



STUDY GUIDE



EPISTLE TO THE

ROMANS

APOSTLE PAUL

IMPRINT



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WE

live in a fast-paced world in which knowledge and availability of information are growing at exponential rates. But is this widespread information and easily accessible knowledge helping people to be better husbands, daughters, parents and citizens?

How can we, as Christians, identify and choose the best options for our day-to-day life and our eternal salvation?

The key to understanding and setting up the right priorities in our lives is Jesus Christ – His exemplary life of service, His death, resurrection and intercessory ministry in our behalf.

Through Him we understand who we are and we receive the strength to overcome sin and its devastating effects. There is nothing we can do to restore ourselves or our relationship with God and humankind but to accept Jesus by faith and establish a solid connection with Him.

This was the discovery that completely changed the life of Paul of Tarsus and triggered the Protestant Reformation. Today it can still help us determine the correct priorities and take the right decisions in the midst of a growing flood of information that may confuse, suffocate and eventually drown us.

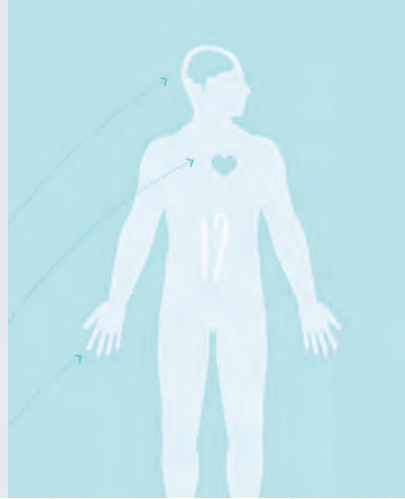
I truly commend the EUD Youth Ministries Department for having decided to publish this timely study guide for the epistle of Paul to the Romans – a systematic and majestic presentation of the Gospel – still relevant for our days.

*May God bless you abundantly
as you engage in the study of these lessons*



Mario Brito
President
of the Inter-European Division





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STUDY GUIDE
EPISTLE TO THE
ROMANS



QUOTE

“WITH GREAT CLEARNESS AND POWER THE APOSTLE PRESENTED THE DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH IN CHRIST. HE HOPED THAT OTHER CHURCHES ALSO MIGHT BE HELPED BY THE INSTRUCTION SENT TO THE CHRISTIANS AT ROME; BUT HOW DIMLY COULD HE FORESEE THE FAR-REACHING INFLUENCE OF HIS WORDS! THROUGH ALL THE AGES THE GREAT TRUTH OF JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH HAS STOOD AS A MIGHTY BEACON TO GUIDE REPENTANT SINNERS INTO THE WAY OF LIFE. IT WAS THIS LIGHT THAT SCATTERED THE DARKNESS WHICH ENVELOPED LUTHER’S MIND AND REVEALED TO HIM THE POWER OF THE BLOOD OF CHRIST TO CLEANSE FROM SIN. THE SAME LIGHT HAS GUIDED THOUSANDS OF SIN-BURDENED SOULS TO THE TRUE SOURCE OF PARDON AND PEACE. FOR THE EPISTLE TO THE CHURCH AT ROME, EVERY CHRISTIAN HAS REASON TO THANK GOD.”

Ellen G. White, *Acts of the Apostles*, 373.2-3

INTRODUCTION

Letter to the Romans

IT'S PUREST GOSPEL

"A letter from Paul of Tarsus? The former Pharisee? Isn't he the guy who persecuted the brethren in Jerusalem? Saul, that was his name, right? So, he is now one of the Apostles together with the Disciples of Christ?" Quite a few church members in Rome might have reacted like this when Paul's letter was opened for reading in one of their church gatherings.


There were certainly some people among the Christians in Rome who knew Paul personally, like the couple Priscilla and Aquila (CH. 16:3; SEE ACTS 18:2,18, 26) and others (SEE CH. 16). But Paul hasn't been to Rome yet so many just knew about him from hearsay. And among the early Christians there were some quite mixed messages circulating about Paul. There was his dubious background as a zealous Pharisee and defender of true and pure religion. So, is his conversion real or is he just working undercover, trying to sneak into the Christian community in order to strike when nobody expects it? We know that Paul had to face such fears and at some points he openly addressed this (1 COR 15:9; GAL 1:13-14). Others suspected Paul of lowering the godly standards for the heathens and neglecting the Law of God (ACTS 21:21-24). Someone who says that he is a Jew to the Jews and a Greek to the Greeks (1 COR 9:20-23) cannot be trusted anyway. He is a liberal.

Wrong! Paul is a fully committed follower of Christ and a devoted missionary, an ambassador of the Good News of Jesus. The Gospel needs to be proclaimed in the entire world and among all people. That is why Paul wants to travel to Rome. The church in Rome could become a missionary hub to him since he wants to go even as far as Spain (CH. 15:23-24). To prepare the church members for his arrival, Paul writes a remarkable letter, probably around the year 57 AD while being in Corinth. Many commentators consider this letter the theological testimony of Paul and the compendium of the Christian faith.¹

Paul wants the Romans to see and understand first-hand what he stands for and what his teaching is all about. It is like a summary of his preaching and an account of what the Gospel message really means. That is why the Letter to the Romans has a unique standing

in the history of the Christian church. When the New Testament canon was put together it was not by chance that this letter was placed before the rest of Paul's letters, right after the Gospels and the book of Acts. In fact, there would probably never have been a Reformation if Luther hadn't been converted – as he says himself – by reading and studying Romans.² For Luther this letter is "purest Gospel".³

I would also trace much of my own conversion story to Romans. For me, as a youth, reading Romans just hit me. I still have the old and worn-out Bible I read almost 40 years ago and in which I wrote, "That's me!" across the passage of Romans 3:9-24. That is when I started to understand the Gospel of Jesus and when the Holy Spirit, through God's Word, touched my heart. And He continues to do so by increasing my joy in Christ!

May the same happen to you as you read the letter to the Romans. May the personal reflections and commentaries of the youth directors of the Inter-European Division (EUD) collected in this volume help you grow in your understanding of the Good News of Jesus Christ. **This** is where true reformation happens! 

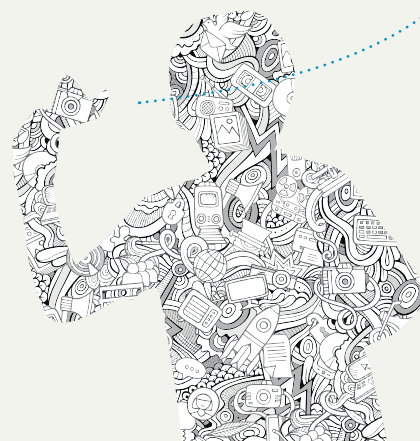


Stephan Sigg

Youth Ministries Director
of the Inter-European Division

- ¹ Luther's fellow combatant and co-reformer Melanchthon designated the Letter to the Romans as the "*doctrinea Christianea compendium*".
- ² Luther has referred especially to Romans 1:17 as the key text for his conversion and understanding of the Gospel.
- ³ Martin Luther, *Preface to the Letter of St. Paul to the Romans*, http://www.ccel.org/l/luther/romans/pref_romans.html, accessed on December 22, 2016.

CHAPTER 1



BY STEPHAN SIGG

ALL FOR THE GOOD NEWS - JESUS!

Paul: unashamed and a debtor to all

01 EXPLAIN



In today's world people use business cards to introduce themselves to others who might not know them yet or what they do. The business card usually identifies the brand or company you work for and summarizes its basic message in a tagline. It tells others who you are, your job title and your function. And along with this some may give you a catalogue or a product overview. In a similar way, Paul does this at the beginning of his Letter to the Romans. Of course, he is far from being a businessman but he is nevertheless a man with a mission introducing himself to a church he does not know and that does not really know him. Right at the beginning Paul states who he is, what he stands for and in whose service he stands: Paul, a servant of Christ, called to be a messenger of the *Euangelion*, the Good News.

Unverbalized, his introduction and self-portrait (vs. 1-4) reflect the story of his own conversion. As a devoted Jew and respected Pharisee he raged against the followers of Jesus (GAL. 1:13-14). On his way to Damascus to capture these heretics who, he thought, disrespected God and God's Law, Paul was struck by a blinding light (ACTS 9:1-3). Convinced then to be a defender of the truth, Paul was brought to his senses when he had a personal encounter with Jesus Christ. He realized that he had been raging against the Son of God (ACTS 9:4-5). This personal encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus changed the paradigms of his life. Now, instead of fighting against Jesus and His followers, Paul felt the personal call to fight *for* Jesus and proclaim Him among the nations

(GAL 1:15-16). Paul thus found the divine calling and destiny that God had planned for him well in advance. Through his own experience Paul learned that Jesus Christ, our risen Lord, is the centre of faith and Scripture and that acceptance and righteousness are undeserved gifts of the living God of love and grace.

This Good News is what needs to be proclaimed not just among the Jews but also among the heathen nations. Paul sees Rome as a perfect place from where the Gospel of Jesus Christ can be carried to the nations. He desires the Christians in Rome to join him in this mission (vs. 5-6) when he visits them (vs. 10-11; 16:5-7). Through their mutual faith in Jesus and as God's saints and beloved ones they are connected anyway. Paul wishes them, and us, what is most essential for our lives: grace and peace from our heavenly Father and Savior (v. 7). The sense of belonging together is also evident in Paul's intercession and in his desire to meet his fellow brothers and sisters to encourage each other for growth (vs. 9-13).

In the end, Paul is fully committed to spreading the Gospel of Jesus everywhere. He is not ashamed of the Gospel in any way. He has experienced its liberating power in Jesus Christ himself and he knows that God's righteousness is evident in the salvation of everyone that believes and trusts in Jesus (vs. 14-17). Forgiveness is available and reconciliation is offered to the fallen world (2 COR 5:18-19). The Father's arms are wide open to all who seek Him. The fact is, we are all His creation but we have lost our destiny – both Jews and non-Jews. Following our own ways will not only lead us away from God our Creator and corrupt the gift of life in its spiritual, physical and moral dimensions, but it will ultimately end in eternal death, which is the consequence of sin and represents the "wrath" of God at the end of human history (vs. 18-32) when Jesus returns (1 THESS 1:9-10).

02 REFLECT



What is good news to you? The first day of vacation that you eagerly longed for? A substantial raise in your salary? Passing a test with flying colours? Having someone you fell in love with finally tell you that they love you back? Or that a tissue sample of your body reveals a benign tumour so you do not have to worry about a deadly cancer anymore? It's all good news, right? It's **good** news, not just a positive headline. It is information that affects you personally and changes your perspective. Good news gets you emotional, maybe even passionate.

That is what Paul means when he's speaking about the Good News of Jesus Christ. The *Euangelion* in his time was usually associated with the proclamation of the end of war (we won!) and the beginning of a new period of peace. But for Paul this victory and peace is associated with one person, Jesus, and the fact that He is the Christ (the Greek word for Messiah). The One that all Scripture, the Old as finally also the New Testament, talks about (SEE LUKE 4:17-21; 18:31, 24:27, 32, 44-45). Jesus is the Good News and knowing Him changes everything. This is surely because Paul had a personal encounter with Jesus that no man could take away. He could see that Jesus is real and alive and that's why he is so passionate about Him.

Jesus Christ is not just another tragic figure in the history of human prophets and do-gooders. He has nothing to do with an ancient celebrity or a Jewish healer and deceiver worshiped by the masses until boredom took hold. Jesus is the Son of God, and as such the living manifestation of God's character and the embodiment of God's word. Jesus' lineage does not just reach back to King David, but to the ultimate King of the universe (SEE COL. 1:15-17; PHIL. 2:5-8). Those who see the Son see the Father and vice versa (JOHN 14:9-10). So, if you really want to know God then look to Jesus. Paul proclaims Jesus as the Good News because in Him we can see how and who God is: The God of love who can heal our brokenness, forgive and cleanse our guilt and restore the life He has created us for. He took the curse of our sins upon Himself and died on the cross, but He rose from the dead as a historic testimony that the ultimate consequence of sin is defeated. That is the victory. Because God loves us we can learn to love back. We can live under God's grace and in peace with Him, our neighbour and ourselves.

You see, for Paul Jesus is not just a nice Christian headline or an empty promise of comfort. This Good News is existential and everything in the opening of his unique manifesto of faith to the Christians in Rome orbits around Jesus (vs. 1-17). That is fascinating because Jesus is **reality**. That God loves you and gives you new

perspectives in life becomes real in Him. Paul – who was a self-righteous and zealous defender of religion – suddenly turns into a passionate messenger of God's love, grace and forgiveness. He became a servant of Jesus. He understood that we are all in need of grace whether we live in ignorance of God or in open rebellion, and, yes, even if we sincerely try to please and impress God. We all are sinners (IN CHAPTERS 1-3 HE IS TRYING TO PROVE THAT) and there is no reason to despise or condemn others. He no longer separated people according to race, colour, culture or educational background. He became a debtor to all of them (v. 14) because he got to know Jesus.

Because Jesus is real you can have true purpose in life and you do not have to struggle for acceptance and human praise just to be loved. Instead, you **are** a saint in Jesus, you do not have to **become** one. He calls you so because you are a beloved child of God: His creation. You can breathe now. You can live in peace. The Good News is alive in Jesus. That is what made Paul so passionate. There was nothing to be ashamed of because there is no other Good News and nothing more important to believe and to proclaim than this: Jesus is real.

“PAUL REALIZED WE ALL NEED JESUS. IN HIM YOU SEE NOT ONLY WHO GOD IS BUT ALSO WHO YOU ARE AND WHAT YOU'RE ABOUT TO BECOME.”

Yet real is also the consequence of sin, and that is what Paul is unfolding in a sharp contrast in the second part of Romans chapter 1 (vs. 18-32). Sin is what corrupts life because it is based on the satanic hubris that life can work independently from the Creator and Inventor of life. But disconnected from God we miss the mark, we miss the purpose of life, and that is evident in the fact that we replace the worship of our Creator with the worship of ourselves and of the things we create. This is idolatry. Humans worship anything: power, money, the free market, consumerism, beauty, sports, entertainment – you name it. Just look around you. We create our own gods. Things we trust and align our lives with. Things we think we can handle and manipulate the way we want. But you cannot do that with God. You are free to replace Him, but this comes with a cost. Nothing else will fill the void in your soul. No stuff, no pleasure, no made-up religion.

The void in human souls will not be satisfied by sex either. Sexual perversion – using other humans or even animals to selfishly satisfy their lust and sensual cravings – had become quite common in the Hellenistic culture and Paul is certainly referring to the sexual confusion of his time as a vivid illustration of the confusion that sin creates. The *epithumia* “sinful pleasures” and *akatharsia* “(sexual) impurity” Paul mentions (v. 24) have been generally associated with adultery, the all-too-common pederasty (sex between a male adult, usually of the upper class, and a teenage boy), homosexual activities of both men and women as well as the involvement of animals in the sexual act. All of this just documents that something is wrong.

But that is also evident if you look at how humans treat each other and what they do to each other (vs. 29-31). Humanity suffers under the weight of egoistic and terrible misbehaviour as a consequence of having lost *the* Source of Love. The harmony of life that existed after “God saw all that he had made, [which] was very good” (GENESIS 1:31) is broken. Peace is lost.

Finally, we reap what we sow. Disconnected from God we do not only lose connection to *the* Source of Love and Peace, but also to Life itself. The ultimate consequence of this is death. That is what Paul associates with the “wrath” of God. But there is a solution to the state we are in: Jesus! God has been ready to clean the mess and restore Love and Peace, the Life we lost. And you and I can be part of that! —

03 APPLY



So many people today have such a distorted understanding of God. Some, because they look at the religious expressions and institutions that claim to represent who God is, what He wants and how we get to Him. We all know what terrible things have happened and happen in the name of religion, including Christianity. Paul himself was once a representative of a self-righteous and holier-than-thou attitude and thought that defending his God and the truth justified using violence against others who did not believe the same. But he learned that God is different when he met Jesus.

Other people just see the suffering and what’s going wrong in this world and blame God – if there is a God at all – for not interfering. If there were a God, He would stop us from doing what we do to each other and to this planet. But God did enter this world and became one of us. He is not indifferent to our human condition. He is all about healing and restoring. He showed that He is all about love and grace. Despite sin He does not condemn us, but forgives and embraces us. He is all about Love and Peace. But the good life cannot just be imposed on us. We need to embrace it. And we learn this when we meet Jesus and accept His call to follow Him.

Paul realized we **all** need Jesus. In Him you see not only who God is but also who you are and what you’re about to become. One way to meet Jesus is to look for Him in Scripture. Just ask Him to reveal Himself to you, and then you’ll see! —

04 ASK



01 Try to remember a moment when you received really good news. What was it about and how did it affect you?

02 What is the Good News about Jesus for you? What do you learn from Jesus?

03 What is the consequence of sin and why doesn't God just stop it? Or does He?

05 QUOTE



“IF YOU DO NOT
FIND GOD IN
CHRIST, YOU WILL
NOT FIND HIM
ANYWHERE; TRY
AS YOU MIGHT.”

Martin Luther

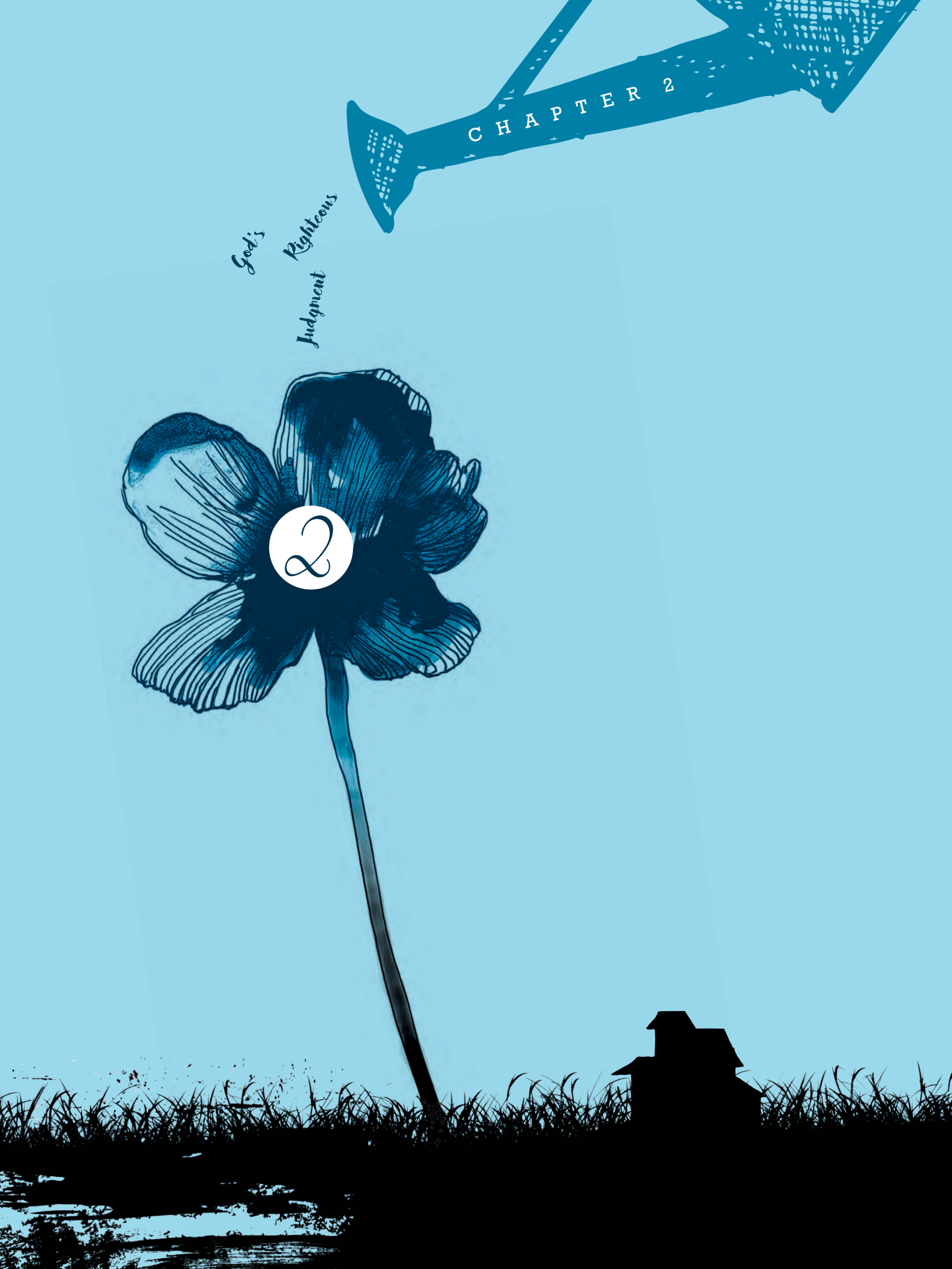


Stephan Sigg
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CHAPTER 2

God's
Righteous
Judgment

2



BY BENJAMIN STAN

TOUGH LOVE!

