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DISCOVERING JESUS

An Introduction to the Savior

LESSON 5 BIBLE STUDY

Romans:

"Becoming God's Beloved Child"

This Bible Study Series Provided By

Herald of Truth

PART 1 HEART TUNING

The New Testament book known simply as "Romans" is a unique section of the Bible. It is a letter (an "epistle") from the greatest Christian missionary to a struggling church in the capital of the Roman empire. Paul's letter is full of advice and explanation for a community of believers. But it is also Paul's personal, passionate message to discouraged people. In effect, he is saying to them, "God loves you! He knows your name! You are his beloved sons and daughters. He has called you to a new and better life! Accept it! Follow him!"

Paul could say these things because of his personal experience. At one time, Paul's life had been miserable, and he had inflicted great misery on others. He could say in all sincerity, without being the least bit dramatic: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners - of whom I am the worst" (1 Timothy 1:15). At one time, with the zeal of a crusader, Paul had devoted himself to destroying Christianity. He even helped execute innocent people, like Stephen, an early church leader (Acts 7-8).

Then one day, while Paul journeyed to Damascus, Jesus appeared to him. Jesus asked Paul, "Why do you persecute me?" Very quickly the heart of this violent, angry man changed. Paul repented of his terrible mistakes, was soon baptized, and Christ forgave Paul of all of his wrongdoing. Paul became the most influential convert in the history of Christianity. Paul wrote to his friend Timothy about his change, "I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who believe on him and receive eternal life" (1 Timothy 1:16).

Jesus had great plans for Paul's life. He called Paul his "chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles" (Acts 9:15). So, the murderer and the arch enemy of the Christian faith became its chief spokesman and missionary. The personal experience of God's unmerited grace permeated every aspect of Paul's life and work. It is the theme of his letter to the Romans.

Sometimes readers get bogged down in Paul's elaborate terminology and explanations (like "justification," "sanctification," "reconciliation," etc.). But there is a way to keep it fairly simple. As you read, always remember Paul's own personal experience. It is the story of a man with a very messed up life, hopelessly lost and spiritually blind, imprisoned by seething anger and smug self-righteousness. This very man Jesus reaches down to rescue and redeem. Why? Because God's love for the fallen is infinite. Romans is a love story through and through. *Ultimately, it is a personal story of God's personal love for you.* If you don't catch the personal dimension of this letter, if you don't

Hope of glory turns our tragedies into something bearable. "The Spirit helps us in our weakness" (Romans 8:26) when we falter. We know with our heavenly vantage point that "in all things God works for the good of those who love him" (Romans 8:28). Yes, there will be tears, but being people of faith, we know the end (the return of Jesus Christ and his judgment) will bring a permanent correction to all that is wrong.

The glorious future prophesied in Revelation when those who suffered for Christ join God in heaven touchingly expresses Paul's view of things:

Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away (Revelation 21:3-4).

Conclusion

God's love is too great for me - or anyone - to explain. It is wonderful to know that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ. Yet it is possible for a parent to love his child without measure, and that child to miss the full benefits of parental love. A child can perversely and blindly refuse even infinite, unconditional love. If we close our eyes or turn away, we could miss the sheer joy of God's redeeming grace. We must be sure to open our hearts to his indwelling, transforming love. We must be sure to declare our faith in Christ, confess our sin, and submit to Christ in all things. We must find and join a local fellowship of Christians so that we can grow up to full maturity.

If we can help you in your decision to walk with God, we invite you to call us or write us. We stand ready to assist you in this great life-changing experience. Let us close with a personal prayer for you, based upon Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3 (as expressed in *The Message*).

A Prayer for You

*We ask God to strengthen you by his Spirit so that Christ will live in you as you open the door and invite Him in. And we ask Him that with both feet planted firmly on love, you will be able to take in with all Christians the extravagant dimensions of Christ's love. Reach out and experience the breadth! Test its length! Plumb the depths! Rise to the heights! Live full lives, full in the fullness of God. Through our Savior we ask these things,
Amen*

a community that shares the same spiritual-genetic material, so to speak. Our uniting with Christ means we are destined to be conformed to his likeness.

How does this happen? Well, first it happens in community. Children don't survive if they are not nurtured in a family. Spiritual beings do not do well outside the family of believers called the "church," which is simply a fellowship of people who are being formed in Christ's image. Jesus is the first-born in a large family. We must connect with this family if we are to grow.

