

STUDY ON ROMANS

Reflections on This & That
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All Israel will be saved (1)

This much-debated verse is central to Paul's Romans 9—11 defense of God's faithfulness to his promises to ethnic Israel. He doesn't say all Israel "can" be saved. He doesn't say all Israel "might" be saved. He doesn't say all Israel "should" be saved and he certainly doesn't say all Israel "won't" be saved. He says all Israel "will" be saved. He doesn't say "all Christians" will be saved but all "Israel" will be saved.

He says "Israel" rather than "Christian" because it's Israel that's at the heart of the "problem" with his gospel. He says "Israel" because it's part of Israel that has been hardened. He says "Israel" rather than "Christian" because the Gentile arrogance he wants to rebuke is directed toward Israel. Gentiles were feeling and maybe saying that God had dumped ethnic Israel and replaced it with a new Gentile people (11:19). Gentile arrogance made it appear that God had permanently jettisoned physical Jews (but see 11:28-29) and this would have been unfaithfulness on God's part. Paul says "Israel" because it was to Israel that God made promises (be sure to read Romans 9:1-5) and it's Israel that's on the outside looking in at the party. When he says all "Israel" Paul has ethnic Jews in mind. We'll return to this later but you might want to look at [Paul's use of the terms Israel and Jew.](#)

When he says "all" Israel will be saved does he mean all without exception? Judas, Caiaphas included? If he is sure that absolutely every single Jew will be saved then his anguish is inexplicable and his claim that he would be willing to be cut off from Christ if he thought it would save Israel is hypocritical (see 9:1-3). Most people are sure that his "all" is not an absolute. It isn't difficult to find texts in the OT where "all Israel" doesn't mean every single person in the nation. In using "all", texts like that suggest "a sufficiently significant number" of Israelites that represents the nation at that time.

So is that what Paul means when he says "all" Israel will be saved? That wouldn't help us much. If he means a significant number of Israel will be saved, does he mean a significant number of Israel out of the number of Israelites since the days of the patriarchs until now? Does he mean a significant number of some coming generation of Israelites? And bearing in mind that he's defending God's faithfulness to his promises to Jews why won't all Jews without exception be saved if God made promises to them? Some people are certain that sometime in the future (the near future, many of them say), just before Jesus returns, there will be a mass conversion of Jews. They tell us that that will be the fulfillment of "and so all Israel will be saved."

So it comes down to that does it? Back in the first century Paul defends God's righteousness and faithfulness in the face of hosts of lost Jews and how does he do it? By saying that a large number from a generation in the 21st century will come to Christ? Did God make no promises to the Jews between the 1st century and now? Imagine a delegation of non-believing Jews saying to Paul, "In light of your 'gospel' God has been faithless to us Jews because according to you so many of us are unsaved." And imagine Paul saying, "No he isn't unfaithful, and the proof of his faithfulness will take place about 2,000 years from now when a significant number of Jews will turn to Christ." Or imagine a delegation of arrogant, ignorant Gentiles saying to Paul, "God is done with the Jews because he has hardened them to bring us in." And imagine Paul saying, "No, the proof that God is not done with the Jews is when, after 2,000 years of hardening them in unbelief, God will bring a significant number of Israel to faith in Christ in the generation just before Christ's coming."

I don't think that that's what Paul had in mind.

All Israel will be saved (2)

Whatever we make of Romans 11:26 we need to remember that it is Paul's triumphant assurance that God is faithful to his commitments. Chapters 9—11 have many difficulties but there's no doubt about what Paul's means to say: In the face of much that bewilders and behind much that has a God-denying look there is a God who can be trusted to keep his promises. Some have looked at 9—11 and walked away fuming. When Paul is done writing it he bursts into praise that just won't be kept imprisoned (11:33-36). Maybe if we knew what he knew and saw what he saw we'd burst into praise as well. Qohelet in Ecclesiastes 1 watches the sun rise and set, rise and set, rise and set. "See," he said, "everything is empty and pointless. Nobody cares. There's nothing but the same old same old." Jesus saw the sun rise and the sun set, rise and set, rise and set. "See," he said, "how kind the Holy Father is. He makes the sun to rise on the righteous and the unrighteous." They both saw the same thing...and yet, they didn't, did they? We read Romans 9—11 and ponder. Paul's reads it after he has written it and burst into praise and says to his secretary, "Add this, 'Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!'"

Paul believed that God hardened Israel (11:7-10,25). Certainly Israel herself was in on the hardening process but Paul, following prophets before him and guided by God to see the present correctly, doesn't mince words. God blinded Israel and bowed their back. See The

Hardened Heart in the Exodus lessons. But it wasn't the whole of Israel that was hardened; it was part of Israel. And the part that was hardened was not the righteous because God doesn't harden the hearts of righteous people. He hardens only those who are committed to unrighteousness and even then it is for a specific purpose. Hardened Israel had no grounds for complaint. It wasn't that they were righteous and God hardened their hearts against him. Their history revealed a pattern of apostasy and unrighteous behavior and when the Messiah appeared that bent for resisting God bottomed out and Israel suffered awful loss (11:12). What Israel (as a whole) had wanted they missed, but the remnant got it (11:7). They weren't blinded. They weren't hardened. They didn't suffer loss. They, and Paul was one of them (11:1-2) were proof that God hadn't rejected the children of Abraham through Jacob. It's nonsense to think that in Palestine that the bulk of Israel rejected Christ. James reminds Paul in Acts 21:20 of the many thousands of Jews that believed. In the scattered countries of the world the masses would not have heard of Jesus and therefore did not reject him. But that's another discussion.

The hardened were those who were lost before Jesus came along. It's a serious mistake to think that the hardening made them unbelievers. No, they were hardened because they were already unbelievers. With the coming of the Christ the plot thickened and revealed the hidden depths of Israel's lostness. This isn't anti-Semitism. Paul's quarrel with Israel is a lover's quarrel. And it isn't anti-Gentile to say that Gentile hands were covered with the blood of the Jewish Redeemer. Romans 11:32 says that God concluded all humans under sin that he might have mercy on them all. But we need to make up our mind to this: those that are hardened are unsaved! It isn't that unbelievers can't turn back to God and be saved—they certainly can (11:20,23). But while they are hardened in unbelief they are unsaved! Putting it in terms Peter used in Acts 3:22-23, those who reject the Messiah are cut off from among his people. However conciliatory we wish to be we're compelled to say that those who reject Jesus Christ as Lord are lost.

That means that Paul does not see a problem when he asserts that "all Israel will be saved" while equally insisting that "some of Israel will not be saved." But it is Israel he has in mind, ethnic Jews, not a non-ethnic, cosmopolitan community called "the church". When he says all Israel will be saved and some of Israel will not be saved he is talking about ethnic Israel!

The hardened are unsaved and it was God who hardened them. And why did God harden Israel? He hardened them that through them he might bring fullness of blessing to the Gentiles (11:12,30). And why did he bring fullness to the Gentiles? That Israel might feel the loss of their blessings and turn back to God in Christ (10:19-20, 11:11,14 and 15:27). When did God harden Israel? More than once, as the prophets testify. But in Paul's era it centers on the rejection of Jesus Christ to whom Israelites and Gentiles were privileged to look for salvation (see 15:8-12).

But what is Gentiles "fullness"? It can mean the "full number or complement" and that's how the NIV and the RSV render it. But it has many and various meanings. In 11:12 the NIV renders the same word as "fullness" (no word of "full number") and the RSV renders it "full inclusion". Paul uses the word (pleromati) in 15:29 to speak of the complete richness of Christ's blessing. The RSV leaves it as "fullness". I think the "fullness" of the Gentiles in 11:26 is the spiritual wealth with which God will bless the Gentiles. Note the contrasts in 11:11-12. We have

- Jewish fall—Gentile salvation
- Jewish fall—World riches
- Jewish loss—Gentile riches
- Jewish loss—Gentile fullness

There is nothing about "numbers" in the section. There is plenty about loss and gain and impoverishment and fullness. God hardens unbelieving Israel and it results in the crucifixion of the Messiah and that opens the door for rich Gentile blessing.

All Israel will be saved (3)

Gentile "fullness" is not a certain number of Gentile converts. It is their state of fullness. It's their being filled with the riches of God's grace in Jesus Christ. In 15:29 Paul tells the Roman Christians that he is coming "in the full measure of the blessing of Christ." He comes with what all that Christ means and is and he calls that "the fullness of Christ." Israel is hardened until the Gentiles have experienced the meaning of Christ.

"Until" the fullness of the Gentiles has come in? "Until" appears to suggest a time sequence. As if, "the hardening will continue (only) until the Gentile fullness has arrived." At that point the hardening will cease. That appears to be the commonly accepted view. Taking that to be true, what then? It's tempting to think that when the hardening ceases Israel will automatically turn to Christ and this is what very many evangelicals believe. But we need to remember that the hardening didn't make this section of Israel into unbelievers—they were already unbelievers and the hardening (God's judicial sentence) made use of their sin. If God withdrew the special circumstances that hardened a section of Israel it would not follow that they would automatically come to faith. If they didn't believe before the hardening there's no guarantee that they will believe after it.

But it's the following phrase that generates the evangelical view. "A hardening in part has happened to Israel until Gentile fullness has come in and so all Israel will be saved." The "and so" is often taken as something like "consequently" or "and then" or "following that" all Israel will be saved. But "and so" should be taken as an adverb of manner, "in this way" or "and this is how" all Israel will be saved.

But making "and so" an adverb of manner is awkward if we link it immediately with the hardening of Israel or Gentile fullness. N.T. Wright in his commentary on Romans takes "and so" to mean "in this way". He thinks that it's always been God's way of saving Israel, by hardening. Maybe it's better to say that it's by bringing in Gentile fullness (and so making Jews jealous so that they want in—11:31) that God will save Israel. But I'm sure it's better still to look back to 11:23-24. All Israel will be saved "in this way," namely, turning from unbelief. This means that 11:25-26 is a little—but not unimportant—aside before he returns to how Israel is to be saved. Where lies their hope? In turning from unbelief (11:11:9,23-24). And when they turn from their unbelief it will be in keeping with the purpose of the Messiah's coming (11:26-27).

Paul changes a preposition in quoting Isaiah 59:20. The prophet speaks of a Redeemer coming "to" Zion but Paul says that the Redeemer will come "from" Zion. I think Paul is rebuking the Gentile arrogance again and reminding them that the root bears them and not they the root (11:18). The redeemer who redeems both Israel and the Gentiles comes not from Gentiles but from the Jews. The Messiah is theirs (9:5, 15:27).

So here's what I think Paul has said here in this section. "You Gentiles must not be arrogant because you are now people of God while Jews are on the outside looking in. You stand by faith and they are outside. It's true that they were cast off (11:15,22b) but this was no permanent purpose of God, he hasn't 'washed his hands of them'. No, if they turn from unbelief they will be received into their own blessings (11:23-24). This is the way all Israel will be saved. Understand this, the hardened condition God produced, is on a segment of Israel—an unbelieving segment (11:20) and it was accomplished that your rich blessing might be brought in (11:30). If unbelieving Israel turns from unbelief they will be gladly received as if they were alive from the dead (11:15,23) because that's precisely why God sent the Redeemer (11:26-27). And by the way, the Redeemer that saves you and them comes from among them!"

All Israel will be saved (4)

Here's what I think leads up to "And so all Israel will be saved" in 11:26. Jewish critics of Paul's gospel about Jesus the Messiah said that his message would mean God was faithless. God had promised salvation to Israel through the coming Messiah, the Messiah arrived and a vast number of the Jews were excluded even though the Messiah was theirs (9:5). It didn't help Paul much to say that they had rejected the Messiah because Paul was insisting that that was precisely how salvation would come to the world. So here it is. The Jewish Messiah comes to save Israel, salvation is to come through his being rejected, the Jews do the will of God in rejecting him and they are excluded! And to make matters worse, while the heirs are excluded Gentiles receive the salvation inheritance. And what was Paul's response when he has done explaining? All Israel will be saved!

That's one side of the coin. The other arises from the Gentile perspective. In Galatians, Judaizers wanted to exclude Gentiles ("they must become Jews if they want Messianic blessings"). In Romans arrogant Gentiles are saying that Jews are excluded. God is done with them. The proof of that are the many Jews that are lost in unbelief. "There's a new people—Gentiles." And what's Paul's response when he has done explaining? All Israel will be saved!