Does God play favorites?

01 EXPLAIN



As Paul makes his transition from the first to the second chapter of Romans, he turns his attention to the synagogue members of Rome, to those first to condemn others for their sinful lives. Paul starts his message by pointing out that the Jews were just as guilty of suppressing the truth of God as the Gentiles. God had revealed Himself to them both, in fact even more to the Jews, just so that none would have an excuse for their sinfulness.

The Jews, however, received special blessings from God and put themselves on a pedestal. From this pedestal they looked down upon others, became judges and completely ignored Jesus' command to "judge not, lest you be judged" (MATTHEW 7:1).

In fact they put so much emphasis on being God's chosen people, they forgot that God's watchful eye was just as much over the Gentiles as over themselves. "You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, ... because you who pass judgment do the same things" (ROMANS 2:1).

Paul wanted to remind them that in His judgment, God is not playing favorites. He is Truth and judges based on truth (v. 2), as He is just, and impartial. God's goodness and tolerance do not take away from this: in fact He uses them to lead us toward repentance (v. 4). But this will not be forever. In fact, if no repentance occurs, God "will give to each person according to what he has done" (v. 6), in each case, whether salvation (v. 7) or condemnation (v. 8), it will be to the "Jew first" and then to the Gentile.

The reason for the "Jew first" is found in the many blessings given them by God: one such difference being the law (v. 14), which

became of such great significance to some that they stopped obeying it and started worshipping it as an inanimate object. The law, however, must be obeyed, and if it is truly obeyed then it will be seen in the lives of those whose hearts are touched by it. Otherwise, privileged or not, judgment will be pronounced (v. 16).

Because of his love for God's chosen, and his desire for their salvation, Paul begins pointing out the value found in the privileges of being called a Jew. To them God gave His written law, and with them He entered into a special covenantal relationship. Because of this they came to know His will, and were given the ability of discernment between right and wrong, because God wanted them to become a guide for the blind, a light for those in darkness (ISAIAH 42:6, 7), instructors and teachers of the Gentiles (v. 20). Paul wanted them to know that all of these privileges were not bragging rights, but a reason to rise up to the responsibility of God's calling.

With the question "you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself?" Paul asks a series of rhetorical questions, to make them see their fallen paths and change their ways. Without doing so, they are in danger of making the Gentiles blaspheme against the name of God.

In closing, Paul approached the other boasting sign of the covenant, circumcision, the mark that distinguished the Jews among the nations. Paul neither speaks against nor for circumcision, but just as with the law he places the value on obedience. And while the Jews continue on their path of disobedience saying that they are the only ones that can enter into a covenant with God, Paul tells them that their outward mark loses its value if they do not obey the law. In fact there are Gentiles who have accepted God's will in their lives, and God has entered into a covenant with them, and God is pleased by this relationship. Therefore, let us not kid ourselves: we all need to "judge not, lest you be judged".

02 REFLECT



A FALSE SENSE OF SECURITY

One of my favorite stories tells of a time long, long ago and a kingdom far, far away, where a rich king hired a "fool" to entertain him and make him laugh when he was sad. He gave the fool a golden scepter and told him that when he met a greater fool than he, he should pass the golden scepter to that person.

Years passed and one day the king grew very ill. As he neared death, the king called for his "fool," wanting to be made to laugh one last time. "I'm going on a very long journey," said the king to the fool. "Have you made preparations and arranged for accommodations at your destination?" asked the fool. "No," answered the king. "I've been too busy." The fool handed the king his golden scepter and said, "Sire, you are a greater fool than me."

When reading this chapter it is very possible to fall in one of two traps. One trap is thinking that since Paul is talking about the Jews, his warning has nothing to do with me. Better yet, by comparison to those who received this message, I am tempted to thank God that I am a good, moral, upstanding citizen, with nothing in common with the recipients of his writings. The other trap is thinking that Paul wants us to suspend all judgment, to put aside our moral compass; to not have the courage to name wrong, wrong, but close our eyes and become so tolerant that we become intolerant toward those who are not as tolerant as us.

The danger behind these traps is that we are sinners: limited sinners, who can err greatly in our judgments. And we either become all-tolerant or over-judgmental: when in fact God does not ask us to suspend our moral judgment to the point of becoming vulnerable when faced with moral dilemmas, nor be so set on thinking that we are called by God to point out the faults in others. In fact I believe the opposite of being judgmental is not being accepting, but being humble.

Humble to accept that we are no better than others, and humble to let the One that is able to see all the facts, motives, attitudes, and actions, both hidden and visible, to judge rightly. Willing to accept that He sees all, and if judgment is withheld it is not because we are ignored and sin is tolerated, but because we are loved and we are experiencing grace so that we have the opportunity to be restored. The question is, when will we believe this?

STORING UP WRATH

Abraham Lincoln said you can fool all of the people some of the time, and you can fool some of the people all of the time, but you

can't fool all of the people all of the time. In Romans 2 Paul says that God cannot be fooled at all. And we have the opportunity to repent. In fact, every time we sin and we think that we have fooled God, instead of making deposits of grace in our spiritual bank account, we're just making continual deposits of judgment. It does not matter who we are, or where we are, we are always in God's sight.

The time will come when all our safety nets will be taken away. Then it will not matter that we felt trapped, or that we were under the pressure of our peers. Then all our great intentions and our championed causes will be measured by who we really are, and our evaluations will be thorough.

Until then we can probably find many excuses for our behavior. While others lose their temper, we have righteous indignation. While others are annoying, we are just having a bad day. While others have a critical spirit, we simply tell it like it is. While other people gossip, we share prayer requests. And we focus on others while excusing ourselves so much that we stop seeing the ways in which we dishonor God. When will we realize that God can't be fooled?

WRITTEN IN STONE/HEART

In "My Favorite Child" Erma Bombeck writes, "Every mother has a favorite child. She cannot help it. She is only human. I have mine. That child for whom I felt a special closeness. The one I reach out to in a rare moment, to share a love that no one else could possibly understand. All mothers have their favorite child. It is always the same one, the one who needs you at the moment for whatever reason – to cling to, to shout at, to hurt, to hug, to flatter, to reverse charges to, to unload on, to use – but mostly to be there." (Excerpt from Bombeck, Erma. *Forever, Erma*. iBooks.)

So, does God love you? Who is His favorite? The churchgoer, the Bible-thumper, the missionary, the tithe-giver, the musician, the nature lover, the professor, the student, the ...

Does God play favorites? There is danger in thinking that He does. The Israelites thought so. They had the stone-written law to prove it. They believed that God gave it to them because He loved them. And He did. But they chose to become its protector instead of its sharer. They believed that the law was a safeguard from the judgment. They believed that if they framed it on their walls, placed it as a magnet on their refrigerator, or hanged it from their rearview mirror, even if they sinned, they would become right with God, over others. After all, others were not so eager to display it. But they were wrong.

Because others had the law as well: written on their hearts. In fact, Paul says that all people, both religious and irreligious, have the requirements of the Ten Commandments written on their hearts. In fact, irreligious people often obey parts of the law and can be very moral. Many are honest, are of great character, are faithful to

their spouse, honor their parents, do not steal, and do not commit any crimes. This does not mean that they are made right with God, but it does mean that they have God's law in their hearts.

We all have a moral compass. God put it in all of us. It may not function properly anymore due to sin's influence in our lives, but it is there telling us when we violate God's law, and we are all guilty of doing it. Therefore none of us can stand in front of God's judgment based on our morality or our merits.

So, does God have a favorite? I believe He does. More than one. In fact, one of them is **you**. Truth be told, we **all** are His favorite (JOHN 3:16). And the reason God does not want us to become entangled in this judging war, is because He knows that it can keep us so busy that we will never have time to prepare for the real journey.

Don't forget that "God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him."

**"DON'T FORGET THAT
'GOD SO LOVED THE
WORLD, THAT HE GAVE
HIS ONLY BEGOTTEN
SON, THAT WHOEVER
BELIEVES IN HIM SHALL
NOT PERISH, BUT HAVE
ETERNAL LIFE.'"**



03 APPLY

Clearly, judging others is detrimental to our spiritual journey. It gives us a false sense of security, by making us believe that we are all alright, that nothing is needed, not even a relationship with God. It encourages us to look at others' faults so much that we may not be able to see ours. It gives us a sense of entitlement to the point that our faith is displayed but not lived.

So what do we do?

Let's take God up on His offer, and start living true lives for Him by focusing on our inner relationships instead of our outward rituals. Let us practice what we say. Let our faith and our relationship with God be seen, heard and felt.

"You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lamp-stand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven" (MATTHEW 5:14-16).

Spend uninterrupted time with Christ today. Tell Him your everything.

04 ASK



01

Think of the last time you thought of yourself as better than others.
How do you feel about it today? Why is it dangerous to judge someone?

02

What is the difference between human judgment
and God's judgment?

03

This passage also speaks about the value of having a healthy conscience. What
influences have helped you shape your conscience?

05 QUOTE



“A CHURCH WILL NEVER DIE FROM THE IMMORALITY IN HOLLYWOOD OR THE CORRUPTION IN WASHINGTON. BUT IT WILL DIE FROM CORROSION WITHIN—FROM THOSE WHO BEAR THE NAME OF JESUS BUT HAVE NEVER MET HIM, AND FROM THOSE WHO HAVE RELIGION, BUT NO RELATIONSHIP.”

Max Lucado



Benjamin Stan
Pathfinder Director
Romanian Union

CHAPTER 3



BY IGNAZIO BARBUSCIA

NONE OR EVERYONE?

*Is grace available to none,
some or everyone?*

01 EXPLAIN



Because of sin, human beings have been removed from the intimate presence of God, thus losing the amazing privilege they were meant to enjoy in this life. Curiously enough, some passages of the Old Testament are quoted in verses 10 to 18 of Romans 3 referring to various parts of the body (throats, tongues, lips, mouths, feet) so as to underline that the whole being has been corrupted by sin – something has changed, and we’ve been changed consequently, from head to toe. However, after this sad interlude, Paul goes on to say that plans were made to restore everything back to the original conditions. As we read the chapter, we can see several opposed terms – none vs. everyone, law vs. faith, righteousness vs. sin. The aim here is to contrast a term with another or even to clarify a concept through the other. Here Paul is indeed trying to explain that, just as everyone has sinned, everyone has the possibility to be redeemed. No one is underprivileged and, more importantly, no one is favored over anyone else. The Jews thought that being born a Jew was an advantage just because they were the descendants of the chosen people of God – Israel. But Paul says that even biologically and ethnically different people are absolutely equal in God’s eyes as regards faith. Thanks to his faith in Jesus Christ, Paul discovered what brings down the barriers between pagans and Jews. Through the sacrifice of Jesus, the necessity of keeping the law of Moses is no longer the only way to salvation. Thanks to Jesus, all human beings are given equal opportunity to be saved. Christ’s justification, redemption and atonement are offered to everyone, without distinction. These words may sound strange or obscure, but I am convinced that

studying this letter from Paul will help you understand them better. The law of Moses was given to Israel not only as a guideline in their relationship with God, but also to limit their tendency to feel proud in front of God for keeping this very law. In Paul’s time – which was also Jesus’ time – the Jews considered the keeping of the law of Moses as the basis to judge if someone belonged to God or not, and, therefore, whether they were saved or not. Woe to those who dared contradict the law! They were seen as seditious. For this reason Paul says, “Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid: yea, we establish the law” (v. 31, KJV). They had forgotten and misunderstood the purpose of the law.

The law informs us about sin. It shows us how helpless we are, but it does not give us a cure. However great their need for a solution, sinful human beings cannot solve the situation. The Jews had forgotten that love is the fulfillment of the law, and that the law is fulfilled – not cancelled – through faith. Have we forgotten that, as well? Just to remind you, the issue has been praiseworthy settled by Someone Else, regardless of everyone and everything. —

**“THANKS TO JESUS,
ALL HUMAN BEINGS
ARE GIVEN EQUAL
OPPORTUNITY TO
BE SAVED.”**

02 REFLECT



Some years ago I went to a friend's house – I had to pick him up and take him along to a meeting. His house was right at the corner of a one-way road and, in order to get there, you had to drive around the block. I was in my car and I was late. I looked to see if anyone was coming, but I saw no one, so I decided to enter the one-way road in the wrong direction – after all, I only had to drive five metres. I know what you are thinking: "You must be crazy! That is so irresponsible!" Well, you are right, but that night I thought: "It is just five metres... He lives right on the corner... nobody is coming... I can do that." Everything was alright; I entered the road and after five metres I parked my car.

As I was getting out of the car, a man wearing a uniform drew near. I know what you are thinking: "It serves you right, you crazy guy!" The man was a police officer and he asked to see my documents. I was driving a rented car. I instinctively opened the compartment where I usually keep the documents in my own car, but I could not find them. I started sweating. The officer kept asking for my documents, but I simply could not find them. Then he told me to get out of the car and follow him. My friend's house was just opposite the police station. As he was leaving the police station, that officer had caught me carrying out that hazardous manoeuvre. I followed him into the office, and I gave him my driving licence, my ID (on which you can clearly read that I am a pastor) and the car rental contract. After telling me much more than what you have just thought, he went into his office and left me in the waiting room. I couldn't respond to the policeman's rebuke; I couldn't say a word. I felt humiliated; I felt like an idiot, an irresponsible jerk.

After a while, the officer came back and said to me: "I will ruin you! You are crazy! We will withdraw your driving licence so that you stop putting your own life and that of others in danger!" Then he went back to his desk and left me alone again. After those words I started to realize what I had done, and the troubles that would imply. At the beginning I tried to justify myself but then I felt even guiltier – I had asked for it! I will spare you what I was thinking right then. I could already see myself walking to work or catching a bus – which I hate – to move from one side of town to the other. I was restless. I was experiencing some pretty rough moments.

After forty-five minutes – which seemed endless to me – the police officer stepped into the waiting room, gave me my documents back and said: "You may go!" I asked myself: "You are saying that I can leave with my documents. Have I got it right?" The officer saw

that I was hesitating and he repeated: "You may go! I don't want to see you again!" I tried to say something, like: "Thank you, Sir!... I am sorry... I won't do it again, I promise!" but he kept talking over me, saying, "Go away!" I took my documents and left as if nothing had happened. Now, I have learned the lesson – any time I pass by that street or see a one-way road I still can't help but think about that night and what I went through. I know what you are thinking: "You got off lightly! You are lucky!" Was that luck? Well... I am not that sure; but what I did learn is that now I know what it means to be a sinner, someone who has made a mistake. I have understood what the word "grace" means – receiving something unexpectedly, but mostly undeservedly. I have understood how you can feel when you make a lot of mistakes, when you are dead wrong, when you expect to be punished because you're guilty, and yet you are set free without even deserving it. I have understood what it means to be "justified freely by His grace" (v. 24 KJV). I have understood what it means that "the righteousness of God without the law is manifested" (v. 21). I did not deserve to be pardoned: rather, I deserved to be punished. As human beings we often find ourselves in this situation and we typically make mistakes.

Sometimes we make mistakes shamelessly, without thinking about the possible consequences. Paul reminds us that "all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (v. 23). No one is guiltless, but the salvation that Jesus has provided for us embraces everyone and copes with the universality of sin. Only someone who really loves you can offer you something like this. Just know that "great as is the shame and degradation through sin, even greater will be the honor and exaltation through redeeming love" (E. G. WHITE, *CHRIST'S OBJECT LESSONS*, p. 162.4). God's righteousness has been revealed to all sinners in Jesus Christ. It is difficult to understand, just as it was difficult for me – and it still is today – to understand how that police officer let me go completely unpunished. This is the reason why Paul says that "faith" – having faith in Jesus – is necessary. Everyone can have free access to grace through faith.

**"THROUGH FAITH,
WE CAN EXPERIENCE
WHAT CHRIST HAS
ACCOMPLISHED FOR US.
JESUS DIED FOR
EVERYONE, NOT FOR
A FEW NOR FOR NONE."**

There are no barriers that can prevent us from receiving this gift besides our willingness to receive it. We have all been given His salvation through Jesus Christ freely and undeservedly – this is what He has done for humanity. All those who believe in Him and in what He has done (v. 22) can benefit from this gift.

Through faith, we can experience what Christ has accomplished for us. Jesus died for everyone, not for a few nor for none. Do not make His sacrifice meaningless. You may feel unworthy and undeserving at times, but you must know that God has declared believers to be righteous in Christ at the beginning of their journey, not at the end. In Paul and Jesus' time some people thought that they necessarily had to do something in order to deserve salvation. After all, thinking with our human mind, we see that we are given gifts only when we accomplish something (for example, on our birthday, on our anniversary, or when we graduate). There must be a specific reason to receive a gift. But if God has declared us to be righteous in Christ at the beginning of our journey, it cannot be for something we have not accomplished yet. It is rather because salvation is really a "free" gift given to "everyone" who accepts it by faith.

03 APPLY



What Jesus Christ has accomplished in terms of justification has already been made available to Christians. Jesus' death and resurrection have their effects not only on the past, but also on the present. He has brought the human being back to a condition of righteousness, innocence and forgiveness.

I can already benefit from His gift today, even if I live in a distressed, suffering world. I can share this gift with others and get them involved in what Jesus has done for me. How? By trying to resemble Jesus and serving Him through the skills and talents He has given me. No matter what project you take up, let Jesus be part of it. Do not bury your talents underground, but use them for God's service. If you realize that something is causing you to drift away from God, then stop and ask Him: "Lord, here am I. What do You want me to do?"

He loves you and will accept you unconditionally. He will forgive you without reserve because He is benevolent and charitable – He does not want you to miss the opportunity to live eternal life. He is your Friend.

04 ASK



01

Faith is the way we take up the challenge of the Gospel; it is the way we live the effects of what Jesus has done for each one of us. Have you put your faith in Jesus? If not, what hinders you from doing so?

02

What has helped you or helps you trust Him?
What changes has this brought to your life?

03

How do you feel about accepting an undeserved gift?

05 QUOTE



“GRACE, THEREFORE,
COSTS US NOTHING,
BUT IT COST ANOTHER
MUCH TO GET IT
FOR US. GRACE WAS
PURCHASED WITH AN
INCALCULABLE, INFINITE
TREASURE, THE SON
OF GOD HIMSELF.”

Martin Luther



Ignazio Barbuscia
Youth Director
Italian Union

CHAPTER 4



BY RUBEN GRIECO

GOD'S GIFT TO YOU!

*What a man of old ages has to do
with your faith today*

01 EXPLAIN



So before we start you would probably like to know what Romans 4 is really all about. Well, I can tell you that you have decided to look into one of the Bible's most exciting and revolutionary chapters. It transformed the lives of people in Paul's time and I am certain that it has the power to do the same in your life today.

You may have read a few verses and yet you can't seem to find any exciting revelations. You might also complain that it mostly talks about an old man from the Old Testament and what's more it also deals with the awkward subject of circumcision. You see, I'm also not very keen on thinking about circumcision. I wouldn't like to do that even if it were in the context of a history lesson.

But I must tell you it would be shortsighted to label the book of Romans as outdated and irrelevant. It would be absolutely wrong to do so! Why? you may ask. Because the meaning of Romans 4 is far greater! It contains the two most decisive aspects of our faith. Hold on now, because these are the key points. First: Paul states that we are "justified" by our faith alone, without any further actions. Now, you might ask why I choose the word "justified" and not a more current term. Well, wait and see – the term "justified" is incredibly rich in meaning and may have the potential to become your favorite word.

Being justified means being deemed good and righteous through our faith and being able to stand before God in spite of the fact

that we are all sinners. That's exactly what Paul states in the previous chapters in the book of Romans. We are all sinners and we cannot stand before God – neither you nor I. That may not sound good, but it's the truth. During Paul's time the Jews tried to follow the laws and commandments as strictly as possible. But Paul says: "No way." We are all lost, regardless. But along with this bitter statement also comes the assurance that we can be justified by our faith. This is followed by the second key part of this chapter: I talk about me and you and all of us, but this was far from being self-evident in Paul's time. Unlike today it was not possible during Paul's time to write about any of this. The only way to be one of God's children was to be Jewish. But then all of a sudden a promise is made that everyone can be justified!

**"I MAY BE A SINNER,
SADLY, BUT GOD WANTS
TO JUSTIFY ME."**

It doesn't end with this, however. Why? Because there is far more for us to discover in this chapter. Amongst other things we will find out why Paul uses a rather old person from the Bible as an example, and what in the world circumcision has to do with it. So take a deep breath, look in the mirror and say: "I may be a sinner, sadly, but God wants to justify me. And that sounds great!" Are you ready? I hope you are smiling. Let's continue.



