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Romans: Chapter-by-Chapter Commentary

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CONTENTS

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Transcript

Paul writes to the Christians in Rome as one who had not yet visited the city. His motives for doing so seem to be that of establishing a base for his future ministry in the Roman Church. Most prominent in the concerns of this letter is the bringing together of Jews and Gentiles in the Gospel.

One challenge that Paul faces is that although he has several connections in the Church in Rome, as we see in Chapter 16, he wasn't its founder. He might be seen to be illegitimately inserting himself into someone else's field of labour. John Barclay suggests that the reason why Paul takes the tact that he does is because he needs to demonstrate to the Romans that, as the apostle to the Gentiles, he is their apostle.

Paul isn't just one of several apostles to the Gentiles, but he is the apostle to the Gentiles, as Peter is the lead apostle to the circumcision. The Roman Church can gain an understanding of their part within the much greater picture from him. This is why so much of the book is devoted to the issue of the relationship between Jews and Gentiles and the way that it fulfils God's purposes.

As we see in verses 5 and 6 of this chapter, the Christians in Rome are predominantly believing Gentiles. Paul introduces himself as a servant or slave of Christ Jesus. He has been called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he proceeds to express in condensed form.

As a slave, Paul is bound to his master and to the task that has been given to him. Although the gospel is a gospel of freedom, Paul explores the paradoxical relationship between slavery and freedom at various points in his epistles, not least in this epistle in Chapter 6. He has been set apart for this purpose. We might recall the setting apart of priests and those devoted to a sacred calling.

The gospel is in fulfilment of earlier prophetic scripture, some of which he will appeal to as the letter progresses. The term gospel is one that draws from Old Testament prophecy, especially passages such as Isaiah Chapter 40 verse 9. And also in Isaiah 52

verse 7. Paul is charged with bringing the word of this gospel, a message fulfilled in the claim that Jesus is Israel's Messiah and the world's true Lord. God is establishing his reign.

The passages from Isaiah that speak of the gospel are speaking about God returning to rule among his people. The signs of God coming near to Zion and that return of God to rule being a sign of judgment and deliverance and a source of joy and comfort to a once beleaguered people. For Paul, the message of the gospel is a message concerning God's Son.

Behind this we should probably hear the words of 2 Samuel Chapter 7 verses 12 to 14. When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.

I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. According to the flesh, Jesus is the descendant of David. He is the Davidic heir of the promises of the kingdom.

He was marked out as or declared to be the Messiah, the Davidic Son of God, in the resurrection. He was already the Messiah, of course, but it was in the resurrection that this fact was openly declared. We might recall the way that the truth of Jesus' messianic identity was a secret for much of the gospel narrative.

Particularly in the Gospel of Mark, this is a prominent theme. It is only after the resurrection that the secret of Christ's messianic identity is shouted from the rooftops. We should also observe the spirit-flesh contrast that is going on here.

Christ's physical descent from David is important, but far more important is the fact that he bears the powerful spirit of holiness. In the resurrection, the new creation of the spirit dawns, being inaugurated even in the time of the flesh. Through the resurrected Messiah and Lord, Jesus, Paul has received his commission, apostleship to the nations.

The intent of this commission is establishing the obedience of faith, the appropriate believing and willing response to the message of God's reign established in Jesus the Messiah. This calling is to be exercised among all of the nations, among whom the Romans themselves are included. Paul's typical epistle refers to the prayers that he makes for the people to whom he is writing.

We see the same pattern here. We should consider the way in which Paul's ministry of teaching and writing is accompanied by an extensive ministry of prayer. The news of the Roman Christian's believing response to the message of the gospel has gotten around.

One can imagine the excitement for Paul of hearing that a growing community of faithful persons can now be found in the very heart of the greatest city of the empire. Especially for Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, meeting these Christians would have been

something that he longed to do. He wants to benefit them and to play some part in what God is doing there.

Paul has a calling both to the Greeks and to barbarians, to the two great divisions of Gentile humanity. He has a message for the church in Rome as the apostle to the Gentiles and is eager to share it with them. Most commentators see in verses 16 and 17 a great summary statement of Paul's gospel message.

Paul is not ashamed of this gospel, although it may seem to be foolishness to many. His confidence in the gospel is and will be vindicated. None who believe in it will be put to shame.

The gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes. The power isn't merely something that accompanies the gospel message, nor is the gospel merely about God's power. God's power is active in the declaration of the gospel message itself.

Through it God is forming a people for his son by his spirit. And this is a message to the Jew first and then also to the Greek. As we will see in this epistle, the message of Jesus the Messiah is in the first place a message to the circumcised.

But it is also a message that brings in Gentiles on an equal footing. In the gospels and in Acts, the message of the kingdom of God goes to Jews first. And when they reject it, it goes out to the Gentiles.

In the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed. What exactly Paul is referring to in the expression the righteousness of God has been a matter of considerable debate. Some have seen in this a reference to God's perfect moral standard.

For many Protestants historically the expression has been interpreted as a reference to the imputed righteousness of Christ. Christ's perfect righteousness that is graciously put to our account. Although there may be some good theology underlying the concerns that drive this historic reading, I don't think these senses of the righteousness of God are what Paul is referring to in this juncture.

Rather it seems to me the righteousness of God needs to be read more in terms of the use of such terminology in the Old Testament. Especially in places like the Psalms and Isaiah. There the righteousness of God is primarily his saving righteousness.

His restorative setting of the world to rights in fulfilment of his gracious covenant commitment to his people. Something that is achieved through judgment and salvation. For Paul this is revealed from faith, for faith or to faith.

The meaning of this expression is somewhat opaque. Some commentators have seen here a reference to the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. Jesus' own faithfulness exercised towards us, producing faith in us.

Again this might be true enough theologically, but I'm not quite persuaded that it is what is in view here. I'm more inclined to see this as a reference to God's faithfulness to his promises. Leading to the answering faith of those who hear the message of his salvation.

This statement ends with a quotation from Habakkuk 2.4 There is some ambiguity over the party whose faith is in view in the Habakkuk text as Paul quotes it. In the Septuagint the faith is God's faithfulness. In the original Hebrew it is probably best taken as a reference to human faith.

It could be a reference to the way that in a time of difficulty the righteous believer lives by confident anticipation of God's deliverance. Or to the way that they live by God's faithfulness to them. Perhaps an argument could also be made that Paul is using this in a Christological way.

Christ is the righteous one. In some respects not a very great deal is riding upon the way that we resolve such questions. In this case all of those senses resonate with something in Paul's message in this letter.

The very ambiguity of the statement presents the reader with fertile ground for reflection upon the manifold relationships between the terms of righteousness and faith or faithfulness. God's righteousness is revealed in the Gospel message. This righteousness is revealed in the conditions of sharpest contrast with the unrighteousness of men who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth as its bleak backdrop.

The repetition of the term unrighteousness makes the opposition very clear. God's gracious righteousness is not given in response to men's righteousness but in the situation of deep unrighteousness. Indeed one of the things that is being revealed at this point in history is God's wrath against sin and against mankind's suppression of the truth.

The wrath will be revealed climactically on the last day. However it has also been revealed in the death of Christ and will be revealed again in the great judgments against Israel and the nations on the near horizon. God has revealed himself in his creation and he's done so plainly.

The knowledge that Paul speaks of need not be considered to be the sort of theoretical knowledge that we arrive at through philosophical reflection even though these truths about God are knowable in such a manner. The attributes that are revealed are invisible yet they are disclosed in creation. In Psalm 19 verses 1 to 4 the psalmist says The heavens declare the glory of God and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.

Day to day pours out speech and night to night reveals knowledge. There is no speech nor are there words whose voice is not heard. Their voice goes out through all the earth and their words to the end of the world.

Even though we suppress it sometimes to the point that we may not know that we know it we all have some basic apprehension of the truth of God. We can blind ourselves to the truth and we can dull ourselves to the truth but ultimately no one can live consistently as if God did not exist. On some level deep down all of us have an apprehension of God's reality.

Indeed it is precisely on account of this sense that our need for forms of idolatry that disguise the truth is so pronounced. The appropriate response to such knowledge is to honour God and to give thanks to him and yet when this response is not made the result is that hearts become darkened. Where there was once the light of revelation and knowledge when that light is consistently rejected people will find themselves groping in darkness.

Presumed wisdom actually led to folly. Perhaps there is an allusion back to the story of the Garden of Eden here where grasping for wisdom in sin led to shame and folly. Also to Psalm 106 verses 19 to 22 They made a calf in Horeb and worshipped a metal image.

They exchanged the glory of God for the image of an ox that eats grass. They forgot God their saviour who had done great things in Egypt, wondrous works in the land of Ham and awesome deeds by the Red Sea. Idolatry which replaces the otherness of God with our own creations and projections is the fundamental sin.

The result of this dishonouring of God is the poetic justice of human beings dishonouring their own bodies. The honour of the body is an important theme in scripture. However where God is lost sight of in practical atheism dishonouring of the body is the result.

If rejecting the light of the knowledge of God leads to hearts being darkened the rejection of the holiness of God leads to the dishonouring of our bodies. There was a direct exchange of the truth for the lie and of God for a counterfeit. Paul here presents homosexual passions and relations as a paradigmatic result of the breakdown of man's dignity after his rejection of God.

God gave them up to such things. Once the restraints are removed sin can take control over people. In cultures that reject God sexual licence can take on the character of a sort of perverse anti-religion.

In place of the dignifying knowledge of God comes promiscuous and unbounded sexuality that dishonours the body imprisoning it to its lusts. Homosexual passions and relations for Paul break down one of the most fundamental features of humanity made in the image of God that we are male and female. The poetic justice that Paul sees in this should be recognised.

If we reject the transcendent otherness of God the otherness of the other sex will be rejected too. And where humanity was once called to be fruitful and multiply and to

exercise dominion it can turn in on itself in fruitlessness and sterility under the cruel dominion of its lusts. Paul sees this as a shameful degradation of humanity.

Paul then points to a structure to same-sex relations and passions that is degrading of humanity. Paul is not talking about quite the same thing as we do when we speak of homosexuality in LGB persons. However there is quite clearly considerable overlap as the church has recognised throughout its history.

We should beware of over-individualising Paul's teaching here though as if he were saying that persons with homosexual desires are peculiarly sinful. His argument is more about human society as a whole. While Paul singles out homosexual desires and relations as paradigmatic of what a society is given up to when it devotes itself to self-love under the mask of its own idolatrous creations and projections, persons who have but resist such desires are not given up to such a homosexual culture in the way that Paul is speaking of here.

We might draw comparisons with the sin of suicide. Suicide as self-murder could appropriately be seen as a profoundly paradigmatic sin. It's a striking out at the image of God in ourselves.

However people who commit suicide, while they are committing something incredibly serious, are very very seldom committing suicide as an intentional performance of that paradigmatic sin. Rather they may be acting out of the deepest depths of despair, out of extreme irrational impulse or in response to unbearable pain. While recognising just how serious the sin of suicide is, considered in itself, we should consider with compassion and understanding the reasons why people might commit it and recognise how unwitting or unintending they might be.

Nor should we consider them sinful beyond all other persons. I believe the same applies to persons with homosexual desires. Here the social character of God's giving up of people to sin should be focused upon.

A society that has been given over will start to give itself over to self-destruction and self-degradation. An entire sexual culture will develop around the practice and approval of homosexual relations and desires. Such a society ends up courting death.

It loses sight of the fruitfulness and the joy and the otherness of humanity created as male and female in the image of God. And as it loses sight of God, it will become more and more imprisoned to its own lusts. In Paul's understanding, for such a society the penalty for sin is found in the degradation of the sin itself.

If people don't see fit to acknowledge God, God will give them up to an unfit mind to do things that are inappropriate. Once again, the punishment fits the sin. And God's giving up of people is not something imposed upon them from without.

Rather it is more a matter of God removing the restraints and allowing the sin to go where it naturally goes, taking the sinners with it. When people reject God, Paul is arguing, they end up degrading themselves. Their own humanity becomes misshapen and distorted in tragic ways.

And this is fertile ground for every form of sin and vice. Such sins and vices fill people up and take possession of them and control of them. Paul lists a large number of these dehumanizing vices, concluding with senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless.

Now, not every person or society will express these vices in equal measure or in equal proportions. However, these are all the sorts of demons that will possess those societies that reject God. Such persons know deep down that what they are doing is dishonoring to God and also to themselves.

That those who give themselves over to these things have treated God's gift of life with scorn and that death is the appropriate sanction for those who have rebelled against the giver of life. Many such persons will be consumed by the destructive tendencies of their own self-hatred, eating themselves up within themselves. However, as if it were not enough to do such acts, they will go out of their way to approve such sins and vices and to form societies in which evil is increasingly called good.

A question to consider, how does Paul's description of the problem here give us indications of the shape that an appropriate solution must take? Verses 18-32 of Romans chapter 1 were a characteristically Jewish condemnation of paganism. We find such condemnation in various Jewish works, such as chapters 13-15 of the Apocryphal Wisdom of Solomon. One could imagine many self-righteous persons nodding along with Paul's condemnation of idolatry and sexual immorality.

Yet in chapter 2, Paul gives a diatribe against such imagined persons. Persons who, accustomed to standing in the position of the judge, confident in their natural standing with God, have never found themselves in the dark. The person in verse 1 regards themselves as the exception, confident in their imagined right to judge and their immunity from judgment.

However, whether pagan moralists or Jews presumptuously secure in their covenant status, they too are without excuse. They also sin in the same ways. The idea that there is a class of sinners that excludes us is unsustainable.

We should recall Paul's description in verses 29-32 of the preceding chapter. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness.

They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Though they know God's

righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them, but give approval to those who practice them. Such a condemnation flows very easily off the tongue of the judge.

But if the judge were to step back and pay attention to what they were saying, they should observe that they themselves are guilty of various of the offences that they are condemning. When we adopt the position of the judge, we like to make excuses and allowances for our own sins, which we consider minor peccadillos relative to the serious offences of others. While a person judging grants that the judgment of God rightly comes upon sinners, they use such judgment to present their superiority, without recognising that everyone comes under the general condemnation that Paul has just given.

Texts such as the Wisdom of Solomon might exhibit a sort of Jewish exceptionalism, for instance, which simply does not reckon with the radical extent of sin, and the fact that even observant Jews aren't exempt from its spread. The position of the observant Jew that Paul has in mind might be that, while the sins of the pagans are damnable, God is more indulgent with the sins of Israel. His kindness, forbearance and patience mean that Israel does not face the same harsh assessment.

God views the sins of his people like an indulgent father. He lets things slide for Israel, because they are his favourite people. However, God's kindness is designed to give us time for and encouragement to repentance, and hope of forgiveness, not to give us confidence in our impenitence.

Those who don't repent treat God's kindness and forbearance as excusing or minimising sin, rather than as making repentance and forgiveness possible. Yet by using God's kindness to minimise their sin, they are merely compounding their initial sin with sustained impenitence and ingratitude to God's gracious extension of time and opportunity for repentance. This is all storing up further wrath for themselves on the day of wrath, when God's just judgment will be disclosed.

On that day, God's judgment will be impartial, delivered according to people's works. No one will get special allowances or exemptions. Some persons will receive eternal life as they patiently persist in well-doing, seeking for glory, honour and immortality.

Paul clearly believes that he is referring to a real, not a hypothetical group here. Some people genuinely will be justified on the last day, when they are judged according to their works. Note that Paul doesn't say that such persons earn salvation.

However, the judgment by which they are vindicated will be according to works. On the other hand, those who do not obey the truth and seek their own ways rather than God's, will face divine wrath and terrible punishment. This judgment will begin with Jews, but will also come to non-Jews.

God is impartial, and all who do good will receive glory, honour and peace. Again, there is no evidence that Paul regards this group as merely hypothetical. How that can be the case, when all are sinful and naturally deserving of judgment, hasn't yet been made clear, but will be in time.

Neither possession nor non-possession of the law excuses someone from divine judgment. When Paul talks about the law, he isn't speaking of some abstract universal moral standard, but about the law given to Israel, the Torah, which set them apart as a people to the Lord. The assumption that mere possession of the Torah granted good standing with God, is dangerously misguided.

What matters is not the mere hearing of the Torah, but actual observance of it. Indeed, despite not possessing the law by birth, the words by nature in verse 14 should be related not to the doing of what the law requires, but to the non-possession of the law. When a Gentile fulfils the moral requirements of the law, they have the reality at which the law always aimed at in themselves.

The work of the law is written on their hearts. Paul here may be alluding to passages like Jeremiah chapter 31 verses 31-34, which promised the writing of the law on the heart of once rebellious Israel, so that they would observe it from the heart. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord.

I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their guard, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, Know the Lord. For they shall all know me, and I will make them my people.

From the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more. Paul describes these Gentiles that show the work of the law written on their hearts as having some sort of awakened conscience, with their thoughts conflicting, sometimes accusing and sometimes excusing them.

This active conscience bears witness to the law written on their heart, evidencing some internalized sense of God's claims upon their lives, and the shape of a God-fearing life. All of this will be revealed on the last day, when the secrets of men's hearts are disclosed, and all face judgment. Paul describes this judgment as according to his gospel.

We should notice how important Christ as future judge is in Pauline presentations of the gospel to Gentiles, perhaps especially something that we see in the book of Acts. Paul focuses upon the Jew who presumes upon his covenant status. This figure has been in view throughout, but now comes into direct focus.

This Jew believes that he enjoys a special status. The judge at the beginning of the

chapter believed that he was immune to the judgment. The Jew here exalts himself as a teacher, without taking into account the fact that this exposes him to a stricter judgment, especially when his teaching is hypocritical.

Much of Jesus' teaching was directed against the hypocrisy of the religious teachers and authorities, who taught things that they did not themselves observe. The scriptures taught that, having been given the law, Israel was called to train their children up after them, that they were a light to the Gentiles, and that they had a special wisdom that would make them stand out among the nations. However, while reveling in the supposed superiority that this granted them, many Jewish teachers were laying heavy burdens upon others, while not truly observing the law themselves.

The Jew here is not, I believe, a reference to the average typical Jewish individual, so much as it is a reference to a hypothetical Jewish teacher that stands for the nation's teachers of the law more generally. While teaching against stealing, they devoured widow's houses and misappropriated funds given to God. While teaching that people must not commit adultery, they were known for their sexual infidelity and their compromising of marriage.

While teaching against idols, they were quite prepared to bend the rules when there was a chance to profit from trafficking and things dedicated to idols. Paul's point is not that every Jewish teacher is guilty of these things, but that these wrongs are so commonplace among them as to be a source and cause of scandal and dishonour to God's name, the Gentiles' blaspheme God on account of their actions. If Paul were making a similar point today, you could imagine him referencing things like child abuse.

While only a small minority of priests and pastors may be guilty of this, this minority and the gross failure of wider church bodies to deal with them radically undermines the claims of those bodies to moral authority and a true teaching witness, and it brings the church and the name of God into disrepute in the society at large. God's concern for the holiness of his name and his people's profaning of it by their sin is a theme in the prophets, for instance Ezekiel 36, verses 20-23. But when they came to the nations, wherever they came, they profaned my holy name, in that people said of them, These are the people of the Lord, and yet they had to go out of his land.

But I had concern for my holy name, which the house of Israel had profaned among the nations to which they came. Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord God, It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. And I will vindicate the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them.

And the nations will know that I am the Lord, declares the Lord God, when through you I vindicate my holiness before their eyes. Paul concludes this chapter by dramatically

relativizing circumcision. Circumcision is of value for those who obey the law, but of none to those who do not.

On the other hand, the uncircumcised Gentile who keeps the law will be regarded as having covenant standing with God. The true Jew is not merely outwardly circumcised, but someone who is circumcised in heart by the Spirit. Paul is here alluding to Deuteronomy chapter 30 verse 6. And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.

Also referencing passages like Ezekiel 36 verses 26 to 27. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you, and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh, and give you a heart of flesh, and I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and be careful to obey my rules. These are blessings of the promised new covenant.

The true Jew that Paul is speaking about here is not just the Christian believer in general, it is the Jewish believer in particular. The law and circumcision are indeed positive things, and have genuinely granted Jews a special status, as we will see as we go further on. However, they are only of value to true and faithful Jews.

To other Jews who are unfaithful and unbelieving, they merely bring judgment. And Israel has been fairly consistently unfaithful throughout its history. A question to consider.

What are some ways in which Paul's challenge here might be applied to Christians and the Church? In Romans chapter 3 we arrive at one of the richest chapters of the Apostle Paul's writings, but a chapter that is very complex and challenging in many ways. If we are reading Paul carefully and intelligently, we should be able to anticipate some of the movement of his argument, much as Paul is anticipating the objections of his imagined interlocutor. Truly to understand a passage of scripture, we need to understand the movement of thought that leads from one verse or argument to the next.

Too many people read scripture as if it were a succession of temporally disjointed tones, rather than the flow of a single piece of music through time. At the end of chapter 2 we should have guessed that the natural response to Paul's relativisation of circumcision, his statement that circumcision becomes uncircumcision for breakers of the law, and that the uncircumcision of the gentile who keeps the law would be counter to circumcision, the natural objection to that would be that this denies the advantage given to Israel in the covenant, and it denies the value of circumcision. If we anticipated this, then we are reading him well, as these are precisely the points that Paul turned to address here.

Paul is not denying that the Jewish people enjoyed great privileges on account of circumcision, most especially the fact that God entrusted his revelation to them, above

all other peoples. God had given them the scriptures, and he had given them promises. And even though many of the Jewish people were unfaithful, this doesn't mean that God himself was unfaithful to his promises.

These remain certain. Indeed, far from the faithlessness of Israel nullifying God's faithfulness, the glory of God's gracious faithfulness was, if anything, seen even more powerfully against the backdrop of Israel's unfaithfulness. This leads, however, to another natural objection.

If it is indeed the case that Israel's unrighteousness and unfaithfulness served to reveal God's faithfulness and righteousness more fully, why should God bring judgment upon and condemn sin? It seems that sin has served his purposes. This identifies a crucial problem that Pauline theology has to address. If God's grace occurs entirely apart from human merit, and indeed is most powerfully manifested in the very contrast between the judgment that our sins merit and the undeserved goodness that he bestows, doesn't this cast divine justice and the moral order of the universe into question? Indeed, taking this to its logical conclusion, if our sins are the very things that make God's grace appear more glorious, why shouldn't we pursue evil so that God's grace might be seen most fully? In the previous two chapters, Paul has made amply clear that God is concerned for the moral order of the universe.

His wrath is revealed from heaven against the unrighteousness of men, and the thoughts and actions of men will be judged on a coming day by Jesus Christ, according to Paul's gospel. On that last day, people will be judged according to works, and those who by patience and well-doing seek for glory and honour and immortality will be given eternal life. However, how to hold together God's concern for the moral order of the world, where judgment is according to works, and the radical grace of God which is given entirely apart from works, is a real question.

N.T. Wright notices that Paul's questions here reappear later in the letter in various forms in chapters 9-11, where they receive fuller answers. This is something that we see on a number of occasions in Paul, where arguments can be recapitulated later in some fuller or different form, helping us to get a firmer grip upon what he is saying. Paul gives a lot of his argument for the whole book of Romans in a nutshell in this chapter, and then he unpacks it at a later point.

