

**Reflections  
In  
Romans**

Moving from a Privatised Faith To Community Faith-fulness

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# A COMMENTARY ON ROMANS

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Building a cooperative unity in faith between ourselves and other sectors of the church, seen as the primary goal of Paul in his letter to the Romans.

Seeing Paul's gospel of faith as speaking of a gospel of faithfulness, meaning passing on God's love given to us through the cross to those around us.

Seeing the primary issue in faith as building a united family in Christ, fulfilling God's promises to Abraham, bringing the nations together in mutual care.

Fulfilling God's promise to Israel, in restoring God's commission to Adam and Eve over a renewed creation.

Applying Paul's treatment of Jewish and gentile Christian relationships to the whole body of Christ today. Paul wasn't against Jewish circumcision and their ceremonial laws but called believers to accept and understand each other. Paul wasn't calling them to separate, but to learn grace from each other, to work through their convictions as one body in the love of Christ.

Paul was calling them to unity as their witness of Christ's love to the world. This laying down of ourselves for others is our bridge to win the world outside to the love of Jesus Christ.

In modern church history, Paul's letters have been interpreted by aligning the Roman Catholics with the Jews and the Protestant's "righteous mission" to separate from them. This is a misreading of Paul. Rather, we can learn a lot from tradition, only when it isn't enforced upon believers in the place of Christ. Paul calls us instead to humbly receive each other in the love of grace, without the arrogance of superiority. And when correction is needed for any of us, we seek that correction in a spirit of humility.

Romans shows us a church that includes those considered scum by the world: the poor, sick, the foreigner, even the enemy, for our mutual healing and transformation by the love of God. This isn't only for "spiritual" reasons, but the church brings a healing lifestyle to the divisions of our world, that threaten even today. We begin to adopt Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream, that teaches us we cannot build a future that doesn't also heal our neighbour.

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# 1

## BACKGROUND TO ROMANS

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We can draw out many things from reading old letters in the New Testament, things that encourage us in the issues we are facing in our own lives at various times. But what were the issues these letters were originally addressing? How did the words the letters used fit into the situation of the early church, when the Holy Spirit was gathering people of different races and classes together as one new family? This sudden shift in religious matters was something of a crisis to Jewish culture and to the values of the Roman empire, and this crisis had to be addressed head-on by Paul. This is the issue that dominates the letter to the Romans, as it dominates Paul's other letters: how the new multi-racial/ multi-class family fulfils God's promises to the Hebrew people on the renewal of creation.

## 1.1 ROMANS - THE STORY OF ISRAEL

It is necessary to see how Paul wrote Romans. It wasn't written in a doctrinal format. Paul didn't sit down to write out the doctrines of the faith. He wrote in story format. Paul was telling a story that was very common in his day among the Jews. It was the story of Israel, about their calling from God to set the world right. All the Jews told this story, by tracing Israel's history and promises from God, and speculating how these would be fulfilled. Speculations of this kind were widespread in Paul's day. Jews of that time often thought the fulfilment would come through a military or political victory over their enemies.

Romans is essentially the story of Israel and how Jesus Christ was inserted into that story to fulfil it in a way that nobody had expected. The way Jesus Christ did this subverted all the nationalistic hopes of the day. He ignored all the power-hungry hopes of those involved. The way he fulfilled the story was to call us all to serve our enemies. This is "the scandal of the gospel." It shakes our human desires to their core. But the point here is that if we don't read Paul's writing as a story of Israel pointing us to Christ, we will not understand how Romans is to be interpreted. Exegesis here (meaning an objective analysis of the text) is useless if we don't see what is behind the text.

## 1.2 THE OCCASION

Western tradition often holds that there was no occasion to why Paul wrote to the Roman church. By this, it is meant that there was no particular problem Paul was addressing. The problems of the Corinthian church are clear, and Paul spells them out and deals with them one after the other. But Romans doesn't seem to so clearly deal with pressing problems in the church. So, it has been assumed, Paul was merely writing to Rome to lay out his gospel in detail, ahead of his first ministry visit to the region.

The tradition continues to explain that this gospel Paul was laying out in Romans was essentially a gospel of personal salvation. Here, the tradition betrays itself. It is because the gospel is seen in this truncated way, this reductionist view of the gospel, that the problem Paul was addressing in the Roman church isn't clearly seen. But when we see the gospel in its broader Hebrew sense of Paul's day, as the good news of community renewal, then the issues Paul was addressing in Romans become far more obvious.

Paul was planning to shift his gospel outreach to the west of Europe. His years up until that point had concentrated on ministry in the eastern realms. His headquarters, so to speak, was in the church at Antioch. From there, Paul launched out into Asia Minor and as far west as Greece. But now, Paul wanted to concentrate on regions further west. So, Rome would be an appropriate new base for him.

Therefore, in preparing the Roman church, and striking the right footing for the future churches in western areas, Paul wants to nip in the bud the number one issue that bedevilled the churches in the east; namely, Jew and gentile relations. We see it in Antioch, Galatia, Philippi, Ephesus and Colossi. Everywhere Paul preached; the hostility, antagonism and rivalry between Jews and gentiles rose up to tear apart the new churches. Healing this rivalry was possibly the main reason why God gave us the gospel. But in our personalised understanding of the gospel we won't see this.

### **1.3 A COMMUNITY STORY**

In getting our reading of Romans right, the background picture or worldview of Paul must be seen. In modern western culture, which has influenced evangelical theology and missions, the worldview is individualism. The “good news” is seen on chiefly a personalised basis. That is, the “good news” is that we escape hell when we die and instead go to heaven. Before then we enjoy the blessings of God by faith and triumph over our enemies. Romans outlines, according to this view, our personal legal fall into sin, cutting us off from God's favour, but our personal rescue through the penalty Christ paid on the cross, and our glorification in heaven if we continue in personal sanctification. Added onto that maybe a last-days revival of Israel before Jesus comes.

This is getting the story of the Hebrew people entirely wrong. And it is the Hebrew story that Paul is writing about when he speaks of Jesus. It is understanding the whole Adam to Christ story in the right light. In the western lens, we see this in a legal way: Adam fell legally and then Christ restores us in order that God's anger doesn't fall on us in hell. This isn't the Hebrew view. They saw the fall of Adam as bringing down the creation. They saw God's call to them in Abraham as restoring Adam's vocation and healing the creation. This has little to do with a personalised gospel, though ironically it is the gospel that is most personally transforming.

If Adam's vocation revived in Israel is Paul's first background story, then God's program through Abraham is the second story in Paul's mind when writing Romans. Again, in western theology we see the promises of God to Abraham chiefly about God bringing personal salvation to people of all nations, primarily to save people from hell to take them to heaven. This is not how the Hebrew people saw God's promises to Abraham. In promising to bless all the nations of the earth through Abraham, God was speaking about bringing people from all these nations into one new family. He was speaking about the unity of these people in the kingdom of God, a new kingdom that would revive and heal the creation through healing the hostility between the peoples of the nations.

In other words, and I emphasise this here, this is the "good news" that Paul was thinking about. When we use the term the "good news" we should be talking about the news that Adam's dominion over the creation is restored, through a new people of love and service towards each other, healing the sinfulness

of the world, restoring the communities of the world and restoring the cosmos itself. The good news is that God is forming us from our diverse backgrounds into one new family. The good news is about the new community which heals the creation. This is what Paul is addressing in Romans.

In these notes we are speaking a lot about the Jews and the gentiles, because this was the issue of that day. Today, this could refer to all our tribal divisions and nationalism and to all our religious groups within Christianity. Please remember, that when we are speaking here of Jews and gentiles, we are also speaking of our own relationships with others today.

# 2

## ONE FAMILY IN GOD

ROMANS 1 - 5:11

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This first section of Romans traces how the creation is destroyed by an idolatrous and boastful humanity. In place of this Paul introduces the gospel of faithfulness: to love God and love neighbour - the Hebrew *shema* - brought about in our lives by the cross and Spirit of God. Paul sets out to destroy the boastfulness within both gentile and Jewish communities, so that he might bring them together in the grace and mercy of God, into a new family, where receiving and serving of one another takes over. This transformation of our lives is the salvation Paul preaches, rather than a “believe-ism” we have adopted in religious culture. This salvation is the power of

God to renew the creation, in fulfilment of God's promises to Abraham, rather than the violence and oppression of human nationalism and empire.

## 2.1 A NEW CREATION

Paul begins Romans by mentioning the promises of God fulfilled through his Son. In the Roman world the term "Son" had a very specific meaning. It meant the one given the authority to rule over the earth, to bring peace and flourishment to human society. In modern times, we think of Jesus being the Son of God as the one who gives us an eternal spiritual life only. Our faith is disengaged from an application within this world. We have privatised our faith. It is no longer about renewing our communities in this world. We worship Jesus in heaven, but not in its biblical sense, about the one who is sent by God to renew the whole creation.

This is a bold opening of Paul to Romans, because the Roman Caesar had very clearly taken to himself full rights to the title "Son of God." And what Caesar meant by this was that he had the divine right to rule the nations of the world. Caesar Augustus assumed other divine titles, like saviour of the world. His birthday was called the gospel, good news, using the same Greek word Paul used for the gospel of Christ. Caesar meant that the "good news" was that he conquered darkness and brought peace and safety to the world. He commanded all nations to put their faith in him as the bringer

of divine justice, faithfulness and righteousness to the creation. Of course, Caesar did this by brutal power and by separating all people into groups of greater or lesser privilege or oppression. His claim to a renewed creation was a corrupt human sham.

The opening of Romans very carefully attributes all these titles the Emperor assumed for himself to Christ instead. Paul claimed Jesus was declared to be “the Son of God, with power by the resurrection of the dead.” (Romans 1:4) His lordship is one over death itself. Paul here was referring to Daniel 7, where the Son of Man ascended to sit at the right hand of power in heaven. Paul knew that the Roman senate had just passed a law, claiming the deceased Roman Emperor Claudius was then in heaven at the right hand of power, ruling on the behalf of subsequent Roman Caesars. Paul, knowingly to that culture of the day, transferred this claim to Christ. Reading Romans today we miss this clear significance of Paul’s words in his time.

The significant point though is what “gospel” meant in that day. We hear the term today with different ears. In Paul’s time it meant the good news about a renewed world, where people lived in peace and justice together. The gospel referred to the kind of vision Isaiah spoke of, with people breaking their swords into ploughs, of enemies becoming one family, of nations on this earth becoming full of peace and goodness. The gospel then wasn’t good news about our personal salvation by going to heaven. It was personal, yes, but it was more about our being part of a renewed creation, where the presence and principles of God’s kingdom ruled, instead of the

arrogant ambitions of divided and hostile humanity. This is the gospel Paul was speaking of and he claimed Caesar couldn't bring this to pass, but that only the Prince of Peace could bring about this new creation, through the hearts and lives of his followers.

## 2.2 THE FAITHFULNESS OF GOD

Paul is “not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.” (Romans 1:16) There is a continued contrast here to the Roman world of brutal injustice and power, in which Christ was crucified. Rome worshiped brutal strength, but salvation to the world comes through the apparent weakness of the cross, the death of a slave in that culture. There is a contradiction here that most people will not understand, and in this contradiction lies the very essence of our faith and of the rule of the kingdom of God in our communities. It is in the giving up our lives to serve others, not in dominating others, that renewal comes to our relationships and world. The cross shows how the promises of God come about in and through our lives for a new creation.

Also, Paul very quickly brings out the major issue in his letter to the Romans, the relationship between the Jewish and gentile believers. This statement, “to the Jew first and also to the Greek,” isn't just a statement about personal salvation being available in Christ for individuals from both

backgrounds. It is a statement about the relationship between both groups of people in the Roman church. The cross of Christ, his humbling of himself to serve, even as a slave, in the very basis upon which the new relationship between Jews and gentiles is to be formed. The rest of the letter to the Romans is just about Paul explaining this new relationship, in which the cross takes over our lives together in community to make us one new family.

“For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith. As it is written, “The just shall live by faith.” (Romans 1:17) The term “righteousness of God” means God’s own covenant faithfulness. It means that God has been faithful to his promises to Abraham, having fulfilled his promises to Israel through the cross, and through the new family the Spirit of God is raising up in the church. It means that this gospel is how God’s promises are being fulfilled, rather than through violence, which many in Paul’s day were advocating as the way to free themselves from Rome.

The term “righteousness of God,” or “covenant faithfulness of God,” was commonly used in the Old Testament (e.g., Psalm 71:19) and in Paul’s day, as we see in the Dead Sea Scrolls (e.g., Qumran hymns) when authors considered how God’s promises to Israel would be vindicated and fulfilled. Paul wrote Romans to explain that these promises were fulfilled in the gospel of Christ, namely, in the one new family which God promised Abraham. This gospel, this one new family consisting of Jew and gentile, is the “righteousness of God,” the demonstration of God’s faithfulness to his promises.

We have commonly used the term “righteousness of God” to describe our own righteousness by faith, but this isn’t what Paul meant by it. It is true that Paul also spoke of a righteousness through faith, to show that we are all one in Christ, but this is distinct from the term the “righteousness of God,” which in Paul’s day was about the way in which God fulfilled his promises to Israel. The surprise, as mentioned above, was that his promises would be fulfilled through the weakness of the cross, by a new serving community of Jew and gentile, and not by the sword of the zealots.

Romans is essentially showing God’s righteousness, *to wit*, that God had made promises to Israel, and despite Israel’s fall, God had kept these promises through Christ. (See Romans 3:1-8, for example.) The gospel is the way in which God has been faithful to his covenant with Israel. God’s righteousness, rather than our own personal righteousness, is the main view of the text. Romans chapters 1 - 16 shows how God remained righteous, to work through Israel’s fall, to bring about one new family for Abraham among Jews and gentiles, to renew the creation. Our love for each other is a demonstration to the world of God’s righteousness, that he has kept his promises to renew our hearts and world.

Paul’s notion of the “righteousness of God,” as we will see later in this commentary, was written in the context of Israel’s return from exile into a comprehensive salvation of their community. Isaiah 55:5 shows this in a nutshell, “My righteousness draws near speedily, my salvation is on the way, and my arm will bring justice to the nations. The islands will look to me and wait in hope for my arm.” Here, the

righteousness of God is his faithfulness to fulfil his covenant promises. God's righteousness comes to pass as seen in the Servant Songs of Isaiah, through the Messiah's faithfulness, and this is what Paul is describing in Romans.

"...from faith to faith..." We need to consider the full meaning of faith. It stems from the Hebrew *shema*, which states, "Hear O Israel... you shall love the Lord with all your heart... and your neighbour as your yourself." (Deuteronomy 6:4-5, Leviticus 19:18) Faith is this new heart that hears with obedience, where this *shema* is written upon our heart. (Jeremiah 31:33) Faith means faithfulness, loving God and neighbour. "Faith that works through love." (Galatians 5:6)

This is how the cross of Christ works in us. The cross is Christ's faithfulness to love, forgive and serve us. And in the cross, God's Spirit renews our heart, leading us into faithful lives towards each other. His faithfulness brings about our renewed faithfulness. "From his faithfulness to our faithfulness." This is the way God renews our community through the cross, bringing about the fulfilment of his promises to Israel. Our new family/ community demonstrates God's covenant righteousness, or his faithfulness. Or as Christ put it, "This is how all men will know you are my disciples, by your love for one another." (John 13:35) We are the demonstration of God's righteousness, of his faithfulness to his covenant promises to Israel.

"As it is written, the just shall live by faith." This is a quote from Habakkuk, who lived in similar times to Rome. Babylon was an unrighteousness nation exerting its power over Israel. Habakkuk was told he would be delivered through a life of

faithfulness. This means faithfulness to the *shema* of God. It is the essence of the law. It fulfils the law without the need of the ceremonial obligations of the law. Self-giving love is the fulfilment of the law. This is the overall argument of Paul in Romans. The new people of God, whether Jews or gentiles, fulfil the law in loving service to each other, without the ceremonies hindering that fellowship. (Romans 3:31, 8:3-4)

When Paul quotes from the Old Testament, he means to include the whole context from that Old Testament passage. Habakkuk 2:4-5 reads “See, the enemy is puffed up; his desires are not upright— but the righteous person will live by his faithfulness — indeed, wine betrays him; he is arrogant and never at rest. Because he is as greedy as the grave and like death is never satisfied, he gathers to himself all the nations and takes captive all the peoples.”

Paul’s use of “faithfulness” is clear. The people who wish to divide the new family in Paul’s ministry have their selfish ambitions at heart, but the faithful will serve their neighbour in love. It isn’t just that we live in empires that oppress us, but we also adopt the same tactics and live the same way of oppression towards others. “We live for number one” and this was the Jewish and the gentile way of life in Paul’s day. The gospel has come to change this in our lives and fellowship within a new family.

## 2.3 THE WRATH OF GOD

Romans chapters 1-3 continue showing that the wrath of God is against both Jew and gentile, so neither group has any cause to boast against each other. Paul's purpose in speaking about the wrath of God is to lay the ground for humility in both Jew and gentile, to receive one another in love.

Paul claims that just as the gospel is the revelation of God's faithfulness, so it is also the revelation of God's wrath, not just to the gentile, but also to the Jew. "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men..." (Romans 1:18) This means that the cross is God's revelation from heaven, from his realm of power, of his judgment. The word "revealed" here comes from the Greek for "apocalypse" and it refers to the cross, in which the true nature of God is revealed and settles everything, both judging and forgiving mankind. God's self-giving love reveals the injustice and self-centredness of the world.

Paul's point here is that the cross reveals the sin of "all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men," whether Jewish or gentile ungodliness. This is another one of those "to the Jew first and also to the gentile" statements. It isn't just the ungodliness of the gentile, but also of the Jew, that Paul is laying emphasis on. In chapter 1 Paul outlines the ungodliness of the gentle fallen world, and then in chapter 2 he turns to the ungodliness of the Jewish people of his time.