WHY PAUL WRITES ABOUT ABRAHAM (VERSE 1)

Paul uses the example of Abraham to illustrate how everyone can be justified by faith. In this regard it's important to note the importance of the figure of Abraham at the time. When Jews heard the name "Abraham," they immediately thought of a law-abiding person. Many people may have seen Paul as a Christian writing about Abraham, the father of the Jewish faith, as a provocation. But even in that case he had their attention. For him it was not about provocation, but rather about using themes that were known to people in order for them to understand what he was trying to tell them. So, be curious about why this old man from the Old Testament is so crucial for Paul, for the people back then and also for you!

ABRAHAM'S JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH WITHOUT WORKS (VERSES 2-5)

Okay, you may object here. Whenever we think of Abraham we inevitably think about his great and adventurous acts of faith. But allow me to stop you there, as it is not any of his great deeds that Paul shares as an example when he refers to the first book of Moses, Gen. 15:6. Nothing here suggests that Abraham has done anything extraordinary up to this point, except answering the call to follow God. Paul makes this clear at the beginning of our chapter: God is the One who acts. He is the One who credits righteousness to Abraham. This is another term the Bible uses which is important to me: "credits." God credits righteousness to Abraham, and it is this step into the unknown – a decision made completely trusting that God would guide him – that leads to this.

Now what do you think of that? We don't need to accomplish anything. What's more, we can't even accomplish anything to stand before God. This frees us of all pressure. You can be relieved and trust that God will make everything turn out all right. This is the gift Abraham received and God also wants to give it to us: to you and to me, if only we believe in Him.

ABRAHAM AS THE FATHER OF FAITH FOR PAGANS (VERSES 6-12 AND 16-17)

Although I am writing of you and me I already mentioned earlier that justification did not seem to apply to all people in former times. Do you remember? Jews believed in coming closer to God through rules and laws. A non-believer or someone of a different faith, a so-called pagan, could also be redeemed, but first he had to convert to Judaism. Now imagine the uproar as Paul stands before the people and says: "You can keep your commandments and rules as much as you want, or think that you are keeping

them, but it does not make you just and it will not lead to your redemption. Believe in God, trust in Him and He will grant you the gift of justification. And not just you, but also your neighbours who are not Jewish. Even a pagan can come to God and be saved, as salvation is a gift from God."

In order to give his words even more weight Paul quotes another important person of that time: King David. And now listen to this: Paul connects David's words with Abraham's story and provides a common thread that emphasizes the notion of justification by faith for all mankind. Paul refers to one of David's statements in Psalm 32:1-2 as these verses had already expressed the same thought 1,000 years earlier. David uses the same term that Paul mentions in regard to justification. Do you remember? Earlier we talked about righteousness being credited to Abraham. David on the other hand talks about something not being "credited" or "counted": sin. This brings up another question: Paul asks who this applies to. Watch out: now circumcision becomes relevant. Paul asks himself whether this statement of sin not being counted applies only to those who are circumcised (which was a distinctive sign of God's people during that time) or also to those who are not.

Paul gives an answer himself. Actually he has already done so. Remember? Paul made it clear from the first verse that Abraham was undeservedly justified. This means his sin was not counted, although he was not circumcised yet. Circumcision was therefore not a prerequisite for justification.

Phew! After taking that hurdle, it will be much easier from this point on. In the following paragraphs it will become clear why Abraham is called the father of faith for all people. He is the father of the Jews; the people of Israel descend from him. But he is also the father of pagans who are justified by faith, even without being circumcised. Paul reemphasizes this once more when in verses 16 and 17 he cites from Gen. 17:5: "I have made you a father of many nations." Wow, what if Paul had never written this? What would have become of you, of me? After all, this is what I base my faith and my hope on today. A hope that trusts against all odds. A kind of hope that I want to learn from Abraham, who believed deeply in God's promise that at his age of 100 and his wife's of 90 they would become parents, as Paul writes in verses 18-22. Abraham understood God's greatness, and submitting to this greatness gave him hope.

WHAT THE LAW CAN AND CAN'T DO (VERSES 13-15)

Paul has made it clear that justification is neither earned by circumcision nor by keeping the law. But what about his readers? Should circumcision and law lose their meaning? What would happen then? Paul has an answer to this as well. He explains that the law can't justify us. It doesn't lead to justification, but to God's wrath. God's wrath? We will soon talk about who is the object of this wrath and how to solve this wrath-upon-someone-problem. So remember this! But one step at a time. First think of a mirror. In this

“JUSTIFICATION WILL BE CREDITED TO ALL WHO BELIEVE IN GOD AND TRUST IN HIS PROMISES.”

text Paul is saying the law itself can't absolve us. The law is important to provide us with orientation; it makes us aware of our sinful state, but it can't redeem us. I like to think of it as a mirror. The law serves as a mirror that shows us how soiled we are. However, it doesn't help us clean ourselves up. The law makes me aware that I am a sinner and that I need someone who can save me and cleanse me from my sins, as I would never be able to do.

FROM ABRAHAM TO JESUS CHRIST (VERSES 23-24)

Well now, do you notice how Paul is steering us gently toward our goal? We are now coming to the final verses. It becomes apparent that Paul had intended something far greater than a history lesson. Now he underlines the key points of this chapter: Justification will be credited to all who believe in God and who trust in His promises. When talking of promises and of someone who can do away with all our sins, all of this leads to Jesus Christ, who died for all of us and who was risen from the dead.

What a message. But wait, something is still missing. Remember? We talked about God's wrath and against whom it might be directed. And here it says Jesus has taken our place. **He** died, and thereby God's wrath has been redirected so that we may live!

03 APPLY



So what to do with all of this?

How amazing the way in which Paul has led us from Abraham to Jesus Christ! Paul helped people then and is helping us today to understand the gift of grace and to accept it.

I am convinced that today also we are all called to take this first step into the unknown, this leap of faith.

When you hear this call and start your journey in the faith like Abraham did, being a couch potato is over. Even without walking hundreds of kilometers I am absolutely certain you will experience and do great things with God: not to become justified, but because you have already been justified by Him. May God bless you!

04 ASK



01 What makes someone a role model for you?
What can you learn from Abraham?

02 How does it make you feel when you read that your
justification is a gift from God?

03 If this is a gift to all mankind, how do you want to live in order
for other people to recognize it in your life?

05 QUOTE



“CHRIST WAS TREATED AS WE DESERVE, THAT WE MIGHT BE TREATED AS HE DESERVES. HE WAS CONDEMNED FOR OUR SINS, IN WHICH HE HAD NO SHARE, THAT WE MIGHT BE JUSTIFIED BY HIS RIGHTEOUSNESS, IN WHICH WE HAD NO SHARE.”

Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 25



Ruben Grieco
Youth Director
South German Union

CHAPTER 5

5

BY SLAVI MITREV

FRIENDS AGAIN

Friends forever

01 EXPLAIN



OUR WORLD CLAMORS FOR...

In spite of our general high standard of living, we doubtlessly find that we live in a want-ridden world where enormous human needs cry for fulfillment. Let's stop right here. Is this true? Don't rush; just think about your greatest need. Is it the same as the world's need?

About 2,000 years ago there was a man who grabbed the pen and described what our world longs for in a few sentences. You'll be surprised to know that it's not feeding the hungry, nor discovering the cure for AIDS or cancer. It's the millennial **longing for peace**. Yes, we need peace among ethnic and religious communities; peace between competing political parties; peace among friends; peace in the family.

Even more disturbing are our constant failures to achieve this longed-for peace. And it's more than logical for our souls to cry out with that deafening groan: Where did I go wrong? What did I overlook? Well, here is the Good News: the Fifth Chapter of the Book of Romans. Inspired by God, Paul adds another revelation: "Don't miss the invisible but enormous need for peace... **peace with God.**"

ESCAPE FOR PEACE

They say I'm a good guy ;-) but I admit that I wasn't the most obedient teenager in the world. I had my downs as anybody else, seriously. My friends betrayed me; the girl I fell for didn't respond. Add to that cocktail a solid dose of boring routine and you'll see, just like me, that it's not a good mix to drink. I simply *had* to run away. There had to be a better place for me, or so I thought while putting some sandwiches in my rucksack, then taking the road to... nowhere.

The cold winter day was a reflection of my soul as I walked. I reached a forest and stopped near a riverbank. I cleared the snow, made a fire and ate the rest of my food for dinner. I drowsed near the fire – which nearly died out at times – all night, trying to warm up.

I woke up freezing and hungry. I had to make a decision. I realized that running away from home wasn't as difficult as going back. You know what lies ahead – a severe punishment – but the scariest thing is the ceaseless flood of questions. When you have no money, no food or shelter; when your feet are soaked in water in the middle of winter, you don't have much of a choice. Still, going back home was not an option for me.

The day was cold and I started to shiver. Thrusting my hands into my pockets, I felt the coldness of my keys. Then it suddenly dawned on me that we had an attic, where I usually spent much time with my friends. They must have already searched for me there so now I could have at least a warm place to sleep in.

I walked all day and late in the evening I found myself in the warmth of my attic bed. Was my life going to be like this – an endless game of hide and seek?

A strange noise woke me up. Somebody was knocking on the door that looked out to the balcony. I instantly knew who it was. For two days and two nights my father had not stopped looking for me. And now he was standing at that same old door. Should I open it or not? What was going to happen? I knew he was a nice person who had never punished me harshly, but now I hesitated. I was paralyzed by guilt and fear. *Should I open the door?* was a question of trust in his character, of belief in his goodness.

While a whirlwind of thoughts was swirling in my head, there was another knock on the door. This time I heard him say my name in his usual kind and gentle way. Extremely ashamed, I reached for the handle and opened the door. He came into the room and asked, "How are you?" There was no scolding, no calling names, no punishment... just a warm, fatherly hug. —



I. WHERE DID EVERYTHING START? (ROMANS 5:12)

A long time ago two individuals decided to run away from their Father. All the world knows their names – Adam and Eve. They probably experienced dissatisfaction too, and strove for a better life as well. It didn't take much time to taste the bitterness of their new life, which apart from pain also brought them a serious genetic disease: a cruel illness passing from generation to generation and bearing the sinister name "distrust in my Father" or the so-called sin (ROMANS 5:12).

And now, thousands of years later, we are all looking for absolute happiness far from our Father's home, just like them. After ages of wandering and suffering, it dawns on us that it's better to come back home. But then we realize it is actually more difficult than running away. Why? Because we've been infected with a "distrust in my Father".

All that our life has so far projected into our minds – I'll be punished, I deserve it; it's too late, I've gone too far – will prevent us from going back. Used to having short and superficial relationships, we are too quick to give up on them when things reach a dead end and to "tear" the bond. Many years ago we "tore" the link with our Father, but He has never stopped looking for us. And now that He has found us, He is standing behind that door that can be opened only from the inside, and He is knocking. What comes to our mind: I will be rebuked, punished, judged? The apostle Paul assures us of just the opposite. God is not like us. He doesn't want "torn" relationships, He wants them restored. He wants us to walk together with Him again. He wants to restore peace among us. Is it possible? The apostle Paul says it is.

II. TWO PREREQUISITES FOR PEACE WITH GOD (ROMANS 5:1, 2)

History always remembers the names of the pioneers in a given sphere. On 29 May 1953, Edmund Hillary and the Nepalese Sherpa mountaineer Tenzing Norgay became the first climbers confirmed to have reached the summit of Mount Everest. On 21 July 1969, Neil Armstrong reached the moon and took the first step on it. But still more praiseworthy are those who take the first step and reach out to the broken human heart and not to cold, lifeless matter. Everybody has heard about the "big soul" Mahatma Gandhi or the man who took the first step to attain a genuine equality between blacks and whites – Martin Luther King. The more lasting the peace, the more long-lasting the name of the person treading the path to achieve it will be in our minds. That's why people will never forget one name, the name of a God reaching out to His children

in peace – the name of Jesus Christ. "...we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (ROMANS 5:1B, NKJV). The first prerequisite for peace is the presence of an individual who is willing and ready to take the first step in achieving it.

I don't know what would have happened if my father hadn't looked for me. I have asked myself why he did that since it was entirely my fault. The answer turns out to be simple – because I'm his son. 2,000 years ago God was incarnated in human form to "seek and to save that which was lost" (LUKE 19:10). He walked down the whole path of reconciliation and now that peace is real (ROMANS 5:11). There He is, standing at your door, knocking. Will you open the door? (Write it down.)

"BUT GOD DEMONSTRATES HIS OWN LOVE TOWARD US, IN THAT WHILE WE WERE STILL SINNERS, CHRIST DIED FOR US."

When I was a little child, my parents sternly warned me never to open the door to a stranger when they were out. If the doorbell rang, I had to ask, "Who is it?" It's difficult to open the door to a stranger and to believe that the person you see for the first time will bring joy into your home. And if we add to this the fact that you've just done the greatest mischief of your life, it would be difficult to let even your own father in: unless... you know him well enough to believe in him; in other words, you are sure of his goodwill and desire to sort out all the mess.

You'll be surprised to know that faith is not a blind and ill-grounded experience, but "the substance of things hoped for" and also "the evidence of things not seen" (HEBREWS 11:1). **The second prerequisite for peace is the certainty of and the belief in the other's goodwill.**

"Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God" (ROMANS 5:1). The Greek word translated here as "justified" is in simple past tense and expresses a fully completed action. This means that when He stands at the door of our hearts knocking, Jesus has already forgiven us: not because we've done something to deserve it, but because we're His children. Do you believe that? (Write it down.)

III. THE LOVE WHICH OVERCOMES EVERYTHING (ROMANS 5:3-5)

You've probably heard about those huge forest fires that destroy thousands of acres of land in just one day. The fire burns so wildly and the temperatures are so high that if you decide to put it out with water, all you do is rekindle it with even more intensity. The greatest threat for the fire now turns into its best fuel because due to the high temperatures water decomposes to hydrogen and oxygen. Is it good news? Of course it is, but only in the case of a fire in our own hearts. If someone loves you – not with a love fire the size of a lighter, but with a love like a great forest fire – all cruel mocking, threats or crises will be unable to put it out. They will only rekindle it even more intensely.

In Romans 5:3-5 Paul speaks about difficulties and trials which intensify the love fire. Not because these are some special kind of challenges – highly inflammable – but because something happened in our hearts beforehand: "... because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit" (ROMANS 5:5).

The peace Jesus offers us will never be exhausted – no matter what difficulties or trials we face. On the contrary, at such moments we'll feel it far more abundantly.

IV. WHAT IS LOVE ACTUALLY? (ROMANS 5:6-8)

Let's remember the "golden text of the Bible" – John 3:16 disclosing God's love to us. What better description of love can you find? In fact, we can. Here is something better – a verse describing what our nature is, that is, that of the people for whom God decided to sacrifice His life, "For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly" (ROMANS 5:6). I offer it to you as a golden text. We'd better highlight it heavily. And if we still wonder what "without strength" and "ungodly" means, let's keep our pens ready and continue underlining: "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (ROMANS 5:8).

The words fail us and prolonged silence turns them into tears running down our sin-battered faces. Reading these verses again and again, I realize that this is love – true love, which loves not "because of" but "in spite of".

The fact that God gave His Son for us when we were still sinners should dispel our every doubt in His goodwill. Let's take a hold of his outstretched hand for peace by faith. _____

03 APPLY



On 20 July 2012, Peter and Christo, both about fifty, were walking down a beach with a tempestuous sea. At a distance, two children continued playing in spite of the parents' feeble warnings not to go into the water. A second later their laughter turned into crying and then loud shouts were heard from the man and the woman, who were staring into the raging sea hoping to catch a glimpse of their children. Peter and Christo didn't waste even a second thinking; they jumped into the water. Why? These were not their children; they could have left the parents to cope with these little rascals. After the severe battle with the roaring elements the two children were saved but... the two men were gone. In several hours other hearts would be grief-stricken. Two other women would be kneeling and crying inconsolably over the lifeless bodies of the two men. The beach is so desolate, only them and the piercing cold wind. No trace of the family whose grief has turned into joy. The relatives of the two heroes would not receive gratitude for the children saved, neither now, nor two days later at the funeral of the brave men. (INSPIRED BY A TRUE STORY.)

2,000 years ago a Man's body was lying lifeless after a severe battle before the eyes of His Father. There is only one reason for all this: the longing to bring life back to His disobedient children; to bring life back to a fallen world. Almost none of the saved came to His funeral. Although He knew what would happen, He chose to jump into the troubled waters of this confused world. You may ask why? Because when we were still sinners, He died to give us life. Because for Him the peace between Him and us was more precious than His own life. (INSPIRED BY A TRUE STORY.)

Jesus is standing, smiling, at your door... will you smile back? _____

04 ASK



01

What can stimulate your desire to restore the peace and relationship with Jesus, to trust in Him and open the door of your heart? Write down a few sentences about your reasons.

02

Think about the price God has paid for restoring peace and your relationship with Him. Why did He do it?

05 QUOTE



“PEACE BEGINS
WITH A SMILE.”

Mother Teresa



Slavi Mitrev
Youth Director
Bulgarian Union

6

DEAD TO SIN,

♦ **ALIVE TO GOD** ♦

← ¹WHAT SHALL WE SAY THEN?
SHALL WE CONTINUE IN SIN
THAT GRACE MAY ABOUND? →

♦ ²CERTAINLY NOT! ♦

HOW SHALL WE WHO DIED TO

★ **S I N** ★

◆
LIVE ANY LONGER IN IT?

BY FABIAN LOOSER GRÖNROOS

POWERFUL GRACE

Operating manual on how to defeat sin

01 EXPLAIN



Thou shalt grow

AT THE TURNING POINT

Turning the pages to Romans chapter six we find ourselves at the beginning of something new. So far Paul has demonstrated everyone's need for righteousness, Jews and Gentiles alike (ROM. 1:18-3:20). Then he continued explaining that righteousness comes through faith in Jesus Christ (ROM 3:21-5:21). This doctrine is called "justification": the condemned sinner is declared righteous through Christ's atoning sacrifice.

Having completed the legal aspects of justification Paul now turns his attention to the experience and the everyday life of the Christian believer. What does this new relationship mean for our lives? In chapters 6-8 he will unfold the consequences of righteousness, in particular the growing and maturing follower of Jesus Christ. Reading this section confronts us with the doctrine called sanctification, the lifelong process of transformation into the likeness of Christ.

DEAD MAN WALKING (ROMANS 6:1-14)

Sanctification is a term that Paul as a matter of fact never uses in the entire epistle to the Romans, except in Romans 15:16 where he uses the word "sanctified". Nevertheless this is precisely the theme of the following section. He talks about the promise of victory over

sin. Does he bite off more than he can chew, or is defeating sin actually possible?

Christ has set us free not only from the penalty of sin, but also from the power of sin. Death fulfills the demands of sin but also opens the door for resurrection. Now that the old self is powerless, there is no need for a person to continue in bondage to sin. We are dead to sin, but alive in Christ.

Sanctification detached from justification ends in legalism, while sanctification fused with justification leads to the misunderstanding that everything will happen on its own. "For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace" (ROM. 6:14). One could think that now that we are under grace there are no commandments for which a Christian is responsible. However, this is not what Paul meant. His main statement is: sin cannot rule over you, now that you live in a relationship with God.

FROM SLAVERY TO SLAVERY (ROMANS 6:15-23)

There seems to be only one option. I will be enslaved either way; a slave of sin, which leads to death, or a slave of obedience, which leads to righteousness (ROMANS 6:16). There is no middle course, only black or white, and I have to choose. Faith is radical! However, this is not a new theme. Joshua challenged the Israelites at Shechem, "Choose this day whom you will serve!" (JOSHUA 24:15). And Jesus himself said, "No one can serve two masters" (MATTHEW 6:24). We are slaves, all of us; no one is free. Therefore when we come to Christ our servitude to sin is replaced with servitude to God. Being a slave of God means we are free from the old master, and we can wholeheartedly say, "Sin doesn't live here anymore!"



Dying to live

FREE FROM SIN OR FREE TO SIN?

My sins are forgiven and I am declared righteous in God's sight. Now what? Paul invites me to ponder upon this issue through a rhetorical question. "Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound?" (ROMANS 6:1) he asks. I don't know the source of this question, but obviously it meant something to Paul's audience. Was it motivated by fear that the doctrine of salvation by faith alone would encourage moral irresponsibility or was it in fact the opposite, that it provided an excuse for a sinful lifestyle? How does this resonate with me?

Paul's rhetorical question is immediately answered with an explicit NO! Not at all! If I am a disciple of Jesus Christ I must take Him seriously; of course His will matters to me.

God invites everyone to come to Him, but that by no means is the end of the process. Staying just as you are is not an option. Change, renewal, growth and healing is what God has in mind.