Understanding of truth often arises from appreciation of the relationship and interplay between the condensed and the expounded presentation of a truth, or the fundamental common logic that binds two realities together, or the different facets of a single reality, and Paul's recapitulated arguments may be designed to help to strengthen our grasp upon fundamental truths in such a manner. Paul began this chapter by answering the question of whether Israel enjoyed any privilege on account of circumcision and its possession of the law. He gave a positive answer to that.

However, a somewhat different question surfaces here. Are the Jews better off in more absolute terms? Does their possession of the law and circumcision mean that they are somehow better than every other people, somehow free from the dominion of sin and death, somehow immune to God's wrath declared against all unrighteousness of man? And to this question, the answer must be no. As Paul has already maintained, Jews and Gentiles alike are under sin.

Paul proceeds to present a catena of scriptural quotations to substantiate his point. Within these quotations he presents a portrait of the wicked, one that applies across the classes of Jews and Gentiles. From the initial general charge of unrighteousness, he moves to people's spiritual blindness, their failure to seek after God, their turning aside into sin and wickedness, the destructive and violent character of their speech and their ways, and their utter lack of the fear of God.

He also shows how various parts of the body are conscripted for the cause of wickedness. Such a portrayal might perhaps remind us of the characterisation of the wicked prior to the Flood in Genesis 6.5. The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. Paul, as usual, when he is remixing scripture in such a manner, is very mindful of the wider context from which he is drawing.

We need to beware of abstracting his quotations from their original contexts, especially as those original contexts can undermine certain ways in which people presume that Paul is using these quotations here. For instance, in Psalm 14, verses 1-3, which Paul uses, read as follows. The fool says in his heart, there is no God.

They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds. There is none who does good. The Lord looks down from heaven on the children of man, to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God.

They have all turned aside. Together they have become corrupt. There is none who does good.

Not even one. But verses 4-5 that come after it read as follows. Have they no knowledge, all the evil doers who eat up my people as they eat bread, and do not call upon the Lord? There they are in great terror, for God is with the generation of the righteous.

Clearly the statement that there is no one righteous needs to be qualified in some sense, because the text that Paul is quoting refers to people as righteous. However, here we should notice the general nature of the characterisation of humanity that begins the psalm that Paul quotes. The human race more generally is characterised by a sort of practical atheism, by foolishly acting as if there were no God in heaven to judge.

The statement isn't exclusively made about the Gentiles, it's more comprehensive than

that, it includes Jews under it. The righteous here are like Noah, who find favour in the sight of God. Their existence is somehow anomalous though, because it isn't as if they are somehow without the sins that lead to the condemnation of their fellows.

For instance, even after the flood in Genesis chapter 8 verse 21, the Lord repeats the characterisation of mankind that provoked the destruction of mankind in the first place. Even the humanity rescued through the flood are fundamentally marked by this evil intention of the heart. And it seems to be the same thing here.

Although there may be some who are described as righteous, they are not described as righteous as people who are immune from that characteristic. All of these scriptures serve to silence mankind before God, rendering all, Jew and Gentile alike, accountable before him. By the works of the law, Paul claims, no flesh will be justified in God's sight.

Paul refers to humanity here as all flesh, and the term flesh is by no means a neutral term for Paul. It foregrounds human weakness, corruptibility, mortality and rebellion. Flesh is not just humanity as such, it's humanity under these particular conditions.

The law doesn't grant some immunity to God's judgement upon sin. Quite the opposite, the law itself, as the verses Paul has just cited illustrate, condemns man. The law has the effect of bringing sin to light.

So it is simply not the case that the works of the law could justify. What are the works of the law that Paul has in view here? Historically, many, particularly Protestants, have regarded the works of the law as deeds performed to accrue merit before God, as if we could earn God's favour by good deeds. However, I don't believe that that is what is in view here, and there have always been Protestants who have held a contrary view to this, holding that it refers to something more particular, ceremonies of the law or something like that.

It seems to me that that's closer to the truth. Paul's emphasis in this context is upon teaching that Jews are not excluded from the general judgement upon all flesh. The works of the law are those things that Jews would have believed set them apart from the Gentiles, putting them in a better position in absolute terms relative to God's condemnation of sin, on account of the fact that God gave them the law and the covenant.

In particular, the works of the law are those practices like circumcision and the dietary requirements, those things that set Jews apart from the Gentiles, marking them out as people of the law. However, as Paul highlights here, that does no good, because rather than rendering those under it immune to God's judgement upon sin, the law itself brings sin to light and condemns it. It's a means of the very judgement that some presume to escape by being marked out by it.

Having presented the problem, Paul now declares God's response. While many present the Book of Romans as principally being about man's problem and God's solution in the way of salvation, it is worth considering the way in which the book is more about God's problem and God's solution to his own problem. The problems that Paul has emphasised at this point are less problems on man's side of the equation, though it is clearly shown that we have no shortage of these, but rather the problems that God faces.

So God must be a just and impartial judge. He must judge Jews and Gentiles alike. He must judge according to truth.

For instance, in Exodus 23, verse 7, he commands, Keep far from a false charge, and do not kill the innocent and righteous, for I will not acquit the wicked. If God will not acquit the wicked, and indeed to acquit the wicked would be contrary to his very nature, how can he justify the ungodly? It seems we have a problem. However, God has, on the other hand, made promises to Israel, promises declaring his intention to save, and to save not just Jews but also Gentiles.

How can God do this and still be righteous? Paul now presents God's solution. The righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law. God has revealed his saving justice at this climactic point in history.

It is not a timeless way of salvation, rather it is a timely act of God in history. It has been manifested apart from the Torah. It wasn't the law itself that accomplished God's saving justice, his setting of the world to rights.

God's saving justice has also been revealed in a way that overrides the division and distinction in humanity established by the Torah. It comes to both Jews and Gentiles alike, rather than being exclusive to the former. However, while being manifested apart from the law, the law and the prophets testify to it.

They foretell and foreshadow it in many and various ways. There is a consistency between God's former revelation in the law and the prophets, and God's revelation of his saving justice in Christ and the new covenant. This saving justice is manifested through, literally, the faith of Jesus Christ for all who believe.

And there has been considerable debate concerning whether the faith of Jesus Christ refers to faith in Jesus Christ, the most common position, or the faith or faithfulness of Jesus Christ himself, or perhaps even to Christ faith, faith with a quality that is grounded in, ordered towards, and constituted by Christ. In the next chapter we read, for instance, of the faith of Abraham, which refers both to Abraham's own faith, but also to the faith of the sons of Abraham who believe like their father. Christ faith, or Christian faith, is, I believe, something similar.

It's a Christ-shaped faith, a form of life first exemplified in Christ, to which we are

conformed. It is through this faith that God's saving justice, his righteous setting of the world to rights, and establishment of his just moral order and fulfilment of his promises, is accomplished. It is fulfilled through the rich and the multifaceted reality of what faith represents.

So on the one hand, faith stands for the faithfulness of Christ himself, a faithfulness by which we are reconstituted, and into which we are formed by the Spirit. It also stands for the way that faith correlates to divine promise and free gift, in contradistinction to the way that obedience correlates to the commands of the law. Faith receives through trusting receipt of a free gift.

We should be careful here of the way that some would try to redefine faith as faithfulness, in a way that dulls our awareness of the correlation between faith and free gift, and faith and promise. That aspect of faith is very important to Paul. Faith also stands for something that, in contrast to the Torah and its works, is open to all humanity, Jew and Gentile alike.

And in the verses that follow, Paul refracts some of this rich reality that the term faith represents. So first, faith upholds the fact that there is ultimately no distinction between Jew and Gentile. All have fallen short of God's glory, and receive a good standing with God on the basis of a free gift, given without regard to whether they are Jew or Gentile.

Second, it is a free gift received through the empty hands of faith, rather than something obtained through obedience. Third, it is accomplished by Christ's faithfulness, upon which our new Christian existence depends. God put Jesus forward as a mercy seat, a place of atonement and covering for sin.

Christ is the great sin offering, who takes sin upon himself. In Christ, God deals with sin in a way that it must be dealt with. Sin is taken seriously in Christ.

He has passed over sin until the point of Christ. The sacrificial system, for instance, did not finally deal with sin. It put sin into a great sort of cosmic pending tray, waiting for it to be dealt with.

And that great sacrificial act that was awaited, by which it would finally be dealt with, occurs in Christ. On the basis of this event, God can be both just, and declare people of faith, constituted by God's work in Christ, to be in the right, to be persons in good standing with him. This statement, on the basis of what Christ has accomplished, can be a statement made in accordance with truth.

As Paul will go on to show in this letter, God can uphold the moral order of the universe, even as he declares people who are sinners, Jews and Gentiles, to be right before him. And can make that judgement according to truth, so it's not just a fiction of the law, but something that really relates to what is the case. All of this has the effect of nullifying

and excluding all boasting in status and privilege, most particularly the idea that Israel has a peculiar status that sets it above all of the rest of humanity, that makes it somehow special and unique and immune from God's judgement.

By what kind of law or Torah is this sustained? By the Torah of works, the Torah that set Israel apart from the nations by its performance of rights such as circumcision? No, rather it is by the so-called Torah of faith, as people have good standing with God on the basis of a promise and free gift received by faith, something that has been testified to and witnessed to by the Torah, rather than on the basis of obedient performance of legal rituals that set Jews over against Gentiles. God is the one creator God of all humanity, not only one part of it, the Jews, and every human being that enjoys good standing with God, enjoys that good standing on the basis of faith and its receipt of God's free gift. The righteous circumcised, who are within the covenant, stand in their good standing before God by faith.

The righteous uncircumcised, who have no covenant standing before God as Gentiles, enter into such a righteous standing through faith. As we move forward in Paul's argument, we will see that the law itself is not jettisoned. Indeed, we can see the law arriving at its intended destination through faith.

The law is upheld, not overthrown by faith. A question to consider. Reading the book of Romans to this point as a story of the revelation of God's justice, what are some of the details that assume a greater prominence or salience? In Romans chapter 4, Paul turns to the example and the character of Abraham.

There has been some debate in the last couple of decades about the translation and meaning of the opening statement of Romans chapter 4. Richard Hayes, N.T. Wright, Stanley Stowers, Douglas Campbell and a number of others have argued for translations along the lines of, what then shall we say? Have we found Abraham to be our forefather or to become our forefather according to the flesh? And there are various suggestions which are all slightly different. They have in common though their emphasis upon the character of Abraham's paternity, whether that be considered as his paternity of the Jews, that the Jews have discovered Abraham to be their forefather according to the flesh, or have not as the case may be, or of believing Gentiles, or some have considered it as a reference to the way in which he obtained paternity. Did Abraham become our forefather through the flesh, through works and this sort of thing? Typically, the verse has been taken along the lines in which it is interpreted in the ESV.

What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? Or maybe, what then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found in this matter? In this way of phrasing it, there may be an allusion to the Old Testament expression, so and so found favour in the eyes of the Lord. The strength of the more recently proposed readings is found in the way that they frame the chapter

less as principally an exploration of the question of how individuals are saved, with Abraham as a selected example from the Old Testament, and much more as an investigation of the character of the family of Abraham. Abraham isn't just a typical believer, but he is the father of the family of the people of God.

Romans 4 then is much more concerned with the question of the shape and the constitution of this family than it is with questions of personal salvation abstracted from that. Abraham is indeed an example of faith, but for Paul he is a very great deal more than this. However, there is no need to play these things off against each other.

For Paul's argument, Abraham is both father of the faithful and an example of faith, and he is the latter precisely because he is the former. As exemplar of faith, he is especially significant because he is the father of the faithful, and the principle of like father like son applies. I am not persuaded of the more recently proposed readings, although I do appreciate the way that they make the reader more attentive to the fact that Abraham's importance to Paul's argument is not as a random example of a man of faith in the Old Testament, but as the father of the family of the people of God.

The works of the law are things that chiefly mark out Jews from Gentiles, things like circumcision and the dietary requirements. However, Paul's concern is not restricted to things like circumcision. He is concerned about anything that would suggest that Abraham or anyone else receives the gifts of God's grace on the basis of something about them.

Although it would come under the same strictures and condemnation, Paul's concern probably is not about people trying to earn their salvation. What he is challenging seems to be more subtle than that. It may be instructive to reflect upon Paul's enumeration of the things that marked him out as a Jew in Philippians 3, verses 4-6.

If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more. Circumcised on the eighth day of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews, as to the law, a Pharisee, as to zeal, a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the law, blameless. We should observe that many of the things that Paul lists here aren't about anything that Paul himself did.

Rather, they concern Paul's Jewish status and ancestry. These are things that he once believed set him apart from Gentiles as an especially fitting recipient of God's grace. The pre-conversion Paul, like Jews of that time more generally, could have spoken at length about the greatness of God's grace.

It wasn't that they lacked a theology of divine grace, believing that salvation was to be earned or merited. Rather, it was because they believed that God's grace was somehow more appropriately given to certain persons. God is indeed profoundly gracious, but there was something about Abraham that made him a fitting recipient of grace.

Being an observant Jew does not earn you God's grace, but it does mark you out from Gentiles, tax collectors, sinners, and the rest as someone to whom God's grace will more appropriately come. We should also note, looking at ourselves, that most of our claims about our superiority and worth, our beliefs that we are somehow greater than or marked out from others, are based as much upon unearned factors of identity, rather than things that we have done. It may be our family, it may be our class, our nationality, our wealthy background, our race, our neighbourhood, our physical appearance, or something else like that.

All of these things can sustain a sense of entitlement, even to things that we would readily acknowledge to be gracious gifts. Such things can also lead to some sense of greater entitlement to God's grace than others, to a belief that we are set apart from others by virtue of some factor of our identity. However, Paul rules out the possibility of any such boast before God.

God's grace is not received according to anything that marks us out from others. On the contrary, it is received entirely apart from any worth in the recipient. We all stand on the same level ground of utter unworthiness before God.

Paul turns to the scripture itself to substantiate his point. He goes back to Genesis chapter 15, where God makes a covenant with Abraham and promises him a multitude of offspring. In verse 6 of that chapter, we are told that Abraham believed God and was considered to be in good standing with God on that basis, as one who believed God's promise.

He then proceeds to unpack a term that introduces Genesis chapter 15, where God announces that Abraham's reward shall be very great. Now the term reward can be used in the sense of pay, but Paul shows that such a meaning cannot be sustained in this instance. Such pay is received as the earned recompense for the work that someone has undertaken.

It is not a gift, but something to which the worker has a claim. Yet the person who has done nothing to earn pay through labour, but simply believes in the one who justifies the ungodly, by the very faith by which he believes the promise of God, he is reckoned to be in right standing with God. The whole logic of work and reward breaks down.

God simply does not operate on such a basis when considering or declaring people to be in good standing with him. The expression, him who justifies the ungodly, here is an astonishing one. We should recall texts like Exodus chapter 23 verse 7, I will not acquit the wicked.

The claim that God justifies the ungodly, that he vindicates unrighteous persons, or declares them to be in good standing with himself, is nothing short of scandalous. Although part of the meaning of the term ungodly might be a reference to those outside

of the covenant of Israel, that simply cannot be the entire meaning, as we see from what follows. Paul now brings forward another witness, King David.

In Psalm 32 verses 1-2, David writes as one, whose lawless deeds are forgiven. The law does not count David's genuine lawlessness against him, but graciously considers him to be someone in good standing with himself. David had violated the law.

The law gave him no standing for an appeal before God, because the law clearly stood in condemnation over him. He acknowledged himself that his deeds were lawless. David's standing before God boiled down to the sheer grace of God in not counting his sin against him.

He was justified apart from works, declared to be in good standing with God apart from any worth on his part. Paul looks more closely at the example of Abraham, paying a special attention to the chronology. The reckoning righteous of Abraham that Paul has referenced, God's reckoning Abraham to be in good standing with himself, occurred back in Genesis chapter 15.

However, Abraham did not receive the sign of circumcision until chapter 17. This suggests that circumcision was never the basis of Abraham's good standing with God. Rather, circumcision referenced something more basic.

Abraham already had good standing with God, by the faith through which he received the gracious promise of God given to him apart from worth. Circumcision functioned as a seal of that standing, a standing that he already enjoyed by faith. It was like the ring that symbolizes and seals a couple's loving union.

It isn't the basis for the loving union, but is a sign and a seal of it. This foundational narrative of Israel actually undercuts supposed Jewish exceptionalism in relationship to God. The Abraham of Genesis 15 is actually the paradigm of the Gentile believer, more than the Jewish believer, although the Abraham of Genesis 17, who is a man of faith marked out by circumcision, is the paradigm of the Jewish believer.

And so Abraham stands for both the Jewish and the Gentile parts of his family. Paul now develops this point. Abraham was promised that all peoples would be blessed through him, that he would be the heir of the world.

However, this could never be fulfilled within the Jewish exclusivism of the bounds of the law. Indeed, if things had happened that way, it would have nullified the promise originally given to Abraham. It would have made the blessing exclusive to one people, confining the riches of God intended for the entire world to a single nation.

It would also have given Jews a ground for boasting in their worth over other peoples. What is more, the law is powerless to bring about the promise. Even worse, the law in many respects exacerbates the problem.

By placing a lot of commandments before Israel, commandments which they broke, it served to multiply transgressions of which other peoples, outside of the law, weren't guilty. Rather than granting Israel a special good standing with the Lord, the law actually had the opposite effect. It singled them out for particular judgement on account of their closeness to him.

As the Lord declares to Israel in Amos chapter 3 verse 2, You only have I known of all the families of the earth. Therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities. The law clearly can't be the basis upon which the promise is fulfilled, not merely because of its exclusionary character, but also because of its wrath-bringing character.

For this reason, then, faith must be the basis, because it is faith that appropriately corresponds to promise, which is of grace, guaranteeing the blessing to all of its designed recipients, all of those circumcised or uncircumcised who share the faith of believing Abraham. The means by which the promise is put into effect is by God's giving of life to the dead, raising up belief in Israel, and calling into existence things that are nonexistent, making Gentiles, who were formerly not a people, members of the people of God. Once again, Abraham is an example of this.

The specific promise that Abraham believed concerned God's raising up of seed for him. However, he was old and his body was dead, as far as fleshly fruitfulness might be considered. More particularly, Sarah's womb was barren.

Yet faced with this situation, he was steadfast in faith in God's promise and did not waver. He was confident that God would fulfil his word. It was precisely God's power and promise to act in the situation of Abraham's utter powerlessness and incapacity that he trusted in, and it was by this trust that he enjoyed good standing with God.

We should observe the way that Paul expresses all of this. He has described Abraham's faith in the Lord's promise of a son in a way that strongly invites the reader's recognition that Abraham's faith is precisely a resurrection faith. God will raise up the promised seed from the deadness of Sarah's womb and Abraham's body.

In the type of the raising up of the son from the deadness of the womb, Abraham might also be seen to be believing not only in the God who would raise Jesus from the dead, but also, under a figure, in the resurrection itself. Moving into his conclusion, Paul presses the analogy between our father Abraham's resurrection faith and our faith in the resurrected Lord, Abraham's promised seed. Scripture records that Abraham's faith was counted to him as good standing or righteousness with God.

Paul claims that this statement wasn't just written for Abraham's sake alone. Paul might be saying more than just that Abraham is an example of faith to all of us, and that we will also be accounted righteous as we show the same sort of faith. He's definitely not saying less than this.

Rather, Paul might be implying that Abraham, as the father of the faithful, enjoyed a graciously given standing before God by faith, and that Abraham's standing is one that all of his children participate in. Children who are distinguished by the fact that, whether they are circumcised or uncircumcised, they exhibit the likeness of their father Abraham, walking by faith and enjoying Abraham's blessing with him. The chapter ends with the statement that Jesus our Lord was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.

We might, throughout this chapter, have wondered how God could be just and still not count people's trespasses against them, and how God's grace, given entirely without respect to the worth of its recipients, might itself be justified. In a deeply pregnant statement, which will be partially unpacked in the coming chapters, we discover that it is through Christ that this occurs. Abraham's resurrection faith was a faith in God's power to act to bring about his promise in the deadness of his own immediate situation.

Our faith is in the God who raised Jesus from the dead. However, if Abraham's example applies to us, his children, our faith isn't just in the fact of the resurrection of Christ in the first century AD, but also in the power of the resurrecting God graciously acting on the basis of his son's work in the deadness of our own situations. A question to consider.

How might we deepen our sense of our being children of Abraham? What might we gain from a greater awareness of this fact? In Romans chapter 5, Paul steps back and looks at the bigger picture. Having received good standing with and vindication from God, the alienation and enmity that once existed between us and God has been overcome through the work of Jesus Christ. It is through Jesus that we enjoy the new gracious standing with God that we now possess.

In this standing, we can also look forward to the future and hope. While justification is about the present status that we enjoy with God, much of its significance is seen in the fact that it anticipates a greater vindication that awaits us on the last day. Being declared to be in the right with God, to have good standing with him, we can await the last day with hope and confidence, believing that God's verdict, declared on the basis of Christ's death for our sins and his resurrection for our justification, will be reaffirmed when we are judged according to our works on the last day.

The justification we enjoy on the basis of God's sheer and unmerited grace through the work of Christ is a justification that is a genuine anticipation of future justification according to our works. Paul says that we have been given access to the realm of God's grace in which we now stand. Grace isn't just a one-time thing, but it is a realm in which we now live and move and have our being.

We live our entire lives out of and on the basis of God's grace. Grace doesn't just begin our standing in Christ, leaving us to our own devices. Grace surrounds and accompanies us on every step of the way.

Christian life is a life characterized by suffering, yet as our suffering is part of the larger movement by which we are conformed to Christ and led by God's grace from his declaration in our favor in our justification on account of Christ's death and resurrection to our final vindication on the last day, we can face suffering with joy. Suffering is a means of our growth in Christian virtue. It produces endurance, and endurance produces deep down strength of character.

This tried, tested and true character yields a depth of hope and confidence in the Lord, an enduring assurance in the Lord's goodness even in the darkest places and hours. Such hope will not be proved to be futile. We are assured of God's final judgment in our favor by the fact that he has given us his Holy Spirit as a down payment and guarantee.

Through the Holy Spirit, the love of God has been poured into our hearts. The Holy Spirit could here be presented as the personal presence of the love of God within us. However, the Spirit is also the one by whom we are formed in love for God.

The gift of the Spirit is a bond of love that goes in both directions. By the Holy Spirit, God is also conforming us to the judgment of righteous that he will declare over us in the future. We might have noticed that the opening five verses of this chapter are developed around the Christian virtues of faith, hope and love.

When the fullness of time had come, Christ died, not for the deserving, but for the ungodly, for the lawless, for those alienated from and at enmity with God. One could scarcely imagine someone dying for another person who was merely upstanding and righteous. At a stretch, perhaps, one could imagine someone dying for a person who was good, a person who stood out from his fellows for his generous, noble and kind traits.

However, God's love for us was demonstrated in the fact that Christ died when we were still sinners and God's enemies. In Christ, God gave the costliest gift, but this gift was given to those who might seem to be the very least deserving of it. If we were justified by such a costly and utterly unmerited gift, we can have even greater confidence that we will be saved by Christ from the wrath of God on the last day, if the death of Christ dealt with the sin that alienated us from God, reconciling us to God and giving us good standing with him.