The sinfulness of the gentile world was well known by Israel. Especially their idol worship, which leads to all kinds of sinful behaviours, which in turns brings about destruction within their lives and within the whole creation. Reading Romans 1 is like reading Jonah's prayer, when he was in the belly of the whale. Jonah rehearsed all the sin of the gentiles, in his self-righteousness as a Hebrew, non-idol worshipper. All the Jews who read Romans 1 would have given a hearty "amen." The Jewish believers in the Roman church would have also. Paul's condemnation of the gentile world would have strengthened Jewish superiority in the church. This superiority, of one group against another, is a theme that Paul keeps coming back in his letter to the Romans.

But hold on a minute. The cross doesn't only reveal the pagan sin of violence and cruelty, but also the sin of the Jews, who handed Christ over to be crucified. The Jew was fond of going into the temple and thanking God that he wasn't a sinner like the gentile. (Luke 18:9-14) But the cross shows otherwise. It reveals from heaven, from God's act in Christ, that the Jews are as sinful as the gentiles. Not only as sinful, but even more sinful, since they had the law and they knew what was good and just. The cross shows God's judgment against the Jews also... and through the cross the Jews need to accept God's free forgiveness, which they do by forgiving their gentile neighbour. Forgiveness is available to the Jew, by them forgiving the ones they hate. This is God's way. Paul is showing this to lay the foundation for non-arrogant, caring relationships between Jews and gentiles in his churches.

As Paul explains in chapter 3, this doesn't mean Israel had no special relationship to God. They did have, as being the ones chosen by God to carry forward his witness to the world. They were the ones through whom God had chosen to heal the sin of Adam, to restore the priesthood of Adam and Eve to the world. This wouldn't be an easy task, as we shall see later in Romans. But this call doesn't mean Israel are exempt from judgement. If they were not subject to judgment, then how could God righteously judge the world?

## 2.4 DESTROYING THE CREATION

Romans 1-2 reveal the failure of humanity in respect to his image bearing priesthood, and as a result of that, the whole creation suffering. Romans 8 takes this theme up later, and shows the restored priesthood bringing renewal to the whole creation.

It starts with idolatry, which we see Adam and Eve indulging in in the Garden. From this flow sinful acts, like murder and immorality, etc. Sinful acts are the consequence of us putting ourselves first, of our own self-centredness. God isn't punishing these acts in a legal sense, but the acts bring about their own results, their own destruction.

Romans 3:23 sums up the situation, "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." This is to prevent Jewish or gentile boasting, but the nature of the human fall can also be

seen in these three chapters. It isn't a legal fall, but an image bearing fall. Man has failed to reflect God's glory into the creation, and because of that, destructive, rather than nurturing behaviour patterns take over. The judgement of God consists of God handing man over to his own will and allowing what mankind does to eventually bring about its own consequences. None of the judgment or consequences comes from God's own actions.

In Psalm 8 it speaks of the restoration of man's image bearing through Christ. Man is crowned with the "glory and honour" Romans says he has fallen short of, meaning his rule over the creation is re-established once again. This is the background Paul is writing from in its Hebrew setting. The glory of God here speaks of mankind's image bearing rule in renewing the creation. It isn't a legal bar we must jump over to get into heaven.

We can see here that Romans isn't a letter about man meeting God's legal requirements, so we can go to heaven when we die. The view of Paul is about the creation being set free from its corruption, by a restored priesthood. This restored priesthood is the new family, in which acts of love and service take over from acts of self-worship and oppression of others. And this is brought about through the cross, by which God justifies both Jewish and gentile peoples, making us to become one new family in love, expressing mutual forgiveness and selfless acts of rehabilitation towards others.

## 2.5 ONE HEALING FAMILY

“But now apart from the law the righteousness (covenant faithfulness) of God ... has been disclosed — namely, the righteousness (covenant faithfulness) of God through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction (between Jew and gentile), for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. But they are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. God publicly displayed him at his death as the mercy seat accessible through faith. This was to demonstrate his righteousness (covenant faithfulness), because God in his forbearance had passed over the sins previously committed.” (Romans 3:21-25 New English Translation)

We have already seen how God deals with sin. First, he condemns it on the cross. It was at the cross where sin was exposed, by what the gentiles and the Jews did to Christ. Our sin was publicly demonstrated by Christ dying on the cross. This is the sense in which Christ bore our sin. He took the sin we laid on him, the sin we committed against him when we put him on trial and crucified him. God judged our sin by publicly showing it for what it is, by exposing the sin of both Jew and gentile on the cross, leaving us both without excuse. This is how the cross is the power of God to form a new family.

The second way in which God deals with sin is that he forgives it. We see this publicly and freely expressed by Christ on the cross. “God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, not imputing their sins against them, but cancelling them.” (2

Corinthians 5:19) When we sinned against Christ he freely and publicly forgave us from the cross. Immediately Christ forgave his enemies.

This is the sense in which Paul is speaking in Romans 3. God did not deal with sin by punishing sinners. He did not deal with sin by the law. Before Paul knew Christ, he was going about punishing people according to the law, thinking this would fulfil God's covenant promises to Israel. Paul thought this was the revelation of the righteousness of God, just as Jonah thought. But now Paul says in Romans 3 that God deals with sin without the law, without punishing the sinner under the law.

Paul said Christ was displayed publicly on the cross as an atonement for our sin by his blood. The word used for "atonement" here means the mercy seat in the Old Testament tabernacle. Christ was held out to the world by God on the cross as his mercy to the sinner, his public declaration of his forgiveness of our sin. And he did this by his blood, that is, by his public death. It took his death to reveal his forgiveness and love to the world, without God demanding satisfaction or repayment for our sin against Christ under the law. By that he redeemed us, delivered us from the law within our hearts, and brought us back into his embrace at the cost of Christ's blood.

And this is what God wants us to pass onto each other. This is how his promises to Abraham are fulfilled, about a new family renewing the creation. In Christ the law is dealt with, so that we might live lives of mercy and restoration towards our fellow man. If the law is taken away, then Jewish and gentile relationships are no longer hindered. The family of God is no

longer determined by the Old Testament ceremonies which separated peoples, but by the love of Christ which forgives us both and draws us together as one.

This was to publicly demonstrate his covenant faithfulness by his free and full forgiveness of our sin in his own death. By this act he paid the ransom to our conscience, for the law, and broke its power over our lives. By forgiving us freely, he justified us all by grace, through faith, that is, if we accept this gift by holding it out also to our neighbours. (Romans 3:26) And the reason he did this was to make us one new family. We accept God by accepting his full family.

“Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded! By what principle? Of (perfect) works (under the law)? No, but by the principle of faith (loving forgiveness that serves)! For we consider that a person is declared righteous by faith apart from the (ceremonial) works of the law. Or is God the God of the Jews only? Is he not the God of the gentiles too? Yes, of the gentiles too! Since God is one, he will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith.” (Romans 3:27-30)

See Paul’s point? It isn’t privatised salvation, but one new family, in which we pass on the love of God to a renewing creation... rather than the condemnation and judgment of the law, which brings death to us all through our hostile and destructive actions towards each other. In Galatians, Paul called it “consuming each other,” because we fail to come to a common table and serve each other. When Paul said in 2 Corinthians 5:19 that God has forgiven our sins on the cross, the purpose of Paul is that we might follow by doing that for each other. This is the new creation Paul was speaking about

in 2 Corinthians 4-5... the God who spoke light into creation, is now speaking *shema* into our hearts through Christ. (2 Corinthians 4:6)

The issue Paul is speaking about here is a very simple one. God has forgiven us for our worse sin which he visited upon him in Christ, so we have no proper cause not to forgive others their sin against us. If this is the case, then we can forge one new family and go out into the world showing the world this new forgiveness of God by our own actions. This is the simple gospel, the good news about what God has done with the sin of the world.

It's so easy to default and take the language of the cross in the human, religious cultic sense, of providing some satisfaction to the gods. But God transforms the meaning so that the cross is not something God demands, but something he gives to free us within. This new meaning sets us on the same new course, of following him to forgive and serve others.

Paul doesn't preach a gospel of "faith alone" in the truncated, or simplified version we may hear. Paul's faith isn't just the "believing" of a privatised religion, but the Hebrew form of faith which is about the law being fulfilled in our lives through personal and community transformation. Paul's faith isn't a legal contract that saves, but a salvation that takes over our lives through its new fruit.

## 2.6 FATHER OF US ALL

Romans 4 continues from where Romans 3 ended, showing that the one family of God is not marked out by circumcision, but by faith that works through love. “The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well, and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.” (Romans 4:11-12)

The reason Paul introduces Abraham and David’s faith here is to show what marks out the one family of God. Paul isn’t considering Abraham from the point of view of our modern cultures, about our privatised faith, but from what the Hebrew people understood all conversations about Abraham were really about: the Hebrew calling to inherit and renew the world. “For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith.” (Romans 4:13)

Paul is considering here how Abraham’s calling to renew the world will come to pass. It would come about by God building one new family of Jews and gentiles. But this new family wouldn’t be marked by the ceremonial aspects of the law, such as circumcision, but by the “righteousness of faith,” meaning faith that does the law, that loves and serves the neighbour.

The Jews of Paul's day were trying to bring about God's promises of a transomed world by imposing the ceremonial aspects of the law upon others. Paul was saying that this wasn't how God's promises to Abraham were to be fulfilled. Circumcision spoke prophetically of a new heart, and this new heart was to be fulfilled in the "righteousness of faith." This whole discussion in Romans was about how the Hebrew expectation of a new creation was to be fulfilled through Israel, through their Messiah. It wasn't a discussion about personal salvation. It was a discussion about the church, how the church was made up all saved/ transformed people.

"For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith (faithful love) is nullified and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression." (Romans 4:14-15) If the family of God was to be based on the law, then the promise would fail to come to pass. Instead of love, the law would bring about wrath, meaning destruction of each other, as the Jews and gentiles had been doing for generations. But where the law (the ceremonial distinction between the peoples) is taken away, then the service of love from the renewed heart can take over at one table.

"I have made you the father of many nations" (Romans 4:17) This is the promise Paul was speaking about, not a promise of privatised salvation that we often think Paul was focusing on. And God's promise to Abraham of one new family from all people, can only come to pass through the service faith, not through the separation-ism and hostility of law. And Abraham received his promise of a child through faith, through God's

loving commitment to him, not by Abraham fulfilling any law. That is how we are to live out God's promise as one family in the world, though the faithfulness of loving commitment to one another.

Abraham was justified by counting on God's love and goodness, not on his works, and this is how community will be justified (will flourish), through receiving and passing on to others the same love and goodness of God. The law, on the other hand, pulls us apart, leaving us falling short, unjustified individually and unjustified by love as a community.

Paul wasn't against the Jewish ceremonies of circumcision and other ceremonies like that. Jews were free to continue in these, just as Paul himself continued to observe temple ceremonies as a Jew. But Paul was speaking about the issue that marked out the entire family of God and how the gentiles would be included in that family. The ceremonies were shadows, which pointed to the faithfulness of love, and this is what all Jesus followers were required to live out, whether they were Jews or gentiles.

And it was this faithfulness of love that would renew the world, bringing about God's promises to Abraham that he would be the heir of the new creation through his children from all the nations of the world coming together as one.

Romans 4 isn't a chapter where Paul expels those from the faith who observe the ceremonial traditions. It is simply saying that these ceremonies should not lead us to exclude those who don't observe them. An incorrect understanding of Paul's message has led us in recent generations to expel the

Romans Catholics from our fellowship because of their ceremonies, claiming these are contrary to faith. Rather, the point Paul is making is that we should receive one another in the faithfulness of love. This way we learn from each other and fulfil what is lacking in each other's faith. We become complete in Christ.

We might ask, "What about the traditions of the Catholics or others that are wrong?" Paul speaks about this in Galatians 6 also, where he says we correct ourselves in the body of Christ with a spirit of humility, in fellowship, not in exclusion. This means we think of our own faults first, which we are often blind to, and then try to understand others and their traditions next. Then we pray for one another and seek each other's restoration. If people are arrogant towards us, we shouldn't return this arrogance to them.

Paul was proclaiming the gospel of one table, not the gospel of personal separation from those who observe works we don't consider to be faith. When Paul spoke in Galatians about there being only one gospel, it was this one table, which Paul was calling Peter back to with his gentile brothers and sisters, that Paul was speaking about. This is the one gospel: the gospel of our complete family as one in Christ. This was the gospel people fought against in Paul's day, as people sometimes do today.

## 2.7 *SHEMA* SAVING THE WORLD

“Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. 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.” (Romans 5:1-5)

We have been justified by the faithfulness of Christ, who on the cross forgave us fully and took away the law that hung over our conscience. This gives room for the Holy Spirit to flood into our hearts with a new grace towards others. Therefore, the Spirit, working in conjunction with the cross, writes the law of *shema* on our heart. He fills our hearts with the same *shema* faithfulness for others, as Christ showed towards us. This is the “from faith to faith,” from the *shema* faithfulness of Christ to the *shema* faithfulness in our new family fellowship, that we saw in Romans 1:17.

We stand in this *shema* fellowship, despite persecution from those who wish to divide the church along tribal or social lines. When Peter was intimidated at Antioch for eating with the gentiles, he withdrew from their table. He needed to stand in the grace of fellowship Christ had won for the new family by his sufferings. Many others, including Paul, suffered for the gospel of one church family.

The *shema* was of first importance to Paul as a Hebrew believer. Paul recited it many times every day in his prayers. The love of God and love for neighbour was the central aspect of both the Law and the Prophets. The gospel was the way in which God was bringing about his true *shema* in our hearts and relationships, in order to renew creation. This is how Paul saw the teachings of Jesus and the Messiah's mission on the cross and in the church.

“For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person — though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die — but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:6-8) This is the explanation of God's *shema*. He cares for the weak, as he did for the slaves in Egypt, in contrast again to the brutal Roman world. And to the weak he “commends his love,” by Christ forgiving us from the cross. The cross is God's assurance to the guilty that he freely forgives us and frees us from the law by his grace. We then are to pass this on to the others who are weak, lifting those in need around us, no matter their affiliation. This is the “from faithfulness to faithfulness.”

“Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God.” (Romans 5:9) The blood of Christ here means his death, through which he has commended and revealed God's love to a weak world. The salvation Paul envisages here is the Hebrew version, the new community God is raising up to refashion the Roman world and beyond, after the values and power of God's kingdom. God will continue to bring about his promises

concerning his new creation, especially now that it has been reconciled by his love on the cross. We will have to wait until Romans 8 until we see Paul outline this salvation in its full. This is the only salvation Romans speaks of: the coming of God's kingdom.

In the first part of Romans 5 we have the conclusion of the first four chapters of Romans: God has made us one new family through his *shema* love and this new sharing community, bringing the tribes of the world together in self-denying love, will bring God's planned rescue to the world, in accordance with the promises of God to the Hebrew nation. Though there is also the hint here that this will happen in the midst of serious persecution, which Romans 8 further describes. The issue so far in Romans isn't privatised faith, but community love. This is faith.

# 3

## CONDEMNING SIN IN THE FLESH

ROMANS 5:12 – 8

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### 3.1 FROM ADAM TO ISRAEL

Israel saw that the purpose of their election was to undo the fall of Adam, and thereby to restore humanity's priesthood over the creation. Israel saw themselves as the Second Adam. They saw the creation of their nation as a kind of second creation of the world: God repairing the world that was broken by Adam's fall. They didn't know how this was going to come to pass. Paul's intention in Romans was to explain this fulfilment, how Israel, even though in a surprising way, that is, by their own fall, restored the fall of Adam and thus the creation.

“Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men... Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.” (Romans 5:12... 18-19)

Paul begins to show Israel's history, how that they received the call from God to undo the sin and condemnation of Adam upon our communities. It's a long history for Israel, until sin was finally condemned in the flesh and cross of Christ. The story of that journey begins here in Romans.

Adam's sin brought the dominion of condemnation into the human family, that ruled over our nations, bringing vengeful behaviour, violence and destruction to all. This is what God called Israel to undo and reverse. The Torah gives us hints of this reversal in the sabbath and jubilee, but it would be the cross that would achieve this turn around in our lives.

That is, Israel was called to enter into a greater realisation of their sin through the Torah. Romans chapters 5 – 8 trace how the Torah worked in Israel's life, bringing them to the point of the cross, where they would be delivered from sin's power. That is, the bondage of the law in Israel's life, led them to a self-righteous and vengeful response to Christ and to his crucifixion. It was at this point that the grace of God was revealed, and the power of the law was finally broken over our lives, undoing the captivity that had begun way back by Adam and Eve.

Israel were called to undo Adam's sin and its hold over humanity, by carrying it forward in the Torah to Calvary, where Israel would be set free. But not just Israel, but the world would be set free with them. This is how Israel's election worked out, and Paul brings this up again in chapters 9 – 11. Carrying Adam's condemnation forward in the Torah, means that Israel bore the condemnation of Adam and of humanity in the law, until their sense of judgment turned them against Christ, where he would respond instead with forgiveness, setting us free into healing. The law made Israel the custodians of the condemnation of Adam and of humanity until Christ condemned that condemnation in his cross.

“Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” (Romans 5:2-21)

The above introduces what Paul expands in Romans 7, how the law took over in Israel's nation, bringing sin to its heightened level of bondage... at which point the love of Christ could be revealed to the nation and to the world. This doesn't mean that God forced the law upon Israel. It was human nature to desire the law. We think it will justify us, but it leads instead to greater sin, so much so, that we turn against God in hatred. So, when the law does its worst work in us, that is where God is present, on the cross, to meet us, forgive us and deliver us from the law, once and for all.

