us all, but is a special danger for the Jews who maintain ‘We have Abraham as our father’.

**The remainder of Israel**  Romans 11:7-10

God has not rejected all Israel. He has not cast away those whom he foreknew; those whom he elected by sovereign grace (11:2). God had his remnant of faithful Jews in the days of Elijah, and in the days of Paul, and he has a remnant today. But what of the majority of the Jews. By definition the remnant is not the majority. What does Paul have to say about these? Rather, what does Scripture have to say; Paul always bases his argument on what is written. This is the focus of his argument in these verses.

Boice calls this section a summary, and to some extent it is. Paul follows on from the discussion about the remnant and also returns to Israel not obtaining what they sought; they stumbled on the stumbling stone which is Christ (9:32). The apostle does not leave open ends in his argument. He does not leave loopholes for enemies of the gospel.

**1. Remnant**

The remnant consists of Jews whom God elects by his grace (11:5). God reserved a remnant of seven thousand for himself, which Elijah did not know about. They had not bowed the knee to Baal; but this was not why they were saved. They were saved because of God’s election. Paul emphasises this in verse 6 and again in verse 7. Some criticise Martin Luther for adding the word ‘alone’ when saying that we are justified by grace alone. In Romans 3:24 it is written, ‘Being justified freely by his grace’. But as Paul says here, if grace is not alone it is no longer grace (11:6).

When you give a box of chocolates do you tell the person they have to pay half? Would they really be thankful for your generous gift? What if the recipient insists on paying half? Would this not compromise the whole thing? You would feel that it was no longer a gift. If salvation is by works it is no longer by grace.

‘The elect have obtained it’ (11:7). Obtained what? Paul does not say, but clearly it is the righteousness of God. Back in 9:30, the Gentiles obtained the righteousness of faith, but Israel missed it. Now we are told the elect of Israel have obtained it. They obtained it in the same way as the Gentiles- by grace through faith.

The Gentiles were not seeking it through the law, as Israel was. The elect were not seeking it in this way either. Paul contrasts the elect remnant with the rest of Israel that, ‘had not obtained what it seeks’ (11:7). They did not obtain it because they did not seek it by faith but by works of the law (9:32). They stumbled because of this fundamental misunderstanding of the purpose of the law. They stumbled because they would not submit to the righteousness of God, which is faith righteousness, but proudly pursued their own law righteousness.

Paul does not leave it there. He does not allow that these Jews, or anyone else for that matter, who say no to God’s righteousness were going against the will of God. They were not frustrating the purposes of the sovereign God. Israel’s failure to believe the gospel in no way meant God had failed to keep his promises. They were in no way undermining God’s will or forcing him to change his will. ‘God has mercy on whom he will, and whom he wills he hardens’ (9:18). He elects whom he wills and rejects whom he wills.

**2. Remainder**

‘And the rest were blinded’ (11:7). Other translations have, ‘But the rest were hardened’. The Greek word is not the same as in 9:18 but it means the same thing. Medically, the word refers to the thickening or hardening of the skin, as in the case of a callous. Figuratively it refers to a closed mind and hard heart- either self-hardening or hardening by God. In 9:18 God hardens whom he wills and it is the same here. In the very next verse (11:8) we read, ‘God has given them a spirit of stupor’.

Some want to contrast the hardening of Pharaoh the Gentile with the hardening of the Jews. But if we look back to Esau, he was the son of Jacob or Israel; and it is written ‘Jacob I have loved but Esau I have hated’ (9:13). There is no reason to differentiate the hardening of the Jews from the hardening of the Gentiles. God hardens whom he wills.

The Westminster Confession of Faith III.7 speaks of the rest of mankind who are not predestined to life. It is not specially about the Jews but all who are not elect. We read, ‘The rest of mankind God was pleased, according to the unsearchable counsel of His own will, whereby he extends or withholds mercy, as he pleases, for the glory of his sovereign power over his creatures, to pass by; and to ordain them to dishonour and wrath for their sin, to the praise of his glorious justice’. Note the word 'ordain', as well as 'sin'.

It is true, as Morris and others point out, that they were hardened because they failed, but it is also true that God hardened their hearts. Ellison writes, “We need not labour the point, that Judah was hardened because of its sin, that the hardening was a judgment, but that does not invalidate John’s sweeping affirmation, ‘Therefore they could not believe’” (John 12:39). They were hardened for a purpose. God always plans and acts with a purpose, that purpose being his glory. John was quoting Isaiah 6: ‘He has blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts’, when he concluded that Israel could not believe (Jn 12:39). All the gospels refer to Isaiah 6; Jesus himself used it to explain why he spoke in parables (Mt 13:14, Mk 4:12, Luke 8:10).

Paul does not use Isaiah 6 to prove the hardening of Israel, as he might have. Rather, he refers to Isaiah 29:10 from which he writes, ‘God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that they should not see and ears that they should not hear, to this very day’ (11:8). Some words from Deuteronomy 29:4 are combined in this. Isaiah encountered the same unbelief as Moses, and then Jesus. Paul was encountering the same unbelief as he preached the gospel to the Jews. Paul found the Jews were not really listening to him. They were not seeing Christ as the fulfilment of the Law and the Prophets. They were spiritually blind- not that this was any excuse. God gave them a spirit of stupor or a numbness of spirit. In Isaiah we read, ‘the spirit of deep sleep’. He also talks about being drunk with wine. An intoxicated person is insensitive to words or touch. They are not aware of what is going on around them. They do not know what they are doing- but they do know when they are drinking to get drunk, and so are fully responsible for their actions.

While some people get physically intoxicated, many are spiritually intoxicated. They are always ‘blind drunk’ as it were- to this very day. Paul refers to the Jews, but many in our society, and even in the churches, are in this condition. They just do not hear the gospel when it is preached. It is a mystery to them. What is sin? Who is Jesus? What about death and eternity? They look blankly at such questions as if to say, ‘What are you talking about?’ Spiritual blindness is much more serious than physical blindness. It leads to hell, not just the hospital.

Paul turns to the third division of the OT, to a Psalm of David, to prove the same point. Psalm 69describes David suffering at the hand of his enemies, perhaps during the rebellion led by Absalom his son. As a Messianic Psalm it also refers to the suffering of Jesus. The verse he quotes tells of their eyes being darkened so they do not see (11:10). Paul uses these two verses from David to confirm God’s blinding of the Jews who turned against him to become his enemies. They were in fact traitors; God’s own people turning against him as they went off to worship idols. They had been at 'the table', maybe the table of shewbread in the temple (11:9). The Jews, remember, had many privileges, but these became a snare to them.

Malachi confronted the Jews about offering lame and blind animals as sacrifices, thereby pouring contempt on the table of the Lord (Mal 1:7). He confronted them about their tithes and offerings, and robbing God. Jesus confronted the scribes and Pharisees about their false teaching and hypocrisy; he called them blind guides. Paul confronted the Jews about their boasting in the law and being guides to the blind. They were breaking the law and dishonouring God (2:23).

The picture of a stumbling stone comes up again in Psalm 69. The Jews had so many advantages but these became disadvantages. The law itself became a stumbling stone as they continued in Paul’s day, and to this day, trying to get right with God through law-keeping and ritualism.

Edward Snowden was given access to highly confidential documents by the US government. He was a privileged intelligence officer. What happened? He turned on his employer. He became an enemy of the US government who trained and employed him. He is an even greater enemy than the leader of the Taliban.

The prophets condemned the priests of Israel. Jesus condemned the Pharisees. Paul uses words of Scripture to explain the present blindness of the Jews. God gave them a spirit of stupor. God blinded their eyes to the gospel of Jesus Christ and the righteousness of God. The Scripture which should have enlightened them actually blinded them. The form of worship God gave them they corrupted. Rather than honouring God they dishonoured him. They sank deeper into bondage, when they should have been liberated in Christ Jesus.

The Jews misused the blessing of God. Boice writes, ‘God’s blessings always are misused unless we allow them to lead us to faith in Jesus Christ our Saviour’. Do we not see something like this in the church today? Liberal scholars are so intent on finding the Jesus behind the Scriptures that they fail to see Jesus as the way, the truth and the life. Legalists still miss the life giving truth of God. Men use the Bible for all manner of things when its one purpose is that you may be saved.

Like in the days of Isaiah and of Malachi, we see corruption and hypocrisy in the church. We see false teaching with men twisting the word of God for their own purposes- how else can the church endorse homosexual marriage? We see people trusting in the rituals when these are just signs of changes in the heart.

Blessings become curses if you trust in the outward sign, be it baptism or communion. Boice writes ‘Entire branches of the church teach that grace is somehow imparted in the physical partaking of the elements so that the physical act conveys salvation’. We enjoy material blessing because of God’s goodness but how often do such things lead us away from God. The Lord’s Day is a blessing from God but how much of it do we give to the Lord. Are we guilty of offering lame and blind animals, and dishonouring the name of the Lord?

In closing let me say, do not go away saying ‘I am not among God’s elect’. Such a question shows you have not understood the doctrine of election. You have heard the gospel and you are responsible to humble yourself, repent of your sin and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. When you do that you are forgiven and you will know that God gave you the faith to believe. You did this because you are one of his elect. I once saw a sign above the entrance to a church which read, ‘Come, all who may’. As I left the church I saw a sign on the inside which read, ‘Chosen before the foundation of the world’.

**Israel’s rejection not final** Romans 11:11-15

Step by step the apostle Paul continues his argument. What is his argument? His argument is about the place of the Jews in the body of Christ, the church. These were the people through whom God chose to reveal himself to the fallen world. It was of great concern to him that the Jews, people of his own race, rejected Jesus, the promised Messiah. God made a covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to bless their nation, and through them to bless all the nations. But they rejected the Messiah, the Son of God, who was the focus of this blessing. Did this mean God’s promise had failed? No! Why? Because not all Israel are of Israel. God elects some and rejects some. He has mercy on whom he wills and hardens whom he wills. In fact God has elected Gentiles as well as Jews. Yet God’s sovereign purpose in election does not rule out mans’ responsibility.

The Jews were very religious but they refused to humble themselves before God and receive the righteousness of Christ. They heard the gospel but refused to accept salvation by grace alone through faith alone. They responded with arrogance and jealousy when the Gentiles believed in Jesus and entered into full membership of the church. But Paul does not leave his argument at this point. He goes on to show that God has not rejected his people completely or totally. He looks at himself. He was a Jew who believed in Jesus Christ. And there were other Jews like him, because God has always preserved a remnant. So at the present time there is a remnant, he says, according to the election of grace (11:5). Always by election and always by grace; never by works and never by race.

**1. Rejection not final**

This leaves the rest of Jews or the mass of ethnic Israel. We specify ethnic Israel because the word can mean different things. If we hear the word today we think of the land of Palestine. This was called the land of Israel in David’s time and it is called this today. But what Paul writes about here has nothing to do with the land of Israel, despite what many people tell you. The only gathering of the Jews Paul is concerned about is their gathering unto Christ and their gathering into the church of Jesus Christ. Note again how 9:6 makes it clear that there is an ethnic Israel, Paul’s countrymen according to the flesh (9:3), and a spiritual Israel, Paul’s brothers in the faith and those who are of the faith of Abraham (4:16). This spiritual Israel is the true Israel or church of Jesus Christ (Eph 6:16).

The remainder of Israel were hardened. They stumbled at the rock, at Christ the rock. God gave them a spirit of stupor. Paul continues to uphold the sovereignty of God in all that has happened, and will happen, with respect to the Jews. Their stumbling was not outside the purposes of God. Nothing is outside God’s sovereign purposes. ’God’s works of providence are his most holy, wise and powerful preserving and governing of all his creatures and all their actions’ (Shorter Catechism, Question 11).

God has not rejected Israel in total but has preserved a remnant. This answers the question about God keeping his promise. But what about the rest who were hardened and stumbled. Was this the end of them? Were they rejected for good? Again we read, ‘Certainly not!’ God has a purpose even in their drunken stupor and their stumbling. They stumbled but not so as to fall beyond recovery (11:11). One person may stumble on a rock and fall down dead, but another may stumble yet manage to remain on their feet- especially if they have someone holding them. The Jews were down but not out.

‘Paradoxically, the unbelief of Israel is directed at the restoration of Israel’s faith and the fall of Israel to their reclamation’ writes Murray. It is a paradox that the Jews were hardened so as to ultimately make their hearts soft and open to the gospel. But along the way the Gentiles will be brought in to establish the church, to the glory of God.

Jesus said, ‘I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it’ (Mat 16:18). Paul writes of the mystery that, ‘Now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places’ (Eph 3:9,10 cf. Romans 11:33). He speaks of the same mystery in verse 25.

**2. Rejection for a purpose**

The remnant of faithful Jews was there in Paul’s day- he was one of them. When the Holy Spirit was poured out at Pentecost, Peter proclaimed to Jews and proselytes from all over the world, ‘Let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ’ (Acts 2:36; despite this people still say the Jews have not heard the gospel). Peter told them to repent and believe in Jesus Christ, and three thousand were baptised. Soon there was over five thousand men. They met in the temple and in homes to worship Jesus.

The church was made up of Jews who believed. Let us not think that there are no Jews in the church, and will not be till the end of the age. But soon these believers were being persecuted by the Jews who were blinded. The first Gentiles came from the house of Cornelius. The church in Jerusalem said, ‘God has granted to the Gentiles repentance unto life’ (Acts 11:18). And so Gentiles began to hear the gospel and believe. Paul led a great ministry to the Gentiles, although he always began in the synagogue where the Jews clearly heard the gospel. Paul had not yet been to Rome but knew there was a church there. Like other churches outside Jerusalem, it would have comprised mainly Gentiles. He speaks specifically to this group in these verses (11:13). This is significant.

The idea of the Jews being provoked to jealousy comes from Moses (10:19, Deut 32:21). There are fewer OT quotes in this section but there are allusions to the OT. The Jews were proud of their religious heritage and boasted, ‘We are the children of Abraham’. When they saw the blessings promised to Abraham going to ignorant pagans they were outraged. But they could not stop these believers praising the God of Israel, the Father of Jesus Christ. The church was growing as Paul persisted in preaching the gospel to the Gentiles.

Paul saw that the trespass (not ‘fall’ as in NKJV) of the Jews was ‘riches for the world, and their loss or defeat riches for the Gentiles’ (11:12). These are parallel statements with the world and the Gentiles being synonymous. Riches means blessing, the abundant blessing of Jesus Christ; ‘the exceeding riches of his grace and kindness towards us in Christ Jesus’ (Eph 2:7). Paul saw great blessing coming to the Gentiles as he preached the gospel. At Pisidian Antioch for example, many Jews followed Paul and then almost the whole city came to hear him preach the word of God. But some Jews were filled with envy and opposed what he said. And so it was in other cities as the gospel was preached and churches were established.

If this was happening as the Jews rejected Christ and opposed the gospel, what would happen if they returned to God and believed in Jesus. ‘How much more their fullness’ (11:12). Note the word ‘fullness’; it comes up later. Murray writes, ‘If fullness conveys any idea it is that of completeness’. Paul speaks of 'the fullness of the time', meaning 'at the right time' (Gal 4:4). With hope and prayer Paul looked forward to the time when God, in his grace and power, would bring the rebellious Jews in ‘fullness’ or 'right number' to repentance. It will be, as he later says, ‘life from the dead’.

Paul had a personal interest in the salvation of his fellow Jews. He felt grief at their blindness and he prayed for them, even as they opposed him and the gospel. They were enemies of the gospel but Jesus said, ‘Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those… who persecute you’ (Mat 5:44). Do we remember this when we are telling others about Jesus. What about those who persecute Christians today- do we pray for them to be saved, or destroyed?

Paul was called by God as the apostle to the Gentiles, but this did not preclude a concern for the Jews. He tells his Gentile readers in Rome that even as he ministered to them, his hope was that those of his own flesh, his fellow Jews, would become jealous and that some would be saved- saved now, not in the distant future. He speaks in the active sense of ‘saving some of them’, but understands, as we do, that it is always God who saves.

Let no one think that the apostle to the Gentiles had no love or concern for the Jews. Let no Gentile be lacking in love or concern for the Jews- or anyone else for that matter. If Christians, past or present, showed no love or concern for the Jews to be saved, Paul would condemn them. The fact that they reject the gospel is no reason to stop praying and preaching. Their present hardness is beneficial to the Gentiles.

**3. Rejection reversed**

Verse 15 is a summary of what Paul has been saying in these four verses- some put verses 13-14 in parenthesis. He refers to them being rejected or cast to the side. We saw this term earlier in the chapter (11:1, 2). There Paul said, No, God has not cast away his people fully because he has saved a remnant. Here he says God has cast away his people but not finally. God in his sovereign purpose had a reason for casting away the majority of the Jews. They were cast away by way of judgment. When ancient Israel rejected God and broke his commands they were cursed and cast out of the land. At the same time this was for the purpose that they might, like the prodigal son, come to their senses and repent and return to the Lord. God would bring them back ‘to prosper, and to love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul, that you may live’ (Deut 30:6).

With the Jews hardened, the world was being reconciled to God. The gospel was going to the Gentiles and they were responding with faith in Jesus Christ. The elect among the Gentiles were being gathered in. The world is being reconciled to God because men like Paul are preaching the gospel and God is gathering his elect from among the Gentiles, as well as the Jews. If this is the case, what will happen when God accepts these ‘cast-aways’ back and into the fold of the faithful? It will be ‘life from the dead’ (11:15). Paul does not say, ‘like life from the dead’, but that is what he means. It is a figurative expression; it carries over from verse 12 - ‘how much more the fullness’.

These are emphatic statements. One commentator speaks of these words as, ‘A figurative expression describing the conversion of the Jews as a joyful and glorious event (like resurrection) – which will result in even greater blessings for the world’. Hodge and Murray think this is a figurative expression. But others take it as a reference to the resurrection coinciding with Christ’s Parousia. They conclude that the conversion of Israel will immediate precede the end time resurrection. This is the dispensational view.

But if Paul was referring to the resurrection, why did he not say so? The resurrection of Christ and the general resurrection are basic doctrines in the gospel he preached. Yet he uses this unusual phrase ‘life from the dead’. If it is a literal expression it is more akin to what he writes in Romans 6:13 about being spiritually alive. As Murray concludes, it refers to an ‘Unprecedented quickening for the world in the expansion and success of the gospel’.

Paul had a different view of the future to most of his fellow Jews, and his Gentile friends. The Jews thought they could destroy the church, or the more moderates thought it would die a natural death (Acts 5:38). The Gentiles also thought they could destroy the church of God. But like Jesus, Paul saw the church surviving and flourishing. The Gentiles were being gathered in, provoking the Jews to jealousy. In the purposes of God the Jews would also be gathered in, to the glory of Almighty God.

**Olive tree analogy**  Romans 11:16-24

We once had some visitors from overseas staying with us. As we introduced them to the food we eat and showed them the highlights of our city, all they said was how much better their place and their food was than ours. Here they were in our country, boasting about their country. This sometimes happens with people who come to live here; they are always telling how their old country was better.

Gentiles who became Christians were, in effect, in Jewish territory. They were enjoying all the blessings God promised to Abraham, the father of all who believe. ‘Christ is the end/fulfilment of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes’ (10:4). It was not right that they should look down on those in the church from a Jewish background- anymore than it was for the latter to look down on them. Nor was it right that they should boast before the Jews who did not believe in Jesus. They should respect them and pray for their salvation. Indeed, they should be such shining Christian lights that unbelieving Jews will become jealous and seek the Lord.

This is the message the apostle Paul has for the Gentiles in the church at Rome. He uses a couple of analogies based on the OT to teach this lesson. The first illustration is taken from the practice of bringing the first fruits of the harvest as an offering to the Lord (Lev 23:10, Num 15:17-21, Deut 26). In Numbers this first fruit is a cake baked from the first grain harvested. This was part of the tithe commanded by the Lord. ‘If the first fruit is holy the lump is also holy’, or the rest is also holy (11:16).

Paul seems to be referring to the patriarchs and especially Abraham (see 11:28). Ellison disagrees saying Christ is the first fruit, which is true of course (1Cor 15:23) - but probably not in this case- especially if we see this analogy being parallel to that of the olive tree in the very same verse. In seeing Abraham as the first fruit however, we must understand it is Abraham as the father of the faithful. The first fruit is holy and therefore the lump is holy.

Holy means ‘set apart’, set apart for the Lord. God is holy because he is set part from his creation. He is above the creation, which is now a fallen creation. God is holy and Jesus is holy; he is perfect and without sin. Holy people are those set apart unto God. Under the old covenant God called Israel ‘a holy people, a chosen people, a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth’ (Deut 7:6). Under the new covenant Peter writes to ‘the elect…and sprinkling of the blood of Christ’ as a ‘holy nation, His own special people’ (1Peter1:2, 2:9).

Believers are the new, special people of God. Abraham belonged to the old covenant as the father of the nation of Israel. He also belongs to the new covenant as the father of all who believe in Jesus Christ. ‘Abraham saw my day and was glad’ Jesus told the Jews who rejected him (John 8:56).

**1. Branches broken off**

We come to the second analogy, that of the olive tree. This time it is the root that is holy. Most see the root as referring to Abraham- based on references to the fathers in verse 28. If the root, like the first fruits, is holy so are the branches. This picture comes from the prophets who spoke of Israel as a green olive tree (Jer 11:16). The olive tree is planted for the purpose of bearing fruit. But Israel failed to produce fruit in terms of worshipping God. They provoked God to anger by worshipping other gods, so he cut them off- ‘its branches are broken’ (Jer 11:16). Paul picks up on this. ‘Some of the branches were broken off’ he writes (11:17). Not all, but some; God preserved a remnant.

They were broken off because of unbelief (11:20). Jesus once came across a fig tree without fruit and cursed it (Mat 21:18f). This is the severity of God (11:22). God is holy and the root is holy. It cannot be that unholy and unfruitful branches exist on this tree. They must be cut out. No injustice is involved in this. In another parable the owner patiently waited for the fig tree to produce fruit; he said that if it failed one more year he would cut it down (Luke 13:6f). These broken off branches could be grafted back if they turned from unbelief to become believers in Jesus Christ (11:23).

**2. Branches of wild olive grafted in**

This brings us to the horticultural practice of grafting. As you probably know, improved cultivars are often grafted onto the rootstock of a wild type that is resistant pests and diseases. Grafting a wild scion onto a rootstock is not done. Some scholars, like Dodd, accuse Paul of knowing little about the practice of grafting- I wonder how much he knew himself! Paul was well aware of the practice because he later says this grafting in of a wild olive was ‘contrary to nature’ (11:24). Even so, various scholars say such grafting was sometimes done in antiquity to invigorate the tree.

In this illustration Gentile believers, to whom Paul is speaking, are pictured as branches of a wild olive tree that had been grafted into the rootstock, namely Abraham, the father of the faithful. They are grafted in among ‘them’, that is among faithful Jews, to ‘partake of the root and the fatness of the olive tree’ (11:17). ‘Fatness’ is an old yet expressive word, but you can read ‘nourishing sap’ as in NIV, if you like. A tree lives on water and nutrients absorbed through the roots.

This is a picture of the church, with believing Jews and believing Gentiles growing side by side in the faith that came through Abraham. Abraham believed God and it was accounted to him for righteousness. Olyott writes, ‘He is not working out some purposes in some earthly nation, but in the church’. Dodd says that Paul’s thinking with this illustration ‘was the continuity between the Christian church and the Israel of the OT. The church is not a new society; it is the Israel of God’.

There is only one tree. There is not a Jewish tree and a Gentile tree. All the branches, like individuals in the church, are there through divine election and faith in Jesus Christ. The Gentiles are not inferior to their brothers and sisters of Jewish background; nor are they superior. Paul was warning them against boasting ‘against the branches’ that were broken off. He had already spoken to boasting Jews- those who said, ‘We have Abraham as our father’ (2:23, John 8:39). Now he warns Gentiles not to boast. Boasting has no place in the church of God. This is the thrust of this illustration; no boasting, because God in his sovereign grace can graft in Gentiles or Jews.

“You will say then, ‘Branches were broken off that I might be grafted in’” (11:19). The apostle grants this. He said some branches were broken off and you (Gentiles) were grafted in. But this is no reason to gloat or start looking down on the Jews who were broken off. Sure, they had failed to believe in Jesus and some started persecuting believers. But this was cause for grief not boasting. This was cause for reflection.

God broke them off because of unbelief. What if other branches became unbelieving and unfruitful? Will they not suffer the same fate? God’s opposition to evil is unyielding. ‘His kindness is not indifferent to moral values’ (Morris). Let the grafted in branches remember that it was by the grace of God and his gift of faith that they were grafted in. It was nothing to do with works or merit. ‘You stand by faith’ Paul told them, so ‘Do not be haughty or arrogant, but fear’ (11:20). ‘The rejection of the Jews should never come across our minds without striking us and shaking us with dread’ writes Calvin. ‘If God did not spare the natural branches, he may not spare you either' (11:21). No one, Jew or Gentile, should presume upon the mercy of God.

God is both good/kind and severe/stern (11:22). He is both loving and just. We must keep both these attributes of God in mind. God blesses those who obey him, and punishes those who disobey. This is how he revealed himself to Israel under the old covenant. He was severe toward those who rejected him and his Son, Jesus Christ. He cast those people out of their city. This is the lesson made clear in the parable of the tenants in the vineyard; the owner would ‘Come and destroy the vinedressers and give the vineyard to others’ (Mark 12:9).

God was being kind and gracious to the Gentiles who were hearing the gospel and believing and being blessed. But let them not become arrogant, or presume upon the goodness and grace of God. ‘Otherwise you also will be cut off’ (11:22).

**3. Broken branches grafted back**

Paul developed the analogy further, stretching beyond the natural, as he admits. Branches cut out are not naturally grafted back in; they soon wither and die. But Paul is simply illustrating the nature of the church. Jews who rejected the gospel, and even persecuted the church, can be brought into that church they rejected and persecuted. Look at the apostle Paul!

This is the wonder of the gospel. It is the gospel of grace and forgiveness that is freely offered to all. Wherever there is life there is hope, the hope of salvation. Those who die in unbelief have no hope of course, whether Jew or Gentile. Sadly some writers speak of all unbelieving Jews being saved in the end, or being raised to have a second chance, as they try to explain verse 26- ‘all Israel will be saved’.

Paul says, ‘If they do not continue in unbelief’ (11:23). In other words, if they hear the gospel and believe in Jesus Christ (10:17), they will be added to the church just like any other believer. ‘God is able to graft them in again’ (11:23). It all comes down to believing God and his word. It all comes down to the grace of God and faith in Jesus Christ. Paul was not talking about grafting them back into the Israel of the old covenant. He is not talking about grafting them into Abraham of the flesh- that is of no consequence now. He is talking about the new Israel and the new covenant. He is talking about grafting them into Abraham in the faith.

For the Jew who believes in Jesus Christ everything falls into place. This happened to Paul. Jesus spoke of all that was written in the Law of Moses, and the Prophets and the Psalms as being fulfilled in him. When Paul was converted he understood this. The veil was lifted and he was no longer a blind, stumbling Pharisee. The OT belongs to the church, and all believers are grafted into this rootstock, going back to Abraham and beyond to the creation of the world. Paul and many other Jews have been grafted back in by the irresistible grace of God. God continues to graft them in today, and into the future, according to his sovereign purpose.

**This mystery**  Romans 11:25-26

We come today to one of the most controversial parts of the Bible in terms of interpretation. This is not necessarily because they are difficult verses. Tony Warren writes, ‘Many theologians either misunderstand, misinterpret, or simply choose to believe that it declares something that it simply does not declare’. The book of Revelation is difficult and controversial because of the visions and symbolic language. Men like to grab texts from this book of the Bible and take them to support all manner of futuristic scenarios. The language of Romans is not symbolic, yet this verse is widely seen as futuristic. It is fed into dispensational and millennial doctrines in which Christ is supposed to return following the rapture of the church and set up an earthly Israel from the seed of Abraham or ethnic Israel- the 1000 year rule of Christ on earth in the land of Israel.

MacArthur writes, ‘God will gather together the Gentile church to himself and set out to graft Israel back in... So the fullness of the Gentiles, that great event, will signal the beginning of God redesigning Israel. And so that’s the mystery’. He asserts that all Israel in verse 26 means the nation of Israel – ‘There is no other way to interpret’ it he says, but then hastens to add that, “When we say ‘all’... does not mean every individual Jew alive at the time will be saved”. It is good, he writes ‘**we**’ because out interest is not what he or anyone else means by “all” but what the apostle Paul means. Lots of scholars say ‘all’ does not mean ‘all’ but means, ‘as a whole’, the ‘mass of Israel’, the ‘bulk of Israel’ and so on. We will look further at this verse later.

We have come to these verses in our studies of this letter to the Romans. We cannot give up and say this is too hard. We must humbly sit under the word of God. We must compare Scripture to Scripture. We must listen to what the scholars have to say, but remember they are not inspired. I find myself disagreeing with many respected Reformed writers, but not all, and I have read many on these verses. You may not agree but I will faithfully teach what I understand from these verses after reading and prayer.

Whenever we start talking about things that must happen before Jesus returns we must be very careful. There is a great missionary text in Matthew 24:14 which reads; ‘And this gospel will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come’. The question arises, has the gospel been preached to all the nations? If we conclude No, then strictly speaking we are saying that Jesus cannot return just yet. But later in that chapter Jesus says that no one knows the day or hour when the Son of Man will come. Some preachers warn people that Jesus can come at any time, but in a later sermon will outline various conditions that have not yet been met- for example, that the gospel has not yet been preached to the Jews.

In the very context of Romans 11, Elijah thought all Israel was reprobate apart from himself. Was he right? No! God had reserved seven thousand that he did not know about. Jesus told the apostles they would be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8) - in other words to the Jew first (Romans 1:16). Within a short time three thousand Jews from all over the world were baptised, and soon there was over five thousand baptised men in the church at Jerusalem (Acts 4:4). This is a sizable number of believers from Jewish background. Let us not presume upon the sovereign purposes of God as to how many must be saved. The Jehovah Witnesses say there will be 144,000 saved- them of course. Premillenialists talk about this as the number of Jews. MacArthur writes of the remnant in Israel as being, ‘144,000 Jews sealed so that they cannot be killed and sent out as missionaries to reach the world with the gospel during the Tribulation’.

We will recap briefly before looking at verse 25. This verse must be read in context. God has always preserved a remnant of elect Jews- from Elijah’s day, to Paul’s day, and into our day- we are in the Last Days, as Paul was. Where are these faithful Jews, children of Abraham in the flesh and in the spirit? They are in the church, the body of Christ. Paul belonged to the remnant and he was a leader in the church, not a Jewish synagogue or a community of Messianic Jews. Paul went on to talk about the rest of the Jews who were hardened by God and who rejected Christ; Christ who is the end of the law, and Christ who said, ‘this cup is the new covenant in my blood’ (Luke 22: 20). These were blinded and broken off for the purpose that the gospel go to the Gentiles, and they be grafted in. Paul was sent to the Gentiles, but still he preached to Jews and saw many saved. He said he was aiming to provoke the Jews and save some (11:14). He was not sitting back saying they will not be saved until the end of the age. The point Paul is making is that God blinded the Jews for a reason- that the gospel go to the Gentiles, and this in turn would provoke the Jews to jealousy. He wanted them provoked through his preaching and to believe in Jesus in his day- and they were, and they continue to be and they will be until the end.

Paul was revealing this amazing plan of God, paradox that it was- so as to save Gentiles and Jews. The blinded Jews were not beyond redemption. They could be grafted back into the olive tree- alongside the remnant and the in-grafted Gentiles. Is the olive tree the Israel of the Old Covenant? No. Gentiles were not made to undergo circumcision, despite the best efforts of the Jews. Is the olive tree the children of Abraham? Yes and No. It is the ‘spiritual children’ of Abraham, the people of the faith of Abraham; not the ‘flesh children’ of Abraham. If you believe in Jesus Christ, as Abraham did, you are in this tree, whether Jew or Gentile. Premillenialists end up with two trees, one being the church and the other the restored nation of Israel.

**1. This mystery**

Paul does not want those in the church from Gentile background to gloat over the blinded Jews, the cut off branches. They were cut off because of unbelief. Branches remain on the rootstock through faith- grace alone through faith alone. In faith there is no place for boasting. Moreover, Paul did not want them to be wise in their own opinion (11:25). He did not want them being conceited or puffed up with pride because of their position on the tree, and thinking that God had finished with the blinded Jews.

What is the mystery that Paul refers to? What does the word ‘mystery’ mean? It means something hidden. There were so-called mystery religions in Paul’s day. Like the Masonic Lodge today, they had their secrets that only the initiated knew. The difference with Paul’s use of this word is that the mystery is now revealed (16:25-26) - it is called the ‘obedience of the faith’. It is the gospel of Jesus Christ (Eph 3:4). The way of salvation revealed in Jesus Christ is not what people, especially the Jews, expected. They expected their works would play a part in salvation.

But the mystery goes deeper than this. It includes the bringing of Gentiles into the kingdom of God (Eph 3:3-6). It is the olive tree with wild branches grafted in. It is the church. It is that Gentiles have been brought into ‘Israel’, the true Israel of God. Gentiles now share in the blessings promised to Abraham. What divine wisdom this is! This is the wisdom God made known in heavenly places (Eph 3:10). Yet many say this is not sufficiently climactic for this passage as they look at verse 33; ‘O, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God’. They say this mystery is the end time gathering in of the Jews, yet nowhere else in the Bible is this referred to as the mystery. Salvation of Jew and Gentile alike is a cause for rejoicing in heaven.

Lloyd-Jones and others keep emphasising the phrase, ‘as life from the dead’, as they try to tell us that all ethnic Israel, but not every individual, will be saved. I hope you find the church in which Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free, stand as one before Jesus Christ a great wonder, the greatest wonder in earth and heaven. What other body of people has such universality and such equality. Only God in his wisdom could establish the church of Jesus Christ.

**2. Hardening in part of Israel**

Israel was experiencing a partial hardening or blindness, meaning that part of Israel was blinded. The remnant of course was not blinded, but the rest were. It does not mean that they were only partially blinded, nor as Lloyd-Jones says that Paul is referring to the length of time; ‘not to its intensity but to its duration’. No, it refers to the extent of the blindness among the Jewish people. As Paul said previously, this blindness is not permanent. They did not stumble so as to fall (11:11). God is able to bring them out of this blindness that he imposed on them. He is doing this and will continue to lift this veil from their hearts because it will continue until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.

Calvin writes, “’In part’, I think, refers not simply to time, nor to number, but means, in a manner or in measure’. He goes on to say, “’Until’ does not specify the progress or order of time”. ‘This blindness served the providence of God in furthering the salvation of the Gentiles which he had designed’. What is wrong with this explanation we might ask? Well his translator, one John Owen (1849) footnotes, ‘Calvin’s explanation of this verse is by no means satisfactory’. He recognised that Calvin’s understanding was not the common understanding in his day. This translator says the fullness of the Jews in verse 12 is determined by verse 26 (which we will come to); ‘It includes the whole nation’ he says. He goes on, ‘The fullness of the Gentiles must mean the same thing, the introduction of all nations into the church’. So all Gentiles will be saved and all then all Jews! How preposterous! But this is where this reasoning leads to.

**3. Fullness of the Gentiles**

‘Until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in’ (11:25). This is where the thinking of scholars starts to diverge. This word ‘until’ is read in the light of the following verse, which many read as, ‘and then all Israel will be saved’. But that verse does not says ‘and then’ it says ‘and so’. It refers to the manner in which God will save, as Calvin says. This word ‘until’ refers to the ‘fullness of the Gentiles’, not to what will happen after this time. It simply says that the Jews will continue to be hardened in part until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in, come into the kingdom of God or the invisible church.

‘Fullness’ means ‘full number’, as in the NIV translation. It refers to God bringing in all his elect, in this case of the Gentiles. Back in verse 12 it referred to the full number of Jews. Most scholars recognise this, although Murray writes, ‘Israel’s fullness (vs. 12) cannot be the total of the elect Israel’. Even so, many start talking about things beyond this fullness and get themselves into all sort of problems. Murray, for example, writes of this fullness being all the elect Gentiles saying, ‘This fullness would terminate any further expansion among the Gentiles’. Then the question comes, ‘How are the Gentiles going to be richly blessed by the fullness of the Jews’ (11:12). Murray realises the danger of bringing, ‘Incoherence into Paul’s preaching’. There is certainly incoherence in his explanation because he writes that, ‘Fullness of the Gentiles’ refers to blessings for them that are parallel and similar to the expansion of blessing for Israel denoted by their ‘fullness’.

Once we start thinking of Jews being restored as ‘all Israel, or the mass of Israel, or the bulk of Israel’ after all the elect Gentiles have been brought in, we get into difficulties- unless we get into dispensational teaching. What Paul writes does not have to be understood in this way and indeed should not be understood in this way. He is writing to Gentiles telling how blessed they are that God has hardened the Jews, because the gospel was now going to them. But this hardening was only partial (there was always a remnant), and it was not permanent. God could lift the hardening and graft them back in (11:23), and he was doing so; was not Saul the Pharisee such a man? What a great blessing this will be to Gentiles and the world. Paul saw Jews being saved. We continue to see Jews being saved and bringing great blessing to the church. In the end God will bring in all his elect from the Gentiles and the Jews, the fullness of the Gentiles and the fullness of the Jews.

**All Israel will be saved** Romans 11:26-27

You will be aware that the verses before us are widely interpreted as referring to the future restoration of the nation of Israel, and this is widely seen as being to the land of Palestine. We have argued that the land of Palestine is not in view in these verses. We do not believe that the temple will be rebuilt and animal sacrifices recommenced, as required under the old covenant. Not many Reformed schools hold to the restoration of the land in this way, but many do hold that these verses refer to a time after the ‘fullness of the Gentiles’ when the mass or bulk of the Jews will be saved. We have not taken this futuristic view and maintain verse 25 need not be understood in this way. We noted that Calvin did not understand it as futuristic.

Much of the argument hangs on what Paul means by ‘mystery’ in verse 25. Nowhere else does Paul use this word to refer to an end time ingathering of Jews. Rather, he uses it to refer to the mystery of the gospel and the gospel going to the Gentiles, which is what he is talking about in this chapter (11:13-14). Lloyd-Jones and others say that Paul is speaking as a prophet as he tells of the restoration Israel. Paul was an inspired writer but nowhere in these chapters does he say he was speaking as a prophet. Rather, he continues to affirm what the OT prophets said. Why refer to Isaiah if he was speaking as a prophet himself?

Hodge, Lloyd-Jones, Boice, and others are critical of the Reformers, saying they were reacting to the, ‘extravagant prophetic views of the Millenarians’, and even say they were anti-Semitic. Calvin would not have been pleased with such a label. Even today, those who do not hold to the futuristic view are given this label. But we could ask of the Reformed scholars of the modern era what might have influenced their understanding of these verses. They will claim to be careful exegetes, and that they are, but if they are honest they will admit to difficulties in their interpretation. The task before us may be daunting but we have come to these verses and we cannot pass over them. We must humbly try to understand what Paul is saying, remembering that he is writing to the church in Rome, not to scholars.

 **1. All Israel**

With these words of introduction let us look at verse 26 and the words, ‘all Israel will be saved’. We note that the verse begins ‘and so’, not ‘and then’. We do not understand it as a time sequence, but as the manner or the way in which God will fulfil his purposes in salvation.