How much more will his resurrection life accomplish the full reality of salvation for us? All of this is a cause for confident rejoicing in God. God is going to carry through the salvation that he has begun in us, bringing it to its full completion. Paul compares the saving work of Christ with the means by which sin first entered the world through Adam.

In this section of the chapter, Paul is placing the saving work of Christ in a grand cosmic frame. The utterly unmerited gift of Christ is the means by which the entire human condition is addressed and reversed. Going back to the very beginning of the biblical story, Paul identifies Adam as the one by whom sin first entered into the world, and

death as a consequence of sin.

This had disastrous consequences for the entire human race. This is the classic biblical text for the doctrine of original sin, and it leads to a number of questions. Why is Adam, for instance, the one by whom sin entered the world, rather than Eve? Surely Eve sinned first by taking the fruit.

There are a few points to make here. First, Adam represents the whole race. Adam is the father of us all.

Adam is the one from whom Eve was formed. Eve does not stand for the whole race in the same way. Adam committed a knowing trespass.

Eve was deceived. Adam was given the law concerning the tree directly, whereas Eve received it second hand, and the serpent played off her knowledge that she had first hand against the knowledge that she received second hand. Adam also was the guardian of the garden and the tree.

He was the one who was given the law concerning the tree. He was also the one charged to guard and keep the garden, and it was his failure to guard the tree, to uphold the law of the tree, and to protect Eve and the garden from the work of the serpent that led to sin coming. The buck stopped with Adam, and when God confronted humanity, it was Adam in particular, Adam as an individual who was most specifically charged with the responsibility.

How can one man bring sin into the world? First of all, Adam is the father of all humanity. He acts on our behalf. By his act of rebellion against God, he brought about the alienation of humanity from God, an alienation that we all live out of.

As human beings, we all live with the consequences of what our forefathers did, and in a great many cases, we're continuing actively their legacy. After Adam and Eve's expulsion, we were all born outside of the garden. However, this alienation is not something merely imposed upon us from without.

It's written into the very logic of our existence in the flesh. Adam's rebellion is a continuing, an active rebellion, an active rebellion in us, something that's expressed in our very sinful nature, as theologians have termed it. Adam started the story, but we are all continuing it.

His first great sin and our continuing sins are all part of a sinful reality, all part of a single rebellion, like father, like sons and daughters. Here again, it might help to look back at the story of Genesis, where the story of the fall is merely the first stage of a series of falls. The fall is played out again and again and again.

Adam's original fall has consequences for everyone. We are all born outside of the

garden. We're all alienated from God, but Adam's fall is also recapitulated, played out again and repeated by his offspring.

In all these different situations, when God brings people near to himself, the fall pattern is played out again. In Genesis chapter 3, the story of the fall is the first chapter of an ongoing story. In the chapters that follow, we see that fall being spread out in its effects and its implications.

Cain kills his brother Abel. A logic of vengeance becomes more pronounced in the story of Lamech and his wives. And as we move further on into chapter 6, we see that the thoughts and intents of man's heart were only evil continually.

Adam's sin, like ink dropped onto tissue paper, rapidly spreads in its effects. Its consequences alienation from God, enmity with God in sin, and death. Death is not just physical death.

Death is primarily alienation from God, the giver of life. Sin and alienation from God were active in the world between Adam's expulsion from the garden and Moses. However, the law brings a different relationship with sin.

Under the law, sin becomes much more explicit. It's smoked out into the open, as N.T. Wright puts it. Outside of Israel, pagans continued sinning in spiritual darkness.

Their sin was not really brought to light. Their sin was not really counted either. The counting of sin is something that happens more when people are brought into God's presence.

In Israel, the law involved a constant reckoning with sin under the sacrificial system, constant reminders of its alienating effects and its transgressive character, constant reminders of the working of sin and death within the human life and soul. Paul has argued for the comparability of the work of Christ and the work of Adam. However, despite the formal similarities, there are radical differences.

The trespass of Adam led to the incredible spread of death, but the grace of God leads to a much more abundant gift. The power of the trespass may seem great, but the free gift vastly exceeds it in power. One produces condemnation, the sin of Adam.

The other, the work of Christ, produces justification. One leads to the reign of death over humanity. The other leads to the reign in life of humanity and Christ.

The contrast here, we should notice, is not between death's reign and life's reign, but between death's reign and our reign in life. Jesus, as the last Adam and the second man, takes the entire destiny of the human race upon himself. The salvation and deliverance that Jesus brings is comprehensive in its relationship to humanity.

Christ isn't just salvaging some of the debris left after Adam's sin. He is forming a completely restored human race in fellowship with himself. Paul isn't teaching universal salvation, as some have argued here.

Rather, he is teaching comprehensive salvation of all in Christ. Adam's disobedience to his heavenly father constituted his offspring as rebels against God, alienated from him, and living out of that alienation. Christ's obedience to his father in faithfully carrying out his commission brings us into right standing with God.

What role does the law play in this story? The law for Paul came in to increase the trespass. It's a very strange expression. What might Paul mean? The law for Paul seems to exacerbate the problem and, if anything, increase the alienation.

While the rest of the nations did not directly deal with the Lord in the same way, by giving them the law, God brought Israel into a relationship with himself in which the more latent force of sin was incessantly inflamed into active rebellion and transgression, where sin became so much more sinful, where it was impossible to ignore because the law was bringing it to light. The problem introduced by Adam, the problem common to all of humanity, rose to its greatest height and visibility in Israel. However, in the very place of the magnification of the power of sin, God's grace was most powerfully revealed.

Just as sin reigned in death on account of Adam's sin, God's grace would utterly eclipse it through righteousness, through God's saving justice, his setting of the world to rights, to the end of eternal life, all through Jesus. A question to consider. Paul personifies sin in this passage, presenting it as a reigning power.

He treats sin's relationship with death, sin's relationship with the transgression. He speaks of the way that Adam established a living legacy of sin, the way that sin is operative within us as we continue that legacy. In this, and a great many other ways, a larger account of sin is just beneath the surface of this passage.

If we were to give more attention to, and develop in greater detail, what Paul says concerning sin in this chapter, what might we learn? Romans 6 begins with the question of how we are to respond to the abounding of grace in the place where sin abounded, a point that Paul made at the end of chapter 5. If the blackness of human sin occasions the most dazzling manifestations of divine grace, couldn't an argument be made for continuing in the domain of sin, so that the radical character of God's grace might be even more apparent? If God justifies the ungodly, and the greatness of his grace is most apparent in this, why should we ever leave the domain of sin? In the previous chapter, Paul spoke of opposing reigns, the reign of sin in death, and the reign of grace through righteousness leading to eternal life. God's grace bursts into the realm of sin's power like a blinding light, but its effect is to release us from that realm, and to bring us into another realm, the realm of grace, where it reigns through righteousness. If grace delivers us from the realm of sin, so radically that we are described as having died to it,

continuing to act as if we lived in the realm of sin would be to empty grace of meaning, it would be like the freed slave that continued to grovel before his old master.

The Christian has experienced a transition from the old realm of sin's reign in death, to the realm of the reign of grace in righteousness, leading to eternal life, and this transition is enacted in baptism. In baptism we are united to Christ and his death, so that we might also share in his resurrection life. In the present, by moral newness of life, by the work of the resurrecting spirit, and in the future as our bodies themselves will be raised to eternal life.

Many people get nervous when Paul speaks about baptism in this way, some have argued that Paul cannot be speaking about actual water baptism, his statements suggest salvation by baptism, he must be talking about some inner spiritual baptism. However for Paul, these things are not detached from each other, entrance into the new realm of life in Christ occurs through baptism. How then are we to make sense of this? The first thing to consider here is that baptism is an integral part of the larger movement of turning to Christ.

An analogy might help, when an old king dies, the next in the line of succession immediately accedes to the throne, the throne is never left vacant. However, while the accession to the throne is immediate in some senses, there is a process by which it is proclaimed, formalized, and put into full effect. The coronation of the new monarch can occur months after the accession.

In the case of King Edward VIII, in the UK, there was never a coronation, as he abdicated beforehand. In Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II's case, the coronation was 14 months after the accession. She was the queen months before the coronation, but her coronation was not an afterthought.

When people think of Her Majesty the Queen becoming queen, it is probably the coronation that comes to their mind. King Edward VIII's entry into kingship, however, was abortive, not least because there was no coronation ceremony. The coronation is the ceremonial formalization and glorious manifestation of the new reign, and baptism is not dissimilar.

Entrance into the new life of Christ is both instantaneous and a process, a process of which baptism is the great formalization and enact Conversion without baptism for Paul would be seen as incomplete, a failure to enter into the full reality of what God has given us in salvation. Like the coronation of a new monarch, baptism ceremonially enacts the reality of the transition in a way that symbolically manifests the meaning and significance of what is occurring. It brings the transition into its full effect, bringing the baptized person into full and public communion in the Church.

A coronation is a public and dramatic manifestation of the reality of what has and is

taking place in acceding to the throne, assuring the newly crowned monarch of their full and true possession of the authority and dignity of the throne, and displaying the reality of the glory of the new monarch to both the kingdom and the wider world. Baptism, again, is much the same. It is a seal of the transition to us, assuring us of its reality, of the firmness of Christ's promises to us, and of the unreserved dedication of our lives to which we are summoned.

It also manifests our transition to the Church and the world, calling them to treat us differently from here on out. Paul speaks of baptism as actually accomplishing something, of bringing us into possession of new life. Is Paul teaching some magical doctrine of baptism? Not at all.

Ceremonies can effect remarkable changes. Two single people can walk into a church, go through a ceremony, say some words, exchange rings, and come out as a married couple. Now, the two persons could conceivably go through the ceremony and leave the church, go their separate ways and never interact again.

Everyone could continue to treat them as if they were still single, and the wedding would be a fairly empty charade. Although formally their status would have changed, in actual fact, little else had. The efficacy of a wedding ceremony is in large measure found in the fact that the participants live and view themselves in a very different way afterwards.

The efficacy of the ceremony is largely prospective. It anticipates the couple confirming the meaning of the ceremony in living new lives after it, new lives that are lived in terms of what occurred in the ceremony. Although a couple may fail to live out the reality that a wedding ceremony ushers them into, many do fail in this way.

A wedding does not bring one into an ambivalent status. It anticipates a positive response, and the person who fails to live faithfully in the newness of married life empties the wedding of its meaning. Baptism is much the same.

Baptism formalises, ceremonially enacts, and seals to us our entrance into the privileges of sons and daughters of God. Its efficacy is mostly prospective. It anticipates our actual living out of the new lives into which we have been brought.

Paul wants the Romans, and us, to look at our baptisms and to live out the meaning of what God has declared concerning us in them. The expectation is that baptised Christians will be living lives of a markedly different character. The baptised Christian who is going on living as he did before is violating the meaning of his baptism.

For Paul, our baptism anticipates and assures us a future resurrection. In baptism our bodies are marked out as bodies to be raised in glory on the last day. Our baptisms call us to look at our bodies differently.

God has claimed our bodies, in all of their weakness, frailty, mortality, unshapeliness,

ugliness, and indignity, for the glory of his heavenly kingdom. Our bodies now belong to the realm of grace. Our bodies are to be released from the dominion of death, from the shame of sin that we feel when we are exposed to others' gaze, or experience a sense of violation on account of things that we have done with, or others have done to, our bodies.

We have been set free, and God wants us to enter into the full experience of that freedom, as his grace reigns in the realm of our bodies, through his saving righteousness, until that great day when we are re-clothed with glorious bodies, like our saviour Jesus Christ, and God's deliverance is consummated in our enjoyment of life eternal. This transition, however, is one that only occurs through union with Christ. We are delivered as our bodies are united with his body, as his death becomes our death, as our old man is crucified with him, and laid to rest in his tomb.

As Christians, we exist as people between death and life, people caught in the tension between Christ's death and his resurrection. Our lives play out in this realm. Our release from sin through union with Christ has been proclaimed in baptism, and now we live in anticipation of its full realisation on the last day.

Christ no longer lives in the realm of the dominion of death, he has overcome it. If we are united with Christ and his death, a reality ceremonially enacted and sealed to us in baptism, we need to think about ourselves very differently. We are simultaneously dead and alive.

While we still have one foot in the realm of death and have mortal bodies, yet we already experience the new life of the resurrecting spirit within us. Recalling the fact of our baptisms, by faith we are to reckon what they declare to be true of us. Henceforth we are to consider ourselves very differently.

Considering ourselves dead to sin and alive to God involves no longer habitually living in terms of the reign of sin as puppets of our passions. Being set free is of little meaning if we still continue to turn up for work for our old master every day. Likewise, the new life of grace is something that we are called to live out.

You can't have new life unless you are actively living it. For Paul, this living out of new life is focused on the realm of the body. We must cease offering our bodily members as instruments for unrighteousness, and must instead present ourselves to God as those raised to new life, with our members as instruments of righteousness.

There are sacrificial overtones that we might recognise here. In Romans 12.1, Paul urges the Roman Christians to present their bodies as a living sacrifice. This sacrificial presentation of the body, powerfully symbolically enacted in baptism, is confirmed in lives of obedience.

The sacrificial paradigm that Paul employs in Romans 12.1 is not so explicit, but it is no less present in this chapter. We are called to present our members, to offer our bodies like sacrifices to God, and the grounds for this exhortation are found in our union with Christ in his death and resurrection. The sacrificial overtones in Paul's statement are to be seen not only in his use of the term present, but also in the notion of presenting members, sacrifices were offered to God in a dismembered form.

This is also priestly in character. Priestly initiation involved the symbolic devotion of limbs and organs to God's service, with the blood placed upon particular parts of the body. By speaking of the presentation of our members, our limbs and organs to God, Paul accords a greater prominence to the body.

What we present to God is not just our actions, not just our agency, nor even yet ourselves as agents, but our limbs and organs themselves in their givenness and objectivity. All of this presents a sacrificial model for Christian obedience. In Christian obedience we confirm in practice the offering of our bodies which occurred in baptism.

Paul's grounding of Christian obedience in the limbs and organs of the body also creates an extremely tight connection between person and action. By acting righteously I am presenting my limbs and organs to God, a membering of the sacrifice of my whole self. John Berkeley draws attention to a further importance of the body within Paul's account of ethics in Romans, highlighting the way that Paul locates the operation of sin and its defeat within the body.

He writes, displaying in counter-intuitive patterns of behaviour the miraculous Christ-life that draws their embodied selves towards the vivification or redemption of the body. Some scholars have spoken about the notion of a habitus. A habitus is our basic embodied orientation towards life, our dispositions, perceptions, sensibilities, our ordering structures, our tastes, our styles, our bodily skills and our habits.

Our habitus is what we have learned by body, those things that have become second nature to us. Paul, John Berkeley suggests, had a sense of this when he spoke of the body of sin. He writes, he seems to have a sense that the body has been commandeered by sin, such that its dispositions, emotions, speech patterns and habitual gestures are bound to systems of honour, self-aggrandizement and license that are fundamentally at odds with the will of God.

The Christian life of obedience that Paul expresses is a life that begins with and in the body. The bodily habitus of sin has to be unworked and a new righteous bodily habitus instilled in its place. And baptism is the place where this training of our bodies most clearly begins.

Berkeley writes again, one could hardly imagine a more effective demonstration of this rescue than the physical rite of baptism, which Paul interprets as a transition from death

to life, performed on and with the body. Henceforth, believers give themselves over to this new life as alive from the dead, inasmuch as they present their organs as weapons of righteousness to God. In other words, they are committed to instantiate a new embodied habitus.

This training of the body is almost invariably a social matter. Our bodies are trained as they are incorporated into a larger social body. No one is born as a native of such a community, nor can we simply choose to be natives.

We must all be formed into natives through the inculcation of a particular habitus. This is a slow process where we take on the character of new people. Baptism is a first step in the process of forming the habitus of the Christian faith within us.

At the point of baptism, our bodies are written into the larger social body, incorporated into it. This formation of the individual body through the social body is alluded to in Romans 12 verse 1, which speaks of presenting bodies, plural, as a living sacrifice, singular. Our individual bodies are rendered sacrificial as they are made part of the many-membered body of Christ.

It is a matter of great significance that baptism brings us into the social body of the visible church. The movement of the body into the life of the church, a movement whose first major step occurs in baptism, is an essential part of Christian training and the process of conformity to the likeness of Christ. Without baptism's process of incorporating us into the body of Christ and the bodily training that follows it in the visible church, the pedagogical process of conforming us to Christ would be extremely limited and the most fundamental part of ourselves would not have been offered to God.

In baptism, our limbs and organs are set apart for God's service. This divine claim upon our bodies is a founding principle of Christian ethics. It's one of the chief reasons why Christian obedience should be properly understood as sacrificial.

Baptism manifests and initiates a reorientation of the body and its members. It incorporates us into a new social body. Indeed, it's a practice that forms the social body itself, the body of the church.

And it does so in order that we might, through its co-option and training of our bodies in liturgy and rituals, in practices and forms and in relations, that we might begin to think, to desire, to perceive, to be disposed and to relate differently. That we might learn to live as natives of the body of Christ. Baptism then not only expresses the sacrificial principle that grounds Christian imperatives, it also begins to instill in us the sacrificial habitus by which we will fulfil them.

Sin's dominion over us, a dominion that imposes understanding, is strengthened by the law, has ceased. We now live in the realm of grace. However, our release from the realm

of sin and death has to be lived out as we present ourselves as servants to a very different master.

The story of the Exodus, for instance, a story that had its great transition in the crossing of the Red Sea, was a story of moving from the oppressive service of Pharaoh to the dignifying and glorifying service of the Lord. We must make a similar movement. We make a mockery of our release if we carry on living our old way of life.

For Paul, slavery and freedom are paradoxically interrelated. Freedom from sin is discovered in obedience from the heart to the teaching that we have been placed under, and in becoming slaves to righteousness. This is a willing slavery to God.

And we often think of freedom as living without a master, and living without any law or standard. For Paul, true freedom is obedience from the heart to a new, good master, who liberates us from the cruelty of other masters, not least the mastery of our own passions. Freedom, for instance, can be found in authorisation.

The Israelites enjoyed a much higher status when they were made servants of God, a kingdom of priests, not just allowed to fend for themselves in the wilderness. They came under the more direct rule of God, but that rule was one that authorised them and gave them authority, not just one that placed them under authority. Likewise, there is freedom to be found through obedience to a standard.

The person who learns the standards and the principles of a musical instrument to the point that they can play as a virtuoso is far freer with that instrument than the person who observes no standards or principles, and ignorantly treats the instrument as if no training were required to play it. The point of obedience from the heart is important. The law is written on the hearts of the people of God in the new covenant.

No longer is the law just an external master, something that we resist and rebel against. Rather, it should be something that we willingly obey from the heart, something in which we find true freedom. The old slavery that we were in was one that escalated.

We might recall the progressive stages of giving people up in Romans chapter 1. It was a movement into greater levels of impurity and lawlessness, leading to more dreadful degrees of dishonour and bondage. However, as we present ourselves to a new master, the vicious cycle is replaced by a virtuous one. As we present our members as slaves to righteousness, it leads to sanctification, to our being set apart for God's presence and service.

The old slavery seemed to promise a sort of liberty. It declared that we were free from the demands of righteousness and God. However, the true nature of that supposed freedom was disclosed through its progressive outworking.

It yielded the fruit of shame. It led to bitter consequences in our lives as we reaped its

fruit. It led to bondage to our passions.

It led to the breakdown of our relationships. And ultimately, its outcome was death. However, while we are replacing one form of slavery with another, in becoming slaves of God rather than slaves of sin, the two forms of slavery could not be more different.

And the difference is ultimately revealed in the radically different outcomes that they have. Slavery to God ultimately leads to the honour and the glory of being set apart for God. In contrast to the old shame and the tyranny of our old master, slavery to God, instead of yielding death, ultimately leads to eternal life.

And Paul returns to the conclusion of chapter 5 in the final verse, wrapping up the entire argument of the chapter. There are two contrasting ways, the way of sin and the way of grace. Sin pays wages.

The natural outworking of sin is death. However, grace operates in a very different way. It isn't wages, but a free gift, a super abundant gift, nothing short of eternal life itself.

And it's given to us in and through the Messiah, Jesus our Lord. If we receive this gift, let us live in it. A question to consider, what are some practical ways in which we can more fully express the corporeality of our presenting our bodily members to God in Christian service? Romans chapter 7, especially the second half, is one of the most debated passages in all of Paul's letters.

In particular, the identity of the eye has been a matter upon which litres of ink have been spilled. Romans chapter 7 verse 1, in many translations, might seem to be starting a new argument, independent of what came before. However, it refers back to what preceded it.

It is still dealing with the issue of the dominion that we come under. Paul presents the Romans with a framework within which they can better understand what he is talking about. However, Paul's marriage framework needs to be treated attentively, as it is less straightforward than we might initially expect it to be.

It has a few unexpected twists and turns. There is a husband, a wife, and a law holding them together. The husband dies, freeing the wife from the law of marriage, binding them together, and enabling her to marry another and enjoy a fruitful union with him.

In verse 4, the husband of the previous verse, however, seems to be you. The term you here seems to be doing double duty. It is both the party that dies and the party that marries another.

How can this be? The answer, it seems to me, lies in statements in the preceding chapter, such as that in verse 6. We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be

enslaved to sin. The dead husband is the old self and the body of sin. The husband dies as we are crucified with Christ.

The law bound us to the body of sin in some way, but it does so no longer. Now we belong to Christ, our new husband. The husband in both cases is a form of humanity.

The old, fallen, and sinful humanity in Adam is the first husband, while Christ, the second man and the last Adam, is the new husband. We are the wife in both cases, but we are also identified as the dead husband at various points in the preceding chapter. Paul makes a similar claim in Galatians 2, verse 20.

Here, as in Romans 7, the I has a number of different senses. In some sense, I have died, and in some other sense, I have been released to live a new life as my I is now associated with Christ. The result of this deliverance is that we become fruitful for God in this new marriage.

We formerly lived in the flesh. For Paul, this term flesh refers to humanity in Adam, humanity that is mortal, rebellious, frail, and fallen. The realm of the flesh is also the realm of sin and death's operations.

Within this realm, the sinful passions are operative. They're paradoxically incited by the law itself. The operations of our sinful passions and our members was the bearing of fruit for death.

However, now we have been released from bondage to our old husband, to the old man, a bondage that was secured by the law. We are still servants, but we now serve in the new way of the spirit, rather than the old way of the written code. Implicitly, Paul might be saying that the law binds us to two different masters.

It initially binds us to the master of sin, and then once we've been liberated by Christ, it binds us to Christ himself. We might also think here of the reality of the new covenant, where the law is written upon the heart by the spirit. Paul speaks in a similar way in 2 Corinthians 3, where the letter kills, but the spirit gives life.

Paul's argument to this point raises a difficult question though. Is the law to blame in this whole situation? The law bound us to the old husband, to the old self, maintaining us under the dominion of sin and death. Indeed, according to verse 5, the law itself incited the sinful passions.

Paul immediately rejects the suggestion though. The law for Paul is vindicated. It is not to blame for the situation.