DEAD TO SIN, ALIVE IN CHRIST

Now that this is made clear Paul's line of argument unfolds (ROM 6:2-14). The ritual act of baptism is used to illustrate his point. On Calvary Christ died in my place. As I was baptized I was buried with Christ through baptism unto death. My "old self," as Paul expresses it, is buried, and out of the water rises a new man. Burial is followed by resurrection. As Christ was raised from the dead, so am I raised to an entirely new way of living. Put simply, to live one must die.

Sin did not disappear in a miraculous way the day I was baptized. And when I read the text carefully I realize there is no promise that sin dies to the believer; it is the believer who dies to sin.

God created me as a moral creature with free will. It is actually my decision-making ability that is called upon. The promise remains. There is victory over sin. Will I choose to believe in this promise?

"What you need to understand is the true force of the will. This is the governing power in the nature of man, the power of decision, or of choice. Everything depends on the right action of the will. The power of choice God has given to men; it is theirs to exercise. You cannot change your heart, you cannot of yourself give to God its affections; but you can choose to serve Him" (ELLEN G. WHITE, *STEPS TO CHRIST*, P. 47).

POWER THROUGH IDENTITY

I am reminded of the story of Raynald. He was a 14th-century duke in Belgium, who eventually became the king of Belgium. His brother Edward was very jealous, though. So he overthrew Raynald's kingship. However, he did not kill his own brother; instead, he built a dungeon around Raynald. The prison was outfitted with all the essentials that Raynald needed to be fairly comfortable. It had a doorway but no door. You should know that Raynald was severely obese. His brother Edward therefore told him, "When you fit through the doorway, you may leave." Of course the new King Edward made sure the most delicious food was available in abundant supply for Raynald. When Edward was accused of being cruel he responded, "My brother is not a prisoner. He may leave when he chooses to."

"THE PROMISE OF VICTORY IS GIVEN TO ME, BUT I HAVE TO EMBRACE THIS TRUTH BY FAITH."

Unfortunately many believers live as powerless Christians because they have forgotten their identity in Christ. We need to stop believing Satan's lies and realize who we are in Christ. "For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace" (ROMANS 6:14). Verse 14 is an encouraging promise: sin will not rule over me. I am in relationship with God; I am both justified through Jesus' act of salvation, and I am in the process of sanctification by living connected to the Lord.

It would be a mistake to believe that only if I am a true follower of Jesus Christ will I never sin again. I do not have to let sin exercise dominion over me; this is what Paul is stating. However, not to be controlled by sin is not the same as not having to fight it any longer. The promise of victory is given to me, but I have to embrace this truth by faith.

TURNING MY BACK

"Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound?" (ROM 6:1), was the first question Paul asked. The next question is: "Should we sin because we are not under law but under grace?" (ROM 6:15). This is the common theme of this chapter, and of course the question is again answered with a clear: NO! By no means!

Why is it so hard to turn my back on sin? What am I afraid to lose? Why do I not want to take this leap of faith? Apparently Augustine

identified three steps in the process of leaving sin behind. This prayer focuses on asking the Lord to “make me good”; however, my willingness to embark on this journey is a process itself. Only in the end am I wholeheartedly ready to say, “Make me good,” with no strings attached.

Augustine defined the stages with sin as:

1. Lord, make me good, but not yet.
2. Lord, make me good, but not entirely.
3. Lord, make me good.

Paul describes sin as a master and a king that rules over us. We are enslaved by it. And eventually sin will claim its wages (ROM 6:23); for the slaves of sin, death, will be inevitable. Why not turn my back to the bondage of sin today?

THE CONTEXT OF LIBERTY

Freedom does not mean the absence of rules. I live in a free country, but I am not allowed to go into your home uninvited and do whatever I want to. There are laws, also in a free country, like my homeland. My country provides for security, quality of life, and offers me endless opportunities; however, this list does not include the lack of laws. Freedom cannot exist in the absence of law. The same is true about living for God.

CHOOSE OR LOSE

Does sin matter? Indeed! Every day I am confronted with choices. Some of the choices I make are minor, while others will affect my whole life. Eleanor Roosevelt once stated, “One’s philosophy is not best expressed in words. It is expressed in the choices one makes.” The verses in Romans 6 call for choices.

The story is told that world-famous tenor Luciano Pavarotti was born into a poor but loving family. His father was a baker and his mother a cigar factory worker. The father himself, a talented but shy tenor, urged his son to work very hard to develop his voice. This Pavarotti did and, simultaneously, enrolled in a teachers’ college. On graduating he asked his father, “Shall I be a teacher or a singer?” “Luciano,” the father replied, “if you try to sit on two chairs, you will fall between them. For life, you must choose one chair.”

03 APPLY



THE GOOD NEWS OF BEING GOOD

When reading the verses of Romans chapter six, two terms instinctively pop into my mind: willpower and disregard. These are two completely opposite concepts. I would describe myself as ambitious, determined, hard-working, and successful. Therefore, if I was left alone with sin I would definitely choose willpower as my strategy. I would fight it as hard as I could; I would fight it to the point of exhaustion. Someone else would perhaps rather choose to ignore sin. Either way, none of the strategies would bring about a working solution; death is inevitable.

However, the truth is: I am never on my own! The good news of the Gospel is, “For if we have been united with Him in a death like His, we will certainly be united with Him in a resurrection like His” (ROM. 6:5). This promise is not restricted solely to the future: I can claim this promise in my everyday life.

I guess when God thinks about these verses from Romans chapter six a completely different term pops into his mind: tailwind.

04 ASK



01 To me freedom means ...
(How would I complete this sentence?)

02 In what areas (education, career, sports, pornography etc.)
am I in danger of becoming a slave?

03 Do I long for renewal and change?
What change processes would I like God to initiate?

05 QUOTE



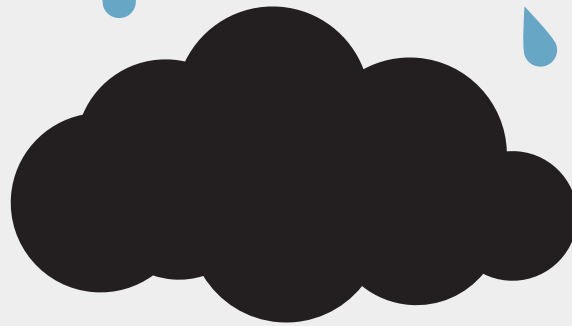
“IF WE SAY THAT WE HAVE NO SIN, WE DECEIVE OURSELVES, AND THE TRUTH IS NOT IN US. IF WE CONFESS OUR SINS, HE WHO IS FAITHFUL AND JUST WILL FORGIVE US OUR SINS AND CLEANSE US FROM ALL UNRIGHTEOUSNESS. IF WE SAY THAT WE HAVE NOT SINNED, WE MAKE HIM A LIAR, AND HIS WORD IS NOT IN US. MY LITTLE CHILDREN, I AM WRITING THESE THINGS TO YOU SO THAT YOU MAY NOT SIN. BUT IF ANYONE DOES SIN, WE HAVE AN ADVOCATE WITH THE FATHER, JESUS CHRIST THE RIGHTEOUS.”

1 John 1:8-2:1



Fabian Looser Grönroos
Youth Director
German Swiss Conference

CHAPTER 7



7



BY PIERRICK AVELIN

THE CHRISTIAN'S PARADOX

The Christian walk, an unexpected journey

01 EXPLAIN



Have you ever done something that hurt someone when you were actually trying to help them? We can sometimes be clumsy and do harm when we are trying to do good. As a believer, I often find myself facing the following frustration: I try to do what's good; I endeavor to follow God's commandments and His plans for my life; yet I constantly find myself making the same mistakes. Have you ever experienced this frustration of wanting to do something, but finding you just can't? Well, I've got good news for us: we're not alone in this situation. Another person had the exact same sense of frustration. And not just anyone; the apostle Paul noticed the same thing happening in his life, as he explains to us in Chapter 7 of the letter he wrote to the Christians in Rome. Let's take a closer look at this chapter together.

WHAT DOES THE TEXT SAY?

You'll see that even though Paul has a way of writing that might initially seem complicated, what he's describing is quite close to what we experience today. He begins by speaking about the law. In this context, that means what God expects from us. It's summed up in the 10 commandments (EXODUS 20) and even more succinctly in the way Jesus put it (actually quoting from the Old Testament): *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: "Love your neighbor as yourself." All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments* (MATTHEW 22:37-40).

When we know the law, Paul tells us that it has authority over us only during our lifetime. To illustrate this, he gives the example of a woman who only has obligations with regard to her husband so long as he is alive. Upon his death, the marriage no longer

exists. As Christians, once we have chosen Christ in our lives, we are no longer condemned. Baptism is of course synonymous with 'death' and 'resurrection' to a new life. We can thus serve God more effectively, because we are freed from a burden too heavy for us. And we bear fruit.

So what's the point of the law then? Paul explains that it's a safeguard: it helps us to know what is good or evil. It's the solution to the temptation that Adam and Eve faced. The serpent had told them: *"For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil"* (GENESIS 3:5). Literally in this case, he meant "you will decide what is good or bad, you will no longer have any references. God will no longer be your benchmark, but instead you will answer only to yourself." This is the temptation to which our first parents gave in: that of becoming little chiefs. So that's the purpose of the law for us today, to help us know what is right and good and what is wrong. Because on our own, influenced by the world around us and our sinful nature, it's sometimes difficult to know the difference between the two.

The problem, Paul tells us, is that the law can also give us wrong ideas: because we are all human, and because we all want to be able to do that which is forbidden. We often laugh when we see children doing the exact opposite of what they have been asked to do, yet we must admit that we sometimes do the same thing. But while the law can give us bad ideas, that doesn't mean it's bad in itself. It shows us how sin can influence us.

Finally, Paul mentions the same frustration we spoke of earlier: *"For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing"* (ROMANS 7:19). He is thereby illustrating all the tension inherent to Christian living. We want to live by doing good around us, but we naturally do evil. Thus, as far as Paul is concerned, without God's help, it is possible to desire good, but it is impossible to do it. We must therefore accept that we cannot be perfect by ourselves; we need God's help.

02 REFLECT



In 2006, a survey was conducted among Adventist youth. Several thousands of young people between the ages of 15 and 35 answered several hundreds of questions regarding their faith, their church. Among these questions, one in particular struck me. When they were asked if they agreed with the following statement: “Salvation is a **reward** that God gives us if we obey Him,” 63% agreed, 19% did not know and only 18% did not agree. It’s incredible to think that three-quarters of our youth are okay with the idea of salvation as a reward and not only as a gift of grace.

But I don’t think such a confusion came about by chance; it’s true that when we read the Bible, we do indeed find a tension between unconditional grace and a call to perfection.

Faced with this tension, we note two opposite approaches:

- Those who say, “God accepts me just as I am... so I don’t have to do anything in particular. In any case, I can’t do what is right, so what’s the point in trying?”
- Those who say, “We need to be perfect. In our own strength, we must be faultless for Christ’s return.”

I think that Paul understood that the solution lay in neither of these tendencies, but rather in a more balanced approach:

“Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus... Join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do” (PHILIPPIANS 3:12-14, 17).

Here we discover the whole paradox of Christian life. And don’t worry: it’s really inevitable. The more we grow in faith, the more we work with God, the more we have the impression of being sinners, of being imperfect: a bit like when you get nearer and nearer to a mirror. From a certain distance, all is well, but once you’re up close... ouch, all the spots show up and things that we would like to hide are clearly visible. The problem is that, for some of us, the next stage is having feelings of low self-esteem. How can we solve this problem?

You will note that in all the texts we have read, at no point does Paul tell us we absolutely must succeed. He says “*I strain toward*”

“I press on.” What Jesus asks of us stems from the same reasoning: to “love with all our heart... soul... and mind.” The strength of that love may vary in the course of our life. In tough times it might be hard to achieve. But, in reality, the requirement of Christian living is not the result, but the intention. We must always do our best to look for higher things. We grow with God, but not **in order** to be saved. It’s **because** we have been saved that we are free to become the man or woman that God wants us to be. That’s the order in which things happen. And that’s what Paul says: once we are free, anything is possible!

One of Ellen White’s finest books is entitled *Steps to Christ*. I don’t think this is a coincidence, because the Christian life is not some huge leap we take when we get baptized, as if we suddenly became little Christs who make no mistake. We continue to make mistakes and that makes us discouraged. This is how the author puts it: *“There are those who have known the pardoning love of Christ and who really desire to be children of God, yet they realize that their character is imperfect, their life faulty, and they are ready to doubt whether their hearts have been renewed by the Holy Spirit. To such I would say, Do not draw back in despair. We shall often have to bow down and weep at the feet of Jesus”* (STEPS TO CHRIST, P. 64).

She too experienced the same frustration as we do and as Paul did! Does that seem familiar? Have you already felt it? Doubt can sometimes creep into our walk with God and we may even sometimes call into question our entire experience with Him. That’s exactly the kind of trick Satan loves to pull. There’s a story that goes like this:

One day, the devil was tired and decided to retire. But since he didn’t have much of a pension to rely on, he decided to make ends meet by selling his tool kit. Everything was there: nastiness, envy, jealousy, hate, greed, self-sufficiency, disdain, cynicism. But one of the tools was sort of apart from the others and seemed far more worn than the others. Intrigued by this, a passer-by asked him:

“... ONCE DOUBT AND DISCOURAGEMENT ARE THERE, IT IS MUCH EASIER TO PUSH IN ALL OTHER TOOLS, WHATEVER THEY ARE.”

"What is this tool and why is it much more expensive than the others?"

The Devil answered, "That is doubt and discouragement."

But the other person insisted, "Why are you selling doubt and discouragement for much more?"

"It's very simple. It's the easiest tool to drive into someone's heart.

And once doubt and discouragement are there, it is much easier to push in all the other tools, whatever they are." (UNKNOWN SOURCE)

His favorite trick? Making us doubt the authenticity of our past experience with God. So we get discouraged and sometimes even wonder: Am I still a Christian? Does God still accept me?

But look at Jesus' life. He sometimes had questions too. When He was baptized, He heard a voice that said: "This is my Son, whom I love" (MATTHEW 3:17). Filled with confidence and fervor, He set off for the desert. And what was the first word he heard there? "If." Satan immediately tried to instill doubt: "If you are the Son of God" (MATTHEW 4:3).

If you are feeling frustrated or discouraged in your walk with God, know that you are not alone. Christ went through it, Paul too: Ellen White and in fact all of us as Christians experience this. But what they all tell us is that the key does not lie in the fact of no longer making any mistakes, but instead in continuing to walk with God. For, as it says in Proverbs, "For though the righteous fall seven times, they rise again, but the wicked stumble when calamity strikes" (PROVERBS 24:16). Honest men often fall, and that's normal. What counts is always getting up: always looking to God. And the fruit you will bear will not be your own, but that of Christ, because in Him you are capable of doing great things. Don't forget what Paul says. "I can do all things through Him who gives me strength" (PHILIPPIANS 4:13). [—————](#)

03 APPLY



Michelangelo once allegedly said: "The greater danger for most of us lies not in setting our aim too high and falling short; but in setting our aim too low, and achieving our mark."

Never stop wanting more from your life. Never stop continuing to walk with God and aiming for eternal life. Never mind the fact that you fall, and never mind your mistakes and the fact that you sometimes take side roads that lead you to make big detours. The important thing is to continue moving ahead. And, in doing so, you are allowing God to act and transform your life.

"May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The One who calls you is faithful, and He will do it" (1 THESSALONIANS 5:23-24).

With the help of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit, even if you do not reach perfection, you will achieve excellence in Christ. [—————](#)

04 ASK



01

Have you ever said to yourself, "I'll get baptized when I stop living in such or such a way? Or else... when I am perfect?" What did this chapter by Paul teach you? Which decision(s) could you take today?

02

Perhaps you are in a situation where you've more or less given up when faced with this frustration of continuing to make mistakes you don't wish to make? Perhaps you just don't want to keep on making such an effort? What did you learn from this chapter? What decision(s) could you take today?

03

Perhaps you think you're perfect? Or you think you can become perfect through your own strength? How does this text speak to you? Which decision(s) could you take today?

05 QUOTE



“THE GREATER DANGER FOR MOST OF US LIES NOT IN SETTING OUR AIM TOO HIGH AND FALLING SHORT; BUT IN SETTING OUR AIM TOO LOW, AND ACHIEVING OUR MARK.”

Attributed to Michelangelo



Pierrick Avelin
Youth Director
French-Italian Swiss Conference

C H A P T E R 8

8

THE RADICAL AND UNCONDITIONAL LOVE OF GOD

How God is dealing with evil

01 EXPLAIN



Paul was a human being like everybody else. Despite all his efforts, his goodwill and his motivation, he could not obey the law perfectly (SEE ROMANS 7:15-24). Sin was still part of his life. What should he do to get rid of evil?

This is the question facing us as we look at chapter 8 of Romans. And the answer comes quickly: *"There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus"* (ROMANS 8:1, NKJV). Despite all the accusations, all the mistakes, all the sins, we are NOT condemned. We are free. This liberation is possible through Jesus Christ. His life frees us from the laws of sin that lead to death. However, two terms are mentioned here: "being in Christ Jesus," and "having the Spirit of God dwelling in us" (VERSES 1 AND 9).

LIFE WITH THE SPIRIT OF GOD

Paul then explains what this means. In verse 14, he explains how we can remain in Jesus and live according to the Spirit: *"For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God"*

"...WE ARE NO LONGER SLAVES..."

(VERSE 14). In other words, to live according to the Spirit means knowing that we have been adopted by God. We have accepted a new relationship with God; we are no longer slaves subject to the tyranny of a master, but we are sons and daughters of a loving Father, who is willing to offer us His inheritance (VERSE 17).

GLORY TO COME

But this inheritance is not here yet. Glory is yet to come (VERSES 18 TO 24). Today we are suffering, as Jesus did. This world is unfair, evil is everywhere around the planet, death destroys our lives. The good news is that this situation is temporary, limited. God has already prepared what's next.

In waiting for God's promises to happen in reality, we are not left alone. *"Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered"* (VERSE 26). The Spirit of God intercedes just for us! Can we believe for a second that God will not listen to us and answer through the intercession of His own Spirit? Best of all, God has a plan. He has decided to share His glory with all those who love Him and answer His call.

Paul closes this chapter with a love song praising God's love! It's an invincible and victorious love. It's a complete and radical love. Never mind those who think that love is for the weak and the losers.

As we are freed from the fear of condemnation, accompanied by the Spirit of God in us, encouraged by the hope of the glory to come, and assured by the absolute love of God for us, we can keep on walking and sharing our faith and getting ready to meet our Savior.



WE ARE NOT CONDEMNED

Paul has always been very clear: the law is important (SEE ROMANS 2:18; 3:31; 7:12; ETC), even necessary. It's the law that helps us to avoid committing evil, shows us what is right, and can lead us into God's presence.

As much as the law is *"holy and just and good"* (ROMANS 7:12), it's not sufficient to transform us into God's image and to eliminate the evil from our lives. Without such a transformation, we are limited, unable to reflect God's character. Evil will continue to proliferate in our lives and in our world.

However, Paul shows us the remedy: we are not condemned, because Jesus offers us freedom and transformation. In Matthew 9:9-13, Jesus reveals to us His mission: to heal people and forgive sinners. In John 3:14-18, Jesus announces His objective: to save men and women, and not to judge and condemn them.

But this salvation comes with one requirement: to look to Jesus, as did the people of Israel in the desert, when they had to look to the bronze serpent (NUMBERS 21:4-9).

When Jesus heals us, saves us and frees us, there are consequences in our lives. Firstly, we are freed from blame. The weight of our mistakes, the feelings of not being good enough, perfect enough or right enough, will disappear from our hearts. It is also freedom from the pressure of "doing good and right" to "be good and right." It's the end of the list of tasks to do in order to be saved. It's simply salvation through grace. Finally, it is freedom from judgment – both judgment we receive and judgment we give. If Jesus will not condemn me, who am I to judge and condemn those around me?

WE ARE CHILDREN OF GOD

Paul specifies that two conditions are needed to receive and experience this liberation: *"to be in Christ Jesus"* (VERSE 1), and *"having the Spirit of God dwelling in us"* (VERSE 9). Sounds good, but it's easier said than done! What does it really mean? How can the Spirit of God dwell in us?

The Bible gives very concrete examples. In Exodus 31:1-5, the people of Israel were filled by the Spirit, which gave them the abilities and the strength to build the Sanctuary. Later on, Paul lists the fruit of the Spirit (GALATIANS 5:22), which allows us to act according to God's will and heart. In Philippians 4:6, Paul adds the values and

the principles inspired by the Spirit. But so far everything is on the outside; they are actions, things to do.

So, let's go to the prophet Jeremiah, who gives us another kind of answer: God wants to write His laws in our hearts, as a power within us, from the inside (SEE JEREMIAH 31:33). And Paul shows us how these laws from the inside could even lead us to salvation (SEE ROMANS 2:14, 15).