The next question is who Paul is referring to by ‘all Israel’. This is a huge question. Morris writes, ‘The end result of this process will be the salvation of all Israel, an expression that exegetes have found notoriously difficult’. There are at least three different ways of understanding these verses - some put it at five. We do not for a moment agree with the idea that all Jews of every generation will be saved- was Judas saved? Briefly the options in evangelical and Reformed circles are (see NIV study Bible)

1. The total number of elect Jews of every generation- the fullness of the Jews like the fullness of the Gentiles

2. The total number of the elect, both Jews and Gentiles in every generation

3. The great majority of Jews of the final generation -living at the time of a special saving activity of God.

The third option is by far the most popular today. In this option, as you see, ‘all’ becomes the ‘great majority’. It is equated with the Jews who were hardened until some future time (11: 25). Others variously say ‘all’ means the bulk, the mass or the whole of ethnic Israel – but not every individual.

This is the first time Paul uses the word ‘all’ in the chapter, but people take it back through the preceding verses with the idea that all the broken off branches will be grafted back. Boice says it is not only possible, but probable and certain, that they will be saved as a nation. But Paul writes, ‘God is able to graft them in again’ (11:23). He writes of their fullness in verse 12, but then in verse 26 he writes ‘all’. This word occurs again in verse 32 with reference to Jew and Gentile; the verse immediately before the majestic doxology; ‘God has committed all to disobedience that he might have mercy on all’ (11:32).

We dismissed the idea that ‘all’ means every Jew who ever lived, but maybe we should not have been so quick to do this. Some dispensationalists believe that all Jews will be raised after the rapture and given a second chance. In a sense this is consistent. Why should only Jews living in the final generation be saved?

This popular teaching insists that ‘all’ Israel is separate from the remnant. Remember, God has always had his remnant according to election (11:5). Murray writes, ‘All Israel in verse 26 … refers to the mass of Israel, in contrast to a remnant’. So the olive tree has remnant Jews as distinct from the mass of Israel grafted back in. How are these different? Are they not all elect? For that matter, how are these different from the grafted in Gentiles? Is there not one rootstock? Paul everywhere, including here, insists that God does not show favouritism, and that believers from every background come in on the same basis, namely faith and the grace of Jesus Christ.

What does the word ‘Israel’ in verse 26 mean? This is the critical issue. With good exegetical reason scholars say this word must mean what it does in the previous verse, namely ethnic Israel. Bruce writes, “It is impossible to entertain an exegesis which takes ‘Israel’ here in a different sense from ‘Israel’ in verse 25”. But what about the use of this word in 9:6. Does not the same word mean different things in the very same verse? In that verse we saw a reference the flesh children or ethnic Israel, and the spiritual children of Abraham or the true Israel, according to election. The verse specifically says, ‘they are not all Israel who are of Israel’. Lloyd- Jones complains, ‘There are no Gentiles there!’ Ellison actually refers to ‘election Israel’, saying he believes 11:26 means, ‘election Israel will be preserved while those who have hardened themselves will be taken off in judgment’. He insists there is no such thing as national salvation in the spiritual realm, even for Israel.

So it is not exegetically impossible to say that Israel in verse 26 is not the same as in verse 25. Calvin and many others still today say that ‘All Israel’ means all the people of God from both Jew and Gentile, the Israel of God (Eph 6:16). This is option two in the list above. This conclusion saves us from all sorts of exegetical gymnastics - like saying all does not mean ‘all’ but ‘most’, like bypassing the doctrine of election, and like ignoring the truth of the new covenant with the first covenant being obsolete (Heb 8:13 cf. 11:27). We do not have to say there will be short time after the Gentiles are saved, or a thousand years after Christ returns, when all the Jews will be saved. Moreover, it makes more sense, following on from verse 25 where Paul spoke of Israel being hardened in part and the Gentiles coming in. God can graft these cut-off branches back in, along with the Gentiles to form a beautiful, fruitful olive tree, the true Israel of God, for his glory in heaven and earth (Eph 3:10).

The Jews had heard the gospel (10:18). They are responding in faith and will continue to do so, pray God in greater numbers, until their fullness or completion, along with the fullness of the Gentiles and then the end will come. Was this not Paul’s prayer for his countrymen (10:1)? Is it not your prayer for the Jews? ‘They are beloved for the sake of the fathers’ (11:28), but this does not mean they will all be saved in the end. There is rejoicing in heaven when one Jew is saved (Luke 15) and there is great blessing to the church here on earth. Paul told his Gentile brothers not to boast but to rejoice because they also were being blessed under this amazing paradoxical plan of God.

**2. As it is written**

Paul does not say this is his prophecy, contrary to what Lloyd-Jones and others try to tell us. What he says of this statement is, ‘As it is written’. He does not quote Scripture, only to modify it for his own prophecy. We must look at his quotes in their OT context if we are to understand what he is saying. All that he says here, and right through these chapters, can be concluded from the OT. How does this passage from Isaiah 59 affirm what Paul has just said about all Israel being saved? Isaiah wrote, “’The Redeemer will come to Zion, and to those who turn from transgression in Jacob’, says the Lord. ‘As for me’ says the Lord, ‘this is my covenant with them: My Spirit who is upon you’” (Isa 59:20-21). Is Paul using this verse, quoted from the LXX, to point to the second coming of Jesus or is he using it as Isaiah intended?

Boice says that it points to the future from Paul’s perspective, but should we not be looking at Isaiah’s perspective? What did Isaiah intend? Isaiah was writing before the exile in Babylon, and often spoke about a remnant being delivered from this bondage. He also prophesied of the coming of Messiah. This verse about the Redeemer coming to, or out of, Zion is such a prophecy. Jesus said to the Samaritan woman, ‘Salvation is of the Jews’ (John 4:22). Jesus was a Jew and he preached to the Jews, ‘The time is fulfilled…repent and believe in the gospel’ (Mark 1:15). He came to turn Jacob or the Jews from sin, telling them that He is the Redeemer or Deliverer.

Isaiah refers to a covenant and God’s Spirit being upon them. After experiencing the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, Peter preached of this as the fulfilment of prophecy. He preached the gospel and thousands of Jews were saved. This is the same new covenant that Jeremiah spoke of (Jer 31:31), and the same that Jesus said was the new covenant in his blood (Luke 22:20). How then can people say Isaiah was referring to the second coming of Jesus? What new covenant is associated with the second coming? Or how will the Redeemer go about turning away ungodliness from Jacob at that time? Will Jesus not come as a thief in the night to judge the living and the dead?

Paul is using Isaiah to support what he says. Those who think he is saying all ethnic Israel will be saved in the end, or ‘most’ of them, must interpret this OT verse as referring to the second coming- it must be future from Paul’s point in time. What they say is that Paul is using Isaiah to prophecy of the restoration of Israel. Why then did Paul simply not say, ‘Thus says the Lord’, instead of, ‘As it is written’? Moreover, men like Boice get in lots of trouble with the covenant here. He is very careful to rule out a ‘separate track of salvation’ for Jews. He says there is only one people of God, composed of both Jews and Gentiles. But then says, ‘The covenant we are considering… (is) only that God will keep his promises to the Jewish people by leading the mass of them to faith in Jesus Christ as their Saviour in the final days?’ He is saying that God has to save the mass of them to keep his promise.

But has not the apostle dealt with this matter back in chapter 9? Did he not say that they are not all Israel who are of Israel (9:6)? As I said previously, Boice and others seem to forget this. God is not bound by his covenantal promise to save all ethnic Israel because God has his purposes ‘according to the election of grace’, not race (9:11, 11:5).

We must conclude. As I do so I know that many disagree with this understanding of these verses- indeed most scholars do, but not all. As one writer says, ‘I can use the opinions of great men as a guide, but I must weigh their opinions and see if they persuade me or cause me to amend my own understanding of Scripture’. I have continued studying the ‘great men’, as I have from Romans chapter one, but find they get themselves into great problems by misunderstanding these verses. The picture of the olive tree is clear. The mystery that God is grafting in Gentiles and is able to graft blinded Jews back in, and is doing so, is amazing. We preach the gospel of salvation by grace alone, not by race, to the glory of God, and Jesus Christ our Saviour.

**Mercy on all** Romans 11:28-32

Imagine there was a split in this church. No, I am not suggesting anything but we know these things happen. If the church had no property everyone would go their own way. But where property is involved it is different. Both groups will lay claim to the property on the basis that they are the ‘true church’. A church in Scotland calls itself the ‘Free Church Continuing’ for this very reason. This group claims to be upholding the constitution or articles of the original church- as does the other group. Since it is not possible to literally split an ancient church building in half, the high court was asked to decide which group was being faithful to the constitution of the church.

We could look at God’s covenant with his people in a similar way. God made a covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob- ‘I will be your God and you will be my people’. Under this covenant he promised to send Messiah who would be ‘wounded for our transgressions; would be led as a lamb to the slaughter; and who would bear the sins of many and make intercession for transgressors’ (Isa 53). God would send his only begotten Son that whosoever believes in him will become a child of God and have eternal life.

When we ask, who are the covenant people of God, we should ask who are the fulfilment of his promises, and who are worshipping him according to his covenant. Who are the true seed of Abraham? (4:16, Gal 3:14). Is it the ethnic Jews who rejected Jesus, or is it the church with Christ as the head? In Galatians 3:16 Paul writes, ‘*and to your seed*, who is Christ’.

Or are there two covenants in operation- one for the Jews and one for the rest? This is what some think. As I continue my reading on this subject I came across the term, ‘two-covenant theology’. The writer denied the truth of such a theology because it says that God will save all the Jews outside the covenant of grace. Is this not a consequence of saying that Paul teaches the restoration of ‘all Israel’ as ethnic Israel in the end? There are many pitfalls in interpreting Romans 11:26 in this way; two-covenant theology is yet another. In Galatians Paul writes, ‘In Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but a new creation… peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God’ (Gal 6:15-16).

**1. Gospel enemies**

In verses 28-32 Paul gives a concluding summary of his argument in chapter 11, particularly from verse 11. Verse 28 begins without a conjunction: ‘Concerning the gospel they are enemies for your sake’. It refers back to the stumbling, the casting away, and the breaking off of Israel (11:11, 15, 17) with reference to the gospel of Jesus Christ. We stress this point because Lloyd-Jones, a man of conjunctions, fails to note this disjunction. The word ‘they’, added to this verse for understanding, refers to ethnic Israel from the olive tree analogy, but he cannot thereby claim that the Israel in verse 26 must therefore be ethnic Israel- a bit far-fetched we might say.

We also keep in mind, as Morris says, that Paul has not departed from his teaching in earlier chapters that justification is by grace through faith to all who believe. ‘The gospel is the power of God to salvation to everyone who believes, the Jew first and also the Greek’ (1:16). The gospel came to the Jew first but most rejected it. Did this mean God’s promise had failed? Certainly not! (3:3, 9:6). ‘For they are not all Israel who are of Israel’. There is a true Israel or election Israel within ethnic Israel. God’s purpose is always fulfilled by divine election- ‘not of works but of Him who calls’ (9:11).

Paul moves on to show that Gentiles are among those whom God has called, just as the prophets said (9:24). Still, it is necessary for people to hear the gospel; God is sovereign in this also. He sends preachers that people will hear and believe. The Jews have heard (10:18) but they stubbornly rejected the gospel. They were ‘stiff-necked’, as Steven said (Acts 7:51), and as Paul soon experienced. But just as God was longsuffering with these contrary people of old, so he continues to deal with them (10:21). He has not cast them off for good – actually he has cast them off for ‘good’- for the good of the Gentiles.

The wonderful thing that God is doing, and what can rightly be called a mystery, is just this, that the casting away of the Jews has resulted in the gospel going to the Gentiles. This is seen in Paul's amazing ministry. This in turn, is bringing about a jealousy among the Jews. Paul rejoices in this amazing and wonderful plan of God to save Jew and Gentile- and all within his election plan and purpose. He has, ‘Made known the mystery of his will… to gather together in one all things in Christ’ (Eph 1:9-10).

The Jews are enemies by divine purpose, and by obstinate refusal to believe. They are enemies for the sake of the Gentiles- Paul is writing to Gentiles in the church. Their opposition to the gospel, in the sovereign purposes of God, led to the gospel being preached to the Gentiles. The Gentiles should remember this and be extremely humble and grateful (cf. 11:20). But this does not mean God no longer loves them, the Jews. ‘Israel are both enemies and ‘beloved at the same time’ (Murray). ‘Concerning the election they are beloved for the sake of the fathers’ (11:28). Paul neither says, nor means, they will all be saved in the end. He says they are loved; loved by God for the sake of the fathers. God’s purpose in election stands. He has mercy on who he wills (9:18). His purposes are not thwarted by the actions of men. Just because they are enemies of the gospel does not mean God cannot love them. Election is not based on works or our response to the gospel. It is determined in the secret counsels of God.

Reference to the fathers takes us back to chapter 9; ‘Of whom are the fathers’ (9:5). God loved Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (9:13). He set his love upon them. Though their descendants turned away to worship other gods, He persisted with them. Because he loved them God punished them in different ways, including the exile. He always kept a remnant according to the election of grace (11:5). Though they are enemies God loves them, and has not cast them away totally or permanently. But this not mean all ethnic Jews will be saved in the end, unless you read this into the verse. Morris warns, ‘We should not understand this (verse) in the sense of the rabbinic doctrine of the merits of the fathers that won all sorts of benefits for their descendants’.

**2. Gifts and calling**

The unbelief of the Jews was astounding, given all the advantages and privileges they had. Back in chapter 3 Paul referred to them being given the Scriptures, the very oracles of God. In chapter 9 he expresses his great sorrow that they had become enemies of God when they had so many privileges; including the fathers and, above all, having God’s only begotten Son born in their race (9:5). So many advantages. So many gifts from God. These gifts remain in place. They are irrevocable (11:29). No one can change the fact that Jesus was born a Jew. God has not changed his mind regarding these gifts. He has no regrets because all has been done according to his eternal purposes in election and justification by grace, not race. Paul was not in the business of making excuses for God and nor are we. We do not say God must save all the Jews in order to keep his covenant promises.

What is the calling of God? Is it effectual calling? Boice says, ‘No’, although Lloyd-Jones says, ‘yes’. This calling refers to God’s calling people unto himself under the old covenant. It is tied in with giving them gifts. God called Abraham to leave his country and go to a land he would show him. He called Moses to go to Egypt. God called them his people, his special people, and this calling remains. But it is not effectual calling and does not mean all ethnic Israel will be saved. When Paul spoke of the great advantages given his countrymen ‘according to the flesh’, he did so with great sorrow; which is hard to understand if he knew they would all be saved in the end.

One of the gifts God promised Abraham was land- although Paul does not mention this in 9:4-5. Abraham never possessed the land of Canaan but his flesh descendants did. Maurice Roberts, in a paper given to me, expounds Romans 11 in the popular way and points to Hosea 3:4-5 as referring to ethnic Israel being preserved, even though Paul does not refer to this verse. Roberts goes on to observe the destruction of Jerusalem in AD70 and ‘that the state of Israel began again in 1948’. This return to Palestine is important to him and many others. Roberts quotes with approval a man who applauds the Israeli army reuniting the old city as the six day war ended and Israel occupying most of the places Joshua conquered 3500 years before! This supposedly marks the end of the time of the Gentiles. This is Zionism.

Lloyd-Jones flatly denies any reference to land here in Romans and condemns the interpretation given in the Schofield Bible. Even so, his interpretation leaves others to ‘fill in the gaps’ as it were - men like Roberts and others. If we understand Romans 11 as referring to a sudden influx of ethnic Jews after the Gentiles have been converted, people see this as an influx into Palestine. They forget that Jesus said, ‘My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world my servants would fight’ (John 18:36). Should Christians be taking up arms with the Israelis?

**3. God might have mercy on all**

We return to spiritual matters; as Roberts does after saying, ‘the Jews have returned to the land of their fathers… first the physical return, the natural restoration and then the full spiritual recovery’. What an amazing thing to say. Paul says nothing of a physical return. His focus is totally spiritual. Paul continues with his summary of the great paradox, the great mystery which is God’s plan to save Jew and Gentile. You will know this plan quite well by now: briefly, God has cast way the Jews that the gospel might go to the Gentiles, thereby making the Jews jealous. God wonderfully grafted wild olives into the tree and is able to graft broken-off branches back in to make one tree for his glory.

Here in verse 30 he says that the Gentiles were once disobedient to God but through the disobedience or unbelief of the Jews, the gospel, accompanied by God’s mercy and saving grace, has come to the Gentiles. This being so, this outpouring of divine mercy upon a disobedient people can also happen to disobedient Jews (11:31). Morris writes, ‘clearly Paul saw justification as working out for both groups in such a manner that each in some way assisted the other. This is the consistent divine purpose’. Many translations have at the end of verse 31, ‘they also may **now** obtain mercy’, because many MSS have this. It makes little difference because we hope no one says that God’s mercy towards the Jews must await some future age.

In some ways Paul is going back to what he wrote in chapter 1-3. There he showed that the Gentiles were given up by God to vile passions (1:26). The Jews were boasting in the law which they failed to obey. His conclusion is that both Jews and Gentiles are alike under sin (3:9). Here in 11:32 he concludes, ‘for God has committed them all to disobedience’. Literally, he has shut them all up in disobedience. They are like prisoners, unable to save themselves. The ‘all’ here refers to both groups, Jews and Gentiles. There is no difference (3:32). It is essential that both Jew and Gentile understand that salvation is by grace and not race. Salvation is by grace alone through faith alone.

Paul’s conclusion is that ‘He (God) might have mercy on all’ (11:32). This does not mean all will be saved in the end, of either Jews or Gentiles. It means that no one will be saved apart from the mercy of God. If there is any element of merit or works then grace is no longer grace (11:6). If there is any element of race or family connection it is no longer grace. May the Lord help us to understand this great truth of the unique gospel that we have heard and that we proclaim? ‘There is no difference; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus’ (3:23-24).

**High ways of God** Romans 11:33-36

I was recently asked to speak from the Bible at a prayer meeting. I explained that when we pray we should begin by focusing on God and his attributes. Daniel begins his prayer saying, ‘O Lord, great and awesome God’ (Dan 9:4). God is great. God is awesome. God is good. I asked the group to tell me some other attributes of God. I also referred to the Shorter Catechism and question 4 which asks, ‘What is God?’ ‘God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth’. The Larger Catechism adds, ’Everywhere present’ or omnipresent, and ‘Knowing all things’ or omniscient. It also adds, ‘Most merciful and gracious’. God is love, of course.

It is the mercy of God that immediately precedes this outburst of praise or this doxology from the apostle Paul in the closing verses of Romans 11. In summing up chapters 9-11 he wrote, ’For God has bound all men over to disobedience, so that he may have mercy on them all’ (11:32 NIV). The ‘all’ here refers to the two groups, Jews and Gentiles. You will remember Paul saying that by hardening the Jews God purposed the gospel to go to the Gentiles, which in turn would provoke the Jews to jealousy. In this way the ‘election of grace’ of both Jew and Gentile will be brought into the church, to the glory of God. God’s plan is truly amazing- how he chose Abraham, and through him built a nation into which the Messiah would be born into this world.

Jesus did not suddenly appear from outer space to save the world. He was born into a Jewish family in Palestine. He was born in a nation that God had prepared for his coming. He gave this people his holy law and spoke to them through Moses and the prophets. But Messiah was not only the saviour of the Jews- he is the saviour of the world. And so God purposed for the gospel to go to non-Jews or Gentiles in all the nations. This was the immediate cause of Paul's rejoicing. These Gentiles would be brought into the family of Abraham to make one family, the family of faith.

There is also a wider cause for this doxology. We can see this cause as being everything that has come before in this letter. In the next chapter Paul turns to the response we should make to the gospel of Jesus Christ. He turns to matters of duty and Christian living. So chapter 11 is the end of the first part, the doctrinal part, of the letter. What this means is the whole gospel of justification by grace through faith is the reason for this doxology. Matters dealt with in chapter 3 and 4 arise again in chapter 11; justification is all of grace and none of works; it is God who justifies and he does so through the cross of Christ. ‘For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus’ (3:23, 24).

This doxology stems from the first announcement of the gospel in Romans 1:16-17-‘The gospel is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, the Jew first and also the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith’. We turn now to the doxology itself. We call it this because of the focus on the grace and glory of God, and the closing Amen. Generally Paul ends his letters in this fashion. Verse 33 highlights four attributes of God: knowledge, wisdom, judgments, and his ways. Remember, these arise in the context of God’s mercy or amazing grace (11:32). Paul cites Scripture to support his highlighting of these particular attributes of God.

**1. Knowledge**

Knowledge is the key to success in this world. The more knowledge you have the more powerful you are in this world. Kings and nations have intelligence agencies to gather knowledge on their enemies. Science is the gathering of knowledge about living and non-living things. The more knowledge we have the more control we have over our lives in this world. Sometimes what is called knowledge is imagination or theory, which leads to weakness rather than strength. Paul rejoices in the knowledge of God. God’s knowledge is rich or abundant; it is deep or vast (11:33). As creator of all things, God’s knowledge is necessarily vastly greater than ours. The man who made this watch necessarily knows more about it than I do- unless I choose to pull it apart and try to put it back together!

God knows every star in the universe because he made them. He knows every hair on my head, every cell in my body, the sequence on my DNA, and even more. If we remember this we will not be so easily led astray by scientists and philosophers who tell us the universe is 68.3 billion years old, and that our brains are lizard brains that have been added to over millions of years. God knows everything. He not only made all things but He knows the end from the beginning. He is the God of history as well as science. He knows the past and the future in every detail. Again our Shorter Catechism helps us, with question 7 telling us that God has ‘foreordained whatsoever comes to pass’. God is a living God and his knowledge is active. It is foreordaining knowledge. The eternal God made all things and sustains all things. He established the laws of nature and keeps the universe in motion. So-called ‘mother nature’ is ruled over by Father God.

Psalms 139 expresses the omniscience of God beautifully. God knows where we are at any time- and that without a GPS or twitter. The world is presently frustrated as it searches for a lost jumbo jet- surely our technology will find it. God knows where it is, even if it is in the depths of the ocean or went off into outer space. God knows all about your coming and going, your every word and your every thought. ‘Such knowledge is too wonderful for me. It is high; I cannot attain it’ (Ps 139:6). There is no privacy with God, even in your thoughts. Do you find this disturbing, or do you rejoice because God knows all about you? Paul rejoiced in the unfathomable depth of the knowledge of God. God knows about your sin so there is no point trying to hide it from him. That was the mistake of Adam and Eve. Instead, confess your sin, and in his grace he will forgive you and you will be justified in his sight.

**2. Wisdom**

In human beings knowledge is not always accompanied by wisdom. This is the tragedy of sin. You may know the good you ought to do but do not do it (7:19). It is odd to see a medical doctor smoking when he knows the harm it is doing to his body. It is hard to understand men and women at poker machines when they know these machines are set to take more than they give. Knowledge is not the same as wisdom. Moreover, worldly wisdom is not the same as heavenly wisdom. The sinful world says it is wise to cheat or tell lies, sometimes or all the time. That is the way to get ahead in the world. This wisdom is self-seeking and sensual. But wisdom from above or from God is pure and peaceable and without partiality; it is gentle and full of mercy (James 3:15,17).

God is all wise. He is the ultimate in wisdom and source of all true wisdom. And since we are made in the image of God we can receive heavenly wisdom. Remember King Solomon when he prayed for God to give him wisdom; and how with such wisdom he was able to judge between two women claiming the baby was theirs (1Kings 3). Knowledge alone was not sufficient for this case. Both said the baby was theirs. Yet with God-given wisdom Solomon judged rightly.

The Bible says that Christ is the wisdom of God. What does this mean? Christ, the Son of God, is all wise. Whatever decisions or judgments he made they were always the wisest - even if the apostles did not always see it like this. But what Paul means is that the cross of Christ displays God’s wisdom- ‘his righteousness and sanctification and redemption’ (1Cor 1:30). The cross is a stumbling block to the Jews, as outlined here in Romans 11, and it is foolishness to the Greeks or the rest of the world. But ‘Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God’ (1Cor 1:24). At the cross God demonstrated his love and justice - sin was punished and sinners were justified. ‘God demonstrated his righteousness, that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus’ (3:26). The gospel is wisdom never before seen by the world and remains the wisdom and power of God today. Do you know this? Has the gospel made you wise unto salvation in Jesus Christ?

**3. Judgments**

God is the supreme judge and ultimate judge of every person born into this world. Supreme in that his decision is final- you cannot appeal to a higher authority - and ultimate in the sense of determining your final destiny. Foolishly, men and women appeal to the court of human reason. Such a court is corrupted by the corruption of human nature. Thankfully this is not the Supreme Court. Where would the poor get justice, or where would martyrs get justice if this was the case.

When Lot was living in Sodom he was disturbed by the wickedness of the people in this city. The Lord told Abraham he was going to destroy the city. Abraham objected saying, ‘Far be it for you…to slay the righteous with the wicked’ (Gen 18:25). You know the story of how God rescued righteous Lot before destroying the wicked inhabitants of Sodom. God’s judgments are always right.

God’s judgments are unsearchable or unfathomable; they are a mystery to us. But Paul praised the God whose ways are just, such that like Abraham we can all say, ‘Shall not the judge of all the earth do right’. Remember this the next time you think God is being unfair to you. Probably all of us have thought like this at some time. When we are sick, when a loved one dies, when we lose our job, or when we are in an accident of some kind, we think it’s not fair- God is not being fair. Nothing ever happens to us outside the knowledge of God or outside his foreordained purpose. And the Bible says that God works all things together for good to those who love him and are called according to his purpose (8:28). This is what we believe even when our own superficial judgment differs.

**4. Ways**

God’s ways are higher that our ways and his thoughts than our thoughts- so we learn from Isaiah 55:9. Paul says that God’s ways are ‘past finding out!’ (11:33), before referring, not to Isaiah 55, but to Isaiah 40:13, and to Job 36:22. God knows our thoughts but we do not know his- because he is the creator and we are the creature. God does not need our advice (11:34). You may want to give God lots of advice, but rest assured he does not need it.

The book of Job is a book of wisdom. It tells of Job’s struggle in the midst of disasters and sickness, and especially him not understanding the ways of God. His friends tried to help with their wisdom but failed. In the end God graciously but firmly spoke to Job. He told Job what Isaiah says, that God’s ways are higher than our ways and beyond our understanding. We are told of the secret counsels of God in this amazing story, but Job is simply told to remember who he is, and who God is. He is not God’s counsellor. Job repents saying, ‘I uttered things which I did not understand, things too wonderful for me’ (Job 42:3). He repented of questioning the judgments of God.

You can be sure that God is not moved to act or change his mind by your gifts or good works. God cannot be bribed. Give to him of your wealth for sure, but do so remembering that all you have comes from him in the first place. Do good works for sure but these are only your reasonable service (12:1), you unworthy servant of the Lord (Luke 17:10). God is not obliged to give you anything (11:35). What he gives is because of his mercy - and you his servant know the abundance of what he gives you. Above all, your salvation from sin and the gift of eternal life is solely because of his mercy. In no way have your earned it. All praise, honour and glory be to God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.

**God at the centre** Romans 11:36

‘Then God saw everything that he had made and indeed it was very good’ (Gen 1:1). Everything that exists was made by God, including you and me. God created us in his own image, male and female. He gave mankind plants and trees for food and put him in charge of the animals. He told him to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. God gave the first man one command to obey.

What an idyllic picture. God made man and gave him everything he needed. All God wanted was to be obeyed- to be honoured and glorified, and not forgotten or rejected. But the latter is what happened. Adam and Eve disobeyed their creator. They sinned against God. Why? Satan suggested that eating the forbidden fruit would make them like God (Gen 3:5). Satan himself had sought to be like God. Sin is rebellion against God. Sin is wanting to be like God. Sin is putting self at the centre of the world.

Since Adam’s sin all human beings are born in sin. All are born with a sinful, selfish heart, a heart that sees everything in relation to self. In the time of the Judges in Israel the people turned away from God and ‘Everyone did what was right in his own eyes’ (Judges 21:25). This philosophy of life continues today. A popular Sinatra song declares, ‘I did it my way’. The Beatles have a similar song, ‘I, me, mine’- so I read.

When the apostle Paul went out into the Roman Empire to preach the gospel he went into a corrupt and immoral society. Prostitution was associated with idol worship in various temples. In Corinth, drunkenness, corruption, idolatry, adultery and homosexuality were rife (1Cor 6:9, 10). It was the same in Rome and many cities. Their news bulletins must have been rather like ours! Paul was accused of ‘Turning the world upside down’ (Acts 17:6). But looking back to Genesis 3 we could say it was sin that turned the world upside down. Through the preaching of the gospel the world was being turned right side up! God was being given his rightful place in the lives of those who believed in Jesus Christ and who worshipped Him alone.

I have often pictured a triangle with ‘God’, ‘me’ and ‘others’ at the angles. Sin has broken our relationship with God and consequently with other people. In Jesus Christ these relationships are restored, first with God and then with others. Now picture this triangle being turned around. At creation God was at the top, Adam at one point and Eve at the other. When they sinned they put God at the bottom. Adam thought he was at the top and Eve thought she was at the top. Most people think they are at the top. They think they are in control of their destiny, and they see everything from this perspective. You might say, ‘But there are some good people who consider the needs of others’. Okay. We can put ‘me’ and ‘others’ on the same level. But that still leaves God at the bottom. Maybe you see God and me being on the same level, but God will not have this. He will not share his glory with another (Isa 48:11). Adam and Eve discovered this to their shame and horror.

We are looking at the closing words of this exalted doxology in Romans 11. The apostle Paul has come to the end of explaining the gospel in which, ‘The righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith’ (1:17). ‘For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus’ (3:23, 24). ‘Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God’, for Jew and Gentile (1Cor 1:24).

Paul is deeply moved by God’s great plan of salvation, which he has just explained, but still struggles to comprehend. The love of Christ surpasses knowledge; it is so high, so deep and so wide (Eph 3:18-19). Just as sin is falling short of the glory of God, so to be justified and to know Jesus Christ is to glorify God and enjoy him for ever. ‘For from him, and through him and to him are all things’ (11:36).

**1. from Him**

‘In the beginning God’ (Gen 1:1). The Bible begins with this profound phrase. What was the beginning? When was the beginning? Scientists and philosophers continue trying to answer this question but are blinded by sin. The answer is ‘God’. In the beginning God. God was there in the beginning- he was before the beginning because he is infinite and eternal.

The first verse of the Bible goes on, ‘God created the heavens and the earth’. He made everything out of nothing because nothing existed before this time. Do not think this has nothing to do with Jesus and salvation because in the NT we read of Christ, ‘For by him all things were created that are in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible… all things were created through him and for him’ (Col 1:16). Again it is written, ‘By faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which are visible’ – in other words, creation *ex nihilo* (Heb 11:3).

We must accept this fundamental truth. Those who reject God say something happened in the beginning and the universe suddenly appeared, but they cannot tell us what happened. It was just a ‘Big Bang’? We are told this happened in one trillionth of a second or less. New ideas keep coming. If you have an idea write and get it published- yes, you will have to get a few ‘experts’ to agree with you first.

What about life? Where did this come from and when? Some years ago some experts put a few chemicals in a jar and zapped it with a few thousand volts of electricity, expecting to create life. Many have the idea that all living things came from some primeval slime. They will not believe that in the beginning God created everything, including life. They know that if they admit there is a God then he is greater than man and therefore must be given all the glory. Men want to take the glory to themselves.

**2. through Him**

In his almighty power and wisdom God created all things. Did he just make the universe and then leave it to run by itself? No. He sustains all things. He is concerned about what he made, especially human beings, the highlight of his creation (Mat 6:26f). ‘God’s works of providence are his most holy, wise and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures and all their actions’ (SC Q11).

God is from everlasting to everlasting. He is not dead. He is not way up there not caring about his creation. All things are through him. Christ is upholding all things by the word of his power (Heb 1:3). Jesus ‘is before all things and in him all things consist’ or hold together (Col 1:17). Christ the Lord upholds all things. Did he not turn water into wine? Did he not stop the wind? Did he not raise the dead? Is he not in charge of the universe, holding it all together?

Christ is the King of kings and Lord of lords. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. Whether you recognise him or not makes no difference- until your world falls apart, and after your death you face Christ, the Judge of all the earth. ‘There is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist’ (1Cor 8:6, ESV). Do you understand and believe this?

**3. to Him**

While some people are searching the origins of the universe and of life, others are searching the meaning of life- the two pursuits are related of course. If we do not know where we came from or where we are going, life becomes meaningless. Many have reached this conclusion. ‘Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die’ they say. Some say, ‘Let me die today’. If I am the centre of the universe what hope do I have. We crumble under the weight of self-responsibility- which is the end result of being self-centred.

The wise man of Ecclesiastes saw the meaninglessness of life, but concluded, ‘Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is man’s all’ (Eccl 12:13). If you remove God from the picture, or have him at the bottom of the triangle, you are left without meaning and without hope in this world.

Knowing God the Father, and Jesus Christ the saviour, you have a sure and certain hope. God is the living God, high and lifted up. Jesus is the loving saviour, risen from the dead and Lord of all. Put your faith in God who has revealed himself in the creation and through Jesus Christ our Lord. Faith is the assurance of things hoped for and the confidence of things not seen (Heb 11:1). When your life is hid with Christ in God (Col 3:3), you have meaning, you have hope, you have a reason for living. You live to please God and to praise God. You live to enjoy God and glorify his holy name- today, tomorrow and for ever.

**4. Glory for ever**

In 2011 I went to hear John Piper speak on his book ‘Desiring God’. He spoke about the sovereignty of God and giving God all the glory. His conclusion was, ‘God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him’. It was an uplifting talk but I kept on thinking of the first question in the Shorter Catechism. If you look at the promo for his newly revised and expanded, ‘Desiring God’, you will read, ‘Scripture reveals that the great business of life is to glorify God by enjoying him for ever’. I did not see any reference to the Shorter Catechism in the promo, but it is all there in Scripture. The Shorter Catechism refers to 1Cor 10:31; ‘Therefore whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do. Do all to the glory of God’. ‘Whatever you do, do it heartily as to the Lord and not to men’ (Col 3:23). The Shorter Catechism could have referred to Romans 11:36; ‘To whom be glory for ever’ or to 16:27; ‘To God, alone wise, be glory through Jesus Christ forever’.

What is the chief end of your life? What is your reason for living? Elvis Presley sang of his wife, ‘She is my reason for living’. This is better than saying such a thing of your job, your possessions or drink and drugs. Do live to please your wife or husband or mother or father, but above and beyond this, live to please you Father in heaven. All glory must be given to him- he will not share it with anyone else. Do not take the glory to yourself. Do not give it to another human being. Sin is falling short of the glory of God.

God alone must be given all the praise and all the glory, for he alone is worthy. Coming to worship as you have today is a vital part of giving glory to God. Of course you must glorify him in all your life, but if your ‘chief end’ on the Lord ’s Day is sport or shopping or working, how can you say you are giving all the glory to God. Let us gather together, seeking to give God the praise and glory due to his holy name. After all, this is what we will be doing in heaven forever.

**How shall we then live?** Romans 12:1-2

Francis Schaeffer was a Christian writer last century. One of his earlier books was entitled, ‘How shall we then live?’- hence the title for this sermon. He was concerned that Christians were living in a way not so different from non-Christians. How do true Christians determine how they are to live in this world? Living in secular society as we do, we can easily start living in a secular rather that Christian way? How do we determine what is secular and what is Christian.

Go to the Ten Commandments some say, and keep these. But Israel had these commandants and see how they lived! Legalism is not the way of the new covenant. The legalist says, ‘do these things and you will live’, but Paul is saying, ‘Live and do these things’ (Morris). Moralism is not what Jesus or the apostles taught, even if many churches teach this today. It is not what Schaeffer taught either. Look at the title above. He did not say, ‘how shall we live’, but, ’how we shall **then** live’. The Christian has reason for the way he/she lives.

Our text begins with ‘therefore’- ‘therefore brothers’ (12:1). As someone said, the ‘therefore’ is there for a reason. Paul does not start this letter at chapter 12, even if some preachers like to start here. This chapter and the rest of the letter focus on practical Christian living, but Paul says such living is in response to the mercies of God.

The previous eleven chapters focus on doctrine or truth about us in our sin, and about God, who in Jesus Christ acted to save us from sin. In the earlier chapters Paul told how Christ is in us by his Spirit and therefore we are not to live according to the flesh or the old nature but to live by the Spirit (6:6, 7:6, 8:12-13). He told us to present ourselves to God… ‘and our members as instruments of righteousness’ (6:13). In these closing chapters he spells this out more fully, telling us how we are to live in relation to God, to other Christians, to non-Christians and to the civil authorities.

**1. Mercies**

Chapter 11 ended with a doxology and an ‘Amen’. The subject and focus in the next chapter is very different; we rightly divide the letter at this point. But this is not to say there is no continuity. We referred to the structure which is like that of Paul’s other letters, doctrine followed by practice. Even at this point of change we see a linkage in the word ‘mercy’. We read of God’s mercy in 11:32. In 12:1 we read, ‘Therefore brothers, by the mercies of God’. In the light of God’s great mercy towards us, what are we to do? How shall we then live?

The apostle urges or exhorts us to live in a certain way because of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. He saved us from death and the judgment to come. He freed us from the penalty and the power of sin. He made us his children to live in the kingdom of God. He gave us the Holy Spirit that we might live to please him and glorify his holy name. We are to do this, not only in word, but with our whole being.

Think of how you would feel towards a person who rescued you from drowning, or saved your life in some other way. You have probably heard of some such situation. You would be for ever grateful to the person who saved your life. You will endeavour to please them in every way. If Jesus saved you from death and hell you will endeavour to please him won’t you? What Paul urges us to do is not unreasonable. It is as he says, ‘your reasonable service’ (12:1).

**2. Living sacrifice**

What is it that Paul urges us to do in response to the marvellous mercies of God? Does he urge us to give generously to the church? Does he urge us to be diligent in Sunday worship? Does he urge us to be kind towards others? What he urges is more than this. It is the offering of ourselves, not just our money or time or talents. We are to offer our whole self to God. Paul calls this a sacrifice; a living sacrifice. When Paul wrote this letter Jews were still offering animal sacrifices in the temple. Gentiles were also familiar with animal sacrifices. The animal was killed, its blood sprinkled on the altar and its body burnt. Sacrifice meant death. Today the term ‘sacrifice’ is used of giving up chocolate for a week or alcohol for a month. Christians do not give themselves as a burnt offering on the altar. Paul speaks of a living sacrifice. This is still a sacrifice of the whole person, but it is a living person.

We are not to think of our body as ours and give only our spirit to God. Sure we worship in spirit and truth, but we worship by being present in body. As human beings we are body and soul or spirit. A body without a soul is a dead body. A soul without a body is of another world. Our body, Paul says, is the temple of the Holy Spirit; ‘therefore glorify God in your body’ (1Cor 6:19). We are to offer our bodies as a living sacrifice to God. When you marry someone you marry the whole person- body and soul. When you believe in Jesus you belong to him, body and soul. An old hymn speaks of surrender: ‘I surrender all, all to Jesus I surrender, I surrender all’. This is what Paul is talking about.