Let me say this again for clarity. Israel carried forward Adam's sense of judgement that ruled them, to the cross, where they

thrust it upon Jesus in their sense of legal vengeance, and God's response in Christ was to say, "No problem. It stops with me. I forgive it and I forgive you." And this response finally brought the law and sin of Adam to its end, where its reign through guilt was broken by God.

As Paul said, one sin of Adam led to the captivity of the whole human race in condemnation, and one act of obedience in Christ led to the realisation of the grace and forgiveness of God, for the whole human race. Israel served the world in this way. As they came under the bondage of the law and the condemnation it produced in their hearts, they transferred this to Christ in their rage, where the love of God was revealed and began its takeover of our hearts and new relationships.

So, the cross condemned sin in our hearts. The cross was the point where our sin came to its height. And the cross was the point where this sin was forgiven, setting us free from the condemnation that ruled over us through the law. The cross brings us into the grace of God, where we pass onto our neighbour the restoring love of God in service, instead of our assumed destructive judgment of God in our former lives under law.

It is the normal default to read sections of Paul from our point of view as individuals, but it is the story of Israel, their mission and its surprising success in their fall through crucifying Christ, that is being told. Our default level reading, putting "me, myself and I" at the centre of the text, and not the gospel story of Israel Paul was narrating, causes us to miss the basic narrative construction of the letter to the Romans.

Israel knew they were called to heal the world by undoing the paganism brought into the world through the fall of Adam. Abraham was called to reverse Adam's fall, to restore the image of God in man, and restore Adam and Eve's priesthood vocation within the whole creation. But Israel didn't know how this reversal would be achieved. They thought it would come about through forcing circumcision upon the world, as Paul was doing before he met Christ. But here, in Romans 5, Paul is revealing the surprising truth of the gospel.

Israel's mission is fulfilled by their crucifixion of Christ. It is there where Adam's sin was nailed to the cross, setting our hearts free from its dominion. It was in weakness, not in power, by his Spirit, not by might, that we are saved, and the creation is healed. The salvation that Paul has in view, by centring it upon Adam's situation, is the healing of the cosmos, the creation, to bring about a Christlike rule of the world, according to the original vocation of Adam. This was Israel's mission. This new creation was the witness of the Old Testament Prophets.

### **3.2 BAPTISED INTO FREEDOM - ROMANS 6**

From Romans 6 onwards, Paul continues to illustrate the gospel using Israel's history. Many Jewish writers of Paul's day did this. See, for example, Flavius Josephus, the Wisdom of Solomon and 4 Ezra, along with many other writings discovered in the Dead Sea Scrolls. Israel's history formed a

template, or background tapestry, to predict how Israel's hopes would be fulfilled in a final deliverance.

Starting from Romans 6, Paul traces Israel's history through the Exodus, to Mount Sinai in Romans 7 and into the promised land in Romans 8. In Romans 9 Paul shows how Israel's election and hardening saved the world, and from Romans 10 - 13, Paul used Israel's exile in Babylon to explain the resurrection and transforming reign of Christ in the nations of the world.

Romans 6 begins with the question, "Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?" This may refer back to Romans 5, which speaks of God's forgiveness after many sins. The nature of these sins was likely more to do with the hostility and greed between Jews and gentiles, between rich and poor, instead of the oneness in Christ, the restoring and caring relationship that Paul was urging. Paul's answer to the question was, "How shall we who are dead to sin, continue any longer in it?" And then Paul goes on to describe our baptism into Christ's death.

"Or don't you know that all of us who were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life." (Romans 6:3-4)

Paul was showing that he was no longer dominated by his old way of looking at things. This baptism, or death of the old way, is an Exodus theme, where Israel were delivered from slavery through baptism in the Red Sea. (1 Corinthians 10:1-2) But what did Paul mean by this in relation to the gospel and the

church community in Rome? We can look at how Paul used this same theme in Galatians as a clue. There, Paul says, “I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live, but not I, but Christ lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh, I live by the faithfulness of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” (Galatians 2:20)

In the Galatians passage, Paul was referring to Peter drawing away from table fellowship with the gentiles because they weren't circumcised, according to the law. Paul spoke of his being crucified with Christ in the context of his refusal to separate from believers based upon racial or social heritage. The question in Galatians was the same as we see in the overall discussion of Romans: Would Peter, and the Jewish community, be continuing in sin by eating with the uncircumcised?

Paul's answer was no. When Christ died, he delivered us from the law which kept us in slavery. The law bound us to a slavery of hostility towards others, blaming and punishing others for their poverty, sin or race, rather than restoring them. If we live in the grace of Christ, this law will no longer have dominion over our relationships. (Romans 6:14)

This was the sense in which Paul said he was crucified with Christ. This former bondage to the law of judgment in his heart towards others was now dead and buried in Christ. Since Jesus forgave us in his death, he took away the law that divided us, the law by which we justify our separation and lack of care towards others. If we live by the law to condemn others, then that law condemns us as well. Jesus died to take

that wall of division away, and to join us into one healing people, accepting each other, as God in Christ has accepted us.

So then, Paul continued, if the law has been taken away, do we live for ourselves, to please ourselves? No, we do not. Paul said, "Christ lives in me." Christ is carrying out his will and purposes in my life. And Paul said, "The life I now live, I live by the faithfulness of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." This isn't a privatised faith. It is a life of faithfulness towards our neighbour. Christ replaced the law of division, of judgement, with a new life of loving faithfulness towards one another, as exemplified by his cross. "I live by the same principles as Christ did, when he loved me and gave himself for me. This is how I now live towards others, instead of accusing them to justify myself."

And when Paul said this, he was speaking on the behalf of the whole Jewish community, to show how Christ had delivered them from a slavery of bondage in the law, which was really a slavery of bondage to the self. When Paul said, "I am crucified with Christ," he was speaking on the behalf of Peter and their whole nation. All the Jews were called to follow Christ into this service of the world, rather than condemn it. This was their baptism into deliverance.

So, in coming back to Romans 6, we see that if the community of Rome was to go on using the law as a basis for their division, then they were really living for self, continuing in sin, rebuilding what Christ had destroyed in his death, going back to Egypt and denying their baptism. This was slavery to self. But if they realised they had been bought with a price, redeemed from self-love through the love of Christ, and that

their lives were no longer their own, then they would live to love God, by living to restore their neighbour. (1 Corinthians 6:20) This “new slavery to righteousness” would actually be freedom. Living for others builds freedom into our personal lives and into our community. This is the true Exodus.

The morality Paul is speaking about in Romans 6 is both the morality of receiving and restoring others to build community, rather than serving the self, and also things like sexual morality. These are really the same morality. They both either build or destroy community. There is one way to freedom, or to slavery. If we say no to self, it won't have dominion over us. In Paul's day, this was true for Israel as a nation, giving up their power and wealth to serve, and true for all the individuals from Jewish and gentile backgrounds, coming together in Christ to form a new serving people.

Personal sin and social sin are really the same thing. In Galatians, Paul uses baptism to speak of denying self to form one table. In Corinthians, he uses baptism to speak of denying self, so as not to destroy community through selfish desires. There isn't a separation between personal and social holiness. As Jesus delivered us from the law, he delivered us from the dominion of sin in all its areas. We embrace the law to justify and live for self. When we live by grace, love is our purpose. Dying to the law, that is, being forgiven by Christ when people put him to death, frees all humanity from the drive of the law within, from the dominion of the self-life.

The wages of going on living for self are death. It is the principle that destroys everything. There is no eternal life in

self-love, so if we are committed to ourselves we will die. But the love of God towards others sustains eternal community.

### **3.3 TAKING AWAY THE LAW - ROMANS 7**

In Romans 7, Paul begins his description of how Israel's fall brought salvation to the world. This theme continues to develop through to chapter 11. Romans 7 is a follow on from Romans 5:20, where Paul said, "Now the law came in to increase the trespass." The purpose of this, in Romans 5, was to deal with the sin of Adam, to begin the process whereby Israel would heal humanity's priesthood over the creation.

Paul speaks of the bondage that the law produces, where he uses normal human experience to portray Israel's plight after they received the law at Mount Sinai. In Romans 5, Paul said that before the law came, sin was not imputed. This means that sin was not known: sin wasn't as clearly revealed to the human conscience. Paul repeats this in Romans 7 and added that when the law came it brought with it the knowledge of sin. It wasn't that God put man under law, as something that God wanted or originated. Man chose law for self-justification, but then God used the law to bring both sin and salvation to public light.

The modern reader may think it unusual that Paul used the first person in Romans 7 to describe Israel's plight under the law. When we acknowledge the text as Israel's story fulfilled in

Christ, this personification by Paul standing in for the Jews is expected. A modern exegesis doesn't immediately see this because it reads outside Paul's Second Temple period story line. In Lamentations, Jeremiah uses this poetic first person very strongly, when identifying himself with Israel's fall. Paul was writing in this same tradition. When you consider the narrative of Romans as a whole, about Israel's fall bringing the good news to the world, then reading Romans 7 as an explanation of Israel's fall reads entirely naturally.

Paul explained that the knowledge of sin that came through the law, surprisingly made sin more powerful. (Romans 7:8-11, see also 1 Corinthians 15:56) The knowledge of the law brought Israel into death, by which Paul meant guilt and self-condemnation. This gives the human an inner sense of alienation from God and from others and leaves us with a sense of emptiness.

This is the deception of sin, that Paul spoke of. Sin doesn't really alienate us from the love of God. Sin, which becomes pride, gives us this perception of our alienation. We then try to fill our emptiness with all kinds of desires and the self becomes our focus. Paul described a guilt driven religion, in which Israel was filled with enmity towards God and towards others. We see this in Romans 2, with Israel's judgementalism of those around them. This eventually drove them to crucify Christ, and as we see later in Romans, this is how Paul explained that the world was saved through the fall of Israel.

Paul claimed, "For I do not understand my own actions." (Romans 7:15) The work of the law driving Israel to greater sin was more a subconscious one. Israel didn't often possess a

conscious awareness and struggle against daily sin. They didn't have a conscious sense of guilt that they were looking for freedom from, like we often speak of in our churches today. When we see the preaching of Jesus to Israel in the Gospels, we see the stubbornness and inability of Israel in recognising their sinfulness. Paul was referring to something going on inside Israel that was hidden, which brought about the breakup of their communities, that filled their land with destruction.

Paul again described the process by which our sin used the law to deceive us. When we hear the law, we recognise that it is good. We have a desire to be righteous, just like we have a desire to emulate or acquire any other thing we see as good. But then our sin deceives us. We could say sin here is the desire to maintain self-rule. This takes over and tells us that God won't accept us because we have broken the law. So, we are then left with no choice but to try to establish our own freedom, with all kinds of inhospitable acts towards others.

This happens even more when the law comes, because we perceive in the law a greater threat against ourselves. This was the subconscious way that the law worked in Israel, hidden by their pride. Instead of seeing their sin, they believed they had a special status with God as custodians of his law. This is the reason religious people can be worse in their end than they were in their beginning. Paul claimed he was perfect under the law and yet he was a killer. (Philippians 3:6) The Pharisee in the temple thanked God for his righteousness. (Luke 18:11) They had succeeded to cover over their sin.

Sometimes we say that Paul wrote Romans to help the struggling conscience of the individual, and that he was speaking of faith for this reason. This is because our churches have a lot of people in them who struggle with their conscience. But this wasn't really the case in Paul's day. Sin was publicly indulged in as normal. It was easily justified in those cultures. Israel wasn't struggling with their conscience. They were proud. (Romans 2:17-21) Paul wasn't speaking about faith and law from our point of view today, but rather from his own point of view: building a united family from divergent backgrounds. Law hindered this unity, faithfulness in love fulfilled it.

So then, what did Paul mean by saying the law came, "in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure?" (Romans 7:13) Did the law reveal Israel's sin and prepare them for faith? Well, kind of, but not really. It revealed sin on a shallow level. The law pointed out their sin, but the deception of their sin was able to cover itself and go on unnoticed. Israel largely went on with no genuine admission of sin. They rather used the law to point out the sin of others.

One of Paul's purposes in Romans was to point out how sin was revealed. In Romans 1:17-18, he said sin was revealed by the gospel. The word in Greek is ***apokaluptó***, which means to unveil something that was hidden by the flesh. Paul said the gospel unveiled both the faithfulness of God and also his wrath against sin. This means the gospel exposed human sin, and the contrasted righteousness of Christ judged sin in his own life for what it truly is. It is what Paul said in Romans 8,

Christ condemned sin in the flesh, by exposing it, making it naked and visible to the world on the cross. (Romans 8:3, Colossians 2:15)

This is what God used Israel to do, and this was a major way in which their election was fulfilled. And the law was an important part in this process. As Paul explained in Romans 5-7, the law drove Israel into deeper sin, in which they finally revealed their enmity against God by crucifying Christ. In doing this, Israel revealed the righteousness of God and the love of God all in one act of the cross. Israel revealed the sin of humanity to the world. They also revealed the faithfulness and love of God to the world. As Paul went on to express in Romans 9-11, the fall of Israel led to the salvation of the world. This is the process that Paul begins to describe in Romans 5-7. The law helped evil to be revealed and then also defeated on the cross.

Let's get back to Paul's main point in this wider section of scripture. We see it again in Romans 5:20-21, "Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." It was the exchange of the reign of the law in the old Adam, with the reign of grace within the new global community. And the eternal life Paul has in view is something we will look at in the following chapters. Paul uses *return from exile* language from Isaiah to show that eternal life is a renewed cosmos, creation and community.

Paul continues speaking about this through Romans 6 & 7. The reign of law is put to death in the body of Christ, meaning through his blood, his death. If we are baptised into Christ, we receive God's forgiveness through Christ when he died, which means the law no longer has condemning power over our conscience. It is forgiven by the love of Christ on the cross. And this also means the law no longer has a separating and destroying influence in our relationships. We are no longer judging others by the law, but rather seeking to restore, as God is restoring us. It doesn't mean that sin is no longer important, but just that the church adopts Christ's approach to healing one another.

“But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code.” (Romans 7:6) So instead of relating to others through the law, we are now called to serve in a new way in the Spirit. When Paul speaks of the Spirit, he means the unity of the church. He is referring to Abraham's one family, which is brought together into one by the Spirit, not by the law, not by the flesh. When Paul uses the terms “grace,” or “Spirit,” he is referring to our one table in Christ, meaning a call to serve others, rather than to use the law to foster our own personal or splinter group interests.

When Paul refers to the Spirit, he is referring to the Spirit's ministry through the book of Acts, where the Spirit was including all people and nations into the one family of God. The tongues in the book of Acts were the sign, the receiving of

all others from diverse backgrounds, without the law, was the message. This was the Spirit's work, building the one church.

We see the similar discussion in Galatians 5. There, Paul speaks of the works of the flesh, "doing that which we do not desire to do," in a similar way as he speaks of them in Romans 7. In Galatians, the topic is the same: a serving life towards the whole body, Jewish and gentile believers, rather than serving the interest of the self or our splinter groups. The freedom of Galatians 5 isn't a personalised freedom in faith, but a freedom to serve each other, not hindered by separations justified by the law. This brings forth the "hope of righteousness" that the Prophets spoke of: a renewed world through renewed relationships. "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love." (Galatians 5:6)

As we trace Paul through Romans we see what he is getting at by describing the way in which Israel brought salvation to the world through their fall. It wasn't through their pride that Israel brought about this salvation, but through their humility in their fall. This is what Paul is getting at throughout his letter: destroying our boasting against one another, so we will receive and serve each other simply by faith. In the same way, Paul later says, the gentiles "who were not a people, but now are the people of God," should not boast against the Jews. (Romans 11:18) It was the Jew's fall and suffering that brought salvation to us. We owe them a debt of gratitude, compassion and service, just as they served us. Election isn't a "special privilege," but a call to suffer, just as Jesus suffered. Now we

are also elect, we are called to suffer for others. This is God's image of love to the world.

The overall theme of Paul in Romans, and the way this theme works out in Romans 7, is very clear: Paul is calling Jews and gentiles to serve one other in love, because being baptised into Christ means the law is no longer a driving force of disunity among us.

### **3.4 THE PROMISED LAND – ROMANS 8**

The new creation themes build up through Romans. The creation is destroyed by the idolatrous image bearing of humanity. In Romans 4, Abraham is heir of a restored creation. These themes build through to Romans 11, where Paul speaks of our salvation in terms of Isaiah's prophecies of Israel being restored from their exile. Isaiah depicts a new land, flourishing with restored community. This is what Paul begins to write about in more detail here in Romans 8.

We have often taken Romans 8 to be a celebration of our final personal and spiritual salvation, maybe in heaven. Statements like, "Whom God called he justified and whom he justified he glorified," are assumed to be about this heavenly salvation. (Romans 8:30) Glorification here is about Adam's restoration to priesthood, to rule the creation in the image of God. (Psalm 8) It isn't saying that the saved people go to heaven. It is resurrection language. Paul speaks of believers ultimately in

bodily resurrection, ruling over God's creation as God intended in the beginning.

I think part of the reason why the church deviated from this biblical perspective over the years is because of its anti-Jewish position which grew over time. There was a rejection of earthly themes as Jewish ideas, so the whole gospel had to be largely spiritualised. This has been compensated for in recent years with Zionism, the idea of a Jewish kingdom being rebuilt in the land of Israel. So instead of being biased against the Jews, we are now biased against the Palestinians. This isn't the biblical vision either. God's kingdom doesn't come by military or political coercion, neither is it racial. It comes according to the community teachings of Jesus Christ in the Gospels.