The central question remains, however. How do we have the laws of God written in our hearts, and live according to the Spirit?

The answer comes in Romans 8:13-16: *"For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, 'Abba, Father.' The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God."* This is the secret: a change of status. To live according to the Spirit means knowing that we have been adopted by God, as His very own children, not as servants or slaves.

Jesus said it in different words: He doesn't call us "servants," but "friends" (JOHN 15:15). And how do we recognize a friend? By his obedience (JOHN 15:14). Obedience to what? To love each other and "to lay down one's life for his friends" (JOHN 15:13; SEE ALSO JOHN 13:34). This is the great truth from the beginning of chapter 8: by our love for each other, we are showing that we are children of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in us. And this Spirit in us allows us to be saved, rather than condemned!

GOD'S ANSWERS TO EVIL

This beautiful truth about our "status" as children of God seems a little bit tainted by what comes next in the text. Paul describes how evil is contaminating our world (ROMANS 8:18-23). No need for long explanations or descriptions. It's something we know only too well. Paul also knew it well first-hand (SEE 2 CORINTHIANS 11:23-28, ALL THE SUFFERINGS HE WENT THROUGH).

Thankfully, he didn't intend just to describe what we also know only too well, but to show us how God will respond to these sufferings of our world. Paul shows four aspects of God's answer.

- A) Firstly, in Romans 8:23-25, Paul invites us to look above our immediate reality. Usually the future can cause us stress, anxiety and fear. But, thanks to Jesus, we can see beyond the "here and now." Paul lived this principle when he said, *"One thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus"* (PHILIPPIANS 3:13, 14).

- B) The second aspect is to remind ourselves about our human limitations. Romans 8:26-27 states that we don't really know what's good for us. The Spirit knows us and knows our deepest needs, and intercedes for us. Praying is mainly surrendering to the Spirit, letting go of our needs, our failures and desires, and living in the assurance and confidence that God knows all about us and is able to do what's best for us. God "works for the good of those who love Him" (VERSE 28).
- C) Verses 28 to 30 show the third point: God has a plan, a purpose for our lives. This well-known verse, "*we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose,*" could lead us to a dangerous conclusion: we may think that everything will always turn out well, that evil is actually good, and that if anything goes wrong, it's our fault (because we don't love God enough). I believe, however, that Paul tries to show us the beauty of God's plan.

This plan is "good" (VERSE 28), meaning that God deeply desires what is bad in our lives to be transformed. I remember Joseph, who ends his story by talking to his brothers, "*You meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive*" (GENESIS 50:20).

God's plan is for us "*to be conformed to the image of His Son*" (V. 29). How can we be conformed to Jesus' image? Do you know the phrase "What would Jesus do?" that encourages people to really ask themselves this question in every choice they make? What would Jesus do in my situation? That's one practical possibility, among many: to be conformed to Jesus' image.

God's plan has a structure. Verse 30 offers us a precise model. God has a purpose for us, a destination, a project; a mission for you, for me, for all of us. His final purpose is to reveal His glory, His power, His majesty, as it happened, for example, when Jesus resurrected Lazarus (SEE JOHN 11:4).

- D) Finally, God's ultimate answer to evil in our world is described in verses 31 to 39: whatever the situation, only one thing cannot be defeated or annihilated: God's love. God IS love. His very nature, His purpose, His need, His ideal, His mission can be summarized in one statement: to give His love to the whole world.

In verse 32, Paul shows us how the cross of Jesus is the focal point of God's love. It's the moment when God's love is expressed in the most intense and painful way. The cross is THE answer from God to all the sufferings we endure.

So, if you would question the character of God, His will, His plan, His grace, His power and His love: look at the cross! _____

03 APPLY



If Paul couldn't change or avoid evil, even though he knew the law, had all the motivation and made so much effort, how can it be different for me? Who has ever experienced this struggle: *I will never misspell this word again; I will never again forget my keys; I won't drive too fast anymore?* At the end of the day, the result is the same: I fail. I try my best, I improve every day. But I fail to erase evil within me and around me. The Good News "from Paul" is that there is neither judgment nor condemnation for us. Quite the opposite: we are delivered from our mistakes and from the judgment, and we are invited to become God's very own children.

Becoming a child of God is something special. It's an honor, and a great responsibility. Every aspect of our life is transformed. We are not following values such as egoism, competition, pride, etc, but rather we desire to become like our Model, our Father and Lord. When I read my Bible, I discover how God, in Jesus, lived according to the divine principles: generosity, unconditional love, patience, forbearance, etc. My challenge and my commitment is to apply these values in my personal life, with the Spirit's help.

This world, and my life, are polluted by evil. To face life's challenges, Paul tells us God's answer to the problem of evil: His love and His plan for us. I'm reminded of the swimmer, Florence Chadwick, who wanted to swim 35 km between two islands. On her first attempt, she gave up after 15 hours of swimming... only 1.5 km from her goal. Only because the fog was hiding the goal. Two months later, she tried again, and succeeded, because she could see the finish line.

Paul encourages us to keep going, knowing that God has a precise plan for each one of us. Despite the fog, there is a goal! The assurance of God's promises is found in His nature: God IS love. Can we really doubt "someone" ready to love His enemies, forgive the worst criminals, and give His own life for men and women who have rejected Him? The love of God is absolute, without limits, without "buts," and unconditional. It's a gift for you, today. _____

04 ASK



01

How can the life and the teaching of Paul (see Romans 7:15-25 and 8:1-17) encourage you to trust God despite the evil around you?

02

What is your situation and mission in God's plan (see Romans 8:28-30)?

03

How is this infinite and unlimited love of God at work in your life? What are its impacts on you?



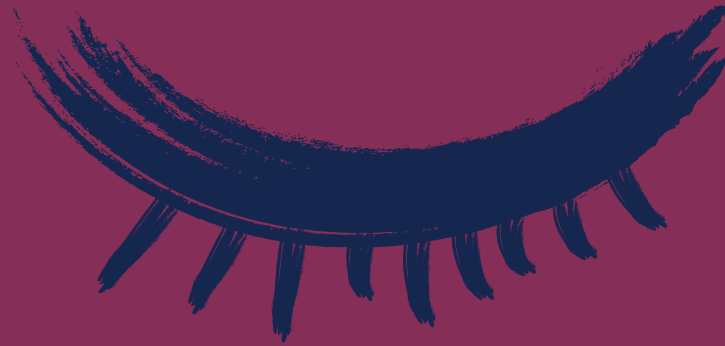
“THE CHRISTIAN DOES NOT THINK GOD WILL LOVE US BECAUSE WE ARE GOOD, BUT THAT GOD WILL MAKE US GOOD BECAUSE HE LOVES US.”

C.S. Lewis



Raphaël Grin
Pathfinder Director
French-Italian Swiss Conference

CHAPTER 9



BY BERT SEEFELDT

THE PEOPLE OF GOD

Who is part of it?

01 EXPLAIN



ISRAEL IS PAUL'S PASSION (VS. 1-3)

Paul starts this chapter by stating clearly that he is on Israel's side. His heart beats for Israel – so much so that he is depressed. It even hurts him to see that his people don't want to accept God's offer to rescue them: an offer Paul has described very clearly in the last verses of chapter 8. Paul is even ready to sacrifice his very own faith, his relationship with God, if by this he can save his people. A man of God can hardly speak out more clearly to declare his identification and solidarity with his people.

TO GOD ISRAEL IS A VERY SPECIAL PEOPLE (VS. 4-5)

Paul does not only show his solidarity with Israel because he himself is a Jew. No, Old Testament history reveals that God has chosen the people of Israel. This people experienced spectacular miracles with God. He accompanied them through the desert. He made special agreements with them. He gave them His Ten Commandments, rules that were designed to enable the people to live in freedom. The key people in God's story with humanity are the Israelites. Additionally, Jesus, the Cornerstone, was born a Jew. No doubt: To God, Israel is a very special people.

BUT NOT EVERY JEW BELONGS TO THIS SPECIAL PEOPLE (VS. 6-13)

Paul adheres to the fact that the promises God gave to His people still hold true. But not every Jew really belongs to this people. He substantiates this thesis with two examples from the early Jewish history, the Old Testament.

Isaac was the son God had promised to Abraham. But, because a lot of time passed until God fulfilled His promise, Abraham and his wife developed a contingency plan. A servant was to deliver a son and thus finally an heir to Abraham. This was Ishmael. Both Isaac and Ishmael were sons of Abraham. But the Old Testament continues with Isaac only.

Isaac later had twins, Jacob and Esau. Since Esau was the firstborn he actually should have been Isaac's heir. But God stated – even before the boys were born – that things would be different: The older one would serve the younger one. The Old Testament story goes on: with Jacob, not with Esau.

GOD SHOWS MERCY TO WHOM HE WANTS (VS. 14-29)

Yet Paul recognizes the explosiveness that lies in what he just wrote: Is this not unfair? Paul's answer is inconvenient: God is sovereign. This means that God decides on His own, depends on no one, does not have to justify Himself to anyone.

Paul makes the comparison: God is the Potter; we are the clay. As the potter decides on his own what kind of vessel he forms from the clay, so God has every right to show mercy to Israelites as well as non-Israelites.

THE STUMBLING STONE (VS. 30-33)

Paul concludes the chapter with two observations: 1. Men and women of other nations have been justified by God although they did not seek justification. 2. The Jews that longed to be justified by obedience failed.

Paul's conclusion: We cannot justify ourselves; only God can justify us. Trusting in that and thus renouncing to earn justification by ourselves is what having faith means. But this is strong meat for a lot of people. _____

02 REFLECT



The last verses are surely the highlight of this chapter. We cannot earn justification with God; we can only let God give it to us. But in this chapter Paul gives two more statements that pack a punch.

PAUL'S ATTITUDE

"For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people, those of my own race" (v. 3). You have to savor this: The very man who was so eager for God before his conversion that he wanted to kill "heretics" (this means those who did not believe his way, Acts 8:1); the very man who was ready to be imprisoned, beaten and stoned (Acts 14:19, 20) so that others were able to hear the Good News; the very man who forgot everything around him to keep his faith (1 COR. 9:24 FF.); this same man now writes that he would sacrifice his relationship with God to save his people. Paul, do you know what you are writing here? Would you really risk your eternal life, your resurrection and your life in God's kingdom – for that's what it means for Paul to be separate from Jesus – to save the rebellious, those who should know better?

His twofold emphasis on the statement ("I speak the truth in Christ – I am not lying" (v. 1)) suggests how serious Paul is about what he is saying. He is really ready to sacrifice everything, absolutely everything – even his own future on this earth and the new one – if this would save his people. What kind of solidarity, what kind of unselfishness! I am impressed by that, and at the same time it challenges me extremely. In our individualistic culture I often see the attitude that in the end everything is about ME, and I recognize how hard it is to withstand that attitude. In discussions, in ads and commercials, at school, at university, at work and even in the church. Isn't everything about **my** issues, **my** possessions, **my** grades, **my** career and **my** faith? Paul is different. He shows solidarity. He is unselfish. He is willing to make sacrifices. I'm convinced that it is exactly this attitude that made Paul so precious and helpful to those around him. Don't you agree?

GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY

Another topic that is hard to swallow is the picture of the potter and the clay (vs. 20-23); a picture already used by Jeremiah in the Old Testament (JEREMIAH 18:1-6). The picture is explained easily: God is the Potter. We are the clay in His hands. Surely, the potter has every right to form whatever vessel he wants the clay to be, and the clay has nothing to say. But that's scandalous! At least for us today, in a time when self-determination and participation in the decision-making are very important values. Thus the question is inevitable: "Is God unjust?" (v. 14.)

I have to admit that for me it is hard to answer this question unambiguously. Is it at all possible to render any just judgment in our intricate world? Can we truly say it is fair for God to grant mercy to someone? Does not this someone deserve something really different? How much sovereignty do I concede to God? How much sovereignty is left to God when He *must* act fairly? If so, should we not be able to explain everything? And does our trust in God not show up most when we don't understand what is going on?

The picture of the potter and the clay shows me that God is sovereign; He is free to decide whatever He wants. Thus I cannot expect God always to act fairly according to my understanding. But I can trust that He will do it well. That's what I call faith.

THE WAY TO SALVATION

And now, on to the climax of this chapter (vs. 30-33). The world's religions offer more or less only three different ways to salvation: The first way can be described best with blind *Iustitia* (Lady Justice), the Roman personification of retributive justice that is depicted as a blindfolded woman with scales in her hand; the good deeds on one side, the bad deeds on the other. According to this way to salvation, God is satisfied when human beings are able to show up with as many good deeds as possible. This way is about weighing, and the deeds are what make the difference. Essentially, here humans have their salvation in their own hands.

"PAUL IN ANY CASE RELIES COMPLETELY ON GOD, GIVING UP CONTROL, DISSOCIATING HIMSELF FROM ANY RELIGIOUS MERITOCRACY AND ACCEPTING THAT HE CANNOT EARN HIS SALVATION BUT CAN ONLY ACCEPT IT AS A GIFT FROM GOD."

The second way could be described with a person whose hands are empty. Here you find no pressure to perform because as a person you have understood that you yourself cannot achieve anything at all to be saved and to find peace with God. Thus you have nothing in your hands. Here God alone is in charge of salvation; you are left with nothing else but trust in God.

The third way is virtually a mixture of these first two ways. God makes a certain amount of demands but He does not expect humans to fulfill them completely. Therefore He accommodates them and fills the gaps as long as they really try to meet the demands.

For Paul the way to go is clearly number 2. Only God makes human beings righteous. We can receive salvation only as a gift from God. Origin, culture, deeds make no difference. All that counts is trusting in God.

This means we are left with the decision of which way of salvation we want to rely on. Do we rely on God or on ourselves?

Paul in any case relies completely on God, giving up control, dissociating himself from any religious meritocracy and accepting that he cannot earn his salvation but can only accept it as a gift from God. Isn't it obvious that this loss of control upsets us and we take offense? [_____](#)

03 APPLY



To me Romans 9 is a rejection of any form of thinking in terms of exclusiveness. I am in no way better than anybody else. Yes, Israel is a special people to God. But all the great experiences with God and even their calling by God Himself do not imply inevitably that the calling, the special mission given to them, remains forever. Thus the calling is not a quality a group or a person can acquire once and forever. Rather, the calling is a commission from God, given for a specific mission that remains as long as the mission is really lived out, and that ceases if it is no longer lived out.

Moreover, Romans 9 teaches me that God calls whoever He wants to: probably beyond everything I can imagine. To state it clearly: God can call people I would not dare to, because of their education, culture, gender, ethics, even because of their religious conviction. God can do so. Therefore I want to be open-minded and appreciative.

For Paul salvation is a pure gift, not something anyone can achieve. My deeds, my works, do not make any difference. The only thing that counts is trusting in God and His ability to save. Paradoxically I can be sure of salvation solely because I believe that my salvation does not depend on me, but on God.

And because God does not demand of me more than that I trust Him, I am freed from the pressure to pose and prove myself. All I can do is live as a child of God – confident, trusting, curious. [_____](#)

04 ASK



01

How do you like the picture of the potter and the clay (vs. 20-21)?
How do you feel, being clay in God's hands?

02

Paul was ready to sacrifice himself and even his future if this saved his people (v. 3).
How far would you go to save your family, friends and neighbors?
What kind of sacrifices do you already make?

03

Which of the three ways to salvation mentioned above do you identify with?
Why?

05 QUOTE



“GOD SAVED YOU BY HIS GRACE WHEN YOU BELIEVED. AND YOU CAN'T TAKE CREDIT FOR THIS; IT IS A GIFT FROM GOD. SALVATION IS NOT A REWARD FOR THE GOOD THINGS WE HAVE DONE, SO NONE OF US CAN BOAST ABOUT IT.”

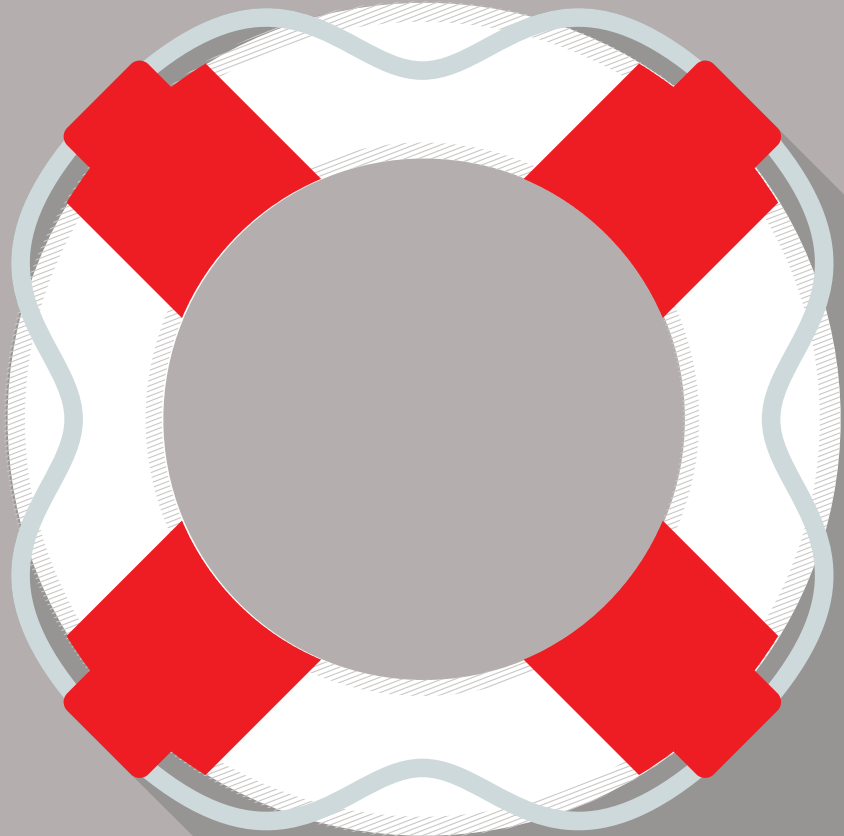
Ephesians 2:8, 9, NLT



Bert Seefeldt
Youth Director
North German Union

CHAPTER 10

1



BY PEDRO ESTEVES

CHRIST

The final destination

01 EXPLAIN



There is no stronger and more convincing argument than experience, the testimony of what has been seen, felt and lived. I can find thousands of valid and fair reasons to say, for example, that racism is bad and irrational, but if I have never heard anybody insulting me because of the color of my skin, if I have never been denied access to a place because those from my “tribe” are not allowed to come in, if I have never been whacked for being different from the majority, as sound as my arguments may be, I will never truly understand what that horrible concept means.

In chapter 10, the Apostle Paul continues exploring an idea that wasn't only logically or intellectually well formulated.

NO!

The strength of this message was anchored in the painful personal experience of a man who, having been a diligent Jew, was yanked from a path of religious violence to a totally opposed path of service and to the proclamation of a message of love and salvation, in the name of the ultimate example of self-abnegation.

JESUS.

Paul does not hesitate to clearly state that Jews (his blood brothers), despite their zeal, lived without a true understanding of God's will.

Paul exposes the flagrant inconsistency of a religious practice that, while seeking justice adamantly, can't even get a glimpse of God's true justice.

A religion so obscured by a veil of self-sufficiency that it believes it is capable of observing the law to perfection, but is in fact so blind in reality that it failed to recognize the author of the law in person, in flesh and bone; He could have truly taught everything it had to offer.

The apostle can write this way because he knows what he is saying; even better, he has experienced what he is talking about.

Israel had everything in its favour: the blessing of having been adopted by God Himself as a chosen people; an alliance and the privileges inherent to it; the law; a temple in which to worship; and promises of eternity. Despite all that, they failed.

How was this possible, if the combination of factors was perfect?! Paul talks about this enigma and how to understand it in chapter 10 – because he lived it first-hand – but he also talks about the hope that everyone can find in Jesus, within or beyond the “frontiers” of Israel – just as he did.

Therefore, we can identify three key moments in this reflection:

- vs. 1-4 - The “justice” of the Jews
- vs. 5-17 - Salvation for those who believe
- vs. 18-21 - Advice is given to Israel

The content of this chapter was very important at the time it was written; it would help believers understand the reasons for Israel's rejection.

However, this chapter maintains its full vitality today because none of us is free from repeating history, ignoring the amazing possibility of a religion of hope and grace or replacing it by the always false, but surprisingly appealing, self-righteousness. In other words: I think I can do it on my own instead of thinking Christ will do it in me! —————

02 REFLECT



As I read the words from this chapter, I remember the many times Jesus explained the essence of His relationship with God, His Father.

Let me remind you of some of them: "Your Kingdom come, Your will be done" (MATTHEW 6:10), He said, when teaching the disciples how to pray; the same disciples that, worried by the fact that He was hungry, heard Him exclaim: "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me" (JOHN 4:34).