Secondly, we grow into his likeness through certain spiritual practices such as worship, prayer, fasting, meditation, study, and so forth. These are commonly called spiritual disciplines. Observe the close relationship between two words: disciple and discipline. The disciplines are simply the healthy, regularly practiced behaviors of Jesus' followers. Any Christian who wants to grow up in Christ will become regular in the disciplines. If you want help in these practices, become a part of a church committed to these New Testament practices. For excellent instruction and guidance, you may also read a book like Richard J. Foster's *Celebration of Discipline* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988).

11. Suffering, Hope and Glory

There is a small phrase tucked away in Romans 8:17 that cannot be overlooked. We are children of God and co-heirs with Christ, "if indeed we share in his sufferings." The inheritance, the hope and glory of the Christian life is conditional: if we are willing to share Christ's sufferings. Much of chapter 8 is a strange mix of suffering and glory, sacrifice and triumph. What is the connection between these apparent opposites?

To enter into the life of Christ is not to be magically lifted above the pain and suffering of this world. Present sufferings may indeed continue. Jesus assumes in his Sermon on the Mount that his followers will be insulted and persecuted (Matthew 5:11). Thus, in Romans 8, a glorious picture of life in Christ, you also glimpse a realistic picture of the pains of earthly existence - trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, and sword (Romans 8:35).

And yet, in Christ, even these terrors take on a new and bold coloring. The light of hope overshadows, overarches, and transforms these things:

No, in all things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:37-38).

hear God's loving call *to you*, you are missing the point of the letter.

Paul wrote in a later letter, I Timothy, the following (from Eugene Peterson's version, *The Message*):

I'm so grateful to Christ Jesus for making me adequate to do this work. He went out on a limb, you know, in trusting me with this ministry. The only credentials I brought to it were invective and witch hunts and arrogance. But I was treated mercifully because I didn't know what I was doing - didn't know Who I was doing it against! Grace mixed with faith and love poured over me and into me. And all because of Jesus. Here's a word you can take to heart and depend on: Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners. I'm proof - Public Sinner Number One - of someone who could never have made it apart from sheer mercy. And now he shows me off - evidence of his endless patience - to those who are right on the edge of trusting him forever (1 Timothy 1:12-16).

Paul, as you can see, wants us to identify with his plot and circumstance. No reader of Paul's letters can say, "I'm too evil. I'm too far gone or hopeless." No, Paul is "Exhibit A" demonstrating God's infinite power to heal and restore the lost. All you have to do is follow in Paul's footsteps. You begin by admitting the most obvious truth: your life (apart from God) is a mess. "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). "Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin. . . . for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:9, 23). "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" (Romans 7:24). The answer soon follows: "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1). You can submit to Jesus your rescuer, just as did Paul. How do you do this? Romans chapters 5-8 explains how.

You may want to begin your study of Romans with the following prayer based upon Paul's words from Philippians 3:10 and Ephesians 3:17:

Eternal Father,

Open my heart and mind to your words from Paul's letter. As I read, show me your Son, Jesus Christ, and the power of his resurrection. Lead me into the fellowship of his sufferings. Make me like him in his death, so that, somehow, I might also know the resurrection from the dead. Loving Lord, let me be rooted and established in love, filled with your power, and able to see how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ. Permit me to know this love that surpasses knowledge. O infinitely loving Lord, fill me with the fullness of your love and power. Through Jesus my Redeemer, I pray.

Amen

PART 2

LISTENING TO JESUS' SERMON

Romans is the longest and most substantial of all of Paul's writings. It has had a profound impact on the shape and direction of Christianity, and it has led to the conversion of countless thousands through the ages. Philip Melancthon, one of the great Reformers of the 16th century, called this letter "a summary of all Christian teaching." It would be ideal if you read the entire letter, but this lesson focuses on four central chapters (5-8).

In this letter Paul explains the meaning of the "Good News" of Jesus Christ. First, the Apostle graphically describes the terrible state of human beings in a world cut off from God (Romans 1:18-3:20); then he explains how lost humanity can be restored to God's loving presence through a process called justification" (Romans 3:21-4:25). Chapter 5 presents two models or patterns for living in the world, one represented by Adam, the other by Jesus Christ. Our need, Paul shows, is to cease living like Adam (who represents sinful humanity) and to start living like Christ (who represents a renewed and purified humanity). However, to make the transition from a state of "Adam" to a state of "Christ" we need help, for we are all living a kind of enslaved addiction to this world.