All that have descended from Abraham through Jacob are not "Israel" Paul says in 9:6. So when you see unbelievers cut off from among their people (see Acts 3:22-23) you must not conclude that a true Israelite has been cut off. The Israelite that rejects faith (in Jesus Christ) shows he is not Abraham's child, he is not truly an Israelite. A true Israelite, a real Jew has both the flesh and faith of Abraham (9:7-8). When Paul says that "all" Israel will be saved he is saying that the remnant that now exists is God's last word about the Jews. He has not gathered in the existing remnant and said, "No more!" The "all" Israel is that portion of Israel that already believed and every other Jew that wishes to come to God in Jesus Christ via the gospel. Imagine a man coming in response to God's gospel about Jesus Christ and wanting to be saved. God says, "What's your ethnic background?" The man replies, "I'm a Jew!" God says, "Oh, no you can't be saved I've closed the door on Jews." That could never happen! That's something like arrogant Gentiles were thinking. Paul says that God elected Israel and made covenant promises to them and he doesn't go back on those (11:29). God's offer of Messianic blessings is wide open to every presently unbelieving Jew! Paul could point to a Jew that has rejected the gospel and say, "That is an Israelite." He could point to a Jew that has rejected the gospel and say, "That is not an Israelite." He would have been correct both times. See Romans 9:6 and compare Revelation 2:9 and 3:9.

And he insists that God has rejected not a single true Israelite. A Gentile with the faith of Abraham is a child of Abraham (Galatians 3:27-28 and Romans 4:11) but a Gentile without faith is as cut off as a Jew without faith. Neither of them is a true child of Abraham. (But while Paul called Gentiles children of Abraham he didn't call them "Israelites". See Abraham's children or Israelites?) So "all Israel" are all the physical kin of Abraham who also have his heart. Not one of these has ever been or ever will be lost. No matter what arrogant Gentiles say.

All Israel will be saved (5)

The common evangelical view is that a mass of Jews, the bulk of living Jews close to the time or at the time of Christ's final appearance will turn to God in faith in Jesus Christ. This they think is the fulfillment of Romans 11:6, "And so all Israel will be saved." Perhaps this is true but we need to recognize the gravity of the loss if this view is correct. Besides, I don't think such a view would accomplish Paul's aim. First, there's the gravity of the loss if this view is correct.

As Paul presents it, God hardens the Jewish unbelievers and they reject the Christ but this is to bring salvation to the world (11:8-11,15). He says the hardening would last "until the

fullness of the Gentiles has come in" (11:25). Numerous people take that to mean "until the last Gentile is saved," or as some versions render it, "until the full number" of Gentiles has arrived. Since Gentiles are still being saved these people think that 11:25 hasn't yet been fulfilled. They think it will be fulfilled close to or at the final appearance of Christ. When the last Gentile is saved, God will end the hardening that blinds Israel and they will turn to Christ en masse.

And what of the Jews between the 1st century and the 21st? Imagine a Jew asking Paul how God proposes to maintain his faithfulness to all of Abraham's descendants through Jacob. Imagine Paul saying something like, "God will continue to harden Israel for two thousand years and then, close to the time when the Messiah makes his final appearance, God will end his hardening work and save the bulk of that generation then alive." What do you suppose that Jew would say?

Remember that "all Israel will be saved" is Paul's way of denying that God is faithless! And would his saving the bulk of a single generation of Jews in (say) the 21st century show his faithfulness to fifty generations of Jews that he hardened? Two thousand years of hardening is to be offset by his saving the bulk (or even all) of a single 21st century generation of Jews?

As for me, it seems better to hold that God's judicial hardening of unbelieving Jews lasted until the door was opened for Gentile blessing (see 11:30-32). That was occasioned by the death (and glorification) of the Messiah when God made Gentiles full of the spiritual wealth that he had always promised to Israel. Once the door had been thrown wide open the gospel was for all (11:32).

Anencephaly and homosexuality

One little child was born with a second head growing out of its functioning head. The second head, it was reported could smile and open its eyes but that is as much as was known about it before the child died due to a brain infection. Children have been born with the intestinal tract on the outside rather than inside. One little boy was born with a foetus inside him. Apparently the process should have produced twins but one foetus wrapped itself around the other and seven years later it was discovered and removed as a large mass with arms, fingers, genitals, hair, legs and toes. Anencephalic babies are born (most don't survive birth) without a major portion of the brain and without skull or scalp and while they might react to some sight and sound stimuli there's no cognitive possibility. I won't go any further with illustrations of this kind of thing but the list of tragic and bizarre biological chaos is long. Our response to these cases is most often pity (though some warped theology holds them to be punishment because the developing person is said to be a sinner). Whatever else we should think about these tragic cases most of us don't berate or blame the victims.

But God forbid that we should speak of rare biological chaos that results in some people having a disordered sexual identity. Because the Hebrew—Christian scriptures do regard homosexuality as contrary to the will and purpose of God we're told we mustn't believe there may be some people with an anomalous sexual makeup. If we think that, we're accused of approving homosexuality and godless society.

I wrote a while back about a specific case that was put to me about an adult who was opposed to homosexuality and was undergoing the process of reconstructive surgery and other expensive and arduous treatment to be able to live honourably before God as a female. Let me repeat, this person had no wish to engage in homosexuality, had no sympathy whatever with what Paul in Romans 1 would characterize as perversion of nature. This person wished to live honourably as a Christian female in keeping with the biblical witness and her mature self-understanding which was the fruit of her lifelong experience. I was asked if such a person could

be a Christian and I said yes and continue to think they can and I praise God for their costly commitment to honour in Christ.

I fully expected disagreement, of course, and got some. A good friend came after me about it and a few other non-friends but courteous in their plain disapproval pursued me on it. None of them ranted about my approving homosexuality since they knew very well that I oppose it in light of the biblical witness.

Recently a newcomer to this site was absolutely appalled at my opinion on masturbation so you can guess at the response to my piece on the person in question. (Some people write with a shriek, don't they?)

The friend I mentioned sent me a great article by Paul McHugh (formerly of JHU) that exposed the willingness of medical centres to subject children to "sexual reassignment" surgery most often at the request of ill-informed and panicky parents and with the approval of a certain brand of psychiatrist. Through his critical persistence and with aid from colleagues he had these irresponsible and life-damaging procedures stopped at JHU and other places followed their lead. Dealing more particularly with children and genital abnormalities and the "quick fix" approach by gullible parents and surgeons, McHugh had this to say:

Medical caretakers and parents can strive to make the child aware that aspects of sexual identity will emerge as he or she grows. Settling on what to do about it should await maturation and the child's appreciation of his or her own identity.

Proper care, including good parenting, means helping the child through the medical and social difficulties presented by the genital anatomy but in the process protecting what tissues can be retained, in particular the gonads. This effort must continue to the point where the child can see the problem of a life role more clearly as a sexually differentiated individual emerges from within. Then as the young person gains a sense of responsibility for the result, he or she can be helped through any surgical constructions that are desired. Genuine informed consent derives only from the person who is going to live with the outcome and cannot rest upon the decisions of others who believe they "know best."

The article is well worth reading and should put an end to the notion that sexual identity is what people "want" it to be and, more to the point, it should cure us of any willingness to be led around by the nose by a sex-obsessed culture that in the words of Freddy Mercury "wants it all and wants it now." But McHugh wasn't supporting the ranters and ravers whose shallow use of scripture and their ignoring of rare and exceptional cases leads them to brand sincere and honourable strugglers as "sheer perverts". Romans 1 isn't dealing with such exceptional cases any more than Genesis 1:26 is dealing with anencephalic fetuses or babies with two heads.

Are Gentile Christians NT Israel?

I'm of the opinion that the terms "Israel," "Israelite" and "Jew" are reserved for the physical descendants of Abraham through Jacob. I believe the scriptures speak of unbelieving Jews as children of Abraham (John 8:37). I believe the scriptures deny that unbelieving Jews are children of Abraham (John 8:39,44). Before Jesus of Nazareth came along a prophet called Ezekiel called apostate Jews the children of Amorites and Hittites and sister to Sodom (16:45,48).

I believe the scriptures call unbelieving Jews "Israel" (Romans 11:25 and see Romans 9:25-29). I believe the scriptures deny that unbelieving Israel is Israel (Romans 9:6 and Hosea 1:9).

The above is doubted by no one. Nor is this. The Scripture speak of believing Gentiles who have been baptized into Christ and calls them "Abraham's children" (Galatians 3:26-28).

Abraham and only Abraham is called the father of all that believe (Romans 4:11-12, Galatians 3:7).

But Paul is very particular about this. He insists that Abraham was justified with God prior to his circumcision so that he might be the father of all that believe (Romans 4:11). He tells us that only Abraham received circumcision as a token of the relationship that he had with God prior to his circumcision (4:10-11). Abraham's circumcision came after his relationship with God was established and Paul takes pains to make that clear. This was not true of Isaac or Jacob (Israel). Gentile Christians as well as Jewish can say that Abraham is our father but only Israel can say Israel (Jacob) is our father.

Galatians 6:16 is awkwardly constructed. Scholars still, I think, favour the notion that there are two groups. Those who "walk by this rule" (Gentile believers) and "the Israel of God". The Israel of God would be the Jewish believers who trust to the Messiah. In any case, the least we can say is that the text doesn't establish the case for saying that Gentile believers are called "Israel".

I think this is worthy of reflection because it affects how we hear Paul's theology, especially as he works it out in Romans and Galatians.

Circumcision in Romans 2:28-29

As surely as there is a Jew and a Jew there is circumcision and circumcision. In this section of Romans Paul is stressing the ethical implications of an already existing circumcision rather than the theological implications of an eschatological circumcision. This is an indictment. His point here is that ethnic Jews in their religious, ethical and moral lives have not reflected the true meaning of circumcision. Since he is making a general survey of Israel's historical response to the torah (see 2:23 and 3:9-19) he is not saying that they lack a "Christian" circumcision that can be found in Christ alone and by the eschatological Spirit. He claims that they had never lived up to the implications of the circumcision they always had. Had they lived up to that circumcision it would not have been merely fleshly but would have been in or by "the (S)pirit". It's surely a mistake to make the Old Covenant graceless and "Spiritless". (See The Spirit: Old Covenant and New)

The circumcision in or by the (S)pirit is contrasted with one that is in or by letter. So what does Paul mean by the "letter"? Moo and many others take it to mean the Mosaic law but that's unlikely. He thinks that Paul sees the Mosaic law as a law written on stone tables and so it has the nature of "letter". But what makes us think Paul saw the Mosaic torah itself as "letter"? If, for example, Moses called Israel to have a circumcised heart and to have the torah on their hearts was he describing the torah as a "letter" condition?

But it isn't quite accurate to say that "the letter" is simply "a way of viewing" the law as people like Dunn suggest. It is less a way of regarding the law (being concerned only for its external embodiment) than it is of how the law relates to the individual (or the nation as a whole in Paul's agenda). If the law is taken into the heart (is written on the heart) it is no longer letter whereas if it remains an "external" requirement it is "letter". So, it's less "a way of viewing the torah" than it is of not keeping the torah because it is not in the heart. When the torah is called "letter" it is the torah that is called letter and not a view of the torah. Paul insists that the torah is spiritual (Romans 7:14). That's its nature, so it doesn't relate only to the external (with respect to Moo). But when Israel claims to possess it while refusing to live up to it, it becomes (mere) "letter". It is a relative description and not an absolute.

"And these words I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently"...(Deuteronomy 6:6) "You shall therefore lay up these words of mine in your heart"... (11:18)

When Jeremiah or Moses speaks of the circumcision of the heart (Deuteronomy 10:16; Jeremiah 4:4 but see 9:26 and Ezekiel 44:7) we know literal circumcision isn't in view but we also know that we're dealing with more than a merely national symbol. In these cases the mark has been moved (as it were) from the flesh to the inner centre of the person so that the meaning, faith and commitment for which circumcision stands becomes the motivating principle of their lives. This doesn't mean that physical circumcision is irrelevant to Moses or Jeremiah but they're making the point Paul makes, a true Israelite takes to his heart the meaning of the covenant of circumcision. Nor should we think that Moses or Jeremiah would think that heart-circumcision was the result of human endeavour apart from God's gracious work. That misses a central truth of the Old Testament by a long way.