It's vital that we understand Romans 8 in terms of Paul's own situation, in describing why Israel fell and what the remedy for their fall is in the Messiah. Their fall was shown by the exile to Babylon, after their nation broke down in idolatry, which was basically self-centred living. Instead of serving the lowest in the nation and serving their neighbours, covetousness broke up their relationships, bringing war and destruction to their land. This is the kind of trouble Paul traced in the previous chapter on the law in Romans 7. If Israel's fall is going to be reversed, and if they are going to fulfil their call to renew the creation, this basic issue of their self-idolatry, their covetousness and their relationships with those around them must be healed. This is the problem and the salvation that Paul sees resolved in the Messiah in Romans 8.

So, when Paul speaks of a salvation in Romans 8, this is what he has in mind. Not a personalised, merely spiritual salvation, but a renewed community, through change in our inward hearts. To see this as a merely spiritual salvation is probably the opposite to what Paul intended. Rather than a personal, self-centred salvation, it is a salvation of our life styles towards one another, towards the world in which we live. It is exactly the self-centredness that salvation overthrows in our lives. The gospel doesn't enhance our self-centredness, by giving us a self-focused salvation, but calls us away from such a focus. It is in the service of others, that we and our nations find true freedom.

The first part of Romans 8 reiterates what Paul had been discussing in Romans 6 -7. Because there is no condemnation in Christ, the Holy Spirit brings us together and helps us to live in his love and care for one another. Forgiveness in Christ "sets us free from the law of sin and death," meaning from our captivity under the law, where condemnation brought about increased hostility between us and others. (Romans 8:2)

The law builds pride into our lives. We show we are righteous by condemning others, instead of helping those in the grip of sin. But the forgiveness that is in Christ builds grace and fellowship. The law wasn't able to overcome sin in our relationships, so Christ came to do it for us. On the cross he "condemned sin in the flesh," meaning he revealed the way we behave towards our neighbour. (Romans 8:3) Christ revealed the way we condemn sinners, when we condemned him. When we condemn the woman caught in adultery, or the woman who has had an abortion, our own sin isn't revealed,

because the woman has some fault. But when we turn on Christ and condemn him, he has no fault. So, his cross reveals our sin. It reveals the way we scapegoat the weak to justify ourselves. And by revealing it, it is judged in public as sin. This then exposes the law as a hopeless avenue for righteousness, meaning for restored relationships and community.

Therefore, “the righteous requirement of the law can now be fulfilled” in our lives as we walk in the Spirit. (Romans 8:4) This means walking in forgiveness and grace towards each other, receiving each other, without our former judgments of racism or nationalism. The righteous requirement of the law is met as we share life and restoration with our neighbour, because the Spirit of grace now helps us to receive them. This love shown towards each other in our daily lives is what the law requires. So, faithfulness, which comes to us through Christ, fulfils the law. The mind set on the flesh leads to condemnation, rejection, separation, hostility, but the mind set on the Spirit leads to grace, receiving and restoring others: life and peace. (Romans 8:6)

Our victory over sin is through the Spirit, meaning walking in the love of God towards our neighbour, building a family of love that includes all the tribes. It is forsaking self-centred “Christian nationalist violence,” as Peter and the disciples were summoned by Christ to do, to instead love others in Christ. (John 18:36, Matthew 5:39) If we have the Spirit this is how we walk, in enemy love. But if we walk in hostility towards others, we are the flesh, we are doing it to please and

save ourselves, not for the gospel of Abraham's one family. If we are not followers of Christ, then Christ is not in us.

And our victory over sin includes the resurrection of our body, which in the Hebrew faith is given to the heirs of the covenant, to be raised up for the eternal kingdom of God. (Romans 8:10) "The Spirit raises us up because of righteousness," to fulfil God's promises to the Jewish nation... because of God's righteousness. (Acts 26:6) This means we can love our enemies, because the promises of God take away our fear of death.

"Not being debtors to the flesh," means we have no debt of sin, so we don't have to live in the hostility of condemnation towards others. (Romans 8:12) If we go on living according to the flesh, which means by the dictates of the law, then we will die. (Romans 8:13) We will set our community on fire with sectarianism and factions. This is exactly what Jerusalem was facing when Paul wrote, and what came to pass when Jerusalem fell in AD 70. It was factionalism – refusing the neighbour love that Jesus spoke of - that brought the city down.

So, "the heirs of God, the children of God," are those who walk by the Spirit. (Romans 8:14) This means they walk in restoring relationships towards others, rather than in condemning postures. This aligns Paul with what Jesus taught. He said, the peacemakers are the children of God. (Matthew 5:9) Jesus outlined what this meant through his Sermon on the Mount, where he spoke of reconciling and redeeming actions towards our enemies, building bridges of peace through self-giving forgiveness of others. This is what

Jesus did on the cross. This Spirit-living is building community. This is what it means to be children of God, because we resemble God, who sent Jesus to reconcile us. Those who live this way of God's heirs.

Being God's heirs means we are the Second Adam. We are the ones who, as Jesus said, inherit the earth. (Matthew 5:5) The commission of God to reign over the creation is given to the peacemakers. When Paul points out in Romans 8 that "the heirs are now being revealed," he is saying that God is moving to restore the creation through us. (Romans 8:19) These peacemakers are the fulfilment of God's promises to Abraham. These Christ-image bearers are the ones to fulfil Israel's mission to the world. The only way creation can be restored is if relationships can be restored, and God's image bearers are the ones who live out this witness to the world.

"We have not received the spirit of fear, to fall back into slavery," as those who wanted to go back to Egypt. (Romans 8:15) Paul is narrating Israel's Exodus and entrance into the promised land, showing how that is fulfilled through our new fellowship as one family of God. If we go back to separationism and tribalism, we are going back to a satanic rule of bondage and death. But God is our "Abba Father," meaning, if we acknowledge his other children, that he is the Father of us all. (Romans 8:15) We are heirs if we suffer with Christ, if we join Christ to include our enemies, despite the persecution this brings to us from our own countrymen. This means we will be part of Christ's resurrection.

Likewise, in Philippians 3, Paul was ready to give up his privileges as a Jew, and as a Roman citizen, in order to come

to one table with all of Christ's people. This was the faith Paul was speaking of, not a privatised concern. And it would bring him into the fellowship of Christ's sufferings, who was also persecuted for identifying himself with those rejected. This then is what it means to "know Christ." In Philippians, as in all Paul's letters, he argues for faith, not for the sake of personal salvation, but for the sake of a common, serving fellowship.

Returning to Romans 8, Paul next explains the end of God's plan for salvation, the promises to Israel of a renewed creation. The creation was "subject to vanity," in the fall of man: not in God's anger, but "in hope" of new creation, through a transformed family. (Romans 8:20) This transformed family is the manifestation of the children of God... which means, that by the love that God's new family has for one another, God's covenant faithfulness, his healing righteousness, is revealed to the world.

This sets the creation free from its bondage to corruption, which is its violent covetousness, which is finally broken down by the cross of Christ and the Spirit working in our new hearts. (Romans 8:21) This is "the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus." (Romans 8:2) Breaking this covetousness brings healing to the world, which currently labours under the mismanagement of humanity, the self-centred idolatry of our fallen priesthood. The cross transforms *power to grab for self*, to *power to serve the welfare of the others* and *power to serve the good of the creation*. Instead of storing up investments for ourselves and our group, we distribute to the need of each

other and to other groups. The early church in Acts was the beginning of this world transforming community.

Before Christ appears to the whole world, the church lives out the witness of the coming kingdom of God, the Spirit of life already being revealed through our new hearts and relationships. This love is the visible sacrament, the sign which shows that love shall come and rule all. This final renewal of the world is known by the metaphor of “the Second Coming.” It is literally the appearing of Christ and of heaven’s rule to the entire earth, bringing about its complete transformation into life. Christ doesn’t come from afar, but is already here, just not yet visible to the mortal eye. The word “coming” means “appearing.” The “redemption of our bodies” is the resurrection of our bodies when Christ appears.

(Romans 8:23) We are raised up to reign upon the earth, a combined new-heaven and new-earth holistic creation, the fulfilment of Adam and Eve’s commission, as God promised to Israel.

These concepts of resurrection, new bodies, the curse of death removed from the earth, the appearance of heaven to and upon the earth, transformed nations, are all Hebrew concepts of salvation. The purpose of the church is to move the world towards this, to be God’s temple, his conduit, through which heaven rules, through which God’s kingdom flows into this world, making all things new. This is what the scriptures mean by salvation. When Paul said in Romans 10:9, that whoever believes in Christ shall be saved, he meant that God’s Spirit of life puts us onto this road of transformation. If you are being transformed into the image and likeness of Christ, then God’s

faithfulness is being seen in you. This shows you are saved, and also are being saved.

Before then, “the Spirit now helps us in our weakness.” (Romans 8:26) This is mainly to do with persecution, to which Paul alluded early on in Romans 5. This persecution becomes a major feature of Romans 8. It is a major aspect of what it means to be a child of God, just like Jesus was persecuted. That is, the transformation of the world, isn’t some supernatural event that just falls out of heaven in an instant. This changing of the world from its bondage to corruption, to its glorious deliverance, happens through a *Sermon on the Mount kind of church*, revealing the light to darkness. It happens in the midst of conflict, and to this conflict we reveal the forgiveness and the love of God that Jesus revealed on the cross. We are called to forgive our enemies, just like Jesus did and by this bring reconciling relationships out of the darkness.

This is what the Spirit helps us with. Our weakness is that naturally speaking we cannot love our enemies. But the Spirit renews our hearts with grace and enables us to do this with heavenly help. When we pray and ask for this help to forgive others, the Spirit begins to help our heart to love the ugly and the unlovely: the poor, the sick, the ones the world cast out as useless, and dangerous to our lives. God enables us to serve. This is truly helping our weakness. This is how the early church renewed the Roman empire and it’s how the church renews our violent world today.

And in this process of helping us, “the Spirit is conforming us into Christ’s image,” who loved and forgave his enemies. (Romans 8:29) The Spirit intercedes for us, meaning he helps

us to hit the mark of Christ's image. (Romans 8:26) This is the opposite to our former sin. He restores humanity's image-bearing priesthood to the creation, for the creation's deliverance, to deliver creation from pagan covetousness, through the self-giving image of its Creator. The Spirit through the church delivers humanity from its mutual destructive violence, by making our enemies our brothers and sisters through the cross, through one mutual redemption of grace, leading us from punitive to restorative justice within our wider relationships. The resurrection is the complete act of restoring our image bearing to this world, which is termed the *glorification*. (Romans 8:30)

“Since God has redeemed us through his Son, the world can bring no charge against us,” nor can they take anything from us. (Romans 8:33) The world is ours. (1 Corinthians 3:22) “No power on earth or over earth can separate us from the love of God.” (Romans 8:35) This shows that the transforming lives of the children of God, in delivering the creation from its corruption, will be contested by the ruling powers, which don't like to give up their possessions. This would have included the rulers of Jerusalem in Paul's day. These are the powers that profit from our divisions and they resist God's rule over a family that shares its lives and possession with the weak, the sick and the rejected nations.

The principle of Christ is that it is through dying that we give life to the world. Paul died every day, “that others may live.” (2 Corinthians 4:11) A Christianity where we seek our own wellbeing is just another religion, where we try to placate God to enhance our own lives. Christ has a family who restores the

world by laying down their lives for it. They are “counted as sheep for the world to slaughter,” but in slaughtering the church, the world comes to see who the true God is and is transformed. (Romans 8:36) It is not through power that the world is changed, but through meek service. Power corrupts, service transforms us all.

Romans 8 sets out the plan for Christ’s image bearers. Christ gave his life so that others may live. This is the life or way of the Spirit. The life of the flesh is saving our own life, building the separatism that existed in the Jewish and Romans worlds. Instead of building separatism, we draw others together to serve. This is the life of Christ, what Jesus did for us by laying down his own life. Giving of ourselves to serve the weak is the very thing that restores our communities.

Condemning sin in the flesh of Christ, in his exposing our sin and forgiving it on the cross, set the kingdom of God loose in our hearts by the Holy Spirit, to form a new world transforming family, in which people are received, served and restored, rather than condemned, isolated and destroyed. It releases into the world a people passionate for restorative mercy, the healing atoning power that the world has lacked ever since Cain and Lamech launched their false way of “atonement” through vengeance, alienation and bloodshed.

Paul’s purpose so far, in Romans chapters 1-8, is to bring Jews and gentiles together into one common purpose in Christ: the purpose of bringing the kingdom of God, the self-giving witness of God, into our nations. It’s that simple. Complicating the doctrines of Romans to the point that we miss Paul’s central purpose, aborts our whole simple mission.

This also usually leads us into arguments that divide us and then overthrow Paul's purpose altogether. Our discipleship which renews the world isn't dividing in our doctrines but emulating the life of Christ together.

A summary of Romans 5:12 – 8... The overthrow of the law in the body and death of Christ brings about a renewed fellowship of grace between the world's diverse peoples, restoring the earth.

# 4

## ELECTION, FALL, RESTORATION

### ROMANS 9-11

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Romans 5:12 – 8 traced Israel history from the Exodus to Mount Sinai and into the promised land. Paul picked up on Israel’s conscious understanding that the Torah had come to Israel for them to restore the Adamic commission over the creation. But Israel thought this would happen by them enforcing the Torah on the uncircumcised, as Paul was doing before he met Christ, and as some Jews were trying to do in all the churches Paul had planted. But Paul showed in Romans 5:12 – 8 that the role of the Torah was opposite to expected. The Torah’s role was to bring Israel to their fall, so that in that fall the Messiah would be revealed to the world. This alone

could nip in the bud the self-power desire of the Adamic race. We are saved by the weakness of the cross. We are saved by the turning of power upside down. This is what Paul said he wasn't ashamed of. (Romans 1:16)

In Romans 9 -11, Paul goes back to Israel's beginning and starts telling their story again. It is still told in the *Adam-to-Christ* history, but this time Paul begins with Israel's election in Abraham's children. To the Hebrew reader, the story is very plain. Paul was speaking about the election of Adam in his commission to rule the world, being given to Israel in their election, for the purposes of reinstating God's kingdom in the world. The "Greek reader" doesn't pick up this story line, but to the Jew in Paul's day, this story was being told everywhere Jews met together in synagogues, or in the desert places where the Essenes lived. Paul just told the story through Jesus Christ. Jesus was Israel's fulfilment of their story.

In Romans 9 – 11, Paul tells the story of Israel's election, their hardening and their restoration in the resurrection of Christ. It is a similar story to the one Paul told in Romans 5:12 -8. Paul begins with Isaac and Jacob, shares about Israel's Exodus, but in this second story, Paul's emphasis is not so much on Sinai and Israel entering the promised land, but rather on Israel's later exile from the land and then their return to Jerusalem. Paul shows how Christ fulfilled Israel's exile and return history, through his own crucifixion and resurrection. That is, in Christ, Israel have their true return to God's land.

The purpose of Paul in tracing Israel's election, to their fall and then to their restoration, was to show that this was how

Israel fulfilled their calling to restore Adam. Adam was likewise elected, or chosen to rule the world, but he fell. So, Israel's election, fall and restoration are the means by which God restored Adam's fall and original election. It was by Israel, on the cross, that God dealt with Adam's sin. By dealing with Adam's sin, Adam's image-bearing priesthood is restored. This traces Paul's story right from Romans 1 through to Romans 11. By restoring Adam's original commission, God restores the world. The purpose of Israel's original election has therefore been fulfilled in the gospel of Christ.

And what was Paul's purpose in sharing this story to the Roman church? Paul's point: gentile believers should not boast against Israel's fall, but join one community in Christ to restore the world through emulating Christ's faithfulness towards each other. Adam was not faithful. Israel was not faithful. But Christ was faithful and so he restored Israel, and this restored Adam, which includes the gentiles. Having destroyed the rule of the law in our hearts, we can now enter Christ's faithfulness through grace and extend this gift by the giving of our own lives for one another, just as Christ did for us. This is faith-fulness. This fulfils the law. This heals the creation.

## **4.1 ELECTION & FALL - ROMANS 9**

It is in this context of the Jews and gentiles receiving each other through grace, that Paul takes up the discussion on

election. He is showing that God receives us on the basis of a free gift alone, and not on our racial heritage, and so the Jews and the gentiles have no basis to reject one another. As said earlier, we receive the grace of God, by receiving our neighbour.

Adam's election is assumed here as background knowledge among the Jews. Adam and Eve did nothing to earn their election. All they had was a gift in creation. They had done nothing for it. God called Israel on the same basis. They were slaves in Egypt. They were despised by the world, the least of all people. They had done nothing to earn God's grace.

So it was with Israel's original election. Isaac had done nothing but received his calling as a gift. It was the same with Jacob. (Romans 9:9-13) Pharaoh, on the other hand, boasted in his accomplishments and rejected or enslaved those he felt were inferior to himself. (Romans 9:17)

This is exactly what Paul said the Jews were thinking. Many believed that because of their tribal descent, they were superior to the gentiles. In holding to this belief, their hearts were becoming hardened, just like Pharaoh's heart was hardened. Here it says that God hardens whom he wills, and he also gives grace to whom he wills. (Romans 9:18) This means that if people choose to reject God's mercy and instead hold to their own pride, God will allow them to continue on their chosen path of destroying one another. But if they desire mercy, by showing mercy to others, God will always give them mercy.

The illustration here is that Israel, according to the flesh, have become Pharaoh. This means Israel trusted in their flesh and didn't show mercy to gentile believers in Christ. They had become hardened, just like Pharaoh. (Romans 9:22-26) Here, Paul brings out God's plan of salvation again. Just as through Pharaoh's hardening, Israel were saved from Egypt, so too it was through Israel's hardening that Christ was crucified and the true God was revealed to the world. This is what Paul was showing through Romans 5:12 -8.