However, it was the law that truly acquainted him with sin, and enabled sin to come to a fuller expression within his life. If it hadn't been for the 10th commandment, Paul's acquaintance with the sin of covetousness would have been quite limited. However, as

the law brought covetousness to Paul's true acquaintance, sin grew to a much higher, more visible, and self-conscious level of activity and expression than ever would have done apart from the law.

Apart from the law, sin is fairly dormant. It's present, but it's not really growing, developing, or gaining power and dominance. However, when the law arrives, that which was a slumbering and shadowy presence awakes as a dominating monster.

The law, which was given at Sinai, changed the expression of sin. One might also compare this to the situation in pagan societies prior to the advent of Christian faith. In such societies, sin is operative in some sense.

However, it is also as if it were slumbering. Then, when the light of truth comes, suddenly sin is awakened and it starts to display its true power. One might consider, as an illustration, the way that few ancient societies had great qualms about cruel structures of dominance.

Racism, for instance, has clearly always been present in the world, in various forms, and in all societies. However, Christian truth, in a more particular way, exposed and brought to light the sins of racism for what they were. It woke up the dragon of racism in the process.

While racism is clearly present in other cultures, few cultures feel as terrorised by its power as ours do. As the light of the gospel woke up and acquainted us with the reality of this sin, it has put us in a position where we feel far more in bondage to it, subject to its power, and unable to get free from it. And this is also operative on individual levels.

As Paul gives the example of covetousness, the person who knows that it is wrong to covet on account of the law will have a very different relationship to lust than the person who is oblivious to it. Covetousness and lust are clearly present in us all, but when the law reveals the sinfulness of lust, lust takes on a much greater power over us. While others continue and blithe ignorance of its sinfulness, we might find ourselves desperately struggling in vain to free ourselves from its tightening clutches in our lives.

The purpose of the law is to present the terms of life in fellowship with God. Its intent is to give life. But here we see that its effects are completely different.

It ends up quite against its intended purpose, to bring death. The law, however, for Paul is holy and just and good. Nevertheless, its coming on the scene leads to our greater subjection to death.

Is this the law's own fault? No, rather it's the fault of sin, which is exploiting the opportunity provided to it by the law, which awakens it from its dormant state. The use of the first person singular in Romans 7 verses 7 to 25 has aroused many different theories. Historically, debates have generally centred around the question of whether an

unregenerate or regenerate person is in view in the passage.

Many have argued that Paul is speaking autobiographically. The helpfulness of this question, however, has been questioned by much recent scholarship. Of particular significance is the work of people like Stanley Stowers, who argue that Paul is employing a rhetorical advice, speech and character, or according to some, that the eye is a sort of generic eye.

A number of suggestions for the identity of the speaker have been put forward. Some argue that it's Adam, others Eve, Gentiles who try to live by the law, or Israel. It seems to me that some association between the eye and Israel more generally offers some more promising ways of resolving the problems.

However, the exact way that the eye and Israel are associated can be a matter of debate. Perhaps Paul is presenting himself as a sort of archetypal Israelite, who stands in some way for the nation as a whole. Perhaps the greatest strength of this approach is the manner in which it does justice to the contradictory character of the eye.

It's in the flesh and sold under sin, yet it delights in the law of God. On this reading, the great transition that underlies Paul's argument is not primarily one from unbelief to belief, but one from the old age of the flesh to the new age of the spirit. In using the eye in this way, Paul can also associate and identify himself with Israel, and not describe her plight as if it were some alien concern.

The change of tense within this section has also played a significant role in determining the identity of the speaker. I believe that change is best understood as a movement from consideration of what happened when the law was first given, to consideration of the ongoing experience of Israel under the law. Verses 7-25 unpack verse 5 of the chapter.

The past tense of verse 5 temporarily situates verses 7-25, until verse 1 of chapter 8 picks up the thread of verse 6 of chapter 7 again. Paul's claim that the law is spiritual in verse 14 is one that he seems to share with his readers. He begins his defence of the law by drawing attention to the imbalance between the law and the eye.

It's an imbalance that exists between spirit and flesh. The law is of the spirit, but he is of the flesh. The flesh-spirit contrast exists between the old humanity in Adam and the new humanity in Christ, and Paul places the law very clearly on the positive side of this polarity, whereas the eye is placed with the Adam, in the negative side.

It is the eye that is fleshly, unable to render the sort of spiritual service that the law calls for. Paul's language here, sold as a slave under sin, seems to rule out that this is a reference to the Christian. Paul has already claimed that Christians are not in the flesh in verse 5, and the description of the eye as sold under sin would seem to contradict many of the earlier statements in chapter 6. Verse 15 helps to explain this.

The sins of the eye in the flesh are unwilling in many senses. The eye does not want to sin, but sins nonetheless. Paul's point here is that the problem does not lie so much at the level of intention, or even instruction in the law, but in the operation of sin that prevents the eye from doing the good thing that it wants to do.

In verse 16, the eye drops any charges that might be levelled against the law. The law is neither evil nor the cause of my death. The eye readily acknowledges the goodness of the law, and intends that very good itself, but it lacks the power to actually perform it.

In verse 17, we see that there is another shadowy actor in the drama, sin. It is sin that frustrates the good intentions of the eye. And the claim being made is not that human beings are not responsible for their actions, but that the eye has been overcome by sin.

It's almost like a demonic possession. In verses 18 to 20, Paul rephrases what he said in verses 14 and 15, in language that's coloured by what he has said in the verses between. Underlying Paul's point here is the claim that, as N.T. Wright puts it, what indwells someone is what gives them power to perform that which otherwise they would want to do, but remain incapable of.

That which is good, the law, in verse 17, has no dwelling in the eye, due to the mismatch that exists between the spiritual law and the fleshly nature of the eye. The law is like good food given to a sick person. It cannot heal the person, but it just causes them to throw up.

Verse 19 is largely a repetition of the second half of verse 15. The difference is that, as Douglas Moo puts it, the good that is willed and the evil that is done are made explicit. Paul underlines his point in verse 20.

His concern seems to be to exonerate both the law and the eye. Verses 21 to 25 serve to sum up what has been discovered about the state of the eye and the law. The law here, it seems to me, refers to the Jewish Torah.

Questions about the Torah have been central to the entire discussion of the chapter to this point, and it would be highly confusing if Paul were to use the word law in a different sense here. Faced with the choice between good and evil presented by the law, the eye finds itself drawn to the evil rather than to the good. Paul then goes on to unpack this.

We see a split occurring within the eye. On the one hand, the eye delights in the law of God according to its inner man. On the other hand, it encounters rebellion against this law in its members.

The split between the members and the inner man should not be regarded as a sort of natural anthropological dualism, as some split within the human person that just exists on account of nature. Rather, it is an unnatural split brought about by the operations of sin. I don't think it's inappropriate to recognise in this some of our own struggles with sin

in our lives.

Where it can feel as if we're split in two, we're fighting against ourselves. There is some force within us that we are battling against. The split within the eye most probably looks back to the start of the chapter, where we saw that the word you was made to do double duty.

In the story of Israel, you can see this delight in the law of God. You can see it in the Psalms and elsewhere. However, while there is this delight in the law of God and this desire to perform it, on the other hand, sin is whipped up and sin and rebellion are excited by the law.

In addition to the split in the eye, the law also splits into two. So on the one hand, you have the law of God and on the other, you have, in the words of Wright, its shadowy doppelganger, the law of sin. On the one hand, the law is the good God-given law.

On the other hand, the law is that which binds us to death and has become the base of operations for sin. The law of sin has already been identified in verses 1 to 4 of the chapter and in verse 20 of chapter 5. The law of God is that which is increasingly coming into focus in Paul's argument. The vindication of the law of God over against the law of sin will finally be made explicit in verses 2 and 3 of chapter 8. It has been Paul's purpose in this chapter to show that the law taken over by sin had paradoxically been part of God's intention in giving it, to prepare for dealing with sin in the flesh of Jesus, and yet that the ultimate purpose of the law, the giving of life, will also be achieved through the work of Christ and the Spirit.

He concludes this section with a great cry of despair. The state of the eye is summed up. The law is not at fault, nor ultimately is the eye itself.

However, the eye is unable to escape from the death grip that the law grants to sin. The more that the eye struggles, the more that it is overpowered. The source of the problem is identified as the body of this death, the state of being flesh and fleshly, and being bound up in the solidarity of sin.

The paradigmatic Israelite eye is unable to attain the spiritual law and its promise of life. Rather, it finds itself bound in death, with no idea of where deliverance might come from. Paul concludes his analysis with an anticipation of the answer to the plight of the eye, to humanity in Adam, bound by the law.

His exclamation of thanksgiving looks back to verse 21 of chapter 5, and forward to verse 3 of chapter 8. Paul proceeds to sum up the argument of the chapter, expressing the split that has occurred in the eye, and also the bifurcation of the Torah. He describes the breach that has been caused in the eye on account of sin. The mind has become alienated from the actions of the members of the body.

The mind longs to fulfil the law, but it finds itself incapable of doing so, given the power of sin and the death of the fleshly body. Now that the plight of the old man faced with the law has been diagnosed, Paul is able to move on to the next chapter to reveal the remedy, and to demonstrate the manner in which the intention of the law to give life, and the intention of the eye to gain life, can both finally be realised. A question to consider, the split of the eye in the concluding half of this chapter, and the split of the law, should remind us of the marriage framework with which Paul began the chapter.

That framework too involved a split, a split between the eye that has to die, and the eye that is freed to be married to another, and also a split in the law, a split between the law that binds me to sin and death, and the law that is the new way of the spirit. How can reading the second half of the chapter in light of the first few verses, help us better to understand both? Romans chapter 8 is arguably the greatest summit in the mountain range of the epistle. It follows closely the case that Paul has been developing since chapter 5. Romans chapter 8 verses 1 to 11, completes the more immediate argument of Romans chapter 7, unpacking the contrast that was drawn in verses 5 and 6. For while we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death.

But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the spirit, and not in the old way of the written code. Romans chapter 7 ended with an expression of the wretchedness of the self in the flesh, and with a bifurcated self and a bifurcated law. When the spiritual law of God comes on the scene, sin simply tightens its grip upon Adamic humanity, leaving it in an even bitterer bondage than it was before.

While the law was given to Israel in particular, rather than to the nations more generally, under the law Israel responded as any other Adamic people would have done, had they been in the same position. There was however a light at the end of the tunnel in the preceding chapter, a means of deliverance from the body of death. The second half of Romans chapter 7 unpacked verse 5 of the chapter, and now Romans chapter 8 verses 1 to 11 unpacks verse 6. But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the spirit, and not in the old way of the written code.

The chapter begins by stating the truth that Paul is about to explain, and then proceeds to unfold it. The opening four verses of this chapter are arguably the most central claim of the entire book. Those in the Messiah Jesus have been released from the condition experienced by the eye of chapter 7. They no longer face the condemnation of the law.

How can this be the case? Paul starts to develop an answer in the dense and cryptic statement of verse 2. Once again there are two laws, the law of sin and death, and the law of the spirit of life, just as there were at the end of the last chapter. There is the law

that tightened the grip of sin and death, and which locked the Jews up and locked the Gentiles out. There is however another law, the law of the spirit of life, a law operative in Jesus Christ.

Paul has already defended the law against accusations that it is sinful in the previous chapter. The problem was never with the law itself, it was with the human material that the law was working with. As Paul points out in verse 3, the problem was that the law was weakened by the flesh.

Now however the law finally achieves its design. The law failed when weakened by the flesh and hijacked by sin, but now it succeeds when empowered by the spirit for those in the Messiah Jesus. The law sought to give life, it declared do this and live, but the flesh rendered the performance of this impossible.

God however has addressed the problem in sending his son. God's son, Jesus the Messiah, entered into the fleshly Adamic condition. He took upon himself the full reality of human nature.

As he entered into our condition, as the Christ, the representative ruler of the people, he could take the condition upon himself and deal with it within himself. He died as a sin offering, what the words for sin means, so that the power of sin could be condemned in the flesh, the place where it had its greatest hold. This then made possible the fulfillment of the righteous requirement of the law in us, as we now walk according to the principle of the spirit rather than that of the flesh.

There have been questions hanging over Romans since chapter 2, where Paul spoke as though some people would be justified on the last day when judged according to their works. We get something of an answer here. Those in Christ have been delivered from condemnation, as that condemnation has been borne by Christ himself, and the new life of the spirit which is producing righteous behaviour in them is conforming them to the judgment that has been declared concerning them in their justification, a judgment that will be reiterated when they are judged according to works on the last day.

Although God justifies the ungodly, delivering them into good standing with himself, those who are justified are not left in sin. It is not the case that after justifying the ungodly out of sheer grace, God throws them back upon themselves to live in a way that merits their salvation. We never cease to stand in and live by grace.

Rather, it is a matter of God's own work within us, transforming us into the image of his Son. It's also the fact that this is the shape that salvation and fellowship with God takes. Paul further draws out the contrast between those who live according to the flesh and those who live according to the spirit.

They set their minds on different things, being defined with ways of thinking, desiring,

imagining and loving. The way of the flesh produces death, while the way of the spirit produces life and peace. Processes of thought lie at the very heart of the problem, and are the primary site of the transformation.

Paul isn't thinking so much about ideas as he is thinking about dispositions and orientations of the heart and mind, with two very different sets of consequences. The central problem of the mind set on the things of the flesh is that it is fundamentally hostile to God. When the law comes along, it will instinctively rebel against it.

It cannot submit to the law, and consequently it cannot please God. It is as though the flesh has a severe allergy to the spiritual law, and as soon as it is exposed to the law, it starts to manifest itself in all sorts of unpleasant ways. It spews out sin, it swells up in rebellion.

The law then, in a situation of the flesh, makes matters worse. It does not actually produce that life that is pleasing to God. Rather, it exacerbates the rebellion and the sin.

Those in Christ, however, are not in the flesh but in the spirit. This strengthens the argument that the end of Romans 7 wasn't referring to redeemed humanity, but fleshly Adamic humanity exposed to the allergen of the spiritual law, primarily in Israel, but in a manner illustrative of the common human problem of the flesh. Flesh was the old realm, and sin was its animating power.

The new realm is Christ and the spirit, and the animating power is also the spirit. It is the presence of the spirit of Christ within us that marks us out as Christ's own. The spirit's empowering presence within us is also Christ's presence within us.

Christ is present within us by his spirit. Although we are still subject to the power of death in our mortal bodies, if Christ is within us, his spirit is life because of God's saving justice, which is setting a broken world to rights. This spirit is the very spirit that raised Jesus himself from the dead, and on the last day, our bodies will also be raised by that spirit.

Until then, however, we already experience the new life of the age to come at work within us. The direct upshot of all of this is that, as people graciously marked out by the spirit of Christ, there is an onus upon us to live according to that spirit, in the newness of life that God has granted us. A life that isn't being lived isn't life, so we must live out the life of Christ if we want to possess that life.

The alternative, of course, is living according to the flesh, which has death as its natural outcome. We are indebted to live according to the spirit, because the spirit of God is the spirit of our adoption. To receive the spirit and to continue to live according to our old way of life would be to nullify the meaning of our adoption.

It would be like an orphan adopted out of the sheer benevolence of his adoptive parents,

continuing to sleep out on the streets. The fact of his adoption needs to be lived out in communion with his new family. Living lives of holiness is part of the shape of salvation, because living in such a way is living out of the life of the spirit, and living in the reality of sonship of God and fellowship with him.

As those led by the spirit, we are also like the Israelites in the wilderness, led by the pillar of cloud and fire, being brought toward the promised land of the new creation. The danger for us, as it was for the Israelites in the wilderness, is that of returning to the old slavery that we left behind, rather than trusting our loving father and following him into the freedom of sonship. The spirit gives us a filial intimacy with God, that leads us to cry out to him, Habba, father! The spirit within us assures us that we are God's dearly loved children, not least in the fact that he spurs us to address God as father in prayer.

If we are God's children, though, we are also the heirs of God, and fellow heirs with his son, the Messiah, as we share in his standing. Sharing in the Messiah's sonship, however, requires commitment to the way of the Son, which is the way of suffering. Union with Christ, which entails life in Christ, the place where we enjoy all of these blessings, is a place of trial and testing.

However, just as it was the path that led to glory for Christ, so will it prove to be for us. A question to consider. Looking through Paul's argument here, what do you notice about the Trinitarian shape of our salvation? In addressing the question of suffering, among other things in the second half of Romans chapter 8, Paul is returning to some matters that he raised earlier in the letter, in places such as chapter 5 verses 3 to 5. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

Present sufferings are put into perspective by the hope that we await, much the same point that Paul has made in 2 Corinthians chapter 4 verse 17. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison. The incomparable glory that awaits us makes all of our present struggles and suffering seem small and of little account by comparison.

Indeed, for Paul, the glory that awaits us is not merely awaiting us, but is awaiting the entire creation. The creation cannot be set to rights until mankind has been restored. The creation eagerly awaits the revelation of the sons of God, because their revelation is a sign of its longed-for deliverance from the futility to which it was subjected.

Until that time, the creation itself exists in a state of bondage. Much as the Gentiles had to wait until the Messiah dealt with Israel's problem before they could be brought in to enjoy freedom as one people with the Jews, so the creation has to wait for the revelation of the family of God. Mankind was created to steward the creation, to be fruitful and

multiply, fill the earth, subdue it, and exercise dominion over its creatures.

This is the purpose for which Adam was created. He was created because the earth needed someone to till it. Until mankind is set right, however, the problems of creation cannot be properly addressed.

The creation is stuck, its intended transformation arrested. At the fall, on account of sin, creation was subjected to futility. The creation was subjected to the frustrating power of death, corruption, and decay in ways that rendered it futile and unable to reach its intended goal.

Genesis 3, verses 17-19, the judgment upon Adam, describes this. And to Adam he said, Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, you shall not eat of it. Cursed is the ground because of you.

In pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life. Thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you. And you shall eat the plants of the field.

By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken, for you are dust, and to dust you shall return. Why was the creation subjected to futility? Perhaps to limit the spread and power of sin. If a sinful and fallen humanity had access to the full power of creation, a creation that wasn't subjected to futility, humanity could have done immense damage, far more than it has been able to do in a creation subjected to death.

It was for this reason, for instance, that man was cut off from the tree of life. If man lived forever, then his sin would have much greater and far less mitigated effects. The sinner is ultimately the one subjected to the futility in the creation.

The description of Ecclesiastes is a good example of this. Life under the sun is described as vaporous. Vapor is something that you can't easily see through.

It masks and obscures things. It's not something that you can grasp hold of. You can't master it and control it and move it where you want it to go.

It's something that leaves no mark behind. It vanishes. It is something that lacks solidity.

In all of these respects, our lives have a vaporous character to them. In Christ, however, we see power over the creation. Especially Christ's power to overcome the futility of the creation and the power of death at work within it.

The wind and the waves obey him. He can raise the dead. He can restore that which is lacking and repair that which is broken.

Subjecting the creation to futility was always only temporary. The intention was always that it would, at the appropriate time, be released from that futility when its stewards

were restored. The salvation of humanity then occurs against a cosmic backdrop.

We were created in large measure as servants within the creation. Salvation should never be narrowly focused merely upon individuals, nor yet merely upon humans. We were saved for the sake of a greater purpose, so that we might be righteous and effective stewards of God within his world once more.

The creation is described as groaning in labour. The theme of labour pangs are commonly used in scripture to speak of the pain through which a new order is brought to birth. Most notably in John 16, verse 21, where Jesus describes the woman whose hour has come, and the pains that come upon her as she's trying to bring a new child into the world, but then the joy that follows.

We should remember that the earth is like a womb. We have that expressed in the poetry of scripture. Naked I came from my mother's womb, naked I will return there, knit together in the lowest parts of the earth.

The earth is our mother, the Adamah from which the Adam is formed. For most of history, however, the womb of the earth has been a barren one. Christ opens the womb of the earth, the womb of the tomb in his resurrection.

He is the firstborn from the dead, and as a result we have the first fruits of the new creation, a creation that is no longer trapped in futility and death, with man returning to the dust, man returning to the tomb, the mother from which he first came. As the people of God, the sons of God, we share in the cosmic groaning of the creation, on account of the fact that we have possession of the first fruits of the spirit. The spirit is the one by whom we are begotten again, but the new birth that the spirit brings about still isn't complete until our bodies are raised.

The spirit's work has begun, but we now join with the creation in longing for the deliverance that is yet to come. We have the first fruits, which serve to guarantee that we will one day enjoy the life of the spirit in its fullness, but we still wait for that day. Many theologians have used the expression already not yet to express the tension in which Christians must live.

The spirit that we have received is already an anticipation of a future that has very much not yet arrived. The already not yet dynamic can affect some of the way that basic dimensions of salvation play out. For instance, justification is already received on the basis of Christ's death and resurrection in the past.

However, we await a justification in the future, as we will be vindicated by God on the last day when we are judged according to our works. The same is true of adoption. We have already been adopted in some senses.

We are already children of God. Yet in another respect, as we see in this chapter, we still

await our adoption, which comes when our bodies are raised. Our salvation, while definitively one in Christ, has not yet been realised in practice.

Our salvation is largely an awaited salvation, albeit one that God has assured us of. Our salvation is in large measure something apprehended by hope. It can't be seen, as it isn't yet here.

However, it can be grasped by the confidence of Christian hope. If we have such a hope within us, we will wait patiently, aware of the glorious character of that which we are awaiting. The Spirit is present with us in our struggles as we patiently await.

The Spirit intercedes for us and also equips us in the manner and the material of prayer, teaching us how to pray. As the Spirit inspires our prayers, His groanings and longings become ours. Paul has earlier spoken of the way that the Spirit grants us a sense of intimacy with God in prayer, as by the Spirit of adoption we address God as Abba.

Now he wants us to see that the Spirit empowers our prayers in other ways, in ways that snatch us up into the great cosmic drama. God is at work within us, renewing us, so that we might become not just sites of His restoration work, but fellow workers with God in that task. Verse 28 is one of those verses that is routinely abstracted from its context and treated as a sort of general promise text.

God works all things together for good to those who love Him, the people He has called for His purposes. Those who love God, and those who are called according to His purpose, are synonymous. God, in calling us, poured out His love in our hearts by His Spirit.

The people in question are the body of people that God has called, in God's call He secures the appropriate response. God's grace is the basis of our spiritual, no less than our natural life. This is the body of people that God is forming in the fullness of time, the sons of God that Paul spoke of earlier.

It's a very specific group of people of which Paul is speaking here. Paul is also speaking of things working together for good in the context of the suffering, weakness and groaning that he has been discussing to this point. The things that are working together for good are the sufferings and the trials in our lives.

The meaning of working together for good should also be carefully considered. This is not just a matter of things generally panning out fairly well for people who believe in a Heavenly Father. No, good is a far weightier word in this context, as we will see in the verses that follow.

The deeper cause of our assurance here is the expression according to His purpose. God has an intention in calling us and He will achieve that whatever might befall us. In verses 29 and 30, Paul traces things back to this deep purpose of God.

Once we realise that everything is grounded in the purpose and the promises of God, we will have much more assurance. It all begins not with us, but with God's foreknowledge. God's foreknowledge is His eternal loving will for our existence as a people for Himself.