Through faith, repentance, and baptism (Chapter 6), we receive divine power to break free of our immoral addictions and the crushing weight of our deep moral conflicts (Chapter 7). Now, freed of condemnation, we enter a new life of the Spirit, a deeply personal relationship with our Heavenly Father, which Paul calls "adoption" or "sonship" (Chapter 8). Through this new friendship with God we experience an infinite, overwhelming love that makes us "more than conquerors." Nothing in all creation, Paul assures us, can separate us from this divine, perfect love.

The letter then moves to a discussion of how the Jewish nation fits into God's eternal plan (Chapters 9-11), a topic of immense concern in Paul's day since many believers were Jewish. The letter concludes with a discussion of Christian ethics - very practical suggestions on how Christians should conduct their daily lives (Chapters 12-16). The theme of the whole letter is summarized in Romans 1:16-17:

I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written, "The righteous will live by faith."

This other "Counselor," this "Spirit of Truth," Paul also calls the "Holy Spirit" or "the Spirit of the Lord" (Romans 5:5; 2 Corinthians 3:17-18). This Spirit is simply the continuing presence of Jesus Christ on earth. He enters our lives through faith, repentance, and baptism (Acts 2:38) and he continues his residence in our hearts throughout our lives. Romans 8 is Paul's description of a life guided by the Spirit.

The Holy Spirit's presence means many things. It means you receive power to endure hardship and trial. It means you have "life and peace" (Romans 8:6). It means you enjoy a special adoptive relationship with God. You become a privileged member of the king's household. As his beloved child, you no longer feel ashamed or beaten down or inadequate. As his beloved son or daughter, you enjoy immense honor and status. You can even talk to your Father in the most intimate of terms:

For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship [or adoption]. And by him, we cry, 'Abba' [or "Daddy! Papa!"], Father. The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children (Romans 8:15-16).

These claims of privilege are breathtaking in their scope and significance. We are heirs of God and co-heirs with Jesus. What value and significance God places on the lives of his beloved children!

10. Image of Christ

"Life in Christ" is a rich phrase in Paul's letters, suggesting a number of important spiritual realities. It is especially important to note that once you are in Christ, you begin an exciting journey towards spiritual maturity. The goal is to be changed so much that you can finally be pronounced "mature" (Ephesians 4:13).

How do you know if this spiritual transformation is occurring? For Paul, the test is simple; Jesus is the pattern or model. As we look at him over time, we start thinking and behaving like him (Philippians 2:5-11; 2 Corinthians 3:17-18). Paul expresses it this way:

For those whom God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of the Son, that he might be the first-born among many brothers (Romans 8:29).

Perhaps you came from a family with several siblings. No doubt you know families with several children. While each child is unique, you are probably most struck by the "family resemblance" of those biologically related. The "family resemblance" makes it clear who is related to whom.

Paul argues that Jesus is the "first-born" child in a large spiritual family -

but I don't really do it; I decide not to do bad, but then I do it anyway.... Parts of me covertly rebel, and just when I least expect it, they take charge. I've tried everything and nothing helps. I'm at the end of my rope. Is there no one who can do anything for me? Isn't that the real question? The answer, thank God, is that Jesus Christ can and does. He acted to set things right in this life of contradictions where I want to serve God with all my heart and mind, but am pulled by the influence of sin to do something totally different. With the arrival of Jesus, the Messiah, that fateful dilemma is resolved.... (Romans 7:14-8:1) *The Message*

As Paul explains, the real jail house is found in the soul; and we lack the strength, cleverness, and courage to mastermind our own escape. What we need, desperately, is an outside rescuer, who can tear away the scaly pythons of self that suffocate us. There is such a rescuer, Paul says. His name is Jesus/ Yeshua=Jesus= "the one who saves or rescues" (Matthew 1:21).

8. Adam and Christ

In Romans, Paul used two great biblical figures to represent our two choices of bondage or freedom. For Paul, Adam and Christ are not only great historical figures. They are also spiritual symbols. They are not only our ancestors, but literally the sources of our physical lives. Jesus Christ created us. "Adam" means "man" or "humankind," literally the father of the human race (Genesis 1:26). Adam and Christ also represent our two life options. We have only this choice: either to be like Adam, that is to live an earthly, bounded life (ruled by death, disease, and brokenness); or to be in Christ, where we enjoy the fruit of the Spirit: (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control) (Galatians 5:22). Chapter 8 is a matchless picture of life in Christ where there is "no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1). It is the place where we are "more than conquerors," where God's love flows ceaselessly.