This sacrifice of your body, your whole person, is a living sacrifice- it is your present life. It is also to be holy. This means consecrated or dedicated. We often talk of dedicating someone for a particular ministry. In fact we are all dedicated to God when we believe in Jesus. We become his and his alone. We no longer rule our own lives and set our own destiny. God determines our destiny. Animal sacrifices had to be holy and without blemish. So we not only offer ourselves but do so in Christ Jesus who makes us holy. God will not accept unholy things- he is a holy God. God will not accept what is unclean or immoral. Offerings apart from Christ are not acceptable. God looks upon the heart not the outward gift or deed.

Giving yourself to God as a living sacrifice is ‘your reasonable service’ (12:1). The word ‘reasonable’ comes from the Greek root ‘logical’. Since Jesus gave himself in sacrifice for your sin- it is logical for you to respond by giving yourself to him. Christ is risen so your service is to a living Saviour and Lord. Some translations have ‘spiritual worship’ for this phrase (eg. NIV). The two Greek words can be so translated but ‘reasonable’ is the more reasonable translation in this context.

Moreover, when we say worship it is not just Sunday worship. The living sacrifice is not limited to Sunday morning. It is your whole life; every day of the week and every hour of the day. You are in the Lord’s service 24/7. Remember you are serving the King of kings. You are serving the king who loves you and gave himself for you. We rejoice in being chosen to serve this King.

**3. Mind renewed**

I recently heard a sermon entitled, ‘Transformed by renewing your mind’. It was a woman preaching. She had recently been to a psychology lecture so told us all about this, and then went on to share about how her mother had brought her up. Just as she was finishing she referred to the Bible verse that we are looking at today. I hope we can study what is the word of God, rather than the word of a woman or man.

Your may recall what we saw in the closing verse of chapter 11. We saw that everything comes from God, the creator of heaven and earth. God created all things, including us, and sustains all things through his Son Jesus Christ. It follows that man’s chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.

This present world is corrupted by sin; it is a fallen world. The word ‘world’ actually means ‘age’ or ‘era’; it carries the idea of an evil age. John speaks of the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life (1John 2:16). Paul speaks of the rulers of the darkness of this age (Eph 6:12). The world under the rule of Satan tries to get you to conform to its ways. We are under pressure to conform. But Paul says, ‘do not conform to this world any longer’ (12:2). Do not yield to Satan or his agent’s pressuring you to conform. These agents may be your friends telling you to join them in conforming to the world.

Morris writes, ‘Christians have been introduced into the life of the world to come; what a tragedy then if they conform to the perishing world they left’. We are in this world but not of this world. We see beyond this world to the kingdom of God. This makes all the difference to the way we live. We see the risen Jesus at the right hand of the Father, ready to return in glory. We fix our eyes on him, not the things of the world that are passing away. We do not live to please ourselves, our friends, or our family; we live to please God. ‘Conform’ has the sense of outward actions, but outward actions are directed by the heart, by inner thoughts and decisions.

The apostle moves from the negative, do not conform, to the positive in telling us to renew our minds (12:2). He speaks of an inner transformation; a change in the way we think and make decisions. The Greek word is ‘*metamorpho*’, the same word as used in the transfiguration (Mat 17:2). It is also used in 2Corinthians 3:18; ’but we all …are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord’. Bruce says this is a helpful commentary on this verse in Romans.

You think and make decisions with your mind. You are not like the animals, ruled by instincts; you can think. As a believer your thinking is not controlled by the flesh and its lusts, or by selfish pride. People speak about a person’s moral compass. This is what is reset when a person believes in Jesus Christ. They are born again of the Spirit of God. We are to ‘reckon ourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Jesus Christ our Lord’ (6:11).

With this renewed mind you can ‘test and approve what is that good, pleasing and perfect will of God’ (12:2). What is God’s will? This is a question Christian’s ask, or should ask. What study, what job, what friend, and what life partner should I take? These are matters of prayer. We pray in all situations, asking God to show us his will. Indeed, we say with Jesus, ‘Not my will but yours be done’. We know the sovereign God has a will and that it is perfect. God knows the future; he has determined the future. We know God works all things together for good for us (8:28).

The verse before us tells us we can know God’s will. How amazing! How wonderful! We do not have to stumble along in the dark. Nor do we randomly open our Bible and grab hold of a verse to find God’s will. The Lord may show us a special verse but not in this mindless way. Our renewed mind must be soaked in the word of God. It must be renewed daily by word and Spirit. With such a mind we can test and approve the will of God. Let me say divorce is never God’s will because the Bible says God hates divorce.

You are concerned and careful about what you put in your stomach, or what your children put in theirs. But are you concerned and careful about what goes into your mind, or your child’s mind. Are renewing your mind from the word of God, or feeding it with the filth of the world?

As the woman preacher I mentioned went on about psychology my mind went to a verse in Philippians; ‘Finally brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are pure, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy, think on such things’ (Phil 4:8). When you think like this you will know the will of God, which is of course perfect. As you move to do his will you will indeed see that it is good, pleasing and perfect.

**Thinking about self** Romans 12:3

 ‘I am special, I am special. Look at me, look at me’. This children’s song was played on the radio by way of introduction to a talk on narcissism. The essence of narcissism is, ‘Look at me’. It is defined as an excessive interest in, or admiration of, one’s physical appearance. Psychologists define it as extreme selfishness, with a grandiose view of one’s own talents and a craving for admiration. They regard it as a personality disorder.

The Bible calls it pride and regards it as a sin. Pride came into the world when sin came into the world with Adam and Eve - who wanted to be like God. Self-centeredness has been around ever since. The difference comes when people start calling a sin a good human trait. Individuals and societies get confused and start to crumble when this happens.

We are not going to have a psychology lecture today- at least not one from Freud and his followers. We are going to look at what the Bible says about how we are to look at ourselves. This verse in Romans 12 gives us the answer to volumes of psycho-analytical theory. Let me begin with a story related by Dr Jim Boice in one of his sermons. He spoke of a pastor who every morning when he got up tried to remind himself of three things;

Firstly, that he was made in the image of God. He was not just an animal driven by instincts but was made to think and relate to God.

Secondly, that he was filled with the Spirit of God. He had become a new person in Christ Jesus. He had the power of God working in him and through him.

Thirdly, that he was part of God’s plan. God has a great plan and purpose for his creation and he was part of this. So what he did today had meaning and purpose.

Beginning each day looking to God, and not just looking in the mirror, makes all the difference in how you will live that day.

**1. Says the apostle**

In response to the mercies of God given to us in the Lord Jesus Christ, Paul urges us to give our bodies to God as a living sacrifice. ‘You were bought at a price, therefore glorify God in your body’ (1Cor 6:20). Paul also urges us to renew our minds. Having been justified by faith and brought into a relationship of peace with God we are to change our way of thinking about God, about ourselves, about other believers in the church, about the world, and about civil government or politics. These are the issues Paul takes up as he teaches how renewed minds are to think.

The first of these is thinking about ourselves. We spend a lot of time thinking about ourselves- in addition to when we are looking in the mirror. Besides questioning the amount of time, we question what it is we think about. Being in Christ and having the Holy Spirit dwell in our hearts we can control our thoughts. We are not driven by uncontrollable instincts like the beasts. We have a new heart and a renewed mind which is informed by the truth of God and directed by the Spirit of God. ‘As many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are the sons of God’ (8:14).

‘For by the grace given to me, I say to’ each one of you (12:3 ESV). The ‘For’ shows that Paul is expanding on what he has just said about renewing your mind. He speaks ‘through the grace given to me’. What does he mean? Most probably it is the grace of apostleship (1:5). He writes with apostolic authority. This is the gift that he received from the Lord (Eph 4:11). He writes to them by way of exercising his God-given gift.

Paul writes to everyone in the church at Rome, not just the leaders or elders. This must be understood when he goes on to speak about gifts ‘given to us’ (12:6). All who belong to Christ must be transformed in their thinking. The place to begin this transformation is in thinking about self- your thinking about God has already been changed if you are a believer.

**2. Superiority thinking abandoned**

Thinking highly of oneself comes naturally. It does not have to be taught, despite popular psychology and children’s songs. Playgrounds are full of little gods and goddesses- just ask any teacher. Such thinking continues into adult life, so people see themselves as top of the pile, whatever the pile may be. Morris says that to think of oneself more highly than one ought is a natural human tendency. He quotes Denney as saying, ‘To himself every man is in a sense the most important person in the world; it always needs much grace to see what other people are’.

Paul was writing this letter from Corinth where there was a lot of trouble in the church. Factions had developed around personalities. Who you know became more important than what you know. Some said they were of Apollos, some of Paul and some of Peter. This was in the church!

We are familiar with the cult of celebrity worship that rages in society today. We see young people, and those not so young, striving to get a photo with some sports star, some stage or TV performer, or some politician- that’s the older people. And then comes the name dropping; ‘I know so and so; he is my friend’.

A friend we visited in India kept on about the important people he had met. He brought out photos with some of them. He did not seem to realise that we had no idea who they were! Other people keep on about all the money they are making or how clever they are – along with name dropping. This is the way of the world. But it can come into the church, as it did in Corinth. It comes from people thinking of themselves more highly than they ought.

Believers should think differently because looking to God they see that everything they have comes from God. ‘Every good and perfect gift is from above and comes down from the Father of lights’ (James 1:17). James wrote in the context of rich men getting a special place in the church. Paul tells the Corinthians to remember where they came from and be humble (1 Cor 6:11). We are all unworthy servants, servants of God. We are to acknowledge God in all our ways and give all the glory to him (Ps 115:1). We must not take the glory to ourselves and think of ourselves more highly than we should.

What about those who think lowly of themselves? Are there not such people? What about people with low self-esteem? Paul does not speak of those who think of themselves ‘more lowly’ than they ought, so we must be careful here. There is the danger of a false humility, or pride in disguise. People may speak about their weakness in order to have others contradict them and tell them how good they are.

There are, of course, people who feel they are hopeless and at the bottom of the pile. This will come about when others claim to be at the top of the pile. In a narcissistic society some will see themselves as ugly because this is what society tells them. Low self-esteem increases when high self-esteem increases. Paul says not to think of ourselves more highly than we ought but to think soberly, or to take a sane and sensible view of ourselves.

**3. Sober judgment**

Wrong thinking about self is the outcome of sin, the sin of pride. Pride makes us see ourselves as the centre of the universe. When we acknowledge God to be the centre of the universe and come into a relationship with him through Jesus Christ we see ourselves differently. We no longer have a high view, nor do we have a low view of ourselves. We have a sober or balanced view of ourselves.

We understand that we are made in the image of God and are loved by God. We understand that we are special to God and have a place in his great plans and purposes. With this renewed thinking as a foundation, we are not burdened by what other people think of us. We do not compare ourselves to other people or try to be like them. We endeavour or be like Christ. Paul said, ‘Imitate me’, but he added, ‘as I imitate Christ’ (1Cor 11:1).

When we have peace with God, we have the peace of God in our hearts. We know that nothing can separate us from the love of God which is Jesus Christ our Lord (Rom 8:39). We will not be thinking incessantly about ourselves and worrying about our place in society, in the church or even in the family. We will be thinking first and foremost about our loving saviour and Lord, trying to do his will and please him. I am sure you have found that reading your Bible, praying, and coming to worship the Lord has freed you from troubling thoughts and worries. These ‘means of grace’ help you to get things into perspective and think soberly. Knowing the Lord Jesus Christ gives us a whole new perspective on life. We judge everything in the light of his grace and sovereignty, and with a view to eternity.

Paul explains sober judgment, saying, ’according to the measure of faith that God has given you’ (12:3 NIV). Believers are saved by grace through faith. Faith is given by God that we might believe. What then is the measure of faith Paul speaks about? It is given to each one, so maybe this is saving faith. But why ‘measure of faith’? There seems to be a different focus in his use of ’faith’ in this context. Glancing ahead to verse 6 we read, ‘In proportion to our faith’, in reference to using the gift of prophecy.

F F Bruce says that faith here, ‘denotes the spiritual power given to each Christian for the discharge of his special responsibility’. Keener also links this faith to the different gifts given to believers. This is what Paul goes on to talk about. Boice says it is about thinking of yourself ‘in accordance within the specific gifts or talents God has given you’.

Faith is to be active in good works. It is to be active in us as we use our gifts in the body of Christ. Morris concludes, ‘Being sober minded means recognising what God has given us and being zealous in its use, as well as humble’. Let us be busy in using our God-given gifts in the church, not to be praised by men but to glorify God. ‘Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart as working for the Lord not men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward’ (Col 3:23-24). Is this the way you are living today?

**Thinking of other believers** Romans 12:4-8

 ‘Are you a Christian?’ the man was asked. ‘Sure!’ was the reply. ‘But you never go to church’, he was told. ‘I don’t have to go to church to be a Christian’, he said; ‘I read my Bible and pray at home’. He went on, ‘Besides, the church is full of hypocrites. I can’t stand any of them’. Is it possible to be a true Christian and not associate with fellow believers?

Individualism is one of the greatest ‘isms’ of our day. It is related to others ‘isms’ like humanism and materialism. Both are God-rejecting and Bible-rejecting philosophies. Individualism is the outcome of sin. One example is the number of people living separate from the person they married. When the relationship gets difficult, off they go to live on their own. Some people never see or hear from brothers or sisters. Some parents are estranged from their children. Every so often we hear of a person found dead in their house and they have been dead for days or weeks. Why is this?

When man sinned against God he became estranged from God. Adam and his wife tried to hide from God. Soon after, they were estranged from each other and blamed each other for coming under the curses of God. And then their son Cain murdered his brother out of jealous anger. Individualism came into the world because of sin. Broken relationships came into marriages, into families and into societies with sin. The rule of sin in the heart means every person does what is right in their own eyes (Judges 21:25).

In Jesus Christ the situation is turned around. Jesus died on the cross as a propitiation for our sin. We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Having peace with God, we know the peace of God in our hearts. And so we can think with renewed hearts and minds. We think differently about ourselves. We think soberly and humbly about ourselves (12:3). The next step in the transformation of the mind is that of our relation to brothers and sisters in Christ. This is what the apostle deals with in this passage before us. We have just two points, namely ‘church’ and ‘charismata’; but under the second we will look at the various gifts listed.

**1. Church**

The word ‘church’, or ‘*ecclesia*’ in the Greek, is not found in this passage. What we find is a metaphor for the church; it is the body. Paul speaks of one body, or one body in Christ (12:4, 5). Just as the human body has lots of different parts or members, like eyes, ears, hands and feet, so the body of Christ or the church has many different members (1Cor 12). Each of these members is necessary to the proper functioning of the body. The eye has the specific task of seeing, something the ear or hand cannot do. I think you get the picture.

This is a picture we must keep in mind when we consider the church. Paul writes, ‘For we have many members in one body, but not all members have the same function’ (12:4). Note the ‘For’. What he writes here follows on from having a renewed mind in which we humble ourselves before God and before other people. We are thinking in a sane and sensible way. There is one body that has all these different parts or members. These members have varied functions. What we see is unity in diversity. What we see is mutual interdependence. What we see is equality but not identity.

This is very different to what we see in the world; which is why Paul stressed, 'Do not to be conformed to this world' (12:2). Individualism is rife in this world as we have seen. Individualism says, ‘I am right; my way is best’. It says that everyone must be like me. Even in a marriage where man and woman are clearly not identical, the world, or feminism in particular, says they must be the same. They have not worked out a way for the man to have the baby, but that aside, women must do everything the man does. Men are in business so women must be in business. Men are in the army so women must be in the army. There can be no equality without identify in this worldly thinking.

The church is not like this, according to Paul. There are many members and they equal before the Lord, but they do not all have the same function. There are male and female, young and old, slave and free, rich and poor, and people from all nations. More to the point, they have different gifts. There is no ‘drab uniformity’ in the church, as Morris puts it. The church is not like the North Korean army. There is a wonderful unity in the church, a unity in Christ, but also a wonderful diversity because of the gifts of the Spirit distributed by Christ.

We are individuals but are not ruled by individualism. We have different gifts that are to be used in the body. In fact these gifts belong to the body not the individual. The idea of a Christian not belonging to the body is something foreign to the apostle Paul - as is the idea that a Christian does not have a gift to be used in the body. What part of the body are you if you think you have nothing to contribute to the church by way of a God-given gift?

Paul was writing this letter to the church in Rome. Christians or ‘saints’ of Jewish and Gentile backgrounds were in the church. There were men and women, children and old people. He indicates that all have a role to play in this church. This was the visible body of Christ in Rome. There were no other churches in Rome; there were no denominations in those days.

**2. *Charismata***

I use the Greek word, partly for alliteration with ‘church’ but also because of the etymology of this word. ‘*Charis*’ is the word for grace; so *charismata* are grace-gifts. They are God-given gifts. They are given to members of the body for the proper functioning of the body and for building up or edifying the body (Eph 4:12). They are not matters of human excellence and are not for self-glorification. Nor are they to be ignored in some false modesty.

You become a member of this church by profession of faith. You have a gift, a *charismata*, to be used in this church. You must recognise this and the rest of us must also recognise this. You may say there is no opportunity in this church; granted, we do have a history of not encouraging members to use their gifts. But I do urge you to pray and share with others in this matter- even as we learn from this passage about some particular gifts given to the church. I also urge you to use your gifts as part of the body, not apart from it. We should not have Sunday school teachers, or the like, who do not attend body worship.

Paul here lists seven gifts. In 1Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4 are lists that overlap but also include other gifts. It is hard to see that any of these lists is exhaustive. Even as Paul lists these various gifts here, his emphasis is on the diversity and on the importance of exercising your gift. For example, if your gift is to give, then give generously and not grudgingly (2Cor 9:7). The gifts here listed include:

Prophecy: The first gift is prophecy. What is prophecy? Books have been written on this matter. A friend has just finished a thesis on this matter. The thing is, the NT does not define prophecy. Paul speaks of prophecy in contrast to speaking in tongues, and of two or three prophets speaking in the church and of others judging what they said (1Cor 14:29).

OT prophets spoke the words given by God- ‘Thus says the Lord’. They often spoke of what God was going to do in the future. There are people in the church today who think they have such a gift. But the Bible says there is no further revelation. God spoke in the past by the prophets but in these last days how has he spoken? He has spoken by his Son (Heb 1:2). Jesus has spoken to his apostles, men who Jesus himself appointed, and they have spoken under divine inspiration. Such revelation has ceased (Rev 22:18). Prophecy today is still speaking the words of God, but it is the words of God written in his holy book, the Bible.

Let me illustrate with two examples. Many years ago I was in a ‘charismatic’ meeting. People were praying and calling upon the Spirit to speak to them. Suddenly one person got a word. The word was, ‘Be still and know that I am God’. Was this a new word from God? God spoke this word in Psalm 46! Another time I heard of a prophet in the church telling people who they should marry. One man listened to the ‘prophet’ but his marriage soon failed.

‘If prophecy... then in proportion to our faith’ (12:6). The word translated ‘proportion’ is a Greek word ‘*analogia*’, which refers to a correspondence between two things. It is like the ‘measure of faith’ in verse 3. Prophecy should be in correspondence to faith- is it ‘our faith’ or ‘the faith’? This is another disputed matter. Morris refers to prophecy being judged or weighed carefully by others in 1 Corinthians 14:29. We must compare Scripture to Scripture, and be alert to false prophecy.

Ministry/serving: the Greek is ‘*diakonia*’. We have an example of serving in Acts 6 with the widows in the church being helped- although Paul is not necessarily referring to the office of deacon here. There are many ways of serving within the church and it is good to see different ones using this gift. We are serving the body when we clean the property, provide food or serve food. Would we be able to worship as we do if the place was never cleaned?

Teaching: The minister has this gift and so he does much of the teaching. Others have it also. This gift is included in all the lists in the Bible. Exercising this gift can be hard work- just like cleaning- but Paul says get on and do it. Teaching is for building up the body of Christ, not for personal satisfaction or glory. Paul said ‘Woe is me if I do not preach the gospel’ (1Cor 9:16). He was compelled to preach and teach.

Exhort/encourage: the actual word here (Paraclete) means to draw alongside as in counsel someone. Barnabas was given his name because it means ‘Son of encouragement’ (Acts 4:36). He got alongside Mark and restored him after he failed. Some members in this church have the gift of encouragement. We all need to be encouraged from time to time. Boice writes that, ‘Many people are hurting but not many are helping’. Thank the Lord for those who have this gift and do encourage us.

Giving: God equips some to give generously to the church -not necessarily rich people. It is one thing to have materials and money but another to give generously to the Lord’s work. The NT church, and the church of the Reformation, were in societies that did not have government welfare. Helping the poor among them was an important task. From this verse Calvin got the idea of a ‘double diaconate’- people who give and people who distribute the gifts.

Leading: This is a general term and not necessarily a reference to elders. It can refer to managers and administrators. There are leaders in families, in the youth, among the women and so on. The important thing if you have this gift is to lead with diligence and eagerness and not withdraw from your responsibility.

Showing mercy: This could be related to serving, but more specifically points to caring for those in need, such as the sick or the destitute.

I trust you have been thinking about the gift, or gifts, God has given you to exercise within the church, the body of Christ. Be sure of one thing; you do have a gift if you belong to the body. We should recognise our own gift and the gifts others have. Above all, let us use our God-given gift for the building up of the body. ‘Fan into flame the gift of God that is in you’, is what Paul told the young Timothy (2Tim 1:6).

**Love one another** Romans 12:9-13

‘Love one another as I have loved you’ (John 13:34). This was the command Jesus gave his disciples saying, ‘By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love one for another’. Jesus called this a new commandment. It is a positive command to love; to love as Christ loved. The Ten Commandments are often seen as negative. They do put matters in the negative, such as ‘do not murder’, and ‘do not steal’. This is the place we start, but Jesus went further in teaching his disciples positive commands. By way of summary of the second table of the commandments he said, ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’. He said that he who is angry with his brother is in danger of the judgment (Mat 5:22). He who hates his brother is in such danger. The command of Jesus is to love your brother and sister in the Lord.

**1. Brotherly love**

The apostle puts great emphasis on love as he expands on the renewed mind. He spoke about having a sober and balanced view of yourself in view of God’s grace in Jesus Christ. The relationships broken by sin have been restored in Jesus Christ. These are relationships of love; love for God and love for your neighbour. Neighbours fall into two categories; those in the body of Christ and those outside. Paul has already spoken about the body of Christ and the gifts given to each member of this body, gifts to be used within the body or church. There is a great variety of gifts. Each is to be used humbly and soberly, not with an attitude of superiority or inferiority. In this context Paul writes, ‘Let love be without hypocrisy’ (12:9). Love is the framework within which gifts are to be used in the fellowship of believers.

What chapter of the Bible is all about love? This chapter is often read at weddings. 1Corinthians 13 does not come in the context of a wedding but of the use of spiritual gifts within the church. Paul writes of gifts like speaking in tongues, prophecy, and faith, saying that these must all be used with love. If we do not exercise these gifts out of love they are of no benefit to the church. Without love, such gifts act to pull down the body rather than build it up. Love is the greatest of all attributes bestowed upon the believer by Jesus Christ. But love is only seen in action. Wearing a ‘I LOVE YOU’ tee shirt, or telling people you are a loving person, is not what love is about. Speaking about love, then acting without love is hypocrisy. Love is not just words. It is not just a feeling. It is a way of life. ‘Walk in love, as Christ also loved us’ (Eph 5:2).

There are a number of different words for love in the Bible, and in this passage. The first one we see is ‘*agape*’ (12:9). This is the word used in referring to God’s love; ‘God so loved the world’ is ‘*agape*’ love. This love comes from the will, not just emotions or feelings. You do not fall in, or fall out of this love. You choose to love in this way. This love comes from a renewed mind, a mind that knows the mercies of God and is directed by the word and the Spirit of God. ‘*Agape*’ love is sincere; it is ‘without wax’, the meaning of this originally Latin word. In ancient times cracks or defects in carved images were sometimes filled with wax. This looked perfect, until it turned hot and the wax melted. So buyers looked for carvings that were ‘sincere’ and not fake. Paul uses the word ‘*hupokrisis*’ or hypocrisy, saying love must without hypocrisy. Love must be without a mask or ulterior selfish motives. Love is never selfish. Love always seeks the best for the other person. Love is not arrogant or rude. Love is patient and kind. Love thinks no evil (1Cor 13:5); it gives no place for pay back or revenge. Perfect love is seen in Jesus Christ who laid down his life for us, and ‘we ought also to lay down our lives for the brothers’ (1John 3:16).

‘Hate what is evil’ (12:9). How can Paul speak of hate in the same verse as love? Because love must be discerning and discriminating. Not everything is lovely even if the world says it is. Sin is not lovely, even if the world says there is no such thing as sin. Being in Christ we are to abhor what is evil. We dare not call sin 'good'. What God hates we must hate. Jesus went to the temple and drove out the money changers because they were desecrating the house of God. John the Baptist rebuked Herod because he had taken his brother’s wife. Paul rebuked a man for having his father’s wife (1Cor 5:1). Actually, he rebuked the church for not hating this evil.

Love does not mean everything must be tolerated and nothing called evil. As believers we must be clear in our thinking, knowing what is good and what is evil. We must not conform to this world but be transformed by the Spirit and the word of God. Paul used strong language, telling us to hate evil and flee from it. What we must do is cling to what is good. We must be ‘glued on’ to what is true, what is just, what is lovely and what is good, in both our thinking and our actions (Phil 4:8).

**2. Brotherly love in action**

What does Christian love or ‘*agape*’ look like? Paul describes this love in 1Corinthians 13 as mentioned. He also describes it here in Romans 12. What we read here are positive statements about brotherly love. Practical Christian living is all about love. Love is the underlying theme of the remaining chapters of this letter. The life we live as those who by grace are ‘in Christ’, and in the body of Christ, is a life of love. Let us be walking in love every day. In verses 10-13 Paul gives nine pictures of what walking in love within the family of God looks like- we call them nine datives because in Greek they are in the form of ‘in love’ or ‘with regard to love’. These pictures continue beyond verse 13 but some later ones seem to relate to unbelievers.

1-in brotherly love be kindly affectionate to one another. You will notice how I have reversed the translation so that it conforms to the Greek. Brotherly love translates the Greek word ‘*philadelphia*’ which is two words, ‘*philos*’ meaning love, and ‘*adelphos*’ meaning brother. *Phileo* is another Greek word for love- it refers to ‘tender affections’. We find it in the word ‘philanthropy’, or love for man. *Phileo* love refers to love for a brother or sister in the family.

What Paul teaches is that this type of love is to be extended to members of the family of God. We are to love fellow believers as we do our biological brothers and sisters. Such love rules out nepotism in the church. The church is not a place for favouring family members. The mother of Zebedee’s sons came to Jesus wanting them to be promoted ahead of the other apostles. Jesus did not agree; still it made for disunity in the group (Mat 20:24). Churches having a family dynasty are not seen in the Bible. The picture of the church is a body, not an institution or monarchy.

The term ‘brotherly love’ is explained by the term ‘kindly affectionate’ (12:10). Kind has the word ‘kin’ in it; this means ‘family’ as in ‘next of kin’. ’Affectionate’ translates a word with the prefix ‘*philos’* again. It means ‘very loving’ or ‘devoted’, again with primary reference to parents and children. People speak about blood-brothers and about a powerful blood-bond. Paul says to the church not to love through blood-bonds but through Christ-bonds, yet with the same intense love as with blood-bonds.

2-in honour giving preference to one another. One translation has ‘outdo one another in showing honour’ (12:12 ESV) because the word ‘preference’ also has the sense of leading or outdoing others in showing love. It means to regard others more highly than yourself. This was not happening at the Lord’s Supper in Corinth where it was a case of every man for himself (1Cor 11:20). Right thinking comes when we understand who we are in Christ and when we are trying to be like Christ; ‘who being found in appearance as a man humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death’ (Phil 2:8). Paul wrote these words as he urged the Philippian church to stop thinking only about themselves but to ‘look out for the interests of others’ (Phil 2:4). ‘Loves does not seek its own’ (1Cor 13:5) - rather it seeks the good of others. Love says to the other person, ‘you first’. Morris writes, ‘Paul is not advocating hypocrisy but humility, and that love which eagerly seeks out and rejoices in and honours the good qualities in other believers’.

3-in diligence/zeal not lagging/slothful. Zeal has the sense of speed or haste. This is zeal for the truth and zeal for love. ‘Speaking the truth in love’ is what Paul urges the Ephesians (Eph 4:15). Often we speak what is not true, and more often speak in unloving ways whether the truth or not. We are to be zealous for good words not gossip. This exhortation comes with a negative- not lagging or not lazy. The flip side is be active in speaking good about others and doing them good; do not put off till tomorrow the good you can do today.

4,5-in spirit be fervent, in the Lord serving. Most translations have a small ‘s’ to refer to the human spirit- which in any case is directed by the Holy Spirit in those who believe. We are to be bubbling over, on the boil, or on fire to love one another. This is a vital part of serving the Lord. You cannot say you love the Lord while hating your brother in Christ. You cannot serve the Lord while shut away in your room or in a monastery. We serve the Lord by showing love to one another, and so the world will take notice, and ask what is different with these people. They will say, ‘See how these Christians love one another’.

6-in hope rejoicing. Love and hope go together in the life of a believer (1Cor 13:13). This hope is not that of wishing for some worldly thing. It is hope because it is unseen, not because it is uncertain. Believers in Rome were frequently persecuted for their faith, just like Paul. But knowing Christ, they had a hope in things beyond this world. They shared this hope with others and so rejoiced together. After encouraging two bickering women in the church to be of the same mind, Paul says, ‘Rejoice in the Lord. Let your graciousness be known to all. The Lord is at hand’ (Phil 4:4-5). Morris writes, ‘Hope lifts a person out of the present difficult circumstances and rejoicing is the inevitable result’.

7-in tribulation be patient. Tribulation refers to deep trouble of some kind. Believers are not immune to trouble in this world- we do not walk in denial. Nor are we fatalistic, always thinking the worst. Nor do we become stoical saying, ‘I will beat this thing’. Rather, we patiently look to the Lord. We entrust ourselves into the mighty and loving hands of God. We wait upon the Lord who renews our strength.

8-in prayer steadfastly continuing. Prayer, along with love, or indeed as part of love, is the greatest weapon a child of God has. Paul concludes his picture of the Christian’s armour with the words, ‘Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit’ (Eph 6:18). He asked prayer for himself despite his gift of apostleship. ‘Rejoice always’, and ‘pray without ceasing’ are among his final words to the church at Thessalonica. Never underestimate the importance of prayer. Jesus kept talking about prayer, as did Paul. They did so because it is so easy to neglect prayer. We get too busy, get tired, or get distracted. We fail to pray when we most need to. We must maintain a regular prayer life. ‘Continue steadfast in prayer’ (12:12).

9-in the needs of the saints share or show hospitality (12:13). The NT church took a special interest in the needs of widows and orphans. They keep lists of such members of the church. They also visited those in prison- like Paul himself. This was a vital part of ‘body life’ in the church. It was not seen as the responsibility of the government. ‘Remember the poor among you’ was the constant call of the apostles. How can we say we have love when we shut our hearts to someone in real need (1John 3:17).

Hospitality is also part of a loving body, even the wider body of the church. Wherever Paul went he stayed with someone in the church. It was a Jewish custom, but even more so in the church. In our recent travels we experienced lots of loving hospitality from fellow believers. Homes were open to us and meals provided. Are brothers or sisters in the Lord welcome into your home? What other ways can you show hospitality? Your life as a believer and member of the body of Christ is to be a life of love. You are called to love others more than your love yourself. You are to honour others, pray for others, rejoice and hope with others, and be hospitable. This is how we are to serve the Lord. Jesus will say, ‘In as much as you did it to least of these my brothers you did it to me’ (Mat 25:40).

**Thinking of others** Romans 12:14-16

The Bible reading in our family devotion recently was very interesting. It was about Abijah, the son of King Jeroboam. This boy got sick and died, and all Israel mourned and buried him, as the prophet said. What was interesting was that he was the only one in this whole family to be buried. Jeroboam and the rest would be eaten by dogs or birds when they died because of the king’s wickedness. But in this boy Abijah, the Lord ‘found something good toward the Lord God of Israel’ (1Kings 13:13).

A long life is not always a sign of blessing. The important thing is to be like Christ and be doing good today. Jesus did not live to see old age; nor did his servant Stephen. Stephen was a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit (Acts 6:5). He preached the gospel in the power of the Spirit. He soon encountered opposition and hatred, just as Jesus did. Jesus said that all who followed him would encounter such opposition from the world. Wicked men grabbed Stephen, threw him out of the city and stoned him. With his last breath he said, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit’, and he prayed for God to forgive those who were killing him. Watching him die, and consenting to his death, was a young man called Saul- later Paul. Augustine said that the church owes Paul to the prayer of Stephen.

‘How shall we then live?’ is the question that Paul continues to address in these verses we are examining today. Let us examine our own hearts as we do so. We are learning about practical Christian living. Being a Christian is not just about what we believe. It is also about living out what we believe. It is about doctrine and practice. Faith without works is dead (James 2:20). Works without faith are not good works in the sight of God (Rom 8:8).

We have been learning how to live in relation to fellow believers in the body of Christ. Some scholars think Paul moves on to those outside the body in these verses (14-16). Certainly, ‘those who persecute you’ seems to indicate this. Boice gives these verses the title, ‘The Christian and his enemies’. But, ‘being of the same mind’ cannot refer to outsiders (12:16). The reference to ‘evil’ and ‘all men’ in verse 17 is more clearly a reference to outsiders.

**1. Enemies**

If you are living faithfully as a follower of Christ you will have people who hate you. You must try to live at peace with all men (12:18), but not all will agree with what you say and do. The world does not like people who do not conform; as a believer you will not conform to this world (12:2). The closer you follow Jesus the less you will conform to this world, and the more the world will hate you.

Unbelievers talk about tolerance and acceptance of others but when you do not agree with them they quickly turn to ridicule and persecution. When the CEO of a large US company said he did not agree with homosexual marriage, his ‘tolerant’ employees called for him to be sacked. If he had kept quiet he would have escaped this persecution. Some of those opposing him may be members of the visible church. Members of the invisible church will hold to the truth of the Bible.

While the ‘tolerant’ world is ready to curse anyone who does not agree with them, Paul says that believers must not behave like this- and not even think about retaliation. Unjust persecution is not easy to deal with. Murray writes that it may, ‘provoke resentment in the minds of believers and, with resentment, thoughts of vindictive retaliation’. When we are mocked and ridiculed for holding to the truth of the gospel we do not curse those doing this, whether they are in the church or outside. Rather we are to bless them.

What does it mean to bless someone? It means to pray that God will forgive and do them good, not harm. Boice writes, ‘If we are asking God to do them good it is patently clear that we must also seek every honest means of doing them good’. To bless a person means to pray for them and do them good. In his sermon on the mount Jesus said, ‘Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you’ (Mat 5:44). Jesus rebuked the sons of Zebedee when they wanted to call down fire from heaven on the unwelcoming Samaritans (Luke 9:54).

We have the example of Jesus, and of Stephen, who prayed for those persecuting them unto death. Twice Paul tells us to bless those who persecute us. He adds the negative ‘do not curse’ to make sure we get the message. He does so because he knows our natural reaction is to curse and retaliate, at least in our minds. The world praises those who practice an ‘eye for an eye’, and inflict even greater harm on their enemies, but God shows us a different way.

There is wisdom in the world that says, ‘do not do to others what you would not want them doing to you’. Jesus puts this in the positive form, ‘do to others what you would have them do to you’ (Luke 6:31 NIV). There is a big difference. Retaliation is a negative rather than positive reaction. A positive reaction to persecution surprises the world, and really confounds people. It is, of course, much more difficult and requires a renewed mind. It requires the work of the Holy Spirit in one’s heart and mind. Remember, ‘A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger’ (Prov 15:1). When you are praying for your enemy and asking God to bless them you will not be able to curse them at the same time. Moreover, your prayer may lead to the Lord changing their hearts. Yes, the Lord can make enemies into friends. ‘When a man’s ways please the Lord, he makes even his enemies to be a peace with him’ (Prov 16:7).

**2. Empathy**

Empathy is defined as, ‘Projecting ones personality into, and so fully comprehending’. It is putting yourself in some else’s shoes. Weeping with those who weep is called sympathy. Paul writes ‘Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep’ (12:15). We understand this with regard to weddings and funerals, as Keener states. But what about other situations in life?

Paul does not say, ‘rejoice with those who mourn, and weep with those who rejoice’. To be glad at the calamities of others is a terrible thing – and will not go unpunished (Prov 17:5). But this is what the sinful heart is capable of. Pride brings jealousy and envy, such that we can hate others when they succeed- remember Cain. Rejoicing in the success of one who has beaten you in the race, or in getting a promotion, is not easy. Rejoicing with someone having a baby when you cannot have one is not easy. But this is what we do in the body of Christ. Murray writes, ‘This exhortation, as much as any in this catalogue of virtues, demonstrates the transformation that must be wrought in those who are one in body in Christ’. Such unity is an essential part of the body of Christ. It brings great blessing to those who practice this virtue- as with all obedience to the commands of Christ.

**3. Exalted view of self**

Many troubles we have with fellow believers, and with those outside the church, come about because we have an exalted view of ourselves. Paul began this chapter telling us to think soberly with regard to ourselves, and not to think more highly than we ought. He returns to this lesson here in verse 16, saying not to set your mind on high things but associate with the humble.

Indian society is cursed by a caste system. Higher caste people do not do menial work- actually the word translated ‘humble’ or ‘lowly’ in verse 16 can refer to doing menial work. Once I had a high caste student refuse to dig his garden plot; he hired a low caste person to do it. It is a shame that even in the Indian church a person from a high caste background will refuse to marry someone from a low caste background- they seem to remember these things for generations.

When you go to England you find a class system still in existence. What you see in ‘Downton Abbey’ is not just a thing of the past. Even in the church an aristocracy can occur. The idea of priests and laity is foreign to the NT church and Paul’s teaching. We may not have an aristocracy in the church but cliques of one form or another are found. In my young days farmers could be looked down on by city folk. What suburb do you live in? There are people who consider themselves intellectual giants and tell others in the church that they will not understand certain things- maybe because they are just farmers, drivers, or labourers. I guess the word is ‘snobbery’. Let there be no snobs in the church, but only people who are humble and willing to associate with the lowly and join in menial work as required. Murray writes, ‘Just as there is to be no social aristocracy in the church, so there is to be no intellectual autocrat’.

‘Be of the same mind towards one another’ (12:16). Further on in chapter 15, Paul prays to God to grant them to be like minded (15:5). ‘Be of the same mind in the Lord’ he wrote to the Philippians when two women were bickering (Phil 4:2). He does not go into the nature of their dispute, nor does he take sides. He simply urges them to be of the same mind in the Lord; and is confident that, with the help of a brother or sister in the church, they will be reconciled.

When we believe in Jesus and receive the Holy Spirit we have the mind of Christ (1Cor 2:16). If we put on the mind of Christ, and think with such a mind, we will think soberly and humbly about ourselves. We will think of others more highly than ourselves. When all the body thinks like this there will be unity in thinking, at least on essential matters, and there will be harmony. This unity is not about dressing the same, eating the same food, getting the same pay, or driving the same car.