To God's foreknowledge is added His predestination, His determination in advance that we will be conformed to the image of His Son, so that a Christ-shaped people might be formed. This is the great governing design in all of this. Some, by treating Christ more as if He were the means of executing God's electional predestination of a certain set of individuals, rather than at the very heart of it all, the one that it's all about, have rather distorted our sense of what Paul is referring to here.

At the centre of God's purpose of foreknowledge and election is not a random set of individuals called the elect, rather it is Christ Himself. He is the one that exists at the heart of God's purpose in history and we are formed around Him and conformed to Him. Having ordained that this people be formed, when the time came He called them into new life by the powerful word of His Spirit, which awakens the spiritually dead and brings into existence people who were no people.

Calling these people God declares them to be, even though ungodly, people in good standing with Himself. He justifies them. Once again, this isn't a timeless truth about salvation, so much as it is a claim about what God is doing in this new work in Christ in the fullness of time and the confidence the Roman Christians could find in this fact.

This work of God in salvation was something hidden from the foundation of the world, but in this moment in history, as a result of Christ's work, it is being revealed and worked out. Not only has God declared the called people to be in good standing with Himself in justification, He has also glorified them. We are now, as Paul says in Ephesians 2, verse 6, raised up with Him and seated with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.

This glorification, like the adoption that he spoke of earlier, or our justification, which anticipates final justification, is anticipatory. We still wait to be clothed with the glory of the resurrected body. However, even now, we already have the first fruits and the guarantee of that future glorification in the gift of the Holy Spirit.

This isn't just an irresistible divine purpose though. When everything is seen, it is not an austere divine plan with which we are dealing, but an unfailing and enduring and persistent divine love, a love that will never surrender us to another, no matter the force that tries to obstruct it. Paul asks a series of rhetorical questions, before launching into a triumphant proclamation at the end of the chapter.

The first question is, if God is for us, who can be against us? The fact that God gave us His Son assures us of everything else. God has done the really great thing. Then why be anxious about all that is small by comparison? This is the point that he made in Romans chapter 5, verses 8 to 10.

But God shows His love for us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since therefore we have now been justified by His blood, much more shall we be saved by Him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by His life.

The second question he asks, who shall bring any charge against God's elect? This is an imagined law court. Who is going to come forward and bring some charge against this person? If anyone were to bring a charge, they would be found to be at odds with God Himself. He has declared us to be in good standing with Himself.

God has justified. Who can stand as an accuser now? Third question is similar. Who is to condemn? Christ Himself has died for our sins.

He was raised for our justification. He is now interceding on our behalf in heaven. The surety of Christ's definitive and continuing work leaves no ground for condemnation.

The fourth question, who shall separate us from the love of Christ? As if trying to figure out the answer, Paul goes on to give a roll call of the forces, the powers and the extremities of creation. Not one of which would be able to cut us off from God's love. God's love in Christ descended from the highest heights to the deepest of all depths.

There is nowhere where people are beyond the reach of God's grace and love. When grasped by God's love, there is no greater power that might rest us out of His hands. Most particularly, all of the sufferings, trials, dangers and difficulties that come our way cannot separate us from God.

Quite the opposite. In our sufferings, we are marked out for loving sacrifice to God. We are also being conformed to His dearly loved Son, who was led as a lamb to the slaughter.

In the light of all of this, we can persevere in tribulations, in hope and in confidence. A question to consider. How has Paul developed the theme of the love of God in the epistle of Romans to this point? Many people have read Romans chapter 9 and following as a sort of appendix to the main body of Romans.

Romans 1-8 are about the way of salvation. Then in Romans 9, Paul teaches about the doctrine of election and then gets into the question of the status of Israel. While popular in some quarters, this is quite a mistaken understanding of Romans.

If we have been paying attention, it will be clear that the issues addressed in Romans chapter 9-11 are absolutely integral to the letter. In fact, a reasonable case could be made that these are the most important chapters for Paul's argument in the epistle. Here it is important to remember that the epistle is in many ways more focused upon God's problem and God's solution to that than upon man's problem and God's solution to that.

What do we mean by this? God has to be both just and the justifier. He has to deal appropriately with sin and maintain moral order in his universe. However, he also desires to deliver human beings from sin and put them in right standing with himself.

He needs to keep the promises that he has made to Israel. At the heart of the book of Romans is not an account of how individuals can get right with a holy God, although Romans clearly addresses those problems. Rather, Romans is about how, in the fullness of time in history, God revealed his saving justice by which sinful people can be put in good standing with him, how that good standing is not a mere fiction but is according to truth, being in keeping with judgment according to works on the last day.

It is about how this new people in Christ fulfills the great purpose that God had from the beginning and will involve the renewal of all creation. However, there is one great big glaring problem and that's Israel. Israel has, for the most part, not responded positively to the gospel.

Indeed, they have generally rejected Christ. Yet Israel receives so many blessings and promises from God, it seems as if God has failed in their case. And if that is the case, everything else is thrown into question.

If Messiah Jesus is the fulfilment of the promises made to Israel, then how are we to explain this? This is a profoundly personal matter for Paul too. He is in very great distress about the state of Israel. They are his own compatriots.

He even goes to the extent of, like Moses in the book of Exodus, expressing the desire that he be cut off in order that they might be saved. He enumerates all of the blessings of Israel, ending with the greatest of all. From Israel, according to the flesh, came the Messiah, Jesus.

There is also likely an exceptionally remarkable statement here concerning Jesus. Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. If this is the right way of understanding Paul's statement, and there is debate on this point, it is a direct statement of the deity of the Messiah, Jesus.

However, it occurs in a context that heightens the irony. God himself took Israelite flesh and yet Israel have failed to receive him. In response to this, Paul retells the story of Israel, in order that we can understand what is happening at this juncture in history.

Though many have missed the fact, most of Paul's thought is about exploring the meaning of history, how to articulate the events of history in a meaningful narrative that gives us the means by which to move forward in an appropriate manner. At this juncture of history, following the Christ event, how do we understand that Israel has largely rejected the Gospel, whereas the Gentiles have accepted it in large numbers? How do we account for this against the background of God's covenant purpose and promise for his

people of Israel? This would seem to be incongruous with God's intent to save his people. It would seem to go against the purpose of the covenant.

In response to this then, Paul tells the story in a way that highlights, for instance, that the Gentiles who had not been seeking God are nonetheless fitting recipients of God's mercy. That this is in keeping with how Israel always was constituted, by an act of pure grace, not on the basis of anything that might mark them out as deserving recipients. Now this is not just a matter of works, it could be a matter of ancestry, or it could be a matter of some other factor, some standing or worth that people could claim before God.

Paul is reading the story of Genesis at this point, and then he moves on to the story of Exodus and elsewhere, but he retells the story in a way that shows that Israel was never established on the basis of its works or its worth, of its keeping of the law, or of its being marked out as the people of the law. What he is talking about here is not primarily earning salvation through merit, although that is an implication of it. Rather he is challenging anything that might mark anyone out as a fitting recipient of God's grace.

For instance, whether it is birth, or being born to a particular father. Isaac was the one through whom God would call Abraham's seed, not Ishmael, so it is not about birth. Mere descent from Abraham or Israel was never the fundamental basis of Israel's identity as a people.

Well, what about the fact of works, and the way that you are an observant keeper of the law? Well, we can see the story of Jacob and Esau. Why did God choose Jacob over Esau? God says, Jacob I have loved, Esau I have hated. Yet this occurs even within the womb itself, before any actions have been performed.

God chose Jacob over Esau and said that the older should serve the younger. At each point in Israel's history, Israel was constituted on the basis of grace and of divine election, of a divine election that was not conditioned upon anything that was done by the human actors. Now as we read through the story of Genesis, we should recognise this.

This is what we see in the story itself. Why did God choose Isaac rather than Ishmael? Not on the basis of anything that either of them did. Rather it was divine purpose, it was divine election.

It was not based on the choice or the actions of the participants involved. It was God. Why was Jacob chosen over Esau? Not because Jacob did anything that earned that, because the choice happened before either of them was born.

Nor was it on the basis of the natural status enjoyed by the older, because Jacob was chosen rather than Esau. Later on we will see that choice reaffirmed and it is something that is manifest also in Esau's despising of the covenant and those sorts of things. But

that is not the basis for it.

It is not that God saw Esau's wickedness and then decided to cut him off from the covenant. Rather God's purpose all along was that Jacob should be the one through whom the covenant line would be established. And so the very origins of Israel were established by an unconditioned series of actions of divine grace.

This is the way that God forms his people. And we should notice the asymmetries as we go through this. This is about God's positive action of grace.

It is not that there is a symmetrical action of grace and a sort of anti-grace of violent rejection and reprobation. This is not a double decree in the way that would make one decree symmetrical with the other. The other thing to notice here is that this is not about salvation primarily.

This is about God's covenant purpose of forming his people. In the new covenant we see that it is far more about salvation because it is the means by which God is blessing and bringing in all peoples. Whereas in the past this was restricted to Israel.

You did not have to be a member of Israel though to be saved. There is no reason to believe that Ishmael was damned on account of his not being chosen for instance. Indeed there are reasons why we might think that he was indeed saved.

The issue here though is who is going to bear the covenant destiny and promise? Who will hold the covenant baton as it is passed down through history? And God always formed his people through an act of unconditioned grace. As we read through the story it continues. So it goes beyond Esau and Jacob and into the story of the Exodus.

He says to Moses, I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion. So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy. Notice again that there is an asymmetry here.

It talks about God's choice of mercy, his exercising of mercy and compassion. It does not speak about God choosing to exercise a violent rejection of people. The word for hated in the story of Esau need not bear the weight of violent rejection and animosity.

Although that element may appear later on as the story develops, it just means that God chose or preferred Jacob over Esau in the sense that he chose him rather than Esau. We see a similar thing in the story of Rachel and Leah. Leah is hated and Rachel is loved.

This does not mean that Leah is violently and viscerally disliked. It might involve a dislike, but that is not primarily what the words mean in that context. The point here then is that God is acting through the unconditioned act of mercy upon people who are unworthy of it.

God's action in grace is always to unworthy recipients. There is no need for God to justify himself in this way. God is not in the position of having to justify himself.

He is exercising pure grace, unconditioned grace, undeserved favour towards people, none of whom are worthy recipients, and all of whom are formed as a people purely out of God's goodness and undeserved favour. Remember, this is the formation of a people, not just the choice of detached individuals. Paul's point here is to discuss the way that God forms his people in history, so that the Romans can better understand why the Gentiles can be brought in, in a way that is in keeping with the way that God always works, and then also how Israel's stumbling can be made to fit in to the larger story of how God works in history.

Abraham, Esau, Jacob, Isaac, Ishmael, these are not just odd individuals who happen to be believers or unbelievers. No, they are the people through whom God was shaping, at its very origins, his people. The choice of Isaac over Ishmael was not just the choice of an individual, it was the choice of a people.

It was the choice of the descendants of Isaac, rather than those of Ishmael. In the same way with Esau and Jacob, it is not that God was choosing this one individual over another individual primarily. It was God determining how he was going to form his people over history.

What sort of people was he going to create? It's the moulding of a people. Notice also that election, as it is described in this chapter, is something that happens in history. The choice of Jacob was declared while he was in the womb.

It's not the same thing as an election in eternity past. God's sovereignty is exercised in history, throughout Israel's history. And this is a point that Paul supports by retelling the story also of the Exodus.

In the story of the Exodus, the truth of God's sovereignty is addressed to Pharaoh. For the same purpose I have raised you up, that I may show my power in you, and that my name may be declared in all the earth. Within the story of the Exodus, then, God raises Pharaoh up.

This is not the same thing as God making Pharaoh sinful. For instance, in the story of Job, Job is attacked by people around him, and all his people are killed, and we have other disasters that befall him. It is not, however, as if the people around him were very favourably inclined to Job, and that Job was in this situation where all his neighbours were praying for him and wishing him well and seeking his good, and then suddenly they just randomly turned on him.

No, it says that God had created a hedge around him, protecting him. In the same way, when we think about someone being raised up or hardened, when we look at the story of

the Exodus, we see that on the one hand God hardens, and on the other hand, Pharaoh hardened himself. It's a fitting way to see things.

It recognises the integrity of secondary causation, that God's causation is not in competition with human causation, and particularly when it comes to sin, God is not the author of sin. When we read the story of Pharaoh, Pharaoh hardens himself, but as he hardens himself, God is hardening him as well. Indeed, on many of the occasions when it talks about hardening, it's rather God giving him the power and strength of will so that he can take his stand.

God's sovereign direction of Pharaoh's heart and Pharaoh's hardening of his own heart are not in competition with each other. Pharaoh is raised up in order to show God's glory, that God, in the act of the Exodus, might demonstrate his power over the false gods and rulers of the Egyptians and deliver his people from the house of bondage, and to do that he gives, as it were, free reign to the sin in Pharaoh's life. Indeed, he empowers Pharaoh's will in order that Pharaoh can stand even more surely in his rebellion.

He allows him to rise to a fuller stature in order that he might be broken down. Paul writes, Paul responds to this with the idea or the illustration of the potter on the clay, something that we find in the Old Testament. The potter on the clay is an important image to attend to.

It is not that God creates a blank slate and then writes on it whatever he wills. The potter clay image is an image of movement between the potter and the clay. God is shaping real entities in history, real people and real people groups.

So whether he is shaping Pharaoh as a part of the Exodus, whether he is shaping his people through the choice of Isaac and the choice of Jacob over Esau, this is God forming his pottery as it were, forming his people over history. And as he forms that people, it is being made into a vessel for his glory. And on the other hand, we have vessels of honor and vessels for dishonor.

Paul raises a hypothetical question at this point. What is Paul saying here? He is returning to the situation at this moment in time and raising a hypothetical question. What if God, as in the situation of the Exodus, with the design of saving and delivering his people, is allowing the vessels of wrath to exist and enduring with much long suffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction that he might make known the riches of his glory to the vessels of mercy? We should recognize a number of things about this.

First of all, enduring the vessels of wrath is for the sake of the salvation of the vessels of mercy. It is for the sake of grace that God endures with the vessels of wrath. Likewise, God is not seen as preparing those to the same degree as the others.

Those vessels of wrath are hardened and they are hardened not necessarily through pure divine action upon them. They can be hardened through their own work as well. As we read this, we should read it recognizing that the background is unbelieving Israel and their rejection of and resistance to the gospel.

What is the purpose of that? Paul is raising the hypothetical possibility that this is perhaps happening in order that God might demonstrate his power. They are being fitted for destruction, a destruction that ultimately comes in AD 70 as Israel is judged and Jerusalem and its temple are destroyed in God's judgment. That event is the means by which God makes his power known.

These vessels of wrath fitted for destruction are not necessarily about vessels of wrath from all eternity fitted for wrath in hell. Again, it is a historical account. It is about God fitting particular people for destruction within history for a historical judgment.

Israel has rejected Christ. They rejected Christ in his initial mission and now they have not just rejected the Son of Man but have rejected the spirit given at Pentecost that bears witness to the risen Christ. As a result, much of that particular generation will be destroyed.

However, God is currently bearing with them with long suffering in order that he might save his people at this moment in time. That bearing with them with long suffering ultimately leads to bringing in many Jews and Gentiles. These are the people that God has called.

This new people is led by the spirit, the people that he has spoken about in chapter 8. And then again he looks back to the Old Testament story of Hosea. I will call them my people who are not my people and her beloved who was not beloved and it shall come to pass in the place where it was said to them you are not my people there they shall be called sons of the living God. Isaiah also cries out concerning Israel though the number of the children of Israel be as the sand of the sea the remnant will be saved for he will finish the work and cut it short in righteousness because the Lord will make a short work upon the earth.

In these references to the Old Testament, Paul is once again showing that this is about the way that God has always done things. The way that God called and established his people at the beginning is the way that he is doing things now in bringing Gentiles in apart from natural status, works or ancestry. God called Abraham as if from nothing.

God formed Isaac through bringing life to a dead womb and preparing Abraham to bear a seed. None of this is on the basis of merit, on the basis of worth, on the basis of being a fitting recipient of God's mercy. One could imagine certain Israelites protesting.

We have the temple. We practice circumcision. We keep the law.

We are a people who are marked out by the covenant. We have all these covenant signs. But in themselves these do not make them fitting recipients of God's grace.

We need to look back through the history of Israel to see at this present moment in time all are under sin. God has formed his people from the very beginning through unconditioned acts of grace. It is not based on birth, ancestry, status, standing or worth.

Ishmael had Abraham as his father too, but he was not chosen. It is not on the basis of what you have done. In the case of Esau, Esau was not the chosen one from his very birth, from even within the womb.

It is not on the basis of being greater or lesser. Esau was the older, but he was still not chosen over the younger. And as we look through the Old Testament, again and again we see this theme repeated, that God chooses, establishes, forms his people through the sovereign work of grace.

It is not on the basis of anything that those people might do to merit their standing or their status. And at this moment in time, just as we see in the prophecy of Hosea, God is calling a people who are not a people, who had been, as it were, not just cut off, but never been a part of the people at all. And as he is calling them, they are, as it were, not just life from the dead, but life out of nothing.

The Gentiles called the people of God are a people formed where there was no people before. Now all of this raises deep questions. What about God's purposes expressed in his gracious choice of Abraham and his seed? We need not believe that Israel deserved its status to also ask questions like the following.

What about God's purpose and commitment expressed in that original act of choosing Abraham? Has God reneged on his purpose and his promise? Has he just abandoned his plan for Israel? Has he just thrown Israel to one side and decided to go on with the Gentiles? These are all questions that Paul is working with and he will continue with them in the next couple of chapters. Paul states the situation at the end of the chapter. The advent of Christ has led to two effects.

Gentiles who had not sought out righteousness, either understood in the sense of God saving justice, setting the world to rights, or righteousness in the sense of good standing with God. Those Gentiles end up perceiving it. While Jews who pursued Torah observance, marking themselves out as special by the law, they believed that that would lead to them receiving God's saving justice or to enjoy good standing with him, but they didn't even succeed in attaining the Torah itself.

They pursued the law in the wrong way, by works of the law, rather than in the way of faith by which true obedience is established. This is all the result of stumbling over a stumbling stone, a common theme in the New Testament. The stumbling stone here is

probably both Christ and the faith that corresponds to the receiving of God's grace in him.

A question to consider. What are some places in the Old Testament which substantiate Paul's point in this chapter that God's formation of Israel from the very beginning was apart from status, worth, standing, observance or ancestry? In Romans chapter 10, Paul continues to address the great question and the tragedy of Israel's failure to receive the Gospel message. Israel had not attained to the righteousness by faith, although Gentiles had.

Rather Israel had stumbled upon the stumbling stone. Paul begins by expressing his deep desire that Israel come to know God's salvation, which they were currently rejecting. He addresses the Roman Christians here as brothers.

Earlier in chapter 9 verse 3 he spoke of the Jews as his brothers, his kinsmen according to the flesh. He wants the Romans to join with him in his desire for his fellow Jews' salvation. As in the case of Paul himself prior to his conversion, the Jews are zealous for God, but their zeal is tragically ignorant.

They fail to recognise how God has actually acted. They have been ignorant of the righteousness of God, oblivious to God's act of saving justice enacted in Jesus the Messiah, a saving righteousness by which God justifies the ungodly, bringing people into good standing with himself, without respect to ancestry, covenant membership, Torah observance or status. Israel, however, has sought to establish its own standing with God on the basis of the Torah through covenant membership and Torah observance.

While the failure of Israel that Paul is speaking about here is a more general failure, it is a failure revealed at a crucial moment, when it really counted, when the Messiah came, Israel dropped the ball. When God acted decisively in their history, revealing his righteousness, they should have submitted to it, recognising the surprising manner of God's action in Christ and joyfully receiving it. However, that was not what happened.

Instead, they were blind to what God was doing in Christ and rather than receiving it, they rejected and opposed it in unbelief. The point here isn't so much that Israel was trying to earn their own salvation, as many have understood it, rather Israel perceived its standing with God to be a matter of their own covenant status and Torah observance. In many respects, this was an understandable and reasonable belief.

It wasn't a belief that they could earn salvation, nor was it a belief in the necessity of absolutely perfect obedience. Rather, it was the belief that when God's saving justice appeared, it would be shown to people deemed more worthy, i.e. Torah observant Jews. Living in a Torah observant way, as a people set apart from the Gentiles, was a good and necessary thing in its time, provided that they never forgot that these things were never the ultimate basis of their standing with God.

That was God's grace alone. However, when God's long-awaited saving justice, the righteousness of God, was revealed, it took an unexpected form. At this point, Israel faced a choice.

Would they submit to what God was doing, or would they continue to insist upon pursuing their standing with God in the way of Torah observance? Would they relate to God on his own terms, recognizing the more temporary role that the law was playing in God's purposes? Or would they cling on to a status gained from the law, even when God was establishing his new covenant people on a very different footing? Jesus the Messiah is the goal at which the law always aimed. With everyone who believes enjoying good standing with God on the basis of what Christ has achieved. In Christ, the law arrives at its intended destination, accomplishing its design.

The law was never a bad thing to be abolished, but a good thing to be fulfilled. The problem was not with the law itself, as Paul argues, the law is spiritual. Rather, the problem was always with sinful flesh and its allergic reaction to the law.

In Christ, the law can finally achieve its intended goal, as the righteous requirement of the law can be fulfilled in us, as we walk no longer according to the flesh, but according to the spirit. The meaning of Paul's statement in verses 5-11 may not be immediately obvious and has provoked much debate, as many other things in the book of Romans. One of the more jarring things is the fact that Paul seems to be juxtaposing the righteousness that is based on the law and the righteousness based on faith.

However, if this is Paul's intent, he seems to be using the wrong verses to do so. He alludes to Leviticus chapter 18 verse 5 as the statement of the righteousness of the law. Yet the verses around which he structures his proclamation of the righteousness of faith are taken from Deuteronomy chapter 30 verses 11-14.

If we read verses 11-20, we'll get a better sense of the original context. See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I command you today, by loving the Lord your God, by walking in His ways, and by keeping His commandments and His statutes and His rules, then you shall live and multiply, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to take possession of it.

But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall surely perish. You shall not live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse.

Therefore, choose life, that you and your offspring may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying His voice and holding fast to Him, for He is your life and length of days, that you

may dwell in the land that the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them. Robert Alter, commenting upon the teaching of these verses, remarks that Deuteronomy, having given God's teaching a local place and habitation in the text available to all, proceeds to reject the older mythological notion of the secrets or wisdom of the gods. It is the daring hero of the pagan epic who, unlike ordinary man, makes bold to climb the sky or cross the great sea to bring back the secret of immortality.

This mythological and heroic era is at an end, for God's word inscribed in the book has become the intimate property of every person. The law contains great depths and wealth of wisdom, but it isn't far off from anyone. This word is in the mouths of Israel and can be in their hearts as they memorize it, meditate upon it, learn its principles of wisdom, delight in it, and sing it forth, and display its principles from the very heart of their lives.

Deuteronomy chapter 6 verses 4-6 describes this sort of relationship with the law. Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.