Later, He dazzled the crowd that wanted to proclaim Him king when He said: "For I have come down from heaven, not to do **My own will**, but the will of Him who sent Me." (JOHN 6:38).

And in a unique moment of great intensity and anguish, He had enough courage and faith to pray: "Father, if it is Your will, take this cup away from Me; nevertheless not My will, but Yours, be done" (LUKE 22:42).

It all seems so clear when we look at it this way, doesn't it? Submission and sovereignty, two sides of the same coin. Christ accepts His Father's sovereignty and lives in submission to Him. He does not do it because He is constrained to do so or because of self-interest. He does not do it to fulfill a simple requirement or procedure. No. It's deeper, more intense and more authentic than that. It's a dynamic between two beings that love each other. It's the foundation of a relationship that blossoms and brings forth fruit, much fruit.

We can call it obedience, commitment, submission, dependence... or any other word that implies a conscious and intentional willingness, a continuous commitment, to do the will of the other.

This was exactly how Jesus and the Father related to each other and this was also the reason why Jesus was, in all things, more than a conqueror.

It's in this context that we can better understand one of the strongest ideas expressed by Paul in his letter to the Romans: "For Christ is the end of the law..." (ROMANS 10:4).

YES, CHRIST IS THE LAW'S PURPOSE; HE IS ITS FINAL DESTINATION.

This is the meaning of the expression *telos*, translated as "end" in the majority of Bible versions; it must be read with the sense of aim or purpose, because that is the real meaning in its original context.

"JESUS INCARNATED WHAT THE LAW WAS SUPPOSED TO HELP ISRAEL EXPERIENCE: THE WON- DERFUL WILL OF GOD."

Jesus came to do the Father's will, the same will that the Father expressed when He granted His law to a people deprived of guidance. He incarnated what the law was supposed to help Israel experience: the wonderful will of God.

Unfortunately, they weren't able to understand the essence of the law, namely, how much it was intended to help them develop a relationship of trust and dependence with their Creator. Instead, they replaced it with a dynamic of self-confidence and independence that was at its best when Jesus appeared in the history of this people.

BUT PAUL GOES FURTHER.

Time after time (ten times, actually), he uses words that had been written to Israel by its own prophets, showing that this relational principle had always been there, as the cornerstone of an identity that might have been glorious, but had ended up being forgotten and ignored.

That's why, in verse 5, he recalls Moses' words in Leviticus, where he wrote: "You shall therefore keep My statutes and My judgments, which if a man does, he shall live by them" (LEV. 18:5). That's also why in verse 11 he quotes part of the Messianic message revealed by prophet Isaiah: "See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation; The one who relies on it will never be stricken with panic" (ISAIAH 28:16).

What an amazing promise.

IF SOMEONE HAD JUST LISTENED TO HIM!

More than 700 years before Jesus – "the foundation and cornerstone" – came into this world as a human being, the Jewish people received the confirmation that those who trusted Him would be safe. However, when He finally came, He was received as an enemy.

Suddenly, we discover an equation that connects the words of Moses (the legislator), Isaiah (the prophet), Jesus (the Messiah - Christ) and Paul (the apostle):

If the law was to be fulfilled because it revealed God's will + If Christ revealed God Himself submitting to His will = Then Christ is the perfect explanation of the law – its final destination – and we can put all our trust in Him.

And this way the radical truth of the gospel is revealed (which is blasphemy to the Jews and madness to the unbelievers, as Paul would say in other letters):

Salvation is accessible to everyone – everyone indeed –, by faith in Jesus!

TRUE CHRISTIANS CALL THIS GOOD NEWS.

This gospel has the power to transform lives, including yours and mine. But the path is only ONE; there are no secrets or excuses here: CHRIST.

Trust in Him, depend on Him, submit to Him, and walk with Him.

However, if we live hooked on the idea that by the law, i. e., by the enormous effort of doing everything right, we can get there, we will never even experience the **Good News** (nor will we do everything right, by the way). Behind an appearance of holiness, we will be, after all, on the wrong path.

But, on the other hand, if we live under the illusion that we don't need to submit our life to Christ's sovereignty, nor even be worried about knowing and doing His will, we will call everything that looks spiritual good news. We will miss out on its power and will fail to follow the way.

Fortunately, we don't need to experience any of these deviations, and Paul describes this truth in a simple and yet inspired way: "It is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved" (ROMANS 10:10). _____

03 APPLY



I know that, reading this chapter, you may get the impression that it's all a set of arguments more adequate for the Jews of the 1st century than for you. Yet discovering the deep sense of these words depends more on the reader's perspective. That's why I believe they have so much to tell us, yes, even us, who are so far from the time when all this was written.

What unfolds and develops in them are, after all, and above all, principles – solid and timeless.

Justice, faith, trust, hope, good news... all of these are concepts; sorry, let me correct myself, are experience, which in the context of a genuine relationship with God is revealed in concrete things that can change our daily life, the way we think and act.

There are so many people that can't live this experience because they simply don't know it, and that's why Paul asks the rhetorical question, "How can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?" (ROMANS 10:14).

If you know the sweet taste of this path of faith in Christ, if you know that with Him you will never feel disappointed, then don't stand still! Show, reveal, let what you are living with Him be seen. And if you have the courage to recognize that maybe you have never savored that taste, or that it's just an idea that is not nailed to your heart yet, then let me use the words that Paul borrowed from Isaiah. Just imagine your Creator saying to you: "I was found by those who did not seek Me; I was made manifest to those who did not ask for Me" (ROMANS 10:20). God is constantly looking for you; you just have to let Him find you.

If you were able to see and to feel Him, to live with Him, if He were your final destination... you would be able to say, as Paul said, "The same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on Him" (ROMANS 10:12). _____

04 ASK



01 Can you find examples in your own or in other people's experience, of what might be a religious practice that is hypocritical and full of self-righteousness?

02 Try to use your own words to explain what you think the expression "The end of the law is Christ" means.

03 When you reflect on your own understanding of and relationship with the law, how does Christ reveal Himself as its final purpose?

04 Which ways better suit you to share the experience of living the GOOD NEWS with others?

05 QUOTE



“THERE IS NOT A POINT THAT NEEDS TO BE DWELT UPON MORE EARNESTLY, REPEATED MORE FREQUENTLY, OR ESTABLISHED MORE FIRMLY IN THE MINDS OF ALL THAN THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF FALLEN MAN MERITING ANYTHING BY HIS OWN BEST GOOD WORKS. SALVATION IS THROUGH FAITH IN JESUS CHRIST ALONE.”

Ellen White, *Faith and Works*, p. 19



Pedro Esteves
Youth Director
Portuguese Union

CHAPTER 11



BY DANIEL BOSQUED

REVEALING GOD'S PLAN

God has no grandchildren

01 EXPLAIN



This chapter represents the climax of the argument that Paul has been developing in the previous verses regarding the composition of the true Israel (ROM. 9:6), the righteousness of God (9:14), the prophetic culmination of the entire Old Testament in Christ (10:4), the centrality of faith in the plan of salvation (10:9-13), the equality between Jews and Greeks (10:12) and the rebellious attitude of the people of Israel (10:21). This whole picture leads Paul to address the question that arises in the minds of the readers: What happens now with the Jewish people? Are they lost forever? In Paul's words: *"Did God reject his people?"* (11:1).

Paul answers the question with an emphatic denial, *"By no means!"* and sets himself as an irrefutable example of a Jew "from the tribe of Benjamin" that God has not rejected. The final proof that God has not shut the door of salvation to the rebellious Israel is the existence of a faithful remnant (11:2-5).

The novelty is that this remnant, far from the Jewish understanding that one could only be part of it by means of lineage or merit, has been chosen *"by grace"* (11:5). Paul breaks with an old misunderstanding, and highlights the inconsistency of attributing any merit to man: *"and if by grace, then it cannot be based on works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace."* This paradox implies that the historical people of Israel, who had spent years struggling to earn salvation, *"did not obtain it"* (11:7), and this had brought a hardening of their hearts as a result (11:8-10).

However, Paul repeats that the stumbling of Israel need not be definitive but it can rather be used by God, who intends to expand the borders of His people by inviting all nations to be part of it, and thus attract the Jews to true salvation and restoration by *"arousing them to envy"* (11:14).

The apostle then turns to Gentiles who have entered the community of faith. He tries to correct the arrogant attitude that was being generated by the stumbling of the Jews. Using the metaphor of an olive tree, Paul warns that if Gentiles – represented by a wild olive shoot – have been joined to the natural olive tree, much more will the original branches broken off for their unbelief be grafted into the saving community again if they meet only one condition: *"do not persist in unbelief"* (11:23).

Therefore, this metaphor expands the boundaries of the true Israel as a community of faith to all the branches that are grafted into it by faith. So Paul can finish the metaphor in verse 26 indicating that in this way, when *"the full number of the Gentiles"* is grafted in, "all Israel" – that is, the Israel of God, the true Israel, the Israel formed by anyone who believes, the Israel chosen by grace and not by works – will finally be saved.

The call of God knows no boundaries and is *"irrevocable"* (11:29), so the door of salvation is still open for Jews, for now unbelievers, so that *"they too may receive mercy"* (11:31).

Paul recognizes that this plan involves an *"inscrutable"* way (11:33) and it ends by praising God's sovereignty (11:34-36).

02 REFLECT



How would you feel if someone in your family did not share your faith in God, and you could see how that person is missing the blessing of accepting Jesus into their life? It would be really sad, right?

Maybe you are going through it right now. Maybe one of your loved ones seems to have closed their heart to God and you feel there are fewer opportunities for salvation. Well, this was exactly how Paul felt.

A few verses before, Paul said he had *“great sorrow and unceasing anguish”* in his heart for his brothers, those of his own race (9:2-3). And it was not easy for him, being a Jew, to realize that many of his people had rejected the Messiah after spending centuries waiting for Him. Therefore Paul, though he had decided to devote his life to preach the gospel to the Gentiles (11:13), kept trying by all means to reach “his blood,” his family, his childhood friends, so that they might be saved.

The motivation of the apostle is the certainty that God does not close the door of salvation to anyone, even when rejection is reiterated. And even the biggest setbacks of life, like the disbelief of an entire people, can be used by God as opportunities to move His kingdom forward throughout the world.

In this sense, it is fascinating to discover how God was able to redirect a tragic situation. Think for a moment: the people whom God had chosen, whom He had freed from Egypt, whom He had led

and protected for centuries, to whom He had sent His prophets, not only rejected Him but killed His own Son: the Messiah they had long waited for.

Everyone, and especially Paul, was aware of the magnitude of the problem this posed in the history of salvation.

Well, what did God do in that situation? He surprised everyone. He always does.

Far from punishing an entire nation forever and denying them salvation, he took the opportunity to invite Gentiles to join the salvific plan of being integrated in the community of faith called Israel (the olive tree), and in doing so, to try to raise awareness within the historic Israel, even if by mere jealousy.

God never gives up. He can use any failure, any mistake, any problem or any apparently hopeless circumstance for a greater good.

In the midst of this tragedy, Israel had the opportunity to learn the same lesson every human being must learn. That is: salvation cannot be earned by any merit; nor can it be inherited by offspring.

Every time we try to behave, to please God, or to fulfill the law with the only purpose of salvation we are falling into the same mistake as the people of Israel did for centuries. We'll never get the goal we seek. Salvation cannot be achieved. It cannot be deserved. It cannot be inherited. It can simply be accepted by faith.

So Paul dedicates a liberating thought to every human being: *“And if by grace, then it cannot be based on works”* (11:6). There is no in-between. Salvation is not 50% gift, 50% merit. Not even 90% and 10%. Such an approach involves misunderstanding grace. It implies a denaturing of the gift of God and a belittling of the sacrifice of Jesus for us.

That is the reason why, since salvation is a gift and God does not close the door to anyone, every human being still has the option to accept the gift and be incorporated into the plan of God.

In this context it is very interesting to note how balanced Paul's approach is. He defends the value of grace with passion, denounces the unbelief of the Jews and yet contains the possible spiritual pride of the Gentiles.

Somehow, the letter suggests a conflict in which the Gentile newcomers were despising the Jews and even questioning their possibility of salvation due to their momentary rejection of the Messiah.

Paul is quick to make it clear that nobody has the right to judge, let alone belittle, when someone seems to be momentarily away from God. The attitude that Paul denounces basically implies misunderstanding the gift. If someone thinks in terms of some sort

“GOD NEVER GIVES UP. HE CAN USE ANY FAILURE, ANY MISTAKE, ANY PROBLEM OR ANY APPARENTLY HOPELESS CIRCUMSTANCE FOR A GREATER GOOD.”

“SALVATION IS NOT 50% GIFT, 50% MERIT. NOT EVEN 90% AND 10%... SALVATION IS A GIFT.”

of superiority because of having discovered salvation, it means that salvation has not been properly understood.

Thus the apostle is able to address, through the metaphor of the olive tree, two underlying errors in the church of Rome, which are still common today: to believe that we can be saved by our own merits, and to fail to understand the gift by pretending that some higher level has been reached.

Finally, it is awesome to discover that God's plan is not complete until the *pleroma* (full number) of the Gentiles has arrived. It's like a party that cannot begin until we have reached everyone. God is still waiting, and only when all guests have arrived (you and me) will the people of God be complete and all Israel be saved at last.

03 APPLY



This chapter has many applications for our time because basically the situation has not changed much.

On the one hand, we are at risk of believing that because they have been in church for a long time some individuals or families have earned heaven. Somehow the belief that salvation can be inherited only because my parents or grandparents were already part of the church is still embedded in our lives. However, belonging to the people of God has never been by lineage. As a wise saying goes: God has no grandchildren, just children.

On the other hand, the respect that any human being deserves is important, no matter what their situation is with God. None of us has the right to feel superior for having discovered the gift of salvation. Only God knows the heart. Only He can judge. The only way to move forward together as a community in His kingdom is to discover that all of us have been called by God and by His grace, and that **grace** is all that holds us within the project of God.

It is crucial to understand the role of **grace** as God's initiative, and of **works** as man's response to a transformed life. Both have their role, but they cannot be mixed. Otherwise the two lose their meaning and *"grace would no longer be grace."*

Finally, it is liberating to recognize, as Paul did, that, no matter how hard we try, there are things about God that we will never understand, because His ways are inscrutable. But there is something we can do, and that is to give Him glory forever and ever (11:36).

04 ASK



01 Why do we struggle to accept that salvation cannot be earned, but can only be received as a gift?

02 What can you tell from this chapter to a friend or family member who has not accepted Jesus for now?

03 Do you think the situation in the Church of Rome was very different from our times? Why?

05 QUOTE



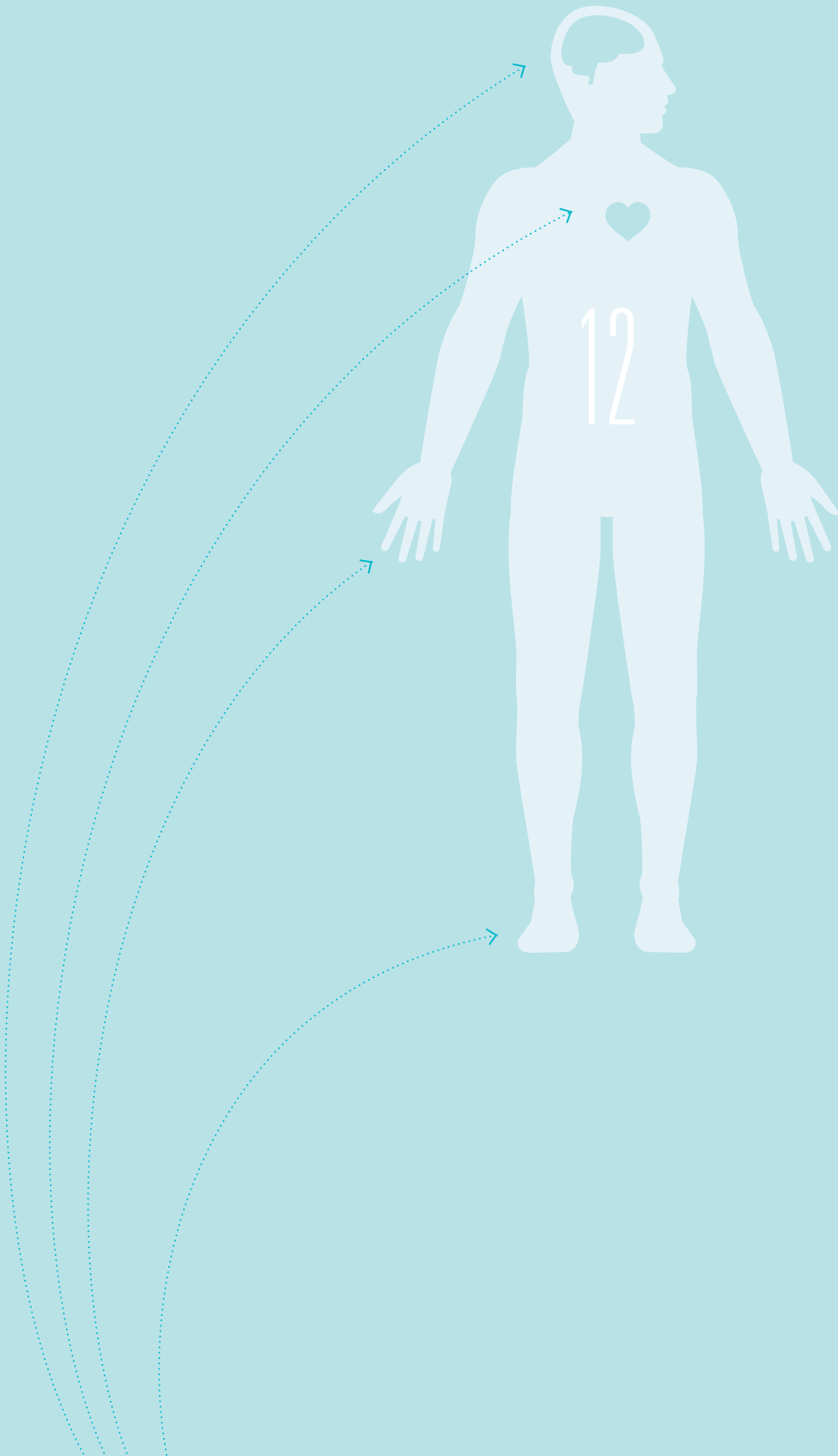
“IT IS NOT EARTHLY RANK, NOR BIRTH, NOR NATIONALITY, NOR RELIGIOUS PRIVILEGE, WHICH PROVES THAT WE ARE MEMBERS OF THE FAMILY OF GOD; IT IS LOVE, A LOVE THAT EMBRACES ALL HUMANITY.”

Ellen G. White



Daniel Bosqued
Youth Director
Spanish Union

CHAPTER 12



DIVINE CHANGE

Daily discipleship

01 EXPLAIN



Lifelong service

PUT INTO PRACTICE

The theological examination of the issue of salvation has already been dealt with extensively. Now Paul draws the reader's attention to the practical implications that everyday life brings to a follower of Christ.

RADICAL SURRENDER (ROM 12:1)

Offerings always had a specific function. They were part of a symbolic ceremony for the forgiveness of sins (LEV 1:4), a kind of payment and compensation. To give an offering means to let go, to relinquish, to give away; it was a sign of man's devotion to God, an acknowledgment that there is only one way to salvation – through the blood of the Lamb (REV 12:11). Only that which complied with God's requirements was legitimate to be given as an offering.

Paul makes it unmistakably clear that it is not man who defines the manner and matter of discipleship. It is "reasonable" to ask what is in accordance with God's will. His will is at the centre of worship, not humans, even if their intentions are most virtuous. Paul appeals to us to give ourselves to God like a holy offering – to let go of our life (ego) – to consecrate ourselves to Him. Through a sanctified life we are like a letter to those around us (2 COR 3:3), carrying the message, "Be reconciled to God!" (2 COR 5:20).

CHANGED THINKING (ROM 12:2-3)

Paul continues to clarify that we should never adapt to the ideals and beliefs of this world nor give in to external pressure. Our focus should be on new ways of thinking; we want our thoughts to be shaped by God's Spirit.

Why is this important?

- 1) To be able to assess what God's will is
- 2) To know what is good and what is to God's liking

A sensible and honest contemplation of self constitutes the necessary basis for a healthy and spiritual maturation. Our value does not depend on our personal achievements, but it is revealed through Jesus' voluntary death on the cross. Paul encourages us to collaborate with the Holy Spirit in order to cultivate self-assessment, which is healthy and sensible and makes you analyse yourself critically. Those around us will perceive such a self-assessment as authentic, real, agreeable and appealing.