9. Spirit and Adoption

Jesus assured his worried disciples, on the eve of his arrest and execution, that he would never abandon them. Not even death can come between Jesus and his beloved followers. In his final instructions before his trial, Jesus stated a promise with absolute clarity:

I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever - the Spirit of Truth. I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you. Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live (John 14:15-18).

For clarity, we also offer you Eugene Peterson's version from *The Message*:

It's news I'm most proud to proclaim, this extraordinary Message of God's powerful plan to rescue everyone who trusts him, starting with Jews and then right on to everyone else! God's way of putting people right shows up in the acts of faith, confirming what Scripture has said all along: "The person in right standing before God by trusting him really lives."

Some of the terms used in Paul's thesis statement will be explained in Part 3 "Background and Commentary" (which you may want to consult before or while you read Paul's letter).

As you read from Romans, read it personally and honestly. Admit that you are kin to Paul in your own struggle with sin. Trust Jesus to save you and renew your soul. When you do this, he will come to your aid. "Grace mixed with faith and love poured over me and into me," will be the great result (*The Message*)

You can be utterly changed. As one believer expressed it, "When I am really conscious...of the wild, passionate, relentless, stubborn, pursuing, tender love of God in Jesus Christ for me, then it's not that I have to, or I've got to, or I must, or I should, or I ought; suddenly I want to change because I know how deeply I'm loved."

TEXT:

Romans 5, 6, 7, & 8 (New International Version)

Romans 5:1 Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2 through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. 3 Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; 4 perseverance, character; and character, hope. 5 And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.

6 You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. 7 Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. 8 But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

9 Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! 10 For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much

more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! 11 Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation

12 Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned - 13 for before the law was given, sin was in the world. But sin is not taken into account when there is no law. 14 Nevertheless, death reigned from the time of Adam to the time of Moses, even over those who did not sin by breaking a command, as did Adam, who was a pattern of the one to come.

15 But the gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many! 16 Again, the gift of God is not like the result of the one man's sin: The judgment followed one sin and brought condemnation, but the gift followed many trespasses and brought justification. 17 For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.

18 Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men. 19 For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.

20 The law was added so that the trespass might increase. But where sin increased, grace increased all the more, 21 so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Romans 6:1 What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? 2 By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? 3 Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? 4 We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

5 If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. 6 For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin - 7 because anyone who has died has been freed from sin.

8 Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. 9 For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again;

Even as we respond to God's call, we must keep our focus on God's love and mercy. If the focus ever turns to our deeds, we are in danger. Baptism, for example, is not our achievement, but God's. It is a kind of "sign language." In it, we say to the world, ourselves and God: "I yield to God. Jesus is Lord. I want his presence in my heart through the Spirit." Baptism is the declaration of surrender, a death certificate for the old self of sin, and a vivid drama of your resurrection in Jesus.

In baptism, you let God transport you across a border, from one country to another, from the Dominion of Death to the Kingdom of Life. It begins a new relationship to the king of a new country where you are united to him (Romans 6:5). Or, to change figures of speech, you are adopted into the king's household; you become his beloved son or daughter by adoption (Romans 8:12-16). Baptism seals the adoption proceedings. No child adopts himself. It is the work of adoptive parents (in our case, God). Paul says that "the washing of rebirth" (Titus 3:5) is the work of God, evidence of his kindness, mercy, and love.

7. Slavery and Freedom

Slavery was a common practice in the first-century Roman world in which Paul lived. Many of the earliest disciples were in fact slaves. Thus, when Paul writes of bondage and freedom, his readers have a graphic, personal context for getting his point. Today, though institutional slavery has been outlawed, we can still understand Paul's point. We understand because the deepest forms of slavery are not physical, but spiritual. Though few of us know what it's like to have leg irons attached to us, we know a great deal about being enslaved to drugs, alcohol, gambling, sexual promiscuity, or violence. Today, we sometimes call our forms of slavery "addictions," but it's still the same problem. We are trapped or enmeshed in dysfunctional relationships; we are destroyed by addictive behaviors, by anxieties, and physical and psychological illnesses. Paul paints a vivid portrait of our dilemma:

I've spent a long time in sin's prison. What I don't understand about myself is that I decide one way, but then I act another, doing things I absolutely despise. So if I can't be trusted to figure out what is best for myself and then do it, it becomes obvious that God's command is necessary. But I need something more! For if I know the law but still can't keep it, and if the power of sin within me keeps sabotaging my best intentions, I obviously need help! I realize that I don't have what it takes. I can will it, but I can't do it. I decide to do good,

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory (Colossians 3:1-4).

