

# Introduction to the Apostle Paul's Letter to the Romans

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## Introduction

The Reformer Martin Luther called Romans the “purest gospel.”<sup>1</sup> In William Tyndale’s 1534 edition of the New Testament, he called Romans “the principle and most excellent part of the New Testament” and “a light and a way in unto the whole scripture.”<sup>2</sup>

People often think of Romans as a New Testament book that gives us a list of Bible doctrines much like a book on systematic theology. Although we find biblical doctrines in Romans, it is not a systematic theology. It’s a letter, rooted in history, written by an individual author to specific people at a definite time and for a unique purpose.

Although Paul was highly educated in both Greek and Jewish traditions, he shouldn’t be seen as a seminary professor who writes papers or books in an academy on Christian doctrine so they can be studied by those who are interested in learning theology.

Instead, Paul was a church planting movement leader who wrote his letters in response to the real problems and questions he faced as he was living out God’s mission to see God’s name honored and his kingdom come throughout the whole world by planting and developing healthy churches. Missions professor Arthur Glasser calls the New Testament authors *task theologians*.

The New Testament authors and local communities of faith, in whose midst these documents were written, were not marginal to participation in the mission to which God had called his Church. These authors were all missionaries. When they were engaged in theological reflection, its focus was on the missionary task in hand. They were “task” theologians, and what they produced had relevance to the particular tasks in which they were involved.<sup>3</sup>

So in order to understand and apply Paul’s letter to the Romans to our lives correctly we need to understand: 1) the general historical context in which he wrote the letter, 2) the broader message of Paul in all his letters, and 3) the unique historical context and overarching message Paul wrote to the church in Rome.

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<sup>1</sup> Luther, “Preface to Romans,” 447.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Bruce, Frederick Fyvie. *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans: An Introduction and Commentary*. 1st edition, Eerdmans Pub Co, 1963, 9.

<sup>3</sup> Glasser, Arthur, *Kingdom and Mission* (1992), Pasadena, Fuller Seminary Publishing, 6. See also Engen, C. E. V., Gilliland, D. S., Glasser, A. F., & Redford, S. B. (2003). *Announcing the Kingdom: The Story of God’s Mission in the Bible* (8.2.2003 edition). Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic.

## I. The Historical Context

### A. The State of the World

Princeton Seminary professor Charles Hodge (1797-1878) writes, “When Paul and the other Apostles were called to enter upon their important duties, the world was in a deplorable and yet most interesting state.” Hodge mentions three observations:

- Heathenism and Judaism were in the last stages of decay.
- Polytheism among the Greeks was being rejected and ridiculed.
- Philosophies of Stoicism and Platonism were leaving people empty.<sup>4</sup>

“Hence, when the glorious gospel was revealed, thousands of hearts, in all parts of the world, were prepared, by the grace of God, to exclaim, ‘This is all our desire and all our salvation!’”<sup>5</sup>

### B. The Upbringing and Early Education of Paul

- **Born A.D. 6 and raised** the son of a Jewish Roman citizen in Tarsus, the capital of Cilicia (modern eastern Turkey) – seen almost as culturally equal with Athens, Greece and Alexandria, Egypt. “I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a *citizen of no obscure city*” (Acts 21:39).
- **Educated in Greek thought** as seen in his logical and linear arguments in New Testament passages like Acts 17, 1 Corinthians 15, and Titus 1. He could read, write, and speak ancient Greek (*Koine*) – the language of the New Testament.
- **Educated in the Jewish faith** (A.D. 20-30) and traditions that included learning a trade (tent making) and studying *Torah* in Jerusalem under the Jewish master-scholar Gamaliel. He becomes a *Pharisee*. “I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city (Jerusalem), educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers” (Acts 22:3). He could also read, write, and speak Hebrew – the language of the Old Testament.
- **Citizen of the Roman Empire.** Paul acquired his Roman citizenship at birth, having been born the son of a Jewish Roman citizen of Tarsus. Roman citizenship was a privileged political, legal, and social status given to free individuals with respect to laws, property, and governance. Paul often used his Roman citizenship to his advantage. (Acts 16:36-39, Acts 22:25-28)

Commenting on the providential preparation of Paul for his ministry, Hodge writes, “As Luther was educated in a Roman Catholic seminary, and thoroughly instructed in the scholastic theology for which he was to be the great opposer, so the apostle Paul was

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<sup>4</sup> Hodge, Dr. Charles. *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*. New issue of 1886 edition, Wm. B. Eerdmans-Lightning Source, 1950, 3

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

initiated into all the doctrines and modes of reasoning of the Jews, with whom his principal controversy was to be carried on.”<sup>6</sup>

### C. The Conversion, Commission, and Revelation of Paul: Damascus and Arabia

- **Conversion:** Paul persecutes followers of Jesus in Jerusalem and Judea. “Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison” (Acts 8:3). Then he was “*immediately converted*”, i.e. without human instrumentality, by the ascended Jesus Christ. (Gal. 1:13-14) The sudden nature of Paul’s conversion is described in Acts (9:3–6; 22:6–11; 26:12–18).
- **Commission:** Paul was commissioned by Jesus Christ to preach the gospel to “Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel” through Ananias who explained to Paul the meaning of his Damascus road encounter. (Acts 9:10-16)<sup>7</sup>
- **Revelation** (A.D. 33-36): Paul was also taught the gospel by “*immediate revelation*”, i.e. without human instrumentality, by the ascended Jesus Christ. “For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man’s gospel. For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a *revelation of Jesus Christ*.” (Gal. 1:11-12)

Paul’s “revelation of Jesus Christ”, the gospel, began soon after his conversion when he decided not go to Jerusalem to be with the other apostles, and continued in Arabia for *up to three years*.<sup>8</sup>

“But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, was pleased *to reveal his Son to me*, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone; nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but *I went away into Arabia*, and returned again to Damascus. Then *after three years* I went up to Jerusalem” (Gal. 1:15-18).

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 4. See Paul’s arguments: “Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they offspring of Abraham? So am I.” (2 Cor. 11:22) “If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee ... as to righteousness under the law, blameless.” (Phil. 3:4-6)

<sup>7</sup> “Probably, therefore, Acts 9 presents the actual sequence of events connected with Paul’s conversion, Acts 22 adds the confirming vision at Jerusalem some three years later, and Acts 26 is an abbreviated testimony before a king ... for Paul the events were inherently one.” Longenecker, Richard N. *The Ministry and Message of Paul*. Zondervan Pub. House, 1971.

<sup>8</sup> The Bible does not reveal exactly how long Paul spent in Arabia. In Gal. 1:18 Paul tells us that the entire time from after his conversion until he “went up to Jerusalem” was three years. This three-year period includes Paul’s return to Tarsus and brief ministry there (he refers to that time as “many days” in Gal. 1:17) *after* being in Arabia and *before* going to Jerusalem.