We know that the family that prays together stays together. This applies to the church family also. The closer we follow Jesus, the closer we will be drawn to each other. We will be eager to pray for others and help one another as we have opportunity. ‘As we have opportunity let us to do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith’ (Gal 6:10).

‘Do not be wise in your own eyes’ is wisdom going back to Solomon (Prov 3:7). Maybe the apostle is quoting this as he wraps up his teaching about renewed thinking in the believer, thinking with regard to others. The person who is wise in their own opinion is the person who protests, ‘I am not stupid you know’. Morris writes, ‘The person who is wise in their own eyes is rarely so in the eyes of other people’. ‘Know it all people’, people who are impervious to any advice but their own, do not make for unity in the body. Some people confuse knowledge with wisdom of course. Wisdom from above is not self-seeking and boastful; it is willing to yield, without partiality and without hypocrisy (Ja 3:17).

**4. Example of Jesus**

If you want to see wisdom at work, look to Jesus Christ, not yourself. If you start thinking you are wise, look to Jesus and feel shame and be humble. Having a renewed mind means having the mind of Christ (1Cor 2:16). Jesus is the wisdom and power of God (1Cor 1:24). Jesus took on human flesh to come and live among us. He was born in a stable and worked as a carpenter. He associated with tax collectors and sinners. He humbled himself and became obedient unto the death of the cross. Jesus said he came to serve, not to be served (Mark 10:45). This is the example we who belong to Christ are to imitate.

This is completely opposite the thinking of the world. But it is the thinking you must have if you are in the body of Christ. Many people read what Jesus said about turning the other cheek, and loving your enemies, but fail to do it. They cannot do it if they are not born again and do not have the Holy Spirit. But if you are born again of the Spirit of God you can and must renew your thinking and put into practice this new way of living.

**Thinking about outsiders** Romans 12:17-21

What happens when your son gets punched in the playground? Do you tell him to be a man and give the other boy two punches? What happens when someone abuses you on email or Facebook? Do you sit down straight away and reply with even more abusive language? This is the way of the world. This is the way of sin. Satan loves to stir up strife. A cartoon in the paper pictured the devil saying, ‘I used to like getting out in the world wreaking evil, but the jobs mostly social media these days’.

Is this the way Christians are to behave? What does the Bible teach? Well, let us look at what we find here in Romans 12. The apostle Paul began this chapter reminding us of the mercies of God. In every aspect of Christian living we must remember that we are sinners saved by grace. God loved us and gave his beloved Son, Jesus, to die on the cross in our place. We must keep reminding ourselves of this; which is why we come to worship, and why we have the Lord’s Supper. If you face difficulty in doing what the apostle teaches, and what Jesus himself teaches, it is probably because you are neglecting these means of grace.

In verse 9 Paul contrasts good and evil; ‘Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good’. But what is good and what is evil? Is good what you say is good? Is good what the majority say is good? This is the popular view. If 70 % of the population thinks killing terminally ill old people is good then it is good, they say. If everyone is living together before getting married then it must be right they say. This is the way of secular humanists who turn their backs on God. Situational ethics being taught in schools will tell you it is good to tell lies sometimes, and it is good to take revenge sometimes; it all depends on the situation! Such teaching is useless of course, because a sinful, Satan-controlled human nature naturally seeks revenge.

The Bible does not leave you or anyone else to decide what is good and what is evil. God our creator and redeemer tells us what is good and evil. We find his words written down by the apostle Paul in verses 9-21 of this chapter. Verse 17-21 bring the chapter to a close with a renewed focus on the nature of evil and overcoming this evil. He has already told us to bless those who persecute us and not to curse them (12:14). These closing words focus on the believers relations with unbelievers or those outside the body of Christ. The first point is about retaliation. We will look at revenge next, and then will close with the more positive behaviours of seeking peace and overcoming evil with good.

**1. Retaliation**

To the church in Rome Paul writes, ‘Repay no one evil for evil’ (12:17). To another church he wrote, ‘See that no one renders evil for evil to anyone, but always pursue what is good, both for yourselves and for all’ (1Thes 5:15). His teaching does not change because it is inspired by the Spirit of God. Nor is his teaching equivocal; he does not say it depends on the situation. It is written, ‘repay no one evil’. The believer follows absolutes, not the way of, ‘it all depends’. We do not conform to this world but think with a renewed mind, the mind of Christ. Peter reminds us that when Jesus was insulted he did not retaliate. What he did was commit himself into the hands of God, the righteous judge (1Peter 2:23). And this is what you must do if you are following Christ; you are called to imitate Christ.

Jesus practiced what he preached? What did Jesus say about those who hit you in the face? Did he say to hit him back harder? Did he say just take it like a good stoic? What he actually said is, ‘turn the other cheek’ (Mat 5:39). Many know what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount but they think it is just theory. Can anyone really do what he says, and turn the other cheek? Jesus does not say it is easy, but he would not have taught this if it was impossible. As Paul later wrote, ‘I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me’ (Phil 4:13). This is the changed mind and behaviour expected in a follower of Christ. Turning the other cheek is a positive response. Jesus goes on to say that if someone takes your shirt, give him your coat as well. If he forces you to go one mile then go two miles. Paul says, ‘Have regard for good things in the sight of all men’ (12:17). ‘All men’ includes outsiders. Those outside keenly watch what we do in the church, particularly how we react to evil done to us. In 1999 India and the world was shocked when Hindu fundamentalists set fire to the car in which missionary Graham Staines and his two sons were sleeping. In an interview with the press his widow, Gladys, said she had forgiven the men who so brutally murdered her husband and two boys. A young man I know was so moved by the Christian response of love and forgiveness towards this evil act that he went to join the mission.

The word ‘good’ in verse 17 can also be translated ‘honourable’, ‘right’ or ‘beautiful’. It is the opposite of evil, as in verse 21- although this is a different Greek word. When evil is done to you, you must, by way of responding, think about what is good, honourable or beautiful. This is not easy- returning evil is the easy way. But it is possible, and it is the way of a follower of Christ. We can behave like this if we stop and think before we act - think with a renewed mind. Morris writes, ‘Your lives are to be lived on such a high plane that even the heathen will recognise the fact’. Your persecutor, and those around, will be shocked when you return good for evil. Note how often outsiders condemn the church for violent reactions and even starting wars. Christians who retaliate with abusive words or violent actions show they are no different to the world. It is those who do not retaliate but strive to do good who cause outsiders to marvel and realise that these people have been with Jesus (Acts 4:13).

**2. Revenge**

‘Beloved, never avenge yourselves but leave it for the wrath of God’ (12:19 ESV). The word ‘avenge’ has as its root the word for justice in Greek. Some see revenge as being about justice. Surely those who act unjustly should be punished! ‘I can’t let him/her get away with that’, we might say. ‘I must defend my reputation. What will they think if I let them get away with this?’ And so the missiles keep flying- literally so in the Middle East.

The Bible does not teach that those who do you evil or treat you unjustly will go unpunished. What it teaches is that this is God’s business not yours. The State has a God-given role to play, as Paul goes on to explain, but the focus here is on God as the judge. ‘Who are you to judge another’ person (James 4:12). God is the judge and he will judge justly. Moses said,’ You shall not take vengeance’ (Lev 19:18). This is the same verse in which he says, ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’. He also wrote that the Lord says, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay’ (Deut 32: 35; Heb 10:30). David must have read these words. King Saul was determined to kill David, so he was on the run to save his life. One day he had the opportunity to take revenge and kill Saul. It happened a second time also. But David knew what God said; ‘Vengeance is mine says the Lord, I will repay’.

Whose is the ‘wrath’ is referred to in verse 19? Haldane and others say it means to leave place for your opponent’s wrath by stepping aside. More recent commentators suggests it refers to the victim’s wrath. You the victim should seek alternative outlets for your anger instead of revenge. However, bashing the boxing bag is secular psychology, not Biblical teaching. One popular Hindu guru built a padded room where his followers could let out pent-up anger. Some sporting gurus see the football field in much the same way. Some husbands see their wife and family is much the same way. The wrath referred to is God’s wrath- as many versions add. We are not to take revenge, even if it is about personal justice; we leave it to the Lord. He will execute justice in his perfect way, in his perfect time – unlike the vengeance we might plan. God’s way, and God’s time of exacting justice may be beyond our understanding. God has set a day when he will judge the world in righteousness. If He has not punished the evil doer in some way before, He will certainly do so on that Day- unless they have repented. The revenge we take will rarely lead to repentance. The ultimate good in all disputes or fights must be the salvation of souls and the building up of the body of Christ. You may win the fight but lose a brother in doing so. Bring all your cares and all your disputes to the Lord and let him deal with them. He will resolve things much better than you.

3.**Live at peace**

The words ‘retaliation’ and ‘revenge’ are not in heaven’s dictionary. Nor should they be in the renewed mind of the believer. Peace is the word that should be uppermost in our thinking. Jesus said, ‘Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God’ (Mat 5:9). Jesus said, ‘My peace I give to you’ (John 14:27). Jesus is the Prince of Peace. Those who are his subjects must also pursue peace with all men. Having peace with God, we can have peace with one another in Jesus Christ. In calling us to live at peace Paul says, ‘with all men’, believers and unbelievers (12:18). He qualifies this saying, ‘As much as it depends on you’ (12:18). We live in an evil world where Satan holds sway over the lives of unbelievers. He does not want peace, especially not with followers of his arch enemy, Jesus Christ. But since it takes two to fight we can deny Satan’s followers their desire by being peacemakers. If you are following Jesus you will suffer at the hands of wicked men, just as Jesus did; and like Jesus you will not retaliate but will seek peace with all men.

‘If it is possible’ suggests there will be times when we cannot live peaceably with some people (12:18). Seeking peace may mean going to certain places and agreeing with certain things that we cannot do because we belong to the Lord. Morris writes, ‘Peace at the price of sacrifice of truth or the compromise of principle is not asked for. The Christian, because he is a Christian, cannot do such things’. Nevertheless, this qualification does not give licence for the Christian to go around stirring up strife, as some are in the habit of doing. Some Christians cannot keep a job or stay in one church because they behave like religious police.

**4. Overcome evil with good**

Do not repay evil for evil. Do not take revenge. ‘Do nots’ however, are not what being a Christian is all about. We are called to be peacemakers. We are called to return good for evil, not just go around grumbling about all the evil in the world. We are to do good to those who hate us and spitefully use us or persecute us (Mat 5:44). ‘Let your light shine before men that they may see your good deeds’ (Mat 5:16). Verse 20 begins with ‘but’, meaning ‘to the contrary’. Paul quotes a Proverb about feeding your enemy if he is hungry; in other words, repaying good for evil. This is contrary to human nature and worldly wisdom but it is very effective for making peace and pleasing God. Wisdom from above is peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits (James 3:17).

‘In so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head’ (12:20). What is this all about? Paul is quoting a proverb but does not explain it- although the closing verse may be his explanation. Some scholars, like Chrysostom, think this is about judgment coming on your enemy. Fire is a symbol of judgment. Keener writes, ‘The vengeance of God points towards fiery judgment for those who do not repent’. Yet most commentators think the picture of burning coals refers to bringing shame, and hopefully repentance, to the heart of your enemy. You can conquer them with kindness. Olyott writes, ‘It is better to be pricked by a sense of shame now than to suffer the punishment of fire later’. You do want your enemy saved not destroyed!

To conclude; the way you live as a Christian has enormous implications upon other Christians and upon non-Christians. Knowing the love of Jesus and having the gift of the Holy Spirit, you can live a life of love. ‘Let love be without hypocrisy’ (12:9). Love underlies your spiritual gift and its use in the body. Be a body builder, not a body destroyer. Knowing the love of Jesus you will respond with love for Him and other people. You will seek to do good and to pursue peace with all people. You will in your own way turn the world upside down –or right side up- as you refuse to be overcome by evil but instead overcome evil with good, to the glory of God.

**Thinking about civil rulers** Romans 13:1-5

The relationship between church and state is a thorny issue the world over, and has been so down through history. At times the state has been under control of the church. We might think this would be best but in fact it is worse. Boice writes, ‘Religious leaders make bad rulers’. When Emperor Constantine became a Christian and began to rule through the church, truth and true worship suffered. The medieval church, which exercised political power in many states, was as corrupt and murderous as any secular government. In 1300 Pope Boniface viii appeared at a great papal function not only wearing a tiara, but also girded with a sword and proclaimed before the multitudes, 'I am Caesar, I am Emperor'.

There is no Biblical mandate for the church to be exercising political power over a nation. The power of the sword is given to Caesar or the state, not the church. Jesus said, ‘My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world my servants would fight’ (John18:36). At the same time Jesus said something interesting to Pilate; he informed him that he had no power unless it was given him from above, or from God (John 19:11).

If Christians are to live in a society ruled by non-Christians, how are they to relate to their rulers? Do they obey the laws made by the government - all of them or just some? Do they accept the punishment that comes from breaking those laws? Do they respect and honour their rulers? Do they pay taxes demanded by the government? These were questions faced by Christians in the first century, and continue to be faced by Christians today.

I hear people say, ‘It all depends’. It depends on whether the government is totalitarian, communist, fascist or democratic. But Paul makes no such distinctions. ‘It all depends on how fair the law is and how reasonable the punishment’. But Paul makes no such qualifications. ‘It all depends on whether the law is contrary to the law of God as stated in the Bible’. This is a valid ‘it all depends’, and it is dealt with in other passages of the Bible. Paul does not deal with it here, even though many commentators spend more time discussing this area of conflict that they do discussing the important principles taught in this passage.

Some scholars say this passage is completely out of context; they say verse 8 follows naturally from the end of chapter 12. Others reject it as being uncharacteristic of Paul. But he is talking about practical Christian living. He is talking about believers having a renewed mind and how this renewed thinking affects relations with people in the church and people outside the church. Our relationship with civil rulers is an important aspect of life as we live in society in this world. Moreover, Paul concluded the last chapter saying that believers are not to take revenge because God will repay evil. We are not to take revenge against another person who does us harm, nor an organisation that does us harm. It is not for us to cheat a person or an organisation if we think they have cheated us. God has given the civil ruler power to punish evil doers.

In India a Hindu nationalist government has just been elected- and that with an absolute majority. When this party was last in power radical Hindus murdered missionaries and burned hundreds of churches. Do Christians today have reason to be worried and afraid? A young preacher we heard while there reminded the congregation not to fear because God is sovereign. He did not preach from Romans 13 but from Psalm 2 which reminds kings and rulers of this world that God is in charge. Is this what you believe?

**1. Divinely appointed**

‘Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities’ (13:1). Here is an absolute statement referring to every person, including those in the church. Yet some Christians think this does not apply to them. Some think the governing authority is evil and refuse to have any relations with the civil authorities. They refuse to pay taxes or to obey state laws. They live in monasteries or communes as enemies of the state. Many Jews in Paul’s day objected to paying taxes to Rome. This attitude may have carried over into the church. Targeted persecution of Christians was not an issue until some ten years later because Christians were lumped together with Jews as a legal religion within the Roman state (Acts 18:14-15).

Being a Christian does not automatically put you into conflict with the state. Through believing in Jesus you do become a citizen of heaven with the duty to serve your heavenly king. But while ever you are living in an earthly society you have duties towards the society and nation in which you live. Why? Because the authorities that exist are appointed by God (13:1). This puts the matter ‘on a very high plane’ as Bruce writes. He says that ‘to disobey them (the government) is to disobey God’.

Is this just governments that are democratically elected and whose rule you agree with? You might think that democratically elected governments are appointed by the people, not God. The truth is, all governments are appointed by God - even bad ones. This may not be easy to understand or accept, especially with rulers like Hitler or Stalin, but Paul says there is no authority except from God’ (13:1).

Pharaoh oppressed the Israelite, making them slaves and murdering their baby boys. But it is written that God raised him up for a purpose (Rom 9:17). God raised up Nebuchadnezzar for his purposes. God raised up Cyrus for his purpose; he is called the ‘Lord’s anointed’ (Isa 45:1). This does not mean these rulers believed in God or submitted to his authority. Nebuchadnezzar built a huge statue of himself and made a law that all his subjects must worship before it. He praised his own power and mighty achievements; this brought God’s judgment upon him. So every ruler has been, is, and will be, appointed by God for his sovereign purposes. For this reason we are to submit to their authority.

Being appointed by God, the governing authority or ruler is under the authority of God. ‘He is God’s minister to you for good’ (13:4, 6). While you have a duty to submit to the ruler, he has a duty to submit to God. He is to minister or serve for good, not evil. Boice says that this assumes ‘an objective moral standard outside itself, either discovered by it, or given to it’. It is not for the government to make up moral standards but to accept what is given, and to uphold these with good and just laws.

It is the role of the government under God to punish evil and promote good or, as Bruce says, ‘the repression of crime and the encouragement of righteousness’. As God’s minister he ‘does not bear the sword in vain’. The king sends his governor, ‘for the punishment of evil doers and for the praise of those who do good’ (1Peter 2:14).The state is given the power of the sword to maintain peace and order for the good of all- not least for believers to freely worship and preach the gospel. The civil ruler is appointed by God to rule over people in civil matters, but not in matters of conscience and belief. Many rulers have sought to extend their authority into matters of faith and worship- as seen with Nebuchadnezzar, some Roman emperors, and with Mary, Queen of Scots.

When Mary returned to Scotland in 1561 she tried to impose Roman Catholic worship on her subjects; they had begun to read their Bibles and ceased celebrating the Mass. She took these words of the apostle Paul out of context to claim that her subjects must submit to her authority in everything, even in worship. The Scottish Reformer, John Knox, informed her in a famous interview that, ‘right religion took neither original strength nor authority from worldly princes but from the eternal God alone, so are not subjects bound to frame their religion according to the appetites of their princes'.

In 1590 Andrew Melville made clear to King James that there are two jurisdictions in the realm, one spiritual and the other civil. Though separate, they are interdependent with mutual obligations. So it is that in Reformed churches we have the so-called Establishment Principle- 'coordinate jurisdiction with mutual subordination'. The state or civil ruler is appointed by God and has jurisdiction over civil affairs, but in the church Christ is the head, not the civil ruler. This was the case in the OT; the king was not allowed to perform the duties of the priest (2Chron 26:16).

**2. Duty to submit**

Much more could be said with regard to church state relations but we must return to the verses before us. The governing authority is appointed by God. God is sovereign over all the nations. ‘He removes kings and raises up kings’ according to his sovereign will and purpose (Dan 2:21). Paul was writing to the church - to us. He was not writing to the king to remind him of his duties to God.

Since the ruler is appointed by God, we have the duty to submit to his authority. To resist the authority is to resist what God has appointed (13:2). To resist or disobey God in this way brings one under the judgment of God. This is the best understanding of verse 2, although some think of this judgment as being that of the ruler. God may well use the ruler to bring about this judgment, but the primary reference here is to the judgment of God. Jesus said that when we help brothers who are hungry, sick or in prison, we do it to him (Mat 25:40). When we obey the government we are doing it unto God.

Have you ever thought that in resisting the government you are resisting God? Have you ever thought that in disobeying civil laws you are resisting God? Renewed thinking as a believer has many implications on how you live in society, as well as in the church. What we must get into our minds and understanding is that God is sovereign over all creation, all people and all nations.

The second reason for not resisting the governing authorities is that God has given them the power of the sword (13:4). The state is instituted by God to promote good and punish evil. Those who break the laws of the nation will be punished by the governing authority. The civil ruler is charged with maintaining the rights and freedoms of the individual, as well as maintaining law and order in the community.

Those who do what is good have nothing to fear from the authorities- they will be praised by them (13:3). It is for those who do evil to fear. The sword pictures the ultimate punishment, that of execution, which is authorised for the avenging of premeditated murder (Gen 9:6). Boice makes the point that the sword is to punish, not reform, the wrongdoer. ‘It is not the business of the state to reform or cure wrongdoers. What is mandated by God is to punish bad behaviour and reward good actions. The state must have standards of right and wrong and must administer these standards impartially. This is all governments can do in the long run.’

Again, some will be asking, ’What about laws that are unjust or immoral?’ Well, what about them? How many laws do we have that are unjust or immoral- by Biblical standards that is, not yours? Is it not true that almost all our laws are designed for good?

The third reason for being subject to the governing authority is that of conscience (13:5). All people have a conscience which directs their thinking and behaviour. The conscience is particularly active in convicting a person of wrongdoing. Some confess to a crime after years on the run. Conscience is affected by sin. It can be misguided in matters of morality. But the believer to whom Paul is writing has a Spirit- illuminated conscience. Our conscience condemns us when we do what is wrong, even when we break the law of our nation. This means we do not simply obey the law when being watched for fear of being caught and punished. We obey the law because it is the right thing to do. We refrain from law-breaking and doing evil out of a fear of God, not a fear of the law. We submit ourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake (1Peter 2:13).

**Taxes** Romans 13:6-7

‘No one likes paying taxes’ was the subheading in a sermon I read on these verses. This seems to be a truism. Yet I once heard a fellow scientist say he was happy to pay his tax. He explained that if we did not pay tax we would not have roads, schools, hospitals, a police force or an army. Taxes are basic to living in a community or nation. We might question how much we pay or how our taxes are used, but not the principle of personal taxation. We might think the government misuses our taxes, but it is nothing compared to the misuse and corruption found in governments the world over. The roads in Kenya are notoriously bad. Major sealed roads are marred by huge potholes. Government corruption is such that roads are poorly maintained. On one section we were surprised to see a man repairing the road. Cars stopped to throw money into a tin which he had. He was doing the repair out of his own initiative. Do we call this direct taxation?

Our government says that a fuel tax will be directly used to build new roads because people are concerned that their taxes are not being used to benefit them. Governments are made up of people like us- they are made up of sinners. Rulers are tempted to line their own pockets, and look after themselves, to the neglect of the people. Such sinfulness must be curtailed by checks and balances in the government and in society, not by abandoning politics altogether, as some Christians do. The Exclusive Brethren on principle refuse to vote, but do get involved in politics. Their understanding of the separation of church and state is misguided. A friend in India never bothered voting until I explained to him that it was his Christian duty to vote and pay due respect to the elected rulers.

**1. Paying taxes**

‘For because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God’s ministers attending to this very thing’ (13:6). The matter of paying taxes arises in the context of submitting to rulers appointed by God. These rulers of the state are ministers or servants of God, as stated in verse 4. Their authority includes the power to punish evil doers or lawbreakers. Christians should be law-abiding citizens. They will do what is right and good and not give the ruler cause to punish them. Christians do not go around breaking laws they do not like, but they submit to the governing authority, even in the matter of paying tax. Sometimes, however, we are guilty of dishonesty in our efforts to avoid paying tax. People who are in every other respect law abiding can be guilty of failing to obey tax laws. Is this why the apostle Paul singles out paying tax in this passage?

Paying tax was even more controversial in the early church than it is today. The Jews were divided about the ‘rightness’ of paying taxes to the Romans who were ruling over them. We know this from the incident when they came to Jesus asking, ‘Is it lawful for us to pay taxes to Caesar or not?’ (Luke 20:22). They came to test Jesus, yet the question was valid in itself, and Jesus gave a valid answer. Taking a denarius, a Roman coin, Jesus pointed to the image stamped on it. The image was that of Tiberius Caesar. Since the coin had this image on it Jesus said, ’Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s’ (Luke 20:25). Paul uses exactly the same word in verse 7 -‘Render therefore to all their due’. This does not simply mean to give, but to give back or pay what is due. Paying your taxes is a bit like your tithe to the Lord. It is returning what rightfully belongs to the one in authority, the one from whom you received the money in the first place.

Christians have a duty to pay their tithe to the Lord, and to pay their taxes to Caesar. Jesus indicated this when he went on to say, ‘And to God the things that are God’s’ (Luke 20:25). Is this more than a Christian can manage? Some want to hang onto every dollar they earn, but the wise person will understand that without God’s blessing they would not be earning money at all, and that without the state with its police force they would have difficulty keeping what they earned anyway. Robbers and violent men might trouble them. Speaking of robbers, Boice relates a story about the French philosopher Voltaire. At a dinner party he suggested to his friends that they entertain themselves by telling stories about robbers. When it was Voltaire’s turn he said, ‘Gentlemen, there was once a tax collector… Good Lord! I’ve forgotten the rest of the story’. Tax collectors might be labelled robbers, but according to the Bible those who do not pay their taxes are the robbers; ‘render’ means to pay back what is due.

Your obligation and mine is to pay taxes to whom taxes are due. It is not to reason that we are being ripped off, or that our taxes are being squandered. That is another matter, and there are legitimate ways to deal with this. We can inform the rulers of their obligation as God’s appointed ministers to serve the people not themselves, and to do good not evil. John Calvin writes, ‘Tributes therefore are paid by law to support such necessities (maintain peace and punish the wicked); it is right, however, that they should remember that all they receive from the people is public property and not a means of satisfying private lust and luxury’.

It is good to hear our rulers speak of ‘taxpayer’s money’, even if it is just words. We have the right, and indeed obligation, to inform our rulers of their obligation to use our taxes for good not evil, for justice not injustice, and with equity not partiality. Using public money to pay for abortions for example is evil not good. Using money to build their own mansion is also wrong- the sort of thing some African leaders and a few union leaders like to do.

**2. Pay respect**

In a final word about how the believer is to relate to governing authorities the apostle Paul writes, ‘Respect to whom respect is owed and honour to whom honour is owed’ (13:7 ESV). The apostle Peter writes much the same thing; ‘Show proper respect to everyone… honour the king’ (1Peter 2:17). These were not just words. These apostles, like their Master, were brought before the civil authorities on false charges, beaten and imprisoned, yet never raged against the authorities. They treated them with respect, recognising their worth as human beings, made in the image of God and indeed as appointed by God to their position of authority.

Jesus did not rail against Pilate for saying in one breath, ‘I find no fault in him’, and in the next delivering Jesus to the screaming Jews to be crucified. He told Pilate, ‘you have no power against me except it be given you from above’ (John 19:11). After being struck on the mouth, Paul protested with some disrespectful language, but then repented saying he did not know that the man was the high priest, and that Scripture said, ‘Do not speak evil of the ruler of your people’ (Acts 23:5).

How do you respond when the Queen or the Prime Minister appear in public near you? Do you shout abusive words to them, or do you show respect and give them the honour due to their high office? I am talking about whoever is Prime Minister, not just the Prime Minister you voted for. It is strange to hear men in parliament address ‘the right honourable member’ and then proceed to attack his character as a person. Surely the word ‘honourable’ means the person is to be accorded honour. And then there are people in the press who pay even less respect to those appointed by God to govern this nation. And then you hear people, even in church, paying little or no respect to those appointed by God to govern them.

The Bible says to honour all people, and to honour the king. Honour the one whom God has appointed. It a similar way leaders in the church are to be honoured; ’Let elders whole rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially those who labour in word and doctrine’ (1 Tim 5:17). Do you find it difficult to show respect to all people, especially those who have authority over you? It seems to be the case with many today, as we listen to all the abuse flying around on social media. We live in a society where it is not ‘cool’ to show respect. It begins in the home- the same place where moral and religious education begins. Children are not taught to honour their mother and father as God clearly commands us. Without respect for father or mother they go on to show little respect for their teachers. Then they show no respect for the police or anyone in authority. And so it ends up with the King or Queen or Prime Minister not being given the respect due to them. Paul tells the Christians in Rome to respect and honour those to whom respect and honour is owed, the implication being those who God had appointed to govern the nation – and the church and the family.

Before we come to our last point, that of praying for kings and all who are in authority, let us consider what we are to do when submitting to the governing authority means going against our Spirit-illuminated conscience or, more specifically, the revealed will of God. Paul does not address this issue here in Romans, even if many readers keep bringing this matter up. It is easy for us to protest that the government is impinging on our conscience or our faith, but is this always the case? We have seen how Jesus dealt with those protesting about paying taxes. We have seen how some Christians refuse to vote. Others refuse military service or refuse to send their children to school. It is interesting that American preachers protest about graded income tax, which we take for granted. Boice writes, ‘Fairness is one thing that cannot be said of taking more taxes from those who make more’.

The early church did encounter conflict between church and state but it was in the matter of preaching the gospel. The apostles were arrested and told not to speak or teach in the name of Jesus. But they said, ‘We must obey God rather than man’ (Acts 5:29). They did not condemn the authorities as illegitimate; rather they were ready to suffer the consequences of not obeying the rulers when it meant disobeying God. God who appoints the ruler so is above the ruler in authority. Daniel did not stop praying to God when the king made a law that all must pray to him only. Clearly there are matters of faith and worship which do not come under the jurisdiction of the civil government.

What about issues of morality, like abortion, pornography or homosexual marriage? Governments are appointed by God to uphold moral standards, not to make them. Revealed religion has a vital role in making known the moral standards of God. Christians obviously do not participate in these immoral activities, but do they have a duty to stop such evils? Should we picket outside abortion clinics or at the homosexual march in the city? The difficulty with such protests is that of straying into illegal activity. Some political parties make a point of getting arrested, but is this for Christians? Is such protesting honouring to God? Certainly it is right for Christians to speak or write to their rulers reminding them of basic human rights and the moral standards given by God. It is important to use the correct words and avoid euphemisms favoured by the wicked. It is not wrong, as one minister suggested, to call abortion ‘murder of the unborn’ because it might offend the authorities. Abortionists want to talk about ‘termination of an unwanted pregnancy’, and the ‘tissue that is discarded’, with the focus always on the mother, not the unborn child. The truth is, an unborn child is being murdered. Pornography in not just about an adult person’s right to see and read what they like. Innocent people are indirectly harmed by this evil. Much of the sexual abuse that is rampant in our society can be traced back to pornography.

**3. Pray**
Our last and most important point is for us to pray for the king and those in authority. We should lobby leaders and write to them about matters of morality and injustice- not just as it affects us but especially as it affects others. But above all we must pray. We pray for God to improve or remove the leader, believing that God has the power to remove kings and raise up kings (Dan 2:21). Such prayer is not an act of insubordination or a failure to show respect. It is to show our respect above all for God and his word. God may not answer our prayer immediately, as with the many prayers regarding Hitler, but we keep on praying. If by obeying God rather than man we incur the wrath or sword of the ruler then we do so with dignity. We do not have the power of the sword and must not seek it. We have the power of the truth, the truth of God who is sovereign over all things.

**Love and the law** Romans 13:8-10

Did Jesus come to do away with the law and usher in a new era of love? I heard an interesting comment in a sermon on the radio the other day. It was a man preaching in one of our cathedrals. Referring to the preface to the Ten Commandments, which reads, ‘I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt’, he said, ‘I have never even been to Egypt. These laws do not apply to me’. I was shocked at such ignorance. Is not the God of Sinai also the God of Calvary? Yet there are many who say the Ten Commandments no longer apply. They say we live under the commands of Christ who said, ‘Love one another as I have loved you’ (John 13:34). But Jesus also said he did not come to destroy the law but to fulfil it (Mat 517). Jesus gave two laws about love but these were a summary of the Ten Commandments (Mat 22:40). This is how the apostle Paul understood what Jesus said (13:9).

Olyott uses the picture a gun to describe the relationship between love and law. This gun is not aimed to kill but at not harming anyone. For the bullet to hit the target it needs an explosive to propel the bullet, and a barrel to direct it. ‘Explosive on its own would be dangerous, and a barrel on its own useless. Love propels the bullet and God’s law directs it. The law needs to be filled with love, and love needs to be directed by the law’. Sadly, we see the damage done when law is enforced without love- in the home, church or school. We also see the chaos of love celebrated without law- we live in the aftermath of the ‘free love’ revolution of the sixties.

Liberal theology and the social gospel emphasise love, not necessarily directed by law. It is so focused on the neighbour that it forgets about God. A lot of gospel preaching and teaching today lacks the direction of the law. It can teach that divorce is the loving thing to do- not so different to humanism is it! Biblical teaching is not about love that feels right or good, but about what God says is right and good. It is not about what we want or what the other person wants, but what God wants. It is about not being conformed to this world but being transformed with renewed thinking, and doing the perfect will of God.

**1. Love, a continuing debt**

To speak of love as a debt we owe is unusual. We like to think of love being our choice and as something spontaneous. But agape love is not about me- it is about the other person, and Jesus. Even so, the idea of debt comes from the context. Paul has been teaching about paying taxes to whom taxes are due (13:7). We should be eager to return whatever does not rightly belong to us. The apostle transitions from the idea of material debts to that of the debt to love one another.

We might pause and consider the matter of material debts, especially as we live in a society with huge levels of personal debt, and a lack of concern about paying back debts. ‘Owe no one anything’ is not a blanket prohibition of borrowing (cf. Mat 5:42). The NIV translates, ‘Let no debt remain outstanding’. Many borrow money to buy a house, but do so with a plan to repay this debt. Some, however, are in the habit of borrowing money or things and not repaying or returning these things. Some borrow more than they can return and get into a lot of difficulty.

Old wisdom told us, ‘if you don’t have the money, don’t buy’. The modern mantra is, ‘you must have this thing and must have it now', even if you do not have the money. What you do is buy on credit. What you do is get another credit card. It is all so easy. Do not worry about repaying the debt- not today anyway. You soon find out that the interest rates are enormous and your debt is increasing rather than decreasing- and soon you have the debt collector at the door.

With a commitment to honesty and integrity, debt must be repaid. This is particularly important in relation to friends. My father was generous in loaning farm machinery to his neighbours. But one man in particular never returned the item. If my father wanted it he had to go and get it back from this neighbour. When my father died the neighbour did quite well as we did not know where dad’s stuff was. This is not how Christians should act in regard to debts or things borrowed- no matter what individual or institution we borrow from. It is not for us to judge that they are rich and will not miss the item.

Paul soon moves from the matter of material debts to the debt of love. While normal debts can and should be repaid, so that you are free from debt, we are never free from the debt to love one another. The NIV translates as, ‘the continuing debt to love one another’. We can never say, ‘I have done all the loving I need to do’, even if we want to say this at times. If we think we have loved a person all we can, we do not understand love. The person may not appreciate our love; they may keep demanding more of our love, or they may reject our love. But this is no reason to say we have loved all we can.

The debt to love continues because the debt is owed to God who loved us so much that he gave his only begotten Son to die for us. ‘By this we know love because he laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren’ (1John 3:16). When you have laid down your life for someone then, and only then, have you paid your debt of love. God loved us while were still sinners. We love God because he first loved us. In view of God’s mercy and love, we offer ourselves to him as a living sacrifice (12:1). We are committed to live a life of love, or to ‘Walk in love, as Christ also loved us’ (Eph 5:2). ‘Beloved, if God so loved us we ought also to love one another’ (1John 4:11).

The commandments God gave his people at Sinai were about love. They may be stated in the negative, but see how Jesus summarised these commandments in Mat 22:37-40; ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind; and love your neighbour as yourself’. Jesus came to fulfil the Law and the Prophets. He fulfilled them in himself, in his works and his words, as the one the Law and the Prophets pointed forward to.

While we are no longer under the law given under the Old Covenant, we are under Christ who fulfilled the law. The law of Christ under the New Covenant is not unrelated to the old law. It is the fulfilment of that law, with even higher demands. ‘Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven’ (Mat 5:20). If you think that as a Christian you have it easier than Jews or Muslims living under their law, think again. When they fast from dawn to dusk they have done their duty. You are called to love others as Christ loved you. You are never done with this duty.

**2. Law of love**

When you love another person you have fulfilled the law (13:8, 10). Paul has already dealt with ‘love for God’ in response to his love in Christ. What he refers to here is loving other human beings, not just fellow believers. The word translated ‘another’ means someone different, someone who looks different or has different traditions to us. He is not like one of us. He may be disabled, be a refugee or a homosexual person. All are human beings made in the image of God. Morris refers to this section as, ‘The Christians attitude towards people in general’; we have moved on from our attitude towards other believers and towards governing authorities.

Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan in answer to the question, ‘Who is my neighbour?’ Who ended up helping the half-dead man lying on the side of the road? Was it someone from his own community or church? No! It was stranger, a man from a different and a despised community- Jews had nothing to do with Samaritans. The lesson of the parable is this; our neighbour is anyone who is in need of practical love.

The gospels were not all written down at the time Paul wrote this letter, but he knew what Jesus taught. Jesus summed up the Ten Commandments in the two love commandments, as seen in Matthew 22. Jesus was teaching from the OT, where Paul also read in Leviticus 19:18, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself'. This is the same verse where it is written not to take vengeance (12:18). While man may teach one thing today and another tomorrow, the teaching of the Bible is the consistent from beginning to end.

Paul knew the Ten Commandments, not just because he was a Jew but because they were given by God. He refers to the second table because he is teaching Christians their duty towards fellow human beings. He runs through the list from the fifth to the tenth commandment. He includes any other commandment that may be found in the Bible, saying, ‘all are summed up in the rule to love your neighbour as yourself’ (13:9).

The law of love does not ask if this person is my neighbour- anyone is your neighbour. The law of love does not give rules about what I should do, or not do, for my neighbour. It is not simply about not taking his wife or his life, or about telling him lies or coveting or stealing anything he has. All this is there, and love does no harm to a neighbour (13:10); but love is a positive mindset. Knowing the amazing love of God, we look to him with love and want to please him. We want to love others as Jesus loves us.

The command is to love others as we love ourselves. Today it is common to look at this command and start talking about how we should love ourselves. Have your heard sermons like this? We are told we cannot love others if we do not love ourselves. What rubbish! Self-love is taken for granted in every human being.

We are all born in sin, with proud, selfish hearts. We all tend to think of ourselves more highly than we ought. We all spend much more time thinking about ourselves than others. It is the world and humanism that says we must build our self-esteem, not the Bible. Self-love does not have to be taught; it is loving other people that has to be taught, especially in today’s world. This love takes effect in the home, in the church, in the school, in the workplace, in the shopping centre and on the internet. We must not be those who love humanity but hate the people we meet. We must not be those who love family, or those of own kind, while turning away from those who are different to us.

I once had a bag stolen while travelling in India. My passport and credit card were in the bag. I was so upset that I started hating the place and all the people. Then I realised my friends were Indians and I was in India to share the gospel. I could not do this if I hated all Indians.

**3. Love fulfils the law**

True love is seen in Jesus Christ; He is the supreme example of love. He kept the commandments perfectly. Jesus said he came to serve, not be served, and this is what we see in his life, and death (Mark 10:45). He served his disciples by washing their feet. Jesus went about doing good, not harm. In love he was ready to suffer hardship and even abuse. He did not go around abusing other people. An old proverb tells us to think before we speak- ‘is it true, is it necessary, is it kind’. Is this not wisdom for us still today?

Jesus forgave people- he forgave us. So we must forgive others if we are to love as Jesus loves- and if we are being true when we pray the Lord’s Prayer. Jesus saw people’s needs and did what he could to help them- even if this was a miracle, as in the case of the widow of Nain. We should do what we can to help others even if we cannot do miracles. Love looks out for those who need love. Loves listens patiently and helps selflessly.

Love suffers long and is kind. It does not seek its own and is not rude. Love endures all things and hopes all things (1Cor 13). We see all this in the life of our Lord Jesus Christ. Let us put on the mind of Christ and love our neighbour as ourselves. Such love is the fulfilment of the law.