So, Paul's discussion on election wasn't to show that God randomly chooses some to salvation while rejecting others, but to show that the basis upon which we receive God's mercy is by showing mercy to others. If we reject our neighbour and our enemy, or those of other tribes, then we are producing a hostility in our land, a hardness in our heart and in relationships with others, that will ultimately destroy us, just like it was about to destroy Jerusalem at the time Paul was writing. The way to be saved from that destruction, and to build a land of peace that inherits God's blessings, is through receiving and passing on God's mercy to restore others.

If we use Paul's discussion on election to enhance our superiority over others today, then we are falling into the same error as many of the Jews did then, who boasted in their own flesh. The text isn't saying that God hasn't chosen Ishmael. Ishmael's mother, Hagar, experienced a theophany. God appeared to her in the flesh. God chose her for the same reason he chose Sarah, because she was despised for her weakness and rejected and gossiped about by others. God chooses on the basis of compassion and he chooses us because

we are weak, so we might be like him and have compassion on others who are crippled by sin and life. If we despise our enemies today, then God chooses them.

Israel's election wasn't to an exclusive salvation, but to serve others. If they didn't believe their own witness, which was a call to the world to serve others in grace, then they wouldn't be saved. They were called to witness, but they had to believe their witness to partake in its blessings. There is a great grace privilege in having Israel's call to witness for the one true God, but there was no partiality in it. (Romans 9:1-5) They were called to serve the least, and if they didn't do this, their calling would be null and void, at least for those among them who rejected it. They would cancel themselves out, by cancelling grace out of their own hearts. They would reject the one thing that could heal and set them free.

Romans chapter 9 isn't a discussion about God saving some by election, but rather it is about God calling us to show grace to others, as God has shown grace to every one of us. Taking this text as a way of assuring ourselves we have salvation when others do not, is the problem Paul was addressing in the letter of Romans: the inclination of humanity to twist the law to our own advantage, so we don't have to serve the plight of the poor.

Although the pot has no right of appeal over the Potter, this does not mean God has been unrighteous. (Romans 9:21) He has determined that we reap what we sow. If we sow mercy we reap mercy. The pot has no right of appeal concerning this. Then Paul shows how God has revealed his salvation through Israel's hardening. He showed patience to their hardness in

order to reveal his mercy through their execution of Christ. (Romans 9:23) This mercy was revealed for the benefit of all, Jew and gentile. (Romans 9:24)

The gentiles become righteous by receiving the mercy of God and passing that mercy onto others. This achieved righteousness, meaning this love they received and shared, fulfilled the *shema* law of God. But Israel, in attempting to fulfil the law in their pride, fell short of that law by rejecting, rather than serving those in need. (Romans 9:30-31) This is also the basic commentary of Jesus that we see in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

The “stumbling stone” means the poor and weak one that they killed, the Messiah... and therefore the weak, despised, the scapegoat becomes the foundation stone of God’s new kingdom in the earth. (Romans 9:33) Their pride, stirred up by the law, made them ashamed on the carpenter, but Paul was not ashamed that accepting such is the foundation stone of eternal life. In receiving and caring for the weak and poor, the gentile and stranger, believers are now fulfilling the law.

“Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.” (Romans 9:33) This is called the “scandal of the victim.” “We preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews...” (NIV) “When we preach that Christ was crucified, the Jews are offended...” (NLT) (1 Corinthians 1:23)

To those under the law, the victim, the sick one is seen as cursed. They are rejected as a scapegoat, “to satisfy God’s wrath.” But to the one who walks in *shema*, the cursed one is

taken in for care and nurture. Those under the law fail to fulfil the law. Those free from the law, free from its condemning power, receive and care for others. This is what Jesus came to do: to overthrow the law that leads to accusation, the casting out of the needy one. He came so that we might bring in the sick, the other tribe, the enemy, and heal them.

This is exactly how Jesus taught faith. He told the Pharisees not to reject the sick on the sabbath, or the person with unwashed hands from their table. He wasn't arguing about faith verses legalism, to get to heaven. He was saying they had used the law to prevent the law's real purpose: service. This service is what answers the prayer, "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven." This is what faithfulness is about. "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive the sins of others." We receive mercy as we show mercy to those in need. This renews our land.

To turn these passages into some discussion of Paul on our private faith, overthrows the meaning of the whole text. To take "faith" out of Paul's context and apply it just to our own salvation, makes it mean something completely different to what Paul was speaking about. And to understand what Paul was saying in his letters, makes his teachings align exactly with Jesus' teachings. They were both teaching about the faithfulness of neighbour love.

But we have also privatised the teachings of Jesus. Jesus taught that whoever believes in him, out of their belly shall flow rivers of life, which is the Spirit of God who fills our new hearts through faith. Jesus taught he is the bread of life. We

have taken these as affirmations of a private faith for everyone who believes.

But the river of life and the bread of life are that which we share with one another, and this sharing makes all things new. This was never meant to be understood in a non-community sense. It's always the faith of faithfulness, which the Spirit of grace brings into our lives. If "the work of God is to believe on him whom God has sent," then this belief brings us into a grace of rebuilding our communities that law could not do. (John 6:29)

If we have a privatised faith, then our faith isn't much different to that of the Pharisees. It was their privatisation of the faith that was the number one critique of Jesus. If we have just changed the language a bit, moved a few commas, Christianised the wording, then nothing much has changed.

## **4.2 RETURN FROM EXCILE - ROMANS 10**

"For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes." (Romans 10:3-4)

The Pharisees were ignorant of God's plan for fulfilling his promises, about how God was going to overcome Adam's sin and renew the world. So, they went about trying to complete

this plan themselves, by enforcing the law on those around them. They did not submit themselves to God's plan, by taking in their neighbours as a community to restore. They did not know anything about this plan of God, even though this neighbour-care was "witnessed to, all through the Torah and the Prophets." (Romans 3:21)

The "righteousness" spoken of here is the Hebrew *chesed*, covenant-faithfulness love. This comes through Jesus Christ. It is by Jesus Christ that this love is revealed, received and passed on to those around us. This cycle of love fulfils the righteous plan of God. Because our sin takes the law, and passes it on to others, as condemnation, it cannot produce the *chesed* of God in our communities. But the faithfulness and love of Christ can do this in our hearts and in our relationships, producing the righteousness, that is, the *shema* love that the law speaks of.

Paul now launches into Israel's return from exile language. Therefore, to understand Romans 10, we must read it as Israel's return from exile, and by what that narrative meant in their Prophets. Israel's restoration isn't some future end-times event, as speculative end- times scenarios we often hear today claim, but Israel was restored in Paul's day, through the resurrection of Christ. This is what Paul is explaining in Romans 10 -11.

First, we see the reason for the exile. Because of pride, we are not able to keep the law. Instead we use the law to justify ourselves and condemn others. Covetousness then replaces service. This hostility eventually broke down Israel's whole community and led them into captivity to Babylon.

So, Jesus comes into our exile. In being taken outside the camp (land) and being crucified, Jesus identified with Israel in their exile: he mirrored their sin and exile upon the cross, revealing Israel's true condition, and there on the cross he forgave them. (Hebrews 13:12-13) So, on the cross Christ gathers us all back to himself, and back to the good land. He reveals our exile and why we are in that condition, by our rejection and violence we visit upon each other in the name of "holiness," and then he leads us out of that hatred, to genuine brother and sisterhood.

Paul quotes Deuteronomy 30, which is a return from exile passage. There, Moses said that God would circumcise Israel's hearts, enabling them to fulfil *shema*. If it wasn't for our sin, *shema* would not be a complex thing. We wouldn't have to "search in heaven or in the deep oceans" to find God's love and pass it onto others. (Romans 10:6-7) Once our pride is exposed and forgiven by the cross, living out the real purpose of the law becomes natural, by the Spirit of grace that now leads us.

"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. And the Lord your God will put all these curses on your foes and enemies who persecuted you." (Deuteronomy 30:6-7)

These enemies were initially the believing Jews' own countrymen, the Jews who rejected the gentile conversions, as in Paul's time. Their curse was their own sin, not something that God did to them. We see that life to us and to our land

comes from obedience to the *shema*, from actual works of faithfulness, which come from the new heart in the gospel.

“If we confess Jesus as Lord and believe in our heart he is raised from the dead, we shall be saved.” (Romans 10:9) This isn’t a legal formula for “salvation,” but it describes a transforming life. To confess Jesus Christ as Lord means to love our neighbour, as he commanded. To believe he is raised means we accept God’s love as our return from exile. The resurrection means our exile has been lifted. We are now brought back to the good land. If we believe this, we then follow Christ into new community.

“For with the heart one believes and is justified...” (Romans 10:10) What Paul meant by saying this, was that this justification has nothing to do with our racial identity, or religious traditions. Again, not that Paul was against Jewish traditions, but only against them limiting *shema* expressed to others. This is the same thing Jesus rejected about their legalism. Paul himself followed these traditions. There is nothing wrong with religious traditions, just because they may seem strange to us. The same applies to our various traditions today.

And this is how the *shema* works: “For the Scripture says, everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame. For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” (Romans 10:11-13) Now that the pride of the law has gone, we fulfil the law by joining with all God’s children. Here, Paul quotes Joel, who looked forward to Paul’s day, when Jews and

gentiles would become one united family, through the word/command of faith-fulness: “the word of faith-fulness which we preach.” (Romans 10:8)

“As it is written, how beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!” (Romans 10:15) This is a quote from Isaiah’s return from exile narrative. Such narrative fills much of Isaiah’s prophecy, depicting a good land, overtaken by *shema*. The new community is described by a wolf and a lamb eating straw together, people beating their swords into ploughs and replacing violence with mercy. That is, the conditions of enmity that led Israel into exile in Babylon, have now been overcome and the land is filled with reconciliation between the tribes, which brings about peace. Because the cross brings us to accept the Lordship of Christ, our inner heart has changed.

“How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, Your God reigns.” (Isaiah 52:7)

This is the good news. Not our individualised salvation, but the renewal of our land. Israel’s land is healed: “Peace on earth and good will toward men.” (Luke 2:14) God’s good will towards us becomes our goodwill towards others. The Lordship of Christ banishes our pride, where the rich serve the poor, “He has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate.” (Luke 1:52) Our hearts are taken over by goodwill towards others: parents and children caring for each other, “capitalists and workers” serving each other, people sharing their goods with strangers

in need. (Luke 3:10-14, Malachi 4:6) The gospel Paul preached is the same gospel we see in Luke.

This is the gospel. Not our privatised salvation, but the renewal of our hearts, which renews our communities. The good news is, “Your God reigns.” He has returned us from exile, by reigning in our hearts, turning us from our self-interest to our neighbour. He has healed our land and our nations. This was the good news Isaiah was speaking about and that Paul was showing fulfilled in Christ’s new community. If someone asks if I am taking away personal salvation, then the answer is that I am not. This is how personal salvation is actualised: “by losing our life, we gain it.” There is no difference between Paul’s message of faith and Jesus’ message of faith: service.

“So then, faith-fullness comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.” (Romans 10:17) Hearing the word of Christ’s faithfulness on the cross, brings God’s faithfulness to our own heart, a faithfulness which we then pass onto our neighbour. This is again an appeal to the *shema*, “Hear O Israel, the Lord your God is one Lord, and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart.” (Deuteronomy 6:4-5) And “you shall love your neighbour as yourself.” (Leviticus 19:18) Moses said this would be fulfilled in Israel’s return from exile. (Deuteronomy 30 :6)

This is what *shema* literary means, “hear and do,” and this brings us back to what Moses said, “The person who does the commandments will live by them.” (Romans 10:5, Leviticus 18:5) Our land lives, experiences life and peace, as the law is fulfilled in us. The *shema* was central to Hebrew faith. Paul

prayed the *shema* many times a day, and saw its fulfilment, not in forcing circumcision on others, but in receiving the foreigner in faith-fulness. Paul said accepting others as one in Christ, to build one family of care, is our return from exile.

Hearing the good news of Jesus Christ results in the *shema* being fulfilled in our lives. Hearing the good news that Christ freely justified us all, not based on our race or traditions, enables us to properly hear and obey what *shema* means. Now in Christ, we truly hear the message and understand its intention of love towards others. Before, we limited that love to those we didn't condemn by the law, to those within our group. Now, that love extends to strangers and even to our enemies. The Spirit enables us to hear, because the cross brings us into his grace.

Now Paul starts explaining how the restoration of Israel takes place. "But I ask, did Israel not understand? First Moses says, I will make you jealous of those who are not a nation; with a foolish nation I will make you angry." (Romans 10:19) The fall of Israel led to the ingathering of the gentiles to Christ. The faithfulness of the gentiles, in their love for the Jews, provokes the Jews to repentance and faith-fulness.

Firstly, we see the remarkable nature of God. Instead of rejecting Israel in their hardening and fall, he uses that fall to save the gentiles and to provoke the Jews to faith. God turns the evil of others to good use. Secondly, and Paul speaks of this again in Romans 11, it is through humility that the body of Christ becomes one in faith-fulness. First, the Jew's humility in their fall and second, the gentile's humility in their love for the Jews. But this humility is something the gentile believers

over the centuries haven't often achieved. We have often misread our faith, so as not to read it as faith-fulness, but as private fortune.

Paul was removing the boast of all peoples, in his area of concern, regarding both the Jews and the gentiles. The gentiles, "who were not a people," but now are a people by grace alone, serve the Jews, who brought salvation to the world through their fall. Here is a community of grace, without boasting, reflecting the love of Christ for each other's restoration. This is the kind of faith Paul was speaking about in Romans 10, rather than outlining a gospel of privatised salvation.

### **4.3 RESTORATION - ROMANS 11**

Paul started his discussion on the non-rejection of Israel by God in the previous chapter, as we have seen above. Here, in Romans 11 that discussion continues. This would be largely for the education of the gentile believers, so they don't think they are greater than the Jews. This pride the Jews had is a human quality, and just as easily replicated now in the gentile believers, since they had received the grace of God in Christ. There is a great danger that they misunderstand that grace, just as the Jews had done.

This happened over many years, that came to be known as replacement theology, the gentiles thinking they had replaced

Israel as God's people, especially after the church took on a more political nature following Constantine. It's the common association of our faith with our nationalist background, really for the cause of assuring our own safety and dominions. The church still hasn't recovered from this today. The church still seeks political alliances for its well-being, at the cost of others who fall outside these alliances. If Paul was saying one thing in Romans, it was about this. We cannot allow our own considerations, least of all political or racial, to define our table of oneness in Christ. But this is just what we do.

So, Paul explains that God includes the Jews as his people. On what basis? On the basis of grace, not on the basis of works. (Romans 11:6) This isn't a discussion on grace from the point of view our "Calvinist" debates, regarding speculation about the nature or source of personal faith. As valid, or interesting as such a discussion might be, it is not Paul's concern in Romans. Paul wasn't writing a theology of personal faith, for us to speculate about in its component parts, but he was writing about a faith-fulness in service towards one another, as seen by God in the cross of Christ.

By "works," Paul first of all here means circumcision. Paul was speaking about the unity of God's people. In passages like Colossians 2:8-15, Paul calls circumcision, and even baptism, "principalities and powers," when they divide God's people into destructive relationships. These powers do this to destroy the creation, that God is renewing. There is nothing wrong with circumcision or baptism in themselves, except when they become divisive.

So, God doesn't justify the Jews on the basis of circumcision. If Paul was saying God hadn't rejected the Jews, to correct gentile pride, he was commenting on circumcision here to correct the same in the Jews. With Abraham, circumcision was a sign of the covenant, while the law existed. This was before Moses, but law still ruled the heart of man, in his vengeful relationships at least. Outward signs of the covenant were necessary until faith came, that is, until love can rule the heart. The sign of the covenant now is love. "By your love, shall all men know you are my disciples." (John 13:35) There is nothing wrong with sacraments in the church today, unless these sacraments become the substance, and not the love of Christ.

"God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that would not see..." (Romans 11:8) This doesn't mean that God closed their hearts actively, or even by his secret decree, but rather he allowed them to have what they wanted. It means that when we reject God's love, this is what becomes of our hearts. This rejection comes about by our own choice. The following verses are very sobering:

"Let their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a retribution for them; let their eyes be darkened so that they cannot see and bend their backs forever." (Romans 11:9-10) This is from the Psalm 69:22. David said this about his enemies. If you read the whole Psalm, it includes verse 21, where they gave vinegar to David to drink, and David cursed them. But on the cross, when they gave Christ vinegar to drink, Christ forgave them and prayed for their salvation.

The point of Paul in Romans is that many Jews had taken these Psalms to be curses against their enemies, especially against the gentiles. But here Paul said their curses upon others had instead come back upon themselves. It was because they would not love and serve their enemies, which really is the central topic of Romans as a whole, that they ended up cursing themselves. Nobody did this to them, not even God. God died on the cross to open their hearts to his love.

This is a warning to us all. The point of Paul in Romans is that gentiles must not do this to the Jews, or indeed to any other groups of people, as we have done and still do.

So, God hasn't rejected Israel in their fall. (Romans 11:11) Rather, their fall ended up being the blessing of the world through the cross. And their fall was thus the way for them to come back, to receive the love of God, shared with them through the church. This way we complete each other. The Jews complete us, and the gentiles complete the Jews. No boasting. Only grace. It's always the case, that when we reject others, we reject our own medicine. This is true no matter how badly the others are painted.

“Now if their fall meant salvation for the world... how much more will their inclusion mean?” (Romans 11:12) This can be understood in various ways. This might be a common “much more” phrase, in usage in that century. “If your fathers can give you good gifts, how much more will your heavenly Father give good gifts?” (Luke 11:13) That is, if we were blessed by the fall of Israel, how much more will we be blessed by their restoration?

That is, salvation doesn't really work out unless we reconcile with one another. It is only in a united church, that the gospel works in renewing the world. If we reject others, the gospel doesn't impact the world at all. The salvation is defunct. The people fail to become the renewing community promised to Abraham to renew all things. We only end up with an "individual salvation" that isn't really a salvation at all. It is in the restoration of others that we are made complete.

