

THE LETTER TO THE ROMANS – PART II

LAW AND GRACE, LIVING AS CHILDREN OF GOD

I. Chapters 3 through 7 raise and then respond to various objections that could be made against the notion of salvation by grace and faith in Jesus.

A. Chapter 3 begins with raising several questions in rhetorical form and then giving a short answer, to be completed in subsequent chapters.

1. The first four questions concern the Old Covenant, and in particular, why God called people to be Jews if in fact the old law did not save, and why there was an old covenant if God knew the people would be unfaithful.

- The quick answer is that the ancient law provided "oracles" foreseeing in fact salvation would occur, and the old covenant did last despite the people's unfaithfulness. Chapter 4 (and to some degree the rest of chapter 3) will develop this theme with reference especially to Abraham, and the promises made to him.

2. The next two questions deal with whether the wrath of God is just, for human sinfulness is inevitable. There is only a short answer to this question, pointing to the fact that sin must offend God. Chapter 5 will develop the theme that it is Jesus who provided satisfaction for sin.

3. The final two questions ask what difference sins make if we are not saved by works anyway.

- The short answer is simply a reference to the punishment of those who think this way. Chapters 6 will refer to the slavery to sin that is the punishment for not caring about righteousness.

4. By referring to "our wickedness" and "I [being] condemned as a sinner," St. Paul is conceding that his life is not perfectly righteous. Chapter 7 will describe the continuing conflict in the Christian life.

B. The rest of chapter 3 describes the universal sinfulness of humanity and the universal salvation offered by Jesus, but does so especially in reference to Jewish Scriptures, thus making this section partially a general theme for the letter and partially a

response to the question of why Judaism was important.

1. After saying in verse 2 that the Jews were better off because of their oracles, St. Paul then says that they are not entirely better off because all are sinful, as the oracles themselves say. He then strings together several quotes to make this conclusion

- Verses 10-12 quote from the nearly identical Psalms 14 and 53, which at the same time describe universal human sinfulness, but also that some people are God's people and that He will provide for them. The letter will develop this theme of God's saving power through Jesus.
- Verses 13 and 14 quote from Psalms 5, 10 and 140, which are pleas for help against God's enemies. There is an implication that we are all at one time or another enemies of God.
- Verses 15 to 17 are most likely a quote from Isaiah 59, in which the prophets describes how all of Israel has been sinful, but how the Lord will make His covenant work all the same. See Is. 59:7-8; see also Prov. 1:16.
- Verse 18 quotes from Psalm 36, which again calls for God's protection against the wicked. There is again an implication that all people on earth are to some degree wicked.
- Verse 19 then states the conclusion that we all should see the law and know, through the law, that we are sinners and fall short of it.

2. Verses 21 to 26 then give the solution, that the law and the prophets pointed the way to Jesus, who provided satisfaction for our sins and bring us justification. There is here also partially an answer to how God can be righteous and save us at the same time. The righteousness of Jesus both gives satisfaction for sins and makes us just.

- This notion of expiation seems to be based upon both the Jewish notion of redeeming a relative who was captured, see Lev. 25:25, or to the idea that at the Day of Atonement, which symbolized the forgiveness of sins by sending a goat, who would symbolically carry the people's sins, into the desert.

3. Verses 27 to 30 then conclude that now, under Jesus Christ, there is universal salvation and that no one should claim

credit for having been Jewish before being Christian. He points out that this universal salvation was the goal of the whole law in the first place.

C. Chapter 4 then describes how Abraham receive the promises of the covenant and became a patriarch before the law was given or he performed any works.

1. In Genesis, the covenant begins with God making Abraham the promise that he would be the father of a great nations and that all nations would be blessed in him. See Gen. 12:1-3. This promise is later reiterated in subsequent visions, which clarify the promise of children and land. See Gen. 15:1-6, 17:1-22.
2. Citing especially the second of the three visions, St. Paul emphasizes the fact that the moral and cultic law had not even been given, and that Abraham did nothing to merit the covenant except put faith in God.
3. The argument is that, as heirs of Abraham, we also receive the covenant by faith without merit. As chapters 7 and 8 will emphasize, there is no inconsistency with the doctrine from the letter of James that we must act on our faith, lest the faith be dead. See James 2:14-26. To make this point, he quotes from Psalm 32, in which King David praises God for accepting his confession and forgiving his sins.