**Wake up!** Romans 13:11-14

How are you at waking up in the morning? Do you have an alarm clock on the other side of the room, set to ring every ten minutes? What about if you are catching a plane at 5am? Do you find it hard to sleep when some big event is looming? I find that I am awake before the alarm when I am excited about getting up for some event. Children seem to have no trouble waking up as soon as it is light. They bounce out of bed, eager to play- their parents do not need alarm clocks. The farmer also jumps out of bed at first light, eager to get his crop harvested while there is light.

Recently we saw police and rescue personnel searching for a man lost in the snow. Darkness forced them to call off the search. But they were up at first light, eager to find the lost man. Are you like these policemen and like the farmer, eager to see the darkness turn to day so you can get about your work? Are you eager to see the present darkness of this world give way to the light of the glory of your Lord returning to save you? If you were really excited about this great event would you be able to sleep?

**1. Day is at hand**

‘The night is far gone, the day is at hand’ (13:12). What is the apostle talking about? He is talking about the passage of time. He is talking about history in terms of night and day. He is talking about the return of Jesus and the consummation of all things. The end of this present world is near at hand. ‘Now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed’ (13:11).

No one can stop the clock. Time marches on; it marches on towards a world shattering event and a universe shattering event. Yes, there will be floods and fires and famines; there will be earthquakes, waves and wars; there will catastrophic events on earth and in the heavens. But this will not be the end. The end will be when the Son of Man comes on the clouds of heaven in great glory. Jesus told his disciples to watch and pray for this day, ‘because your redemption draws near’ (Luke 21:27-28). Paul says our salvation is getting nearer every day. Peter says, ’The end of all things is at hand; therefore be serious and watchful in your prayers’ (1Peter 4:7). Do you think about this- never, rarely, often? Does the fact that Jesus is coming soon influence how you live?

If you were living before the first coming of Christ you would have been looking forward to the coming of Messiah. Abraham looked forward to coming of Jesus (John 8:56). David spoke of ‘my Lord’, a person who was not Yahweh (Ps 110:1). The prophets spoke about the ‘Servant of the Lord’ who would deliver the people from bondage; bondage to sin and death (Isa 53). Messiah has come. Jesus came and died on the cross. He rose again and ascended into heaven. You are not looking forward to the coming of Messiah- at least not in his first coming. You are looking for Jesus Christ to return in heavenly glory. You are living in the Last Days, days in which Jesus can return at any time. Knowing this, and believing this, should affect how you live today- right now. ‘Knowing the time’ or ‘understanding the present time’, how shall we then live? (13:11).

You may recall that we looked at this question when we started chapter 12. Paul has been writing about practical Christian living since then. In response to God’s mercies in Jesus Christ we are to live lives pleasing to God. We look back to the cross and all that Christ did for us. ‘For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of ourselves it is the gift of God’ (Eph 2:8). ‘You were bought at a price, therefore glorify God in your body’ (1Cor 6:20). Present your body a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God (12:1). Moreover, you have Christ dwelling in you by his Spirit. ‘If anyone is in Christ he is a new creation’ (2Cor 5:17). ‘Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption’ (Eph 4:30). You will not grieve the Holy Spirit if you are walking in the spirit, and walking in love for God and love for one another- selfless, sacrificial love.

There is a third reason for living each day to please God, namely the knowledge that Jesus is returning soon. He is near at hand. He is coming to judge the world in righteousness (John 5:27, 30, 1Peter 4:5). Be assured he has not yet returned, even if false prophets tell you this. Beware men who tell you when he will return- this no shortage of such self-proclaimed prophets.

Be careful in trying to pinpoint events to work out prophecies, because Paul writes to the church in the first century saying, ‘The day is at hand’ (13:12). If you are waiting for some prophecy to be fulfilled before Jesus returns, you may be in for a shock. ‘The Lord is at hand’ (Phil 4:5). The Lord will come like a thief in the night (1Thes 5:2).

Paul did not necessarily think Jesus would come in his lifetime, as some claim, and then conclude he was mistaken. Paul knew that having died and risen and ascended to heaven there was nothing to stop Jesus from returning at any time. He did not picture multiple comings of Jesus, as some Christians do. He knew he was living between the first coming of Jesus and his second coming. We are still living in this time or this dispensation.

Peter, like his fellow apostle, urges us to live in the light of the imminent return of the Lord. ‘The end of all things is at hand… therefore have fervent love for one another’ (1Peter 4:7-8). This is just what Paul says here in Romans 13: ‘Owe no one anything except to love one another’. Living in the Last Days, as we surely are, let us be ready for our Lord and Saviour to return at any moment. Let us be found living in the way that pleases our Lord; living a life of ‘*agape*’ love.

In a number of parables Jesus teaches us to be watching out for his return. What is the lesson of the parable of the talents and the parable of the ten minas? Be faithful, serving the Lord till he comes. What is the lesson of the parable of the ten virgins? They were sleeping when the bridegroom came. The foolish ones were not prepared and were locked out of the wedding feast- to their surprise!

With the Lord at hand there is no time to sleep. Wake up; now is not the time to sleep. ‘It is high time to awake from your slumber’ (13:11). Do you feel yourself nodding off- spiritually speaking? Do you see yourself drifting into the comforts of this world? Drifting off to sleep is very dangerous if you are driving a car. It is very dangerous if you are on the road to heaven.

**2. Deeds of darkness**

Unlike little children and hardworking farmers, wicked people love the night. They hate the light of day. ‘The light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil’ (John 3:19). People whose minds are not renewed by the Spirit of God continue to live according to the flesh and cannot please God. They do not bear the fruits of the Spirit but bear the fruits of the old nature- idolatry, adultery, drunkenness, envy and anger, to name a few from Galatians 5:19-21.

Here in Romans Paul lists three pairs of ‘works of darkness’ (13:13). They focus on drunkenness, sexual immorality and mistreatment of others. This is the stuff of the popular press. This is the stuff of so much conversation and gossip - not yours I trust. You must put on the armour of light and resist this stuff. Do not get caught up in the torrent of wickedness, the ‘flood of dissipation’ that is swirling around us in this world. ‘Put on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet the hope of salvation’ (1Thes 5:8). Faith, hope and love!

Those who are ‘in Christ’ honour God in their bodies. They do not get drunk and disorderly. They do not get involved in drunken orgies, looking for opportunities to satisfy the lust of the flesh. Prostitutes and adulterers like the dark. Intoxication removes moral restraint and leads to abuse and violence. Pride and envy leads to strife, to plotting evil under cover of darkness. Abhor what is evil. Flee sexual immorality. Flee youthful lusts. Stay away from people and places which focus on drinking or illicit sex- including places on the internet. A follower of Christ will walk in the light, not in the dark. They will not be walking in the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life. They will be walking in the truth, the truth of Jesus’ death and resurrection and imminent return. They will be walking in love, serving the Lord, remembering that love does no harm to a neighbour (13:10).

**3. Dress of Christ**

The book of Romans is the inspired word of God; it is living and powerful, sharper than a double edged sword (Heb 4:12). Many Christians have been converted through reading this book, including Martin Luther (Rom 1:17), Augustine (Rom 13:13-14) and John Wesley (Luther’s preface).

Augustine was very intelligent, but as a young man got caught up in sexual immorality. His home city of Carthage was notoriously corrupt- not unlike ours. He ended up in Milan as a professor of rhetoric- a prestigious post. Yet his soul was restless. He knew about God but did not know God. In Milan he was impressed by Ambrose, an outstanding teacher of the gospel. He was challenged but did not want to give up the ‘good life’. One summer afternoon in AD 386 he was in the garden with his friend Alypius, reading the Bible. Augustine got distressed about his sin and started to weep. Then he heard a child in the next house saying, ‘Take up and read, take up and read’. Taking this as a command from heaven he open the Bible to read from the very passage we are reading today. He read, ‘Let us walk properly as in the day, not in revelry and drunkenness, not in lewdness and lust, not in strife and envy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfil its lusts’ (13:13-14). Augustine was converted at that moment- light flooded his soul and ‘all gloom of doubt faded away’.

Commenting on Augustine’s conversion and the verse before us, Boice writes, ‘Don’t put off putting on’. We are called to put on the Lord Jesus Christ (13:14). This is the closing word of this passage about living in the Last Days. The night is almost over. Put off all wild living, all lust and all laziness, and live in the Lord Jesus. Be clothed with Christ and live as his child.

Paul often spoke of putting off the old man and putting on the new (Eph 4, Col 3). Does he have to keep telling you to do this? If you have believed, and have been given the Holy Spirit, you are a new person in Christ. You will not be living like unbelievers. You will not be chasing after the treasures and pleasures of this world. You think differently. You think about Jesus who died for you. You think about the imminent return of Jesus. You think about people who will be condemned when Jesus comes, unless they repent and believe soon. The day is at hand.

Do you like getting dressed up in fine clothes? We like to look good. But remember also to put on Christ. Remember to be clothed in Christ wherever you go. This means to live in a way that pleases the One who died to save you. This means following Christ, living like him and imitating him. Jesus did not walk in the lusts of the flesh- nor should you. God’s will for you is your sanctification (1Thes 4:3). Your personal holiness pleases God and brings glory to his holy name. Your personal holiness is essential to entering into the joy of the Lord when he comes.

We close with words from Dr Jim Boice; ‘Life is from God, and the time you have has been given to you by him. Time is for Jesus, and history is about God calling a people out of this present evil age to believe in him and also to live for him. Your role in this present time, if you are a believer, is to live for Jesus- and witness for him too’.

**Christian liberty- diet** Romans 14:1-4

The strategy of divide and conquer was successfully used by the British during the expansion of their empire in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They did not invent the strategy but used it to great effect as they drew local rulers into local conflicts and then marched in to take over the whole region. What a tragic situation exists in the world’s newest nation, South Sudan. After 25 years of war against non-Christians, they finally got their independence and began to live in peace. But now they are at war again, this time among themselves, a nation reported to be 60% Christian.

Satan was using this strategy of divide and rule long before the British, and he still uses it in his war against the people of God. More churches are destroyed by internal disputes than by attacks from outside. Too many churches ‘major on minors’ as we say. They become so focused on minor issues that they lose sight of the big picture.

Do I have to remind you of the big picture? It is to go and make disciples of all nations. It is to preach the gospel to all people that they may repent and believe and be saved. As Christians we are engaged in a battle – a spiritual battle. Let not this battle be a civil war but a war for the souls of lost men and women currently held in the grip of Satan.

**1. Diversity in unity**

The apostle Paul pictures the church as a human body with the different parts working together (1Cor 12, Rom 12). He pictures a unity in diversity as each member of the body uses their God-given gift for building up the body of Christ. He does not picture a ‘drab uniformity’, as we said when studying Romans 12. The church is the most diverse body of people on this earth. It is made up men and women from all races and all ages. No wonder the church is the glory of God; ‘The manifold wisdom of God might be made known through the church to the rulers and powers in the heavenly places’ (Eph 3:10).

There must be unity in the church, even as diversity remains. It is not easy for us to accept this diversity because we tend to think we are always right, and everyone else must conform to our ways. Paul tells us not to be conformed to this world (12:2), but he does not say we must conform to a particular person in the church. We do not look for clones in the church. Paul rejected the idea of a person being of Apollos, or of Cephas, or of Paul. All are to be of Christ, and Christ alone. We are to have a renewed mind, that mind being the mind of Christ (1Cor 1:12, 2:16, Rom 12:2).

Some years ago an earthquake struck the hills of North India. Thousands of people died as they slept in their solid brick or stone houses. When the earth shook these houses broke and caved in. In Japan houses are not at all solid. They are light and flexible allowing them to move when the earthquake hits.

Paul writes of a degree of flexibility in the church- not in regard to matters of faith but in regard to the outworking of a person’s faith. He writes about ‘doubtful things’ or ‘disputable matters’ or ‘opinions’- what we might call ‘non-essentials’. Opinions can be held strongly. They may come as a conviction from the heart or conscience. They are to be taken seriously, but are not the same as Biblical truth.

In India Christians do not smoke cigarettes. If you went to a church there and lit up a cigarette afterwards, they would start telling you how to become a Christian! Here we simply tell you to stop abusing your body and risk getting lung cancer. They also believe that a Christian does not drink wine. If you went to the home of an Indian Christian with a bottle of wine they would be shocked and treat you as an unbeliever. The Bible of course condemns drunkenness, but many Christians drink wine with their meal.

‘Receive one who is weak in the faith’ (14:1). Who is the person ‘weak in the faith’? They are ‘in the faith’. They are a brother or sister in Christ. They are to be treated with respect and brotherly love (12:10). They are weak in the sense that they enjoy less liberty in the gospel than ‘the strong’ (1Cor 8:9). They have certain scruples about matters of conduct that are not demanded in the Bible. Morris says, ‘They do not understand the conduct implied by faith’. Personal background or matters of conscience keep them from doing what others do with a clear conscience.

**2. Diet**

Paul does not address issues of smoking or drinking or dress, as we might today; what he address is the matter of diet, and of special days (we will look at the matter of diet today). Apparently these were issues in the church in Rome at that time. The matter of food was an issue in the church from the beginning. The first Christians were Jews who had lived under very strict food laws. These were based on the OT ceremonial law but many things were added by the religious leaders, the Pharisees. They only ate ‘kosher’ food- no pork or shellfish, cooked in a special way, and eaten in special ways also. Eating was quite a ritual!

Such rituals are not easily shaken off. The apostle Peter, who was a Jew, started eating with Gentiles in the church. But when Jews from the church were present he went to eat with them. The apostle Paul severely reprimanded Peter for his behaviour (Gal 2). He did so because these Jews were demanding OT food laws be retained, not as matter of conscience but as a matter of faith. Paul insisted that in the gospel of grace there was no place for works. He rejected the gospel of works which is what a demand to eat certain foods amounted to (Gal 1:6). Having said this, the church at Rome did not appear to be under threat from these so-called Judaizers. Paul is not dealing with apostasy but with non-essential matters. Still, the issue of diet was present in the church; ‘For one believes he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats only vegetables’ (14:2).

Not only did those from a Jewish background have scruples about food. It seems that some Gentile converts came from a background of vegetarianism. On the other hand, the issue may have been that the meat in the market was from animals sacrificed to idols. This was an issue in the church at Corinth (1 Cor 8). Rather than risk eating such contaminated meat, the weak may have decided to eat only vegetables.

Matters of diet arise in the church in India- and they are arising in the church here. Our society is obsessed with diets, and some are demanding we stop eating meat because this is destroying the planet; others say killing animals is no different to killing people. Such ideas are infiltrating the church.

Most people in India do not eat meat because in Hinduism the cow is holy. Some believers from a Hindu background find it difficult to eat meat. A new believer thought that Christians had to eat meat- she was told that the Lord’s Supper was eating meat. Hinduism, as with Judaism and Islam, has strict foods laws. Christian converts are often glad to be free of such laws and rituals, but some choose to stay on a vegetarian diet.

No one should say that now they are a Christian they have to eat meat- any more than we say you have to drink alcohol to prove your liberty in Christ. Sadly some people, particularly the young, think like this. They say they can drink if they want, but it may be against their conscience to do so.

What then is the issue Paul is addressing? The Christians at Rome were free to eat all things, or to eat only vegetables if they so choose. They may choose to abstain from meat for conscientious reasons. The issue is that each must accept the other, without passing judgment or without looking down on the other.

The one who eats everything, the strong one, must not despise, look down on, or make fun of the one who has scruples about what they eat. Paul first speaks to this person. But he also speaks to the weak saying they must not judge the one who is happy to eat anything (14:3). That the weak can pass ‘censorious judgment’ on the strong seems a contradiction in terms, but this is what the apostle says, and condemns.

Paul does not refer to matters of dress, or length of hair, but such issues arose in the church I grew up in. Talks and discussion at church camps could be all about how long a man could grow his hair. Not so long ago I heard a so-called ‘strong Christian’ condemn someone in the church for what they were wearing to worship. Needless to say, neither is now in the church. I say ‘so-called strong Christian’ because it must be humbling to realise that Paul calls such people 'weak in the faith'.

**3. Divine servant**

How do you as a parent feel when someone comes up and starts yelling at your child? How do you feel as a school teacher when a teacher from the school down the road comes into your class and starts shouting at the children? How would you feel if, as the boss of a factory, the boss of another factory comes and starts telling your workers what to do and not do?

How does God feel when you start judging his servant? Yes, your brother and sister in Christ is first and foremost God’s servant. They are responsible to God, not you. Paul is not talking about church courts and discipline on matter of doctrine or morality. He is talking about individuals who choose to judge fellow believers on a matter of opinion.

‘For God has received him’ (14:3). If God has received him, who are you to not receive him? ‘There is one Lawgiver who is able to save and destroy. Who are you to judge another’ writes James (James 4:13). Jesus warns us against judging others; ‘Judge not that you be not judged’ (Mat 7:1). So often it is the case that those who judge on these non-essentials are themselves guilty of real sin; failing to love your brother is a sin.

He is God’s servant- remember that. If God has accepted him we must accept him and not be despising a weaker brother, or judging one who enjoys greater liberty than we do. ‘To his own master he stands or falls…God is able to make him stand’ (14:4). The correct translation is ‘Lord’ rather than ‘God’, but this is not to say, as Murray says, that the reference is to ‘the Lord Christ’. That this ‘standing’ refers to the last judgment is questioned by Murray. But it is hard to exclude the truth that our standing before God is based solely on the grace of God in Jesus Christ. We do not stand before God in our own good works- be this what we eat, or drink, or wear. God makes us to stand by imputing to us the righteousness of Christ.

Do not put off putting on Christ- this was how Paul concluded the last chapter. Let us concentrate on putting on Christ in our own lives and let God deal with fellow believers- they are his servants, not ours. Remember the body of Christ and focus on your role within the body. Being a busy body is not a God-given gift- nor is being a religious policeman! Other religions have their police checking what people wear and what they eat, not us. Whatever gift you have it is for building up the body of Christ, not pulling it down.

We have no authority to demand from other believers what is not clearly taught in the Bible. Remember, there are disputable matters, matters on which believers differ. Love does not insists on its own. Love covers a multitude of sins (1Peter 4:8).

**Christian liberty- special days** Romans 14:5-9

The apostle Paul had never visited the church in Rome when he wrote this letter. He was actually planning to visit on his way to Spain (15:24). Over half the letter is about doctrine- justification by grace through faith, the imputed righteousness of Christ, and having peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. In chapter 12 he started teaching about practical Christian living, not as the way to be saved but because we are saved, saved by the grace of God in Jesus Christ. He is writing to men and women in the church, not to outsiders. The Christian life is a life of love; love for God and love for one another.

In chapter 14 he teaches how this love operates when differences of opinion or debatable matters arise in the church. He writes of one who is weak in the faith and then of one who is strong. He writes of two issues which potentially polarise believers, issues which amazingly continue in the church today- we also have new ones today. These are the issues of diet and special days. We looked at diet last time. Today we will look at the matter of special days, and further lessons from the pen of the apostle Paul.

Did Paul know what was going on in the church at Rome or did he just assume things from his experience in other churches? We know that at Corinth, from where he was writing this letter, that there was concern about eating meat that had been offered to idols (1Cor 8:4). Whatever the reason for some in Rome not eating meat, the lesson was; do not look down on those who do not eat meat, and do not judge those who do. Accept your brother even if his opinion is different, because God accepts him.

**1. A day above other days**

‘One person esteems one day above another, while another esteems all days alike’ (14:5). What is the apostle talking about? Many jump to the conclusion that he is talking about the Sabbath day, and then use this verse to claim there is no longer a Sabbath day. Morris writes of this verse, ‘This has often been taken to mean that the weak brother observes the Jewish Sabbath. But Paul does not say this, and it is equally possible that he is referring to feast days and fast days’. Murray says that the reference is to ceremonial holy days of the Jews. He goes on the say that, ‘The Sabbath institution is a creation ordinance. It did not begin to have relevance at Sinai’. He also points to mention of the Lord’s Day in Revelation 1:10. There were plenty of holy days in the Jewish calendar, as there would have been in the Gentile calendar. In Hinduism there are heaps of holy days. Christians also have their holy days- some more than others. Most have Good Friday and Christmas, neither of which is mandated in the Bible.

When a person became a Christian it was not easy to give up their holy days. ‘Many Jews would not have understood all the implications of the gospel and had still a scrupulous regard for these Mosaic ordinances’ writes Murray. Some continue to observe holy days not mandated in the Bible. There is a sense in which it is good to worship the Lord every day, or to esteem every day as special, a day to be given to God.

The Sabbath day is mandated in the Bible. It is a creation ordinance, meaning it goes back to the time when God created the universe. He rested on the seventh day, blessed it and made it holy (Gen 2:2, 3). Some think the Sabbath day started when God gave the Ten Commandments at Sinai. Boice said of the Sabbath that, ‘It was a uniquely Jewish institution and there is no evidence that it was ever observed by any other race or nation, and that it was observed for the first time by Israel only after the people had received the law at Sinai’. I was shocked to see a Bible scholar- and a Presbyterian at that- make such a fundamental error in his exposition of the Bible. After Moses led the people out of Egypt, the Lord sent manna which the people gathered every morning to cook and eat- every morning except the morning of the seventh day. ‘Tomorrow is a Sabbath rest, a holy Sabbath to the Lord’; this is what we read in Exodus 16:23, some three months before they reached Sinai.

Moreover, Dr Boice would be the first to warn against arguments from silence. Other nations would not call the seventh day the ‘Sabbath to the Lord’, but one day of rest in seven may well have been the custom in other cultures. Villages in India which have never seen a Bible still close their school on Sunday.

The NT affirms the day on which Jesus rose from the dead, the first day of the week, as the Lord’s Day or Christian Sabbath. It is a day to cease from work and remember the God of creation and redemption. God made us in his image and redeemed us by the precious blood of Christ. Jesus did not cancel the command to keep the Sabbath, nor did Paul. But he did condemn legalists who made the Sabbath a burden instead of a delight (Isa 58:13).

As Paul teaches about matters of opinion, remember not to judge someone for not keeping the Lord’s Day as you do. Jesus permitted works of necessity and mercy (Luke 6). You have decided what this means for you, but it is not for you to impose your opinion on others. John Murray affirmed the Sabbath, as we have seen, yet this man was thrown out of his church because he associated with a minister who felt free to take public transport to get to church. Some have scruples about what they read or don’t read on the Lord’s Day. This is okay but keep it to yourself because it is your opinion.

**2. Act in good conscience**

‘Let each be fully convinced in his own mind’. Let him observe the day unto the Lord and let him eat as unto the Lord (14:5, 6). What does this mean? It means we must act according to our conscience. The person weak in the faith has a weak conscience (1Cor 8:7). We are not clones remember. We have a conscience and even though this is illuminated by the Holy Spirit when we believe, it remains uniquely ours- ours before God.

If a person’s conscience tells them not to eat meat offered to idols then they should not eat. To do so is sin (14:23, 1Cor 8:12). If your conscience tells you not to read the paper on Sunday then don’t read it. Be fully convinced in your own mind. But the conscience of a brother may be different. What his conscience tells him is between him and the Lord, not between you and him. He does have to be careful not to wound your weak conscience of course- that would be contrary to the command to love your brother as yourself (14:15). You may have to curtail your liberties if your brother or sister is influenced to act against their conscience- though not if they are acting contrary to the truth of the Bible. We will come to this later.

For now the lesson is this; it may be right for you to be a vegetarian and for me to eat meat. You may not eat meat because it is expensive, inconvenient or because you do not like the taste- if so, you have no right to expect me to be a vegetarian. But you may be a vegetarian because of deeply held beliefs. You may be convinced in your own mind; you may eat your vegetables giving thanks to God (14:6). In this case it would be wrong for you to eat meat, but this does mean it is wrong for me to eat meat. It may be wrong for you to read the paper on Sunday, but right for me. It may be wrong for me to celebrate Christmas, but right for you; if you observe the day as to the Lord. ‘He who observes the day, observes it to the Lord (14:6).

**3. as to the Lord**

Did you notice how many times Paul says, ‘as to the Lord’ in these verses? Is it six times? He must have loved the words, ‘as to the Lord’. Do you? In Colossians he wrote, ‘Whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men’ (Col 3:23). Now there is something- ‘as to the Lord, and not to men’. We do a lot of things to please other people but what about pleasing the Lord. Most of all we do things to please ourselves. But followers of Christ must do everything, and indeed live every day, as to the Lord.

For none of us lives to himself and no one dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord’ (14:7, 8). This refers not to our relationship to other people but our relationship to the Lord. Not that our relationships with other people are not important, but they come after our relationship to God, not before.

‘Neither in life or death are we quite alone; we do both before God’ writes Morris. Murray writes, ‘it is the guiding aim of the believer to be well pleasing to the Lord’. This is practical Christian living, as we saw in Romans 12:2. Paul has no qualms repeating this lesson because we so often forget it; not least when we start judging other people. What is interesting here is that we not only live to the Lord but also die to the Lord (14:8). The Lord has the greatest claim over us because he continues to have claim over us after we die. Is this what it means to have eternal life?

We touched on this verse when looking at the Sadducees question about the resurrection. Jesus said that God is, not was, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. ‘He is not the God of the dead but the living, for all live in him’ (Luke 20:38). Paul says, ‘Whether we live or die we are the Lords’ (14:8). In Acts he said, ‘For in him we live and move and have our being’ (Acts 17:28).

We all want to belong- to another person, to a family, to a group, to a country, but best of all is to belong to the Lord because he lives forever. Jesus died and rose to live again, that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living (14:9). With these thoughts Paul could write, ‘For me to live is Christ and to die is gain’ (Phil 1:21). We continue to hear of the tragedy of suicide in our society- over two and a half thousand each year. They say that people get overwhelmed with a feeling of hopeless. When I heard this I recalled this word being used in the Bible. ‘Having no hope and without God in the world’ wrote Paul of those without Christ (Eph 2:12). He then said, ‘But now in Christ Jesus’.

‘When Jesus saw the crowds he was moved with compassion because they were harassed and helpless’ (Mat 9:35). Jesus saw the hopelessness of the people. I took this verse with me when I went to villages in India. If you think our suicide rate is high, take a look at what it is in India. Do you know, and appreciate, the wonder of belonging to God and of living in him?

You did not make the decision to be born. Your parents had something to do with your birth, but ultimately God gave you life. And God decides the time and manner of your death- suicide and euthanasia notwithstanding; these are an affront to the sovereignty of God. It is good to see that Dr Nitschke is now deregistered. It was tragically ironic to see a medical doctor whose greatest achievement was assisting people to suicide.

The words of Job reflecting on his life are profound; ‘The Lord gives and the Lord takes away, blessed be the name of the Lord’ (Job 1:21). The apostle Paul agreed with Job’s words wholeheartedly and found great comfort in this truth. Do you? Do you believe that whether you live or die you belong to the Lord?

The Lordship of Christ extends to every aspect of your life- and death (14:9). He is Lord of all and fills all things, having descended to the depths and risen to the highest place (Eph 4:9-10). You are not lord of your life. No other person is your lord. Laws and rituals no longer determine how you live- Christ does. You are no longer under law but under grace, the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. Christ the Lord set us free from bondage to sin and death. Christ the Lord set us free from the yoke of the law (Gal 5:1). He yokes us to himself with a yoke that is easy and light; under his yoke you will find rest for your soul (Mat 11:28). Christ the Lord has set us free to love, to love God and love one another.

‘Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God’ and be thankful (1Cor 10:31). Remember, the kingdom of God is not about eating or drinking (14:17). It is not about keeping holy days either. It is about righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. It is about glorifying God and enjoying him for ever.

**Christian liberty- accountable to God** Romans 14:10-12

Have you ever been called to the boss’s office with a ‘please explain’ letter? A lady told me how this happened to her. Someone had complained to her boss about something she said. She was called to give an account of what she said and why. No doubt the matter went onto her file.

We will all be called to give account to God. Sometimes we are called to give account in this life. God may call us, as it were, by afflicting us in some particular way, causing us to stop and consider his claim upon our life. God disciplines those whom he loves. God is interested in the lives of his children. One day all of us, without exception and without excuse, will be called to give account before God. We will have to explain to the Lord whatever we have done in the body, whether good or bad (2Cor 5:10). This is a solemn thought. This is a humbling truth. The apostle Paul reminds us of this truth as he urges us not to be judging others. Judge not that you be not judged.

**1. Judgment seat of Christ**

In dealing with differences of opinion within the church at Rome – differences about diet and special days- Paul identifies two types of people, namely the weak Christian who does not eat meat, and the strong Christian who eats anything. He said the strong was not to despise the weak by his Christian liberty and the weak was not to judge the strong by his personal scruples.

Paul repeats this warning as he wraps up this section of his letter. He says, literally, ‘You, why do you judge your brother; and you, why do you despise your brother?’ (14:10). He addresses directly and personally the weak Christian and the strong Christian who is more concerned about their brother’s behaviour than their own. They should focus on their own behaviour and see that they are loving their brother and doing him good, not harm.

It was previously explained that each is God’s servant, and as such is directly responsible to God (14:4). We do not need mediating priests or religious police in the church. Christ is the only mediator. Christ is the only Lord. He is Lord of the dead and the living by virtue of his death and resurrection (14:9). As Lord he will judge us all in the end; the Father has committed all judgment to the Son (John 5:20). Even though most manuscripts have ‘judgment seat of God’ in verse 10, the ‘judgment seat of Christ’, as in the NKJV, is fitting in the context (see 2Cor 5:10).

We know that Christ lived in this world. We are called to live in him and like him. It was Christ who summed up the commandments with the two commands to love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul and all your mind; and love your neighbour as yourself. Christ not only said this; he showed us how to live like this.

We are born in sin and our sinful nature leads us to judge others (Rom 2), but in Christ we are a new creation. Christ gives us a new dimension in life, a heavenly dimension. We must walk in Christ, which means walking in love and not in judgment of others. Walking in Christ means that one day you will meet him. On that day you will have to give an account of your every word and every deed. Think about this before you start judging your brother or sister in Christ.

The Greek word ’*bema*’, which is translated ‘judgment seat’, does not refer to the judge’s seat in a court of law. Rather, it was the raised platform of the referee or umpire at the games. Keener writes, ‘Residents of Rome were familiar with the ‘bema’ or judgment seat, corresponding to the rostrum in the Roman forum’. This is where contestants who finished the race came up to receive their reward.

Believers will not face the Great White Throne judgment of Revelation 20, because their names are written in the Book of Life. This is a judicial judgment upon those whose sins are not atoned for by the blood of Christ. This is the heaven and hell judgment. But this does not mean believers will not be held accountable for what they do in this life. Our liberty is in Christ, not apart from Christ. It does not mean we are no longer accountable for what we say or do. God knows every word we say and will demand an accounting (Mat 12:36). This is a fearful thing; which is what Paul says in 2Cor 5:11: ‘Knowing therefore the fear of the Lord, we persuade others; but we are well known to God’.

**2. Account to God**

Everyone is writing their biography these days- or so it seems. Most do it when they get old- maybe this is why I am noticing this- but some are still young. Such books are usually controversial, with some people saying the facts are wrong. Moreover, authors usually leave out details that cast them in a bad light. What Malachi talks about as a ‘book of remembrance’, and what Paul talks about as giving an account to God, is not our own selective account but every detail of our life as recorded by God.

Paul had not visited this church in Rome. How then did he know that they were judging one another? Has someone brought him news from Rome? More likely he is simply assuming that they are like every other church. Churches are made up of sinners saved by grace. The old sinful nature is ever present. The propensity to judge others is universal. It is one of the first sins we commit and the last we conquer. F. F. Bruce writes, “There is no sin to which Christians- especially ‘keen’ Christians- are more prone than that of criticising others. The apostle’s words are seriously intended.”

Have I told you about the church where one man saw it as his duty to tell everyone else their faults and failures- he was a ‘keen’ Christian no doubt. If you were not in church for some time he would rebuke you - I assume he was regular in attending himself! If you were not dressed according to his rules he would rebuke you. One day someone spoke to this man about something he was doing. He was deeply offended and left the church. Sadly you will find people like this in many churches. Do pray, ‘Lord, let this not be me’.

If you are tempted to judge a brother or to despise a brother, remember firstly, that God has received them (14:3). It is because God has received him, and you also, that he is your brother in Christ. Paul uses this term ‘brother’ carefully. Not everyone is your brother; but everyone who belongs to Christ is. Secondly, your brother is God’s servant, as already noted (14:4). Thirdly, in these closing verses, and with the authority of Scripture itself, Paul warns each one of us that one day we will have to stand before the judgement seat of Christ (14:10).

We keep on hearing of people whose lives are destroyed because their phone or email messages are made public. Sometimes these messages are used as evidence to convict them in a court of law. How can anyone think the words they put on social media will somehow evaporate or disappear? How can anyone think that what they say in private is not heard by God, and will not be revealed one day (Mat 10:26, 1Cor 4:5)? This verse in 1Corinthians 4 refers to each one's praise coming from God (1Cor 4:5). This is what the judgment seat of Christ is about. It is about Christ saying, ‘Well done good and faithful servant… enter into the joy of the Lord’ (Mat 25:23). Jesus said this of those who had used their God-given talent. He spoke further of rewards being given to those who used the mina given to them (Luke 19:17, 19).

The apostle Paul viewed himself as running a race in order to get the prize- an imperishable crown (1Cor 9:25, 2Tim 4:8). If you want to win a race you do not look back to see what others are doing- that was the first thing I was told anyway! Yet many Christians get distracted looking around to see what others are doing. Where should you be looking? You should be looking to the finish line. It is there that Christ is waiting for us, waiting for us to finish the race. Boice, in his exposition of these verses, reminds us that we will have to give account not only for every word we speak, but even what we hear. What we hear, of course, greatly influences what we say. If you want to keep your speech wholesome (Eph 4:29), and that of your family, be careful what you listen to on the TV. Boice also reminds us that our check books will be opened before the Lord. We will have to give account of how we spent every dollar the Lord gave us. And then we will have to give account of how we spent every minute of our lives- also a gift from God. This comes back to using the gifts we have been given and not being lazy.

Paul spoke of beating his body into subjection lest, after preaching to others, he himself be disqualified for the prize (1Cor 9:27). In our society people are flocking to gyms to get their body into shape- but for what purpose? They could just get a special mirror! Pray that the day will come, and come soon, when they will flock to the house of God to get their body and soul into shape for the purpose of running the race of life and getting the prize from the Lord Jesus Christ.

3**. Just as written**

By way of a final argument, the apostle characteristically quotes Scripture. Just in case anyone think that they will somehow avoid giving an account to God, he quotes Isaiah saying, ‘Every knee shall bow and every tongue shall confess to God’ (Isa 45:23). You may be familiar with similar words in the confession of Christ’s Lordship in Philippians 2. Isaiah introduces the words with a divine oath; ‘I have sworn by myself’. Paul uses a different oath found in Isaiah 49:18.

There is no room for exceptions in this declaration. Jesus is risen and he is Lord. He is coming again as Lord to judge the living and the dead. There will be the judgment of all human beings who have ever lived, and then the ‘*bema*’ judgment of believers. The Book of Life will reveal those who are redeemed by the precious blood of Christ. These will be called to give account to Christ for things done in the body, whether good or bad. Those who have spent a lot of time judging others will not be regarded with divine favour.

To bow the knee to Christ means to worship him. If you are in the habit of doing this today, you will not find it difficult when Jesus comes. Worship is focused on Jesus, not on other people or on things around you. God has given us a tongue to confess the name of Jesus, not to be judging others. How many of your words qualify as confessing and praising Jesus? How many of your words qualify (disqualify!) as condemning or despising brothers and sisters in Christ?

Speak to one another in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs (Eph 5:19). Dear friends, ‘bear with one another and forgive one another… even as Christ forgave you, you also must do. But above all, put on love which is the bond of perfection’ (Col 3:13, 14). ‘Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect’ (Mat 5:48). But remember, it is God’s role, not yours, to be judging your brother or sister whom God has received, and whom God will make to stand.

**Love before liberty** Romans 14:13-18

For meat to be ‘kosher’ a Jewish cleric has to be present when the animal is slaughtered. For meat to be ‘halal’ a Muslim cleric has to be present when the animal is slaughtered. Do you buy meat from a ‘halal’ butcher? Maybe you don’t know and have no concerns- in which case I should not be telling you these things! In India the only meat we could get was buffalo meat, all of which was slaughtered by Muslims. We ate this freely. Yet when a Muslim friend gave us a small piece of meat from a goat he sacrificed, we did consider the people living around us. What you eat, and who you eat with, is a big deal in these religions because they are all about law-keeping. Biblical Christianity is not about laws but about love. It is about God’s love for us revealed in Jesus Christ, and about loving God and loving one another. ‘Love is the fulfilment of the law (13:10).

Romans 14 is about Christian liberty, and about Christian love. Martin Luther wrote, ‘A Christian man is a most free lord of all, subject to none’. In the next sentence he wrote, ‘A Christian man is a most dutiful servant of all, subject to all’. A Christian is indeed free and no longer under the yoke of the law. We enjoy a wonderful liberty in the gospel of Jesus Christ. We are no longer slaves, slaves to the law or slaves to anything else; we are sons of God through faith in Jesus Christ. As sons of God we are to be like Jesus and walk in love. Out of love we will be willing to forego our liberties, if exercising our liberties threatens to cause a brother or sister to stumble.

**1. Cease judging**

Paul had not been to the church in Rome but knew believers from both Jewish and Gentile backgrounds were in this church. He also seemed to know about issues in this church. He told them the church was like a body with many members, each having different functions. He urged them to accept one another despite these differences, and to love one another in Christ Jesus.

But differences about food, and keeping special days, seemed to be affecting this church. Paul identifies weak Christians with scruples about eating meat and keeping special feast and fast days. Next to these were strong Christians whose conscience allowed them eat anything, and to move on from keeping special days. He urges the strong not to despise the weak, and the weak not to judge the strong; the reason being that each one is God’s servant and is accepted by God apart from these matters. We should be looking to ourselves, not others, because each of us will have to give account of ourselves to God.

The church is the fellowship of believers. Some take a limited view of this fellowship such that they do not join in any fellowship meals. Such a position certainly avoids any disputes over food, but this is not what Paul advocates as a solution to this problem. He does not tell the Romans to stop eating together. Paul accepts that fellowship over food, as long as it is done without greed and drunkenness, is important (1Cor 11:21). He accepts such close fellowship as long as it is done with love and consideration for the weaker brother. We do not need laws if we exercise our liberties with love.

‘Resolve not to put a stumbling block or cause to fall in your brother’s way’ (14:13). The verb for ‘judge’ is translated ‘resolve’ or ‘decide’ in the second part of this verse because it has this different sense. The tendency we have to judge others is to be turned on its head to become a resolve not to do harm to a brother or sister. Imagine what the church would be like if this was how we all acted! Barclay comments, ‘A new age would dawn in the church if we remembered that our rights are far less important than our obligations’. Morris writes, ‘For all its popularity among some Christians, judgment of others is an activity for which believers do well to abstain’. From being a legalistic Jew, Paul became a liberated Christian. He wrote, ‘Though I am free from all men, I have made myself servant of all that I might win the more’ (1Cor 9:19). To the weak he became weak in order to save some.