In Colossians 2:11 we have a different setting and a different agenda. We have "the circumcision of Christ." What are we to make of that genitive? Does Christ perform the circumcision or is he the one who is circumcised (cut off) or does the genitive here simply say that their "circumcision" is the kind that belongs to Christ (it is a heart circumcision)? It probably means more than "this circumcision is a heart circumcision, the kind that belongs to Christ" because such a circumcision existed prior to Christ. Besides, the precise issue here isn't ethical content--it's more theological and doctrinal than that. A heresy of some kind is being exposed (a heresy that certainly includes some Jewish elements) so that one circumcision leaves the other redundant (see 2:17).

The forgiveness of sins is clearly involved and is connected with the "putting off the body of the flesh" which is the act of circumcising (2:11,13). This putting off and circumcising is done "in Christ" (2:11) and is said to be "the circumcision of Christ". What if it's the case that the circumcision of Christ is his being cut off and that the circumcision of the Colossians is seen as taking place in identification with Christ? It would be the case that they would not only be circumcised "with" Christ, they would be circumcised with him because they are circumcised "in" him. (Just as the Romans died "with" Christ by dying "in" Christ--Romans 6:3-8.)

In this section we have a series of sun verbs. The Colossians are co-buried, co-raised and co-resurrected with Christ (2:12-13). It's certainly the case, and should be insisted on, that these realities aren't experienced alongside Christ as if independent of him. They are experienced with Christ only because they are experienced in Christ.

In either case, Paul contrasts it with a Jewish national circumcision done with hands (2:11). So in this sense it is the "true" circumcision, which is no doubt what Paul has in mind in Philippians 3:2-4 when he contrasts Messianic believers with merely nationalist Jews who bitterly oppose the Messiah.

The idea that the Spirit had not been at work in pre-Christ days is clearly unacceptable. Paul claims that persecuted Isaac was born of the Spirit (Galatians 4:29) and goes on to say "it is the same now." How difficult is it then to think that circumcision of the Spirit was an ancient experience? It isn't necessary, then, to think that because the true circumcision is in or by the Spirit that this circumcision is an eschatological experience (as it most certainly is in Colossians 2 and Philippians 2).

There's this too. In Romans 4 Paul sees the circumcision of Abraham as peculiar. In historical fact he was the only one of the elect whose circumcision marked him out as already justified by faith, independent of circumcision (4:9-12). This was not true of Isaac or Jacob (Israel) and consequently they could not be the father of all (both the circumcised and uncircumcised). Which leads me to say that while all believers are "Abraham's seed" (Galatians 3:26-29) they are not "Israelites" or "Israel". Israel (Jacob) is not the father of all that believe. In fact it appears from Romans 4:11 that Paul makes a deliberate play on the timing of Abraham's circumcision--it was post faith and righteousness. "The purpose," he says, was "to make him the

father of all who believe." (RSV and the versions which take "eis to eina" as purposeful rather than mere summary as in the NIV.)

Damned For others?

Maria White never enjoyed good health and she died at the tragically young age of thirty-two, but not before she had established herself as a poet of note and married James Russell Lowell, who, with her help, finally outshone her as "a name". She had a poet's heart and like all the truly fine poets she saw things the rest of us only grope after in part blindness. Speaking as a Christian I recognise that human loves share in the flaws that are part of our humanity but speaking as a Christian who has known more than his share of ignorance down the years I haven't seen the beauty and riches God has placed in these human loves. Too, I've underestimated their power even while I admitted that they have immense power. I haven't seen the beauty and richness of life because like so many others before me—people who've taught and shaped me—I've spoken almost exclusively of sin and forgiveness, of God's redeeming activity without connecting it with his eternal purpose to bless and give life and I've said more about leaving this life than truly living it.

Again, like millions before me down the centuries I've narrowed the meaning of the life and death, resurrection and glorification of Jesus to how they relate to and deal with sin. I can hardly make up for my failure by now saying nothing about sin and atonement for that would be tragic as well as a distortion of the meaning of Jesus Christ. He deals with our sin, thank God!

But he deals with our sin to gain God's ultimate and eternal purpose, namely, to bless the human family with fullness of life; a fullness of life that is holy and honourable in righteousness but a life that includes human loves cleansed of all of whatever that mars them. Redemption confirms God's creation intention rather than reduces or dismisses it. Redemption and blessing aren't two distinct stories running parallel—they're two faces of one coin, two themes in one drama.

I mentioned Maria White Lowell at the beginning because in one of her poems she stresses the depth and appeal of human love. She wrote four sonnets about her love for her husband, James Russell, and she makes the point that if Death came and took her to heaven that even there, in the midst of all the glory and with heaven's shining ones by her side she would tire of the endless blue if she couldn't look down on the earth and see the one she loved. No one should accuse her of heresy; they should simply pay attention to her way of expressing the beauty, glory and wonder of the love of one human for another. Here's what she says (quoted in H. E. Scudder's biography of her husband).

If Death uplift me, even thus should I,
Companioned by the silver spirits high
And stationed on the sunset's crimson towers,
Bending over earth's broad stretch of bowers,
To where my love beneath their shades might lie;
For I should weary of the endless blue,
If that one soul, so beautiful and true,
Were hidden by earth's vapours from my sight.

But what she implies about the depth of human love pales before what we hear from Moses in Exodus 32:32. God has threatened to obliterate apostate Israel and Moses, while freely acknowledging their great wickedness, begs him to forgive them, "but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written." What do you make of such devotion?

Then we have Paul in Romans 9:3 saying, "For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel." The scholars tell of various linguistic possibilities and niceties but Dunn is surely right when he says the search for linguistic options is fed by what Paul seems clearly to say and N.T Wright refuses to hide his astonishment at Paul's statement.

It would be foolish to think that Paul thought his being anathematised could save others and there's certainly no need to think he was actually saying to God what Moses did say to God. [There is more in Paul's statement than there is in Moses'—but that would be another discussion.] What seems clear beyond dispute is that Paul so loves his people that being damned, cut off from Jesus, wouldn't be too great a price for him to pay on their behalf. He knew what Moses felt toward them and he knew even better what Jesus felt about them and he here expresses his own heart toward them. Make what we want of it, Paul's love for his people and his agony over their loss leads to this outpouring of passion.

In Exodus 32:33 there is something of a rebuke—so I judge—in what God says to Moses; but there is no reason for us to believe that God is not pleased with the depth of Moses' feeling for Israel. Paul isn't offering developed theology in Romans 9:3 but he is revealing the wonder of the love humans can have for one another that they can feel to such depths and express such ongoing thoughts.

By the time some of us are done trying to get around the plain import of the statement we have Paul saying nothing worth saying. "If it was permissible for me to ask such a thing and if I thought it might avail something (though I know it wouldn't) I could see myself praying such a prayer."

That doesn't at all sound like what Paul said. James Dunn is right, "In cases like this it is always wise to ask not simply, What did the author intend to say? But also, What could the author have expected his readers to understand by his language?" It seems clear to me that Paul is saying something like, "I'd be willing to be damned for their sake; that's how deeply I feel for them."

I'm not the only one for who feels that there is a handful of people for whom I feel so deeply that if they didn't make it to the better world and life that is ahead it wouldn't be a better world for me.

I know that we're not to read the deep feelings of Maria White Lowell, Moses and Paul and "measure the speech of their hearts with the rules of logic." Humans are capable of feeling so deeply that they can contemplate losing all if their beloved gains. This is a gift of God.

Hindsight and Heroes—Romans 14

With the benefit of hindsight and heroes it's easy to be good at saying how things should have been handled all those years ago. Where it is the case we now live in a world created by people better, wiser, braver and far and away less selfish than we are. We breathe the air they have purified, we think their thoughts or, better, the kind of thoughts their way of thinking brings and we are often seduced into admiring ourselves for our superiority over past ages. But without exceptional people—people unlike the rank and file of us—we would still be the people of past ages, doing the things and thinking the thoughts of ages now past. Those who led us well may not have redeemed us from a slavery that had our hands and feet in chains but they certainly delivered us from enslaved minds that dared to put chains on the hands and feet of others.

We shouldn't apologise or feel even the slightest twinge of regret that we as societies have advanced ethically and morally (where indeed that is the case) for even if we can

"understand" some of the harsh and heartless institutions and public practices of the past we can never admire them and much less can we glory in them.

Still, because we each have a vote we're tempted to think we're worthy of it and because we each have a vote we're tempted to think we vote out of the reservoir of our individual brilliance and virtue. The truth is: without the sensitive and wise and brave, the bulk of us would mill around with our voting papers stuck in our collars, like sheep to be penned, and that might well be the case not only because we lack insight but because we lack character!

It isn't a mark of character if we jump on every bandwagon that passes by and join in with the crowd, subscribing to the latest trend in religion or foreign policy or social theory—it takes character to refuse to do that. But it's a mark of character to gladly submit our thinking to the test of other ways of thinking, other ways of doing things. It is a mark of character that we examine our preferred ways of thinking and doing for signs of self-service; "does it cost me to think or do this?" or "do I pursue this to further feather my own nest?" or "are we as a society blind and careless to the needs of all others?" As surely as it is no mark of character to follow the latest parade, it is no sign of character to be blindly loyal to the past and refuse to budge. Having thought, it is a sign of character to move forward on the basis of what seems to us to be the truth.

We owe our world a debt! Boreham passionately insisted, "Let me make no mistake. Unless I give back to the world something that costs me blood and agony and tears, I shall, when I quit the planet at last, be in the position of the man who leaves the neighbourhood without first discharging his just and honourable debts." This is the kind of thing Lord Macaulay had in mind when he said: "We are free, we are civilised, to little purpose, if we grudge to any portion of the human race an equal measure of freedom and civilisation."

To cash in on the costly achievements of men and women of former days who stood up for the benefit of others and then to use their accomplishments to completely dismiss others is not to have known these people at all. It is to feed on their bones and forget their sacrifice; as if a Christian waxed tearfully eloquent over Jesus forfeiting his rights that he might live while he is stubbornly unwilling to forfeit some of his own that his brothers and sisters might live (see Romans 14).

It's more than arrogance, it's silly arrogance, when we strut with our store of respectable, even correct, views as if they were our creation and as if the world should thank us for what we have inherited.

Vision is never a merit, it is a gift and Macgregor was right: those who can see are always and everywhere debtors to those who are blind.

Homosexuals and Homosexuals

Romans 1:18-32 has a central agenda: to proclaim the Gentile world under God's just condemnation for its sin.

But that central concern is part of a larger purpose. It underscores human unfaithfulness as a startling contrast to God's faithfulness. He purposed to bring his creation to final glory and righteousness in a "last Adam" (Jesus Christ—a purpose he began to execute in Genesis 1) and he wouldn't walk away from it despite the human family's treachery.

Whether we like it or not part of God's redeeming of the human family and bringing it to glory is his giving it over to wallowing in its sins and in the long (but not exhaustive) list of sins is homosexuality. People simply have to work too hard to get around Romans 1 when they insist that homosexuality is just as pleasing to God as honourable heterosexuality. When we reduce human sexuality to mere animal passion we've taken leave of the Bible—as we do when we reduce anything to the mere mechanical or physical.

Homosexuality is not only our sin it is the mark of God's judgment on a more broadly sinful human family; it is only one of the ulcers that breaks out on the body of the human family and tells us that down below there is a systemic infection.

The redemptive judgment of God and human sin go hand in hand and is a very complex matter though it isn't obscure. Where it appears obscure it's complex and its great complexity is what overwhelms us. It's hardly worth saying that we can't get to the bottom of it because we're simply not up to it—intellectually or morally—but patient and obedient and prayerful reflection will bring us a lot of truth and deliver us from much ignorance.

I don't believe the judgment of God is arbitrary. I believe he has taught us about his character and the manner in which he relates to the human family and we must keep that in mind as a guideline as we draw conclusions.

As a general truth, I don't believe that God wakes in the morning (so to speak) and decides to kill this or that person, maim this or that person, send this or that calamity though I accept that he may on occasion choose to do so (Sodom, Nadab and Abihu and others). Even on those occasions there is nothing arbitrary about the judgment. He has set in motion and maintains a stream of judgment against sin (Genesis 3) that engulfs the human family (the innocent as well as the guilty).