D. Chapter 5 then describes the paradoxical justice of God that brought about redemption through His Son's sacrifice.

1. It begins by addressing the paradox many Christians must have wondered at, i.e. why it is that before accepting Christ they got along perfectly well, but now are suffering. St. Paul responds that this suffering opens up to the joyousness and glory of salvation in Christ.
2. He then proceeds with a poignant analogy that anyone should understand, i.e., dying to save another person, the highest act of human love. Cf. John 15:13. St. Paul argues that Jesus' sacrifice was greater than that because He died to save the unjust, who had offended Him. And now His risen life confers God's saving power all the more.

3. The chapter then introduces the theme of the three ages.

- Verses 12 to 14 describe how from Adam to Moses, death reigned, for there was a break between humanity and

God. Although people may not have been as guilty of sin because the law was not known well, there was still that fundamental flaw that kept us from life with God.

- Verses 20 and 21 describe how, from Moses to Christ, the law was given that sin may become more obvious and thus people recognize their need for salvation.

- Verses 15 to 19 at the center describe the perfect balance through which justice is restored as one perfect act more than balances out the sins of humanity, which began with the one sin of Adam. Thus, there is both mercy and a just balance.

E. Chapter 6 responds to the question of why a Christian should avoid sin, or uphold the law, if he is not saved by the law anyway.

1. Verses 2 to 11 focus on the union with Christ as being its own motive. The idea is that, if we truly have faith, we will be in union with Christ and, therefore, will have died to sin, which in turn will eliminate our desire for sin. This liberation from sin is effectively receiving already a new body in Christ, one that will be raised again in glory.

- Here, as elsewhere, sin is portrayed as almost a personal force that seeks to dominate our lives through our desires. The unity with Christ breaks that dominance and makes us want to live in accord with the law of Christ and of the Spirit. Chapter 8 will discuss more of the Spirit.

- Verse 2 clearly ties this unity with Christ to baptism, without any apparent need for argumentation. It seems that the fact of baptism was already established among the Romans. Cf. Acts 2:38.

2. Verses 12 to 23 then discuss the notion of service and life and death.

- As with classic Wisdom literature, the letter presents two ways and two ways only, slavery to righteousness through Christ and slavery to sin. To the degree that one willingly sins, one is a slave to sin, which in turn leads to death. The "slavery" to righteousness is, by contrast, only a human term and only superficially related to the alternative, for it leads to holiness and everlasting life. Chapter 8 will go further and say that we become nothing less than sons and daughters of God.

- These verses are building on Jesus' discussion of the freedom He offers, a freedom built upon truth and obedience, which makes us children and friends of God. See John 8:31-59, 15:11-17.

F. Chapter 7 then goes back and discusses the continuing effects of the law and of sinfulness.

1. After the discussion in chapter 6, one could be inclined to think that once one is Christian, one would never be tempted to sin again. But that is contrary to experience.

2. The first 6 verses begin with an analogy between marriage and the relationship of humanity and the law. Humanity was in a sense married to the law, but sin kept acting almost as an adulterous lover, conceiving sin. This analogy may build upon the common Old Testament analogy between God's relationship to His people and a marriage, to which the people were -often unfaithful. See, e.g., Is. 1:21; Jer. 2:1-3:5; Hos. 2:4-3:5.

- Here, there is a curiosity, for it is the death to sin of the now faithful ones that ends the marriage with the law, and leads to a new life in the Spirit.

3. Verse 7 to 13 continues the theme that the law is a great and glorious thing, but sin used that glorious law to produce sin, for humans tend to resist anything above them. But even this temptation works towards salvation, for the more sins that sin produced, the more obvious the problem became.

4. The letter then continues on along this line, but implying that sin continues to work its effect in St. Paul, or the general person, even though the reign of grace has begun.

- The implication is that, on this earth, the death to sin, and entrance into grace, still needs to be completed, for the power of sin is not ended. Cf. 1 John 1:5-10. Even now there is a conflict between the flesh and the soul.