And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. The law is at its heart a remarkably democratic document. It isn't written merely for a scribal, judicial, or royal elite.

It doesn't require the great feats of epic heroes, the deep learning of philosophers, or the wandering of mystical pilgrims. It is written for the learning, understanding, and practice of every Israelite, from the least to the greatest. It isn't a shadowy and arbitrary set of principles imposed upon them from without, but a book full of rationales, explanations, and persuasion, designed to enlist the will, the desires, and the understanding.

God is close to every Israelite, not just to the high priest, the sage, the prophet, or the king. Now Paul is not a careless reader of the scriptures. It seems strange that he would use a reworked text advocating for the keeping of the law as his clincher text for the righteousness of faith over against the righteousness of the law.

What is he doing here? One thing to note here is that Deuteronomy chapter 30 is the great passage about God's work of grace in the future, the work by which he will restore his wayward people, circumcising their hearts, in verse 6, so that they will love him as they ought and live. This is what it will look like when the law finally gives the life it intended, through an utterly unmerited act of divine grace. Perhaps, rather than presenting a great contrast between the righteousness of faith in verses 6-11 and the righteousness of the law in verse 5, Paul is actually revealing a fundamental continuity.

So, perhaps, verse 6 should begin with an AND rather than a BUT. The word of Christ that is believed is the divine word that has graciously come near to us, so that we might receive it and have life. The statement of Leviticus chapter 18 verse 5, that the person

who does these things will live by them, is fulfilled in the covenant restoring and establishing act of God by which his word comes so very near to us, entering into our very hearts.

Nevertheless, we should notice that even in the fulfilment there remains a contrast. The word of the law is primarily a word of command to be obeyed and done. The word of Christ is primarily a word of promise and grace to be believed and confessed.

Salvation and the promised restoration of the new covenant comes with the believing reception of this word of the gospel, the message that Jesus is Lord. As Richard Hayes observes, Paul has also mixed the Deuteronomy 30 quotation with an expression found elsewhere in the book of Deuteronomy, particularly in chapter 8 verse 17 and 9 verse 4. And then in chapter 9 verse 4. Paul probably hopes that attentive readers will pick up on these echoes. Both of these texts underline the sheer grace by which Israel enjoys its standing with God and its place in the land.

Likewise, the reception of the word of Christ does not depend upon the great deeds of heroes, the lofty wisdom of sages or the powers of human rulers. In God's action in the gospel, his revelation has come near to us all in a way that reaches directly into our unworthy condition, wherever we may find ourselves. He doesn't require great feats of bravery, genius or power of us, just the reception of faith by which we can be saved.

The law called for obedience as the means of life. However, the law also promised that God, in a great act of grace, would realize the law's intention for a people who are unfaithful and would unavoidably come under the law's curse in their history. The law was not merely command but was also promise.

And in Paul's movement from Leviticus chapter 18 verse 5 to Deuteronomy chapter 30, Paul follows the shift from command to promise and manifests the fulfillment of the promise that has occurred in Christ. Christ is God's revelation come near to us all, so that the law might be fulfilled and humanity restored in relationship with God. Salvation is now made accessible for everyone who believes.

The promise of the gospel is a universal one. God is the God of all, Jews and Gentiles alike. Referencing Joel chapter 2 verse 32, who prophesies concerning the great day of the Lord when the fortunes of Israel will be restored and reversed, Paul declares that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved.

This also prepares us for some of the points that he will go on to make about Israel in the following chapter. In verses 14 to 15, Paul expresses the Gentile mission in terms of this new covenant fulfillment framework. For the prophecy of an indiscriminate gift of salvation to Jews and Gentiles alike to be fulfilled, the message needs to go out to Gentiles, which is where Paul's own work fits in.

Quoting Isaiah chapter 52 verse 7, he describes the wonderful character of the heralds of the good news, or the gospel, the message that Jesus is Lord, that God is establishing his kingdom in his Son. Yet not everyone who hears the message of Paul's gospel responds with obedient submission to Israel's Messiah and the world's true Lord. The gospel as the proclamation of the Lordship of Jesus the Messiah is not just a message that we can take or leave.

We must bow the knee to Christ or else stand in rebellion against him. Just as Isaiah expressed the widespread rejection of his message, so Paul's gospel proclamation is widely rejected, even among Gentiles. Faith comes from the heard report, and the heard report comes through the word of Christ that has come near to mankind in the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ.

God's revelation of his Son, Jesus Christ, the word that has come near to us, is what drives and lies at the heart of the proclamation of the gospel. Paul quotes Psalm 19 verse 4 in an admittedly rather confusing verse. As usual, we should pay attention to the context.

Psalm 19 verses 1-4 speak of the universal revelation of the glory of God by the heavens. The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge.

There is no speech, nor are there words, whose voice is not heard. Their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. Perhaps Paul's point here is that no one, not even the Gentiles, are without excuse.

While the word of God has come near in Jesus and the proclamation of the word of the gospel, it is not as if the Gentiles were completely without revelation. God has already spoken to them in the creation itself. The chapter ends with a statement of the truth that Israel had not been left without warnings of this situation, of the good news of God's kingdom and his saving justice going to the Gentiles, while they rejected it.

They should have known. He quotes from Deuteronomy chapter 32 verse 21 and Isaiah chapter 65, verse 1 and then verse 2. In such places Israel had already been warned by God that as they rejected the gospel, God's grace would be shown to people who had never sought it, ultimately with the effect of moving Israel to jealousy. Paul is here returning to some of the points with which he concluded chapter 9 and setting things up for the chapter that follows.

A question to consider. How does the connection between the promise of Deuteronomy chapter 30 and the call to live by the law in Leviticus chapter 18 verse 5 help us to understand the proper place of the law in the larger picture and story of scripture? In the book of Romans, the apostle Paul declares that through the death and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah, God has bared his holy arm before the nations and wrought salvation

in fulfillment of his promises. This gospel is the power of God for salvation for everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

It delivers the Jews from the condemnation of the Torah that they were under and Gentiles from their state of exclusion, grafting them into the one people of God in which they share in the spiritual blessings of Israel. Yet at the heart of this glorious declaration of God's work of salvation lies troubling questions of divine faithfulness. For while the gospel is making inroads among the Gentiles under the ministry of Paul and others, the Messiah has largely been rejected by his own people.

Much of the later half of the book of Romans is devoted to addressing the question of how this perplexing state of affairs could come to be, and in Romans 11 this comes to its height. Paul recognises the troubling force of this challenge, something that raises questions about God's justice itself. If the Jews have been cast off or stumbled so as to fall completely, as the situation might appear to some, then the very character of the covenant-keeping God is thrown into doubt and a dark shadow is cast over the gospel itself.

In chapters 9-11 of Romans, Paul turns to address this question directly. Tracing the story of Israel from its patriarchal origins, through the Exodus and into the period running up to the exile, he demonstrates that from the very beginning Israel has been formed purely by unconditioned divine grace. God determined that Abraham's line would be called through Isaac and chose Jacob over Esau his brother.

He raises up and brings low adversaries like Pharaoh to demonstrate his power. He can reduce the innumerable hosts of a rebellious people to a small remnant and form a new people from those who were never a people. But how can this be squared with God's covenant commitment to his people? Paul begins to answer this by presenting himself, a Benjaminite descendant of Abraham, as proof that God has not in fact rejected his people Israel utterly.

Then once again he turns to Israel's covenant history to locate parallels with the current situation. During the ministry of Elijah, for instance, God reassured the prophet that even though the nation had largely fallen away, he had reserved 7,000 faithful men as a remnant. In much the same way, Paul maintains, God had reserved a chosen remnant of grace in his day.

However, the majority of the nation were hardened in judgment and suffered rejection. Paul proceeds to discuss the mysterious ways in which the conversion of the Gentiles and the stumbling of Israel fit into God's purposes. He denies that the stumbling of Israel occurred in order that they might fall.

Rather, it happened in order that the Gentiles might be included and that through their inclusion Israel might be made jealous. Here we should recall Paul's reference to

Deuteronomy 32 verse 21 in the preceding chapter. Paul believes that his own ministry as the apostle to the Gentiles is involved in God's purpose in this regard.

His mission is not merely performing the role of bringing in the Gentiles, but through the bringing in of the Gentiles, exciting his Jewish compatriots to jealousy so that they too might be saved. Paul employs the image of an olive tree, with natural branches cut off and wild branches grafted in to illustrate the situation in his day. The wild branches are grafted in contrary to nature, contrasting with the natural branches which, even if broken off, could easily be grafted in again.

The wild branches grafted in enjoy their place by a sort of double grace. Not only are they supported by the root, as the natural branches are, but their very inclusion in the tree is solely by virtue of a radical act of gracious engrafting. Paul cautions Gentile believers not to vaunt themselves over the natural branches, knowing that the natural branches, by virtue of their origin, enjoyed by promise some sort of title to God's covenant riches that the Gentiles never possessed.

In chapter 9 verses 4-5 Paul had enumerated the blessings and covenant privileges that were proper to his Jewish compatriots. They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship and the promises. To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever.

Amen. The concept of jealousy plays an important role in Paul's developing argument. As graciously adopted children in the family of the covenant, Gentiles ought to act in a manner that provokes jealousy in the wayward natural sons, faithful Gentiles manifesting the riches that the Jews rejected.

Even after they have largely rejected his gospel, Paul can make the most startling claims concerning natural Israel's status. For instance in verses 28-29 Just before his argument erupts into its doxological crescendo, Paul declares a divinely established symmetry between the deliverance of Gentiles from their formerly unbelieving state, and the mysterious act by which, through the mercy shown to Gentiles, Israel itself might be shown the most remarkable mercy. In verses 30-32 Christians have differed in how they have made sense of Paul's argument in Romans chapter arguably the crux text for discussions of the future of Israel.

The question of the identity of the all Israel that Paul says is going to be saved in verse 26 is one that serves to manifest much of the range of different readings that are on offer. A minority of interpreters, John Calvin and N.T. Wright among them, have identified all Israel in verse 26 as the Jew plus Gentile people of God in Christ. Yet even though commentators like Wright may helpfully highlight some of the complexities that the gospel exposes and introduces in the definition of Israel, the readers of Romans could be forgiven for confusion at such a sudden shift in the meaning of a term that has been

fairly stable in its reference to national Israel throughout Paul's argument to this point.

Others, like William Hendrickson, have argued that it refers to the full complement of Israel's remnant elect who alone constitute true Israel. The fullness of Israel in verse 12 refers then to the complete number of the various remnants of elect Israelites over the centuries, rather than to any more general salvation of the people of Israel. As in the Jew plus Gentile people account of Wright and Calvin and others, national Israel mostly disappears in this account.

This it seems to me introduces serious problems into Paul's argument as it is precisely the question of God's commitment to his promises to national Israel that are at issue. While the remnant may serve as an assurance that God isn't completely finished with national Israel yet, by themselves they certainly do not constitute a fulfilment of his commitment to the Jewish people. Devolving all old covenant promises onto the Messiah, a route that some others have suggested, seems to get God off the hook with a technicality, but it undermines the very logic of the Messiah's representation in the process.

For God to strip the olive tree of almost all of its natural branches and repopulate it with grafted wild branches instead, raises serious questions about the tree's continued identity. Even if we maintain that the Messiah is the root of the olive tree, bearing all of the branches, the olive tree is not reducible to its root, much as the body of Christ isn't merely reducible to its head. Paul is clear that the branches themselves, even while broken off, retain immense significance.

They are natural branches, continuing to belong to a tree that is deprived of something proper to it, as long as they are unattached to it. For Paul, they remain beloved for the sake of their forefathers, and they are holy on account of the forefathers. While the identity of Israel can be focused upon and borne by the Messiah, it cannot simply be alienated onto the Messiah.

As Paul says in the context, the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. Indeed, Paul's claim in verse 15 suggests the most startling relationship between the Messiah and the nation of Israel, even in its state of rejection. The rejection of Israel is the reconciliation of the world, and their acceptance would mean life from the dead.

The story of the Messiah cast away for the reconciliation of the world is recapitulated in his people according to the flesh. Just as the Messiah was raised from death, so must Israel be, and when they are, it will mean resurrection. The symmetries with Paul's statement in verse 10 of chapter 5, for if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life, must be noted here.

Just as Gentiles were reconciled by the death of the Messiah, so they were reconciled on

account of the rejection of Israel. Just as we were loved while enemies, so Israel is still now beloved, even though they are enemies of the gospel. The people of Israel still have a part to play in redemptive history, a part to which the deep narrative logic of their national story determinately gestures forward.

This event of Israel's restoration causes Paul's argument in Romans 11 to ascend into the ecstatic heights of praise. It is an event that supposedly heralds a far more exceeding blessing for the world than their trespass ever did, as Paul argues in verse 12. If their trespass meant that salvation came to the Gentiles, their restoration must be remarkable in its effects.

It is, as I have noted, an event spoken of in language redolent of Christ's own death and resurrection, an event that after the reconciliation of the world entailed by the rejection, will entail life from the dead, in verse 15. Paul speaks of this event in the grandest of terms and expressions, as Israel's fullness, in verse 12, as the salvation of all Israel, in verse 26, as the banishing of ungodliness from Jacob, and the taking away of their sins. In this event, the mysterious purpose of God will be finally disclosed.

We can be forgiven for finding the claim that this has already been fulfilled somehow, both unconvincing and underwhelming. The destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 is an event of epochal significance in New Testament theology. It represents the decisive end to the old age with its covenantal order and the full establishment of the new covenant age.

The shadow of this event lies over the entirety of the New Testament. We should resist notions of a dual covenant, the idea that Israel has its own track and the Gentiles have theirs. Even though Jews and Gentiles stand in differing relationship to it, there is only one olive tree, and Gentiles now participate in the spiritual blessings of Israel.

This is a truth that we see in Romans chapter 15 verse 27 and Ephesians chapter 2 verses 11 to 22. AD 70 has ramifications for Israel's continuing identity, an identity which, even if it isn't simply alienated from them as some suppose, can only be fulfilled in their rejected Messiah. Nevertheless, this neither abolishes nor straightforwardly secularizes their peoplehood.

There is such an abundance of biblical prophecy and promise concerning Israel in both the Old and New Testaments that must be either ignored or spiritualized away in order to accomplish this. Besides all of this, the troubling questions of God's justice and narrative continuity that Paul wrestles with in Romans and elsewhere are greatly exacerbated by simplistically supersessionist positions. Promises whose relation to fulfilment can only be grasped in terms of highly involved hermeneutical systems and theological frameworks are appropriately viewed with suspicion, as are those who make them.

We should be wary of fulfilment's divorce from any natural reading of the promises in

question. When God claims, for instance, that the offspring of Israel will not cease from being a nation before him forever, in Jeremiah chapter 31 verses 35 to 37, to interpret these words as a reference to the Church is greatly to strain both the text and the credulity of its readers and to raise unsettling concerns, if not about the truthfulness of God's promises, at least about their clarity. If God has already fulfilled the word of Romans 11, it seems as though, relative to what the text might have led us to believe, a dramatic, glorious and climactic revelation of the greatness of God's mercy and wisdom in the fullness of time, it was just a bit of a damp squib that went almost completely unrecognized.

Likewise, when Israel's national history is presumed to have reached its terminus in the destruction of Jerusalem or 1870, save to the degree that it was transposed into the story of the Church, much of the narrative energy and many of the driving concerns of the Old Testament must simply be abandoned after the advent of Christ. As Gentile Christians, as we see in Romans chapter 4, we are the children of Abraham, vitally connected to the story of Israel, as we see in 1 Corinthians chapter 10, sharers in their spiritual blessings, as we see in Romans 15, 27, and one new Jew-Gentile people in Christ, in Ephesians 2, in which the Jew-Gentile opposition is no longer determinative of covenant membership. Such convictions against the distortions of movements such as dispensationalism can excite our crucial recognition that the Old Testament is a word that addresses us in Christ.

However, there are dangers lying in the other direction here, of spiritualizing the Old Testament away from the obstinate particularity of Christ's people according to the flesh. In presuming that we already know how the story of Israel ends, we are in considerable danger of reading scripture inattentively, unalert to the many threads of the story of Israel in Old and New Testaments that are still loose, waiting to be tied up. One of the salutary effects of adopting a more careful reading of the New Testament's teaching concerning Israel, the New Covenant, the Church and the future, a reading that doesn't presume that all the loose ends are sewn up in Christ's first advent, may be a greater attentiveness to the innumerable suggestive details and unresolved narrative threads in the scripture.

For instance Luke gives us several details that anticipate a restoration of Israel that does not seem to have yet occurred. In the Olivet Discourse, for instance, Jesus prophesies the judgment of AD 70, but also indicates events beyond that. They will fall by the edge of the sword and be led captive among all nations, and Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.

The similarity of the last clause of this statement with Romans 11.25 should be noted. In Luke 22.30 Jesus promises that the apostles will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel, again suggesting the probability of Israel having some role to play in the future. Even after the death and resurrection of Christ, the apostles want to know when the

kingdom will be restored to Israel.

In Acts 1.6 they present Jesus to the Jews as the Messiah appointed for them, who will fulfill the promise of the great prophet whom Israel will hear. In 3.19-26 the expectation of the restoration of Israel and the dramatic surprise of its non-occurrence is a crucial driving theme of the book of Acts. The book begins with the question of the time of the restoration of Israel and ends with the judgment of Isaiah 6.9-10. In chapter 28 of Acts verses 23-28 we might also note here that Acts begins with similar themes to 1 Kings, a departing David, the establishment of officers in the new regime, a gift of the spirit of wisdom and the building of a temple.

And it ends on a similar note as 2 Kings with decisive judgment on Israel and a Jewish remnant in exile at the heart of the Gentile empire which crushes Jerusalem with their former imprisonment somewhat relieved and kind treatment from the nations. How then should we think about Israel in the present situation? In discussing this subject it is important to keep the distinctions and relations between Israel and the covenant in mind. In the old covenant the covenant was more or less coterminous with the nation of Israel.

In the new covenant the covenant includes many peoples. The new covenant is the fulfillment of promises made to the people of Israel under the old covenant but includes many other peoples beyond them. The new covenant establishes a new international people who relate to God on an equal footing but it doesn't merely dissolve people into an indiscriminate multitude.

Jews, Greeks, Romans etc. remain. Jews as the natural and first born seed of Abraham now need to relate to Gentiles as full siblings in the family of Abraham.

They don't cease to be a distinct people nor is that distinction a matter of unimportance though. The birth or adoption of many further children may mean that the first born no longer exclusively enjoys family membership but he doesn't cease being the first born. Israel alone among the nations was born directly from divine blessing in the call of Abraham.

All the other nations were judged at Babel and have needed to be engrafted into blessing. While unbelieving Gentiles bore no relationship to the family of Abraham, unbelieving Jews are rebellious sons, alienated from blessings and covenant riches that should be their proper possession. The full inclusion of Israel is the eschatological hope of the restoration of a people.

In the Old Testament the Lord makes special promises to Israel as his people and he is the King of Israel. However, there is also the promise that the Lord's kingdom will one day extend over the whole earth and bring many other peoples under it. The kingdom should be then distinguished from the people.

Kingdoms can grow beyond their origins. For instance, the United Kingdom used to be three separate kingdoms. Wales was annexed to the Kingdom of England in the first half of the 1500s.

The Kingdom of Ireland, while distinct, was from Henry VIII in personal union with the English crown as the same king was the king of both. Later in 1603 James VI of Scotland inherited the thrones of England and Ireland, becoming monarch of all three kingdoms and bringing them into personal union, even while the kingdoms remained formally distinct. In 1707 the Acts of Union formed a single kingdom of Scotland and England together, with the United Kingdom being formed with the addition of the Kingdom of Ireland in 1801.

While we may typically trace the history of the monarchy of the United Kingdom back through the kings of England, other distinct peoples such as the Welsh, Scottish and Northern Irish now come under this monarchy. Let's say we had a situation where the English people were generally rejecting the monarchy and becoming republicans, while the United Kingdom prospered and expanded to include peoples who had once rejected it, such as say the French and the Americans. It would clearly be a tragedy, made more tragic by the fact that they were rejecting something that was clearly especially appropriate to England.

Paul is making a very similar point in Romans chapter 11. Christ Jesus, the Messiah, while the Lord of all nations and peoples, is a Jew and the king of the Jews. The Kingdom of God was once limited to Israel, but now spreads across the globe.

However, as long as Christ is rejected by his own people, there is a glaring missing piece, no matter how much the Kingdom of God prospers elsewhere. A question to consider, how is the great theme of grace that runs through the book of Romans developed more fully in the context of Israel's rejection and the Lord's response to it? In Romans chapter 12, Paul's grand vision of the gospel assumes clearer practical shape, one grounded in the life of the church as the renewed people of God. Here we find the answer to the crisis of humanity disclosed in chapter 1, with the formation of a new humanity, ordered not towards idolatry, but true worship.

As false worship led to the breaking down of humanity in chapter 1, the restoration of humanity begins with true worship in this chapter. This chapter also looks back to chapter 8, with the fulfilment of the righteous requirement of the law in those who live according to the spirit, and the formation of a new people in the fullness of time, people conformed to the image of Christ. It also looks back to the portrayal of God's sheer grace in the formation of his people in chapters 9-11, where the mercy of God was foregrounded.

Paul's ethical instruction is firmly rooted in his theological vision. There are many who believe that we can abstract the ethical dimensions from the Christian message, so as

either to have a sort of Christian morality apart from Christian faith, or increasingly to have Christian faith purged of certain unwelcome ethical elements. Paul does not allow for either of these divides.

The therefore in verse 1 connects this with what has preceded it. The grounds to which Paul appeals are the mercies of God, which have been the subject of much of the preceding chapters, for instance chapter 11 verses 30-32. While Paul uses a different term in these references, the fundamental reality of mercy is the same.

The call to the heroes of the epistles to present their bodies as a living sacrifice frames Christian obedience in terms of the offerings of temple worship. Such worship is fulfilled in the worship of the church, a worship confirmed in transformed lives. Sacrifice was always symbolic.

It represented the offering of the person, their entire self and all of their actions, under the symbol of an animal ascending to God in smoke. The sacrifice required confirmation in the living of lives that were oriented to God in the same way as the sacrifice symbolised. The sacrifice here is a living one.

Unlike the animals which were killed before they were sacrificed, the true human sacrifice is of a living body, a body devoted to God's service. On several occasions the New Testament speaks of sacrifice continuing in the life of the church. However, what was once the offering of animals in a physical temple is now the offering of human bodies, their actions and their gifts in the spirit.

Here we have a gift of money or resources presented as a sacrifice. and Paul's potential martyrdom presented as a drink offering placed upon that. Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name.

Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God. The bodies that are offered are plural, but the sacrifice is singular. Now it is most likely that the term sacrifice is being used to refer to the mode of sacrifice that is being offered.

However, there might possibly be a reference to the corporate character of the offering of our bodies. Although each Christian's body is a temple, we are also a temple together. We individually have bodies, but we are also the body of Christ together.

We offer our bodies individually, but all in fellowship with others as well. As we saw back in chapter 6, we must present our members to God as instruments of righteousness for his obedient service. This is a sort of sacrifice.