A significant part of Jesus' revelation to Paul in Arabia probably included explanations of the Old Testament Scriptures, similar to the resurrected Jesus' revelation given to those who said, "Did not our hearts burn within us *while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?*" (Luke 24:32)<sup>9</sup>

#### D. The Early Ministry Years of Paul: Damascus, Jerusalem, Tarsus, Antioch

- **Damascus** (A.D. 36): After Paul's extended "revelation of Jesus Christ" in Arabia, he "returned to Damascus" (Gal. 1:17) where he "spent many days with the disciples" (Acts 9:19, 23) preaching the gospel message in the Jewish synagogues in the area. But soon the "Jews plotted to kill him" so he left Damascus for Jerusalem by barely escaping with the help of his disciples.

"And immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God." And all who heard him were amazed and said, "Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called upon this name? And has he not come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests?" But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ." When many days had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him, but their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night in order to kill him, but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket" (Acts 9:20-25).

- **Jerusalem** (A.D. 36): Paul was in Jerusalem for fifteen days. Although the disciples were all afraid to meet with him at first, Barnabas took him to meet with Peter and James and told them about Paul's bold preaching in Damascus.

Luke writes, "And when he [Paul] had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples. And they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had *preached boldly in the name of Jesus*" (Acts 9:26-27).

Paul wrote, "I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas (Peter) and remained with him fifteen days. But I saw none of the apostles except James the Lord's brother." (Gal. 1:18-19)

During his brief time in Jerusalem, Paul focused much of his time preaching, teaching, and arguing boldly with the Greek-speaking Jews (Hellenists). Luke writes, "So he went in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the

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<sup>9</sup> See also Luke 24:44-45, where the resurrected Jesus said to his disciples, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." Then he *opened their minds to understand the Scriptures.*"

name of the Lord. And *he spoke and disputed against the Hellenists*” (Acts 9:28-29).<sup>10</sup>

Soon Jesus appeared to him in a vision and told him to leave Jerusalem. Paul said, “When I had returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, I fell into a trance and saw him (Jesus) saying to me, ‘Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about me’” (Acts 22:17-18).

When the disciples in Jerusalem learned that the Jews had a plot to kill Paul, they immediately sent him back to his home town. “And when the brothers learned this, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.” (Acts 9:30)

- **Tarsus and Caesarea (A.D. 36-44 – Hidden Years):** The next several years are called Paul’s *hidden years* because there is no mention of him in the period between his time when he left Jerusalem for Tarsus (Acts 9:26-30) and the time (A.D. 44) when Barnabas came to Tarsus to recruit him to come to the church in Antioch. (Acts 11:25-26) Paul refers briefly to this time in his letter to the Galatians.

“Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia (Tarsus). And I was still unknown in person to the churches of Judea (Jerusalem) that are in Christ. They only were hearing it said, ‘He who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy.’ And they glorified God because of me” (Gal. 1:21-24). “So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch” (Acts 11:25-26a).<sup>11</sup>

**Antioch and Jerusalem (A.D. 44-46):** “For a whole year they (Barnabas and Paul) met with the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians” (Acts 11:26b). During this time, a famine spread throughout the regions. In response, the Antioch church sent a financial gift to the elders of the Jerusalem church through Barnabas and Paul.

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<sup>10</sup> Paul’s aggressive, public debates with the Greek-speaking Jews must have alarmed the apostles and disciples in Jerusalem. Only a few years earlier the deacon Stephen, a Greek-speaking Jewish Christian, also publicly debated these Hellenists – resulting in his trial before the Jewish authorities (Sanhedrin) and public execution by stoning. (Acts 6:8-15; 7; 8:1-2) Paul “approved of their killing him” (Acts 8:1a). Widespread persecution of Jewish Christians (diaspora) followed resulting in the fleeing of Jewish Christians throughout Judea, Samaria, and most likely beyond. (Acts 8:1b) In God’s providence, as they became involved in Jewish synagogues throughout the world, the foundations were being laid for the advance of the gospel through future church planting ministries in obedience to Jesus command to be his witnesses “in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

<sup>11</sup> “Many of the hardships and trials enumerated in Second Corinthians 11:23-27 may stem from situations faced at Caesarea and Tarsus during those days, for they find no place in the records of the later missionary journeys in Acts. Perhaps the ecstatic experience of Second Corinthians 12:1-4 also comes from this period in his life.” Longenecker, Richard N. *The Ministry and Message of Paul*. Zondervan Pub. House, 1971, p 37

“So the disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea (Jerusalem). And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul” (Acts 11:29-30).

“And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had completed their service, bringing with them John, whose other name was Mark” (Acts 12:25).

## E. The Missionary Journeys and Letters of Paul<sup>12</sup>

The Jews had been disbursed everywhere throughout the world. The Roman empire normally allowed Jewish people to assemble in synagogues, except for a period of persecution under Claudius' rule (41-51). Paul's church planting strategy was to use his “religious credentials” to preach the gospel first in the Jewish synagogues that resulted in the conversion of two types of people: 1) the Jews and 2) the Gentile proselytes called “God-fearers”. From these two groups, Jewish and Gentile converts, Paul would plant new churches.

- **First Missionary Journey (A.D. 47-48)**  
First missionary journey with Barnabas, to Cyprus and Galatia
- **At the Council of Jerusalem (A.D. 49)**  
Paul argues successfully that Gentile Christians need not follow Jewish law; returns to Antioch; confronts Peter over question of Jewish law
- **Second Missionary Journey (A.D. 49-52)**  
Second missionary journey with Silas, through Asia Minor and Greece; settles in Corinth. Writes letters to the **Thessalonians**. Returns for brief visits to Jerusalem and Antioch (A.D. 52).
- **Third Missionary Journey (A.D. 52-57)**  
Stays in Ephesus (A.D. 52-55); writes the letters to the **Galatians** and **Corinthians**. Travels through Greece and possibly Illyricum (modern Yugoslavia) (A.D. 55-57); and **from Corinth he writes his letter to the Romans**.<sup>13</sup>
- **Paul's Arrest and Death**
  - A.D. 57–59 Returns to Jerusalem and arrested; imprisoned at Caesarea
  - A.D. 59–60 Appears before Festus and appeals to Caesar; voyage to Rome
  - A.D. 60–62 Under house arrest at Rome; writes letters to the **Philippians, Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon**
  - A.D. 62–64 Released; journeys to Spain?; writes letters to **Timothy and Titus**
  - A.D. 64 Returns to Rome; martyred

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<sup>12</sup> Janet Meyer Everts, *The Apostle Paul and His Times: Christian History Timeline*, Christian History, Christianity Today.

<sup>13</sup> In keeping with normal ancient custom, Paul used a scribe (*amanuensis*) identified in Romans 16:22 as Tertius, to actually write the letter that Paul dictated.