II. Chapter 8 then stands in the center describing the new life in the Spirit that Christ brings.

A. The chapter builds upon the prophecies of Jeremiah and Ezekiel that God would bring about a new Covenant for His people by pouring out His Spirit upon them. See Jer. 31:31-34; Ez. 36:22-37:14.

B. The first 13 verses dramatically describe the difference between the way of the Spirit and the way of the flesh.

1. The section begins by speaking about the spirit in the more general way, as in "the spirit of Christ." But by the end of this subsection and for the rest of the chapter, St. Paul describes the Spirit of God in increasingly personal terms as the one who raised Jesus and the one who leads us and comes to our assistance.

2. Living according to the "flesh" here means serving mere desire, which rebels against God who draws the spirit higher. By contrast the Spirit raises us up to a life of the spirit that is at the realm of God a realm beyond death.

C. Verses 14 to 17 take the issue even further and promise nothing less than adopted sonship of God, being heirs to a greater kingdom. This promise even more dramatically distinguishes the seeming slavery to righteousness with the slavery to sin. However, he reminds us, in order to be sons of God, we must be willing to join Christ in His suffering.

D. Verses 18 to 27 describe this suffering of Christians as a part of the suffering of all of creation as it awaits redemption.

- St. Paul describes here the mystery that even nature was affected by the fall of man (and presumably of angels) and needs to be, and will be, redeemed.

- Verses 26 and 27 adds a recognition that prayer too is difficult, but that the Spirit guides in this way too, referring at the end to Psalm 139, which marvels at the wonder of God's providence and the mystery of His ways.

E. Verses 28 to 39 then celebrate God's providence, making all things work for those who love God.

1. Verses 29 and 30 give the progression from God's knowledge of us to predestination to calling to justification and finally glory as adopted sons through Jesus Christ.

- One has to recognize that God's knowledge is eternal, and thus terms such as pre-destination and foreknowledge do not imply that the future is fixed, for past, present and future are all one to God. He knows who is saved, not because He has fixed from the time someone is conceived, or from the creation of the world, who is saved and who is not, but rather because He sees all time as one.

- What St. Paul is trying to do is stress the primacy of grace, not make a point about free will. In chapters 13 and 14 he describes how the work of God can be destroyed by scandal. See especially Rom. 14:20-22; see also 1 Cor. 9:27; Phil. 3:12-14.

2. Verses 31-34 then speak of his confidence that God will deliver us from sins, for He has already invested in us the death of His only Son.

3. Verses 35 to 39 also speak of the power of God over anything external to the self. Such things are unable to separate us from God.

- Noteworthy, however, he does not say that sin cannot separate us from God. Such a choice can break off that life in the Spirit, as the letter will later indicate.

III. Chapters 9 to 11 then discuss how God worked through the Jewish people, but now how He has made the covenant available to all.

A. The chapter is balancing two considerations: (1) the fact that God truly called His people and brought about salvation through them; but (2) the fact that salvation now belongs to all the world. He wants to avoid either the error of thinking that Christianity is simply a different sort of Judaism, or thinking that the Jewish Scriptures are irrelevant.

B. St. Paul speaks of his love for his former people and the glory they have received. And he predicts confidently that his people will come to the Gospel. See Rom. 9:1-5, 10:1-4, 11:17-29.

C. In chapter 9, St. Paul points out that Abraham and Isaac had other descendants, and that God called the few to prepare the way for the many to be saved. Why He chose some and not others is mysterious, but that choice did not mean others could not be saved. For, as verses 30-33 point out salvation was by faith, not by works of the law. In fact, an over-dependence upon the law caused many Jews to stumble.

D. Chapter 10 and the beginning of chapter 11 argue that even the Jewish Scripture said all along that salvation would be by belief, not by work, and that Moses, Elijah, Isaiah and the Psalms among others spoke of a remnant being saved, while others disbelieved. The point is that it is hardly surprising that most of the Jewish people did not accept the Gospel immediately, for

most people generally have not accepted the truth when first presented.

E. The rest of chapter 11 then warns against any arrogance towards people who have not yet converted. For, it points out that the Gentile converts were originally outside as well and have only recently come in, and so it will be even more glorious when God's Chosen People do so.