We might also think of the priests here, as they were offered to the Lord as servants in ways analogous to the offering of animal sacrifices. It is bodies that we are offering. We

might perhaps recall Paul's discussion of baptism in chapter 6. In baptism, our bodies are formally presented to God, washed as sacrifices, marked out as his possession, and as his dwelling place by his spirit.

God claims our physicality for his service, not just incorporeal souls or minds. Our bodies are holy and acceptable to God as sacrifices. Here again we get a sense of why treating the body with honour is of such importance for Paul.

This also contrasts with the dishonouring of the body in sexual immorality that Paul described back in chapter 1. This is spiritual or reasonable worship, worship that is appropriate to what God has accomplished for us in Christ. Christians must be separate from the world, not conform to it. It is incredibly difficult not to assume the patterns of the world around us.

This is one of several reasons why the church as a new community is so important. We are creatures given to imitation, and without positive examples to imitate around us, we will easily assume the patterns of surrounding society. Paul instructs the Corinthians to imitate him as he imitates Christ.

We need communities of mutual imitation in holiness and faithfulness. Instead of being conformed to the world, we must be subject to an ongoing process of transformation. Paul doesn't seem to allow for any neutral position here.

You are either being conformed or you are being transformed. The transformation involves the renewal of the mind. We might here recall Paul's statements concerning the mind in chapter 8 verses 5-7.

For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the spirit set their minds on the things of the spirit. For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the spirit is life and peace. For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law, indeed it cannot.

Sin develops from a fundamental disposition of the heart and mind. It is a matter of our loves, our desires, imaginations and longings. Paul described this back in chapter 1 as minds were darkened in ignorance and people were given over to folly, with dishonouring passions and debased minds devoted to all sorts of evil.

Deliverance from the dominion of the flesh in our lives requires a renewal of the mind, a change in the fundamental orientation of our spirits within the world. Instead of darkened minds, our minds will be equipped to discern the will of God and that which is good, acceptable and perfect, enabling us to pursue ways of life in which rather than debasing ourselves we rise to our full stature. Paul charges the hearers of the epistle not to have too high an opinion of themselves.

This ties in with Paul's highly developed critique of boasting. Boasting must be grounded in God's grace, not in that which belongs to us in ourselves. Greater humility is connected with a greater aptitude for handling great gifts.

As Jesus teaches in Matthew 23 verses 11-12, The greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted. We must think about ourselves soberly, not as those who are puffed up, but as those who appreciate that we are the recipients of great gifts, completely apart from what we deserve.

According to Paul, the measure for thinking about ourselves must be the measure of faith that God has assigned to us. There are two possible ways of reading this at least. The first, which I prefer, would be a reference to each person having a different measure committed to them.

The thought then would be similar to 2 Corinthians 10 verse 13, But we will not boast beyond limits, but will boast only with regard to the area of influence God assigned to us, to reach even to you. John Barclay notes the fact that the word used for faith here could be used in the sense of trusteeship in other writings contemporary with Paul, which I think is the most natural way of understanding this, it's that which is committed to your charge. A second possibility is that the faith in question is the common gift of faith received by all in Christ.

The commonality of the one faith that we have would prevent us from exalting ourselves over others. The content of the faith would also humble us in our recognition that we have nothing that we did not receive. We have a similar choice to make between two possible senses of the term faith in verse 6. Paul's vision isn't one of a flat equality of individuals, but of a dynamic mutual involvement of persons who are what they are in fellowship with and in service of each other.

This all occurs in Christ, the Messiah who is the source and the site of our unity. Likewise as members in a body, rather than members in a club, the distinctiveness, the dignity and the indispensability of each member is emphasised. Our unity is of a single body in Christ.

However, individually we are also members of each other. Paul's point isn't merely that we are all individually in a vertical relationship to our common head, Christ. We also have horizontal relationships with each other.

We are members not just of Christ, but also of each other in Christ. We have responsibilities to each other, not least that of honouring each other as brothers and sisters. Paul lists a number of different gifts that can be exercised within the body of Christ.

Prophecy, service, teaching, exhortation, contribution, leading and acts of mercy. This list is not comprehensive and it also differs from the list that we find elsewhere in places such as 1 Corinthians chapter 12 or Ephesians 4. The list here, for instance, is of more ordinary gifts in contrast to the sign gifts that are more prominent in 1 Corinthians. If you have gifts, God desires that you use them for the benefit of others and for his glory.

As you do so, you yourself can grow. God has given to us in order that we might share in his giving process. We are rich as we give our gifts to others, not in order to build ourselves up, but to serve others.

The exercise of various gifts is also connected with appropriate corresponding virtues. Contributing should be done with generosity, leading with zeal and acts of mercy with cheerfulness. It doesn't just matter that we exercise our gifts, how we do so matters too.

As we read in 2 Corinthians 9, verse 7, for instance, As in 1 Corinthians 13, Paul presents love ahead of everything else. Love is of paramount importance. Christian love must be genuine, not just feigned.

Such love is not merely a matter of feelings, although feelings should be involved. On the other side, Paul expects his readers to develop a godly hatred and loathing for that which is evil. Genuine love and an abhorrence for evil will together equip us to cleave to what is good.

At the heart of the fulfilment of the law is the writing of the law on the heart, so that we might perform it from the heart. The law was always to be fulfilled in love, and the centrality of love in Pauline ethics is no accident at all. Paul presents a series of affections, practices and virtues to which Christians must devote themselves, all of which serve to build us up together.

We must have a love for each other as brothers and sisters in Christ, concerned not merely for ourselves but also for the well-being of each other. We should go out of our way to show honour to each other, honouring each other as recipients of God's honour. We must cultivate zeal and fervency in ourselves, regarding ourselves as servants of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Our lives must be marked by rejoicing, patience in hardship, constancy in prayer, and hospitality and generosity to our brothers and sisters. Moving his attention beyond the life of the church and Christians' treatment of each other within it, Paul speaks of how they should relate to persecutors. Persecution is to be expected and can't easily be avoided by the faithful.

However, how we respond to it is crucial. Like Christ, we should seek God's forgiveness for our enemies, rather than cursing them. We should not respond in kind to their cruelty and hatred.

In 1 Corinthians 12 24-26, Paul describes the fellow feeling that should characterise the church. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honour to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another, if one member suffers, all suffer together, if one member is honoured, all rejoice together. It might be in verses 15-16 that Paul is charging the hearers of his epistle to pursue such fellow feeling with each other in the body of Christ.

However, N.T. Wright raises another possibility. Perhaps Paul is not referring to fellow members of the church, but to outsiders. Considering the placing of these verses at a point flanked by verses speaking of relations to those who mistreat us as Christians, this possibility shouldn't be dismissed.

If this were the case, Paul's teaching would be that Christians should seek appropriate common feeling with their non-Christian neighbours. When they are suffering, Christians should get alongside them and weep with them. When they are celebrating, Christians should celebrate with them.

Christians should pursue harmony, peace and mutual honour over conflict and polarisation. Christians should not be puffed up on account of their faith, but should particularly associate with those of little honour or status, regarding themselves as lowly servants of Christ. Christians should not give in to a false sense of superiority.

We must act honourably before our neighbours, having unimpeachable character, and being concerned not to bring the gospel into disrepute. This will likely, as we see in 1 Corinthians, require sacrifice of certain of our liberties for the sake of the gospel. As Paul adapted himself to those to whom he was ministering, so as to cause no needless offence to them, so Christians should be diligent in seeking to live peaceably with those around them, having good reputations, and being respectable, and adopting the customs that are appropriate for the time and place.

A powerful description of what this looks like is given by the Epistle to Diognetus, writing of the character of the early church in the 2nd century. For the Christians are distinguished from other men, neither by country, nor language, nor the customs which they observe. For they neither inhabit cities of their own, nor employ a peculiar form of speech, nor lead a life which is marked out by any singularity.

The course of conduct which they follow has not been devised by any speculation or deliberation of inquisitive men, nor do they, like some, proclaim themselves the advocates of any merely human doctrines, but inhabit in Greek as well as barbarian cities, according as the lot of each of them has determined, and following the customs of the natives in respect to clothing, food, and the rest of their ordinary conduct. They display to us their wonderful and confessedly striking method of life. They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners.

As citizens they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers. They marry, as do all others.

They beget children, but they do not destroy their offspring. They have a common table, but not a common bed. They are in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh.

They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives. They love all men, and are persecuted by all.

They are unknown and condemned. They are put to death and restored to life. They are poor, yet make many rich.

They are in lack of all things, and yet abound in all. They are dishonoured, and yet in their very dishonour are glorified. They are evil spoken of, and yet are justified.

They are reviled and blessed. They are insulted, and repay the insult with honour. They do good, yet are punished as evildoers.

When punished they rejoice as if quickened into life. They are assailed by the Jews as foreigners, and are persecuted by the Greeks. Yet those who hate them are unable to assign any reason for their hatred.

Just as God showed the most incredible grace to us while we were still his enemies, so we too must reject the path of vengeance and retaliation. Rather than zealously pursuing justice in our causes, or taking matters into our own hands, we should place vengeance in the hands of God and his appointed ministers, of whom we will read in the following chapter. The Lord is just and he will act for his people.

Confidence in the Lord of justice allows us to surrender our frantic quests for justice on our own terms, and to give up our grudges. As an alternative form of practice, we should respond to cruelty with kindness. When we see an enemy in need, we must act with the compassion that we should exercise with a friend.

This will have the effect of heaping burning coals on our enemy's heads. Most take Paul to be referring to the shame caused by receiving kind treatment for cruel, something that might lead to change. Another, less popular possibility is that the burning coals are a symbol of divine judgment.

This needs to be handled with care. The story of David and Saul might be helpful in this regard though. David treated Saul with kindness and did not take vengeance into his own hands, even when he could.

Rather, he left vengeance to God's providence. David's kindness did lead Saul to shame

in his cruelty, but it also set Saul up for divine judgment. We might consider the example provided by God himself in chapter 2 verses 4-5 of this book.

Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance, but because of your hard and impenitent heart, you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath, when God's righteous judgment will be revealed? Like God did to us, we should show kindness to our enemies, in the hope that they will repent. However, if they do not, their cruel response to our kindness will lead to their greater condemnation. The final statement of the chapter sums up the concluding section.

We don't fight evil with evil. Evil is something that we can overcome, not merely retaliate against, when we act with goodness. However, if we reject the way of peace and grace, we will ourselves have been overcome by evil.

The only true way to arrest the spread and resist the power of evil is to commit ourselves to the way of kindness to enemies, exemplified by God himself. A question to consider, how does Paul's gospel about the revelation of God's justice in Christ inform and empower the ethic of grace to enemies that he describes here? Romans chapter 13 is one of the more controversial passages in Paul. Paul's brief statements about our relation to the authorities within it seem to proceed from an exceedingly conservative political vision, one that has troubled many, especially those who have hoped for somewhat more support for political radicalism from an apostle for whom Christ's universal lordship is such a prominent theme.

However, as is often the case with Paul, closer examination may reveal a more subtle picture than we initially supposed. As usual, one of the first things that we need to do is to read these verses in their context, both the wider context and the more immediate one. The wider context of the letter speaks of the great act of God's grace in Christ, by which God's saving righteousness is realized in a manner which puts the ungodly in good standing with God, while manifesting and upholding the just order of the world.

Christ declared to be the son of God by the resurrection from the dead, and the good news of his reign is to be spread to all nations, calling people to the obedience of faith. Clearly, in the light of such a message, governments cannot simply go on as if nothing had ever happened. Although Paul's statement at this juncture should not be expected to present a full account of the impact of Christ's lordship upon the realm of earthly government, we should read it aware that it belongs within such a larger picture.

In the more immediate context of the preceding chapter, we also have teaching about not avenging ourselves, which provides important background for the discussion of the ruler as an avenger, serving God and carrying out God's wrath. Beyond this, Paul has also just been teaching about how we relate to those outside the faith. His emphasis upon living in harmony and at peace with others is particularly important.

Contrary to what some suppose, there is a very great deal that Christians can have in common with their non-Christian neighbours. There is no necessary conflict between Christians and their non-Christian neighbours and governments in most situations. We should be those who prioritise and seek peaceful coexistence in our societies.

As the Lord addresses the Jewish exiles in Babylon in Jeremiah 29, verse 7, But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile and prayed to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. Even where harmony clearly does not exist, Paul has already taught about the importance of blessing those who persecute us. The persecutors of the early Christians were often those in government.

Even in the context of the admittedly early reign of Nero and the commonality of suffering at the hands of the authorities for Christians, Paul can speak as if the ordinary relationship between Christians and government is one of respectful and obedient submission. And he does not seem to be excessively concerned to articulate the potential, and I believe quite real, exceptions to or qualifications of this that we might so desire. Paul, we should remember, was a man often imprisoned, beaten and otherwise mistreated by authorities of various types.

Yet who spoke of these authorities as an obedient citizen, rather than as a vengeful revolutionary. He served a Lord who had been unjustly condemned by the religious leaders of his people and crucified by the empire of which he was a citizen. Paul had also been a participant in events such as the martyrdom of Stephen, so he was well aware of the evil that could be done in the name of authorities.

He was not someone who viewed authorities with rose-tinted spectacles or had any illusions about their character. If we consider carefully whose words we're reading, we might realise that Romans chapter 13 verses 1-7 are far more radical than we might have supposed. Some have debated whether Paul's statements were merely for Christians in that immediate time and context, telling them to submit to rulers who weren't so bad.

However, there is nothing in Paul's statements here that suggests such narrow scope, nor should we believe that the rulers were really that good. Besides, a broader application to his words resonates with what we find scripture teaching elsewhere. Paul charges his readers to be subject to the governing authorities.

Government as such is ordained and intended by God, and both Christians and non-Christians alike ought to submit to it. Clearly, there are various forms that government can take, and the associated forms of subjection can vary accordingly. What it means and looks like to be subject to a modern democratic government is rather different from what it would have meant for the Roman Christians to submit to the emperor and the various officials of the empire.

Nevertheless, Paul here teaches that we must subject ourselves to non-reciprocal human structures wherein we are commanded and have obligations laid upon us. He grounds this duty upon the fact that all authority ultimately derives from God's own authority, and that the actually existing authorities have been established by God. We might here recall Jesus' words to Pilate in John 19, verse 11.

Jesus answered him, You would have no authority over me at all, unless it had been given you from above. Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin. Authority may be exercised rightly or wrongly by different bearers of it.

However, it is important that we honour and are subject to authorities. This is closely related to children's duty to honour their parents. Children must submit to and honour even unrighteous parents as they can, honouring them as they bear a natural authority relative to them.

This honouring is not incompatible with conscientious objections to certain immoral requirements that they might make of us. But those who start with considering such objections are seldom obeying the primary command, which is perhaps most important at the point where the authority is committed to immorality. We might perhaps think of David's attitude to King Saul here, Even after Saul had killed the priests and pursued him without a cause in order to kill him, David still refused to strike the laws anointed and addressed Saul with humility and with honour.

How does God institute authorities? First, we should recognise that authority is less something that human beings construct from scratch in the world, in the great, for instance, founding events of social contracts imagined by some modern political theorists. Rather, authority is something that emerges more organically and unpredictably in society and, as Paul believes, is raised up by God. Authority emerges in God's providence.

We should begin to recognise a demythologising dimension to Paul's teaching here. In a society with an emperor cult, for instance, the statement that the authorities are providentially raised up by God and, by implication, can be brought low or removed in a similar fashion, is a somewhat deflationary account compared with the grand myths of the empires and kingdoms of the day. Authority is fundamentally a gift that God has given to humanity, and not just authority as such, but also the various actually existing authorities.

A world stripped of authorities would not be a good place. In the ordinary and divinely intended state of affairs, rulers function as a terror to evildoers, not to the righteous. There are clearly exceptions to this, as Paul well knew, even from his own personal experience.

However, he is talking about the normal situation, not the exception here. Authority was

given by God in places such as Genesis 9-5-6 as a means of dealing with malefactors. A proper relationship to authority should seek the approval of those in authority over us, through righteous submission.

A fundamental posture of resistance to authorities is a resistance to God's appointment. While there may be times that we cannot submit in good conscience, out of a desire to maintain peace, we will not be seeking out such occasions. When we encounter them, we need to behave in a way that recognises and honours authority, even while we resist its unlawful impositions upon us.

Oliver O'Donovan has remarked upon the radical character of Paul's statement here, arguing that, while in the light of Christ's victory it is nonetheless God's purpose that the structures of the old age continue to exercise their sway, the manner in which, and the purpose for which they do so, has been fundamentally reconceived. He writes, St Paul's new assertion is that the performance of judgment alone justifies government, and this reflects his new Christian understanding of the political situation. Paul explicitly taught that Christians should not avenge themselves, but here teaches that the authorities can minister God's vengeance.

We might again recall Genesis 9, verses 5-6. Beyond our need to subject ourselves to the authorities to avoid the wrath of God that the authorities minister then, we must also subject ourselves out of a conscientious recognition of them as God's servants. When we encounter authorities, we should render them their due honour, also acting towards them in ways that will sustain their authority, through the payment of taxes and the rendering of respect and honour.

We don't get to bargain about taxes, or to decide what we think that they should be expended on. Rather, we pay authorities the tribute that we are obligated to give them. Just as we don't get to pick and choose what taxes we pay, we don't get to pick and choose what laws we obey.

We respect the authorities as servants of God and ministers of the good of society. This doesn't mean that they are always good servants. However, even a bad servant is due some honour and recognition on account of his master who has commissioned him, and not yet removed him from his office.

Paul now declares, Owe no one anything. Peter Lightheart observes of this, That does not mean, as it might seem, Do not become a recipient of benefits. Paul knows that everyone is needy, dependent on God and on others for almost anything.

No debts means that benefits are always finely referred to a single divine patron. In the community of Jesus, the only debt is the debt of love. Thanks is owed, but it is owed for, rather than to, benefactors.

Recipients of gifts are not indebted to the givers. They do not owe return payment. Givers do not impose burdens of gratitude on their beneficiaries.

They cannot use their gifts to lord over recipients. The father and his son cover all debts, supplying all needs according to their riches. Such teaching undermines the structures of patronage and clientage, which were essential to many structures of rule and social power in the ancient world.

Once again, Paul is subtly, yet radically reconfiguring people's relationship with authorities. The authorities are not removed, but they are demythologized, humbled and stripped of their presumed capacity to impose obligations that once raised them up as masters, rather than as stewards and ministers of God's justice. Lest we may have forgotten, which we definitely ought not to have done, that we are still reading the Book of Romans, Paul now speaks of love as the fulfillment of the law.

This is what it looks like for the righteous requirement of the law to be fulfilled in us, as we live by the Spirit. The law is all fulfilled in the command to love your neighbour as yourself. This, we should note, is a central point in Jesus' own teaching concerning the law, in such places as the Sermon on the Mount and elsewhere.

It is also found elsewhere in the New Testament, in the teaching of James, for instance. The concluding verses of this chapter are perhaps most famous, as those which occasion St. Augustine's conversion. As in several other places in the New Testament, they present Christians as living at the time of the approaching dawn, something heralded by the advent of Christ.

Christians must consequently live as people of the day, abandoning the works of darkness. As some commentators have observed, the behaviours he lists are those behaviours typically encountered in the night time, with drunkenness, sexual immorality and brawling. The alternative to these is to put on the armour of light and the Lord Jesus Christ, something that Paul has associated with baptism in Galatians 3.27. Baptism is like donning armour that will protect us against Satan's assaults.

Whenever we are tempted by the insobriety and the iniquity of the night, we must recall that we have been marked out by God's promise as children of the light, and we must turn to Him for deliverance. A question to consider. What are some of the ways in which Paul's teaching here frees Christians in their relationship to the law, in their relationship to others, and in their relationship to the authorities? In Romans chapter 14, Paul addresses issues of judgment and conscience.

Paul might have been speaking to specific issues of concern in the Roman church, of which he had heard. However, there is every reason to believe that such issues were common in the churches to which Paul ministered, so it would not be strange to address them at this juncture. The unity of the church as one body in Christ is a matter of

particular concern for Paul, and he is especially alert to the way that congregations might divide along particular fault lines, between Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, weak and strong, etc.

Paul addresses similar issues elsewhere, in places like 1 Corinthians. Paul begins by instructing them to welcome someone who is weak in faith, who might have scruples about all sorts of issues that a mature Christian would not. In welcoming such a person, however, they should be careful not to get involved in quarrels over adiaphora, things that are neither commanded nor forbidden, issues about which faithful Christians are permitted to differ.

Paul gives the example of differences in belief concerning dietary matters, what foods were permitted or forbidden to the Christian in various contexts. We find examples of some of these differences in the area of idol food in 1 Corinthians. Such questions could be very difficult in situations with different modes of practice coming into collision.

Some Jews, for instance, might still be observing kosher requirements. Some converts from paganism might have very sensitive consciences about the slightest contact with anything that might have any association with idols. The fundamental principle that should apply in such cases is one of welcome without passing divisive judgment.

As Paul says in chapter 15, verse 7, Paul is concerned that such matters don't become the cause of alienating judgment or division. There are matters concerning which judgment must occur. For instance, in 1 Corinthians, chapter 5, Paul is adamant that sexual immorality not be tolerated in the church, but that unrepentant offenders be removed from fellowship.

However, on Adiaphora, we must recognize that it is not our place to judge our fellow Christians. This refraining from judgment goes in both directions. It isn't just the strong who must refrain from judging the weak, but also the weak who must refrain from judging the strong.

Judgment is to be left to the Lord, before whom we must all stand on the last day. The Lord is able to make both the weak and the strong brother to stand before him. Paul gives a second example of holding certain days to be holy.

Presumably, Paul chiefly has in mind Jewish Sabbaths and feast days. The important thing is that everyone act in good conscience, properly convinced that they are acting in integrity. Whatever practice is adopted, it is to be adopted in the sight of God, as those who will be judged by him, not primarily in the sight of others, as those involved in judging and being judged by our neighbours.

Christ has died and rose again, in order that he might be Lord of all. Consequently, all of our lives must be lived with reference to him. So often we are preoccupied with how we

appear relative to others in the realm of human judgment.

We constantly judge and are judged, whether or not we are doing so verbally. Paul challenges this entire way of life, calling us to live above all else in the light of Christ's judgment and not our neighbours. Recognizing that we are all subject to the judgment of God puts all of our attempts at judgment into a very different perspective.

Our judgment seat is petty and premature. Paul's teaching here resonates with that of our Lord in Matthew 7, verses 1-5. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, let me take the speck out of your eye, when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite! First take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.

When we are aware that we will have to give account of ourselves before God, we will be much less inclined to judge and condemn others. We might think here of the experience of being in the same room as a world-renowned expert when someone makes an obvious error in something related to that expert's field. We will be much more hesitant about speaking up to judge that person, well aware that the expert can see much in us that is no less worthy of judgment.

Playing on the verb, Paul says that rather than judging one another, we should rather judge not to put a stumbling block or a fence before a brother. This, of course, is a far more modest form of judgment, and far better for the health of the people of God. Paul claims that nothing is unclean in itself.

The source of uncleanness is the heart, not objects in the world. He came to this persuasion in the Lord Jesus. Perhaps Paul is suggesting that this is a particular teaching of Jesus which he had received from others.