## II. The Apostle Paul's Message

### A. The Importance of Paul's Message

The difficulty and complexity of understanding Paul's core message of the gospel in his New Testament letters, and especially in Romans, can be very intimidating. The apostle Peter shows the enormous challenge of understanding Paul's thought by writing, "His [Paul's] letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction" (2 Pet 3:16).

Nonetheless, the difficulty of Paul's thought or the mountains of differing scholarly opinions throughout the generations must not deter us from understanding his message with greater clarity. There is too much at stake.<sup>14</sup> Although caution should be taken against adopting a rigid or narrow understanding of Paul's message, precise clarity concerning the heart of it is essential.<sup>15</sup>

### B. The Uniqueness of Paul's Message

In order to understand the unique nature of Paul's message, we must go beyond merely analyzing Paul's individual letters or individual "gospel texts" in his letters. Instead we need to understand Paul's larger theological corpus in pursuit of essential concepts and motifs. In this process care must also be given to understanding the unique historical context of Paul's letters<sup>16</sup> and how Paul's message fits with the overarching message of the other inspired biblical writers.<sup>17</sup>

Paul's letters in the New Testament should not be seen as giving an exhaustive treatment of his message. Paul's essential message transcended the sporadic glimpses he gives us in his letters. Nevertheless, sufficient New Testament writings have been preserved by the Holy Spirit to give us a relatively clear understanding of the basic tenets of his message.

The unique nature of Paul's message is shown by his reference to it as "my gospel" (Rom. 2:16; 16:25; 2 Tim. 2:8) and "our gospel" (2 Cor 4:3; 1 Thess. 1:5; 2 Thess. 2:14) He has a very definite view of the content of his gospel.

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<sup>14</sup> "The mission of the church cannot succeed without the unity of the church in the truth of the gospel" (Beker 1980:306).

<sup>15</sup> "A mood of uncertainty about the heart of the gospel, the Lord of the Church, and the Savior of the world, is unworthy of Christians and bodes ill for the future of missions if it is allowed or encouraged to persist" (Webster 1966:20).

<sup>16</sup> Richard Longenecker writes, "Nor is one entitled to treat the collection of his [Paul's] letters as a volume on systematic theology, for though he thought theologically, everything the apostle wrote is set in the context of history and polemic" (1971:87).

<sup>17</sup> Douglas Moo presents an integrated synthesis of Paul's thought with other biblical authors. Moo, Douglas J. *A Theology of Paul and His Letters: The Gift of the New Realm in Christ*. Edited by Andreas J. Kostenberger, Zondervan Academic, 2021.

Paul even pronounces a curse on any other message that is contrary to his. He writes to the Galatians: “But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned” (Gal 1:8-9). Paul’s very definite understanding of the gospel is also evidenced by the fact that in about half of his references to the gospel it stands by itself without qualification.<sup>18</sup>

### **C. The Origin of Paul’s Message**

Paul claims that his gospel came to him directly by a revelation of Jesus Christ (Rom. 16:25; Eph. 3:2-10) and not by means of any human source. Paul writes, “I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ” (Gal. 1:11-12).

Paul’s claim of receiving the gospel directly from Jesus Christ does not nullify his reception of this gospel message also from the apostles and others in his day.<sup>19</sup> Paul makes clear that his message is in essence the same as the other apostles (1 Cor. 15:11; Gal. 2:6-10).

The apostle frequently refers in his letters to preaching traditions apparently held in common by Christians in his day (Rom. 6:17; 1 Cor. 11:2, 23; 15:3-5; 2 Thess. 2:15; 3:6).<sup>20</sup> Michael Green writes, “It is the same gospel the world over, to Jew and Greek alike, though it may be couched in different terms and even thought forms.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Michael Green writes, “You can spread the good news of it, teach it, announce it, chatter it, make it known, or put it forward for discussion. Similarly, it could be heard, received, accepted as reliable tradition and so on. There was a recognizable shape to it” (1970:54).

<sup>19</sup> J. Gresham Machen writes, “When he (Paul) says, therefore, that he did not receive his gospel from men he does not mean that he received no information from Peter or Barnabas or Mark or James or the five hundred brethren who had seen the risen Lord. What he does mean is that he himself was convinced of the decisive fact--the fact of the resurrection--not by the testimony of these men, but by the divine interposition on the road to Damascus, and that none of these men told him how he himself was to be saved or what he was to say to the Gentiles about the way of salvation. Materials for the proof of his gospel might come to him from ordinary sources of information, but his gospel itself was given to him directly by Christ” (1925:146-147).

<sup>20</sup> “Paul’s gospel given him by revelation was not a gospel differing in kerygmatic content from that of the early church” (Longenecker 1971:88). As there could be only one Christ so there could be only one gospel.

<sup>21</sup> Green, Michael. *Evangelism in the Early Church*. Rev. ed, W.B. Eerdmans Pub, 2004, p. 54



#### **D. The Interpretation of Paul's Message**

Discerning the core content of Paul's gospel message has preoccupied scholars for generations.<sup>22</sup> The result is many conflicting and contrasting views.<sup>23</sup> The two polarized extremes are defining Paul's message too narrowly versus defining it too broadly. In an attempt to move away from any doctrinal-propositional core to Paul's message, some scholars deny that there even is one.<sup>24</sup>

In Christian theology, sound doctrine is teaching that agrees with the Bible. But how can we know if our beliefs are in agreement with the Bible? Don't we need to rely on the expertise of the clergy and bible scholars to understand the meaning of the Scriptures? The short answer: No.

The historic Reformation concept of the sufficiency of Scripture (*Sola Scriptura*) affirms that the Bible's teachings are clear to every reader or hearer of ordinary intelligence, without requiring special instruction. Theologians refer to this as the *perspicuity of Scripture*. This means that if we have access to the Scriptures in a language we understand, we don't need the clergy to explain its meaning to us. The Bible alone can give us sound doctrine, through the illuminating work of God's Holy Spirit.

So we must be on guard against clergy and scholars who use their expertise in Bible and theology to teach for or against certain views of Paul's message that cannot be clearly understood and affirmed or denied by the plain reading and reasonable understanding of Scripture.

On the other hand, the church as a community has made significant progress in understanding the Bible. And as a result of many controversies in the church's past, written statements of biblical doctrine, called creeds and confessions, have emerged. It is arrogant and even foolish to neglect learning from historical writings and traditions, but we must always see them under the Bible as our higher authority.

With so many Christian creeds, confessions, doctrinal statements, and commentaries written since the time of Jesus, which ones should we affirm? Although the Bible is infallible, our understanding of it is not. Sometimes we make mistakes in interpreting the

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<sup>22</sup> Contemporary scholarship finds much of its origin in Ferdinand Christian Baur's work on the historical investigation of the Pauline epistles, *Paul, The Apostle*. Charles H. Dodd makes a significant contribution to the study of Paul's message in his work, *The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments* (1949).