**2. Clean and unclean**

Paul begins to deal with this matter of not causing a weaker brother to stumble, by making clear his position as one who is persuaded or ‘convinced in the Lord Jesus’ (14:14). Just what the phrase, ‘convinced in the Lord’ means is not certain, although his position is certain. Jesus said that nothing going into a person’s mouth can defile him - it goes into his stomach not his heart (Mark 1:15, 19). In a vision, the Lord told Peter that no food was unclean - this was for the purpose of sending him to the home of a Gentile (Acts 10). Before meeting the risen Jesus on the Damascus road, Paul was very particular about what he ate. His righteousness before God at that time was based, among other works, on what he did not eat. But after this encounter he regarded this idea of righteousness as rubbish. In the true gospel there is no place for such legalistic righteousness. No food is unclean in itself.

Food is for the body, not the soul. It is said of poor people that they eat to live, whereas the rich live to eat. The Christian eats to live, giving thanks to the Lord. Being a Christian has nothing to do with what you eat or drink (14:17). In condemning false teachers who made certain foods taboo, Paul wrote, ‘Every creature of God is good and nothing is to be refused if it is received with thanksgiving’ (1Tim 4:4). Even food offered to an idol was okay because the idol is nothing- there is no other God (1Cor 8:4).

Paul was a mature or strong Christian, and as such firmly believed that no food was unclean in itself. He condemned anyone who taught otherwise; those who made food a matter of faith. But he did allow individuals to have scruples about food as weaker brothers. New believers had to grow and mature, or be sanctified. When a person, as a matter of conscience, considered something unclean then to that person it was unclean.

**3. Christ died for him**

A person’s faith in Christ is very precious. It is the most precious possession any person can have. They have nothing at death apart from faith. Only their faith in Christ will get them to heaven. We need to regard our own faith as a precious possession and not do anything to jeopardise it. We need to regard the faith of a brother or sister as very precious and not do anything to harm them. Disputes over food and drink never… never serve any good purpose. Let each one be convinced in his own mind (14:5).

Yet no man is an island. The church is a body, remember- the body of believers. If you do not belong to the body you do not belong to Christ. The closer you are to Christ, the closer you will be to one another. The closer you are to one another the greater the potential for differences of opinion to arise. At the same time, however, the closer we are to Christ the more Christ- like we will be. Being like Christ means walking in love. Being like Christ means refraining for words and actions that will cause a brother or sister to stumble in their faith. Be careful not to distress them because of your food (14:15).

‘Do not destroy with your food the one for whom Christ died’ (14:15). What this means is spelt out in detail further on in the chapter, and also in 1Corinthians 8. If the weaker brother goes against his conscience and eats meat, he is committing sin. This is what the Bible says (14:23). He is not eating with thanks and faith, but with doubt and fear. God does not just look at words and works but looks on the heart. He judges motives, not just behaviours. Keener writes, ‘For Paul, sin is not only a matter of behaviours but of motives’.

If the strong brother is guilty of ‘forcing’ the weaker brother, either directly or indirectly, to act against his conscience, then he is also guilty before the Lord. He is guilty of not acting in love. ‘When you sin against the brother and wound his weak conscience, you sin against Christ ‘(1Cor 8:12). In other words, the law of love takes precedence over the law of liberty. Your liberties in the gospel are wonderful, and are to be enjoyed, but not at the expense of a brother who is weak in the faith. ‘Love does no harm to a neighbour’ (13:10).

Furthermore, you risk having the liberties you enjoy spoken of as evil and dangerous (14:16). Scholars disagree as to what Paul means by ‘good’ in this verse. Some think he is talking about the gospel, saying that the gospel is being brought into disrepute by inconsiderate use of Christian liberty. Ultimately this is the case, but the context indicates that in the first instance your liberties will be condemned as doing harm to the faith of the brother, and secondly harm to the fellowship of the church, and thirdly harm to the gospel ministry of the church.

**4. Kingdom of God**

Our last point covers another important lesson from the pen of the apostle, namely, the nature of the kingdom of God. Paul does not use this term very often; here he is referring to the church. The others lessons we have learnt today are: do consider all foods ‘kosher’ and eat with thanks to God, but do not cause a fellow believer to stumble by what you eat, and do not bring the fellowship into disrepute over matters of food- or other matters of opinion.

The church is not about eating and drinking- or about special days, and celebrations, or about dress or a special language. The church is about righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (14:17). In 1Corinthians 8:8 Paul writes, ‘Food does not commend us to God’. In 1Corinthians 10 he writes, ‘Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God’. These things are not central to the life of the church. Spiritual matters are central. Christ is central. The church is not just another social club where we come to meet friends, have a chat and enjoy good food. The church exists to bring glory to God. Man’s chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. This is what we do as a body of believers.

As believers we meet together to share in the righteousness of Christ, peace with God, and joy in the indwelling Holy Spirit (14:17). Here we see the holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Some say these qualities are ethical in nature; that they refer, for example, to the peace with one another rather than peace with God. But we must have peace with God through Jesus Christ before we can have peace with one another (5:1, Phil 4:7).

The Kingdom of God is firstly about the Triune God, about God’s love and the imputed righteousness of Christ. It is about serving the King of kings and Lord of lords. But serving the King means bringing honour to his name. It means doing what is acceptable to God and approved by men (14:18). We read that Jesus grew in favour with God and men (Luke 2:52). This does mean that people necessarily liked him- many hated him. It means that they could find no fault in him. They could not honestly accuse him of failing to act in love. Jesus lived to please his heavenly Father. When we live to please God, which is our reasonable response to his amazing grace, we will similarly be approved by men. We will stand the test of God and men.

Let us not be open to an accusation of harming a brother or sister rather than loving them. Let us not be accused of pleasing ourselves and using our liberties in the gospel at the expense of distressing, even destroying the soul of a fellow believer- or anyone else for that matter. Remember what the Kingdom of God is about- righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

**Build up – or tear down?** Romans 14:19-23

Coming to chapter 12 of Romans we began to read about practical Christian living. Some got excited because at last we would find out what things a Christian should do and should not do. We got a taste of such things, being told to be loving and hospitable and not to take revenge. But some felt let down. They were looking for a list of do’s and don’ts; a list of sins, serious sins and not so serious sins maybe. This is the way the Pharisees approached religion, and it is the way many approach religion today- and not just the Roman Catholic Church. This is what is called legalism.

Practical Christianity comes in response to the grace of God in Jesus Christ. It comes from a renewed mind- from putting on the mind of Christ. Paul refers to the Ten Commandments but does not hold these up saying, ‘you must obey these if you want to be saved’. He says that these (the second table that is) are summed up in the command to, ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’. Practical Christian living, living in a way that pleases God, is not just about do’s and don’ts. The do’s actually focus on a most intangible thing called love. We are to love God and love one another. This is how we are to keep the law.

Love is not only intangible- it is also relative. How can we assess ourselves in love? What are the rules and regulations surrounding love? How can we run an organisation like the church without a list or rules and regulations? On the other hand, there are those who think the command to love gives them to freedom to do what they like- as long as it is loving. They reject the Ten Commandments and follow this way of love- what they think is love. These are not legalists but libertines or antinomians.

You may think the apostle Paul is heading down this track when he writes of sinning against one’s conscience -as he does in this chapter and in 1Corinthians 8. Is he saying that all sin is subjective? Is he saying that if your conscience is clear then it is not sin? Certainly not! What he is teaching about in Romans 14 is disputable or non-essential matters. There are many matters that are essential to faith and practice. Paul was the first to condemn sexual immorality in the church at Corinth. Apparently some libertines there were proud of their sexual freedoms, but the apostle demanded that a man guilty of taking his father’s wife be put out of the church.

The matter of eating food offered to idols was different. It was not a black and white situation, yet the church at Corinth, and apparently at Rome also, was divided over this matter. At the Jerusalem council (Acts 15) a rule was made regarding circumcision and the Law of Moses. These were not to be demanded of new believers. But this same council also gave advice about food polluted by idols (Acts 15:20, 29). Paul’s opinion as a mature believer, and as one ‘persuaded in Jesus Christ’ (14:14), was that no food is unclean, even food offered to idols (1Cor 8). But he did not judge those who had a different opinion. He did not force the issue in a legalistic manner. He took seriously the scruples of weaker brothers.

Here are the end of chapter 14 we find the apostle repeating much of what he has already taught, but with a focus around a new word, ‘edify’ (14:19). We will look at all he teaches, even if it is repetition because this must be for a reason. It is when things are important that we repeat them, making sure they are heard and understood.

**1. Build up**

‘Therefore let us make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification’ (14:19 NIV). The kingdom of God is about righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, not about eating and drinking (14:17). ‘Peace on earth and goodwill towards men’ was the message of the angels at Jesus’ birth. He said to his disciples, ‘My peace I give to you’ (John 14:27). We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ (5:1), and being in Christ we have peace with one another. Christ is the head of the church so the church should be about peace. This may come as a shock to some in the church but not to you I hope. We are about peace are we not?

We live in a fallen world, a world filled with conflict- conflict in the home, in the school, in the workplace, in the community and the nation. People are looking for peace. May they find it in the church, in the fellowship of believers? ‘Therefore pursue what leads to peace’ is actually Paul’s conclusion from the previous verses. Those who seek the things of Jesus Christ, and also the welfare of others, are doing the will of God and will be approved by their fellow man (Phil 2:21, 4).

With peace comes the opportunity to grow and develop. A nation at peace can focus on growth and development. Learning flourishes and industries flourish and expand in times of peace. A church that is at peace, a church in which love gets priority over differences and individual rights, will similarly flourish. Sweeping a floor with lots of individual straws is very difficult, but bind those straws together into a broom and the job becomes easy. Paul goes on to speak of ‘edification’ or literally ‘house building’. He uses this term a lot- fifteen times in all- to refer to individuals being built up in their faith, and to the church being built up in Christ to the glory of God.

To change metaphors for a moment- the Christian life is like riding a bicycle. To stop from falling off we must keep moving. On the cycle track near my place I often remove branches so the cyclists to not crash. It would be a wicked thing to actually put obstacles on the track. The apostle tells us, strong Christians in particular, not to put a stumbling block in the way of our brother. If in exercising your liberty, by eating meat or whatever, you distress your weaker brother, you are doing just that- you are putting a stumbling block in his way. What you should be doing is making sure the track is clear so that he can progress in his Christian life.

Paul can describe the church as a body, as seen in chapter 12. He can also describe it as a building. It is the household of God built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Jesus as the chief cornerstone (Eph 2:20). Peter speaks of us a living stones being built into a spiritual house (1Peter 2:5). Each member of the body, each brick in the house, is important. If you start undermining one of the bricks the whole building may collapse. In the church it is important that each member be built up in their faith. We have already been reminded how precious each soul is to the Lord; ‘Do not destroy with your food the one for whom Christ died (14:15). Paul repeats this command in verse 20 replacing ‘the one for whom Christ died’ with ‘the work of God’.

He goes on to reaffirm that all food is clean (cf. 14:14), but that it is wrong to offend your brother by what you eat (14:20 NIV). This seems to be what the apostle is saying, but some understand his words differently. Some, including Murray, say the offense is because the weak brother offends his conscience when he eats. This may be the case, but in the first instance it is the strong brother who is eating the meat. Both ‘eatings’ are wrong- one because it is not out of brotherly love, and the other because it is not from faith with thanks.

We indicated that the ‘work of God’ in verse 20 is in parallel to the weaker brother in verse 15, although some take a wider view of this unusual term, ‘the work of God’. They say it refers to all believers and others in the church of God. Whatever we understand Paul to mean he ‘certainly includes what God has done in the weaker brother’, according to Morris.

**2. Brotherly love**

‘Be kindly affectionate to one another in brotherly love’ (12:10). This was the first thing Paul said after introducing the most important of Christian graces, namely love. He went on to say, ‘Love does no harm to a neighbour’ (13:10). Love is not ‘puffed up’ or arrogant (1Cor 13:4). It does not puff up our own ego but seeks to puff up or build up our brother and sister in Christ. ‘Knowledge puffs up but love edifies’ (1Cor 8:1). We do not parade our liberties in the gospel for all to see, and some to be hurt. We keep them to ourselves, between ourselves and God (14:22); just as the weaker brother keeps his scruples to himself and does not go around judging others. Brotherly love must flow both ways, even if the emphasis in this passage is on the strong curtailing his liberties.

‘It is good neither to eat meat nor drink wine or do anything by which you brother stumbles’ (14:21). Paul has dealt with this matter, although he has not up till now put it so directly. In saying it is good not to eat meat he includes for the first time drinking wine. Some wines were kosher but still some Christians had scruples about drinking wine. Drinking to excess or to intoxication is a sin, but drinking wine in itself is not a sin. But some in the church at Corinth, and maybe at Rome also, came from a background of drunkenness. They, and maybe others, were avowed non-drinkers. Drinking of wine can be an issue among Christians today and we need to sensitive to the conscience of weaker brothers. One’s liberty must not be paraded in the wine bottle. There are Christians who cannot even drink wine in the sacrament. If this is so, then offer them grape juice. Do not do anything which causes your brother to stumble.

**3. Blessed**

‘Blessed is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves’ (14:22- ‘blessed’ is a better translation than ‘happy’). Paul continues to address the strong. He is a blessed man if he does not condemn himself by what he approves. He is blessed if he enjoys the liberties that the apostle himself enjoyed. Such a person can freely relate to Christians from all sorts of backgrounds. They are free to witness to people from all nations. In his freedom Paul could become a Jew to win Jews. He could become a Gentile to win Gentiles- although not to the extent of breaking Christ’s law (1Cor 9:21). How free are you to fellowship with Christians from different backgrounds? How free are you go to people who have many scruples about what they eat and drink and wear?

‘Do you have faith’ or literally, ‘you faith having. Have it to yourself before God’ (14:22). Morris writes, ‘He is not speaking here of saving faith, but presuming it. He is rather thinking of the faith that enables anyone who has it to follow, without hesitation or scruple, a course of action which his weaker brother cannot follow’. Faith here has the sense of belief (as in NIV). What you believe about food and drink keep between yourself and God. You are a blessed person if you can eat anything without condemning yourself. You are also blessed by God if you can refrain from eating anything that will cause another to stumble.

On the other hand, he who eats against his convictions or beliefs- that is the weaker brother- is actually committing sin. He is not eating with faith, giving thanks, but with fear and doubts. ‘Whatever is not from faith is sin’ (14:23). It is sin against your God-given and spirit- illuminated conscience. It is not a sin to have conscientious objections to certain food and drink, although with maturity these scruples will give way liberty in the gospel. But in the meantime, it is a sin to act contrary to your current belief and your conscience.

If you as a believer enjoy liberty in the gospel be thankful to the Lord. But if you cannot be thankful to God when you eat or drink certain things, wear certain clothes, do certain things on the Lord’s Day, go certain places, or read certain books, than do not do these things. Olyott writes, ‘A believer is not to embark upon any course of action as long as he nurses a scruple, qualm, reservation, doubt or hesitation about it. In no circumstances whatever is he to violate his own conscience, however different the consciences of others may be’. And you who enjoy certain liberties, be careful not to cause your weaker brother or sister to stumble. Let each one focus on the interests of Christ and the work of God, which is the building up of the church into a ‘spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ (1Peter 2:5).

**The example of Christ** Romans 15:1-3

In Jesus of Nazareth we see a great man, a man who lived a life of love and taught us how to live such a life. For some this is all they see in Jesus; they emphasise his human nature at the expense of his divine nature. As evangelicals we tend to react against this by emphasizing his divine nature, including his power to perform miracles and his unique work on the cross and in his resurrection. We must not lose sight of Christ’s atoning work, his substitutionary death on the cross. But in the Bible we are also told to see Christ as our example. ‘To this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us leaving us an example, that you should follow in his steps’ (1Peter 2:21). Paul said, ‘Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ (1Cor 11:1). As Paul draws to a close his teaching about the weaker brother here in Romans he tells the stronger brother to look to the example of Christ and follow his example.

The apostle’s teaching on practical Christian living began in chapter 12 and comes to an end here in chapter 15 - just three and a half chapters. It is interesting that a whole chapter- and that the longest chapter- is given to this matter of liberty and the weaker brother. This is especially intriguing when he had not even been in this church at Rome.

He began these chapter stressing the need to have a renewed mind in order to know the will of God. He spoke of the church as the body of Christ, and of living in love. If we truly love one another we have fulfilled the law (13:8, 10). This matter of the weaker brother is actually an outworking of such love. Love is not just giving a dollar here or there, nor just giving a few minutes here or there. Love is costly. In loving your brother you may need to curtail your liberties. You may need to give up eating meat – now that might test some! This is a serious matter because if your weaker brother is led to go against his conscience and eat meat, this is sin. He sins because he does not eat from faith with thanks (14:23), and you the stronger brother sin by not showing him love (1Cor 8:12).

Paul emphasised why the strong are not to look down on the weak and why the weak are not to judge the strong. Firstly, God has received your brother; secondly, he is God’s servant not yours; and thirdly, Christ is the judge before whom all will have to give an account. The second part of chapter 14 is directed at the stronger brother curtailing his liberties out of love for his brother, and for his edification – and indeed the building up of the whole church.

As Paul winds up teaching on this matter here in chapter 15 he gives the stronger brother another reason for not exercising his liberties, namely the example of Christ. He tells how Christ curtailed his power and liberty more than any man, as he suffered more than any man in the history of this world.

**1. Who not to please**

The other day our four year old granddaughter suddenly said, ‘I can do as I please’. I was surprised that one so young was adopting this philosophy of life. It is a very popular philosophy and one that many maintain throughout life. ‘I will do what I want and you can get lost’ is what we hear from teenagers. Adults might be a bit more circumspect in the words they use but the philosophy remains. (The four year old later admitted she had to do what Mummy said!)

The default condition in all human beings is, ‘I will please myself’. This is how we were born. This is the outcome of a sinful mature. This way of thinking soon brings us into conflict with other people- and with God our maker. It soon leads to us hurting someone or other. Love, on the other hand, does no harm to a neighbour (13:10). Love means thinking about the wishes and needs of others. The first commandment is to love the Lord your God, and the second is to love your neighbour as yourself.

Love for God comes first. We cannot truly love one another if we do not love God. We cannot love God if we do not know the love with which he first loved us. ‘This is how we know what love is; Jesus Christ laid down his life for us’ (1John 3:16). This verse goes on, ‘So we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers’. Here we see Christ as our motive, our teacher and our example. It is in response to the mercies of God in Jesus Christ that our thinking is transformed (12:2). It is a work of the Holy Spirit. Our thinking is turned upside down, such that we think about pleasing others not ourselves.

This is what Paul tells the strong Christians; ‘We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak and not please ourselves’ (15:1 ESV)- this translation is good in using the word ‘obligation’, which is actually the first word in the verse, but ‘failings’ is better translated as ‘weaknesses’. This is a debt owed to the weak. It is the duty of the strong to bear with the weakness of the weak. ‘Bear with’ is more in the sense of ‘bear up’ or ‘support’.

The strong are to take the scruples of the weak seriously, while at the same time leading this weaker brother into a greater maturity in his faith. Your dealing- or our dealing- with a weaker brother is all about him, not about me; note how Paul includes himself among the strong in this verse. It is about pleasing the weaker brother and building him up in his faith.

This matter of being weak or strong is not a label we attach to people in the church. There is a good deal of relativity and flexibility here. Do any of you consider yourself a weaker brother? Christians in other churches might consider us all weaker brothers and sisters- or stronger, depending on their position. But this is not our concern. The point is, weaker Christians mature and become stronger Christians with less scruples about non- essentials, like what we eat, what we drink, what we wear and so on. Paul is not dealing with differences in the essentials of the gospel. He is not, for example, saying the strong in their liberty can deny the resurrection. Nor is he saying they do not have to belong to a fellowship of believers. The Bible is clear in saying, ‘Do not forsake the assembling of yourselves together’ (Heb 10:25).

‘Let each of us please his neighbour for his good’ (15:2). This word ‘good’ qualifies the way we relate to a weaker brother. Morris writes, ‘we may find it easy to please people by permitting something that is really harmful in the long run’. We are to please our neighbour for his **good.** Morris goes on to say, ‘This does not mean the weak control the church- that they have only to express a scruple and all rush to conform’. Churches have been destroyed by one or two or a small band of members demanding all members abide by their scruples. Again Morris writes, ‘A genuine concern for the weak will mean an attempt to make them strong by leading them out of their irrational scruples so that they too will be strong’. It is not good to confirm the weak in their weakness.

Paul was not a man-pleaser. He wanted all believers to enjoy liberty in the gospel as he did (Phil 3:15). He was about humbly and gently leading them in this direction (cf. Gal 6:1-5). He was about building up the church to the glory of God. He was not about having the whole church remain weak just to please one or two.

**2. Who is our example?**

‘For even Christ did not please himself’ (15:3). What was the philosophy Jesus lived by- if we can put it this way? He lived to please his heavenly Father. ‘I have come down from heaven not to do my own will, but the will of Him who sent me’ (John 6:38). His prayer to the very end was, ‘Not my will but yours be done’ (Luke 22:42). ‘He came not to be served but to serve’ (Mark 10:45). Jesus did not live to please himself; he lived to please his Father and to serve other people. This is our example.

As Jesus began his ministry he was tempted by Satan to go down the path of self-gratification and self-glory. We might wonder how different his life would have been if he had gone down this path. The results for us would have been tragic of course. Jesus resisted the temptation, reminding himself and Satan of what is written in Scripture. Maybe this also reminded Paul to see what was written in Scripture - although he often confirms what he teaches by referring to Scripture.

It is amazing that Christians today fail to see anything about Christ in the OT. Isaac Watts, the so-called father of English hymnody, set about modifying the Psalms with explicit references to Christ. The apostle Paul had no trouble seeing Christ in the Psalms. He found Christ in Psalm 69 verse 9. Christ is clearly referred to throughout this messianic psalm. Paul understood Psalm 69:9 as being written about Jesus Christ. ‘These words imply that Jesus endured reproach and insult for his faithfulness to God, which might have been avoided by choosing an easier path’ writes F F Bruce. Keener writes, ‘Jesus suffers on behalf of God, offering a model of laying down one’s desires to serve others’. Jesus pleased his Father to the extent of laying down his life. Christians are called to do the same - to suffer and even die for a brother in Christ. If this is the case, giving up eating meat for a time is surely not too hard to manage. It is all about your focus in life. Is your focus is on pleasing yourself or on pleasing the Lord?

Pleasing God is not just a matter of words and rituals. When we aim to please our brother or sister in Christ we are pleasing God. Forgoing our freedom to eat meat, or drink wine, for the sake of a weaker brother is pleasing to God. ‘Inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren you did it to me’ said Jesus (Mat 25:40).

What Paul quotes is the second part of the verse in Psalm 69. The first part is, ‘Zeal for your house has eaten me up’ (Ps 69:9). This is also understood in the NT as referring to Jesus (John 2:17). Jesus was fully focused on pleasing God by purifying God’s house. The strong believer, indeed all believers, should be fully focused on building up the house of God to his glory. Man’s chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever (Shorter Catechism Question 1). Let our enjoyment of God and our liberties in the gospel not be at the expense of God being glorified in his body here on earth.

In the church at Philippi a dispute between two women was going on. Paul does not give details but it does not appear to have been about essentials of the gospel. It may have been about some non-essential matter or some difference of opinion. In any case, he urges them to be of the same mind, as he does here in verse 6 of Romans 15.

Prior to this, in his letter to the Philippians, Paul exhorts them to look out for the interests of others not just their own (Phil 2:4). He holds up Christ as an example of this. Christ humbled himself in coming into this world as a man and living among us as he did. Just as Jesus made it his business to please his heavenly Father, so we are to make it our business to please Jesus Christ our Lord (Phil 2:21). Let us not be out there trying to please ourselves. Let us be following Christ as our Saviour and Lord, and imitating him in his humility.

**Hope and unity** Romans 15:4-6

Winston Churchill is a household name. He was the Prime Minister of England during the Second World War. He was a great leader and a great orator. He is famous for his speeches and his one-liners; like, ‘Attitude is a little thing that makes a big difference’. His dying words are not so famous; they were, ‘There is no hope’. He died in utter despair- like many other famous people. ‘Despair’ is a powerful word; a word we use with care. It comes from the Latin, ‘*desperare*’ meaning without hope.

What purpose do we have in life? Some never stop to ask the question; they just keep busy at work or at play- all day every day. But of those who, like Churchill, do stop to consider this question, many come to the same conclusion that he did. We see celebrities and others taking their own life because they have no hope. They are without God and without hope in this world. Hope is essential to living. We read a lot about hope in the Bible. While emphasising the supremacy of love, the apostle Paul puts faith and hope way up there with love (1Cor 13). Faith, hope and love go together. If your faith is only in yourself, or your family, or your money, this life is ultimately futile. Faith must be firmly founded in the truth. It must have a solid anchor if it is to keep you living. Jesus Christ is that truth. He died but is risen and he is Lord. As the old hymn says, ‘My hope is built on nothing less, than Jesus’ blood and righteousness’.

In any fellowship of believers there will be differences of opinion on some matters; non-essential matters. We come from different family and cultural backgrounds. We have various gifts, and our own particular scruples. There is diversity in the church but there must be unity in this diversity. Paul’s detailed teaching on the weaker brother is aimed at maintaining this unity, to the glory of God. Paul draws this teaching to a close with a prayer for unity, or being like-minded. Prior to this we saw his reference to Christ as our example and his confirmation of this from Psalm 69. This led him to a most important proclamation about a believers understanding and use of Scripture.

**1. Proclamation**

‘Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction’ (15:4 ESV). Paul’s reference to ‘the Scriptures’ later in this verse shows he means what is written in the Bible, not in other books. The Bible is different to other books. Its words are inspired or God-breathed. The Scriptures for Paul were the Law of Moses, the Psalms and the Prophets (Luke 24:44). But the NT is no less the inspired word of God. ‘Men spoke from God as they were moved by the Holy Spirit’ (2Peter 1:21, 3:16). The interesting point with this proclamation is that whatever is written in the Scriptures is for our instruction. And it is not just some of what is written; it is not just portions that we, with our informed and sophisticated minds, agree with. It is whatever is written. Sure there are things hard to understand both in the OT and the NT. Even the apostle Peter admits this (2Peter 3:16).

We are to read all the Bible. We are to preach the whole counsel of God. Some preachers avoid difficult passages but with expository preaching we go verse by verse and word by word, endeavouring, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to understand and learn from all Scripture. Paul makes the same point when writing to Timothy. He writes, ‘All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, reproof, correcting and for training in righteousness’ (2Tim 3:16 ESV). In writing to the Corinthians he says, referring to events in the OT, ‘These things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom, the end of the ages has come’ (1Cor 10:11). The Bible is different to other books. We can learn from other books but not in the same way as we do from the Bible. This is the living and enduring word of God. Our parents and grandparents learnt how to live from this book. We pray that our children will learn how to live from this book, and not from some sporting hero. In the Bible we learn about God, about ourselves, about sin and salvation. This is called theology.

Because it is the word of God, reading the Bible brings blessings from God (Rev 1:3). That blessing may be in the form of correction or in the form of encouragement. It will certainly accomplish the purpose God has for his word going forth (Isa 55:11). Here in Romans 15, Paul writes of the encouragement coming through the reading of Scripture. He says that what is written is for our instruction or learning by way of encouragement and patient endurance. There is a fine grammatical point as to whether only encouragement/comfort is through the Scriptures; but it is best to see both patient endurance and encouragement coming from what is written- and ultimately coming from God, as seen in the following verse.

Firstly, encouragement or comfort. The Greek word is ‘*paracletos*’, the same word used of the Holy Spirit ‘coming alongside’ to comfort and counsel the believer. Jesus is also called ‘*paracletos*’, translated ‘advocate’ in 1John 2:2. The Scriptures are like a companion. The Psalmist meditated on them day and night. Paul asked for books, especially the parchments, to be brought to him in prison (2Tim 4:13). We read of other Christians smuggling their Bible into prison. We hear of Christians in poverty crying out for a Bible of their own to read. Why? Because the Scriptures are such a comfort. The Scriptures enable us to persevere in times of trouble. They are the word of God still speaking to us today.

Have you ever found the Scriptures to be an encouragement? I am sure you have. On many occasions I have taken hold of the words, ‘I will never leave you or forsake you’. I am not the only one because the writer to the Hebrews refers to these words, which were first spoken to Joshua in the OT (Heb 13:5, Josh 1:5). God’s word is unique in that what was said to Joshua still applied to readers in the first century and still applies to us today. This is the living and enduring word of God. Maybe it is Psalm 121 that you have found encouraging. ‘I will lift my eyes to the hills, where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth’. We could go on with many more words in the Bible that encourage us when we need encouragement- which is every day- right! This is what our meditation should be. Meditating on anything else is useless and brings no hope whatsoever.

Secondly, patient endurance. We must have patient endurance if we are to continue to the end. We will face troubles in this world, but should not be discouraged. These things are for our testing, and for making us stronger in the faith. Tribulation produces perseverance, perseverance character, and character hope’ (Rom 5:4). This is the teaching; the Bible also gives us examples of perseverance. Who is widely seen as a man of great perseverance? Yes, Jesus himself is such an example, but the OT character is Job. This book of the Bible is all about perseverance in the face of adversity. James writes, ‘You have heard of the perseverance of Job and seen the end intended by the Lord- that the Lord is merciful and compassionate’ (James 5:11). If you are having a tough time then read the book of Job. That is why it is written- for your instruction in patient endurance.

I recently heard about a woman who would have greatly benefited from reading Job. She lost her mother, her husband (by divorce), her job and her house in just eighteen months. A few years earlier she was basking in the glory of Olympic gold. When all this happened she turned to drugs and ended up in prison. All around us people in trouble are turning to drink, to drugs and to suicide. Some respond to counselling, but the best counsel of all is the Bible. Not only do we read of Job and his perseverance but also of Jesus and his love and his power to save. See what James, as an inspired man of God, wrote- ‘the Lord is very compassionate and merciful’ (James 5:11).

We read of Joseph who suffered so much because of his wicked brothers. He could have been consumed by revenge but he trusted in God and was blessed in the end. What a great example of trust and perseverance. He forgave his brothers knowing that, ‘in all things God works for the good of those who love him’ (Rom 8:28). There is no place for revenge and no place for despair in the Christian life. May you be encouraged and press on patiently in the Lord even when you walk through the valley of the shadow of death- the Lord is with you (Ps 23).

‘That we …might have hope’ (15:4). God’s purpose in our being instructed from the Scriptures is that we might have hope. We read of men and women who faced trials and temptations just like us. ‘No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man’ (1Cor 10:13). We tend to think our troubles are worse than anyone else has ever experienced. If we look around and maybe read the newspaper we may be able to say this. But in the Bible we have lots of examples stretching back to the beginning of human history. We have examples chosen and recorded by God. And with these examples we see how God brought them through. We see how God made a way of escape because he is faithful (1Cor 10:13).

We find hope by meditating on Scripture. We find hope because God has poured his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit (Rom 5:5). The word and the Spirit go together to give us hope that does not disappoint. This is why you must read your Bible and pray every day. Faith, hope and love come together as a wonderful blessing in the Lord. They can also be lost together. This is why you are urged to read what is written for your instruction. This is why Paul now turns to prayer.

**2. Prayer**

The lesson ends with prayer. Preaching is done with prayer. Reading the Bible is done with prayer- as with every spiritual exercise. ‘Now may the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus’ (15:5)? The prayer parallels the proclamation. The apostle not only urges the Roman Christians to read the Bible but prays for them also. He prays that God will give them the grace they need to endure and be encouraged.

What Paul prays for is unity or harmony in the fellowship. His prayer is focussed on accepting the weaker brother and not judging one another. This comes about when our minds are renewed by the Holy Spirit; when we all have the mind of Christ. We have Christ as our example; his thoughts were on pleasing his heavenly Father. Our thoughts are to be on following Christ’s example, and indeed on Christ himself as our Saviour and Lord. He is the pioneer and perfector of our faith. He is the one who saved us by dying in our place. He is the one who is risen and who is coming again on the clouds of heaven. Let our thinking be on Christ, on his death, resurrection and return, not on our own interests or liberties in the gospel.

With our thinking directed at pleasing our Lord and Saviour we will also be trying to please our brother and sister Christ. When we, like the apostle Paul, turn to prayer we will understand those things. We will know forgiveness and blessings. We will humbly and lovingly endeavour to do his will, knowing his will is for unity in the fellowship. Jesus’ prayer in the upper room was about love and unity among his children (John 17:20-26). He was not about organisational unity but unity in the Spirit- one Lord, one faith, one hope.

Why is unity so important to God? ‘That you may with one mind and one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ’ writes Paul (15:6). The church fellowship exists to glorify God, on earth and in heaven. Just as the perseverance of Job had consequences in heaven, so the perseverance and praise of the church has consequences in heaven. We not here to please ourselves- although in pleasing God we are blessed by him. We are not here to display our personal scruples- pious as they may be. We are here to glorify God. We do this when we worship with one mind and one mouth. Those who cannot be of one mind and one mouth need to humble themselves before the Lord and consider this prayer of the apostle Paul. They might also look at what Paul writes in Colossians 3:12-15 about being humble, meek and longsuffering, and above all putting on love.

**Without hope and without God** Romans 15:7-13

The words of our sermon title come from the Bible- from Galatians 2:12. They are solemn words, words that ring in our ears as we recall our past life, and as we look at the lives of millions around us today. Living without hope is a feature of our post-modern era. Atheists, agnostics and all unbelievers can be labelled as people without hope, according to the Bible (1Thess 4:13).

Living without hope is like being imprisoned for the term of your natural life. Preventing such prisoners from taking their own life requires constant surveillance. They are reduced to living like animals, to living without hope. Many on the outside live much the same life, to the extent they live without hope. This is shown by the way people seek solace in alcohol and drugs, or in the ultimate escape, death.

This verse from the Bible is so important because it links hope with God. God is the God of hope (15:13). Hopelessness comes from being estranged from God. Sin separates us from the God who made us, and gave us life. Hope comes when we know God; when we know his greatness and his love in Jesus Christ. ‘But now in Christ Jesus’ writes Paul; now those without hope have hope because of the blood of Jesus Christ (Eph 2:13).

The life-termer can have hope even while in prison because hope comes through knowing Jesus Christ. Hope is not about the things we have or things we want to have. It is not about things at all- it is about a man, the man Jesus. Those on the outside can have the same hope which is through the blood of Jesus Christ.

This personal lack of hope is reflected in our society- in a corporate lack of hope. This has come about as men and women turn their backs on God. Being without God means being without knowledge of the truth. A lot of our science is no longer based on truth. It is based on lies, like macro-evolution. We hear of data being manipulated to fit with certain theories. The great hope of psychology is now being questioned as more and more people suffer depression and mental illness. The teaching that happiness is found in our possessions is turning out to be a lie. So much of life is based on lies. Where can we get the truth?

**1. Accepted so accept**

‘Therefore receive one another just as Christ also received us/you to the glory of God’ (15:7). We could have taken this verse as the conclusion of the previous section – as in the ESV. In that section Christ was held up as our example of not pleasing yourself. Christ lived to please his heavenly Father. We should live to please Christ and in so doing we will please our neighbour. As the children’s chorus about joy tells us, ‘**J**esus first, **Y**ourselflast, and **O**thersin between’.

Paul writes in the context of accepting the weaker and the stronger brother. In fact, this larger section began with the instruction, ‘Receive one who is weak in the faith’ (14:1). Why must we do this? Because God has received them (14:3). Our verse here in 15:7 returns to this theme to conclude the lesson. We are told to accept one another, weak or strong, in the fellowship of the church. Why? Because Christ has accepted us. No one in the church is in a position to look down on another person. We do not go around touching the feet of priests or elders. Whosoever is in the true church has come in by the same door- the door of Christ (John 10:7). Our pedigree, piety or good works had nothing to do with our going through that door. We are all sinners saved by grace alone through faith alone.

When we enter in through Christ, the door, we will go in and out and find pasture. We will have life, abundant life (John 10:10). This is a popular verse with preachers of the prosperity gospel. ‘Come to Christ and have an abundant life’ they proclaim. They see this as a life without sickness or sorrow. They promise heaven on earth, but this is not what Christ promises. ‘In this world you will have tribulation’ says Jesus. This does not mean we have no hope. He went to say, ‘Be of good cheer; I have overcome the world’ (John 16:33).

The church of Jesus Christ is not a place to glory in ourselves and our successes in this world. It is a place to glorify God. Do not be like some whose prayer of thanksgiving is more about telling everyone their achievements than giving glory to God. Remember that Christ accepted us while we were still sinners; he gave his life to bring us into fellowship with God and with one another in the church. He did this, ‘To the praise of his glory, by which he made us accepted in the Beloved’ (Eph 1:6).

**2. All nations to glorify God**

In verse 8-9 Paul mentions ‘the circumcision’, or the Jews, and the Gentiles. Why does he return to this theme, so extensively dealt with in chapters 9-11? Olyott writes, ‘This is because the difference over matters of conscience was not the only issue which threatened the happiness and welfare of the church at Rome. There was also the racial question to be considered’. This may be the case, although the differences probably overlapped. Those from Jewish backgrounds found it hard to break with their traditions about kosher food and special days.

Becoming a Christian does not mean all culture and traditions are erased. What it means is that they are transformed into a Biblical culture or else relegated to matters of low priority. Christ must come before culture. Truth must come before tradition. Unity must come before personal scruples. ‘Above all have fervent love for one another’ (1Peter 4:8) - not just love but fervent love- self-sacrificing, agape love!

‘Now I say that Christ has become a servant to the circumcision’ (15:8). The focus on Christ continues. A Christian’s focus must always be on Christ. Christ came to serve, not to be served; he paid the ransom to set us free. He came as the suffering servant of Isaiah 53. His earthly ministry or service was largely to the Jews. Jesus was born a Jew, in the line of King David. He was born according to the promise or covenant made with David, ‘Your house and your kingdom shall be established forever’ (2Sam 7:16).

God first made a covenant with Abraham to bless him, and through him all the nations of the earth (Gen 12:2-3). Circumcision was given as the sign and seal of this covenant. So Paul refers to the Jews as ‘the circumcision’. The very title Christ or Messiah also points to, ‘promises made to the fathers’ (15:8). Messiah means ‘anointed one’ or ‘appointed of God’. The promise of a deliverer was fulfilled in Christ even if the Jews did not, and still do not, accept this. God is always true to his word and so he sent his Son, ‘born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law’ (Gal 4:4-5).

This was not the end of God’s promise- to redeem the Jews only. No. God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son’ (John 3:16). God intended to gather in elect Gentiles to join elect Jews in one body, the body of Christ- to his glory. As detailed in chapters 9-11 he did this in his own wonderful way, with the Jews rejecting their promised Messiah and the gospel then going to the Gentiles. The apostle confirmed this teaching from Scripture, especially the Psalms and the prophet Isaiah. So there is one church with Christ as the door, and as the head. ‘For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek (Gentile) for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon him (10:12). Paul described this as a mystery. He never ceased being amazed at the plan of God, in his mercy, to save both Jews and Gentiles. It was a plan promised beforehand in the prophets, in the Psalms, and even in the Law of Moses.

**3. As it is written**

Paul cannot resist, so it seems, quoting a few more verses from the Bible to remind himself and his readers of this great plan of God which is fulfilled in every detail in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Quotations from all sections of the Hebrew Bible prevent anyone from saying, ’O, that is only the poetry of the Psalms, or that is only the symbolism of the Prophets’. Christ is in the Law, in the Psalms and in the Prophets.