We might here be reminded of Mark 7, verses 18-23. And he said to them, Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him? Since it enters not his heart, but his stomach, and is expelled. Thus he declared all foods clean.

And he said, What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.

However, Paul develops this teaching even further. If someone's heart is wavering in unbelief or uncertainty concerning something, that thing is unclean for that person. It is the heart that makes the thing unclean, not vice versa.

If we act in ways that cause others to stumble, or to go against their consciences, even if

something is clean in itself, we are risking great spiritual harm to them by encouraging them to go against their consciences. Perhaps most damning, for the sake of our liberty to eat what we want, we are putting little value upon the spiritual safety of someone that Christ redeemed at the cost of his life. Paul makes a similar point in 1 Corinthians 8, verses 10-13.

For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols? And so, by your knowledge, this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.

For Paul, this is very much a matter of priorities. Paul hardly ever speaks about the Kingdom of God using that expression, although the reality of the Kingdom pervades his writing. However, he does so here.

The Kingdom of God is about God's saving justice, by which we enjoy good standing with Him. It is about peace with God and our neighbour. It is about rejoicing in the Spirit.

Anything that gets placed before this is a problem. Paul fleshes out this point further in verses 19-21. The work of God in our brother is of so much greater value than is our freedom to partake in whatever we want.

As Paul argues elsewhere, we should be prepared to surrender our liberties in such minor matters, for the sake of what really matters and has value. If saving our brother from stumbling involves refraining from eating meat or drinking wine, then so be it. Paul is concerned that people refrain from judging their neighbour, while acting in clear conscience themselves.

Our conscience must be clear, not merely in not believing that what we are approving is wrong for us, but also in being clear of causing any harm to our neighbour. When we act in bad conscience, whether concerning ourselves or in our duty of love to our neighbour, we are engaging in sin. A question to consider.

How do you believe Paul's approach enables us to distinguish between situations where people are genuinely put at risk of stumbling by our behaviour, and situations where people are imposing their scruples upon others as oppressive and illegitimate burdens? Romans chapter 15 is the conclusion of the body of the letter, when Paul's argument reaches its final climax. Here we find the larger themes of the letter connected with their very practical outworkings. It picks up various of the themes that have been at play to this point, and ties them up.

The most immediate theme of the relationship between the strong and the weak is taken

up, alongside themes of the new worshipping community that arises out of God's great act of grace in Christ, which might remind us of chapter 12. Themes that take us back to the earlier parts of the letter are also present. The union of Jews and Gentiles, the spread of the gospel throughout the world, the nations being brought to the obedience of faith, and the nature of Paul's apostolic mission take us back through to the very beginning of the letter, returning us to the point where we first started.

Paul begins by charging those who are strong, among whom he seems to include himself, to bear the weaknesses of the weak. The task here is not merely one of patience with the weak, but the more positive duty of supporting and bearing them up. The strength of the strong is best expressed not in judgement of the weak, but in gracious support of them.

Indeed, as Christians, we are obliged to such support of our brothers and sisters. The point is not to pursue our own interests, or to please ourselves, but to build up others. This principle is established by Christ himself, who we must imitate in this as in other matters, and Paul here alludes to Psalm 69 verse 9, For zeal for your house has consumed me, and the reproaches of those who reproach you have fallen on me.

In his willingness to go to the cross out of his zeal for the house of his father, in the face of every human instinct that recoils at it, Christ is the ultimate example of not pleasing himself. Just as Christ acted for the sake of others, so we must act for the sake of our neighbours. Having quoted the scriptures, Paul makes a brief aside, explaining his understanding of the place of scripture in the life of the new covenant people of God.

The scriptures are not just written for people in the past, but for us too. The word of God looks us directly in the eyes and speaks into our world. We might recall here verses like 1 Corinthians 10 verse 11.

Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. Addressing the Roman Christians here, Paul wants to assure them that, as they patiently endure and as they look to the words of the scriptures, they will find that their hope and their confidence grow. The scripture is a source of encouragement.

As we meditate upon its promises, heed its warnings, and are animated by its exhortations and answer to its summons, we will be strengthened, encouraged, emboldened and revived. Paul has just said that the scriptures were given so that, through endurance and through the encouragement of the scriptures, we might have hope. Now he describes God as the God of endurance and encouragement, presumably the endurance and encouragement that he ministers to us through the scriptures.

His prayer is that we would be granted harmony with each other, in accordance with Christ Jesus. The harmony and unity of the church, with one voice, is found in being

accord with Christ Jesus, and in the act of glorifying God the Father. As he did in chapter 14 verse 1, Paul charges the Roman Christians to welcome each other.

The model for such welcome is Christ's welcome of us, and the outcome of such welcome is the glory of God. Christ's grace was seen in the way that he welcomed us, apart from any worth that rendered us worthy of welcome. We glorify God as we participate in his welcome to others.

Much of the Book of Romans has been about God's welcome expressed in Christ, and one of the implications of this is the duty that we all have to live in terms of it. For instance, Jews need to welcome Gentiles, the strong need to welcome the weak, the rich need to welcome the poor. The theme of God's glory is an important one here.

Much as the unity of the church in its voice of worship glorifies God, so our welcoming of each other in Christ glorifies him. The welcoming of one another needs to be understood in terms of the great act of God in Christ that Paul summarises in verses 8 and 9. This action in Christ achieves both the fulfilment of God's ancient promises to Israel, and, as a result, allows for the Gentiles to enter into the enjoyment of the blessing and the mercy of God. The promises that God made to Israel were promises through which the entire world would be blessed.

Both Jews and Gentiles, having been welcomed by God through the great act of his faithfulness and mercy in Christ, should express welcome to each other in the one people of God that has been formed through this act. The act of God by which we are welcomed, and the division between us and God removed, is also an act of God by which people are reconciled and the divisions between them are removed. With three citations from Scripture, Psalm 18 verse 49, Deuteronomy 32 verse 43, and Psalm 117 verse 1, all in the Septuagint, Paul brings forth testimony to the one voice with which a Jew and Gentile people should glorify God.

The underlying image evoked by these verses is that of Christ the sufferer who has triumphed and is now surrounded by Jews and Gentiles in a single rejoicing company of worshippers. This is the great outcome of it all. Capping off his argument, Paul quotes Isaiah chapter 11 verse 10.

The root of Jesse arises to rule the Gentiles. In Christ's resurrection, he is the one who has risen as the root of Jesse. We might here wonder why Christ is the root of Jesse rather than the root of David.

In the Old Testament, it is as if the tree of David has been completely uprooted and destroyed. When the Messiah finally arrives, he arises from the buried remnants of David's line as a root out of dry ground. The resurrection isn't just about Jesus as an individual or even Jesus as the Messiah.

It is also about the raising up of the dynasty of David which might have seemed lost and utterly destroyed. When Christ, the son of David and the root of Jesse arises, declared to be the son of God with power by the raising from the dead, he arises to rule the nations and the nations come to place their hope in him. Paul's prayer at this point is that God as the source of hope might give the Roman Christians joy and peace in their faith as the Holy Spirit's power at work among them causes their confidence in God's future to grow and to be strengthened.

Moving towards the end of the body of the letter, Paul begins his turn to some more practical matters. However, as is invariably the case with Paul, even the most practical and concrete matters are shot through with theological concerns and considerations and insights. Paul doesn't seem to be writing to them to set them right on serious matters that they have gone wrong, but in order to minister to them as the Apostle to the Gentiles and so that they will participate in and support his ministry in that regard, recognising the importance of his mission.

The main teaching he offers serves more as a reminder than as a correction or a novel instruction. Paul has, however, been given a very particular and special calling by God as a minister of the Messiah Jesus to the Gentiles. Paul has been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, as we see in Galatians 2, verse 8, paralleling him with Peter who has the gospel to the circumcised.

He has a special calling and as such he has an appropriate interest in the Romans and gift to minister to them. He describes what he is performing as a priestly service. He is preparing an offering to be presented in the Holy Spirit who will set the Gentiles apart as acceptable to God.

As in the beginning of chapter 12, Paul here presents the service of God in terms and concepts borrowed from temple worship. Such patterns of worship are fulfilled in the humaniform worship of the Church. Paul expresses a boast in what Christ is accomplishing through him.

He is well aware of the fact that this all comes from the gracious act of God and his Son, not in some peculiar skill of Paul's own. It is being achieved by the Spirit of God. The extent of Paul's ministry has stretched from Jerusalem in the south to Illyricum in the northwest, the present-day region of the Balkans.

The movement of the gospel described in Acts begins in Jerusalem, includes all Judea, extends to Samaria and from there to the end of the earth. Paul also describes his ministry in a way that goes out from Jerusalem and moves to the wider parts of the world. Paul's mission is to break new ground, rather than merely to develop work that has been started by others.

He sees himself as one introducing the message of the gospel to those who had not

formerly heard. While there is nothing wrong with building on another person's foundation, Paul speaks of such building in 1 Corinthians 3, that is not the mission that Paul himself is undertaking. This ambition that drives Paul's mission is now directing his work towards the land of Spain.

He has hitherto been occupied in the eastern Mediterranean region, but now claims that he no longer has room for work there as a pioneer and church planter. Clearly the message of the gospel has spread widely in those areas, and there are now communities of Christians in all of the major regions. This might give us a sense of how rapidly the gospel was taking root during this early period.

At this juncture the logical next move for Paul is toward the western Mediterranean by way of Rome. The mission to Spain is one that he hopes that the Roman Christians will help to support, and as he makes his way there he hopes to spend some time with them. Before he makes his way towards Spain however, Paul has to bring aid from Macedonia and Achaia to the poor saints in Jerusalem.

This, as we see in so many of Paul's letters, is a task that Paul regards as an integral dimension of his mission. In letter after letter he speaks of, or encourages the Christians to whom he is writing to participate in, this gift. For Paul this gift is a lot more than just a needed financial boost to some needy Christians.

It's an expression of the unity between Jews and Gentiles in the body of Christ, and the coming in of the riches of the Gentiles to Zion is prophesied in the Old Testament. Paul sees himself as fulfilling this. Paul's mission is not merely to the Gentiles, but also to encourage the mutual welcome in the gospel between Jews and Gentiles.

In this gift, a reciprocity of grace between Jews and Gentiles is not merely expressed, but realised, strengthening the church as a single undivided body of Jews and Gentiles. Paul's ministry, then, is not merely about forming individual churches in particular cities and regions, but about forging an international church across regions with strong bonds of fellowship, mutual service and reciprocal recognition. This task of remembering the poor saints in Jerusalem was a task that the pillars of the church in Jerusalem especially charged Paul with in Galatians chapter 2. Paul's concern to accompany this gift may be motivated by his desire to ensure and to demonstrate that he has faithfully discharged that commission.

After that has been done, he can move to Spain by way of Rome. Travel within the ancient world was often dangerous, as we see from Paul's own hardship lists in books such as 2 Corinthians. Although travel was safer on account of the Roman Empire, many unknown dangers still threatened those engaged in long journeys such as Paul's.

In addition to the typical dangers of travel, Paul also has the concern of Judeans who are, as he once did, seeking to destroy the church. Paul is a marked man, and they would be

eager to do away with him. He calls the Roman Christians to wrestle in prayer that he will be preserved in his mission, and that it will serve the purpose of bringing joy and stronger unity to the church, as the gift of the Gentiles is pleasing to the Judean Christians.

His desire is that, by their prayers, he would finally safely be brought to them in Rome, having the joy of his completed commission and of fellowship with them. A question to consider. Much of Paul's ministry described in this chapter and elsewhere is not at the level of the local church, but in forging a stronger, more united, more harmonious, and more mutually welcoming international church, a church that spreads across many regions and cities.

What are some of the ways in which Paul pursues this mission? How might we serve the same sort of mission in our own day? Romans chapter 16, after the immensely rich theology of the letter, might seem a little anticlimactic. However, examined more closely, we may find several aspects of it that will reward our attention. The most immediate thing that might jump out at the reader of the chapter is the sheer number of the names that are mentioned.

By my count, 26 people in Rome are mentioned by name. A few others are mentioned without being mentioned by name, such as the members of various households, or the mother of Rufus. It seems astonishing that Paul would know so many Christians in a church that he had yet to visit.

T. W. Manson suggested that Romans 16 was a letter to Ephesus, attached to the epistle to the Romans, so that the letter could be sent on to them. However, there are a number of problems or weaknesses with that position, several of which are identified by Peter Lamp in an article, The Roman Christians of Romans chapter 16. He notes that it would have been likely that Paul would have had many more co-workers to address in Ephesus.

Having such an attached letter would also be without precedent in Paul's writing. A letter composed entirely of greetings would be remarkable for Paul, who couldn't resist getting into theology. A number of the names in this chapter also aren't found in many of the thousands of inscriptions that we have from Ephesus, although they are found in Rome.

And then besides the fact that the manuscripts of Romans that we have don't end with Romans chapter 15, there is also the fact that Romans 15 would be a very unnatural ending to the book. Nowhere else in Paul's letters does Paul address quite so many people. Yet Rome was different.

Rome was a church that Paul had not yet visited. Perhaps this is precisely why Paul can greet such a long list of people personally. Greeting so many people in other churches would seem to single out people in a way that might fuel rivalries and status conflicts.

However, when Paul has yet to visit, he is freer to single out people that he already knows. These people that Paul already knew in Rome were an important initial connection that he had with the congregation, which he would be able to build upon over time. Along with the names in this list of greetings, Paul often adds a brief statement describing his relationship to them or saying something about their character or their service.

Especially in the case of the people mentioned who have worked alongside Paul in the past, such as Prisca and Aquila, Epinatus, or Andronicus and Junia, these were obvious character references for Paul. These people could commend him to the Roman church. This is another reason why the chapter makes most sense as one addressed to Rome, along with the rest of the letter.

Paul would not require such references for almost every other church to which he wrote. Interestingly, Paul does not greet these people directly, but instructs the recipients of the letter to convey his greetings to the people in question. Perhaps this suggests that, in the first instance, this would not have been read to an entire gathered congregation of Roman Christians.

Before moving to consider any of the names in particular, we should consider the fact that there are so many of them, and what this might suggest about the character of the early church, and of the church in Rome more particularly. It seems as though many of the Christians in the church in Rome were migrants from the East. Then there is the fact that some Romans would have spent some time living away from the capital.

In Acts chapter 18 we discover another reason why Paul might have encountered so many Roman Christians. In verses 2-3 we learn of Paul's first acquaintance with Priscilla, or Prisca as she is here called, and Aquila. And he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome.

And he went to see them, and because he was of the same trade he stayed with them and worked, for they were tentmakers by trade. A number of Roman Jews had been expelled from the city by Claudius, before returning later. As Paul had been teaching in synagogues all around the East during this period, he doubtless would have met many of them, including many who would have returned at a later point, perhaps after being converted through his ministering.

There is also the possibility that some of the names on the list Paul knew, not by personal acquaintance, but by reputation. Besides this, there is the amount of travel that people could undertake in the 1st century Roman world. As Lamp observes, from the biblical details given concerning him alone, we know that Aquila had moved from Pontus to Rome, to Corinth, and to Ephesus, and then probably back to Rome again.

It would not be at all surprising if he had moved back to Rome by the time that Paul wrote the epistle to the Romans. There is also the possibility that some of the persons mentioned might have been associated with each other. Epinatus, for instance, mentioned immediately after Prisca and Aquila, may have travelled back to Rome with them.

Especially if, like Paul, several of the people mentioned had done missionary work as well, we should not be surprised if their paths would have crossed with Paul's elsewhere. This does give us a sense of how cosmopolitan the early church could be, and how extensively networked. This should be a source of confidence for us as Christians when we consider the greater strength, spread, and possibility of confirming eyewitness testimony in such an environment, along with the greater coordination of the message of the churches across vast regions.

The chapter begins by commending Phoebe to the Romans. Phoebe is presumably the one who bears the letter to Rome. She is a servant of the church at Sancrea, someone noted for her ministry.

Sancrea was in the region of Corinth, the eastern port of the Corinthian Isthmus. She was most likely a businesswoman whose own affairs gave her reason to travel to Rome, and who was sufficiently known to and trusted by Paul that he could send an epistle of such great importance with her. She is described as a servant of the church in Sancrea.

She is an emissary of, or a respected envoy for, her church in this instance, and the Romans should receive her with honour as one who acts on behalf of her congregation in various ways. More particularly, Phoebe is described as a patroness of many, including Paul himself in the verse that follows. The role of patrons was very important in the early church, and it seems that a culturally disproportionate number of these patrons of the church were women.

They presumably funded the ministries and the ministers of the church, and hosted their assemblies. A wealthy businesswoman like Phoebe likely hosted the Sancrean church in her house, and showed hospitality to missionaries like Paul who passed through the city. This is also something that was true of Jesus' ministry, as witnessed in Luke 8, verses 1-3.

Soon afterward he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. And the twelve were with him, and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities. Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna the wife of Cusa, Herod's household manager, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their means.

Such persons would have been of considerable importance to the early church, and likely enjoyed considerable honour in their congregations. Phoebe is the first of a number of

women mentioned in this chapter. There are twenty-six names mentioned in verses 3-16, nine women and seventeen men.

However, as Lamp remarks, of those especially praised for their service, six or seven are women, Prisca, Mary, Junia, Trifina, Trifosa, Persis, and perhaps also Rufus' mother, while only five or three are men. Such a list implies that women were active, prominent, and honoured in many quarters of the life of the early church. Prisca and Aquila, a couple we first met in Corinth in Acts chapter 18, come first in the list of the Christians in Rome.

They were some of Paul's dearest friends, who had risked much for him, and to whom the wider church owed a considerable debt. They host a congregation in their house, probably one of several such congregations in the city. Perhaps the most controversial name on the list is that of Junia, whose name has often been translated as Junias, a male name.

While technically possible, this is almost certainly a mistranslation. In the early church, Junia was identified rightly, I believe, as a woman, by people who clearly opposed women in pastoral ministry, something which many modern readers of Romans have used her name to support. Andronicus and Junia were most likely a married couple, or perhaps a brother and sister who travelled together.

We have description of such situations in 1 Corinthians 9.5 They are described as Paul's kinsmen. This may mean that they were relatives of Paul, or simply, perhaps more likely, that they were Jews. They also seem to have been in prison alongside Paul at some point, maybe in Ephesus.

The detail that has particularly made Junia a figure of much prominence in debate is the description of the couple as outstanding or well-known among the apostles. While the ESV's translation, well-known to the apostles, is possible, it is much more likely that Andronicus and Junia are included among the apostles in some sense. They clearly aren't members of the Twelve, but they are possibly apostles in the sense suggested in 1 Corinthians 9.1, as witnesses of the resurrected Christ, maybe among the 500 persons who saw the risen Christ at one time.

Going further than this becomes speculative very quickly, but considering how prominent and widespread debates concerning them are, there are some points that we should make concerning Junia, and the ways that other women in this list are used in contemporary debates about women in pastoral ministry. We should, at the very outset, notice the presence of a number of prominent women in the list. Whatever positions we hold concerning pastoral ministry, we should note the prominence of the various ministries of women more generally, and the honour that Paul held such women in.

We have much clearer teaching on these matters elsewhere in the New Testament, and we shouldn't need to rely on speculation about such passages. Making questions of

women in pastoral ministry hang upon the uses of particular words and phraseology in such passages is stretching the evidence far further than it can actually support. In debates on such matters, it is telling how often the word leadership is focused upon.

Romans 16 clearly shows women being prominent figures in their churches, being key workers, and being honoured for their faithful service. However, the need to make a case for women in pastoral ministry leads to a focus upon these women as so-called leaders, which is a category that seems to be a rather clumsily fitted one, unsuited to the service that the women here are actually performing. Perhaps one of the lessons we should learn from this passage is that leadership should not have such a monopoly on honour, and that other forms of service in the life of the church should receive much more recognition.

We should beware of importing our modern assumptions about individuals filling essentially gender-neutral roles, for which their sex is a matter of indifference, assumptions that arise in no small part from our modern economic order. In most societies across history and cultures, a person's sex colours the way that the roles they perform are perceived, and how those roles function, even when the roles they perform are nominally the same as roles the other sex can perform. A number of the women mentioned here are also mentioned alongside their husbands, their children, or their siblings.

Rather than individuals performing gender-neutral roles, in many of these situations we seem to have husband-wife teams, or families who are known for their service. Clement of Alexandria, writing around the year 200 AD, speaks of the apostles making their wives fellow-workers alongside them, with the wives focusing on ministering to women, to which the apostles themselves would not have had such ready access. In the case of Rufus' mother, Paul describes a woman performing an explicitly gendered role of service, acting as a mother to him.

The domestic setting for many of the ministries that Paul addresses here, in house churches, as married missionary couples, as families, etc., naturally allowed for women to enjoy much more prominence as the face of their communities, sometimes because there were relatively few male converts around. As the church assumed a growing public profile, and the informality of house churches was replaced with more formal offices and ordered communities, the ministry of male leaders naturally assumed much greater prominence on the broader stages that the church was moving into, a development that could strengthen the entire church in certain ways. Nevertheless, in local communities, the more domestic and communally grounded ministries of women would still have enjoyed considerable honour and prominence, even though their ministries would not have been as prominent on the broader stages.

Looking through the names, there are some scattered clues to social status, to the

regions of origin that people come from. Most of them were probably born outside Rome. Slave-born and free-born identities are sometimes hinted at, and in the case of Andronicus and Junia, their Jewish origin.

It seems likely that the majority of the Roman church were slaves or freedmen, or women. Throughout this list, Paul often uses the words, In the Lord, or In Christ, speaking for instance of Andronicus and Junia as being in Christ before him. Christ is the new realm of his people's existence, and the source of their identity.

Before sending his companions greetings and signing off the letter, Paul gives an exhortation. He is concerned that the Romans watch out for the type of people who cause divisions and set up obstacles. Such people are not motivated by the truth, and the love and service of Christ, but are just in it for their own appetites.

However, they can lead many naive people astray. Paul writes very positively about the Romans themselves, but he wants them to be wise in discerning what is good, and completely averse to that which is evil. Alluding to the promise of Genesis 3, verse 15, he promises that God will crush Satan under their feet shortly.

The serpent will be attacking them in various ways, but Paul is assured that they will prove victorious. In verses 21-24, Paul conveys greetings from his fellow workers, and his amanuensis, Tertius, conveys his. Timothy is described as Paul's fellow worker, presumably something already well known by Christians in the eastern Mediterranean region.

The references to Gaius and Erastus suggest the possibility that Paul was writing from Corinth. Also, Erastus' public office is evidence of individuals with higher social status among the early Christians. The book ends with a grand doxology, summing up the meaning of the Gospel.

In the fullness of time, according to his eternal purpose, and in fulfilment of prophetic promise, Jesus the Messiah is being proclaimed as the world's true Lord, and the one in whom the reign of God is established. This message is being proclaimed throughout the nations, so that all nations might submit to him with the obedience of faith. This is the Gospel.

This God, who has established his glorious kingdom in his son Jesus Christ, is also able to establish his people, secure in the strength of the kingdom that he is making known at this present time. A question to consider. Putting together various clues that we get in this chapter and elsewhere, what might we imagine the Roman church in the late 50s AD was like?