<sup>23</sup> With a pointed hint of sarcasm, Green cites multiple cases of scholars since Dodd who have sought to define a fixed message of the gospel. "Footnotes to Dodd have been added in plenty, of course: A.M. Hunter sees a basically three-point gospel throughout the New Testament, as does C.T. Craig, only unfortunately the three points are somewhat different! Floyd Filson and T.F. Glasson both contend for a five-point kerygma, though here again their five points are not identical. Gartner suggests a seven point message, and Geweiss gives a detailed exposition of the united kerygma of the early Church" (1970:60).

<sup>24</sup> Rudolph Bultmann denies that the Paul's gospel even has a specific content. In his *Theology of the New Testament*, Bultmann writes, "Paul's theological thinking only lifts the knowledge inherent in faith itself into the clarity of conscious knowing. Paul's basic position is not a structure of theoretical thought" (1955:190).

Scriptures. This is why we must learn how to apply sound principles and methods of interpretation, called *hermeneutics*, in our study of the Bible.

However, no matter how sound and biblical our theology may become, Paul reminds us that our knowledge of God on this side of eternity is always limited: “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known” (1 Cor. 13:12). Paul did not allow the awareness of his incomplete knowledge of God to keep him from pursuing a deeper knowledge of God.

Therefore, by God’s grace, and in reliance on the Holy Spirit, we must use all means available to us to interpret the Bible correctly and avoid the polarized dangers of embracing a rigid, narrow message or the view that there is no message at all.

### **III. The Apostle Paul’s Letter to the Romans**

#### **A. The State of Paul’s Ministry**

Toward the end of Paul’s third missionary Journey, he is in Corinth where he writes his letter to the Romans. In the final part of his letter he makes an astonishing statement – that all the work of the gospel that God called him to do in the entire eastern Mediterranean world was now complete.

He describes the vast regions where his work is fulfilled saying, “from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ” (Rom. 15:19).<sup>25</sup> In Rom. 15:23 he writes, “I no longer have any room for work in these regions.” As a result of Paul’s first three missionary journeys, consisting of almost twenty-five years, he helped plant churches in:

- Southern and Western Asia Minor (Tarsus, Pisidian Antioch, Lystra, Iconium, Derbe, and Ephesus), and
- Eastern Europe: Macedonia (Philippi and Thessalonica), and Greece (Corinth).

However, Paul did not believe that *all* the work of the gospel was fulfilled in the entire Mediterranean world – just *his* work as a pioneer church planter. He knew that the churches he planted could take responsibility for their own evangelism, discipleship, mercy, and church planting ministries to continue their obedience to Jesus by “making disciples of all nations” in and through their own regions.

Therefore, Paul is at an important transition point in his life and ministry. As he looks ahead, he tells us in Rom. 15:22-29 that there are three strategic locations he sees in his next season of gospel ministry: Jerusalem, Rome, and Spain.

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<sup>25</sup> Illyricum includes today’s Albania, Montenegro, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Croatia.

## 1. Jerusalem

During Paul's third missionary journey he collected financial offerings from the new churches (mostly Gentiles) so he could give this collection of money to the Jerusalem churches who were suffering from severe famine. Paul frequently refers to the importance of this offering. (1 Cor. 16:1-4, 2 Cor. 8-9)

Paul saw this collection for the Judean churches as not only a way to provide famine relief, but also to help strengthen the spiritual bond between the Jewish churches in Judea and the mostly Gentile churches Paul planted. He writes:

At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints. For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. For they were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings. (Rom. 15:25-27)

## 2. Rome

Paul did not plant the church in Rome. Although there has been much speculation regarding who planted it, including the Apostle Peter, the Bible does not tell us who planted the church or how it was planted. But while on his missionary journeys Paul kept hearing good reports about the Roman church, so he regularly prayed for them and longed to visit them.<sup>26</sup> He writes:

First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world. For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you. For I long to see you ... I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented) (Rom. 1:8-13).

## 3. Spain

However, Paul's ultimate destination after he completes his mission in Jerusalem is not Rome but Spain. In Rom. 15:28 he tells the Roman church that on his way to Spain he wants to be with them in passing. "When therefore I have completed this and have delivered to them what has been collected, *I will leave for Spain by way of you.*" In Rom. 15:24 he writes, "I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain ... once I have enjoyed your company for a while."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Aquila and Priscilla were in the Roman church and came to Corinth when Paul was there – probably because of the persecution of the Jews in Rome under Claudius. Therefore, many of the firsthand reports about the Roman church to Paul were probably from them.

<sup>27</sup> We do not know whether Paul fulfilled his intention to visit Spain. The early church leader Eusebius believed that Paul's appeal to Caesar was successful – allowing him to spend some years in Spain before he was again imprisoned and sentenced to death. Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 2:22 There are several official and popular traditions of Paul's missionary journeys to Spain held by the church in Spain.

Why was Paul's ultimate destination Spain? It was because the people in Spain, unlike the eastern Mediterranean world and the regions around Rome, had never heard the preaching of the gospel. So Paul writes, "I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else's foundation" (Rom. 15:20).

## **B. The Purpose of Paul's Letter to the Romans**

### **1. Raise support for his mission to Spain**

Paul needed a new "sending church". For all of Paul's previous missionary journeys he relied on the prayers and financial support of the Antioch church as his sending church. But now that his mission to the eastern Mediterranean world was finished, he needed a new home "sending church" for prayer and financial support as his mission shifts to the unreached people in Spain. Paul writes, "I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, *and to be helped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a while*" (Rom. 15:24).

### **2. Heal divisions between Jewish and Gentile Christians**

One of the most likely origins of the church at Rome is that the Roman Jews, who were converted at Pentecost in Jerusalem (Acts 2:10), returned to Rome as Jewish Christians and began incorporating their new faith in Jesus as Messiah into their synagogue worship. Therefore, Christianity in Rome was probably birthed in Jewish synagogues, as it was in much of the eastern Mediterranean world. By the end of the first century Jewish immigrants made up a significant part of the population in Rome.

By A.D. 49, the Roman emperor Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome. In Acts 18:2 Luke tells us "Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome." Douglas Moo writes, "The significance of this scenario for Romans is clear. Gentile Christians, undoubtedly part of the community before the expulsion, would have come into greater prominence as a result of the absence of all, or most, of the Jewish Christians. Theologically this would also have meant an acceleration in the movement of the Christian community away from its Jewish origins."<sup>28</sup>

By the time Paul writes to the Romans (late A.D. 50's), the Jews returned to Rome and were a significant part of the population. Many differences arose between the Jewish and Gentile Christians – ethnically, socially, and theologically. As the church started becoming predominately Gentile, the more divisive issues included the role of the Jewish Mosaic Law (Torah)<sup>29</sup> in the life of the Gentile believer and the place of Israel in God's plan for the world. Since the Roman church consisted of several decentralized

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<sup>28</sup> Moo, Douglas J. *A Theology of Paul and His Letters: The Gift of the New Realm in Christ*. Edited by Andreas J. Kostenberger, Zondervan Academic, 2021. 21

<sup>29</sup> The New Testament as we know it did not yet exist, so their Scriptures were only the Jewish Old Testament, often in Greek (*Septuagint*).