I know of children born with horrendous physical/mental disabilities and I have no reason to doubt that some children are born with their sexual wiring all shot to pieces.

I see no wrong at all in "gender reassignment" surgery where that is the case and where the patient means to live honourably in the role to which their inner structure points. We're happy that a child born with major organs on the outside of its body can have surgery to fix the situation and I think where the case is genuine we should be happy too for those who have surgery to fix the "gender situation".

I've no reason to doubt that there are some born with the makeup that when it is developed hungers for sexual experience with persons of the same sex. I think this is the outworking of humanity's rebellion under God's redemptive judgment. I think the same is true of the terrible abnormalities we hear about every day. I don't mean that this is God punishing those individuals or that God arbitrarily chooses to maim or warp these specific individuals. [The matter of human interdependence counts heavily here.]

But the reality of a given condition doesn't determine that the condition should be accepted as "normal". Much less does it mean that conduct stemming from such a condition (say, homosexual "wiring") should be regarded as "normal" or "acceptable". A baby with an entire intestinal tract on the outside of its body is not regarded as "normal" though it is very real. We work to heal that situation.

I don't know enough about the inner workings of a human in relation to genetic predisposition and environment to speak with complete certainty—of course! Nor does anyone else I know about!

But I do know that those who have a profound addiction to prey on children—however we are to explain their condition—are not to be regarded as normal and certainly their behaviour is not to be thought of as acceptable.

The drive may be real but it must be resisted. It must be resisted no matter how difficult that resistance is. God is able to take into account all varying degrees of power to resist and he will judge righteously.

Heterosexual people (apparently) are born with varying degrees of sexual hunger that range all the way from none to profound addiction. [It seems certain that environment would strengthen or weaken the predisposition.] This would mean that some people are more severely tested in this area than others. Some people will never commit sexual adultery because they don't have it in them. [Where that is the case the person might rightly be happy

at the abstinence but there'd be little point in bragging on it.] There are others whose sexual appetite is very pronounced but they won't commit adultery because they simply refuse to do it. [The elements involved in that great refusal are no doubt many. It'd be easy to come up with a long list of them that would be perfectly sensible. For example, does the spouse see to it that the other is fully satisfied, do they have other honourable hungers that balance the sexual need? And so forth.]

The point I want to make here is this: it isn't only homosexual people who have drives that must be controlled—they are not the only people under stress and they mustn't think of themselves in that way; mustn't see themselves as the only "victims" of a very powerful drive.

It's true that heterosexual people have avenues of satisfaction that are not open to some (most?) homosexual people. That is, heterosexual people can honourably satisfy their sexual hunger. That's true, but it isn't true for all heterosexual people. Most Christians (I suspect) would say that full sexual experience is to be enjoyed only between husband and wife; at least that is the standard by which they seek to live and that is often a severe test for single people—but hosts of them live up to it.

Then there are those who due to health reasons aren't able to cherish and enjoy one another in the sexual way; they too are faced with living without sexual satisfaction.

All of this to say: the existence of the hunger doesn't give us the liberty to satisfy it if the means of satisfaction is dishonourable in the sight of God. [Of course, for those who care nothing about God there is nothing to be discussed. Everything goes—bestiality included.]

What, then, of a person with very strong homosexual drives who wants to be a Christian? They certainly can be! But in my view, as I understand the Hebrew—Christian scriptures, they must wrestle against the urge to do the wrong and pursue with honour the life God is calling us all to. They must do that in the same way others who go hungry must do it. Those who are left without sexual satisfaction and who feel the deep hunger for it (hetero or homosexual) must learn to live without it.

“Yes, but that's easy for heterosexuals to say!”

Is it? Hmmm.

You understand that most of the above infuriates many homosexual activists. They resent being told they're “wired up” wrong. They vehemently insist that homosexuality is a choice with them. I don't doubt for a moment that that's true for that particular group and I think Romans 1 comes right home at this point. Then there would be many homosexuals who would say that they were born homosexual but that it's not a matter of “wrong wiring” and that humans don't come in just one “flavour”. They think it is as normal as maleness and femaleness, as the variation in ethnic groups. I can't share that view and think however we explain its precise development that homosexuality is one of the markers (along with adultery and other moral wrongs) of humanity's alienation from the God who cares for all of us.

I'm more concerned at this point with those who are burdened with hungers they didn't seek, hungers they don't approve and who are struggling with little help or understanding from the rest of us. At the end of the movie Streets of Philadelphia we have Neil Young's song in which the homosexual character makes this appeal. To Philadelphia he says:

City of brotherly love

Place I call home

Don't turn your back on me

I don't want to be alone.

I find that appeal profoundly moving and I can't help thinking that there are those battling a great battle who long to acknowledge the City of God as their home and they ask us not to turn our backs on them but to join them in the great enterprise instead of holding them

at arm's length. Heterosexual sexual sinners—though not always and everywhere—get a lot of sympathy and compassion. Homosexuals get...?

I'm open to criticism on this—write me if you wish.

Natural Theology in Romans 1?

In Romans 1:16 Paul speaks of God's faithfulness as it comes to focus in Jesus Christ; but the background to God's faithfulness is human faithlessness (1:18-3:20). Romans 1:18-32 is a description of the moral darkness of the Gentile world and its condition under the judgement of God. He's describing Gentiles unfaithfulness (and he will go on to describe Jewish unfaithfulness). Paul isn't making a rational argument, such as, design to Designer or creation to Creator. Nor is he saying that such an argument can successfully be made. That isn't his point—it has nothing to do with what he is working with. He isn't saying, "They could look at the heavens and reason from there and know that idolatry is abominable." To isolate 1:19-23 from the rest of that section is to confuse the issue.

These Gentiles suppressed (and suppress) truth. They suppress truth that God had made known to them (1:18-19). God had revealed himself as Creator and in their moral darkness the Gentiles suppressed that truth and turned to idolatry. What a piece of nonsense it was too, Paul indicates, since from the very beginning the creation proclaimed God's everlasting power and divinity—animals indeed (1:20-25)!

Given revealed truth, those that worship sticks and stones and crawling things and even people (yes!) defy the very heavens above them and the earth beneath them. Such people are inexcusable.

Their behaviour was not inexcusable because there was "natural theology" available. Their inexcusable behaviour included the immorality and unrighteousness that characterised them. These people knew the moral law of God (1:32) and they knew that those who behaved as they behaved deserved God's judgement. You can't—via unaided reason—come up with the moral strictures in this chapter. These Gentiles didn't learn the essential content of the Torah by inferring things from creation (see 2:12-14).

Some non-believers would like to think that we can establish moral law independent of special revelation but others more forthright (though inconsistent in practice) agree with Russell, Flew, Sartre, Kaufmann and others who say that moral law is a question of preference buttressed by prudence and self-interest.

Some believers become impatient when the issue of moral authority and content is raised. "Look, everybody knows it's wrong to 'steal' or 'murder' or such." And how do they know? "They just know!" But that's not good enough! I think we make a serious mistake when we minimise our dependence on special revelation.

But does Paul not say that the works of the flesh "are obvious" (Galatians 5:19-21)? Yes he did; but this is a man who has been taught by God and he's speaking to people who have committed to God in Jesus Christ. To such people we can generalise and say the evils that rise from our inner evil "are obvious". But they aren't "obvious" to all. [It hardly needs saying that even Christians have to be instructed about what is evil ("Do you not know...?" or "Are you ignorant?" and such phrases).] The truth about God's moral/ethical requirements are taught and from the foundational truths other truths are learned by extension. For those called by the gospel the situation is even more specific since their ethical response is to be modelled on the life (Jesus) that has been revealed to them.

This much is clear, the Gentile world of which Paul spoke knew God's righteous decree and knew how God felt about flagrant and impenitent perversion and ungodliness (Romans 1:32). Look at the long (but not exhaustive) list of vileness—this is part of what Paul had in mind

when he said they were inexcusable (2:1). These weren't things they could deduce from the design of the human eye or celestial mechanics.

The central thrust of the above can be exposed as inadequate if we can make an "unaided reason" argument stick. Maybe someone will frame the argument without leaning on scripture; that would do it.

Paul's Use of the Term "Israel"

Does Paul use the word Jew or Israel to speak of non-Jews? I don't think he does. Let's take a look at the book of Romans. "Jew" occurs eleven times, "Israel" occurs eleven times and "Israelite" occurs twice. Out of these twenty-four occurrences only two are disputed. They're in 2:28-29 and 11:26. There is 9:6, of course, which has a varied history in the dispute.

I'm of the opinion that when Paul uses either word he means a physical descendant of Abraham through Jacob. But there are some Jews (as just defined) who have the faith of Abraham and have faith in Jesus Christ and some that have neither. A Messianic Jew is a physical Jew that has faith in Jesus Christ. He is an Israelite. The non-believing Jew is also an Israelite.

9:6 says that not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. There are some that have descended from Israel (Jacob) who are not Israel. He doesn't say, "physical Israel isn't Israel." He says, "not all physical Israelites are Israel." But notice that he is speaking of physical Jews!

The word "Israel" is understood by many to mean "true Israel" by which they mean the non-ethnic, cosmopolitan Christian church. But this is out of touch with Paul's aim in chapters 9—11, which is to vindicate God's faithfulness. The claim is that God made promises to physical Israel and if Paul's gospel is true then God has been faithless. And why is that? Because according to Paul the mass of Israel is unsaved. Part of Paul's response is 9:6. He insists that not all physical Jews are part of Israel because it takes more than Jacob's flesh to constitute (true) Israel. Not all Abraham's descendants were his children (9:7-8). A true Israelite is a descendant of Abraham through Jacob that has the faith of Abraham. Acts 3:22-23 says that Jews who reject the Messiah will be "cut off from among his people."

Paul agreed with his Master (John 8:31-44) that there are Jews and Jews, Abraham's children and Abraham's children. Christ said he knew his critics were Abraham's children and then he goes on to deny that they are Abraham's children and that someone else was their father. Gentiles are nowhere near either John 8 or Romans 9:6-7.

This lays the groundwork for Romans 2:28-29. The real Jew, Paul insists, is the Jew that lives out the meaning of circumcision. We need to remember what Paul is doing in this section of Romans. He has shown that the Gentiles are under condemnation for sin and now he is bringing Israel under judgement. In this section he is showing that Israel, physical Jews, have bragged on possessing the Torah, the Sabbath and circumcision but it was all external to them because they didn't have the torah written on their hearts. In this section when Paul implicitly denies their Jewish status it's on moral and spiritual grounds. The prophet Ezekiel insisted that his Jewish peers were Amorites and Hittites (16:45). They were Israel but they weren't "true" Israelites. Neither the prophet nor Paul was saying that others were Israelites. They were denying that external Israelites were (true) Israelites.

The other text in dispute is Romans 11:26. In 11:2 Elijah appeals against Israel and in 11:7 what Israel sought she failed to get. In 11:11 God brings in Gentiles to make Israel jealous and Paul calls them his "own people" in contrast to Gentiles (11:14). Gentiles are warned not to dismiss Israel because God hasn't jettisoned them. He would do the same to Gentiles if they turned to unbelief and he will save Israel if they come to faith (11:13-24). And how does he explain in 11:25-26 the Jewish rejection of the Messiah and the consequences that flowed from

it? "Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved." (See 11:7 on the hardening of Israel.) 11:28-31 continues to contrast Gentiles with "them".

To accept that "Israel" all the way through this section speaks of physical Israelites and then to make 11:26 a figurative, non-ethnic and cosmopolitan church is too difficult to swallow. And when we remember that "all Israel will be saved" is part of Paul's defense of God's faithfulness to his promises to Israel (see 9:1-6) we must allow "Israel" to be "Israel".

For Paul "Israel" was divided into two. Those who were Israel after the flesh and who rejected the Messiah and those who were Israel and had the faith of Abraham who believed that God could give life to the dead (see Romans 4:18-25). The non-believing and believing Israel were both Israel as you can see simply by reading the texts.