The first quotation mentioning the Gentiles comes from Psalm 18. In this psalm David is praising God for delivering him from all his enemies- including Saul. His praise is so exuberant – The Lord lives! Blessed be my Rock! – that he praises God even among the Gentiles.

The second quotation is from the book of Deuteronomy; from the song of Moses shortly before his death. Again it is a song of praise but this time a call for the Gentiles to rejoice with the Jews. The third quotation is again from the Psalms, from the shortest Psalm of all. It is a call to the Gentiles to praise God without any reference to Jews. All nations and all peoples are called to praise Yahweh because he is truth and full of mercy.

The final quotation is from the prophet Isaiah, as Paul himself indicates (15:12). The root of Jesse will produce a shoot to reign not only over the Jews but over the Gentiles. King David was the son of Jesse but the root of Jesse would be further down the line – while also being before Jesse. This is the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ. In the coming age Christ will reign over all nations. ‘Paul is saying that the age of blessing has begun by Christ’s coming and that the hope of the Gentiles is in him’ writes Boice. He will be the hope for all nations. Blessed is the man and the nation whose hope is in the Lord.

**4. Abound in hope**

On the note of hope, hope for Gentiles as well as Jews, Paul concludes this section of his letter. He concludes with prayer, just as in the previous section (15:5-6); note there that it was on the note of hope that he turned to prayer. There it was hope based on what is written in the Scriptures (15:4) that led him to pray to the God of patience and encouragement. Here he is led to pray to the God of hope (15:13).

God is the source of hope, as well as the object of our hope. Our hope is in God. We trust in God because he is trustworthy. He has fulfilled all his promises in sending Jesus to suffer and die, bearing the sins of many. The ‘many’ includes people from all nations. Jesus is risen from the dead. Surely this gives joy and hope for the future. Surely this means you do not face death or grieve as those who have no hope. Jesus has gone into heaven from where he will return. In the meantime he has sent the Holy Spirit to dwell in our hearts. In the written word and in the Holy Spirit we have knowledge and power. We have victory over sin and death. ‘Be of good cheer’ said Jesus, ‘I have overcome the world’. Jesus gives us hope as we live in a world without God and without hope.

The world is in a huge mess at present- not that this is new. As violence and brutality abound, people flee for their lives. Refugee camps are growing like mushrooms. Closer to home, societies are breaking down as easy divorce laws bear fruit, as young people with a sense of hopeless turn to drink, drugs and suicide, and the elderly are pushed towards euthanasia. Meanwhile politicians wrangling in the parliaments give us no hope. But in the midst of all this we can have hope. We can abound in hope. Where sin abounds grace abounds much more (5:20). We look to the God of hope. In the midst of the turmoil we find joy and peace in believing. Joy and peace are fruits of the Spirit. They are fruits of the faith, hope and love put into our hearts by Jesus Christ.

In closing, remember the Philippian jailer. He was about to kill himself out of a sense of shame and hopeless when a Christian spoke to him. That Christian was Paul, but it could have been any other Christian. It could have been you or me. What that Christian said to this man without hope was, ‘Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved' (Acts 16:31). That man was saved, saved from killing himself and saved from sin. He lived to praise and glorify God in his family, his church, his city and his country.

**Personal note of explanation** Romans 15:14-16

This letter is signed by Paul, ‘a bondservant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle’. It is written to all the saints or believers in Rome (1:1, 7). Paul knew of this predominantly Gentile church in the imperial capital. He prayed for them but had never been there. The people probably knew who Paul was but wondered why he was writing to them.

At the outset he told them he wanted to visit and share with them. He was ready to preach the gospel in Rome (1:15). At the end of the letter he tells of his plan to visit Spain (15:24). But still they might have asked why he wrote such a long, detailed letter. He was not responding to questions from them or to problems in the church. Here in his closing remarks he offers an explanation of why he was writing such a letter.

**1. Roman church**

In his introduction to this letter, and in all his letters, Paul praises the saints in some way. He praised the Roman believers for their faith that was spoken of throughout the world (1:8). Here in chapter 15 he praises them for their goodness, their knowledge and their ability to instruct or admonish one another (15:14). He is not trying to flatter them. He is being positive and acknowledging their maturity in the faith. But this does not stop him from instructing them in the way that he does. No Christian is so mature as to be beyond instruction or admonition.

The apostle expresses confidence in these brothers at Rome, confidence that they are filled with all knowledge. He is referring to their knowledge of the gospel- the gospel of grace in Jesus Christ. These brothers knew that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone. They had not perverted the gospel of Christ by adding an element of good works, as in some churches- particularly those infiltrated by Judaizers. Paul did not praise the churches in Galatia for their knowledge because they were departing from the truth of the gospel (Gal 1:6-7). He praised the Corinthians for their knowledge but not for their goodness (1Cor 1:5). There were lots of moral failures in the Corinthian church.

The brothers at Rome were full of goodness in Paul’s assessment (15:14). Their knowledge did not lead them to being puffed up with pride. Rather, their knowledge was accompanied by love. They were living out their faith, doing good to all as they had opportunity, especially to those of the household of faith (Gal 6:10). They were also, in Paul’s opinion, competent to instruct or admonish one another (15:14). It is a mark of maturity that people in the church can not only encourage one another but also admonish or correct one another.

The Corinthian church was failing in this regard. They were dividing into factions on the basis of personalities and scruples about food. This meant they were not able to exercise discipline within the church. Unity within the church is important for many reasons, one being effective correction and discipline. It is very difficult to discipline members when the leaders are not leading by example. Paul said that those we love in the Lord we will rebuke and correct in a spirit of gentleness (Gal 6:1); and that we will accept admonishing when we deserve it.

**2. Remind you**

With these courteous and encouraging words Paul goes on to explain why he has written in the way he has. He wrote to them as brothers in Christ, and as such was prepared to instruct or admonish them as necessary. He admits that it might seem bold of him to be doing so, and that some things he says may seem harsh, but he does so out of love and out of apostolic responsibility. Yet there is little by way of rebuke in his letter because all he has heard about them was good. It was more that he was reminding them to press on in the truth of the gospel. He was not bringing them anything new or novel. The word translated ‘remind’ is only found here in the NT; it means ‘remind again’.

Earlier in this chapter Paul urged those in Rome to patiently endure and be encouraged from the Scriptures, and from God himself. A faithful, flourishing church today can become a faithless, failed church tomorrow. Years of patient and persistent building up of a church can be destroyed overnight if church members are not reminded of the truths of the gospel and of the dangers lurking in the flesh, and in the world. It is not just the Church of Rome as it is today that reminds us of this danger.

Worldly people are always looking for something new. Australians are renowned as being the fastest people to adopt new technology. Colour TV, flat screen TV and all manner of technologies have been taken up more rapidly in Australia than in any other country. The Americans may have an edge when it comes to adopting new religions but Australians are not far behind. This eagerness to adopt new things and new ways is seen within the church. The church must be reforming, but reforming in accordance with the Bible, not the ways of the world.

‘Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind’ (12:2). Renewing your mind means becoming more Christ-like in your thinking, and in your living. We become more Christ-like when we learn more about Christ through reading the Bible, and through prayer. The sacraments are there to remind us of the gospel of Jesus Christ - ‘this do in remembrance of me’ is what we hear said.

We can take on new technologies all we like but beware of taking on new teachings in the church, even if people claim they are coming from the Bible. Our forebears loved to sing the hymn, ‘Tell me the old, old story of Jesus and his love’.

**3. Responsibility of the preacher**

Paul was not only a brother in Christ encouraging and reminding fellow believers on points of doctrine and practical Christian living; he was an apostle or sent one. He began his letter declaring he was an apostle, separated to the gospel of God (1:1). As an apostle he was called by Christ and set apart to preach and teach the gospel. He was given special grace for this purpose. With this calling and empowerment came the responsibility or duty to preach the gospel. ‘Woe is me if I do not preach the gospel’, he said (1Cor 9:16). He made it his aim to preach the gospel where it had not been preached before (15:20), but as a minister of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles he wrote to this largely Gentile church in Rome (15:16).

Some find it strange that we call the ‘pastor’ of our church a ‘minister’. They know about ministers in the government (13:6) but see no relationship to ministers in the church. The relationship is that both are a public office with the responsibility to serve the people. Ministers in the government are elected and appointed, as are ministers in the church; those in the church being ordained by God. The minister in the church has a God-given duty and empowerment to preach the gospel of God- theological study being part of that empowerment. This ministry is to the soul not just the body. Those who minister to the body are called deacons. This word is translated ‘minister’ in verse 25 of this chapter but really means ‘to serve’ in a material way; Paul is referring to a collection being taken for the church in Jerusalem. The term ‘pastor’ is found only in Ephesians chapter 4 where it translates the Greek word for ‘shepherd’.

Although Paul goes on to speak of his ministry in priestly terms, he does not refer to himself as a priest. There are no priests in the new covenant, except Christ himself, the great High Priest who offered himself without spot to God; offered once to bear the sins of many (Heb 9:14,28). The true church does not have priests offering ‘bloody sacrifices’ as in the mass. Paul does not use priestly language ‘in connection with any liturgical practice but explicitly with the gospel of God. It is a striking way of affirming that the proclamation of the gospel is a solemn and sacred act’ (Morris). Paul sees the Gentiles as an offering acceptable to God; made holy by the Holy Spirit (15:16).

Gentiles were regarded as unclean by the Jews. Peter would not go into the house of a Gentile until ‘forced’ to do so by God. He went and saw Gentiles receive the Holy Spirit. He later declared in the Jerusalem council of these Gentiles who heard the gospel and believed, that 'God, who knows the heart acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us’ (Acts 15:8). The gospel has the power to break down all barriers between men - as well as the barrier between man and God. Paul understood the awesome task given him by God, a task not to be undertaken in his own strength but only by the grace of God.

While the sacraments were an essential element of worship in the NT church, they were always linked to the preaching of the word. Paul was sent by Christ to preach the gospel, not to baptise (1Cor 1:17). He commanded Timothy to preach the word (2Tim 4:2). In the church in Jerusalem the apostles appointed other men to be deacons so they could continue preaching the word (Acts 6:2).

As the church drifted from its foundations, preaching the word was shifted to the side- literally. The central pulpit was replaced by an altar at which the priest performed the sacrifice of the mass. Haldane writes, ‘the bread of the Lord’s Table at length became the body of Christ in a literal sense; the table on which it lay became an altar; the teachers became priests who offered the sacrifice of the mass; and the contributions of Christians became offerings. In all these things, and innumerable others, the figurative sense has been, by a gross imagination and artifice of Satan, turned into a literal sense, to the utter subversion of truth’.

As the Reformers returned preaching to its rightful place in the church, so they returned the pulpit to the centre stage of the church building. It is a concern that some so-called Reformed churches still have an altar centre stage in the church building. In many we see something else centre stage – namely drums and guitars. The pulpit, if present, is down to the side. It may only be a matter of architecture but these things are symbolic. Preaching of the word is a holy ordinance. By the grace of God his word is preached. The preached word of God goes forth with power to accomplish God’s purposes (Isa 55:11). Remember what Paul wrote back in chapter 10; ‘faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God’ (10:17). ‘How shall they hear without a preacher’ he said (10:14). Loud music entertains, but it is preaching that brings the word of God to people’s ears.

Let us not drift away like the early church, or like the post-modern church, from the centrality of preaching in ministering the gospel of Jesus Christ to Jew and Gentile. Let us not get caught up in ancillary activities in the church either, thinking that these are more important than the preached word. The first question asked of prospective ministers or missionaries is, ‘do you faithfully attend worship in your church?’- Not, are you busy in youth work or in attending Bible studies. Worship in which preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ is central is the mark of a Reformed church.

**Christ through me** Romans 15:17-21

The apostle Paul is thought to have written this letter to the Romans from the city of Corinth in the year AD56 or 57. At that time he was preparing to go to Jerusalem with a collection for the poor people in the church there. After this he planned to go to Spain. This was a time for him to reflect on some twenty years of missionary service within the region. He thought of the churches planted across what is now Turkey and into Greece. We know about Paul’s involvement in planting these churches from the book of Acts, and also from letters he wrote to these churches; churches in Galatia, in Ephesus, in Colossae, in Philippi, in Thessalonica, and in Corinth. These were predominantly Gentile churches with some Jewish background believers. Paul was called by God to preach the gospel to the Gentiles.

Gentiles were not welcomed into the church at first. All the apostles were Jews and those at Pentecost were Jews; and as Jews they held to a policy of apartheid or separation. It was humanly impossible to pull down the barrier between Jew and Gentile, but this is what Paul was called to do in the church. He went out to preach the gospel to Gentiles as well as Jews, and to welcome both into one church. Unique communities called churches sprang up, communities in which Jew and Gentile stood together worshiping God through Jesus Christ.

**1. Boast in Christ**

Paul was writing to a predominantly Gentile church, albeit one that he had no hand in establishing. But he was writing to them in his capacity as a minister of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles. He was explaining how the Gentiles were like an offering acceptable to God (15:16). They were like a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God (12:1). Did Paul feel a sense of pride in what he had achieved in his three missionary journeys? Was he ready for some personal boasting? ‘I have reason to be proud of my work for God’. Is this what Paul writes in verse 17? No. He writes, ‘In Christ Jesus, then, I have reason to be proud of my work for God’ (15:17 ESV). The words, ‘In Christ Jesus’ make all the difference.

It was not a matter of what Paul achieved in his ministry but of what Christ had done through him. He goes on to say, ‘For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me’ (15:18 ESV, NIV). He said this in reference to the Gentiles turning from sin to believe in Jesus Christ and obey him as Lord. In the church at Corinth there was at one time a faction calling themselves followers of Paul. Maybe they called themselves Paulites or Paulists. Imagine that- having a group of Christians calling themselves by the name of their minister. Imagine! We do not have to imagine, do we? The other day someone was talking about the ‘Ravi Zacharias ministries’. What about the ‘Billy Graham Evangelistic Association’? I know these are not churches, but do they have to use their own name?

Paul established churches, not a 'Paul of Tarsus ministry association'. He did not establish any ‘St Paul’ churches either. And what about Wesleyans, Lutherans, Calvinists and so on. John Calvin did not establish the John Calvin church. He established a church in Geneva, Switzerland, which might be called Protestant or Reformed to distinguish it from the Church of Rome.

Denominations are a part of the church today, but to the extent that the church held to the true gospel of Jesus Christ, the apostle Paul condemned a faction named after him, or Peter or anyone else, except Jesus Christ (1Cor 1:12f). Paul goes on to mention Apollos as another minister some in Corinth were claiming as leader. He writes, ’Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers through whom you believed, as the Lord gave to each one. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase’ (1Cor 3:5-6). The latter words point to Paul’s strategy of planting churches in virgin soil as it were.

In missionary circles some boast about the number of churches they have planted or the number of baptisms they have performed. But when you later go to visit these churches you may find nothing. They were planted but no one watered. Paul kept in touch with churches and left fellow workers to continue the ministry and appoint elders in these churches. Even so, the churches he planted do not exist today; but the church continues to expand into all the nations through faithful and fearless preaching of the gospel, as demonstrated by the apostle Paul.

‘Let him who glories, glory in the Lord’ (Jer 9:24). This is what Paul kept reminding himself and all believers, especially ministers. Paul had men seeking to undermine his ministry. He had men who boasted of their abilities and achievements over against his. It is a sad but true feature of the church today that men boast in themselves. In a celebrity driven culture churches are coming up with their celebrities. A Reformed minister whose books are popular told us that a publisher wanted to use his name on a new book in order to sell it – they would get a ghost writer, he was told.

The minister is a servant of the Lord. He makes himself available to be used by the Lord and he gives glory to the Lord whatever the outcome of his ministry. Some see fruit for their labour while others see nothing, not because they are less faithful but because it is the Lord who gives the fruit. It is God who gives the increase (1Cor 3:7).

**2. Power of the Holy Spirit**

Those given to the greatest boasting in the church today are those who claim to work wonders or miracles, mostly in healings or exorcisms. John Wimber established a signs and wonders ministry in the 1970’s- thankfully calling it the Vineyard Church rather than the Wimber church. In Kenya I saw a poster advertising a healing meeting to be conducted by a lady who had been performing signs and wonders since she was five years old!

What are the ‘powerful signs and wonders’ that Paul speaks of in verse 19? Are they a part of ministry today? Boice writes, ‘In Biblical language a sign is a miracle that has significance through pointing beyond itself to a truth about God or the gospel. All Jesus’ miracles recorded in John are signs in this sense. A wonder is the same event regarded from the point of view of the awe it evokes in a human observer’. So Jesus had a signs and wonders ministry in this sense. He healed people, not just for the sake of healing but to demonstrate that the kingdom of God had come. Jesus’ first miraculous sign was turning water into wine. Why did he do this? It was a sign to manifest his glory, and his disciples believed in him (John 2:11).

Someone once asked a preacher to turn water into wine as Jesus did. The preacher said he could do something better than that. He told of a drunkard who neglected and abused his family coming to Christ after hearing the gospel. Then the preacher said, ’we didn’t turn water into wine but we turned whisky into milk for his babies’. This is the power of the gospel.

The presence and power of the Holy Spirit does not have to be confirmed by speaking in tongues or by performing signs and wonders, as some try to tell us. The fruits of the Spirit are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal 5:22). Preaching of the gospel is done in the power of the Holy Spirit. The Lord does not look for men of letters or eloquence. He does not look for men who are able, but men who are available, men who will give themselves as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to the Lord (12:1).

**3. From Jerusalem to Illyricum**

‘I have fully preached the gospel of Christ’ (15:19). Paul’s aim or ambition was to preach the gospel, and he claims to have completed this task within a certain designated region. As the bondservant of Christ, his task was to serve Christ and to glorify God. It was not about him and his personal ambition, but about Christ and his calling to preach the gospel to the Gentiles.

Too many Christians get caught up in the worldly notion of personal goals and milestones rather than focusing on Christ and the glory of God. We must have aims and ambitions of course, but let these not be all about me and my ministry. We should be about Christ, about obeying him and giving him the glory. A minister who measures his ministry by tallies of converts or baptisms is open to deep disappointment- or self-deception.

Paul began his ministry in Antioch, quite a long way north of Jerusalem. He had been in Jerusalem and was heading back there as he wrote this letter, but he never really ministered in Jerusalem. He ministered in Macedonia, but there is no record of him visiting Illyricum. This was a province on the eastern shores of the Adriatic Sea- what is today Albania, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Paul does not actually say that he ministered in these places- rather he indicates that Jerusalem and Illyricum formed the borders of his ministry.

Paul felt he had ministered in this whole region to the east of Rome- not to every person but in strategic centres from where the church could continue to evangelise. He was ready to head to the west in accordance with his commission to preach to the Gentiles, and his own personal decision to preach where Christ was not named. Paul saw himself as a pioneer evangelist, a planter rather than one who waters – not that he neglected the churches so planted. Although personal, this aim was based on Scripture- on what is written in Isaiah 52:15 (15:21). This verse comes from the last Servant Song, and in the context of Gentiles hearing about the Servant of the Lord.

Paul was not saying that all ministers have to share in this aim to preach where Christ is not named. Nor is he indicating that this is some sort of glamourous, self-glorifying ministry. Some aspiring missionaries have the wrong idea about missionary service, thinking that this is some sort of glamourous, exciting ministry. They are usually screened out at the first interview.

We all minister the same gospel, but are called to serve in different places and in different types of ministries, according to the purposes of God. We should do what the boss tells us and go where he tells us! Paul had those who supported him in his ministry. Epaphroditus ministered to Paul’s need when he was in prison (Phil 2:25). Others like Timothy were left to minister in churches he planted. There is a multitude of ways to serve the Lord but let none be separated from the preaching of the gospel. As Olyott concludes, ‘Let us beseech God to raise up gospel preachers in our day’.

**Moving on** Romans 15:22-28

Changing jobs is not easy. Some people, like my brother, began work at sixteen, and forty years later finished work in the same place. Sadly he did not get to finish up in pleasant circumstances. Most people have a number of different jobs and often do not leave in pleasant circumstances. It is the same in mission work. How you finish up is very important- as a wise person told us. Too many leave the mission field in unpleasant circumstances, be it personal bitterness or the manner in which they leave. We made the effort to leave on good terms; we did not sell every last thing we had to the highest bidder as some colleagues did. Till today we are welcomed back to the place where we served for thirteen years.

The apostle Paul was on the verge of leaving one mission field and going to another. His letter to the Romans was by way of preparation for moving on to Spain. Plans and preparation are important, but farewells are also important. He was on his way to Jerusalem in an attempt to maintain good relations with the ‘mother church’. It was not simply about Paul of course; he was concerned to keep unity in the church of Jesus Christ, unity between churches from Jewish and Gentile backgrounds.

**1. Journey to Spain**

Paul began this letter telling the saints in Rome of his plan to visit them. He even said that he had been hindered from doing so (1:13). He returns to this theme in chapter 15 verse 22, without specifying exactly what hindered him, apart from the necessity of going to Jerusalem. Here in the penultimate chapter he makes it clear that he was not coming to stay, at least not for a long time. He was coming for a visit, before journeying on to Spain.

Paul felt called to minister in places where Christ was not named (15:20). There was a functioning church in Rome. It was predominantly Gentile and he hoped for some fruit among them (1:13), but his main calling was to plant new churches. Paul had preached and planted churches across the eastern region for some twenty years. He was confident these churches would continue on, especially with good men like Timothy and Titus in Ephesus and Crete respectfully- and elders appointed in all the churches. The Roman Empire extended to the west and so Paul, as minister of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles, planned to go to Spain.

The subject of calling to missions or ministry is interesting and controversial. There is a great range of ideas, from the hyper-Calvinist to intensely Arminian and Liberal ideas. It was a hyper-Calvinist who said to William Carey, 'Sit down young man; when God pleases to convert the heathen, he will do it without your help or mine’. But Carey knew from the Bible that God ordained for his people to take the gospel into all the world (Mat 28:19). He prayed and he planned to take the gospel to the heathen. He learned as much as he could about the people of these heathen lands and was eventually sent out with the support of his church. Some missionaries are very independent in where they go and in their support. They plan and budget everything themselves.

Paul was a young Christian in the church at Antioch when the Holy Spirit called the church to set apart Paul and Barnabas for missionary work- although Paul had a personal calling to Gentile ministry at his conversion. The Antioch church sent them out with prayer and material support, and they returned to report on their mission. As they moved out further other churches, like Philippi, supported Paul. With his plan to move further west, Paul was probably looking for a new ‘home church’, one within reach of Spain. Paul writes not only of visiting Rome but of being ‘helped on my way there by you’ (15:24). This word ‘helped’ literally means ‘being brought forward’. It refers to assisting one on their journey with food, transport, money, as well as with prayers. Paul was seeking to build a partnership with them, a partnership in mission.

Churches which support a missionary are more outward looking churches. They are reminded of the Great Commission to take the gospel into all the world. Too many churches, and especially those without serving missionaries to support and pray for, become inward looking. They get involved in church politics, maintenance and building programs. They lose sight of the big picture of the gospel, namely that the gospel is to be preached in all the world. Paul hoped to enjoy the company of the saints in Rome, but also hoped to bring blessing to them as they became his partner in mission (1:11-13).

In speaking of a call to mission, and of planning for mission, we do not see these as being mutually exclusive. Some mission organisations look at all the statistics and say we must 'go there' to plant a church. Others say, ‘God has called me to this place’, which may be ministry within an existing church. We should remember that God knows what he is doing. He is Lord of the harvest. We go as harvesters into his field; actually some sow and some reap (John 4:37). Yet it is the will of God for the gospel to be reached to all nations and then the end will come (Mat 24:14). Mission is quite fluid. Today we see missionaries going to places which not long ago were sending out missionaries- as with Europe.

Paul’s mission into Asia Minor was through the Holy Spirit speaking to the church. His second mission into the same region was simply a case of; ’Let us go back and visit the brethren’ (Acts 15:36). That was when he and Barnabas parted ways. Then, in a vision, Paul was called to Macedonia, and so he went to preach in Macedonia and Achaia (Greece). He does not indicate any specific calling to go to Spain here in this letter, but he does ask for prayer.

Following his own teaching, Paul offered himself to God as a living sacrifice. Through prayer he was walking in the will of God. This is what is needed most of all in missionary work and in every ministry; people who are transformed by the renewing of the mind, people who offer themselves totally to the Lord, people of prayer and patient endurance- such people are needed today more than ever to reach the whole world with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Did Paul ever get to Spain? We learn from the book of Acts that he got to Rome (Acts 28). He got to Rome as a prisoner. He wrote the so-called ‘Prison letters’ from Rome. But after this we cannot be sure. Some understand from 2Timothy 4:18 that he had a second imprisonment in Rome, so he could have gone to Spain after his first imprisonment. He could have returned to Rome to report on his activities and there been arrested again and martyred.

There are two documents not in the Bible which point to him getting to Spain. Clement of Rome writes in his, ‘Epistle to the Corinthians’, that Paul reached ‘the bounds of the west’. Did he mean Spain? The other document is the Muratorian Canon which mentions, ‘the journey of Paul when he left Rome for Spain’. But, as Boice concludes, these documents ‘fall short of proof’.

**2.Jerusalem**

The apostle was eager to see the saints in Rome and to move on to Spain, but he had important work to finish before leaving the east. In particular he had to complete the collection he had been making for the poor in the Jerusalem church. When he last left Jerusalem he was asked by the church leaders to remember the poor (Gal 2:10).

Various reasons are given as to why the church in Jerusalem was poor. It was of course a long way from Rome, the centre of the Empire. It was not a place of trading but a holy city- holy to the Jews. The Jews of the diaspora sent their ‘temple tax’ to this city but the Christians no longer benefitted from this. There are indications there was a famine in Palestine, or it may be that they were poor from being persecuted by the Jews. Dodd tries to blame the ‘voluntary communism’ practiced in the early church. Whatever the reason, Paul was committed to helping brothers and sisters in need.

He writes firstly of this collection as being diaconal aid. As we have opportunity we are to do good to others, especially those of the household of faith (Gal 6:10). The Jews hated Paul, and many in the church at Jerusalem were not convinced of the liberties he gave the Gentiles- not demanding circumcision, for example. Yet Paul did his utmost to keep fellowship with this church. In fact, he calls this collection a ‘*koinonia*‘(15:26) - which actually means ‘fellowship’ rather than ‘contribution’. He said he was going to ‘minister to the saints’ (15:25); the Greek for ‘minister’ is ‘*diaconeo*’. He was doing the work of a deacon.

Secondly, he writes of the churches in Macedonia and Achaia (Greece) being pleased to help in this way (15:26). From 2Corinthians we learn that this church had to be reminded of this collection, but still they were pleased in the end. None of us by nature are willing givers. We have to be taught. Paul taught the churches to be willing and cheerful givers because, ‘God loves a cheerful giver’ (2Cor 9:7). When we recognise how much God has blessed us, we will be cheerful givers to those in need. Do you recognise how much the Lord has blessed you? Are you returning to the Lord your tithes and offerings?

Thirdly, Paul refers to a special debt that the Gentile churches had (15:27). They had received spiritual blessing from the Jerusalem church. They had received the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ. Morris writes, ‘Nothing in all this world can compare to the gift of God in the gospel, and the gospel came first to the Jews’. The Jews rejected the gospel and so it came to the Gentiles, but still, it was from the Jews. Paul was a Jew. The apostles were Jews. It was right and proper for ‘daughter’ churches to remember the ‘mother’ church in Jerusalem, and minister to them as the need arose. At this time the need was material- but still Paul refers to this material giving as ministry- ‘*leitourgia*’ in the Greek.

Have you received spiritual blessings in the Lord Jesus Christ? Have you received material blessings? How do you respond to these blessings? We have an abundance in our land: food on the table, warm clothes to wear and a roof to sleep under- not to mention schools, hospitals and welfare. Do you respond by giving to those in need, especially those of the household of faith?

Paul was taking this collection personally to the Jerusalem church- others went him (1Cor 16:3-4). He wanted to ‘seal to them this fruit’ (15:28). What does he mean by ‘seal’? Was it just to make sure they received this fruit, which is how the NIV translates? Yes, but the NIV study notes go further to say, ‘This gift needed interpretation. It was not merely money; it represented the love and concern of the Gentile churches’. Paul wanted the gift to be received in the right spirit. The Jerusalem church may have seen this as the duty of the Gentile believers, or they may have resented this ‘charity’. They may have seen it as a bribe for theological concessions. Within the church both those who give in the Lord and those who receive in the Lord are blessed by the Lord.

Finally, it is important for those in the church to give wisely, as we see here with Paul. He took the trouble to go to Jerusalem and see that the money was received by those who need it. We should not be giving blindly. Sometimes money given by the church is wasted or misused. Money given for orphans may not get to the orphans. One of the reasons I go to India is to build up relationships with those we are helping and see that our gifts are being used properly. Do you have any relationship with those to whom you give? Above all remember that God loves a generous, prayerful and cheerful giver to the Lord’s work.

**Pray for me** Romans 15:29-33

A few years ago a man called us asking if he could come and stay. We did not know him but he said he was a friend of Dickson our friend, so we welcomed him. When he arrived he called up another man who actually lived in Sydney and called him over. He wanted to meet this man whom had never met before- but he was involved in the student ministry in India. So we had an interesting meal that evening with two Indian men we had never met before. It was a great evening because they were brothers in Christ who were all part of the student ministry in India. In fact, we now have regular fellowship with David, the man Dickson’s friend invited for supper.

The apostle Paul had not been to Rome but he wrote to the church there in a personal way, telling them of his plan to go to Spain and visit them on the way. He expected to be welcomed, like the friend coming to our house from India, as a brother in Christ sharing in the same ministry. Paul was not concerned about ethnicity, politics or the food they ate or did not eat. He does not ask about their theology, although he outlines his theology and expects them to accept it as the true gospel of Jesus Christ. He expects them, as those belonging to Jesus Christ, to be living out the commandment to love your neighbour as yourself.

**1. Plan and the will of God**

Paul began his letter telling his readers of his plan ‘to come to you’ (1:13). He reminds them of his plan again in chapter 15 verse 22. After explaining his plan to firstly go to Jerusalem, he again refers to his coming to them in verse 29 - and again in verse 32. Paul was not a man of ‘ifs’ or ‘maybes’. He was not out to please himself or to build his own reputation. He was a man seeking to do the will of God and to glorify the name of Jesus Christ. It is a shame when men of God are overtaken by a sense of their own importance and frown on preaching to a small gathering.

‘When I come to you I shall come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ’ (15:29). This is the confidence of a man walking close to the Lord. This is the assurance of a man who knew Christ as Lord, and knew the importance of the blessing of Christ in whatever he did. Boice tells us about different aspects of the word ‘bless’- how it means being set apart as holy, and how it means a state of happiness- but the essential meaning of the Greek is a ‘good word’. It means to speak well of someone, as Boice also adds. Paul is confident that when he comes it will be with the full approval or blessing of Jesus Christ.

When believers moved from one church to another they took a letter of introduction from their old church to the new church. We have such a system; some people come to us with a letter from their previous church which is essentially a ‘good word’ about them. Paul did not belong to any local church so did not have any letter of introduction as such. Instead he was coming to the church in Rome with a ‘good word’ from Christ. In a sense this letter was a letter of introduction. He says that he is coming with the seal of Jesus Christ.

When Paul did come to Rome he came as a prisoner- as we read in Acts 28:16. He was not expecting to come in this way when he wrote this letter, though he was aware of the dangers awaiting him in Jerusalem. Morris and others point out that these words are a mark of authenticity in this letter because a later writer would not have written like this. Even so, Paul does not rule out arriving in Rome as he did. Even when he arrived as a prisoner he was preaching the gospel, knowing that Christ was with him and blessing his ministry.

Further on in verse 32 Paul again writes of coming with, ‘joy by the will of God’. Paul was walking in the will of God. He had surrendered himself to God as a living sacrifice. In doing so he could know and ‘prove what is that good, acceptable and perfect will of God’ (12:2).

What a great blessing it is to know you are walking in the will of God. If you are walking in sin you are not walking in God’s will and will not know his blessings. If you are walking so as to please yourself rather that God you cannot expect God’s blessing – you are thinking only of yourself. If you are always unhappy and discontented you show you do not know God’s will- or that you do not accept his will.

When you are walking in God’s will you will be confident and contented; you will be walking with peace and joy in your heart. It does not mean that your never change your situation or your job; it means you will be serving the Lord with all your heart, all your mind and all your strength wherever you are, knowing that you are where the Lord has put you.

It is amazing the lengths to which people go to avoid the call of God- like Jonah. Some deny any such thing as the call of God. A minister friend spoke of moving to a new parish as ‘just common sense’. Beware of this this term and this thinking. Paul’s going to Jerusalem was contrary to common sense. Another friend was thinking of overseas mission but found a verse which reads, ‘Let each one remain in the same calling in which he was called’ (1Cor 7:20). He was taking a verse out of context- Paul was writing about marriage and the like! Walking in the will of God is not the same a settling into a comfortable life for yourself and your family; that is walking in the way of the world.

**2. Plea for Prayer**

In these closing verses we see a plea for prayer (15:30-31). Even the great apostle Paul needed prayer, and asked for prayer. He does this in many of his letters: he asks prayer for boldness to preach the gospel in Ephesians 6:19, and prayer for God to open the door for the word in Colossians 4:3. Here in Romans he asks prayer for a specific matter- that he, ‘may be delivered from those in Judea who do not believe, and that his service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints’ (15:31).

Before looking at these two specific requests, notice how he speaks of prayer in the previous verse. He speaks of ‘striving together with me in prayers to God for me’ (15:29). He was requesting them, as fellow believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, and as those filled with the Holy Spirit. Through the unity of the body and the love of the Spirit he urged them to pray for him, a fellow believer.

Prayer is not easy. We speak of being a ‘prayer warrior’ because we are engaged in spiritual warfare. In this fallen world Satan is out and about seeking whom he can devour. He wanted Job. He wanted Peter (Luke 22:31). Every believer is his target. Paul was aware of Satan’s attack. Are you aware of being stalked by Satan? If you are, you will be serious about prayer. Prayer is how we defend ourselves against Satan. Let us not reduce prayer to simple, selfish requests relating to our own comfort.

It is right to be asking God for things we need but do not ask that, ‘you may spend it on your pleasures’ (James 4:3). Think beyond yourself to other people. Think beyond your home and city to the world of men and women, especially the lost. And yes, think even beyond this world to the universe and to God the creator, the redeemer, and the judge of all people. James goes on to say, ‘the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective’ (James 5:16).

‘Strive together with me’ in prayer writes Paul. The root of the word ‘strive’ is to ‘agonise’. Prayer is tough work- true prayer that is. This is why we do not rely on set prayers. These help us to pray, but true prayer is striving with God; it is earnest, even desperate, calling upon God to deliver us in this spiritual battle. We get very earnest in prayer when bombs start falling around us, but we do not always see the unseen enemy attacking us. Jesus has defeated Satan but he is still on the loose and we must pray. If he can get us to stop speaking of Jesus, stop praying, stop reading our Bible and stop coming to public worship, he will be satisfied. Without taking up the armour of God and the weapons God gives us, including prayer, we are no match for Satan (Eph 6).

Our prayers are to God. We pray to our Father in heaven. Paul mentions the whole Trinity in this verse. We pray in the name of our mediator, Jesus Christ, and we pray with the help of the Holy Spirit (8:26). The more people who pray, and the more often we pray, the better, as Jesus pointed out in the parable of the persistent widow. Missionaries often send out emails for prayer so we pray for them. At evangelistic camps we often had prayer vigils with a least one person praying every hour of the day and night.

Paul's first prayer request was to be delivered from the unbelievers (lit. disobedient) in Jerusalem. These were the Jews who hated the gospel of Jesus Christ, just as they hated Jesus himself. Even in Gentile territory the Jews were trying to kill Paul; what would it be like in Jerusalem, the heart of Judaism?

His second request was that the believers or saints would accept him, and the gift that he was bringing. Persecution drove the first believers out of Jerusalem but a church remained and grew, especially after Paul, then Saul, stopped persecuting them. Believers from a Jewish background were still oppressed but it seems there was some compromising with the Jews. Many believed but they were also zealous for the law (Acts 21:20).

Many of the saints were not happy with what they heard about Paul and the Gentile churches. They continued with circumcision and other Jewish ways. Paul was not against circumcision- it cannot be reversed of course- but he did not demand it of the Gentiles. He firmly resisted this demand because it was tantamount to saying we are saved by works of the law.

Yet Paul was going to make peace with the brethren in Jerusalem. He had a collection which he prayed they would receive in the right spirit as a gesture of love and fellowship in Jesus Christ. As we know from the book of Acts, he went up to Jerusalem despite a prophetic warning (Acts 21:10f). He was almost killed by the Jews. Romans soldiers saved him. This is not to say his prayers were not answered. He was delivered from the Jews and indeed had opportunity to preach the gospel to them. The collection appeared to be received in the right spirit by the church leaders (Acts 21: 17-20). God always answers our prayers, but not necessarily in the way we expect. God’s ways are higher than our ways, as the apostle Paul found out.

**3. Peace**

Paul closes this chapter, and in a sense this letter, with a brief prayer or benediction for the saints in Rome. ‘The God of peace be with you all. Amen’ (15:33). A more extensive benediction is found at the end of the next chapter; and there is an earlier benediction at the end of chapter 11. God has many attributes. He is the God of patient endurance (15:5). He is the God of hope who fills us with joy and peace (15:13). He is the God of peace (15:33).

It is God, and only God, who brings peace to our hearts, and so to this world- a world without God and without hope and without peace. We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ (5:1). We do not follow a religion that is just for Sundays and just for our private life. We proclaim the truth of Jesus Christ. We proclaim the gospel of peace, peace with God through Jesus Christ.

From all reports there is not much peace in the world today. Why is this? Because there is no peace for the wicked (Isa 48:22). Because of a lack of the knowledge of God, and of Jesus Christ through whom we have peace with God (5:1). Are you praying for peace- peace in the world, peace in your family, and peace in your own heart? If so, remember that the knowledge of God is essential for peace. Pray that the knowledge of God may cover the earth as the waters cover the sea (Isa 11:9). Amen.

**Greet, greet, and greet** Romans 16:1-16

Friends are fundamental to being human. We cannot survive as individuals. We are ‘social animals’ according to a social researcher. In his new book he speaks of the curse of individualism in western society, noting that more people than ever are living in single person households. For all the interconnectedness of social media we are less connected than ever. What this social researcher and many others fail to examine is the influence churches have on social connectedness.

Selfishness is at the heart of individualism. This sin renders us unable to share material things, beliefs or even emotions with other people. It cuts us off from other people, leaving us lonely and even bereaved. Knowing God, and knowing his love for us in Jesus Christ, we have the beginning of a life of relationships. Loving God and loving your neighbour are basic to being fully human, as God intended us to be.

So how many friends do you have- real friends, not just Facebook friends? Who are your friends and how are you at maintaining friends? In this closing chapter of his letter to the Romans, Paul lists a surprising number of friends or people he wants to greet at Rome. Even more remarkable is the fact that he had never been to Rome and probably had not met quite a number of these people. But he sends warm regards to them as brothers and sisters in Christ. He was ready to greet them with a holy kiss and enjoy fellowship in the Lord with them. He was not planning to book into a hotel room and spend his time sightseeing in Rome.