“house churches,”<sup>30</sup> it’s likely that some house churches were predominately Jewish Christian while others were Gentile Christian.

### 3. Preach the Gospel to the Christians at Rome

When Paul was in Corinth, where he wrote his letter to the Romans at the end of his third missionary journey, he had just ended several intense battles for the gospel against Judaizers in Galatia and Corinth. Paul’s insights into the gospel, and how to preach and teach it effectively, were clearer to him than ever before. In light of these deeper insights and his awareness of the divisions between Jewish and Gentile Christians, Paul determined to write his letter to address both groups in Rome.

#### C. The Themes of Paul’s Letter to the Romans

Paul’s primary theme in Romans is the *gospel of Jesus Christ*. In the letter’s introduction he refers to the gospel four times.

- He begins in Rom. 1:1 identifying himself as “Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for *the gospel of God*.”
- In verse 9 he writes, For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit *in the gospel of his Son*.
- In verses 15-16 he writes, “So I am eager to *preach the gospel* to you also who are in Rome. For I am not ashamed of *the gospel*, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.”

In the letter’s conclusion, he also refers to the gospel four times.

- In Rom. 15:16, he refers to himself as “a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the *gospel of God*.”
- In verses 19 he writes, “I have fulfilled the ministry of *the gospel of Christ*”
- In verse 20 he writes, “I make it my ambition to *preach the gospel*.”
- In Rom. 16:25 he begins his final doxology in the letter, “Now to him who is able to strengthen you *according to my gospel*.”

In Rom. 1:17 Paul quotes the Old Testament prophet Habakkuk (2:4) describing the core foundational nature of the gospel on which he starts and builds his entire letter, writing, “For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by faith.’”<sup>31</sup>

When Paul describes the gospel as “the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (Rom. 1:16), we see his two major themes in the gospel and in Romans. The first theme is primary and vertical. The second theme is secondary and horizontal.

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<sup>30</sup> Paul writes to Priscilla and Aquila, “Greet also the church in their house” (Rom. 16:5).

<sup>31</sup> New Testament scholar F. F. Bruce translates this, “It is the one who is righteous through faith that will live.”

### **Primary and Vertical Theme: Personal Salvation**

Paul's first and primary theme in Romans is the good news of the universality of God's gift of righteousness "to *all* who believe." This gift is "apart from the law" (3:21) and it provides for the true fulfillment of the law (3:31; 8:4). This is the "vertical" good news of "justification by faith" Paul expounds in Romans 1-4 regarding how sinful humans can experience the power of God's personal salvation and be declared right before a holy God through believing in Jesus Christ.

### **Secondary and Horizontal Theme: People of God**

Paul's secondary and horizontal theme in Romans is the good news that God's salvation is "to the Jew first and also to the Greek." The good news that God reconciles "*all* who believe" to himself without disenfranchising the people of Israel. Paul expounds the good news of this relationship of Jews and Gentiles within the New Covenant people of God in Romans 9-11.

It's critically important to affirm the primacy and centrality of the gospel as good news of personal salvation.<sup>32</sup> Moo writes, "But that gospel itself, the theme of Romans, is fundamentally not about bringing Gentiles and Jews together but about bringing sinful humans and a just and holy God together ... While, therefore, the focus on Gentile inclusion is a welcome correction to a tendency in some forms of the Reformation tradition to submerge it too deeply below Paul's concern with individual salvation, we think the tendency in much recent scholarship to elevate it to the level of the central theme of Romans is an overcorrection."<sup>33</sup>

### **Paul's Multifaceted Gospel**

The gospel is the broad concept that comes closest to describing the core of Paul's beliefs and theology in Romans and all his New Testament letters. Paul's gospel is multifaceted including not only the good news of justification through Jesus' righteousness but also propitiation (forgiveness) through Jesus' blood.

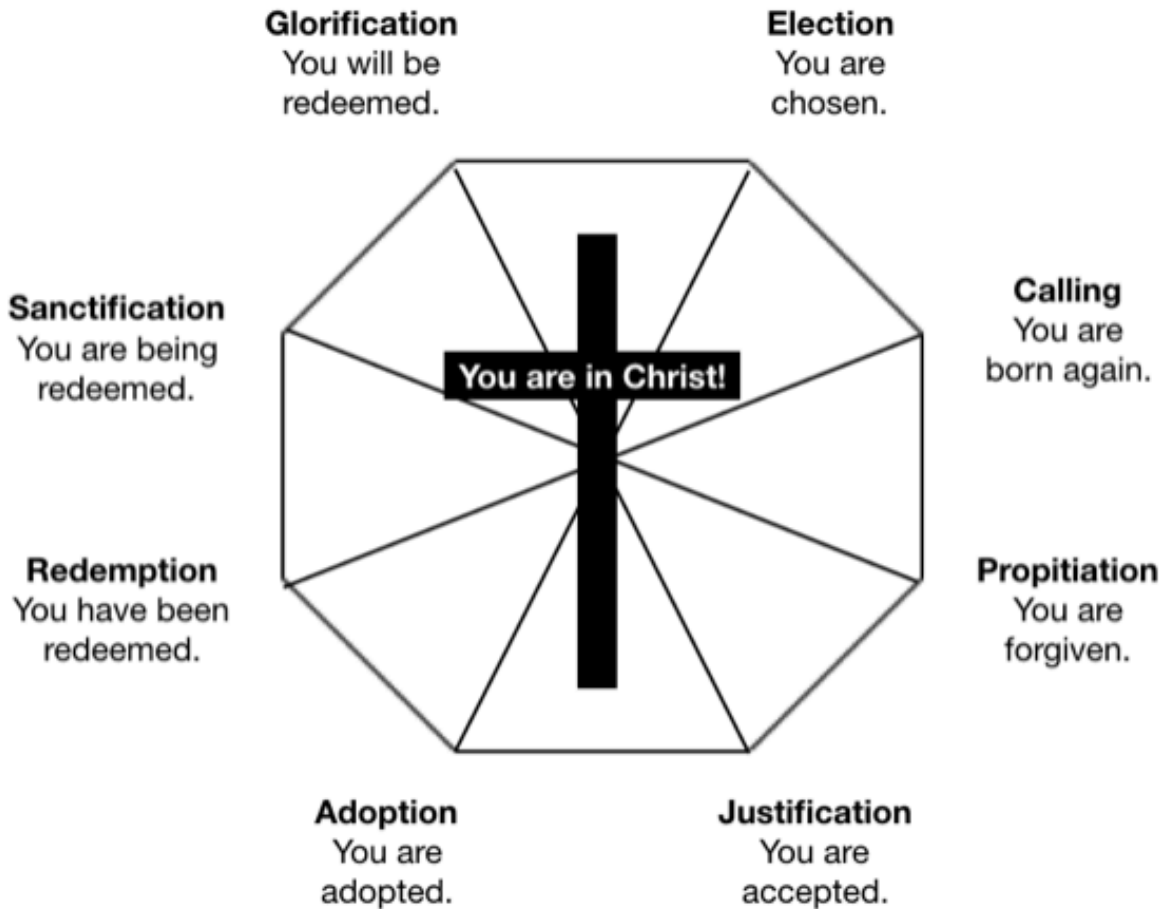
Paul's gospel also includes the good news of election, adoption, regeneration, redemption, sanctification, and glorification. It's good news of not only a new standing before God, but also a new heart (nature) from God by his Holy Spirit, and a new body and world from God when Jesus returns to make us and all things new.