So what does he mean when he says, "all Israel will be saved"? Scholars like N.T. Wright say that "Israel" in that text is the New Covenant people regardless of ethnic background. I don't think that's correct. The Gentiles are tempted to arrogance, believing that God has dumped the people he made promises to (Israel—9:1-5) just to let them in (11:19). Paul insists that God has never been faithless to Israel and that not a single Israelite would be lost because the Messiah came from them to save them (11:26-29). But the true Israelite was an Israelite that was not only physically kin to the patriarchs but one who had their faith (see 9:5). All of these—without exception—will be saved. More on this later with a brief look at Galatians 6:16. [See All Israel will be saved \(1\).](#)

Romans 1: The Witness & His Story

Chapter 1:1-17

Paul introduces his good news of God's righteousness (faithfulness) in 1:1-17, which is good news for the whole of humanity (1:5, 13b-17).

Note that the word "gospel" occurs six times in these opening verses. Paul certainly used texts to explain and present his message but he preached "the gospel" rather than a host of verses.

The centrality of "good news"

Why did Paul write the book of Romans? Scholars continue to debate that question and they come up with differing answers. Perhaps there is no one single reason for Romans. There certainly isn't one that stands out so plainly that scholars can agree on it. That's the trouble with and the beauty of rich literature. It carries our minds in so many directions that we find it hard to stay with one profound insight. This is especially true when the writer himself hasn't offered a single purpose for writing. And even if a writer has a single purpose in mind, if the material is very rich he or she will be saying more than they consciously mean to say. This is because truths exist in a network of truth rather than standing in isolation so one leads to another.

In any case, it's always helpful and sometimes critically important to discover the overall reason for the book. Just the same, sometimes we can understand how some of the pieces work together even if we can't determine where it is going as a whole. Something like a jigsaw puzzle I suppose. We can piece together some of the sections and still not know what the whole is about. But if we can piece a significant number of pieces together we can get a sense of the kind of scene we'll find in the end. We may adjust our educated "guess" but we'll not be simply groping in sheer ignorance.

Paul introduces his good news of God's righteousness (faithfulness) in 1:1-17, which is good news for the whole of humanity (1:5, 13b-17).

Note that the word "gospel" occurs six times in these opening verses that act as an introduction to the entire letter. Since he uses that "good news" word so often it should affect how we view the book as a whole. However somber some of the parts of Romans are we need to remember that Paul sees himself as a preacher and teacher of "the gospel of God" (1:1) and it's that good news he wants to bring to the Romans.

The truth and authority of the "good news"

An inscription discovered in Prienne in northern Turkey is dated 9 B.C. and it gives us an insight into what the word "gospel" means. Here's a piece of what it says.

"Whereas the Providence which has ordered the whole of our life, showing concern and zeal, has ordained the most perfect consummation for human life by giving to it Augustus, by filling him with virtue for doing the work of a benefactor among men, and by sending in him, as it were, a saviour for us and those who come after us, to make war to cease, to create order everywhere and whereas the birthday of the God [Augustus] was the beginning for the world of the glad tidings that have come to men through him. Paulus Fabius Maximus, the proconsul of the province has devised a way of honoring Augustus."

From this it's clear that the "gospel" is glad tidings. It's also clear that the gospel is an announcement, a proclamation rather than just an invitation to share the joy inherent in the good news. This inscription isn't saying that Augustus is lord if only the people would let him into their hearts. It claims that the power that governs the universe had established Augustus as lord of the world and he is its instrument to bring peace and security to that world.

Individualism is such a part of our culture and religious decision is so stressed that we forget this aspect of the gospel.

When Paul preached Jesus as King he wasn't inviting people to faith in a new religion, he was proclaiming a change in the entire creation because a new King had risen! Nothing is now to be seen in the same way. So he warns them as he approaches the gates of Rome, the world's center of Caesar power, that he is coming with a gospel that is God's power to save anyone who believes it!

Even the Roman historian Tacitus, in a bitter moment, admitted that Rome by force of arms created a desert and called it peace; but Paul insists that he was not on a destroying mission he was coming with a gospel of salvation and life. It is this gospel he wants to lay before the Romans and see it bear fruit among them.

Some characteristics of the good news

He says it is the "gospel of God" (1:1). This phrase may mean it is a gospel that comes from God, a gospel that God himself makes known. It may also mean it is a gospel "about" God. There is no need to choose between these two because Paul might have had both in mind. Both are certainly true and it is important in the book of Romans to see that both are true.

The gospel isn't about less important things like the weather, or the economy of the Greco-Roman world or how to get along with our neighbors. The gospel is about God himself and how he relates to his sinful creation. And the gospel comes from God himself.

It isn't good advice or a philosophy that Paul or others have dreamed up--it comes from God. All this means that the Romans (and we) should pay close attention to his message.

He says the gospel concerns God's Son (1:1-4,9) who is Jesus the Messiah (Christ). Paul insisted that God had made himself and his purposes known in Jesus Christ in a way that never happened before.

When we think of the Son of God Paul insists that he had come to the world as a son of David's line but that he was also marked out as God's unique Son by his resurrection out from

among the dead. The phrase "according to the spirit of holiness" seems to suggest that there was more to Jesus than his "fleshly" (human) nature. Viewed from his "fleshly" side he is David's son and viewed from his "spiritual" side he is God's Son. Many scholars think we should understand that Christ was David's son according to the flesh but that he was shown to be God's Son by the Holy Spirit ("the spirit of holiness").

That is, they think, and they may be correct, that here Paul isn't speaking about the deity of Jesus but is particularly interested in his resurrection and glorification via the Holy Spirit.

He says the gospel is God's power to save (1:16). We're tempted to think of God's "power" as merely "divine muscle" but it's a mistake to think of it like that in this context. Even when speaking about human power we know the difference between the power to move a huge stone and the power to "move" a person. A person "saved" in Paul's sense means God brought that person back into relationship with himself and so saved him/her from sin and loss. This kind of "saving" isn't done with "divine muscle". Since God saves us in and by the cross of Christ it's clear that he doesn't bully us into life and doesn't save us by force. To be saved by God's "power" means God set himself the task and was able to complete. The gospel, or good news, is the message that a faithful God did that very thing and that he did it through the crucified Jesus Christ. There are some places naked power or force can't enter and one of them is the human heart.

He says the gospel is God's power to save all who believe because in the gospel God's righteousness (faithfulness) continues to be revealed (1:16-17). God's righteousness is God's faithfulness. He keeps his commitments and when he created humanity he made a commitment to humanity. Despite our rebellion against him he didn't utterly destroy us he was faithful to his word and that's part of what we mean when we say God is "righteous". His faithfulness is to all people and not only those who are Jews. The gospel message that proclaims God's faithfulness draws people to God in response to that faithfulness and they put their trust in him. So the gospel is "from" faith (God's faithfulness) "unto" faith (the faith of those who hear). The relationship between the righteous God and those who are declared righteous by faith is a dynamic one if salvation is to be experienced. It isn't just God keeping faith with man; it is man trusting himself to that God who keeps faith.

He says the gospel of God's righteousness in Jesus Christ was promised in the Old Testament scriptures (1:2). Paul will make the point repeatedly that the Old Testament scriptures (including the covenant Torah itself) pointed to the gospel he was preaching about Jesus Christ, God's Son (see also 3:21 with Acts 26:22-23).

So, in some senses Paul's message might be surprising but the truth is, Israel had been given fair warning of how the good news would be worked out in Jesus the Messiah (see Luke 24:25-27,44-47). Many in Israel, eager to establish their own national connection with God missed what the Old Testament taught about God's righteousness toward and for the whole human race (see Romans 9:30 -10:4 in light of 1:16).

In addition, the OT scriptures spoke of these glorious coming things as promises to Israel. Paul stresses again and again that the good news had special significance for Israel and then through them to Gentiles. But it's "to the Jew first" [Romans 1:16 and elsewhere].

Romans 3.31 and Establishing the Torah

Romans 3:31: "Do we nullify the Torah by faith? Not at all! We establish it."

What leads him to ask and answer the question?

Paul will say that possessing the Torah is a two-edged sword that could cut Israel.

He will say God's faithfulness in the Messiah is for all nations and not just Jews.

He will say God's righteousness in the Messiah is independent of the Torah.

He will say the Torah itself had all along been saying that.

He will say that to view the Torah as exclusivist and not to view it through Jesus generated unhealthy boasting and nationalism.

He will say the right way to view the Torah is from the perspective of faith in Jesus and that would make it a "Torah of faith"—a Jesus-interpreted Torah.

He will say that viewing it in the way he offers it is to give it its true place in the unfolding of God's purpose.

Paul has told "the people of the Torah" (Israel) that having the Torah (and all that that entails) doesn't matter if the Torah isn't faithfully observed. It means nothing and guarantees nothing and in fact it is the Torah that the people of the Torah needed to fear in light of their unfaithfulness as a nation (2:8-9 with 3:9-19 as his development). By the time Paul is done in chapter 2 a Jew would want to know, "Where's the advantage in being a Jew and having the oracles of God?"

Then in 3:21-26 he proclaims that God's hoped-for faithfulness is revealed "now" and culminates in Jesus, independent of the Torah (3:21) and for the blessing of believing non-Jews as well as Jews. What's more, he claims the Torah had all along borne witness to this development (3:21).

Then he claims that viewing the Torah in an exclusivist way (and not as part of God's larger purpose that includes the entire human family) generates unhealthy boasting and undermines the truth of the Shema (3:27-30). He insists that the Torah must be viewed from the perspective of Jesus and if it is viewed that way it makes unhealthy boasting impossible. If the Torah is looked at as a Torah that finds its end in Jesus to bless the entire human family it is "a Torah of faith" (3:27—ignore the NIV, and note Romans 10:4).

A Jew might be forgiven if he thought, "He has undermined the Torah. I no longer recognize it as the Torah given to Israel by God through Moses." Israel knew that God had elected them and no other nation and that one of the markers was his gift of the Torah (Nehemiah 9:5-14 and Romans 9:4 illustrate) It was by its very nature exclusivist. Now they've been told that the Torah was meant to benefit non-Jewish believers in Jesus completely independent of the Torah. Paul's entire treatment of the Torah up to this point triggers the question and answer of 3:31.

James Dunn wryly noted that C.H. Dodd "again" thought he understood Paul's logic better than Paul. Dodd said Paul should have had the courage to answer "yes" to his own question, "Do we nullify the Torah by faith?" But to an Israel always keen to establish its own righteousness (see Romans 9:30—10:3; again, ignore the NIV in 10:3 which speaks of a righteousness "that comes from" God when "that comes from" is nowhere in the Greek text)—to a nation always keen to establish its own righteousness (right relationship with God) Paul says the Torah was to find its termination in Jesus by finding its goal in Jesus ("telos" as both termination and goal—10:4).

Paul claims that his understanding of the Torah is the right way to see the Torah and give it its rightful place in God's unfolding drama. The NJB on 3:31 offers, "Are we saying that the Law has been made pointless by faith? Out of the question; we are placing the Law on its true footing."

So Paul has "explained" the Torah in such a way that it looks like the nation God gave it to might as well not have gotten it. So, what's next? Abraham? Did having Abraham as their father mean nothing as well?

Romans: A Faithful & Relentless Lord (3)

Chapter 3:21-5:21

In light of the truth that the whole world had rebelled against God the question might well arise (several forms of the question may well arise) why God left apostasy unpunished (stated positively, why he "passed over sin" during that long night). An answer comes in Romans 3:21-26 where God's (righteousness) faithfulness to his creation is shown in Jesus Christ. The human race wasn't obliterated (their sins were passed over) because the holy Father is lovingly committed to it, as Jesus Christ demonstrates. Since it is only by God's faithfulness, even in the face of sustained and aggressive rebellion, that creation continues in hope, no one can boast that they have any claim on God and since the Shema is true, it bears witness to God's faithfulness to the entire human race (3:27-31). This is true whatever else is true.

The faithfulness of God was always independent of the Mosaic Torah or any other expression of God's goodness and the work of Jesus demonstrated that it was independent of all that. He didn't purchase faithfulness from God by his death-his death was the revelation of the always existing (though often puzzling) faithfulness of God (3:21-26). The character of God is seen in the gracious Torah but God's faithfulness is bigger than the Torah and the gracious gift of the Torah. To limit it to that is to put in jeopardy the truth of his faithfulness to the entire creation. Paul argues from the Shema that the faithfulness of God (shown in Jesus Christ) must be a creation-wide faithfulness-3:27-31. And since it is faithfulness to an apostate human race it must be "good news" to all. For a generous and wise heart a promise to a drunken man is still a promise that needs to be kept. God sees his promise as a promise he will keep even if it's made to a world that has become a drunk.