Romans 11:12 could also mean, if the gentiles can be included in the gospel, how much more can Israel, as the original people, be regathered. This seems to be the meaning in verse 24: "For if you (gentiles) were cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these, the natural branches (Israel), be grafted back into their own olive tree."

It is very unfortunate that the system of thought known today as dispensationalism, has taken hold on this chapter. It teaches that in the "end-times" the Jews are going to be grafted back into Christ and this will bring the return of Christ. There are all kinds of variations in this teaching. But it generally gives place to a political and militaristic faith, that is completely opposite to the reconciling faith that Paul is teaching in this chapter.

Paul isn't teaching a hostility against certain groups, to favour others, to bring about the kingdom of God. Paul was teaching the reconciling of our different groups into one, without favouritism, in grace. He was speaking about one family based on love, not a repetition of the usual worldly hostility we have seen in the Crusades and other conflicts. These come about by

a blindness to the Prince of Peace. We go into a stupor, with eyes that cannot see. Our rejection of the Muslims today is not different to our former rejection of the Jews.

“For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead?” (Romans 11:15) Here is where we see what Paul means by the acceptance of the Jews. He wasn’t speaking on some future event, like an end-times event. Paul was speaking of the resurrection of Christ. When Christ was raised it signalled then the acceptance and restoration of the Jews. And their acceptance in Christ is then shared with the world.

Paul was speaking of Christ identifying with Israel in their exile and restoration. Christ had identified with Israel’s fall in his crucifixion, and in his resurrection, he had brought Israel into restoration as a people. So, if in Israel’s fall, the world is shown the love and forgiveness of God on the cross, how much more in the resurrection of Christ, shall new creation come to us all? This is the meaning of Paul. We all come into renewed land in all our nations.

Paul was quoting themes from Isaiah, about Israel’s exile and restoration to the land, being restored back to their God. This tells us so much about Paul’s meaning. The “blessing to the world” Paul was speaking about, that the resurrection of Christ signalled, was renewed creation. This was the eternal life he was speaking of: restored relationships that brought renewal to all our nations of the world. This was Isaiah’s message about the kingdom of God.

This is what Paul meant by saying, “A partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the gentiles has come in. And in this way all Israel will be saved...” (Romans 11:25-26) “Fullness” here means life, “From his fullness we have all received.” (John 1:16) Dispensationalism teaches that after all the gentile nations have been saved, then at the “end-times,” God will save all the Jews. But this idea does not follow Paul’s track from Isaiah. Rather, Paul said that hardening came to Israel, so that the gentiles may be included in the gospel through the cross, so that we also might partake in the fullness of Christ... for the world to be renewed.

“All Israel” here are all the believing community, just as Isaiah said, “Enlarge the place of your tent, stretch your tent curtains wide, do not hold back; lengthen your cords, strengthen your stakes.” (Isaiah 54:2) “The children born during your bereavement will yet say in your hearing, this place is too small for us; give us more space to live in. Then you will say in your heart, who bore me these? I was bereaved and barren; I was exiled and rejected. Who brought these up? I was left all alone, but these—where have they come from?” (Isaiah 49:20)

The bereavement of the Jews here means their exile. But it was in their exile that many sons were born to them through the gospel. This is what Isaiah was saying. It is the forsaken that increase, not the powers that cause exile, like Babylon, or Rome. “Sing, O barren one, who did not bear; break out into singing and cry aloud, you who have not been in labour! For the children of the desolate one will be more than the children of her who is married, says the Lord.” (Isaiah 54:1)

Restoration doesn't come to the Jews in the "end-times" before Jesus comes, to be brought about by some violent confrontation with the nations. This isn't the kingdom of God. This isn't the teachings of Christ on how the good land is possessed. All his teachings point to living out non-racial neighbourliness, as in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. This is his kingdom. Non-violence. We never win by violence. We are not to adopt the ways of the Zealots of Christ's time, but the way of Christ himself.

Paul was teaching that restoration came to the Jews through the resurrection of Christ. He was teaching the exile-restoration theme of Israel, showing that it was fulfilled in the resurrection of Christ. The Jews aren't restored after the gentiles. In Isaiah, the Jews are restored before the gentiles. It is because the Jews are restored in the resurrection of Christ, that the gentiles may partake and share in their salvation.

"If the first-fruits are made holy, then the batch is holy..." (Romans 11:16) The whole batch is the whole renewed Israel, including gentile believers. The gentiles are made holy, because Israel are restored in the resurrection of Christ. It is "the Jew first, then the gentile." The whole reason for calling Israel, was so they may become leaven to bring in the whole world, to make us all the one people of God. "For he himself is our peace, who has made us both (Jew and gentile) one and has broken down in his flesh (by the cross) the dividing wall of hostility." (Ephesians 2:14)

The Jews were restored in the resurrection of Christ. They became the new temple in Christ. It was the Jews who stood up saved first on the Day of Pentecost, and from Jerusalem

the word of the Lord went out to the gentiles of the world. “On that day living water will flow out from Jerusalem.”

(Zechariah 14:8) This is how all the Prophets depict it: the world participating in the blessings of a restored, elect people of God, Israel.

And as the gentiles participate in the blessing of Israel to the world, then we live in love, drawing all men to Christ, including our gentile and Jewish neighbours, who are yet to come in by faith-fulness. God had already restored Israel in Christ’s resurrection, so therefore, Paul was saying, the gentile believers should love their neighbours, including the Jews, so others can be awakened to restoration and come into Christ’s faith-fulness.

“It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be lifted up above the hills; and all the nations shall flow to it, and many peoples shall come, and say: Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths. For out of Zion shall spread the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.” (Isaiah 2:2-3)

This is restored Israel, the mountains, meaning the rule of God in the gospel, bringing salvation to the world. Then from the Messiah, the word of salvation goes out to the ends of the earth. As Isaiah says, when Israel are returned from their captivity in the Messiah, then the gentiles also shall be included in Israel’s restoration. So too does Ezekiel: when Israel’s temple is renewed in Messiah, then its water flows out

to all the gentile nations. (Ezekiel 47) Israel are restored first in the resurrection, then the nations are brought in.

"It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth." (Isaiah 49:6)

“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, A voice of one calling: In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together.” (Isaiah 40:1-5)

This is a picture of Cyrus restoring the Jews from Babylon, their return from exile. As they come back to the land, the gentiles are also saved and become part with Israel in the new kingdom of the Messiah. “All flesh shall see the glory of the Lord.” “All flesh” means the gentile nations. When God speaks comfortably to Israel and takes up the barriers in the way of their salvation and restoration, then he also brings the gentiles in to become part of Israel’s deliverance in Christ.

This is the narrative Paul is speaking of in Romans 1. It is the Cyrus narrative fulfilled in Christ. It shows us that Jews and gentiles become one in Christ. And because we are one, our land becomes renewed with peace and loving care. And because of this, the deserts spring like a forest, the waste

places are renewed like a garden, the fruits of the land break out everywhere and the curse of sin is destroyed in our nations. This is all Paul is saying in Romans 11. He was saying to the Jewish and gentile believers in Rome that they should love one another as the one people of God in Christ.

And this is our witness today as the church to the world. It isn't a political and militaristic salvation for the world, but a witness of renewed community, where we seek to bring and include our neighbour and enemy for their healing. This heals wounds, not the former ways of the fallen Adam.

And so, here is Paul's conclusion to his discussion: "As regards the gospel, they are enemies for your sake. But as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers. For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. For just as you were at one time disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, so they too have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may now receive mercy. For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all." (Romans 11:28-32)

... So that we relate to each other, not on the basis of our supposed superiority, but on the basis of grace and love. This would include our relationships with all groups, whether Catholics closer to us, or Muslims we consider further away. The principals are the same. Some of them may be enemies because of the gospel, or they might be enemies because of our ill behaviour towards them and our superior view. But they are loved by God and Christ died for them. We were also "one

time disobedient” or maybe we still are disobedient, regarding what Paul was teaching us all here.

“For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.” (Romans 11:36 )

He is bigger than us and bigger than our group. Don't consign him to be any less than he is. He came for us all, not just for our group.

# 5

## PILGRIMS IN EXCILE

ROMANS 12 - 13

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In the next two chapters, Paul continues his Israel in exile theme, but from another perspective. Israel didn't only bring blessing to the gentile world through the crucifixion of Christ, but their fall brought blessing in other ways as well. Their exile into the nations was called the diaspora. As Israel were spread among the nations, they brought with them the leaven of the word of God. The synagogues they built became centres from which the Old Testament scriptures became known to the world.

These scriptures were translated into Greek hundreds of years before Christ came and they had a huge influence on the

gentile world. They pollinated all world religions, from Greek ideas, to far eastern ideas, even in Asia and India. And even before Christ came, many gentiles turned to the God of the Old Testament scriptures. They forsook their idols and worshiped Yahweh. These were known either as full circumcised proselytes, or as the uncircumcised lesser welcome God-fearers, such as Cornelius. (Acts 10)

So, in this sense also, the fall of Israel, their judgment, sufferings and dispersion among the nations, became a huge blessing to the world. This is part of the Servant theme in Isaiah, showing how the sufferings of God's people brought blessing to the world. The Servant Songs in Isaiah need to be understood in this way, as not only pointing to the sufferings of Christ, but also to the sufferings of Israel. (Isaiah 42:1–9, Isaiah 49:1–13, Isaiah 50:4–11, Isaiah 52:13–53:12) Christ enters into Israel's sufferings and carries their calling to suffer for the world. He takes their judgment upon himself, allowing the gentiles (Rome) to slay him, and brings salvation to all the world.

This is the theme that Paul takes up in Romans 12- 13. This is the story behind the text in these two chapters. The church also identifies with Israel's diaspora, their sufferings in the world, in which the church also brings renewal to the whole creation. This would have been clear to the Jewish readers of Paul's text in his day.

Peter also took up this theme in his letters. Peter was writing to the Jewish believers, "scattered throughout the gentile world." (1 Peter 1:1) Peter called them "pilgrims" and the word here meant ambassadors. They were not of this world, but as

ambassadors in this world, they were bringing the kingdom of heaven to rule within the nations. This is what the term “missionaries” means, bringing another culture to take over, like leaven takes over the lump of dough, renewing the whole lump.

Peter also spoke of the sufferings of the church, because the un-renewed, covetous cultures of the world would be against the non-violent, caring inclusion of all peoples, that the church would be living. While Israel were in exile because of their sins, the church as forgiven restored people, were in a kind of exile, dispersed as ambassadors in a fallen world, bringing the good news of peace. The exile of Israel bringing blessing to the world, served as a type of the life of the believers in the nations, bringing huge transforming blessing, making all things new.

Therefore, Paul was drawing on Old Testament narrative, for example from Jeremiah, about the Jew’s exile in Babylon, and reflecting on what that meant for the church scattered through the Romans Empire in Paul’s day.

Jeremiah told Israel not to resist the Babylonian captivity. He said the Babylonians were sent by God and to resist them would mean Israel’s own destruction. (Jeremiah 27:12-15, 38:17- 18) Jeremiah told Israel to rather go peacefully to Babylon and when there, to pray for the peace of Babylon. (Jeremiah 29:7) They were to live out their faith within the Babylonian Empire, bringing transformation to the brutal pagan world. Daniel also forms a part of this picture of the church renewing the pagan powers, counselling Nebuchadnezzar to use his power to restore the oppressed.

(Daniel 4:27) This background forms the way in which we are to understand Romans 12- 13.

## **5.1 THE CHURCH'S IDENTITY IN THE WORLD ROMANS 12**

One of Paul's summary statements in Romans 11 was, "Lest you be wise in your own conceit." (Romans 11:25) This false wisdom promotes fracturing, corruption, greed and violent breakup of the community and creation. On the other hand, it is humility that can bring Jew and gentile together by grace to serve each other. This service is their renewing leaven in a pagan world.

Romans 12 starts to deal with the issue of what the church's identity is, as ambassadors within the world. The chapter begins with, "I appeal to you therefore..." This appeal comes directly as a result of the preceding chapter, about the Jews and gentiles living graciously towards each other, rather than in the pride, self-interest and self-asserting violence of the world around them. The church's transforming identity in the world is to be one of humility. This is the trait that Paul explains though Romans 12. Humility is the opposite identity that the world shows, and this is the only way the church brings genuine change. As Philippians 2 shows, the humility of the Son of God is Paul's call to the church.

The believers are to “offer themselves to the Lord as living sacrifices.” (Romans 12:1) Offering ourselves to the Lord, means offering ourselves to serve each other. This shows the New Testament understating of sacrifice. It isn’t blood shedding, in the way the Old Testament saw it. It isn’t offering up the life of others for our own sin. Rather, it is the offering of ourselves, to serve others. This is how evil is defeated, as Paul said later in the chapter, “overcome evil with good.” (Romans 12:21)

The idea was prevalent throughout pagan culture, that evil is defeated by violence, by sacrifice, by blood shedding, by offering someone else, whether animal sacrifice, or killing others, to heal our own troubles. This is prevalent throughout pagan religion. In Christ, it is the opposite. He offered himself. This is to become the culture of the whole Christian community. We don’t scapegoat. We don’t shed blood. Instead, we are to lay down our own lives as the way of peace in the face of violence and greed. This is “holy and acceptable” to the Lord, not the former blood shedding sacrifices. (Romans 12:1)

“Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of the mind.” (Romans 12:2) We have heard preaching from this text that says, if we want riches or health we must see ourselves this way first. It is said that this is renewing our mind by our confession, to become what we want in life. This is the exact opposite of what Paul meant. This is the preaching of self, that Paul was seeking to stop, that has corrupted lives today.

We are not to take what we like to hear, as the meaning of Paul. As we read on through Romans 12, we see what Paul meant by the “renewing of the mind.” He spelled it out very clearly. He starts with humility in our relationships in the church. Then he continues by describing the church’s non-violent role in a violent world. This is the transformation Paul was instructing the church about.

Paul then talks about the charisma in the church, “not to think of our self, more highly than we ought to think.” (Romans 12:3) The believers aren’t to see “charisma” as an opportunity to promote self, or our church group, above another. This is the way charisma is often used today, to draw members from other churches, claiming, “We grow green grass for the sheep.” This personal demonstration of “power” has become dominate in our “worship.” To Paul, this isn’t genuine worship. We are called to build up others, other churches, not ourselves.

Charisma is commonly used to claim power for a person over the people; too often used to enhance position and money-making opportunities. This is not how we are to serve God. We are to serve with our gifts in a team, not exalting ourselves above anyone else. Charisma isn’t our opportunity to become popular among the people. All of this is “thinking of ourselves more highly than we ought.” Instead, we are supposed to think of ourselves as servants. We use charisma to serve, not to be at the front of the flock. The Servant Songs of Isaiah show Christ as our servant, and so we are called to be the servants of others as Christ’s body.

Then Paul goes on to speak of genuine love, both inside the church and the love of the church within the community at large. “Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection.” (Romans 12:9-10)

“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. Repay no one evil for evil but give thought to do what is honourable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord. To the contrary, if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head. Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good.” (Romans 12:14-21)

This is the “mind renewal” Paul spoke of. The church answers the violence of the world with caring-help for those in need, even towards their enemies. This touches the conscience of the world and this brings repentance and renewal to our communities. This is how the church is to “renew its Babylon,” when in exile among the heathen.

Only God brings vengeance, not the church. We are not God’s instrument of vengeance, of retributive justice. We are instruments only of mercy. God brings vengeance his way, and his way is not through doing violence to others himself. His

way is to give people up to their own violence, but he never is the one who does violence against them.

Paul instructs the church towards enemy-love and helping the weak and outcast. The cross shows Christ was outcast, and this shows us to bring in the outcast, as an expression of our love for Christ. The church's call in the world is to help the lowly, the child, the woman, the powerless, the ones the world treads under foot. We are called to condescend to help the despised, because Christ was despised. This is what we learn from the cross. We are not called to be big, or popular in the world's sight, or we are doing just as the world does. This is Paul's instruction in Romans 12. This is the opposite of Roman power and pride.

If we want to win the world to Christ, we don't do it the world's way, by being big and popular. We do it Christ's way, as Isaiah, Paul and Peter outline for us. If we win the world to the church the world's way, then the church is no longer the church.

This is the primary way in which our mind is to be renewed. This is the primary distinction between the church in exile and the world around us. And if we suffer to bring this love, then, just as Peter also said, we are followers of Christ in his suffering. This is our call. It was our call in the early church, and it's still our call today. Even though the church has often armed itself with the powers of the world, as Satan also offered Christ these powers for his kingdom purposes, using these powers this way is to abandon our call, and instead become a whore, like Babylon herself. (Matthew 4:8-9)

Our identity is not the power of Babylon, but the Suffering Servant, bringing in a new kingdom that is not of this world.

The exilic Servant Songs continue in the church. Just as Jesus bore the exile of the world, in his sufferings, being cast out by the world, so the church continues in Messiah's call and identity. Our call isn't any different to Jesus' call. We aren't any better than Jesus, to exempt ourselves. In suffering, Christ reflects the forgiving love of God to the world, reconciling the world and drawing the world back into fellowship with God and with each other.

This is the image the church also bares to the world, following Christ in reconciling the world through sufferings. This is the new life the church brings to the world, as Jesus described in the Sermon on the Mount, and as Paul spoke of: "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh, I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church." (Colossians 1:24) We don't bare the sins of the world as the spotless Son of God, as Christ did, but we still walk in his same vocation, as his body in the world.

Let's read the Servant Songs as also applying to our own service in the world, as members of Christ. We too are called to shine the same light in the darkness. We turn our cheek to the smiters, to show a condescending love and service, to lift the world around us.