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<sup>32</sup> What is often called the *New Perspective on Paul* (James Dunn, N. T. Wright) wrongly pits the secondary, horizontal/corporate nature of salvation and justification *against* the primary, vertical/personal nature of salvation and justification, calling into question the biblical necessity of personal faith in Christ for the salvation of individuals. The problem with *New Perspectives* teaching on justification is not what it affirms, but what it denies. *New Perspectives* proponents like N. T. Wright believe and teach that the doctrine of personal justification by faith, promoted by the Reformers like Luther and Calvin, is not biblical, but a reflection of Medieval thought categories.

<sup>33</sup> "Moo, Douglas, J. *The Letter to the Romans*. Second Edition, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018. 26-27





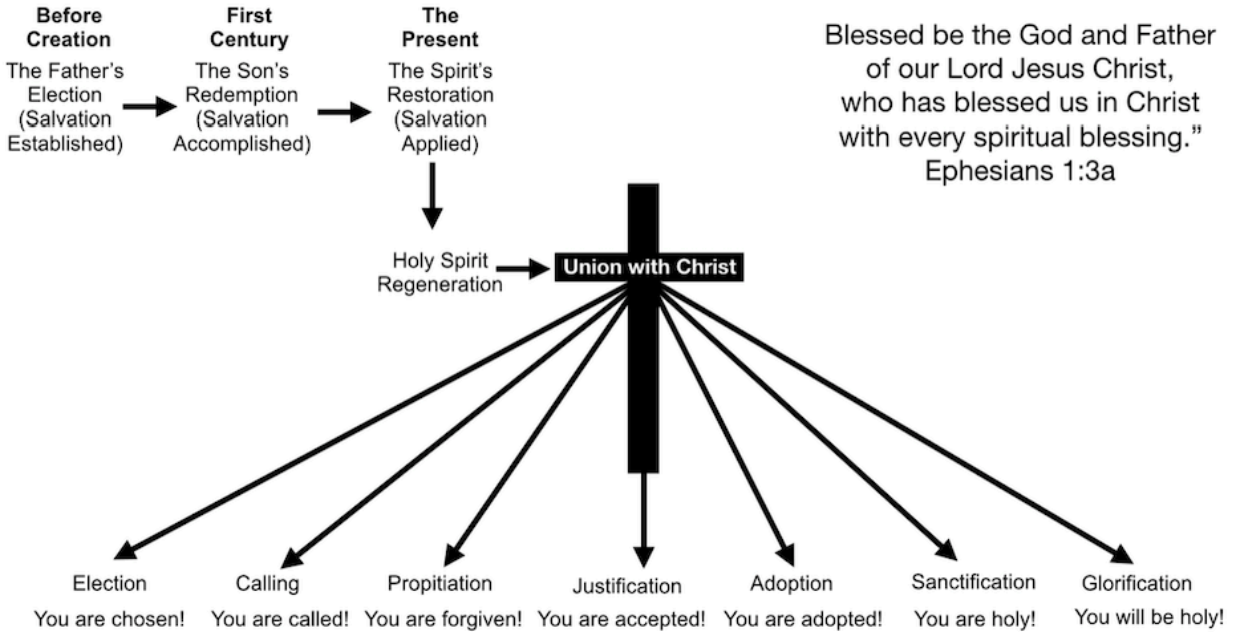
The various biblical terms and resultant images describing salvation display different facets of the gospel – reflecting the multi-faceted spiritual blessings God promises to everyone in union with Christ – that is the highest blessing of the gospel from which all the other gospel blessings flow.

The many facets of the gospel should not be seen as separable, but as unique dimensions of salvation as a whole, as various facets of a multi-faceted jewel. A full understanding of any particular facet of the gospel jewel comes only by seeing that unique part of the good news in light of the whole.

The Apostle Paul did not preach all the gospel blessings every time he proclaimed the good news of salvation in Christ. Instead, he seems to have selected specific aspects of the gospel he believed would be applicable to his audience’s specific needs and problems. The English Puritans also seemed to follow this approach when preaching and teaching the gospel. Commenting on Puritan Richard Sibbes’ gospel preaching in his classic work, *The Bruised Reed*, William Black writes,

Only when the disease is properly diagnosed can the right cure be applied.  
And having thus expounded man’s desperate state and need before God,

Sibbes proceeds to describe and apply God's cure. To this end, Sibbes focuses our attention on Jesus. *And as a jeweller examines his diamond facet by facet, in a light which makes his stone dazzle, so Sibbes bids us look on Christ in the light of God's word, where we see refracted through the facets of his character and offices a rainbow of comfort and hope and mercy* (emphasis mine) (1988:49).



# **An Outline of Paul's Letter to the Romans by F. F. Bruce<sup>34</sup>**

## **Prologue (1:1-15)**

### **I. The Gospel According to Paul (1:16-11:36)**

- A. The Theme of the Gospel: The Righteousness of God Revealed (1:16-17)
- B. Sin and Retribution: The Universal Need Diagnosed (1:18-3:20)
- C. The Way of Righteousness: The Universal Need Met (3:21-5:21)
- D. The Way of Holiness (6:1-8:39)
- E. Human Unbelief and Divine Grace (9:1-11:36)

### **II. The Christian Way of Life (12:1-15:13)**

- A. The Living Sacrifice (12:1-2)
- B. The Common Life of Christians (12:3-8)
- C. The Law of Christ (12:9-11)
- D. The Christian and the State (13:1-7)
- E. Love and Duty (13:8-10)
- F. Christian Life in Days of Crisis (13:11-14)
- G. Christian Liberty and Christian Charity (14:1-15:6)
- H. Christ and the Gentiles (15:7-13)

## **Epilogue (15:14-16:27)**

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<sup>34</sup> Bruce, Frederick Fyvie. *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans: An Introduction and Commentary*. 1st edition, Eerdmans Pub Co, 1963. 24

## A Paraphrase of Paul's Letter to the Romans by F. F. Bruce<sup>35</sup>

### PROLOGUE (1:1-15)

Greetings from me, Paul, to the Christians in Rome. I thank God for all that I hear about your faith, and I remember to pray for you constantly. I have often longed to pay you a visit, and now at last I am to have an opportunity to do so. To preach the gospel in Rome is a long-standing ambition of mine.