Since there is one God there is one human family

Since there is one God the entire human family is loved by him

God's faithfulness is revealed but not created by his redeeming work

The faithfulness of God to the whole human race is seen in his choice of Abraham (and consequently of physical Israel)-4:1-25. It has nothing to do with prior human claims of any kind and it is independent of the possession of special revelation, peculiar birth situations, ordinances or liturgies of one kind or another. The good news that Paul has to proclaim is that God is righteous (faithful) and that that faithfulness has shown itself in Jesus Christ to the entire creation (humanity included). He will work out what that means for the entire creation in 8:18-39, and see 4:13.

Such faithfulness to humanity involves the oneness of humanity. It is one in its sin and it is one in being the object of the holy Father's loving commitment. The one father (Abraham) and one Father of us all are prior to the Torah that divided the human race into two families. The holy Father purposed to reconcile the whole world in Jesus Christ which means (in keeping with the Abrahamic covenant) that there would be one family. Abraham would be the father of that family through Jesus Christ (as noted in Galatians 3:26-29) to those who have the faith of their father Abraham (4:16).

The feeble Abraham wholly dependent on God

The universal outreach of the Abrahamic covenant

Abraham's faith in God and ours in the God seen in Jesus Christ

But making the human family one in sin (in Adam) and one in the Jewish Messiah generates questions about physical Israel, "the seed of Abraham" and the Torah. What advantage did the Jew have by being God's elect (3:1)? Has God been faithful to his people since so many are now unblessed by their own Messiah (chapters 9-11), and, in light of 5:20, how is the Torah to be viewed? Is it evil, an enemy of the promises and anti-life? (The response is seen in 7:1-8:4.)

If the Torah was given (5:20) in order to (a) a clause expressing purpose rather than simple result-see 11:32) augment the trespass (the Adamic-5:15-19) that seems to speak ill of the Torah. If sin reigns through death and the Torah was given to augment the offence then the Torah must be anti-life and pro-death. It must be a "torah of sin and death". And if it's that, then it looks like God didn't mean to fulfill his promises. His faithfulness comes into question.

Of course Paul goes on to say that where sin was increased God's faithful grace was more than a match for it. This might be true, but if augmented sin results in augmented grace and therefore more glory comes to God, it would appear the logical and right thing to do (since we live to bring God glory) would be to abide in sin that grace and God's glory might be increased. It sounds like Paul's gospel undermined and even denigrated the Torah by making abiding in sin a service for God (see 3:8,31).

As far as Paul was concerned Jews and Gentiles were all under sin. You could write across their history, "like Adam". And this was true even though the Jew had been given a revealed covenantal Torah. The Torah the Jewish nation gloried in stood in judgment over them and branded them "like Adam". Because of their sinfulness the covenant Torah became part of the failed human process.

Romans: God's Righteousness Vindicated (6)

Chapter 9 -11

Paul's defence of the Torah may be plausible but hard facts say that the physical Jew has been abandoned. So while Paul may be able to talk his way around objections to his view of the Torah, he can't talk his way around the fact that so many physical Jews to whom the promises were made (9:1-5) are unblessed and unsaved. Paul's gospel surely means God is faithless.

Paul insists that the physical Jews had all the promises made to them and the covenants, Torah, the Shekinah, and even the Messiah belonged to Israel. According to Paul's gospel (which was his version of God's faithfulness) the bulk of the Jewish nation was jettisoned. If the promises and all the rest were given to Israel and the bulk of Israel has missed them what happened to God's faithfulness?--the promises failed. Paul says the promises didn't fail because not all who descended from Israel (Jacob) is Israel and not all Abraham's descendants are his children (9:6-7). So, did God "move the goal posts"? Is this "gospel" to be defended by now saying that Israel isn't Israel? Paul insists that the elective principle is not new to the gospel. In fact the gospel takes the selecting work of God seriously. Israel is glad that God excluded Abraham's son Ishmael. They were glad God excluded Isaac's son Esau. Paul claims their acceptance of that electing work of God stopped too soon because God didn't see all Israelites as Israelites. The patriarchal narratives made that clear.

As early as Deuteronomy 18:17-19 God made it clear that mere fleshly descent from Abraham and Jacob wasn't enough if they were to enjoy his favour. Those who did not submit in love to the prophet(s) God raised up would be dealt with severely. Peter (Acts 3:23) renders the passage in the strongest possible terms. Whoever doesn't listen to the prophet(s) will be "cut off from among the people" (strong verb and the definite article is there). In this rendering of the Deuteronomy text, to reject Jesus or his commissioned prophets is to be cut off from Israel. Flesh isn't enough!

This is seen in Isaiah and Hosea (Romans 9:25-29) where Israel is said to be "not my people" and then later (when they turned to God) they were called his people. This Pauline teaching wasn't brand new; it wasn't special pleading to save his case. The true "Israel" was those who had Abraham's flesh and faith (see Romans 2:28-29 which is speaking of physical Jews).

This is seen also in Elijah's day (11:1-6) when God claimed only 7,000 as his own. Paul says it's that kind of truth he was telling now (11:4-5). What the nation as a whole sought (the Messiah and messianic blessings) they missed and only the elect got it (11:7) when they got Jesus Christ.

Had God then jettisoned Abraham's physical descendants? Had he changed his mind about the promises he made to them? God forbid! Though God did cause them to stumble (11:7-10) it was not to be done with them, it was to open the door for the world (11:11-12,30-32). It was also to open the door for Israel if by trust in God they'd receive it (11:14, 23-24). God had not changed his mind about his gifts and calling (11:28-29).

Because the mass of Jews (at least the mass of Diaspora Jews who had heard--see Acts 21:20) had rejected Jesus Christ and were outside his blessings, some Gentiles were tempted to think God was done with them; had cast off the people he had originally called (11:1, 17-24). But Paul insists this was never true. God had not been faithless to a single Israelite. Nor would he ever be. All Israel would be saved (11:26, see 9:6 and the previous paragraphs). God did not prove faithless to Israel in order to do Gentiles a favour. In fact, the reason Paul worked so hard among the Gentiles was to bring a wake up call to his own beloved people (11:14, 30-31). And the reason God concluded all men under sin was so that he could show mercy to all (11:32). It was wrong for Jews to be arrogant and exclusive but it was equally wrong for Gentiles to be like that (11:17-24; 15:27).

So what are they to conclude? That Gentiles who didn't pursue a right relationship with God found it and that Israel who sought an (eschatological) "torah of righteousness" missed it (9:30-31)? Yes. They missed it because they sought it within the limits of fleshly Israel, because they sought it within the limits of a Torah given exclusively to Israel and which therefore could not embrace the world (all nations, as per the Abrahamic covenant). That covenant Torah could not be the means of showing God's faithfulness to the entire human race since it was confined strictly to those to whom it was given (Leviticus 18:5; Romans 10:5). Israel wanted to establish its own (national) righteousness (10:3) and didn't see (didn't want to see--compare Isaiah 65:1-2 and Romans 10:16-21) God's righteousness (faithfulness) which isn't sectarian or national. Their blindness wasn't new, it was characteristic of them (10:16-21). For all their zeal when the Messiah came they were blind to the truth that he was the goal to which the Torah led and he was the termination of the Torah as a marker of righteousness. The children of Abraham, the elect, were now redefined (in keeping with Torah truth). No more could (even a righteous) Jew appeal to the Torah from Sinai as the mark of election. God's saving purpose was for the entire world and the Torah (which, in any case, stood in judgment over Israel and brought her under curse for apostasy as per Deuteronomy 27:26) was nationalistic and exclusive (compare Ephesians 2:11-22). To seek the eschatological "torah of righteousness" (9:31) in the Torah as a strictly Jewish covenant marker was to make the Torah an end in itself. This meant they missed the eschatological righteousness of God in Jesus Christ (for the entire world) it was also to judge the Torah "after the flesh" and miss its real significance and prostitute it. So Israel's problem was twofold. They violated the Torah by not living it out before God and they missed its place in God's scheme of redemption.

What complicated things was Paul's claim that it was through the hardening of Israel and their rejection of the Messiah that salvation came to the whole world. If that was true then Israel was only doing the will of God when they rejected the Messiah. Why then should they be cast off for doing God's will? See 3:3-8 and 9:14-21. Paul assures them that Israel's doing God's will was not a holy and obedient move on their part--it was rebellion for which they were responsible. It wasn't to their credit that God used their sinfulness to gain generous and holy ends. But God hardened the apostatic part of Israel (11:7-10,25) in order to bless the world

(11:32) including those he had hardened. No wonder Paul rolls his eyes in pleasure and awe in 11:33-36.

Romans: Gospel & Torah (4)

Chapter 6:1-8:17

The following section (6:1-8:17) which is a response to these Torah issues is not dealing with the dynamic of the Christian's life or the power to overcome sin in our lives (though it will mention that); it has to do with the "obligation" of the "new man" in Christ. Paul's gospel doesn't obligate people to live after the flesh in order to bring God glory--the reverse is true (8:12-17). In responding to the issues raised by 5:20 Paul develops the meaning of the disciple's baptism which commits him/her to new life in/with Christ, death to sin, definitive severance from sin, life unto God and righteousness (moral uprightness though not mere moral uprightness). Paul has assigned the Torah to the Adamic realm (the realm of the old man) from which they've been freed and that makes it look like the Torah is part of the evil the Messiah is opposed to. Because, if you can only offer acceptable service to God when you're free from the Torah that augmented the offence then surely the Torah must be evil (6:11-23). This Paul vigorously rejects.

The marriage law that binds a woman to a husband is not evil (even if the husband is an evil man). The Torah that binds Israel to its Adamic, sinful flesh and apostasy is not evil (7:1-6)--it is the reverse. It is holy, just and good. It is Israel that failed and through their failure Sin was shown to be exceedingly sinful by using the commandment (Torah) which was unto life (7:10 and see Genesis 2:16-17 with 3:1-19) to deceive and slay Israel--the Adam/Eve experience is recapitulated. So in the hands of Sin the Torah that is always holy, just and good becomes a Torah of sin and death. (That is, a Torah in Sin's service and which results in death-4:15a and see 1 Corinthians 15:56.) Israel sees the Torah as holy, just and good but because Israel is in the flesh (7:14-18, 21) the Torah without changing its essential nature is another torah that brings Israel under sin and death. While in the flesh (in Adam) Israel longs but loses and finds itself in a body of death. The Torah (followed in flesh) is a law of sin and death but in Jesus Christ it is the "torah of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus". Through the Messiah the "torah of the Spirit" (8:2) sets Israel free. It's important to see that in Jesus Christ the Torah itself is vindicated and declared to be a freeing agent. This in turn means that the righteous requirement of the Torah is met (8:4) by those who in the Spirit (of Christ) fulfill the Torah (see 13:8-10). All this is connected with 6:1-8:17.

Romans: Setting the Scene

In Romans Paul is not rehearsing his gospel teaching to 21st century Anglo-Saxons or to a 16th century Roman Catholic hierarchy. If he had been addressing either of these he would have framed his gospel presentation differently.

In Romans he is addressing a community of Jews and Gentiles who had placed their faith in Jesus as the promised Messiah and King, the promised Savior of the world.

Though he is addressing believers in Jesus he is saying things about all Jews and Gentiles as they relate to God and to one another in terms of Jesus whom Paul claims is the revelation of God and his saving righteousness.

Paul is speaking to Christian Jews who are part of a nation that God had chosen as his peculiar people, a nation to whom he made promises and a people to whom he gave circumcision in their flesh as a constant reminder of that covenant which he made with them in their father Abraham. Paul is speaking to members of a nation which God chose out from among all other nations, a nation with whom God made covenants from which he excluded all

other nations (Ephesians 2:11-12 and Leviticus 18:5) God gave that nation a constitution (the Sinai covenant) that shaped and guided their lives under his sovereignty and it contained within it public ceremonies that bore witness to God's redeeming work exclusively with Israel (Passover, Weeks and Tabernacles for example). Paul was speaking to members of a nation to which the OT prophets promised a coming redeemer, the Messiah—their Messiah [see Romans 9:1-5].