This new way of thinking and being is not accomplished all in one flash, however. Transformation is gradual. While we cooperate with God in the transformation - it is essentially the work of God's Spirit living in our hearts. "Following Christ," in other words, is not a matter of being a good Boy Scout or Girl Scout. It is not accomplished through heroic human effort. Rather it is a matter of "letting go," of letting God be in charge. It is a matter of submission, of death to self, rather than superhuman achievement. Baptism is passive, something you allow to happen to you. God does the work, not the believer.

Through baptism God places you in a new position to face the world's temptations. You enjoy a new closeness to God. His presence, in the form of the Holy Spirit, surrounds you (Romans 8:9-11; Acts 2:38). This Spirit is a Spirit of power, giving you new resources to face suffering and trial. And, over time, His indwelling Spirit liberates and reshapes your soul so that it looks more and more like Jesus Christ himself:

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:17-18).

6. Faith and Works

Many people have worried and wondered. What is the relation of faith and works? Repeatedly, Paul tells us that we are saved by faith, not works (Romans 1:16-17; 3:25-26; Ephesians 2:8-10). Yet Paul also tells us to do certain things: to repent; to confess; to be baptized; to love; to serve others; to forgive; to worship God; to proclaim his Word to the lost, etc.

Quite interestingly, Paul never sees a contradiction between faith and works. Action, to Paul, is simply an obvious and inevitable response to grace, but never a means to achieve grace. Paul is simply stating what all of the Bible teaches - faith always, necessarily, leads to action. This is one reason why Paul tells the story of Abraham in the 4th chapter of Romans. Abraham is "the father of all who believe." This great Old Testament leader trusted God's promises first, and this trust led to courageous action on Abraham's part. But, Paul maintains, Abraham did nothing to earn his salvation. Abraham acted because he trusted God and because God saved him. God alone is the source of righteousness or "justification".

death no longer has mastery over him. 10 The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God.

11 In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. 12 Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. 13 Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness. 14 For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace.

15 What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! 16 Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey - whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness? 17 But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted. 18 You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.

19 I put this in human terms because you are weak in your natural selves. Just as you used to offer the parts of your body in slavery to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer them in slavery to righteousness leading to holiness. 20 When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness. 21 What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death! 22 But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. 23 For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 7:1 Do you not know, brothers - for I am speaking to men who know the law - that the law has authority over a man only as long as he lives? 2 For example, by law a married woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive, but if her husband dies, she is released from the law of marriage. 3 So then, if she marries another man while her husband is still alive, she is called an adulteress. But if her husband dies, she is released from that law and is not an adulteress, even though she marries another man.

4 So, my brothers, you also died to the law through the body of Christ, that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit to God. 5 For when we were controlled by the sinful nature, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in our bodies, so that we bore fruit for death. 6 But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code.

7 What shall we say, then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! Indeed I would not have known what sin was except through the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, "Do not covet."

8 But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire. For apart from law, sin is dead. 9 Once I was alive apart from law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died. 10 I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death. 11 For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death. 12 So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good.

13 Did that which is good, then, become death to me? By no means! But in order that sin might be recognized as sin, it produced death in me through what was good, so that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful.

14 We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. 15 I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. 16 And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. 17 As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. 18 I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. 19 For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do - this I keep on doing. 20 Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.

21 So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. 22 For in my inner being I delight in God's law; 23 but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. 24 What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? 25 Thanks be to God - through Jesus Christ our Lord!

So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in the sinful nature a slave to the law of sin.

Romans 8:1 Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, 2 because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. 3 For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, 4 in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit.

your mind, your family, your friends, your work, your dreams and your goals, your possessions - everything you have-is a gift from God. You never really "earned" anything in your life.

But tragically, humans in their sinful pride and blindness have forgotten the gift-giver. They have abandoned the very Source of their being. And this leads to God's greatest gift of all - freedom from self-destruction "by the grace of the on man, Jesus Christ" (Romans 5:15). Jesus is "God's abundant provision of grace and the gift of righteousness" (Romans 5:7).