### I. THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO PAUL (1:16-11:36)

#### A. The Theme of the Gospel: The Righteousness of God Revealed (1:16-17)

I am in no way ashamed of the gospel: no indeed, it is the message which God uses effectively for the salvation of all who believe. This is the message which reveals God's way of putting men and women right with himself by the exercise of faith, in accordance with the statement of Scripture: 'It is the one who is righteous through faith that will live.'

#### B. Sin and Retribution: The Universal Need Diagnosed (1:18-3:20)

The need for such a message becomes clear as we contemplate the world of mankind. Not only do we see divine retribution working itself out among pagans, whose wrong way of life is the fruit of wrong ideas about God; we see the Jewish nation too, in spite of their knowing the law of God and enjoying so many other privileges, failing to keep the law they know. In fact all human beings, Jews and Gentiles alike, are morally bankrupt before God; no-one can hope to be pronounced righteous by God on the basis of any work or merit of his own.

#### C. The Way of Righteousness: The Universal Need Met (3:21-5:21)

If men and women are to be pronounced righteous by God, then, it must be by his grace. And God in his grace has made it possible for them to be put in the right with him, thanks to the redemptive work of Christ. On the ground of his sacrificial death, Christ is set before us as the one who makes full atonement for our sins; and we may, by faith, appropriate the benefits of his atoning work. Thus God maintains his own righteousness, and at the same time bestows righteousness on all believers in Jesus, regardless of whether they are Jews or Gentiles. The law of God is thus vindicated, and the sacred Scriptures are fulfilled.

If you consider Abraham, for example, you will find that this was the way in which he found acceptance with God: 'Abraham believed God', says the Scripture, 'and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.' (Nor is he an isolated case; the same principle can be seen at work in the testimony of David.) Mark this too: these words about Abraham were spoken while he was still uncircumcised, showing that this way of righteousness by faith is for Gentiles as well as for Jews. Abraham is thus the spiritual father of all believers, irrespective of their racial origin. And the statement that Abraham's faith was reckoned to him as righteousness means that if we believe in God, whose saving power has been revealed in the death and resurrection of Christ, it will similarly be reckoned to us as righteousness.

So then, by faith we receive God's gift of righteousness, and with that we receive also peace, joy and the hope of glory. Thus we can endure affliction cheerfully, for God himself is our joy. If his love, demonstrated in the sacrifice of Christ, has reconciled us to himself, much more will the risen life of Christ procure our final salvation on the day of judgment.

Once we formed part of an old solidarity of sin and death, when we lived 'in Adam' and shared the fruits of his disobedience. But now that old solidarity has been dissolved, to be replaced by the new solidarity of righteousness and life which is ours 'in Christ', the fruits of whose perfect obedience are shared by many. The law of Moses has nothing to do with this change of status; it was introduced simply so that human sinfulness might be brought into the open. But God's grace has triumphed over human sinfulness and now reigns supreme.

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<sup>35</sup> Bruce, Frederick Fyvie. *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans: An Introduction and Commentary*. 1st edition, Eerdmans Pub Co, 1963. 32

#### **D. The Way of Holiness (6:1-8:39)**

Do I hear someone say, 'Let our sinfulness increase, then, so that God's grace may be glorified yet more'? Perish the thought! For 'in Christ' we have entered on a new life; we are dead so far as our old relation to sin is concerned. That, surely, was the meaning of our baptism. You may think of sin as a slave-owner, whose slaves we used to be. A slave is bound to obey his master's orders, but when he dies, or passes into the ownership of another, his former master has no further authority over him. So sin no longer has any authority over you, for now you belong to God, who has liberated you from your former slavery. Sin was a harsh master who dealt out death as his wages; God, by contrast, bestows on his servants the free gift of eternal life in Christ.

So, too, as regards the old bond of legal obligation. Those who lived under the law were as much bound to it as a wife is bound to her husband. But as death breaks the marriage-bond, so the believer's death-with-Christ has broken the bond that once bound him to the law, and has set him free to be united to Christ. The law stimulated the very sins it forbade; those who are united to Christ produce the fruits of righteousness and life.

I know what I am talking about when I say that the law stimulates the sins it forbids; it was the commandment 'You shall not covet' that first brought the sin of covetousness to my attention and tempted me to commit it.

It is not the law that is at fault; it is my corrupt nature that reacts in this way to the law. And that nature is still present, in league with indwelling sin and waging war against those elements in me that recognize the nobility of the law of God and desire to obey it. But my own strength is insufficient to win the victory over indwelling sin, or to prevent it from forcing me to do its bidding. I remain divided at heart and defeated in life until I gratefully appropriate the victory that is mine through Jesus Christ my Lord.

Those who are in Christ receive his Spirit, and the Spirit of Christ sets in operation a new principle – the principle of life – which counteracts the old principle of sin and death. And those whose life is directed by the Spirit are able to fulfil the requirements of God as the law never enabled them to do. The Spirit enables the new nature to triumph over the old; the Spirit keeps the new life in being and action here and now, as one day he will transform our mortal bodies into immortal ones. The Spirit, thus directing our lives, enables us to live as the freeborn children of God: it is he who prompts us spontaneously to call God 'Father'. The day is coming when the sons and daughters of God, liberated from all that is mortal, will be manifested to the universe in the glory for which they were created; and on that day all creation will be liberated from its present frustration and share their glorious freedom.

For that day creation longs, and so do we, but amid our present restrictions we have the aid and intercession of the Spirit, and the assurance that he co-operates in all things for our good, since our good is God's purpose. His purpose, which cannot fail, is to invest with glory all those whom he chose, predestined, called and justified. Let us therefore take courage. God is on our side; Christ is our almighty Saviour, and from his love no power in the universe, here or hereafter, can separate his people.

#### **E. Human Unbelief and Divine Grace (9:1-11:36)**

##### 1. The problem of Israel's unbelief (9:1-5)

In all this, however, I have one unceasing sorrow. My own kith and kin, the nation specially prepared for the coming of the Saviour, the nation into which he was born, have failed to accept him.

##### 2. God's sovereign choice (9:6-29)

This does not mean that God's promises to Israel have been frustrated. Throughout the course of history he has set his choice on some and passed others by.