All this being true it shouldn't surprise us that his message in Romans is shaped as it is.

It is because the above is true that the gospel Paul and others preached was difficult for many Jews to believe, especially when Gentiles were being blessed and many pious and virtuous Jews who lived by the Torah were excluded. Paul knew his gospel was offensive to the Jews and in Romans he attempts to explain God's faithfulness in working out his purposes with both Jews and Gentiles in mind. [See Romans 15:8-9.]

Suppose God had made a covenant with George Washington and his new national children—the Americans—a covenant from which he excluded all other nations. Suppose the Americans had the sign of that covenant in their flesh and a constitution that had the will of God for their lives; a constitution that had public ceremonies that celebrated God's delivering them from slavery and setting them on the road for ultimate deliverance and blessing which he would bring to them in a coming "George Washington".

Suppose that promised one came and went and nothing particular had changed. Suppose then a little group of Americans began to say that the coming one had risen from the dead and was now Lord of All and that he was offering the American hope [spoken of in their constitution] to the Chinese, the Russians, the Iranians, the Cubans, the Koreans, the Venezuelans and all the other nations independent of the Americans and independent of the American constitution.

Suppose that this group said that many Americans were not going to be blessed with the blessings brought by the new "George Washington" and that those who would be blessed would be blessed independent of the American constitution that had shaped the chosen American nation.

That's something like the setting in which Paul writes his Romans and it is something like the scandalous nature of the gospel he has been preaching and will develop in Romans.

Romans: The Glorious Inheritance (5)

Chapter 8:18 - 39

Abraham and his children were to inherit "the world" (4:13, and see 1 Corinthians 3:22-23) apart from the Torah. Strange as it was to Israel's ears the inheritance was to be independent of the Torah so that Israel (as well as Gentiles) could receive it (4:16). This meant Israel needed to be redeemed from the holy Torah that bound them to their apostasy (signalled and underscored by the rejection of their own Messiah). In Christ that rescue from the Torah and its curse has taken place and the inheritance is secured with the Holy Spirit as a pledge of the coming complete fulfillment.

But the inheritance is for all of Abraham's children, Jew and Gentile who are in Christ Jesus (see Galatians 3:26-29). Since creation was subjected to bondage as a result of human rebellion it awaits the day of their full redemption and inheriting. The full redemption and glorification of God's children guarantees the redemption of the creation (8:18-23). Sin has been dealt with in God's faithfulness so no condemnation exists for those embraced in Christ. The full inheritance of the world is assured despite present tribulation or distress (8:31-39). The Lord has not been faithless to the human race and has not abandoned them despite their universal apostasy.

To those who (Jews or Gentiles) who insisted on living in the flesh (outside of Christ with all that that means for each group) there is only death (8:5-8) but for those (Jews or Gentiles) who in union with Christ live in and walk after the Spirit the righteous requirement of the Torah is fulfilled (8:4). And this is the "logical" and moral end of Paul's gospel (rather than 6:1). By the Spirit rather flesh they belong to Christ (8:9) and if they are Christ's they are Abraham's seed and heirs of "the world" according to the promise (Galatians 3:29 with Romans 4:13-14 and see 1 Corinthians 3:22-23). And since they are Christ's and therefore Abraham's children they are God's children and heirs rather than slaves (8:15-17).

But where is the glorious inheritance? It is secured in Christ who for his co-heirs is bringing it and them all into completed glory. He reigns in the midst of his enemies and until all the enemies are defeated

(1 Corinthians 15:25-26; Psalm 110:2). The last enemy that will be defeated is death, which is listed here in Romans 8:35-39 (and see 1 Corinthians 15:26).

And who will inherit though at this time they have something of a wilderness experience? The glorified children of God (8:18,30).

And what will be their inheritance? The glorified creation that groans while it eagerly watches for the glorification of the children of God! Humanity dragged creation down with it and the new humanity in and through Jesus Christ will rise it back up when its glorification is complete. The creation was subjected to corruption or futility and so reflected the loss of glory humanity brought on itself but when the children of God, the new humanity in Christ, are glorified creation will be redeemed from the curse and glorified with them (see Genesis 3).

Romans: The Grand Adventure (7)

Chapter 12:1-16:27

In light of God's faithfulness to his promises to the humans race even though we rebelled against him-in light of God's faithfulness how should his people live in the world and with one another? It's important that we drink in all the rich truth Paul has revealed but how is it to be lived out? What follows in the next three and a half chapters is a profile of how God's elect people, the church, should respond to everyone around them.

In our relationship to God and the congregation we are offer ourselves in completeness but function in the specific role for which God has gifted us (12:1-8). In our inter-personal relationships we are to be generous and open (12:9-13). In relation to those who are actively our enemies we are to follow the Master's line of blessing when cursed (12:14-21).

In relation to political authorities God's people are to see them as ministers of God on the political stage. They are empowered by God to see that his creation goods get to the people God has committed to them. Because this is true God's people are to see them as fellow-ministers though at a different level and with a different specific agenda (13:1-7).

In relation to behaviour and its basic motivation we are to act out of love which will mean we won't live irresponsibly or pursue the harm of any human being (13:8-14). We are to take seriously the ethical call of the Torah because we are people of the day who have been raised from a moral sleep.

In relation to church unity in the face of temptations to fragment we are to receive one another as Christ has received all of us into his body with our different religious and theological baggage. This we should do because Christ alone is Lord and because he has called us both to himself (14:1-15:13).

In relation to promoting the spread of the gospel. Paul is a missionary and wants to preach the gospel throughout the world so he is laying the theological groundwork for his appeal for help. Having told them what he teaches/preaches he is free to ask their help by

being a sort of home base for his further travels into Spain and other places (15:24). He would no doubt want their financial supports if it came to that but he would like their blessing so that his work would not be needlessly hindered by his own brothers and sisters.

He salutes old friends and converts (16:1-16). In doing this he is confirming relationships, of course, but he's also laying out his credentials. He is well known to many people at Rome so he isn't coming in as some sinister and unknown figure. If the church leaders at Rome need to check him out there are plenty of people who could vouch for him. He closes the book as he began it with a reassertion of his apostolic commission and gospel.

Romans: The World: A Beloved Rebel (2)

Chapter 1:18-3:20

He begins this section with creation and the human apostasy from God. In that human rebellion the creation itself became an occasion for sin, was perverted and was treated as if it were God instead of the creature (1:18-23). From there he moves to Sinai, the creation of Israel (compare Isaiah 43:1,7; 44:2,21,24; 49:5 and elsewhere) and Israel's apostasy (2:1-3:20). The whole world is under God's judgment.

(He will later summarize humanity as non-redeemed in Adam, the old man-5:12-21.)

Why is a message about God's faithfulness such good news? Part of the answer is implied in 1:18—3:20 where Paul charts the sinful course of human history. In light of humanity's treacherous betrayal of God and our crass abuse of the dominion he gave to us (Genesis 1:26-27 with Genesis 3) it might be thought that God would obliterate us.

And in some ways the biblical record could be seen as proof that God had abandoned humanity. The expulsion of Adam, Eve and Cain from God's presence, Noah's flood and the destruction of Sodom & Gomorrah could be used as proof that God had turned from humanity and was bent only on destroying them in outbursts of his anger. If such expressions of his anger were typical of his full feelings toward the human race our situation would be hopeless and lead to utter despair. But Paul's good news is that God is faithful even in the face of our faithlessness. This means that however we understand the wrath of God it is to be seen as part of his faithfulness toward us.

But far from implying that God is not angry about our sin Paul insists that the anger of God is being revealed against all unrighteousness (1:18). We need to note the present tense of the verb and follow the major versions and we need to note that when God's wrath is being revealed it is against "all" unrighteousness.

[It's clear not only from the biblical record but from looking around us that not every evil person is suffering from God's anger in the present time. Oppressors and cheats, drug barons and porn kings, warlords and corrupt financiers are living in luxury while feeding off the helpless. Is the wrath of God being revealed against all that? Paul would say yes. Every time one oppressor is exposed and dealt with every oppressor is judged. When a society imprisons a ruthless criminal it speaks its mind against all ruthless criminals. Society can't catch up with them all but God can! The justice he brings down on criminals at a national or individual level is a demonstration of how he feels toward all oppression and impenitence. Specific judgements are a promise and a prophecy that all crimes are noted and will be dealt with. No one "gets away with" anything. As God works to bring his eternal purpose to a glorious conclusion in a final judgment and revelation he shows his local and individual judgments— these remind us that a final judgment is up ahead.

The psalmists and prophets indicate this when they speak of judgments on various nations. They often describe the judgments in galactic terms. Stars fall, skies are rolled up, the earth is bludgeoned and the like. This links the crime of the particular nation in view with a

humanity-wide rebellion and a universal judgment. See Isaiah 13, 34 and Jeremiah 4 as illustrations of this.

It's worth noting that Paul begins this section of Romans with God as our Father creator and that all the corruption he lists later begins with our departure from him (1:18-23). If we're out of tune with God we're out of tune with creation and our fellow-humans. Paul views our sin not simply as the breaking of some universal laws—it is a violation of a personal relationship. And our betrayal of God, our refusal to acknowledge who he is and give to him our grateful thanks blinds us. Professing ourselves to be wise (Genesis 3 and the forbidden fruit is in view) we became fools (Romans 1:21). Sin disables us until we are no longer able to think well. It isn't that now we have rebelled against God that we think 2+2=5. It's all subtler and much more dangerous than that. Thinking we're very wise (thinking we're gods) we refuse to be taught. Our intellectual gifts are used to serve our own selfish ends. They're used to "explain" why we should deprive one another or why it's okay to jettison developing human beings. We show why it's all right to bury little nations under mountains of debt in order to please stockholders and to demand our rights at every single point to the destruction of community relationships.

Thinking we are very wise we not only do we oppose gender-discrimination, we completely deny the differences in gender which is part of our being in the image of God (see Genesis 1:26-27 and Romans 1:26-27). We substitute "citizenship" for relationships (like father and mother and children) and wonder why we promote the absence of "natural affection" (love for family members). Did ever a nation or an individual admit that what it was doing was just plainly evil? Haven't we all justified our wickedness?]

As history developed our evil grew Paul says God gave us up to perversity and moral derangement (Romans 1:24,25,28) It's one face of God's wrath (though it's not the whole picture) that he chose to give us over to our sin. Our deepening wickedness is the result of God hardening us. It isn't that God simply stepped back and "allowed" us to sin more—the passages speak of a direct act of God that results in our choosing to sin even more. God's doesn't choose sin for us we do that ourselves but God works with us (as he did with Pharaoh and Israel see Romans 9:17-18 & 11:7-10) to drive us further into desperate need.

Paul's good news, however, is that God didn't drive us under sin so that he might be rid of us. He concluded us all under sin "that he might have mercy on us all" (Romans 11:32). His giving us up to our wickedness was an act of mercy. We're tempted to think that a worsening world is proof that God will or has abandoned us but Paul sees it as the merciful wrath of God driving us to desperate need for mercy which he is eager to provide. Our "wisdom" is our arrogance and our arrogance by God's grace leads us into abysmal trouble out of which we cry for help.

The apostle takes up the Jewish story (2:1-3:19).

They felt superior to the Gentile world Paul had just sketched but their own scriptures made it clear that though they possessed the Torah they had not internalised it. They had not taken it into their hearts. They had the marks of God's special favour (like circumcision, the covenants and the Torah) but they didn't have the heart or lifestyle that these called for or bore witness to. So that while they called themselves Jews and took pride in the name they weren't true Jews because a true Jew had the flesh of Abraham and his faith. A true Jew had a circumcised heart as well as body. The true Jew not only possessed the Torah, he lived it (Romans 2:28-29; 9:6).

Paul lumps humanity together and makes the claim that Gentiles who had on their hearts what the Torah called for (Romans 2:14-15) would receive eternal life (through the Messiah) as surely as the Jew who lived in honor before God (Romans 2:6-16). Did this mean

the Jews had never been peculiarly blessed by God (Romans 3:1-2)? No, Paul insists they were given special privileges but that they had been faithless just as the Gentiles had been and so, in practice, Jews were no better off than any other nation. A collection of texts from the Jewish scriptures showed that the Jews, like the Gentiles, didn't give to God what was his due (Romans 3:9-19).