- St. Paul uses the image of the vine, saying that the Jewish faith was the original vine, but that those who have gone astray (in this case not accepted the Gospel) are, in a sense branches broken off, while others who were outside are as branches grafted onto the vine. This image is building on the vine imagery Jesus used at the Last Supper. See, e.g., John 15:1-10; see also Ps.80:9-17; Jer. 2:21; Ez. 15:2, 17:5-10, 19:10; Hos. 10:1.

F. Chapter 11 concludes with a reflection upon all human sinfulness as being allowed by God, so that the glory of His mercy may shine through. The implication is that the fallen but redeemed state has led to a greater glory than was there at the beginning.

IV. Chapters 12 through 14 and the first part of chapter 15 then give directive on how to live out this life in the spirit.

A. Chapter 12 begins with the controlling principles that: (1) we must live a living sacrifice to God as our worship of Him in contrast with the ways of the world; and (2) the unity of the Church, with the image of the Church as the body of Christ, an image St. Paul also uses in First Corinthians, Philippians, and Ephesians.

B. Verses 9 to 21 of chapter 12 then list numerous principles of Christian life, especially emphasizes charity towards others and forgiveness of enemies.

- Especially on the latter point, St. Paul quotes from the Hebrew Scriptures, again emphasizing that the old law is still valid. See Lev. 19:18, Deut. 32:35-41, Prov. 25:21-22.

C. Chapters 13 and 14 focus on a rightful sense of Christian liberty.

1. Chapter 13 emphasizes that the faith does lead to a moral revolution but does not imply a political anarchy.

- One should uphold civil obligations, but not take on unnecessary burdens, so that one may be free to love others

and serve God.

- There is a grand battle between light and darkness, which is guided by the highest law. The victory over sin allows us to awaken to the life with God.

2. Chapter 14 cautions against unnecessary rules, but also reminds Christians that liberty is meant for love. Thus, if a legitimate liberty causes another scandal, it should not be exercised, the self-limitation being an offering for another's faith.

- There seems to have been a background dispute here, possibly over: (1) Jewish Christians who wanted to continue refraining from food unclean under Jewish law; (2) eating food that had been sacrificed to idols, see 1 Cor. 8:9-11; or (3) Christians who wanted to refrain from all alcohol on the grounds that it caused so much sin, see 1 Tim. 5:23. St. Paul points out that such rules are not in themselves necessary, but if they are a part of one's faith, they should be followed, and another person should not tempt one of the faithful to fall away from them.

D. Chapter 15, verses 1-13 then conclude the doctrinal section of the letter with a glorious call for unity between the Jews and Gentiles, for the faith and universal call is the fulfillment of Jewish prophecies.

V. The rest of chapter 15 and chapter 16 are mostly a conclusion that describes St. Paul's plans and his greetings, but there are some concluding messages.

A. St. Paul describes his overall plan to bring the Gospel to new nations, including finishing this missionary journey and launching a new one to Spain, during which he hoped to visit Rome. It turns out that, upon his arrival back in Jerusalem, he was again seized by religious authorities and had the case brought to Rome for the sake of receiving the Emperor's protection. See Acts 21:27-28-16.

B. Among the commendations and greetings, St. Paul refers to Phoebe as a "diaconos." That term would later come to mean deacon, see 1 Tim. 3:8, 12. However, in the early church what we now call deacons did not have this title, see Acts 6:1-7, and the term "diaconos" seems to be a general term for people who had a special role in serving the church, see 2 Cor. 6:4, 11:23.

C. There is near the end a warning against false teachers and factions. The emphasis on this point is not as great here as in other letters, such as 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, and 1 and 2 Thessalonians, probably because St. Peter was in Rome with control

over the situation. But divisions and doctrinal disputes are apparently finding their way in.

D. The final doxology in verses 25 to 27 of chapter 16 once again emphasize that this salvation through Christ has been a mystery, first revealed through the prophetic writings (i.e. the Jewish Scriptures) but now made manifest to all nations. The goal again in a faith that act in tune with God, the "obedience of faith," which leads to glory.