##### 3. Human Responsibility (9:30-10:21)

And my kinsfolk have refused the way of righteousness through faith presented to them by God, preferring their own way of righteousness through law-keeping. The Gentiles have chosen God's way, while Israel has refused it.

#### 4. God's Purpose for Israel (11:1-29)

Israel has refused it, I say, but not all Israel. As God had his faithful remnant in earlier days, so he has in our day a remnant chosen by his grace. And as then, so now the remnant is a promise of better things to come; Israel's refusal of the gospel and consequent setting aside by God are only temporary. The Gentiles' enjoyment of gospel blessings will stimulate my kinsfolk to jealousy; they will turn and embrace the gospel for themselves, and all Israel will rejoice in God's salvation.

#### 5. God's Purpose for the World (11:30-36)

You see, God's ultimate purpose for the human family is that all without distinction, Israel and the Gentiles together, should enjoy his blessings in Christ. How wonderfully and wisely God works his purpose out! To him be eternal glory!

## **II. THE CHRISTIAN WAY OF LIFE (12:1-15:13)**

### **A. The Living Sacrifice (12:1-2)**

In view of all that God has done for you in Christ, your lives should be lived out in his service.

### **B. The Common Life of Christians (12:3-8)**

You are fellow-members of the body of Christ: see that you discharge your respective functions for the well-being of the whole body corporate.

### **C. The Law of Christ (12:9-21)**

And in all your relations with others, show the forgiving mercy of Christ.

### **D. The Christian and the State (13:1-7)**

Render all due obedience to the civil authorities. They in their way are servants of God.

### **E. Love and Duty (13:8-10)**

Let your one continuing debt be the debt of love.

### **F. Christian Life in Days of Crisis (13:11-14)**

And in the ominous times that impend, keep alert in spirit and live as Christians should.

### **G. Christian Liberty and Christian Charity (14:1-15:6)**

Show great gentleness and consideration to your fellow-Christians. There are matters such as special days and certain kinds of food on which Christians do not all agree. Christian liberty is a fine thing, but it should not be asserted at the expense of Christian charity. Remember the example of Christ, how he always considered other people's interests before his own.

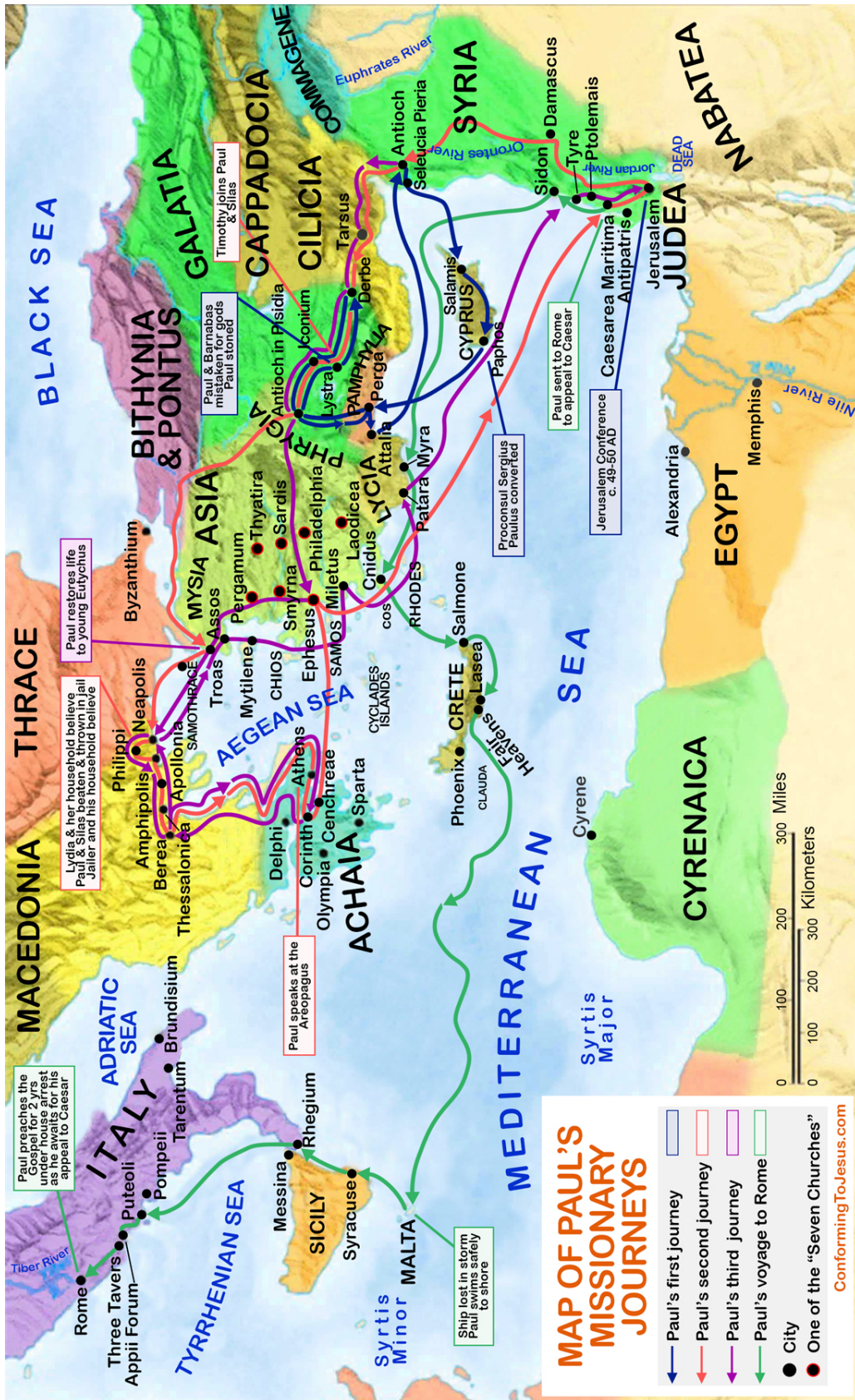
### **H. Christ and the Gentiles (15:7-13)**

I write to you as the apostle to the Gentiles. I attach the highest importance to this ministry of mine; it serves the divine purpose of blessing for all nations, a purpose disclosed in the ancient Scriptures.

### **Epilogue (15:14-16:27)**

I have fulfilled this ministry from Jerusalem to Illyricum, and now I propose to take it up in Spain, and pay you a visit on my way there. First I must go to Jerusalem with a gift which the Gentile churches have contributed for the relief of their brethren there. Pray that all may go well in this respect. Give a warm welcome to Phoebe, the bearer of this letter. Give my greetings to all my friends who are with you. Beware of those who bring divisive teachings; preserve the fine reputation you enjoy throughout the churches. My friends here send you their greetings. The grace of Christ be with you, and all glory be to God.







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