SERVE GOD WITH SPIRITUAL GIFTS (ROM 12:4-20)

Now Paul gets very practical. He uses several examples to illustrate what a life as a holy offering in pursuit of the knowledge of God's will, together with a healthy and sensible self-assessment, looks like. He likes to use the image of the human body, which is rather self-explanatory. Church is more than a hand, a foot, or an eye. Every part of the body has its function, its value and a specific task that cannot possibly be performed by others. None of the organs is less valuable than the others. Only if everything is in balance and works together harmoniously, and only if each part fulfills its task, can the body be a complete whole. Christ's church is like the body.

Paul appeals to us to employ our God-given talents as a natural course of action, so that we can serve our church and those around us with excellence. But it is not all about doing the right thing. Paul emphasises the importance of having a correct attitude when dealing with one another. To be a Christian means to serve with a right attitude and not to be served by others (MAT 20:28). This brings us back to the beginning of the chapter, which is about radical commitment: being a living and holy sacrifice and serving with our whole life.

STAY FOCUSED (ROM 12:21)

It is all about perspective. Paul does not focus on the "avoidance of sin," but on "doing good," a scientifically-proven recipe for success.

02 REFLECT



A DESIRE FOR MORE

When I was a child and teenager, it was a MUST to attend the sermon in our church service. While coloring some pictures I waited for the liberating “Amen” at the end of each sermon. One Sabbath, however, this changed abruptly. I cannot remember the content of the sermon, but I do recall this moment vividly. It was like WOW – the Holy Spirit had been talking to me! After the church service I wanted to talk to someone about my experience, but the people I met seemed to be too preoccupied with ordinary topics. In vain I searched for someone with whom I could converse about my thoughts. I wanted to understand more. For the first time in my life I asked myself the question, “What does discipleship mean?” Something inside me told me that it must be more than what I experienced every Sabbath in my local church.

This moment was a turning point in my life with Jesus.

WELL-MEANT BUT POORLY EXECUTED

In the years following this turning point I took my first steps as a disciple of Jesus. These were marked by different stages. In the first stage, personal Bible studies and reading the writings of Ellen White led me to understand Jesus’ sacrifice more deeply. Comparing Jesus’ character with mine I wondered how God could possibly accept me.

Everything I did I wanted to do right. I wanted to be obedient with all my heart, to shun my sins and to prepare myself for the Second Coming. This resulted in separating myself from everything that, according to my understanding, was not spiritual or holy – people, parties, social events and more. I started following a wholly plant-based diet, I only listened to the “right” music and basically had nothing to do with sin and sinners out of fear of being led to sin again.

Life became a burden; life around me was oppressive and wearisome. Since I felt a kind of responsibility for my environment I took every opportunity to support people both inside and outside of the church in their process of “conversion” – at right and inopportune moments. Comparing myself with others led me to become spiritually arrogant and to have self-righteous thoughts.

“HE SAID, ‘ASK, AND IT WILL BE GIVEN TO YOU.’”

Like the rich young ruler, I was very self-sufficient and considered myself to be better than others. Because of this, my elder sister gave me the nickname “preacher.” She was not very impressed with my behavior; even if she knew that content-wise I was right. The way I acted was not appealing, let alone convicting; the fear of losing eternal life was my core motivation.

One of the statements from Ellen White that I always kept before me at that time was the following:

“The traits of character you cherish in life will not be changed by death or by the resurrection. You will come up from the grave with the same disposition you manifested in your home and in society. Jesus does not change the character at His coming. The work of transformation must be done now. Our daily lives are determining our destiny” (*THE ADVENTIST HOME*, P. 16).

Because of this I made many sacrifices. I was stern with others and myself in order to remain faithful – but this happened out of my own strength. My motives and aims were upright and good. Nevertheless, although well meant, they were poorly executed.

Does Paul think of such a life when he talks about being a living sacrifice? Doesn’t he say, “For I say to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think...” (ROM 12:3, NKJV)?

This stage of chastising was followed by another phase. I felt that my personal endeavors wouldn’t save me; God is not as narrow-minded. There had to be another way. Jesus loves us and His love covers many sins. We are justified by faith and not by works. But still I regularly read verses of Scripture that were very distinct: a living and holy offering acceptable to God, even a perfect offering? Entire correspondence with God’s will? Does God really mean that? Yes, He does. He is not okay with in-betweens.

IT IS WRITTEN

Did Paul err? Was he too radical? Did Ellen White exaggerate? No, not at all. Through His servants the prophets, God has always let us know what was important to Him (AMOS 3:7). Jesus Himself emphasised His actions with the words, “It is written!” Jesus did not modify Scripture to make it more culturally acceptable. He did not change the smallest detail (MAT 5:17). Rather, Jesus lived in this world and culture as a living and perfect sacrifice and an example of true discipleship (HEB 4:15).

“He endured every trial to which we are subject. And He exercised on His own behalf no power that is not freely offered to us” (*DESIRE OF AGES*, P. 14)

In the letter to the seventh church (REV 3:18), Jesus advises them to buy white garments. These are equivalent to the white garments of righteousness and they represent a changed mindset, which is

the basis for our character and is expressed in our daily thinking, communication and actions; it becomes visible (REV 19:8).

TOGETHER WE ACHIEVE MORE

Athletes train for competition. They want to win and the objective of their whole life, diet, phases of training and rest, and social and mental balance is to reach this goal. Their trainers help them through this process; they work together as a team.

T = Together
E = Everyone
A = Achieves
M = More

They go through all of these struggles simply to get a piece of precious metal, a bowl of glass or a cup.

HE WILL GUIDE YOU TO ALL TRUTH

The Holy Spirit (JOHN 16:13) became my trainer. I had to learn to cooperate with Him, which is why I asked Jesus for help. He said, "Ask, and it will be given to you" (MAT 7:7). Philippians 1:6 makes it clear that Jesus has already begun this work of transformation within me, and that He will also finish it and seal it in the Book of Life. This gave me peace.

Ezekiel 36:25-27 explains how God would go about it:

- 1) HE cleanses
- 2) HE bestows new sentiments
- 3) HE changes my thinking

CHANGED BY CONTEMPLATION

To train my character – changing my thoughts and actions – is what motivates me today. I have learnt to cooperate with the Holy Spirit as a team. By looking at Jesus' example every day, I behold His character; and being changed by the contemplation of His life is my daily aim – to overcome the bad with good (ROM 12:21; 2 COR 3:18). _____

03 APPLY



Because God is so merciful

Scientific studies have shown that inner motivation is the basis for a sustainable willingness to learn and to be changed. Other systems of positive conditioning would not even faintly show similar results.

Unconditional discipleship is based on the same principle. Only those who begin to fathom the gift of mercy – which Jesus gave to us through the working of the Holy Spirit – will show the readiness and even the desire to surrender their whole life as a living sacrifice to God.

To become like Jesus will be the goal and even the desire. They no longer focus on avoiding mistakes but on doing good. This change comes out of a transformed mind, which will become visible in transformed actions.

Neurological tests confirm the following: Infants who learn to walk concentrate on the thought "Remain standing!" rather than on "Avoid falling!" This is what Paul emphasizes in verse 21: focus on the good if you want to overcome the bad.

Chapter 12 is embedded between two central thoughts:

- 1) The right attitude comes from understanding God's mercy
- 2) Evil can only be overcome with good – changed by contemplation _____

04 ASK



01 What thoughts and reactions do you have when you look at Paul's standard of giving your whole life to God as a living and holy sacrifice which is to God's liking?

02 To abstain from "adapting to the ideals and beliefs of this world" – what would be the consequences of this thought in your personal life and the practical living of your faith?

03 Which spiritual goal do you focus on?
How do you overcome evil?

05 QUOTE



“BUT WE ALL, WITH UNVEILED FACE, BEHOLDING AS IN A MIRROR THE GLORY OF THE LORD, ARE BEING TRANSFORMED INTO THE SAME IMAGE FROM GLORY TO GLORY, JUST AS THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD.”

2 Corinthians 3:18



Reinhard Schwab
Youth Director
Austrian Union

CHAPTER 13



BY DANIEL CHIRILEANU

THE SUPREME COURT

Between man's and God's authority

01 EXPLAIN



DIFFERENT CULTURES – DIFFERENT TOPICS OF INTEREST

Paul was a man with a high level of education and an expert in the contemporary society of his days. He knew the Hebrew culture very well; he was an expert in the Greek culture, and also an expert in the Roman culture, being a Roman citizen himself. He knew that the topics he would and could look at with a Hebrew were different from the ones he could discuss with a Greek. And a topic of interest for a Greek represented nothing of the kind for a Roman.

Hebrews were enthusiasts about religious laws, while Romans were interested in the law as a whole and in civil laws in particular. For a Christian descending from the Romans, the authority was of prime interest. The apostle knew how hard it is to establish priorities, and he was aware of the possibility that the Christian be tempted to reject the human authority in an exaggerated way. The 13th chapter of Romans is dedicated mainly to explaining the relationship a Christian should have with the authorities from his or her community.

Paul started with an endorsement: *"Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities."* Then he argued, *"for there is no authority except from God."* Christians should agree that civil authorities are part of the set of tools God uses for man's sake; else it would be difficult for submission to be widespread.

MAN'S AUTHORITY COMES FROM GOD'S AUTHORITY

Paul listed the authorities according to their importance: God's authority is above, then comes human authority, because man's

authority comes from God: *"whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God"* (v. 2).

Fear is eliminated with logical arguments: *"for rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same"* (v. 3).

Paul lifted up the authorities' importance by describing the ruler as being *"God's minister"* (v. 4).

LOVE IS THE FULFILLMENT OF THE LAW

In the second part of Chapter 13, Paul associates the law with love. Again, Paul makes an appeal to logic as he presents the commandments, the law's requirements, in their spirit. He demonstrates in this way that, in fact, the basic purpose of each commandment is the manifestation of love. In summary, all of this would result in this: *"you shall love"* (v. 9); *"love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law."*

In his epistle Paul proposed what the Romans never did: to associate the law with love, which would have a very happy result. The difference between an ordinary heathen Roman and a Christian Roman would be this association of the law with love.

AN IMPORTANT THING: CLEANLINESS

The last verses of this chapter present the importance of cleanliness and the way to keep this quality: wakefulness (v. 11-14).

Here we have a poetic argument, an interesting metaphor: *"the night is far spent, therefore let us cast off the works of darkness and let us put on the armor of light."*

The allusion is clearly made to the spirit of the society and the world that does not know God, as well as the vicious acts of men both then and nowadays.

02 REFLECT



Our mind always needs a framework of reference. Deep within us there is something that has been placed by God, which manifests itself as a seat of authority: our conscience. The conscience, when not worn down and broken, is, in a way, “the voice of God” in man’s heart. What is bad about our conscience is the fact that it can be deteriorated by overriding it, or by committing acts that are contrary to its message. Like the majority of human functions, the conscience has a certain degree of adaptability to man-made situations. If we ignore the reproofs and the impulses of our conscience, we will make it accept the negative behaviors and decisions as normal. It is just as if we changed the settings in our inner being that usually tell us that some things, in certain conditions, are wrong and make us feel guilty, so that those same things now become positive and acceptable.

Apart from our inner being, which has a positive orientation due to its basic settings (from Creation and birth), we also need some outside references to which we can relate our judgment and decisions. A wholly safe reference is the Law of God. As long as we have this authority as a criterion for making decisions we can be sure that we will not err. But many times, even if the Law remains unchanged, we interpret it tendentiously and subjectively to justify some acts and thoughts that are against God’s will.

Unfortunately there are no laws that are so detailed as to refer to every aspect of life in the minutest detail. The situations in which things happen are so different that the Law of God accomplishes the keystone role for our actions, and it contains the basic principle for our decisions. In brief, the Law can be summarized in the verb “to love.” Everything else that is not covered by this expression does not belong to the Law of God.

Love should have rules to protect its best framework in order to be clear and real. The existence of civil authorities and the established rules, in this context, are supposed to ensure the presence of love and the manifestation of justice.

THE PRINCIPLE IS AN ELEMENTARY ONE: LOVE IS THE FILTER OF OUR ACTIONS.

If something harms another human being in any way, it should not be done; if something does not demonstrate love for my neighbor or for God, it should not be done. From this perspective it is simpler to understand and apply the Law.

The apostle Paul, a good theologian, succeeds in clarifying and simplifying the truth in this chapter.

This understanding of the Law of God led the Reformers to understand God and His character throughout history. The fact that they placed the Law of God in relationship with His love changed the understanding of the Christian life in faithful people’s minds (even in the minds of those from the Dark Ages). Knowing that God is love, they came to understand His forgiveness and grace. They realized their errors about Purgatory and Hell.

Satan is not happy at all when people see and understand the love of God. He would like humans to remain as far away as possible from God’s love, losing the courage to ask for forgiveness or to regard the relationship with their Heavenly Father with joy.

THE GREATEST CHALLENGE

“Let us walk properly... not in lewdness.” v. 13

The list that would comprise the category of infamous acts is pretty important, but it is not as long as the one that would comprise the gestures of a noble life. The noble lifestyle is much more varied and wide than the one limited by transgression, immorality and corruption. A man living by the love principle would discover an infinity of opportunities in every area. Not only the acts themselves, but also his words and thoughts would be noble. When someone lives led by the laws of love, they will have no reasons for fear, regret or shame. —

“THE EXISTENCE OF CIVIL AUTHORITIES AND THE ESTABLISHED RULES, IN THIS CONTEXT, ARE SUPPOSED TO ENSURE THE PRESENCE OF LOVE AND THE MANIFESTATION OF JUSTICE.”

03 APPLY



PERSONAL IMPLEMENTATION

When I look for a sure reference point I come unavoidably to the authority and laws of God. It is always very important to establish whether or not I want to accept God's will in my life. Another fundamental thing is to decide for myself that, no matter what the context and conditions, I will choose the divine authority as my first priority. On the other side there would be the rest of the authorities such as society and the influence of friends and family.

It is not easy to choose to submit to God's will when what society or friends expect from me is totally different, or even against His requirements.

However, what would facilitate our decision process as well as our living a noble life – in walking properly, without lewdness – is the power of love. Neither the human authorities nor friends or family relationships, nor laws nor temptations would ever be above the love of God and His laws based on love.

Lewdness is like a garment: "works of darkness." They are not evident in moral gloominess, and they are visible only when the presence of God is manifested and when His Word shines.

MORAL PURITY, A PRECIOUS AIM

In order to preserve my moral purity I need to be always in the area of influence of the Spirit of God.

And if I put on the works of darkness, I need more than only one simple decision; I need to ask for help from the Redeemer.

Taking off the works of darkness is a true struggle. It is a fight that is not won on our own. The submission of our will to the authority of God plays an essential role. Things would be easy if this submission of our will simply entailed a transfer of signed documents from one office to another, but Satan does not give up so easily on what he claims as his own.

**"IT IS NOT EASY
TO CHOOSE TO
SUBMIT TO GOD'S
WILL WHEN WHAT
SOCIETY OR
FRIENDS EXPECT
FROM ME IS TOTALLY
DIFFERENT, OR
EVEN AGAINST HIS
REQUIREMENTS."**

If God prefers the light, His enemy chooses the darkness; he wants to overcome us by encouraging us to keep away from prayer, from reading the Bible and from finding opportunities to meditate on God's love. He knows very well that a man who does not pray is defenseless against temptations; he also knows that if he can persuade me not to study the Scripture, he can lead me into error. Therefore, my only way of escape from his evil trap is to ask God to come close to me. God will answer such a prayer with gladness.

In fact He is waiting for this: for **me** to allow Him to help me. —

04 ASK



01

How difficult is it for me to accept somebody else's authority in my life?
Does it bother me? Does it make a rebel out of me?

02

Do I remember a situation when I understood what God wanted,
but I preferred to find excuses and to act differently from what I knew was right?
How would I describe it?

03

What is harder: for me to obey the civil authorities or to submit myself
to the Law of God? Why?

05 QUOTE



“THE SPIRITUAL
AUTHORITY IS THE LIGHT
IN MEN’S HEARTS THAT
COMPELS THEM TO
DO RIGHT EVEN WHEN
THE LIGHTS GO OFF
AND THE POLICE ARE
NOT AROUND.”

Rick Joyner



Daniel Chirileanu
Youth Director
Romanian Union

CHAPTER 14



BY GILBERT CANGY

DIVERSITY WITHIN THE CHURCH

Learning to accept one another

01 EXPLAIN



How should we handle differences of opinion and practice within a church community? In Romans 14, Paul addresses this situation. The present issue is food: more precisely, clean and unclean food, which had become divisive within the church at Rome. Some, whom Paul calls “strong,” are of the view that they can eat ‘everything’; others, described as “weak,” think that they should only eat vegetables.

This is not the only church community with whom Paul discussed this concern; he does the same with the church in Corinth. A quick reference to 1 Corinthians 8 sheds some more light on the specific nature of the issue at hand. It appears that the distinction between clean and unclean food in the context of Paul’s letters is based on whether it had been sacrificed to idols or not, and not on Leviticus 11 dietary laws. The “strong” believers, of whom Paul was certainly one, knew that an idol is a representation of a “god” that in actual fact does not exist; it has no power or influence, except that which is ascribed to it by human beings. There is only one God. To these “strong” believers, whether the food being sold at the market was sacrificed to idols or not did not make any difference to them. Unfortunately, sometimes, these “strong” believers felt proud of their superior knowledge and looked down on the “weak” believers.

The “weak” believers within that same community of faith were those who came from pagan backgrounds or associations, where idols were very “real.” Even after their conversion to Christianity, their conscience was not at peace about consuming food that had been associated with idol worship. And when they saw the “strong” believers consume food that they knew had been sacrificed to idols, they condemned them because they thought that they were engaging with pagan worship.

So the “strong” looked down upon the weak and saw them as inferior in knowledge; and the “weak” condemned the “strong” for denying the faith and selling out to paganism.

First of all, Paul raises the issue in the context of what he calls ‘disputable matters’; matters that are not actually essential for our salvation, matters on which we can exercise our personal choices in a responsible way. On the matter of food, he affirms, “The Kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit...” (VERSE 17).

TO ALL BELIEVERS CONCERNED:

(1) On disputable matters, everyone is entitled to their own views, but these opinions must be informed and guided by faith and love (v. 23). (2) If your opinion is likely to upset another believer, keep it between yourself and God; do not be driven by pride and do not enter into public disputation because it will endanger unity within the community of faith (v. 22). Above all, we do not live for ourselves but for Jesus, who lived and died for us and has called us to unity. (3) We should not judge or look down on each other. We must recognize that we are all following what we individually believe to be right (v. 6). (4) We are all accountable to God and ultimately to Him we will have to answer for our opinions and course of action (v. 10, 12).

TO THE “STRONG”

(1) Act in love and make every effort to pursue whatever leads to peace and mutual edification (v. 19). (2) If your brother is genuinely distressed by what you eat, you might not be acting in love (v. 15). The weaker believers belong to God as well; do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food (v. 20). (3) It is better to forgo of some of your privileges in order to protect your brothers and sisters who otherwise might lose faith.

TO THE “WEAK”

God has accepted your “strong” brothers and sisters; so it is not for you to judge them (v. 3, 4).



My wife and I are currently on a once-in-a-lifetime adventure. We are driving about 3,000 miles across much of the United States from East to West. So far after Washington DC, we have enjoyed the beauty of the beaches of North Carolina; the majesty of the Rocky Mountains in Tennessee; the home of country music in Nashville; the iconic places of the Civil Rights Movement in Birmingham and Selma, Alabama; the French heritage of New Orleans in Louisiana; and have just been deeply moved at the Sixth Floor Museum in Dallas, Texas from where the much-loved President John F. Kennedy was assassinated.

While this feels and sounds like a real exciting adventure, it is filled with potential conflicts that can easily turn the dream adventure into a nightmare. My wife and I share some common personality traits; but, on the other hand, we are so different in so many ways. Many of these differences surface when we are traveling together and come into play when decisions have to be made as to what places we should see; how much we should spend; how much luggage we need; what is the shortest way to get there, etc.

All these details sound pretty basic and not really worth arguing about; they are all a matter of preference and certainly not a matter of life and death and nothing that should threaten our relationship. They are, as Paul would suggest, “disputable matters” that are in their very nature negotiable. But my wife and I can bear testimony to the fact that these same “disputable” things have messed up some of our best vacations, unnecessarily.

As I look back on my journey with Jesus and with the church, I realize that some of my most challenging and most long-lasting conflicts have been over “disputable matters” that we have come to consider as issues that are fundamental to our faith; I learned this fairly early in my Christian experience.