"Who has believed what he has heard from us? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he

had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely, he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—everyone—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” (Isaiah 53:1-6)

Christ did this for the world once and for all. But Israel also walked in this calling, even though it was due to their own sins, bringing blessings to the world through their own sufferings, that is, their captivity by expulsion from their land. And the church also, redeemed and loved by God, still suffering in a foreign world, and yet bringing the light to the nations by our enemy love, just like Jesus did on the cross.

Quoting the same Servants Songs, speaking of the church as pilgrims in the world, this is exactly what Peter calls the church to follow: “For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been

healed. For you were straying like sheep but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.” (1 Peter 2:21-25)

Christ bore our sins: he took our sin, our violence against him in his flesh and did not repay it back to us. He answered instead with forgiveness and care. This, we are to follow. We once went astray, following the world in its self-centredness, but now we see and follow the true life in Christ.

Let’s understand Romans 12 as part of the Servant Song heritage to Israel and learn from that the church’s identity in this fallen world. Paul and Peter both draw from Israel’s exile and Servant Songs to speak of the church’s identity. The Servant Songs are the context in which Paul wrote Romans 12, so when we read Romans 12, we read it with the Servant Song, to understand Paul’s message to us.

The renewing of the mind is what Paul was speaking about, and the Servant Songs are the biblical framework showing us the mind we are supposed to have: a mind of condescension, to lift those around us in need, rather than think of ourselves. This is what renews our world. Nothing else can.

## **5.2 BABYLON – ROMANS 13**

“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.” (Romans 13:1)

Having spoken of the church's role in the world, Paul turns to speak of the powers of the world. He speaks of these also in Ephesians 2:10, "So that through the church, the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places." This means the governments of the world. The "heavenly places" means above, the higher places of government over people. (Titus 3:1)

Paul's description in Ephesians 2:10 is in line with Christ's reconciling kingdom, that Paul was speaking about from Ephesians 1. Christ is even reconciling the ruling powers of the world, meaning our governments and cultural institutions, bringing them into his image. This means, into the serving image of the cross.

Peter also speaks of this, showing the church's role in giving respect to the powers, even to Emperor Nero, one of the worst rulers to oppress the world. Yet, according to Peter, the church was still supposed to honour the king as appointed by God, not to overthrow the rulers through revolution. (1 Peter 2:17) Christ didn't revolt against Pontius Pilate in his sufferings but had a different method of renewing authorities. The church should follow the cross as God's means of renewal.

Likewise, Paul said in Romans 13 that the government of Rome was appointed by God. The church was to respect the government in the places where the church lives in diaspora. This is what Jeremiah told Jerusalem in his time. They should not rebel against the government of Babylon but be subject to them. (Jeremiah 27:12-15, 38:17-18)

In other words, Jeremiah wasn't commending the Babylonian Empire. We know the biblical testimony against this empire, about how wicked it was. It was the same with the Roman Empire. This passage in Romans 13, isn't Paul commending the government, but showing the church that the way in which she fulfils her role in society isn't to rebel against government, but instead to renew it by example. Governments are renewed as they see the wisdom of God within the church. This is God's plan, not rebellion or revolution.

Sometimes we have seen this passage in Romans 13, about the government being ministers of God, and that they have the sword to punish the wicked, as a warrant for the church to take up such powers for her own security or dominion in the world. But to think this, is far from what the bible teaches. Paul was distinguishing the role of the church from the role of state power and showing in Romans 12 and 13 that our functions are very different.

Our role is to pray for the government, for peace in our region, but not to attempt to use the government for the purposes of the church. If we do, this brings injustice against others and creates more enemies for the church. The gospel must be shared through the cross, never through the sword. The church doesn't do power well, it always ends up using it for worldly purposes. Power corrupts, as we hear, and complete power corrupts completely. So, it must be by the cross, meekness and by service that the church carries out its mission. If not, then we are not the church, not followers of Christ. As the saying goes, "When Christ disarmed Peter, he disarmed the church."

What Paul was saying in Romans 13, is that the church is like the Jews in diaspora. We see Daniel as an example of this. He was in Babylon and advised the king. He respectfully advised the king to, “break off your sins by practicing righteousness, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the oppressed...” (Daniel 4:27) He was bringing a transforming influence to the government, so that its power would be used to serve the weak, instead of oppressing them. If we, as members of Christ, find ourselves serving in government, then this is the transforming influence we are to bring.

We are to bring the cross to the government, to show that it is to beat its swords into ploughs, to serve the poor. If we use the government, like some biblical Jews tried to do, to bring its power against our enemies, then we create further enemies for our future. We are instead to seek justice and mercy for the needy, not to think of our ourselves. This will renew our world.

Some might claim that Paul said it's God's will for the government to execute the wicked. This is in a broken world. Habakkuk struggled with this question, asking “Why does God use wicked Babylon to judge Israel?” God used wickedness to stop the wickedness of others. He didn't motivate any of the wickedness of Babylon. That came entirely from their own hearts. But he allowed their wickedness to control the evil of Israel, to limit evil in the region.

And then Babylon's wickedness also came back upon their own heads and brought them down as well. This is how the untransformed world works. In as much as it's God's permissive will in a fallen world, and the church shouldn't

interfere with it in revolution, this doesn't mean that these governments bear the image of God in what they do. Only Christ bears the image of God through the cross.

And this was where Habakkuk was told that the just shall live by his faith-fulness. (Habakkuk 2:4) It was in direct contrast to the wickedness of Babylon, and the sword they used against Israel as God's messengers. Though they were "the army of the Lord," they were still a corrupt power. (Joel 2:11) This brings us back again to Romans 1:17 and what faithfulness is in this letter of Paul. It is living out a community witness of selflessness in the midst of a corrupt and covetous world.

This is the purpose of the community Paul was building in Rome, and the reason he was striving to bring Jews and gentiles together into one loving family, to fulfil God's promise to Abraham. This was to fulfil the purpose of exposing, reconciling and renewing the world's corrupt powers, just like the cross of Christ did, to deliver the creation from its bondage to corruption. Romans 13 is about renewing these powers through the witness of community. If these powers aren't renewed, then the creation isn't renewed.

The church in Paul's day understood what Paul meant, as they forbade any baptised believer from enlisting in the Roman army and killing in any way. The early church had a consistent pro-life policy. They forbade abortion, infanticide, capital punishment, killing in war, or euthanasia for the elderly or sick. This was the consistent policy of the church for at least its first 200 years, possibly longer, until in the era of Constantine this policy changed, along with the church's theology.

The reason the church held to this policy on killing, was because they said killing was inconsistent with the nature and kingdom of Christ. They appealed to the image of God seen in the cross and to the Prophets, like Isaiah, who spoke of the kingdom of God coming through a serving, self-giving church, that put an end to all violence. They said that if all became Christians, followers of Jesus (this was before “Christendom”) then there would be no more war. There was no argument about his in the early church. Their baptism was a baptism to peace. The ending of war is a stated goal in scripture for the coming of the kingdom of God through the church. But today, this vision in this age of the church, has been largely set aside.

So, Paul was not invoking the role of the government to commend it, nor to suggest the church use the government to support the church’s peculiar interests, or to suggest the church emulate the government’s power, but only so that the church would not come into danger and harm by revolting against the power, just as in the same way Jeremiah advised Jerusalem concerning the Babylonian Empire in his own time.

The church’s role is to bring a transforming leaven to the powers of the world, not to emulate or use the powers for its own particular interests within the society. The church’s role is to transform the powers of the world through our own model of a self-giving, cross ethic, in caring for the least within our community. This is what the church did within the Roman Empire and it worked. They eventually transformed the empire this way.

The best thing the church can teach the powers of this world, is to overcome the world’s greed and violence by caring for the

poor and by reconciling different groups of people together through merciful justice to them all. When the world builds separate pockets of self-interest, not caring for others, then trouble is certain, and warfare will be inevitable. The church shows reconciling life styles, healing within our wider church community, the peace we live between our different races and economic groups within the church, as the witness of how the governments are to heal their nations. This is the tree of life the governments will eventually eat from in Revelations 21-22.

This is the church's role in the society:

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

(Romans 13:8-10)

Paul sites the Ten Commandments, which were the renewing word of Israel to the nations in their diaspora. The Ten Commandments were the centre piece of the synagogue's testimony to the nations. Now the Ten Commandments are the renewing word to the world, through the love in our own hearts, lives and relationships. Love within our transformed lives is the living witness of Israel's Torah, come to life in our relationships through the cross and Spirit of Christ. Our lives are the word of God that the world reads. This, not the world's power, is what the church uses for transforming our

communities. Paul was siting Israel's diaspora mission being fulfilled in the church of Christ.

“Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armour of light. Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarrelling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.” (Romans 13:11-14)

“The night is far spent; the day is at hand.” We only have a limited time in our life to serve God. We should spend it wisely, before we spend it on foolishness. The wise way to spend our life is in building a renewing community on the ethics of the kingdom of God, giving witness to the world of the kingdom to come. Because when this kingdom comes, which will be very soon to us all, then this kingdom will be eternal.

Israel wasn't to be in Babylon forever. They were to expect their deliverance and the renewing of their land through their return. The Prophets, like Isaiah's Servant Songs, were clear, that God would deliver them in his righteousness, and that they should not give up this hope. So, the church isn't to follow the ways of Babylon, but to expect that through us, there is coming a new kingdom into our nations, which finally, in the resurrection, will renew our land entirely. This is how we are to live, as though this day is now upon us. We are to

live with the Romans 8 vision of a world being set free from its corruption, rather than join that corruption.

# 6

## THE HEIGHT OF ROMANS

### ROMANS 14-16

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Rather than being less important, winding down comments, the content of these three chapters form the height of the letter.

Romans 1-8 show that we are all justified and healed together, by God's faithfulness in Christ and that this healing of our community is also the healing of our creation. Romans 9- 11 show the reason why God called the Jews for the gentiles and why the gentiles are equally called to love a restored Jewish people. All this is necessary to bring the believers to Romans

14, so they can dispel the cultural lies and sit down together in the grace of love. This sitting down to heal each other is more important than the finer points of the theology in Romans we have divided over, especially when we realise why that theology was penned.

Romans 14 is the chapter in which Paul gets into some of the nitty-gritty of how the believers in the church are to relate together as one people, ensuring they are not divided. The practical matters discussed here are the outcome of all the theology that has preceded in the letter so far. All Paul's discussion is to bring the believers to this united place, so they could understand the basis of God's dealings in each other's lives and accept each other without prejudice.

Romans 15 summarises the main issues the letter is about. In case we didn't know the main theme of the letter, Romans 15 makes that clear. It doesn't say anything there about our personalised faith, but about the love of Christ being the basis upon which we receive love one another. This is the subject matter of all the theology in the letter.

Romans 16, in Paul's closing comments, applies this theology to the issue of gender in the church and in ministry. There, Paul spells out that the issue is not gender, but agenda. The agenda of service. This is the agenda of the kingdom of God and the outcome of all Paul teaches and lives among the people. This is the example of Paul that we are called to follow.

## 6.1 THE PEAK - ROMANS 14

The significance of this chapter cannot be overstated. If we consider which chapter in Romans is the peak of the mountain top, we might think of Romans 8. There, the children of God bring the creation into deliverance from its curse, under which creation has laboured throughout our whole history. But if we consider how this deliverance takes place, then Romans 14 is the peak of Paul's letter.

“One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables... One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.” (Romans 14:2- 5)

Today, we might think that simple advice on how people were to eat together is a minor thing, especially after all the heavier theological matters the letter discusses. But, as I have said before, the only reason Paul went into theology in his letters, was because of the table where we eat together. His theology was for the purpose of bringing us together at this table, and not allowing any person to disturb the unity of this table. Paul didn't go into a theology of salvation to satisfy our personal need, but for the sake of the unity of the church.

Consider what a huge issue this table was in Paul's day. You only have to see Jesus in the Gospels to notice its importance. The Pharisees had very strict codes on who they could eat with. The kind of unified table Paul was speaking about was possibly the biggest seismic shift in the culture to ever hit them since Abraham and Moses. The way Paul described the table was simply unthinkable to most people of that day.

Paul's table wasn't just unthinkable for religious reasons, but also for economic or social reasons. The Roman Empire was very strictly controlled along class lines, just like some cultures today, which are controlled by gender or cast (social group) lines. People cannot behave in a socially equal way. Today, in some places, we may take this freedom for granted, but in many other places today, what Paul was discussing in Romans 14 would still be completely unacceptable.

In many ways, the table is the very centre of Christian fellowship and worship. If the worship of God is our care for our neighbour - our worship together as one - then the table is central to that worship. In the early church they "broke bread from house to house." This was their church. Mostly, they didn't meet in large groups. And when they did meet, it was as one: no social, gender or racial lines of divisions between them.

Someone said, "If we are to bear one another's burdens, then we can only do that sitting in a circle, not sitting in rows." That is, the way churches are often organised today, we come along to "worship," without spending time with each other, not serving one another. We may greet each other, but little more. That is not church, and it is not worship.

The point about the table in the early church, was that slaves, bankers, farmers, Jews, gentiles, Africans, Europeans, soldiers, and everyone else, all ate together. There were no borders, no visas needed in the church, no permission required, to eat as one people. And this is the point: it is only in this way that *shema* can be fulfilled. We can only love another as the law requires - as faith-fullness requires - if we eat as one people. It is at the table that we talk, learn and find out how each person is doing, and how we can help and serve one another. Without this kind of open table, where we are truly socially one, we could say there is no genuine church.

This is where the renewed creation comes from. Without this serving table, our communities cannot be repaired. We still get our segregations along racial and social lines. Today, we still have these segregations, even where “churches” exist. Our nations and suburbs are divided along racial and social lines, and even the “church” buys into this and lives accepting it. The churches are not integrated and not serving each other across borders. The church was given by the Lord to heal the divisions, so genuine love can be shown, love that isn’t selfish along group lines, and this way we heal our communities and heal the creation. The church can only be the church if we are like those in Acts, where we worship around a completely common, open table.

This was the issue in Jerusalem in the generation of Paul, in which the people lived in division and exclusion from each other, building their bigger barns, rather than gathering in and healing the sick community. This filled the teachings of Jesus. It was the reason, in the end, why the city fell in its

bitterness, hostility and self-destruction. The world continues doing this, unless the church becomes the genuine church and brings redemption through Christ's life in us to the communities.

This meal was the *communion* of that time, in the early church, not the little biscuit and sip of juice we take today. As they ate together, the broken food spoke of their lives broken and laid down for each other. As they ate together, they heard each other's stories, and learned how to serve each other in their need. Isolation was replaced with healing. Only this can shatter the bondage of the Roman world. The communion, the sacrament, wasn't the bread and the wine, but their love for each other. This love is the sign of the kingdom of God which renews all things.

So, Romans 14 is the pinnacle of Paul's letter. And for this table to exist, the ceremonial restrictions that hindered one table must be set aside. This is what Paul spends time discussing in the chapter. Whether it is the type of food or drink we take, or the holi-days we consider important, we should allow one another these freedoms, without judging their faith. The thing that is important, isn't our own conscience on the matter, but the conscience of the other person. That is, at the table of the Lord, we don't consider what is important to us, but what is important to the other person.

This is the other huge difference that Paul fought for in the cultures of the day: fellowshiping with people, thinking of what was good for their need, rather than what is good for ourselves. This is the central issue of the cross of Christ. On

the cross, Christ did what mattered for others, not what mattered for himself. He could have saved himself from the cross, but that way none of us would have known his love. None of us today would be serving each other based on the love of Christ. We would all still be living in Roman type cultures of abuse.

The idea of thinking of the other person ahead of yourself is the ultimate revelation that comes into our world through the cross of Christ and without the cross, the world would not have this renewal within our relationships, transforming our nations. This, not law, is what renews us. All laws can be broken, but genuine love that considers the other person cannot be broken.

We can come together with Christians from all denominations, not judging them because of their ceremonial ways. We are commanded to receive each other genuinely in love and service, not thinking either of us is superior to the other. And we can stop mocking those of other religions because of their own devotional practices. I am not speaking here of destructive practices, but people of genuine devotion that is still unformed. We don't often win someone to faith by destroying the weak faith they have. We share the gospel with respect. If we don't share the gospel with love, we don't have a gospel to share.

In Galatians 6:1-4, Paul discusses a similar matter. In Galatians, Paul was speaking about the same unity between Jews and gentiles at one table fellowship. And at the end of that discussion he said, "If anyone is taken over by a fault, you who is spiritual restore such a person, in a spirit of meekness,

considering yourself as well.” We have often separated this section from Paul’s overall discussion in Galatians, as though it was just an add-on about general matters. But instead it’s better to see it as part of Paul’s issue in Galatians about bringing believers together as one, at one table.

So, we see here that “spirituality” is defending the unity of the body by seeking to restore, not opening rifts and factions because of the perceived faults in others. In building unity across our denominations, one might ask, “But what about the faults of others, or important issues concerning right and wrong?” These don’t go away. There are still important issues of right and wrong in our lives, but we seek to address these in a spirit of fellowship, in as much as possible, rather than seeing only other people’s faults and not our own faults as well.

In both passages, Romans 14 and Galatians 6, Paul was addressing the challenges that unity brings to us from diverse backgrounds, traditions and viewpoints. It isn’t that nothing else matters, but only unity. It isn’t the case that there is no other truth that is important to our lives. It is the spirit by which we approach these differences that matters. It is recognising that we can learn from others. We can learn from their perspectives, and we can also learn about ourselves, especially by how we handle those who we believe need correction.