He concludes this section then by saying that the whole world is brought under judgment before God. On the whole the Gentiles bore the marks of rebellion against God and the sign of his wrath on them. On the whole the Jews had the witness of the Torah against them as perennial transgressors.

It's possible for humans with their darkened hearts and sensitivity to pain to think that God's reaction to sin is something of "over-kill". We might claim it is too great a reaction to the crimes of humanity but this is part of the reason Jesus Christ is our redeemer. He is able to see it for what it is and confess it for what it is—our sin is the one unendurable!

And the cross marks us out Jew and Gentile together as rebels against God for when God came, in and as Jesus Christ, we slew him! Explain as we will, protest as fiercely as we might, we showed that as a race we were enemies of God when we laid hands on him and sought his extermination.

So, 1:18—3:20 writes across the entire human family's history: FAITHLESS!

3:21—5:21 is a section that writes across God's history climaxing in Jesus: FAITHFUL!
and 5:12-21 is the summary of of the contrast.

The argument of Romans 7

Keith asked how Romans 7 functions in the argument of Romans. Paul has a lot of things to say about the Torah (covenant law) in his writings. He said that if you don't keep the Torah it's worse than not having it (chapter 2). While he insisted that having the Torah had advantages (3:1-2) he insisted it wasn't all advantage since it pronounced judgement on the Jewish nation because of its sin (chapter 3:19-20). He also insisted that God's saving purposes came to fullness in Jesus and independent of the Torah (3:21). This all made it look like he was undermining the covenant law and despising the Jews (see 3:31). No wonder they asked (3:1), "What advantage is there then in being a Jew?"

Worse was to come in 5:20 when he said God brought the Torah in "so that the trespass might increase." Chapter 5:12-20 summarizes humanity in Adam and "the trespass" that was to increase was the sinful rebellion of Adam's children. Instead of making things better the entrance of the Torah only made the human sinful situation worse. And Paul said it was meant to do that (note the use of "hina" and compare 11:32). This all sounded terrible. The covenant law (Torah) was meant to increase sin? Does that not make the Torah a bad thing? Besides, if the wages of sin is death and the Torah was brought in to increase sin then it was brought in to bring death rather than life. And what is more, if the purpose of the Torah was to promote sin so that God would get more glory for his increased grace that should mean that people "should" sin since they're supposed to bring God glory.

His critics would claim that the logic of Paul's gospel would put them under obligation to sin or live after the flesh (see 6:1 and 8:12). The whole of 6:1 through 8:17 is one piece that is dealing with these matters.

Paul insists that that is not the logic of the gospel. He insists that their baptism which brought them into union with the living Christ and his death, severed them from sin in every way (6:2-10). He insisted they were now slaves to Christ and must follow this sin-destroying Master. Yes, but if the Torah has been set aside, having done its job of making the human sin

situation worse, why aren't they free to sin? Because they are free only to unite with and serve Christ the sin-destroyer.

Yes, but has he not said bad things about the Torah? No, he insists that the Torah is holy and righteous and good and it was given to Israel that they might have life with God (7:7-13). But, like the good and holy commandment in the Garden of Eden, the Torah became an occasion for Sin to seduce Israel as the Serpent had seduced Eve. The result for both was death. Israel reenacted the sin of Adam and Eve. It wasn't that the Torah was evil--it was the reverse. But the holy commandment bound Israel to its rebellion and pointed her out as under God's judgement. In doing this, the Torah was doing precisely what it was supposed to do. The problem was in Israel's divided heart (see 7:14-25) because the Torah was always holy and spiritual.

In fact, as it turns out in the purposes of God, when people walk after the Spirit (in more ways than one) they fulfill what the righteous Torah was after (8:3-4). The holy Torah never becomes evil though it becomes a tool in the hands of Sin (7:7-11). The Torah itself never brings death (7:10). It is Sin that makes use of it to condemn sinners and so it becomes "a Torah of sin and death" (7:21-23).

In this whole discussion Paul is dealing with the many faces and roles of the always holy and spiritual Torah. He shows he doesn't despise it, that it serves more than one function depending on the angle one looks at it from, that its covenant form and nature has served its purpose and is restructured by the Spirit in Christ (Romans 8:1). It's only on the surface he appears to contradict himself and it's only on the surface that he seems to be promoting sin by speaking evil of the Torah. Be sure to see 13:8-10 where he calls Christians to live out the requirements of the Torah.

The Cross & God's Righteousness

The NIV of Romans 3:25b says God set Jesus forth as an atoning sacrifice and that "He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins done beforehand unpunished." The NRSV says, "He had passed over the sins previously committed."

In this text it's clear that the cross not only saves us—it saves God! If the world in general and Israel in particular were as evil as Paul said they were in 1:18—3:20 how can it be that the holy God didn't utterly obliterate it? If Paul had told the truth about humanity's sin then God must have been soft on sin all those centuries. As Godet would have it, there existed a "four thousand year scandal." It would appear from the text that whatever else we aren't sure about, we can be sure that sin wasn't adequately dealt with until God dealt with it in Jesus and the cross. It isn't necessary to adopt a penal substitution theory of atonement to see that in the text. It isn't necessary to claim that Christ had to bear the full quota of punishment for sin if forgiveness were to be made possible. It's clearly Paul's point that God's righteousness was not proved in this ultimate sense until the cross of Christ.

The translation of *paresis* as "left unpunished" doesn't make sense to me in light of the Old Testament record that tells us about the flood, Sodom and Gomorrah, the Korah rebellion and the exile. I don't see how "pass over" makes a lot of sense either in light of Noah's flood and Romans 1:24, 26 and 28.

It appears to be true that the word *paresis* is a weak word to use if Paul was speaking of forgiveness but it can be used for the remission (of taxes, 1 Maccabees 11:34) and the verb form for the remission of debts and other obligations (Arndt & Gingrich, 626). So maybe he intends to say sins were "remitted" (as in the KJV) but uses a weaker word for the process.

But why would he choose a weaker word and avoid the stronger words (*aphesis* and *aphiemi*)? Maybe he did it not to deny full remission in the Old Testament but to stress that the

atonement sacrifices by which forgiveness was gained were only provisional and shadowy. The Hebrew writer who knew full well that forgiveness was gained via atonement in the Old Testament still insisted in 10:4 that the blood of animals couldn't take away sin. And despite the fact that we're expressly told repeatedly that if ancient worshipers offered sacrifices "their sins shall be forgiven" (Leviticus 4:14-15,20,26,31,35; 5:5,10 as examples from many) the Hebrew writer still says (9:15) that Christ's sacrifice redeemed from transgressions that were under the first covenant. So while forgiveness was genuine (compare Romans 4:7) and it was mediated most often by sacrifices (Hebrews 9:18-22) there was still a sense that sin had not adequately been dealt with via the sacrificial system. Maybe this is why Paul used the weaker word, to suggest this rather than develop it. He contrasted the openness of Christ's sacrifice as over against the hiddenness of the Yom Kippur sacrifices. Perhaps he's also contrasting the fully satisfying atoning sacrifice via Christ as over against the provisional means in the Old Testament. If this has merit then he could be saying that the pre-Christ sacrifices dealt with sin but didn't fully deal with them though they mediated forgiveness to the worshipers.

It's vital that we remember that no punishment of sins can possibly reveal in fullness the righteousness of God. Retribution is only one "weapon" in God's armory in his all-out war against sin. His full purpose is redemption and salvation and not simply punishment. (I've extracted this from my little book "The Dragon Slayer," pages 133-34.)

http://www.amazon.com/Dragon-Slayer-Jim-McGuiggan/dp/0972967109/sr=8-2/qid=1159624859/ref=pd_bbs_2/104-4299072-5766362?ie=UTF8&s=books

Written on the heart means what?

It's often said that the difference between the New covenant and the Old is that the Old was written on stone tablets and that the New is written on human hearts. That'll hardly do! Was the Mosaic covenant written only on stones or was it written on human hearts also? The notion of words written on stone slabs seems simple enough. There are the stone tables and there are the letters carved out on them. Was the Mosaic covenant such that it could never be other than words written on stone slabs? On the occasion of restoring the 10 commandments God says this in Deuteronomy 10:16, "Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds..." (see 10:16 and 10:17). This appears to say the words on the stone could be recorded on their hearts. The psalmist (119:11) was sure this was true of a righteous man, "The law of his God is in his heart" and in fact one psalmist thought the law of God was in his own heart (119:11). In Isaiah 51:7 God speaks to those among his people "who have my law in your hearts."

The image of people having words written on their hearts was so commonplace that it was a part of proverbial speech. Proverbs 3:3 urges the son to keep love and faithfulness always present and "write them on the tablet of your heart." The same is said of the teaching of the teacher in 1:10 so having something written on the heart was a common experience, however "mysterious" such things always are. So when Jeremiah (31:33) mentions this as part of the future blessing in the days of a new covenant he hasn't said anything new in using the expression.

The promise that God would write his laws on the hearts under the new covenant is no new thing either. The ancients knew very well who it was that worked good things in the hearts of sinners. David begged, "Create in me a clean heart, O God" (Psalm 51:10). Another (86:11) pleaded, "Unite my heart to fear thy name." Another begged (119:36), "Turn my heart toward your statutes." He insists that he will run (not walk) in the paths of God commandments when God has enlarged or set his heart free (119:32). In fact, when Israel proved herself to be a rebellious nation Moses saw their self-chosen condition as the absence of God's blessing. Here's how he puts it in Deuteronomy 29:4, "But to this day the Lord has not given you a mind [heart]

that understands or eyes that see or ears that hear." But see Deuteronomy 5:28-29, which makes it clear that Israel is answerable.

We often hear that the difference between the Old Covenant and New is that God didn't give Israel the heart to keep the Old Covenant but that he does give the NT church the Spirit so they can keep the New Covenant. This won't do. As we can see from the texts above, God's blessing of a heart that loves and keeps his commandments is no exclusive eschatological gift confined to the New Covenant arrangement. It has always been and will remain true that the gifts of God are precisely that—gifts, that people can refuse.

We know that God hardens the heart and we also know that the sinner hardens his own heart. We know that God writes his laws on our hearts and we also know that we write his laws on our hearts. Ezekiel 18:30-31 says this: "Repent! Turn away from all your offenses; then sin will not be your downfall. Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get ["make"] a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, O house of Israel?" God here insists that they get [make] a new heart but he also insists that he is the one that gives a new heart and spirit (11:19-21 and 36:26-27). In 11:17-20 God speaks of the restoration of his people and their obedience from the heart that he generates in them but we need to note 11:21 which shows that some in the restored people don't offer the new heart response. This should make us careful in our use of texts because on the surface it looks like everyone who is restored from captivity is given the new heart, which isn't true, as 11:21 shows. We need to recognize "community" language and take it seriously.

So what does it mean to have something "written on the heart"? It surely means that what might have been external to begin with has been internalized and become part of the inner structure of the person. It means we have "taken it to heart." There's nothing especially difficult about the expression. If something is done from the heart it means that that behavior expresses the inner structure of the one doing it. It isn't mere conformity to some external requirement. If something is written on the heart it means that wherever else it is written it has become part of the person on whose heart it is written. See this from a negative angle in Jeremiah 17:1 where Judah's sin is said to be written on the tablets of their heart. Jeremiah 24:7 and 32:39 give God the credit for the good heart that "takes to heart" what he has to offer. The expression "tables of the heart" suggests what had been merely external is now internalized; that is, in contrast to what was written on some other tables (stone or whatever).

We hear of Gentiles who had the torah's requirements "written on their hearts" (Romans 2:15). They didn't have the torah codified and external to them in the way Israel did, but their lives showed they had the torah internally. It's a bit of a stretch to think that Gentiles who didn't have the torah delivered to them could have the torah's requirements written on their hearts while the Jews to whom the torah was revealed couldn't have them written on their hearts. That doesn't make sense. While the tables of stone were in the Ark of the Covenant there were many in Israel that had the covenant written on their hearts. There was nothing about the Mosaic covenant that meant it couldn't be written there.

So what about Paul's comments in 2 Corinthians 3 where he contrasts the Mosaic covenant with the New covenant, saying that one was written on stone and the other on hearts?