I recently visited a church in the Darjeeling hills of India. An ex-colleague took me and I knew the pastor from teaching in a seminary. They put us up for the night and feed us while we fellowshipped with them. To my shame I struggle to remember the names of the church elders or any of the others we met in this village. The apostle Paul could name twenty four people in the church at Rome even before he visited! Did he carry a notebook or was it that he prayed for these people regularly.

Moreover, intellectuals like Paul are not usually that interested in people; they are more interested in their books. With Paul we a see a professor of theology taking a sincere interest in a long list of people, people from all walks of life. He was no absent minded, detached professor. Morris reminds us that this letter ‘was not written to professional theologians (though through the centuries scholars have found the epistle a happy hunting ground). As we consider the weighty matters Paul deals with, we are apt to overlook the fact that it was addressed to people like Ampliatus and Tryphena and Rufus. Clearly Paul expected this kind of person to be helped by what he wrote, a fact which modern experts sometimes overlook. And it is fitting that this letter, which has given us so much solid doctrinal teaching, should end with this emphasis on persons, on love, and on a reminder that humble servants of God perform all sorts of active ministry.’

Paul was writing to all sorts of people in the church at Rome and he expected them to understand what he wrote. I hope you have understood what we have read in this letter; if not, go back and mediate on the amazing things written here.

**1. Phoebe**

The first name mentioned in this closing chapter is ‘Phoebe our sister’ (16:1). This otherwise unknown woman is recommended to the church at Rome by the apostle. It appears that she was on her way to Rome and would be carrying this amazing letter. There was no postal service in those days; letters were carried by personal couriers, usually men (e.g. Tychicus, Col 4:7). Phoebe must have been a woman of some wealth and standing in society, and in the church. Some compare her to Lydia in Philippi.

Phoebe was a pagan name, the feminine form of Phoibos, a name for the god Apollo. Olyott notes that she was not required to change her name, ‘as many modern missionary groups would have insisted’. In fact missionaries no longer encourage such name changes. Phoebe now bore the name of Christ. She was a ‘servant of the church at Cenchrea’, a port city about 10km east of Corinth.

The word ‘servant’ is a translation of the Greek word ‘*diakonos*’ (16:1). A few versions, like the RSV, prefer not to translate the word, leaving it as deacon or deaconess. It is the same word translated as ‘serve’ in chapter 15 verse 25 and Acts 6:2, but untranslated as ‘deacons’ in Philippians 1:1 and 1Timothy 3:8, 10, 12. It is very doubtful that Paul is here referring to an elected or appointed office bearer in the church as some argue. Murray writes, ‘There is neither need nor warrant to suppose she occupied what amounted to an ecclesiastical office comparable to the diaconate. Boice and other Presbyterians however, while restricting the eldership to men, do not see women in the office of deacon as violating the stipulation of 1Timothy 2:12- namely a) an authoritative teaching position, or b) an authoritative disciplining position.

Paul commends this unknown sister to the church and asks them to ‘receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints’. Phoebe was a fellow believer and as such should be warmly welcomed by other believers. Her reception was not to be based on her gender, ethnicity, status in society or position in the church, but upon her ‘being in the Lord’. Every believer is a brother or sister in Christ and should be treated as such. The church is a family, a spiritual family that transcends the biological family. When you visit, expect to be treated like family- especially if you have a letter of commendation. And when someone visits us with good intentions we must treat them as family also.

Paul asked the saints in Rome to help this fellow saint in ‘whatever she may need from you; for she has been a patron of many and of myself as well’ (16:2 ESV). He asks the church to welcome Phoebe and assist her as necessary. He recommends Phoebe as a sister in Christ who has been a blessing to himself and others. Her faith was seen in works of love. The word ‘helper’ or ‘patron’ can mean a legal representative or wealthy patron. She must have used her wealth to help poor and oppressed believers. While riches lead to the downfall of many, others use their wealth to bless fellow believers.

The name of Phoebe is not on the list of Nobel laureates. It is not seen on any churches or civic buildings as far as I know. But it is here in the most read book in the world- and even more important, it is in the Lamb’s Book of Life. Is your name recorded in that book? Is it there as a helper or patron of many, a man or woman whose words and works have been a blessing to many of God’s people? ‘In as much as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me’ said Jesus (Mat 25:40).

**2. Priscilla and Aquila**

The first greeting to anyone in Rome is to the only people we know something about, Priscilla and Aquila. Paul actually calls her ‘Prisca’ while Luke called her ‘Priscilla’. This married couple were well known to Paul as, ‘fellow workers in Christ Jesus’ (16:3). Paul met them in Corinth after they were expelled from Rome, along with all Jews, by Emperor Claudius in AD49 (Acts 18:2). He met them and stayed with them because they also worked as tentmakers. Paul mentions Priscilla first, as does Luke in most instances; scholars like to speculate as to why they do this.

When Paul went to Ephesus they went with him. When he left to return to Antioch they stayed in Ephesus where they ministered to the young Apollos, ‘explaining to him the way of God more accurately’ (Acts 18:26). Paul returned to Ephesus and ran into some trouble with the local pagans – followers of the goddess Diana. There is no mention of Priscilla and Aquila at this time but their ‘risking their own necks’ for Paul may have been at this time (16:4). Paul writes that he and ‘all the churches of the Gentiles’ were thankful for what they did (16:4). This comment reminds us of the ruling made by Gallio in Corinth in which Christians were regarded as Jews under Roman law and so given legal status as a religion- but again there is no mention of Priscilla and Aquila ‘risking their own necks’ in this incident.

When Priscilla and Aquila were in Ephesus there was a church in their house (1Cor 16:19). But they had returned to Rome by the time Paul was back in Corinth and writing this letter. He again writes of a church that is in their house, this time in Rome (16:5). Clearly they were active in evangelism, and a couple who opened their home for worship and fellowship where ever they lived. They had learnt this ministry as fellow workers of the apostle Paul. House churches were common in the first century. They appear to have extended beyond the extended family of children and servants to include all local believers. Verses 14 and 15 point to other house churches in Rome at the time.

**3. People otherwise unknown to us**

Paul goes on to greet another twenty two people in Rome, people mentioned only here in the NT. This list gives a great picture of the church in Rome at that time. Men and women, singles and couples, Jews and Gentiles, slaves and freedmen and even nobles are mentioned. Such an extensive list which fails to mention the apostle Peter indicates that he was not present in Rome and certainly not bishop of Rome, as some claim.

Most are given brief ‘epitaphs’ as Boice calls them. They are, ‘in Christ’ or, ‘in the Lord’. A number are referred to as, ‘my beloved’ or ‘fellow workers /labourers in the Lord’. Like Jesus, Paul looks on the heart of these people and remembers how they served the Lord. What sort of epitaph might the apostle have given you? What epitaph would you like to have?

Epaenetus was a fruit- a firstfruit- of Paul’s ministry in Asia (16:5- not Achaia as in NKJV). It must have been encouraging to know that, although now in Rome, he was still going on in the Lord. Being top on the list, Paul was no doubt anxious to see Epaenetus. Mary, a Jewish woman, is also high on the list even though her labour was not for Paul but ‘for you’ (16:6 ESV). Whatever her particular labour for the Lord it was known to the apostle and greatly appreciated.

Andronicus and Julia, man and wife, were also Jewish and ‘fellow prisoners’ of Paul (16:7). We do not know where or when they were in prison together. This couple were in Christ before Paul and were ‘of note among the apostles’. This does not meant they were apostles, although the word ‘apostle’ simply means ‘sent one’; ‘the apostles’ refers to the Twelve. Paul was converted within a year or two of the crucifixion so they must have been converted before this. Since there were Jews from Rome at Pentecost, and the apostles were at Pentecost baptising believers, it is possible that this couple were among those Jews from Rome; rather than Palestine.

Amplias was a common slave name associated with the imperial household, as was Urbanus; the name Stachys was not so common but again associated with the imperial household. All were believers. Apelles was tested and approved in Christ.

Next in the greetings comes the household of Aristobulus and ‘Herodion my countryman’ (16:10, 11). Aristobulus was a grandson of Herod the Great and friend of Emperor Claudius. He is not greeted as a believer- it is his servants who are greeted. Herodion may have been the head servant in this household. Morris comments that, ’it is of interest that there were Christians in such a household in Rome’. Narcissus is another name associated with a Roman household. He was a rich freedman, a friend of Claudius but later executed by Nero. He was not a Christian but is mentioned here because, as with Aristobulus, a number of his servants or slaves were in the church at Rome.

To this wonderful mix of people in the church is added two women, Tryphena and Tryphosa (16:12). They were probably sisters and certainly sisters in Christ. Just how they ‘laboured in the Lord’ we are not told. In India there were two women, sisters in Christ, who travelled all over the land ministering to students in colleges and universities. ‘Beloved Persis’ was probably an older woman; her labour in the Lord is spoken of in the past tense (16:12).

Rufus is one name we do find elsewhere in the NT. He was a son of Simon of Cyrene, the man grabbed and made to carry the cross of Jesus (Mark 15:21). Why does Mark specifically mention the name of these two boys? If his gospel was directed towards Rome then it may have been because these two boys were known in Rome. It is a long shot, but there it is! What makes this more plausible is Paul’s reference to ‘his mother and mine’ (16:13). It seems that at one time Rufus’ mother took Paul in and ‘mothered’ him. In another long shot, Bruce links this Simon with Simon Niger in Antioch (Acts 13:1) and suggests Rufus’ mother took Paul in when Barnabas first brought him to Antioch.

Paul’s next to last greeting in this long list is to five men and brethren with them. These could belong to some trade guild or more likely to a house church. Then comes Philologus (meaning ‘chatterbox’) and his wife Julia, Nereus and his sister and finally Olympas (16:15). Again, 'all the saints with them' are included in what looks like another house church.

Looking at all this we see quite a detailed picture of the church in Rome at that time; a church without a huge building of their own but made up of a number of house churches. It is people who make up the church. We also see what a remarkable man the apostle Paul was; to remember so many in the church and to do so with such love and affection. He urges them to greet one another with a holy kiss (16:16), a common greeting at that time but nonetheless a warm and affectionate greeting, fitting for brothers and sisters in Christ.

**Watch and stay away** Romans 16:17-20

How do you respond when some Jehovah Witnesses or Mormons come knocking on your door? Do you invite them in and listen to their carefully crafted message? They will use lots of words and verses from the Bible, but they cleverly place them in their own framework which is different to that of the Bible. The first chapter of a book entitled, ‘Thirty years a watchtower slave’ is called, ‘It appeared so harmless’. Finely dressed Mormons come knocking saying they are from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. This sounds like a regular church that believes the Bible, but then you are told about the Book of Mormon which they hold above the Bible.

It amazing how many people who think they are Christians get sucked into these and other cults. They get taken in by smooth talking men and women making very appealing promises. Christians who know the gospel will not be taken in by these false teachings. Christians who know the gospel will not invite such people into their home. Paul writes, ‘Note those who cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine you learned and avoid them’ (16:17).

**1. Shun them**Some are surprised to read the rather strong words of the apostle Paul at this point in the letter to the Romans. They say it is out of character with the rest of the letter. It certainly is a different focus and tone to the earlier part of this chapter. Paul has just greeted some twenty four men and women in the church at Rome, speaking of them as, ‘beloved in the Lord’ and, ‘fellow workers in Christ’. He encouraged them to greet one another with a holy kiss. ‘All the churches of Christ greet you’ he said (16:16). It may be that thinking of these other churches, especially the one where he was at Corinth, led to this warning about false teachers and those who cause divisions. It would be foolish to think that the church at Rome would escape such things.

Paul told the Romans the essentials of the gospel (chapters 1-8) and then how to deal with non-essential differences (chapter 14). Some people, deliberately or otherwise, confuse these two categories. While some call essentials non- essentials, others call non-essentials essentials. Either way, whether it be the antinomians/libertines or the legalists, the gospel is perverted and the unity of the church is threatened. Unity in the church is maintained by belief in the truth of the gospel and by faithful living out of this truth. Those who know the love of God in Jesus Christ will love God and love their neighbour also. They will not be looking out for themselves, making sure their needs are met before the needs of others.

Paul hated false teachers, those who twist the word of God and those who mix the pure gospel with the teaching of men. It was not that these men were confused. Confused men can be taught the way of God more accurately, like Apollos. No, these men teach their own ideas for their own benefit. They want to be popular or to have power. They want to get rich- money is the root of all kinds of evil, including the evil of false teaching and false religion. Jesus used strong words to condemn false teachers. He said it is impossible that no offences should come, but woe to him through whom they come (Luke 17:1). The Greek word ’*skandalon*’ is used by Luke and Paul and is translated as 'offences'. Jesus condemned the Pharisees for their legalistic demands upon the people of God, especially when they failed to obey their own rules.

Paul does not indicate just who might cause divisions in the church at Rome. Some think Judaizers were in his sights; others think libertines or proto-Gnostics (Morris). Judaizers were Jews who followed Paul demanding that Gentile converts be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses. Paul would soon face such men in Jerusalem. Legalists like this are still disrupting churches today- even Presbyterian churches. It is not uncommon for an individual or a group to enter a church and start demanding people conform to a certain dress code, a certain version of the Bible or certain Sabbath rules. This person or persons gets a few ‘converts’ and then starts challenging the minister and elders- if they have not been made elders. The challenge is, ‘change your ways or we will take the people elsewhere’. Years ago we had a man come here wanting to start a Bible study in the church. He had his own legalistic ideas and wanted to spread them. Small churches with a new minister are particularly vulnerable. Keep your eye out for men or women who cause divisions. If necessary look into their history- you may well find they are serial troublemakers.

It may have been libertines or antinomians that Paul was warning the Romans about. He had certainly had his trouble with such people at Corinth- probably men from a Gentile background. In that church there were all manner of backgrounds represented- idolaters, adulterers, homosexuals, thieves and so on (1Cor 6:9-10). When they believed they turned from such wicked ways- they were washed, justified, and sanctified in the name of Jesus. But there were those who fell back into old ways and sought to justify themselves under the freedom of the gospel. There was the case of sexual immorality tolerated and even praised (1Cor 5). We cannot but reflect on preachers or churches today that praise themselves for having the first homosexual bishop, or being the first to marry homosexuals. Such ‘*skandalon*’ have led to divisions in the church- which obviously follows when so-called ‘liberal theology’ is taught and practiced. False teaching may be the new ideas of men, or it may be ancient church tradition. Any doctrine contrary to what is found in the inspired and infallible word of God is to be rejected, whether it is old or new. ‘Avoid them’ says the apostle (16:17). Have nothing to do with them. You cannot fellowship with such people (2Cor 6:14).

Paul goes on to explain the motives of such people. They are not men or women seeking to ‘serve our Lord Jesus Christ’ (16:18). It is their own ‘belly’ they are focussed on. ‘Their god is their belly’, as Paul tells the Philippians (Phil 3:19). These are earthly minded people, pedalling the gospel for profit. We see such men on the TV, especially in America. They are smooth talkers as Paul says. They often know the Bible, or parts of it, such that they can string together texts into a message by which they can get their hands into your pocket as quickly as possible. They often follow the healing routine, calling people with sore knees and bad backs to come out and be healed. Boice writes of one California-based evangelist who, during a large crusade, claimed to have supernatural knowledge of names and ailments of several people in the audience. Someone found that his wife had previously contacted these people and was messaging him the information during the meeting.

These are the smooth talkers, men who appear to be kind and loving but are wolves in sheep’s clothing (cf. Acts 20:29). These are men who love to flatter others for their own nefarious ends. Flattering speech can be used by ministers and elders in any church for the purpose of gaining the favour and following of various people. Paul warns us not to be deceived by smooth talking, and usually fast talking men- they are not usually men who listen to what you have to say. If you are a person who thinks the best and not the worst of others, and I hope you are such a person, do be aware of the clever, ‘wolf in sheep’s clothing’ kind of person. Know your Bible and test their words against what is written. Look beyond the smooth words and into the heart- to do this you will need to pray. If they refuse to acknowledge the truth of the gospel, and to demonstrate this truth in their life, shun them. Avoid them like the plaque. John Macarthur writes of smooth talkers; ‘they are often driven by self-interest and self-gratification- sometimes for fame, sometimes for power over their followers, always for financial gain and frequently for all those reasons. Many of them enjoy pretentious and luxurious lifestyles, and sexual immorality is the rule more than the exception’.

**2. Sincere**’For your obedience has become known to all’ (16:19). Paul was given to praise where praise is due- but not flattery. These words however, were also by way of alerting the Roman Christians. If their faith and obedience was widely known, false teachers would soon target them. These men are, after all, agents of Satan, as we will soon be told. But Paul is also expressing confidence in the saints in Rome. If they read this letter and firmly hold to what Paul taught them, they would be well equipped to stand against men bringing false doctrine and division to their church. ‘I want you to be wise in what is good, and simple concerning evil’ (16:19). The threat of ‘divisions and offences’ should not cause the saints to be fearful or overly sceptical, and go into lockdown mode. Some churches are like this- they only ever grow as member families grow. What Paul wants, as Morris says, is for ‘Christian’s to avoid both gullibility and cynicism’.

Jesus told his disciples to be, ‘wise as serpents and as harmless/innocent as doves’ (Mat 10:16- the same word as ‘simple’ in our text). Wisdom includes intelligence. It includes knowing what is written in the Bible. Jesus answered Satan with words of Scripture. You can answer false teachers with words of Scripture- use John 1:1 in answering the Jehovah Witnesses who are not Trinitarian. How can you become intelligent in the Scriptures? By listening to the word preached! Those who say they know it all and do not need to come to church are the very ones who are taken in by cults and false teachers.

Beware of those who say you must experience evil to know evil. ‘How can you condemn this book or this movie if you have not seen it’ they say. If the book is promoted for its immorality or idolatry you know it is evil- pornography for example. It is good to be innocent concerning evil, especially spiritual evil. Stay away from the occult. ‘Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good’ (12:9). What is good? God is good (Luke 18:19). Being wise means having knowledge of God and his word and using this to direct your behaviour, rather than the wisdom of the world. Wisdom from above is pure and peaceable, and without hypocrisy (James 3:17). Learn to be discerning in what you listen to and what you believe.

**3. Satan crushed**If Paul’s call to look out for and avoid false teachers comes as a surprise at this point in the letter, his reference to Satan is even more surprising- and objectionable to some. There are people in the church, even preachers, who do not believe Satan exists. They speak of Satan as some mythical figure. But the Bible speaks of Satan as actively opposing God and his people. He is the adversary. He tempted Jesus. Satan entered Judas. Satan wanted to sift Peter as wheat (Luke 22). What brought Satan to Paul’s mind at this point in the letter? The reference to God crushing Satan under your feet (16:20) has obvious links back to Genesis 3:15. Genesis chapter 3 is about sin entering the world; it tells about when Satan promised Eve that by eating the forbidden fruit her eyes would be open and she would be like God, knowing good and evil. There it is - good and evil! Eve wanted to know both, and by disobeying God she lost her innocence of evil. When she knew only good, she and Adam had fellowship with God. Satan stepped in and tempted her to doubt God and his goodness, and to promise her she could be like God.

This remains the essential feature of sin -wanting to be a god. If you are god you do not have to answer to Almighty God, your maker and judge. You are free to do as you like - free to sin. But the truth is, you are a slave to sin. Satan tempted Adam and Eve to sin and brought them under the curse of death. The gospel tells of Jesus’ death and resurrection, his victory over sin and its consequence-death. Satan opposes the gospel. He was active in bringing about the death of Jesus but his plan backfired. The victory of Jesus was prophesied in Genesis 3:15; ‘the seed of the woman will crush/bruise the head of the serpent’.

Paul encourages the saints in Rome saying, ‘The God of peace will crush Satan under your feet shortly’ (16:20). Satan is defeated, but he still fights against God and his people. He will ultimately be crushed and thrown into the lake of fire. Satan is evil. He is a loser and those who join him in evil will go down with him.

‘The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you’ (16:20). Paul is again moved to a benediction; a prayer for the beloved of the Lord at Rome. He prays for the grace of God to be upon them. By the grace of God they are saved, and by the grace of God they will be sanctified and preserved till the coming of the Lord. Do you know this saving and sustaining grace of God?

**Companions in Corinth send greetings** Romans 16:21-24

The apostle Paul lists more names as he closes his letter to the Romans, this time of people present with him in Corinth. They wanted to send greetings to brothers and sisters in the church at Rome. The previous list of twenty four men and women from all sorts of backgrounds were members of the Roman church- or different house churches in that city. This time just eight men are listed.

Lest you find these names foreign and uninteresting let me share with you what Dr Boice has to say on this passage; ‘What is said, though brief, is one of the most remarkable pictures of the Christian life and fellowship from the ancient world or, for that matter, from all history or literature’. We will take this bold claim on board as we look at this passage. We remember that the Bible is historical; it is not just a book of rules or doctrine. We have looked at lots of doctrine in this letter itself, but remember, it is a letter written to a church in the first century. If we do this it will be easier for us to apply things to our church in the twenty first century.

**1. Companions**

This list of names in these closing verses are all men, men present with the apostle Paul in a house in Corinth. He was in Corinth waiting to go to Jerusalem with a special collection from local churches for the poor Christians in Judea. He was in Corinth for three months (Acts 20:3). In these greetings we learn about where he was staying and how he produced this letter.

The first name is familiar to us; it is that of ‘Timothy, my fellow worker’ (16:21). Timothy was a young man of mixed parentage- his mother was a Jew and his father a Greek. He must have heard Paul preaching the gospel at Lystra on his first missionary journey, because on his second missionary journey Paul found Timothy and took him along as his assistant. Timothy became Paul’s right hand man. He wrote of him saying, ‘I have no one like-minded, who will sincerely care for your state…as a son with his father he served with me in the gospel’ (Phil 2:20,22). In the Bible we have two letters that Paul wrote to Timothy, ‘a true son in the faith’ (1Tim 1:2).

In many of his letters Paul includes Timothy as a co-author. Why did he not do so in this letter to the Romans? Was it because Timothy was not so well known to the Roman church? Or was it because Timothy was not present when Paul began this letter? He was present as Paul concluded the letter and wanted to send his greetings to fellow believers in Rome.

‘Lucius, Jason and, Sosipater, my countrymen, greet you’ (16:21). ‘Countrymen’ or ‘kinsmen’ means ‘of the same origin’. It means they are fellow Jews who believe in Jesus Christ. We do not know anything about Lucius apart from his name- which is a Roman name. There was a Lucius at Antioch but he is not thought to be the same person (Acts 13:1). Nor is this Luke the physician, who was not a Jew and whose name, though similar, is different. Jason was from the church at Thessalonica. He took Paul into his house and later got dragged out by a mob for doing so (Acts 17:5-9). Sosipater may well be the Sopater of Berea who, ‘accompanied Paul to Asia’ (Acts 20:4). It seems that these men had come with their collections to join Paul on his visit to Jerusalem. They wanted to add their names and greetings to this letter going to fellow believers in Rome.

**2. Commoners or slaves**

‘I Tertius, who wrote this letter, greet you in the Lord’ (16:22). Paul used a secretary or amanuensis to write his letters- they were written on scrolls of papyrus. Tertius is the only such person named. He is a fellow believer who greets the saints at Rome in the Lord; although the Greek actually reads, ‘I Tertius greet you, who wrote this letter in the Lord’. ‘In the Lord’ refers to how he wrote the letter. It was a great privilege for this man to listen to the great apostle dictate this amazing letter.

Clearly Tertius was educated, but his name indicates that he was a slave or servant. His name simply means, ‘third boy’. Apparently this was how slaves were named- first boy, second boy, third boy, and so on. We come across ’fourth boy’ or Quartus in the next verse. ‘First boy’ would be like the butler. These men belonged to the house of Gaius in which Paul was staying. We read of a ‘Secundus of the Thessalonians’ in Acts 20:4.

So Tertius was the third ranked slave in this household. Number one and number two must not have been present in room at the time, or else they were not believers. Quartus was there, another brother in the Lord. Boice pictures him standing off to the side as a lowly fourth servant boy would, but right at the end raising his hand to say, ’Don’t forget me’. So last but not least, the name of Quartus is added to this letter to be read in the church at Rome, and by millions more down through the ages.

The gospel of Jesus Christ brought huge changes to the household of Gaius, an obviously well-to-do man living in a large house in Corinth. He became a Christian and some of his servants also became Christians, probably through his witness. We were blessed to see our household servant in India become a Christian- not that we had such a huge house! These men kept working as slaves for Gaius, but they now did their work as unto the Lord; and Gaius was treating these slaves as brothers in Christ. Their names went next to each other on this letter.

Not only were their names together; they would have sat together for worship on Sundays, singing and praying together. Such a situation was revolutionary in that day- and even today in many places. The apostle Paul is often criticised for condoning slavery. This is because people do not understand the power of the gospel. Through the gospel the idea of one man being born above another goes out the door- it is unthinkable. The idea of one man rising in status above another because of money or education is also unthinkable. All become one in Jesus Christ: Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female (Gal 3:28). Jew and Gentile, slave and free, were present with Paul at this time, and all got to send their personal greeting to the church in Rome. This was revolutionary!

**3. Corinthians**

We have already referred to Gaius who was hosting Paul at this time. Indeed, he hosted the whole church (16:23). He must have been a rich man to have such a large house. Who was this man called Gaius? His full name was probably Gaius Titius Justus, a Roman citizen. We come across Gaius in Paul’s second missionary journey. His house was next door to the synagogue in Corinth. He was a worshipper of God; in fact he was baptised by Paul (1Cor 1:14). He opened his home for Christian worship when the Jews rejected the gospel and threw them out of the synagogue.

Gaius’ house has become a place of refuge and warm Christian fellowship in this bustling pagan city. His door was always open. It is one thing to go to a hotel when you arrive in a foreign city but quite another to be welcomed into the home of a fellow believer. As a missionary I always carried the mission prayer calendar so that when I arrived in a foreign city I could contact a fellow believer- then they stopped including addresses and phone numbers! Hospitality was something the roving apostle Paul knew about. He urged Christians to practice hospitality in this very letter (13:13). Gaius was a very gracious host. What about you? Do you valiantly guard your privacy like so many in our society?

‘Erastus, the treasurer of the city, greets you’ (16:23). This man is unlikely to have been Paul’s travelling companion of the same name mentioned elsewhere (Acts 19:22). He had a responsible job on the Corinthian city council. ‘Treasurer’ is a translation of the Greek, ‘*oikonomos*’ meaning ‘house manager’. The NIV translates as ‘director of public works’. Here we have a top public servant who is a Christian and willing to put his name alongside that of a rich man and a couple of slaves on a letter written by the Paul the preacher. What a wonderful picture of Christian fellowship. Yes, the names of other Jews were also on this letter.

Moreover, Erastus the Christian continued in his quasi-political job, most likely working alongside lots of pagans in this city. Haldane comments, ‘It shows that Christians may hold offices even under heathen governments, and that to serve Christ we are not to be abstracted from worldly businesses’. Christians in the NT church came from all walks of life and areas of employment; they remained in their jobs after conversion, unless they were in immoral or illegal businesses.

Erastus (meaning ‘beloved’) was a common enough name at the time. An archaeological dig in Corinth has come up with a pavement stone from the first century. On this stone is written, ‘Erastus in return for his aedileship laid (the pavement) at his own expense’. This is may well refer to the Erastus here in Paul’s letter. The aedile was the Director of Public Works, which is not the same as Treasurer, but this Erastus may have held both positions or moved from one to the other. Corroboration of the Biblical record in this way is interesting, although in no way necessary.

So there it is, an amazing glimpse into life in the early church. A wonderful mix of people came together for one reason- for one person in fact, the person of Jesus Christ. They came together to worship Jesus Christ our Lord. They were not all interested in football or golf; they were not all interested in sewing or cooking; they were not all interested in partying or even parenting. They came together because of their common bond to Jesus Christ, a bond established by the grace of God in the gospel.

Is there anything else in this world that brings together people from such diverse backgrounds, rich and poor, slave and free, male and female from all nations? ‘What about the Olympics?’ you say. Yes, people from all walks of life and all nations come together for the Olympics, but for how long and how often? In the church we meet at least once a week – the early church met daily. We continue steadfast in the apostle’s teaching and fellowship, watching and waiting for the return of the King and Head of the church, Jesus Christ our Lord.

‘The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen’ (16:24). This benediction is not found in all MSS but is entirely appropriate as Paul closes his letter to the Romans. He has, of course, just said much the same prayer before these final greetings from the brothers in the house of Gaius (16:20). Maybe these greeting were impromptu, the outcome of his looking around the room, or of Tertius wanting to write a personal word at the end of the letter. As we have said, their brotherhood was based on their being in the family of Jesus Christ, the Head of the church in every place and for all time. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.

**The only wise God** Romans 16:25-27

We come to the end of what most regard as the greatest letter written by the apostle Paul, and the greatest letter written in the history of mankind. We have been studying this letter for two and a half years with one hundred and fifteen sermons. This is only half the number preached by Dr Jim Boice, and not even one third the number preached by Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones. We could well go back and start again, such is the marvel of this letter- not that this is my intention!

This letter has been used by God to convert many souls, and to teach many more the precious truths of justification by grace alone, through faith alone, and of the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. It has also taught us of the sovereignty of God in creation, in redemption and in judgment upon this world. Leon Morris must have been a mathematically minded man because he tells us the word ‘God’ occurs one hundred and fifty three times in this letter, with an average of once every forty-six words. ‘This is more than any other NT writing’ he says. One reason for this may be that the letter was going to Rome, the centre of the Roman Empire. Historians like Jim Harrison remind us of the religious features of this empire. Nero and other emperors assumed divine status in this pagan empire. This pagan world had a cyclical view of time in which each new emperor (new god?) brought the promise of better times.

Roman society was polytheistic- the new emperor simply added his name to the list of gods. Christians worshipping Jesus was no problem unless they refused to worship Caesar also. In his thesis Harrison discusses these things as they relate to this closing doxology of Romans. He writes, ‘It could be viably argued that Paul is here engaging the Julio-Claudian propaganda’. These ideas can become too imposing on our reading of this letter, but we should keep in mind the socio-political context in which Paul was writing.

We should keep in mind the socio-political context in which we preach the gospel today. We live in an increasingly pluralistic society; we are being told to recognise many gods. The cry of ‘intolerance’ goes up when we refuse to bow down to other gods. We live is a secular society – this word comes from the Latin meaning ‘an age’. Secularism is a religion tied to this world and this age. It worships created things, principally human beings- hence the description ‘secular humanism’.

Let me go a little further before we get into our text for today. In 1859 Charles Darwin brought forward a theory about the origin of human beings called evolution. This theory has taken hold in our society because it removes God as the creator of all things. So many people believe that millions or billions of years ago life somehow just appeared- indeed the universe just appeared. This is looking into the past. What about the future? Evolution taught that man was still evolving into a higher being- although after two world wars some doubts have arisen.

We now have a new theory that addresses the future. Al Gore is seen as the father of this theory. It tells us that man is in charge of this planet and he must urgently do something to save it. Like evolution, this new theory deliberately ignores God. And like evolution lots of Christians are being deceived. Remember what Leon Morris wrote- the name of God occurs 153 times in this letter. Why? Because God is sovereign in this world that he made. Our future is in his hands.

Still by way of introduction we briefly note that some scholars do not accept this doxology as authentic. They point to the fact that some Greek manuscripts do not have it, while others have it at the end of chapter 14. Many blame a heretic called Marcion for cutting off chapters 15 and 16 because he did not like the OT or anything Jewish. Others think the end of the papyrus scroll simply broke off! These are interesting ideas but, as we will see, this doxology ties in very well with the opening chapter of Romans. Keener actually tabulates the parallels for us. So putting controversy and speculation aside, let us look at this doxology as we have it.

Paul wrote it under divine inspiration. He had no doubts about his apostolic authority. He writes here of ‘my gospel’ (16:25), not that it was his idea or that it was different to the gospel of the other apostles, but he had been chosen by God to preach the gospel of grace to the Gentiles. He was ‘separated to the gospel of God which he promised before through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures, concerning his Son Jesus Christ our Lord’ (1:1-3).

**1. Power**

‘Now to him who is able to establish you’ (16:25). This is a doxology, not a benediction, which is actually a prayer. A doxology is an outburst giving glory to God (16:27 *doxa*= glory). Such is the majesty and glory of God that words become hard to find. This doxology is the apostle’s inspired effort to find suitable words, as in his previous doxology at the end of chapter 11. Paul did not speak of God’s power (*dunamis*) there but concluded, ‘For from him and through him and to him are all things’ (11:36).

God is all powerful- he is omnipotent. He created everything out of nothing (Heb 11:3). This is powerful! He did this by the power of his word. His power is seen again in the cross and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. He defeated sin and death. He defeated Satan whose power is in death. ‘The God of peace will crush Satan under your feet’ (16:20). Man has no power to do this- to overcome death. But God raised Jesus from the dead. In the gospel preached by the apostle Paul Jesus is ‘declared to be the Son of God with power… by the resurrection from the dead’ (1:4).

Paul preached ‘Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God’ (1Cor 1:24). He preached to Jew and Greek. The Greeks loved their philosophy but this was not philosophy. All their philosophers are dead and buried, just like all the Roman emperors- even those who thought they were gods. Jesus also died but then he rose from the dead. God in his mighty power ‘raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality and power and might and dominion’ (Eph 1:20,21).

This is the sovereign God Paul proclaimed. This is the God who is ‘able to establish you according to my gospel’ (16:25). Establish means to fix or set in place. God is able to ‘set you in concrete’ as it were. He is able to make you stand, ‘and having done all, to stand’ (Eph 6:13). ‘Finally brothers, be strong in the Lord and power of his might’ (Eph 6:10). The apostle glories in the power of God to save and to keep his chosen ones, ‘such that nothing shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Jesus Christ our Lord’ (8:39).

**2. Everlasting**

God is infinite and eternal and unchangeable in his being (Shorter Catechism Question 4). Paul refers to the everlasting God (16:26) - in contrast to the emperor god. He speaks of, ‘the mystery kept secret since the world began’ (16:25). Now we are going back a way! Before the world began means before man existed or even the world existed. Paul does not speak of billions of years- he speaks of eternity. He believed what is written in Genesis 1:1; ‘In the beginning God’. That there was a Big Bang two million five hundred and twenty three years ago (or whatever the latest date is!) is not what we read in the Bible. We read that God who is infinite and eternal created the heavens and the earth.

God made this world and he will destroy this world- just when, he does not tell us. We are not told to look for these dates but to look to God. It is more important to find God than find the origin of the universe. It is important to understand that God, who is from everlasting to everlasting, is in control of the world we live in, lest you fear a man like Nero, Hitler, Putin or Al Gore is in control.

God has acted in this time line of eternity to create this world and everything in it. The story of humanity in this world is the story of the Bible. The man created by God disobeyed God’s command and brought the whole the creation into corruption and decay. Death entered the world. None of this contradicts what we observe in the world today. Yet even as sin entered the world God had a plan to reverse the curse, to redeem mankind and make a new earth. This plan he ‘kept secret since the world began’ (16:25). He kept it secret until the revelation of Jesus Christ because it was in Him that this plan became a reality.

Jesus was not just another self-proclaimed prophet who would soon disappear along with his followers- as Gamaliel suggested (Acts 5:38). Jesus is the offspring of David according to the flesh but the Son of God by virtue of the power of the resurrection (1:4). Jesus is the eternal Son of God; he is the same yesterday, today and forever (Heb 13:8). God’s plan to send Jesus into this world is from eternity. It is written in the prophetic Scriptures (16:26). Jesus has come and fulfilled the plan of God. The Son of God has come and is here to stay as the only Saviour of human beings, and the only mediator between God and man’ (Acts 4:12, 1Tim 2:5).

**3. Revelation**

The righteousness of God, which is central to God’s plan of salvation, is revealed in the gospel (1:17). It is a righteous which is from faith to faith with no place for works. It comes through Jesus Christ. Christ’s righteousness is imputed to us who believe. Paul does not use the word ‘righteousness’ here in this doxology but he does so some thirty times in this letter. God’s righteousness is at the centre of his revelation; the mystery now made manifest.

We last saw Paul using the word ‘mystery’ in relation to the way God planned for the Gentiles to hear the gospel (11:25). The gospel announced in the Holy Scriptures went first to the Jews. Abraham believed in God and it was credited to him as righteousness (Gen 15:6). But when this gospel was fully revealed in Jesus Christ the Jews rejected it and so it was offered to the Gentiles- who accepted it, making the Jews jealous, just as God planned. This was a mystery.

Yet the bigger mystery was the very essence of God’s salvation. It is the righteous of God now revealed as apart from the law (3:21). It is the ‘mystery of Christ’ (Col 4:3,1:27). Morris writes of this mystery as pointing to ‘the gospel as something that people could never have worked out for themselves. The truth that the Son of God would come from heaven to live and die for us, and that we enter into salvation only by faith is him, is not obvious and could be known to us only when and as God revealed it’. Paul in this doxology is so incredibly thankful that God has revealed this mystery. It was veiled in the OT but revealed in the new covenant in the blood of Jesus Christ.

The infinite and eternal God, the high and lofty one whose ways are beyond our understanding, in his love and grace has revealed himself to us sinners. ’How unsearchable are his judgments and his ways past finding out’ (11:33). Is this what you understand about God- that he is beyond your understanding? May we never think we know better than God - by thinking that we can save ourselves by good works? May we never bring God down to our level and try to argue with him, as Job did. May we always be thankful that God revealed himself and his plan of salvation in Jesus Christ, because in the history of mankind no one else has come up with a way to defeat death- and that in all the nations? Hundreds of religions- none can save but Christ alone.

God is not only all powerful and eternal; he is also holy and just. Sin screwed up man’s ability to judge with justice. God’s plan of salvation had to be just and at the same time justify sinners. When Adam disobeyed God’s command he was justly sentenced to death- and all mankind with him. For God to simply ignore this sin and its penalty would have been unjust. The mystery revealed in Jesus is that God the Son would take the penalty so that God the Father might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (3:26).

For Keener the most important echo of Romans 1:2-5 in this closing doxology is the ‘obedience of faith’ (16:26). In the gospel the commandment of the everlasting God is made known to all the nations. ‘Gospel’ means ‘good news’, but it is only good news to those who respond in faith- obedience of faith. The message of the gospel demands a response. When Peter preached at Pentecost the listeners were cut to the bone and cried out, ‘What must we do to be saved?’ (Acts 2:37). They did not mock or turn away saying, ‘what an interesting philosophy’. They did not say, ‘If it works for you, good; but something else works for me’. Will the sovereign God be mocked? No. God will not be ignored by Jew or Gentile.

**4. Wise**

The doxology comes to a climax, if that is possible, in the words, ‘to God, alone wise’ or ‘to the only wise God be glory through Jesus Christ forever. Amen’ (16:27). His previous doxology noted the wisdom and knowledge of God as unsearchable (11:33). Here he notes that God alone is truly wise. He concludes by ascribing all glory to God through Jesus Christ. We can do no more than praise God for his great and gracious salvation. We stand in awe and deep thankfulness for what God planned and executed through his own beloved Son. As we look back over this letter we lift out hearts in praise and adoration, today and every day, as we await the return of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

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