Our practice has often been to divide. We may sometimes treasure division as a mark of spirituality. But the opposite is the truth. In all Paul’s letters, he built the main Christian challenge around how we are to reconcile, as the cross shows

us the reconciling nature of God: how to lay down our lives, to call people together, where we can then care for and restore one another. “The sick need a doctor,” need restoration, and we can best do that for each other, together. (Mark 2:17) If we don’t learn how to restore each other in the church, how will we ever learn how to restore others, our enemies, and the world?

The Christian difference in a self-centred world is to put the spotlight on our own sins, not on the sins of others: “Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way, you will fulfil the law of Christ. If anyone thinks they are something when they are not, they deceive themselves. Each one should test their own actions. Then they can take pride in themselves alone, without comparing themselves to someone else. For we are each responsible for our own conduct.” (Galatians 6:1-5)

This is how Paul says we come to the table of the Lord, considering the wellbeing of the other person, not the “righteousness” of our own group. This way, true righteousness, which means faith-fullness in healing our neighbour, spreads and the genuine gospel is revealed to the creation. “Carry each other’s burdens,” trying to restore others, as Christ has restored us. Being mindful that it is our own conduct we are responsible for, a conduct of love that seeks to restore others, rather than priding ourselves on the fall of others.

Romans 14 shows a new culture emerging in the Christian community within the Roman Empire. It was a culture where instead of refusing others because of tribal, ceremonial or social differences, we seek to include, understand and heal one another. Paul wasn't saying this to nullify important aspects of our faith, but to show that condescending and humble service is the faith-fulness of Christ that we are to live out in fellowship with others. Sharing this faith across our communities brings healing to our world.

## **6.2 THE PURPOSE OF THE LETTER - ROMANS 15**

“We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbour for his good, to build him up. For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, ‘The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me.’ For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope.” (Romans 15:1-4)

Paul quoted here from Psalm 69:9, a passage with a similar message to the Servant Songs of Isaiah. Paul added that these passages, that show the endurance of Christ, are also there to teach us. We are to carry the same manner in the world as Christ did, seeking to heal others, rather than to please ourselves. This encouragement is to give us hope, when things look like they are against us.

In the context of Paul's message to the Jews and gentiles, this means that instead of us standing for ourselves and our own party, those of us who think we are superior, for any religious reason, should include and care for the weak. We should receive the one we think is religiously inferior and look for their healing. It is in behaving like this, that we find our own transformation and our own healing as well. And when our community reconciles this way, our world begins to look like Isaiah's new creation.

To live in this way is to replicate the love and faith-fullness of Christ, whose faithfulness consisted in the fact that he did not please himself, but his neighbour instead. This is the essential matter Paul is addressing in the whole letter of Romans, the matter that draws Jews and gentiles together as one family, according to the promises of God to Abraham.

“The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me.” (Romans 15:3, Psalm 69:9) A beautiful description of the atonement. The scapegoating of the religious, economic and political communities against God, which is always brought down upon the weak, came down upon Jesus in his sufferings, throughout his life and death. “He was numbered among the transgressors and made intercession for them.” (Isaiah 53:12) He took his part with the afflicted, not with the afflicter, and in doing so he showed them God's solidarity, love and forgiveness, instead of the punishment or neglect others brought against them... and drew them back to God. This is how the Jews should serve the gentiles, and visa-versa.

That is, it should be no surprise to us, that if the community marginalize a certain group of people, like the Pharisees did

the “sinners,” then showing any form of solidarity for them, will bring the community’s sanctions against ourselves as well. This is what Paul said we should be willing to bear, to glorify God. God seeks to restore the weak, the poor, the rejected. So, Jews and gentiles should receive each other, despite their countrymen’s attitudes and persecution. In Christ we receive those others reject, even though this may invite sanction upon ourselves.

“That together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.” (Romans 15:6-7) Again, this is the pinnacle of the letter. If we can glorify God together as one people, then we can be “the righteousness of God in Christ Jesus” to the world. (2 Corinthians 5:21)

That is, our lives show God’s righteous and just plan, that in the cross he has brought the nations together in love and healing. This one church in Christ, shows God’s righteousness to the world. It shows God has kept his promises to Abraham, by making us one people through his cross and Spirit, defeating our pagan violence and greed, through one Lordship of Christ and an obedience of love.

This, not a colonial expression of Christendom, is what the scripture means by God’s announcement to the pagan powers, “As I live says the Lord, to me every knee shall bow, and every tongue confess that I (Yahweh, Jesus) am Lord.” (Isaiah 45:23, Romans 14:11, Philippians 2:10-11) It refers to our inner transformation of love, the cross life that Jesus lived, that made him, rather than the Roman Caesar, Lord. It is

through this servant life that his kingdom rules the world.  
(Matthew 20:25-26)

“Because God has welcomed us in Christ, we should welcome one another.” This is the full extent of the theology in the letter of Romans. On the cross, God showed his love and forgiveness to the world, forgiving us for our hostility against him, in condemning him and nailing him to the cross. This is how we should forgive and receive each other, no matter the social propaganda against other groups. We should resist the cultural tradition about other groups, that we are told to separate from, and instead embrace them into one love, shown to us in Christ.

“For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God’s truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.” (Romans 15:8-9) Such beautiful text. Christ served the Jews, to show them God’s faithfulness to forgive them and to bring in the gentiles to one family, as he promised the patriarchs. This is “God’s righteousness” that Romans 1:17 spoke of us, revealed to us in our relationships with each other, through the gospel.

“As it is written, ‘Therefore I will praise you among the gentiles, and sing to your name.’ And again, it is said, ‘Rejoice, O gentiles, with his people.’ And again, ‘Praise the Lord, all you gentiles, and let all the peoples extol him.’ And again, Isaiah says, ‘The root of Jesse will come, even he who arises to rule the gentiles; in him will the gentiles hope.’” (Romans 15:9- 12)

These aren't just concluding remarks to the letter of Romans, but they explain the whole point of Paul's writing, what his theology of justification is all about: bringing the gentiles into God's family, to be one with a restored Israel in Christ. This was written about the gentiles, so the Jews would accept them, just as God has accepted the Jews in their fall, in Christ. In accepting each other, we can then go on showing love to each other, as a witness of God's faithfulness to the world.

The way in which the Messiah rises to rule the world is through this one new family. His isn't a rule of violence, but a rule of family care, which renews our hearts and eventually transforms our communities. It is a rule of *shema*. It is termed "a rod of iron" because this cross, this love, can utterly route out God's enemies from our own character and through us transform the powers of the world. (Psalm 2:9)

The "rod of iron" is a metaphor of conquest, but the conquest is a conquest of the Servant through the cross of self-giving love. This is what many of Paul's countrymen didn't understand. This "righteousness of God," that should be displayed through enemy service, rather than by establishing a superiority over their enemies, is the righteousness that many did not want to submit themselves to. They couldn't see how Old Testament promises of conquest were metaphors of the Suffering Servant.

In concluding comments, Paul defends his ministry to the gentiles and this also is part of the reason for his writing, so the gentiles he has brought to Christ aren't dismissed by the Jews as invalid believers but are accepted. (Romans 15:14-21)

In Romans 15:22-33 Paul explains how he would like to come through Rome on his way to Spain, for the Roman believers to join with him in prayers and support for his mission westward, to areas that have not yet heard the gospel. This was Paul's missionary desire, to always take the gospel to regions where it was not known. In making Rome a new base for his westward missions, he needed the Roman church to be united between the various groups, because this acceptance and unity in Christ was Paul's message to new fields. If this love didn't work in Rome, there was point preaching it in Spain or beyond.

### **6.3 PUTTING OTHERS FIRST - ROMANS 16**

The last chapter of Romans has amazing new creation overtones running through it. This is the final stage of Israel's history, life in the resurrection of Christ. It's impossible not to notice the extent to which women feature in this chapter and on Paul's ministry team.

We first notice this in the Gospel of John. John's Gospel focuses on new creation from its opening chapter. To the Hebrew reader, the God who came in spirit, word and light in the first creation, has returned in the same through the gospel of Jesus Christ, to raise up his children once again, to drive back the chaos and darkness in the world. (John 1:1-14)

This theme follows all through John, especially in his renewed temple emphasis from Ezekiel, through which heaven comes to bring new creation. The “water into wine,” the temple cleansing, the “destroy this body,” the “rivers of living water,” the scenes of teaching around the temple, the Davidic shepherd song, the true vine and the “Father’s house,” with its *shekinah* presence, all invoke Israel’s expectation of new creation.

So possibly, this also forms part of John’s crucifixion and resurrection account. Jesus’ body is a new temple, a new Adam, the bridge between our old and new creations. Christ dies on the sixth day of the week saying, “It is finished,” that is, the old creation that is being destroyed by sin. He rests on the seventh day in the grave. He rises on the first day of a new week, which in Jewish symbolism means a new creation has begun. This is John’s 1:1-14 new creation, beginning to unfold through the resurrection, meaning a new world transforming heart for the family of God.

If we were to announce something as important as the resurrection and new creation, how would we do it? We would want to make the announcement look as important as possible.

But in the culture of that time, God does the opposite. He chooses women to be the first, and also Mary, a sinner, out of whom were driven several demons. They were the first to announce that the new creation had begun in Christ.

Mary thought that Jesus was the gardener. This has overtones to the first creation, in which Adam and Eve walked with God

in the Garden. The first Adam was a gardener. The gardener in the tomb speaks of the new Adamic commission restored and a renewed world. John's use of these historical events in his narrative tells a clear story to the Jewish reader. The resurrection of Christ was a new creation, that would focus firstly on the rejected and weak of society. It would not promote itself through what our cultures consider to be important.

And the gardener depicts the kind of things God values about his creation. It isn't the grand economics of our societies, in which our nations compete for resources and go to war, or our commercial industries that take over the world, exploiting the interests of the weaker people, storing up wealth in the hands of a few. The important things to God exist in the more simple and humble things of life. Rome was about empire, greatness, divisions, slaves: the new creation is about sinners, women, the despised, gardens, relationships.

When we think of Paul's mention of women in Romans 16, the significance of this often escapes us. It's like us not noticing how significant it is that Paul speaks of Jews and gentiles eating at one table in Romans 14. It seems a minor point to the reader today, but at Paul's time, it would have been an earth-shattering chapter to read. Romans 16 is equalling earth-shattering.

An ancient blessing goes, "Blessed are you O God, King of the universe, who has not made me... a gentile, a slave, or a woman," disclosing the patriarchy of Paul's day. Even today we may not notice, or possibly wish to ignore, Paul's mention of the women on his apostolic team. Paul had a large team,

through whom he planted and oversaw many churches. It seems that the Roman house churches were led by Priscilla and Aquilla, members of Paul's team. Priscilla was the leading member in this husband and wife team, and most likely the founding and head apostle in Rome. (Acts 18:1-4, 18-19, 24-26, 1 Corinthians 16:19, Romans 16:3-5)

The significance of this is as huge as Jews and gentiles eating at one table. This is a massive cultural change and only something as huge as the new creation could account for such a change in the culture. It reflects Paul's dictum that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, bond nor free, rich or poor. (Galatians 3:28) Paul was very serious about this. Each part of this statement, on its own, was a massive revolution in Paul's day. Together, these statements, and the new family they reflect, would completely turn the world upside-down. This is surely new creation.

Paul's statements about women in his various letters can be confusing to readers today. But there is no doubt his ministry team was filled with women leaders. What about Corinthians, in which Paul states that women are the image and glory of the man? (1 Corinthians 11:7) Paul often quoted others in his letters and then corrected them. This seems to be a clear case of that. Genesis said that both male and female were made in the image of God.

It seems Paul was overthrowing the patriarchy at Corinth, as he did also in Ephesus. If "Eve was first deceived," according to the men at the church, then "she should learn," Paul countered. (1 Timothy 2:14) Women learning as disciples in that day was a huge cultural shift.

Paul was following Jesus, who admitted Mary to “sit at his feet,” a phrase that meant she was a disciple of the rabbi. (Luke 10:39) This offended Martha. Jesus was making a massive break from the culture of the day. A disciple learns, with the intent to pass on the word, teaching others. The new creation would overturn the patriarchy of men who often ruled over others uncaringly. God would not have this human culture in his new kingdom. Power would be renewed: be it the power of government, of armed forces, of business, or of patriarchy. The least would be honoured. Power would serve the least. This includes pastors. Our whole way of leadership is renewed, so as not to be self-honouring. (Matthew 20:25)

The revolution wouldn't come about through a dishonoring of culture. Women were to respect their husbands, just as Christ respected Pontius Pilate, and slaves respected their masters. (Ephesians 5:21-33, 1 Peter 2:11-3:1-22) But this was neither to condone patriarchy, nor the clearly ungodly rulers of their day, or slavery. It was rather to show the opposite, selfless spirit, by which the church reforms cultural powers.

If we are confused by some of Paul's statements in his various letters, due to our lack of background, then this new creation, the kingdom of God way of life, should guide our interpretation. Romans 16 makes it clear what Paul felt about women ministers.

Firstly, Paul speaks of Phoebe, the lady who delivered Paul's letter to the Roman churches. (Romans 16:1) In Paul's day the person who delivered a letter also read the letter to the recipients, in order to explain any misunderstandings. The one who delivered the letter explains the author's intent by the

words used in the letter, to ensure the message was clearly communicated and understood. So, Phoebe was the first person to give a commentary of the letter of Romans. I wish we had a copy of her commentary today. It would be very useful.

Paul called Phoebe a minister, or servant, of the church at Cenchreae. This term for servant was used to denote leaders in the church. It is used equally of men and women. It means that in Christ, a leader is the lowest, the servant of all. Phoebe was a leading servant in the church. Paul used the same term for Phoebe as he used in describing his own ministry. Phoebe had an apostolic role on Paul's team.

As Paul continues in Romans 16, he says the same about several women. In fact, it is mostly the women that Paul mentions first. He mentions Priscilla, Mary and Junia, who Paul says was noteworthy among the apostles. These were all apostles. Apostleship didn't have the kind of hierarchical and patriarchal import that we invest in it today. They were simply servants of the church, important to God, but among the church they lead as servants.

Romans 16 simply makes no distinction between women and men in regards to the terms used for them as servants of the church. The one aspect Paul claims over and over again that qualifies a person to lead in the church, is their servanthood. That is, their agenda. Have they come to serve the church, or to serve themselves? Have they come to lift up others, or to lift up themselves?

That is, the way Paul speaks of ministry in the church, is the same way he has been speaking of Jew and gentile relationships throughout his whole letter to the Romans. Jews and gentiles should not think they are of some import and exclude the other group from privilege. In the same way, those who lead in the church should do so in the manner of Christ, who didn't seek his own import, but gave himself for others. This is the qualification for leadership in the church, not our gender.

Men and women today should not think either is more important than the other, and position themselves above the other, but serve together in humility, allowing each one's gifts to come out naturally within the church to serve the interests of all. Once we impose ourselves on the other, or upon the other gender, we are no longer serving in the spirit of Christ.

If churches don't have the weaker people ministering, including younger people, trainees, or even people with disabilities, but only the one who can exert himself more strongly over others, then something is very wrong with the expression of Christ in those churches. Our job in Christ is to put others forward, not ourselves forward. This means leadership is from the back, raising others up. This brings a whole new cultural witness to our wider communities, transforming the meaning of power: a witness of acceptance of others, raising up others and service, which Paul was aiming for in his letter to the Romans.

Phoebe cared for many. Priscilla and Aquila gave their lives for the safety of Paul. Every other apostle Paul mentioned laboured, giving themselves for the church, who even became

“fellow-prisoners” with Paul, for the sake of serving the churches. (Romans 16:2, 4, 6, 7, 9, 12) This is what “approved them in Christ.” (Romans 16:10) This was the consistent quality Paul mentioned with every leader he spoke of. He didn’t once speak of the gender, but only of their agenda in the church, how they served. This is Paul’s qualification for leadership in the kingdom of God.

“Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them that are causing the divisions and occasions of stumbling, contrary to the doctrine which you learned: and turn away from them. For they that are such serve not our Lord Christ, but their own belly; and by their smooth and fair speech they beguile the hearts of the innocent.” (Romans 16:17-18)

Here again, we see the point of Paul’s letter. It is to build the unity of the church. Those who divide the church based on tradition, are to be avoided. They claim to be serving God, making a distinction on the basis of their own group’s beliefs, but they are really serving their own interests. If they were serving Christ, they would be building the unity of the body he died for and loves. But instead, they are serving their own career or organisation. We are not called to serve the interests of our own sectarian body, but the interests of the one who was crucified for us all.

They make “smooth” speeches about the theological importance of their division, but this hides their real motive. Such self-interests should not be followed. Often, we mask our division in “sincere theological concern,” but our concern maybe ambitions within our group or denomination. We should be striving to build the unity of the church, honouring

the blood of Christ, who died for us all to be on family, not building again the walls of division Christ took down in his flesh. (Ephesians 2:15)

Therefore, be “wise to that which is good, and simple to that which is evil.” (Romans 16:19) That which is good builds family, that which is evil divides. “And the God of peace shall bruise satan under your feet shortly.” (Romans 16:20) This is probably a reference to the dividing forces within the Jewish community at that time, that were trying to maintain control over the wealth of Jerusalem. We divide today for the same reason, to keep the wealth or political control of our group intact. If we do this, the God of peace, who is building a new creation based on family love, is opposed to us serving our own interests.

“Now to him that is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which has been kept in silence through times eternal, but now is manifested, and by the scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the eternal God, is made known to all the nations to obedience of faith: to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory for ever. Amen.” (Romans 16:25-27)

The mystery is that we of all nations should be one in Christ, for the healing of the world in the love of Christ. This is the “righteousness of God,” his promise to heal the nations unfolding in his new community. This is what our nations are to obey, following the church’s witness of love for neighbor, not our divided self-interest. This is Paul’s mystery in all his letters: the Lordship of Christ, reconciling the powers to

himself, bringing all things together into one. (Ephesians 1:9-10)