I come from a good Seventh-day Adventist home where my mother in particular made sure that we adhered faithfully to the Church’s teachings. Family worship was part of our daily practice as well as Wednesday night prayer meetings, and of course, Sabbath worship. However, in my teenage years, I drifted away from the values I was brought up with. My deep interest in music led me to become immersed in secular, contemporary music of my time and the clubbing scene. I was the bass guitarist in my school and later a popular soul/rock band. However, a few years later, the Holy Spirit led me through an understanding of my deeper needs to a transformational experience with Jesus. My deepest gratitude to Jesus translated into radical discipleship and

the deepest desire of my life was to please God and serve Him the best way I could.

Soon after my encounter with Jesus, I was invited to an evangelistic event run by a group known as “Youth for Christ.” As I entered the hall, I was in shock; I could not believe what I saw; the band that was leading out in worship was using drums, a bass guitar and all the instruments that a secular band would use. I was so offended that at the end of the program I went straight to the leader and rebuked him for destroying the work of God and leading young people astray. He was equally shocked and asked me about the nature of my concern. Well, I told him that I used to play in a secular band, where I used all those instruments in a very worldly environment; I had left all these behind to walk the new life with Jesus and it was my conviction that those instruments did not have their place in the worship of God.

“THE ‘WEAK’ BELIEVERS JUDGED THE ‘STRONG’ BELIEVERS AND THE ‘STRONG’ ONES LOOKED DOWN ON THE ‘WEAK.’”

The band leader surprised me with his answer: he told me that he had never used those instruments in any secular environment and had always used them in worship, to express his devotion to God and to lead other young people to faith in Jesus. He told me that my problem was one of association; I was condemning the use of these instruments because I associated them with my past life, which was not in harmony with Jesus; he did not have this association. The issue was not the instruments in themselves, but in what I associated them with.

My encounter and conversation with this man set me on a journey of reflection that eventually led me to understand that my perspective on musical instruments was the same as the “weak” believers in the church in Rome. The “weak” believers only ate vegetables because the meat that was sold in the market place was likely to have come from animals that had been sacrificed to idols. Consuming such meat would be equal to participating in pagan worship, which they had left behind to follow Jesus. However, there were many other believers from the same church, the “strong” ones, who did not have this kind of association and did not have a problem with eating meat sold at the market place. The

“weak” believers judged the “strong” believers and the “strong” ones looked down on the “weak.” Paul condemns both groups and their respective attitudes. He admonishes them all to exercise mutual respect and to choose the way of Jesus, the way of mutual acceptance, the way of love and the way of self-sacrifice, with the ultimate purpose of building one another up.

Paul deplores the fact that believers are “destroying” one another fighting over issues that have little to do with the essence of the Kingdom of God. “The Kingdom of God is not a matter of eating or drinking...” and then Paul goes on to proclaim what the Kingdom is really about: it is about “righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (ROM 14:17). I wonder, if Paul were to write to our church today, whether he would add “musical instruments” to his list of “disputable matters.” I believe he would. But one thing I am sure of is that God desires for us to major on the things that are central to His Kingdom – righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

How is it humanly possible for believers within a Christian community to switch from fighting and spiritually destroying one another over “disputable matters” to building their personal lives and their community on the foundation of righteousness, peace and joy? There is only one way – the way of Jesus, through the transforming power of the Holy Spirit: “in the Holy Spirit” as Paul puts it.

I had seen enough disputes in my local church as a young person and one night, in desperation, I cried out to God to show me a better way; I was impressed to read Acts 2:42-47 and there I saw the picture of the early Christian church that was just born out of the Spirit. After His resurrection, Jesus gave His disciples the gospel commission and then, strangely enough, told them not to go, but to wait; to wait for the gift that the Father had promised and promised them: “...you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” ACTS 1:8. The early Christian church we read about in Acts 2:42-47 was the direct result of the transforming work brought about by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. This is our greatest need today.

03 APPLY



John F. Kennedy is well known for the following challenge that he gave to young people: “Ask not what your country can do for you; but what you can do for your country.” However, in the context of the issue under discussion – unnecessary division within the church community over “disputable matters,” it is my conviction that we need to go beyond our human capabilities, beyond what we can do for our Church, and cry out to God for the supernatural assistance that He has promised us.

The word “disengagement” readily comes to mind in all church circles when we think of young adults today; this is alarmingly true. If this ecclesiastical exodus of our young people were attributed to the fact that they were losing faith in the teachings of the church or were calling into question the very existence of God, we would understand to a certain point, because many have in times past. However, research has clearly shown that the fundamental reason our youth are checking out is not doctrinal, but relational. It is essentially about interpersonal conflicts over “disputable” matters. It is my view that we need to seek “righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.”

I challenge you to read the first two chapters of the book of Acts and see what God did for the early Christian church. He has done the same for me and will do the same for you. Be a change agent for God’s Kingdom. _____

04 ASK



01

Paul says that Christians do not live for themselves: they live for Jesus.
How do you relate to that?

02

How does your church community deal with "disputable" matters?

03

Paul once asked some believers: "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?"
How would you answer this question?

05 QUOTE



“THE DESCENT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT UPON THE CHURCH IS LOOKED FORWARD TO AS IN THE FUTURE; BUT IT IS THE PRIVILEGE OF THE CHURCH TO HAVE IT NOW. SEEK FOR IT, PRAY FOR IT, BELIEVE FOR IT. WE MUST HAVE IT, AND HEAVEN IS WAITING TO BESTOW IT.”

Ellen G. White, *Evangelism*, p. 701



Gilbert Cangy
Youth Ministries Director
of the General Conference of SDA Church

CHAPTER 15

15



BY DANIEL KASLIK

THERE IS ROOM FOR DIVERSITY IN THE CHURCH

The responsibility of the strong

01 EXPLAIN



Paul now continues with the theme of chapter 14, where he dealt with disputes in Rome. He begins chapter 15 by calling on the “strong.” He clearly considers himself to be one of them as well. Romans commentator Ernst Käsemann stated that “there are strong and weak people everywhere and, as the designation ‘strong’ implies, it is the strong who are always held responsible.” **It is obvious that the strong must help the weak to carry their burdens.**

In verses 1-6 Paul elaborates on how Christians should help others. He challenges them to follow the example of Jesus Christ by trying to get closer even to those who think differently and to actively help them.

Verses 7-13 focus on how God did not call only the Israelites to be saved; rather, in His mercy He offered salvation to the Gentiles as well, as was foretold in many parts of the Old Testament.

Starting in verse 14 and continuing to the end of the chapter, Paul talks about his authority as an apostle. He describes his mission and the ultimate goal of God’s calling for him – to bring the Gospel to those who haven’t heard yet about God. He also explains what God has done through him for the conversion of the Gentiles and how God’s work is ongoing. He then describes his next mission plans to go to Jerusalem, Rome and even Spain.

“‘THERE ARE STRONG AND WEAK PEOPLE EVERYWHERE AND, AS THE DESIGNATION “STRONG” IMPLIES, IT IS THE STRONG WHO ARE ALWAYS HELD RESPONSIBLE.’ IT IS OBVIOUS THAT THE STRONG MUST HELP THE WEAK TO CARRY THEIR BURDENS.”

Paul closes chapter 15 by wishing the Romans to experience the presence of the God of peace. What follows is Romans 16, a chapter full of personal greetings.

02 REFLECT



Who are the weak and the strong? What defined them? This information is given to us in the previous chapter. The key issue was the diet – vegetarianism. Some followed a vegetarian diet while others also ate meat. That was the root of their conflict; it was not a question of being consistent with your principles.

“For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol’s temple, will not the conscience of him who is weak be emboldened to eat those things offered to idols?” (1 COR 8:10).

In the Epistle to the Romans, the issue had to do with meat that had been offered to idols. It was not about unclean food since Paul writes that if somebody goes to the butchery for meat, recognizes what kind it is but not whether it has been offered to idols, and eats it, he is blameless. It is important to note that among the Jews living in the Roman Empire there were people who did not eat meat because the meat that was available in the market could have been consecrated to the gods. According to Paul, those who did not eat the meat because of this reason were “weak in the faith.” Moreover, those who chose to eat the meat while considering it as

“PAUL ENCOURAGES BELIEVERS IN ROME TO FOLLOW THE EXAMPLE OF JESUS CHRIST AND STRIVE FOR UNITY, WHICH THEY COULD NOT ACHIEVE IN THEIR OWN STRENGTH BUT RATHER AS A RESULT OF RECEIVING IT AS A GIFT FROM GOD.”

taking part in pagan worship would be committing sin. However, those who ate it and did not care about it being offered to idols did not sin. What Paul explains is that everything that is not of faith is a sin: in other words, an individual’s conscience plays a key role. Similarly, some people still kept feasts that had already lost their meaning (FOR INSTANCE, THE JEWISH FEAST OF TABERNACLES – ROM 14:5, 6). These feasts represented salvation and were a prototype of Christ; Sabbath, on the other hand, was established before sin.

RECEIVE ONE ANOTHER IN DIVERSITY

Paul calls on the strong to bear the weaknesses of the weak. What exactly did he mean by that? Paul points out that a Christian’s duty is to look up from his or her own vanity. As Christians, we are “not to please ourselves.” Paul is pointing back to his own proposition in Romans 14:7-9, where he explains that nobody lives or dies to themselves. This is what enables Christians to forget about themselves and seek to please their neighbor (V. 2). But who is our neighbor? In this case, it is not someone who is like-minded, but rather someone who actually holds different opinions to ours, a person whose weaknesses we should bear and thus prove ourselves in the law of love. The whole chapter could be summarized as “Receive one another in diversity”; that’s the whole point of the law of love.

ANCIENT WORDS EVER TRUE

In verse 3 Paul quotes Psalm 69:9, a text that refers to the life of Jesus Christ. He then adds that everything we read in the Bible is for our edification and encouragement, even if it was written many centuries ago. The Bible was written in such a way that it would “update” itself and speak to the hearts of those willing to listen. Thus, Scripture is alive and powerful in every time and age. Moreover, it is important to know that it is the Holy Spirit who speaks to us and touches our daily lives as we read, listen or reflect on this Book.

The Bible’s purpose is for us to personally meet God, even today. How does that happen? A great way to start is to read Bible passages several times in a row, intentionally searching for thoughts that will speak to us throughout the whole day. You can try repeating the text out loud. The Jews used to learn and speak the Scripture passages by heart, and thus they could ponder on them during their daily activities. The text was written in their minds. Try to pronounce the text out loud several times. This has a special effect. The Jews also chose to delve into Scripture to discover its profound meaning, and this brought them salvation: “We have preserved this Book and the Book has preserved us” (BARON, JOSEPH L. (1965). *A TREASURY OF JEWISH QUOTATIONS*).

LIKE-MINDEDNESS

Paul encourages believers in Rome to follow the example of Jesus Christ and strive for unity, which they could not achieve in their own strength but rather as a result of receiving it as a gift from

“THE QUESTION FOR ME IS WHETHER I SEE GOD'S GUIDING AND CALLING IN THE AREA HE ENTRUSTED ME WITH”

God. And still today, unity can be achieved by approaching others and carrying their burdens: “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” (GAL 6:2).

FAITHFUL AND MERCIFUL GOD

In verses 7-13 Paul praises God for His faithfulness to the promises given to the Israelites and also for His mercy towards those who according to the Jewish perspective did not deserve it – the Gentiles. In the same way that God chose Israel many centuries ago, He covered the whole earth with His mercy. God wants to give everyone eternal life; no one is excluded from accepting this undeserved gift. Such a merciful God leads us to praise and rejoice.

WHAT SHOULD WE BOAST ABOUT?

In verse 17 Paul does not boast about what he has done, but what God has done through him. To boast and be proud of God’s work is not a sin. If you are not sure if your pride is holy, ask yourself the question, “Am I proud of what God does through others or only of what He does through me?”

WHAT IS GOD'S MISSION FOR ME?

Paul was clearly aware of what his part was in God’s plan of salvation. He was a zealous man going all-in. He knew what God’s will was for his life – to become an apostle to the Gentiles. The question for me is whether I see God’s guiding and calling in the area He entrusted me with as well, for the Bible says, “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (EPH 2:10).

FINAL THOUGHTS

In verses 22-33 we read that Paul considers his God-given mission in Asia Minor finished. He is looking forward to bringing the gospel also to Spain and to visiting the believers in Rome. He is well aware of the enmity between many unbelievers in Judea and also of the power of the Devil’s snares, so he humbly asks that the believers of Rome would pray for him. If such a spiritual giant as Paul was asking for prayers, how much more should we long for and ask others to pray for us. Paul knows the power of such prayers.

03 APPLY



Paul chooses Jesus as an example of how to deal with “neighbors” who think differently. Christ personally experienced human animosity and even suffering and death. How often are the petty problems and misunderstandings among church members the beginning of building walls and becoming hostile to one another. In his Epistles, Paul sometimes strongly criticizes a wrong theology or a belief that ends up burdening others’ life of faith and salvation with various Jewish traditions and rules. At the same time, there are problems within the life of the church that are in the so-called “gray area,” meaning that believers may have differing views regarding a particular matter. Paul exhorts them and us to exercise tolerance, cooperation, dedication, self-sacrifice and acceptance.

Back then, Paul considered that meat that had been offered to idols, vegetarianism as a result and the observance of some Jewish feasts in Christianity were actually problems in the “gray area.” It often also included matters related to the cultural tradition in which Christians grew up. I’ll leave the assessment of what is part of this grey area nowadays – the 21st-century Christian world – to each individual.

What is clear is that we should always act in accordance with the example of Jesus Christ, and that the strong are called to support the helpless and the needy.

04 ASK



01

What are the "gray" topics of our church in the 21st century?
What should we tolerate in others?

02

What helps you to clearly hear the Bible speaking to you
and to think about Scripture throughout your day?

03

Do you know God's calling for your life? Do you have any God-given mission?
What can you do to further discover God's plan for your life?

05 QUOTE



“I DO NOT PRAY FOR THESE ALONE, BUT ALSO FOR THOSE WHO WILL BELIEVE IN ME THROUGH THEIR WORD; THAT THEY ALL MAY BE ONE, AS YOU, FATHER, ARE IN ME, AND I IN YOU; THAT THEY ALSO MAY BE ONE IN US, THAT THE WORLD MAY BELIEVE THAT YOU SENT ME.”

John 17:20-21



Daniel Kaslik
Youth Director
Czecho-Slovakian Union

CHAPTER 16



BY PASCAL RODET

A TWEET FOR OUR FRIENDS!

Don't forget about them...

01 EXPLAIN



This last chapter begins with a list of friends that Paul wants every Christian of Rome to remember. It is the expression of a big family, one in which everyone keeps in touch.

Here we encounter a series of names, with various origins. The Christians in Rome came from many different areas. This is why we find Jewish, Roman and Greek names.

Paul especially commends Phoebe, who lived in Greece and was used to welcoming anyone who was in need in her home. He also mentions Priscilla and Aquila, who risked their lives to help people in need just like Paul himself. Paul then talks about several people who are important to him, having lived the same Christian experiences, as they also worked in the nascent church.

However, for Paul there are not only positive people in the world. He warns us against those who foster division, and who have thoughts against the faith and against what has been taught to the Christians of Rome. These people think only of themselves and their own glory. But the only thing that can save the Romans is their faithfulness to the Faith, and also their obedience to and knowledge of Scripture. These will allow them to differentiate between good and evil.

He ends his presentation with words of encouragement and blessings from God.

“THESE PEOPLE THINK ONLY OF THEMSELVES AND THEIR OWN GLORY. BUT THE ONLY THING THAT CAN SAVE THE ROMANS IS THEIR FAITHFULNESS TO THE FAITH, AND ALSO THEIR OBEDIENCE TO AND KNOWLEDGE OF SCRIPTURE.”

God has the power to make you strong in the Faith and in the sharing of the Word of God, which reveals Jesus Christ's message.

God's plan includes not only the coming of Jesus, but also the words of the prophets in the Old Testament

Paul finishes his letter with a dedication to God, who possesses the wisdom and all the glory forever and ever. —

02 REFLECT



Surely you are familiar with social networks such as Facebook, Twitter or Instagram.

You use them to talk to your friends and share your activities and experiences. They also allow you to take a peek into your friends' accounts to experience a part of their lives. Even if you have friends around the globe, you can still see, hour by hour, what is going on in their lives.

You may be addicted to posting on your wall or on somebody else's: so addicted that when you get back home, the first thing you do is connect your phone to the Wi-Fi network. When you go to a store or to a restaurant, the first thing you do is get up to date with the latest posts. That's how you end up knowing the precise location of the best hotspot areas around!

But when you find yourself in a bad reception area with no Wi-Fi, it seems it is the end of your world! Your life stops, you have no friends, you are alone.

Now, picture yourself in Paul's shoes, during a time when friends were really rare. Sometimes it would take months before a letter reached its recipient. The post system didn't exist back then; only the official letters would be delivered by a horseman. For those who wanted to keep in touch, they would have to find someone who was trustworthy to deliver the letter during one of their long trips.

So you can understand why Paul uses his letter to the Romans to also greet everyone. He cares about the people he knows. And we find here that Paul is a kind man, friendly and brotherly. He really wishes to include every single person he has connected with in the past.

And what about you? Have you ever lived and shared any experiences with your brothers and sisters from your church?

Here, it appears that Paul is going through a powerful experience. He discovered salvation in Christ on his way to Damascus. Then he reminds us, in his letter to the Romans, that salvation is by God's grace, and that all of his life has been led by this amazing sacrifice of Jesus. He can't help but share it with the people who have become very close to him.

The list of people and the explanations we find in the chapter are an example of grace itself, a grace Paul has experienced for many

“YOU MIGHT SAY THAT THE COMMUNITY YOU’RE IN, OR WERE IN, ISN’T A PLACE OF JOY OR GRACE... AT ALL! DON’T WORRY, PAUL DIDN’T ALWAYS LIVE GREAT MOMENTS IN HIS COMMUNITIES EITHER.”

years. He testifies about what Jesus' sacrifice has changed in the life of every one of them.

But let's get back to the social networks you use. You must have discovered that there are also some people who give out false information and lie. They do not hesitate to insult others, or even give some fake data covered with positive sentences, to make it believable. As a result, we can't tell if it's true or not, at first.

Sometimes they can also use sentences that are directly insulting and that crush the spirits of young people, making them feel really low. Maybe you have experienced this, or heard of a friend who was or is in this situation.

Those people only serve their own desires and feelings. They have only one goal: to hurt someone only because they can't stand him or her. This is the exact opposite of a spirit of service and a willingness to listen.

Paul reminds us that it is our responsibility to pick our friends and choose our words. If I experience the love of God, through the understanding of Jesus' sacrifice, I am freed by grace! And, therefore, I will only want to share and live it with others!

And that is how community is built. We are happy to come together in order to live the joy of the grace and love of God. We share those moments of service and support.

You might say that the community you're in, or were in, isn't a place of joy or grace... at all! Don't worry, Paul didn't always live great moments in his communities either. But, just as it was

important for him to go through them, it's important for us as well. God has the power to make us strong through the gospel. Do you relate to that last part? If not, you have to experience it! And even if you feel your current church is in "ruins" instead of being the visible "body of Christ" – as it is supposed to be – you cannot use this as an excuse for not experiencing the mystery of grace! On the contrary, you need to pay more attention to it! The message of grace is for all cultures and all people, wherever they may be.

The need to be firm and to stick together has never been more pressing. And only God can make us stronger, through the gospel, and by the grace of God.

To do this, God offers His help and support. He alone is able to provide this bond of faith and grace between all people of goodwill.

And He will give you, through the Holy Spirit, the ability to share the joy and the love with those around you, as long as you are willing to help others. This is the mission He's offering you: to share His grace with everybody around you. In every kind word of appreciation and support, whether on paper or out loud, you will be delivering a bit of God's grace. _____

**“AND HE WILL GIVE YOU,
THROUGH THE HOLY
SPIRIT, THE ABILITY TO
SHARE THE JOY AND
THE LOVE WITH THOSE
AROUND YOU, AS LONG
AS YOU ARE WILLING
TO HELP OTHERS.”**

03 APPLY



SO... WHAT NOW?

From now on, remember your friends, and send them a message. Let them know how grateful you are for having them in your life!

Is there anyone God may have used to guide you in your life or to help your faith grow? Think of them. Send them some words of appreciation and express all your gratitude to them. _____

04 ASK



01

Do you realize the true value of Jesus' gift of grace?
What does it mean to you?

02

Think of people who have been significant to you in your spiritual journey or who have helped build your faith. What could you do to show them your gratitude?

03

What could you change to make your friends discover the grace of Jesus Christ through you?

05 QUOTE



“A FRIEND LOVES
AT ALL TIMES, AND
A BROTHER IS BORN
FOR ADVERSITY.”

Proverbs 17:17



Pascal Rodet
Youth Director
Franco-Belgian Union



STUDY GUIDE

EPISTLE TO THE ROMANS



to God, alone wise, be glory
through Jesus Christ forever.

AMEN.