Some Christians have tried to "improve" on God's generosity. Unable to believe that God would pour out his salvation so freely, they have tried to revise God's plan of salvation by making it a kind of "joint project":

Man's Efforts + God's Gift = Salvation

This "joint project" view of salvation is wrong, and Paul emphatically opposes it. He makes the point clear in his letter to the Ephesians: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:10). And in Romans, he writes, "If [salvation] is by grace, then it is no longer by works: if it were, grace would no longer be grace" (Romans 11:6).

5. Baptism

If you visit a bookstore today, you will find a long shelf of books in the "self-help" section. You can learn how to build a house, refinish an old car, remake your personality, overcome an addiction, or restore a troubled relationship. The message is, if you need something fixed, you can do it yourself with the right information. When it comes to spiritual restoration, however, there are no adequate books. Why? Because spiritual restoration is the work of God.

Nevertheless, Paul teaches us that it is necessary to respond to God's saving work in our lives. Submitting to God's authority and rule through the act of baptism is a natural response to God's grace.

Baptism is an important topic throughout the New Testament. John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus' ministry by preaching a "baptism of repentance for the remission of sins" (Mark 1:4). Paul's letter was written to people who had already been baptized (Romans 6:1-11). Explaining their freedom from sin, he simply reminds them that their immersion (baptism) into Christ helps empower their resistance to temptation.

Baptism in the church of Paul's day was both a solemn and a joyous occasion. It was serious since it was a "death" to an old way of life - the life of sin: But it was also as joyful as an Easter morning since it was a "resurrection" to a new life in Christ:

purity and holiness. Simply put, God is "right"; he is "upright." This means he is far removed from worldly evil and sin. God expects us to become like him in moral purity. The process of getting right with God is often called "justification".

If we are to enjoy freedom, joy, and hope, we must acquire this quality called "righteousness". Yet we face an insurmountable problem. Where do we get it? We can't buy it. We can't earn it. We can't work for it. We can only receive it as a gift. It is a gift of grace that comes to us when we believe in Jesus as our Savior: "This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe" (Romans 3:22). This is God's miracle! He grants to us a moral quality which we neither earned nor deserved. Though we are faulty, frail human beings, because we trust Jesus, he chooses to look on as though we were as pure (as "righteous") as Jesus Christ himself! This is a sign of God's immense love and grace. (See "Grace" below.)

3. Anger of God

Many people misunderstand the Bible's teachings on God's "anger" or "wrath". They either make too much of it (by dwelling on it); or out of discomfort, they ignore it altogether. Either extreme distorts the gospel. God's anger is not some irresponsible outburst by a hostile divine parent. God is never arbitrary, fickle, or unreasonable. Rather, God's wrath is "the justifiable reaction of a loving, faithful God toward his disobedient people and their proneness to idolatry, to evil, and to sinful conduct."¹ God's anger does not mean he takes pleasure in punishing. Quite the opposite.

But he does respect our human freedom so much that he allows us "to stew in our own juices," if we insist on it. God's wrath means that he lets people have their own way. He lets them suffer the consequences of their own actions. Thus, the violators of divine law, "receive in themselves the due penalty of their willful disobedience" (see chapter 1). If you defy the law of gravity by jumping off a cliff, you are duly punished. In the same way, if you willfully defy divine law, punishment naturally follows. This is the wrath of God.

One should remember, however, that Paul's primary emphasis is on God's amazing patience, love and grace.

4. Grace

To Paul, God's grace is truly and forever amazing. He uses the term over 20 times in Romans. Most simply, grace means "gift". God is the gift-giving deity. He is delighted to pour out gifts on his creatures. (He invented Christmas, after all, in sending Jesus into the world.) Your life, your breath,

¹ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, The Anchor Bible: Romans (New York: Doubleday, 1993): 107.

5 Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. 6 The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; 7 the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. 8 Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God.

9 You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if any one does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ. 10 But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness. 11 And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you.

12 Therefore, brothers, we have an obligation - but it is not to the sinful nature, to live according to it. 13 For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live, 14 because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. 15 For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." 16 The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. 17 Now if we are children, then we are heirs - heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.

18 I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. 19 The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. 20 For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope 21 that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.

22 We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. 23 Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. 24 For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? 25 But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

26 In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. 27 And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will.

love him, who have been called according to his purpose. 29 For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. 30 And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.

31 What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? 32 He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all - how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? 33 Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. 34 Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died - more than that, who was raised to life - is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. 35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? 36 As it is written:

"For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered."

37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 38 For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, 39 neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

PART 3

BACKGROUND AND COMMENTARY

Theme Verse:

"There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

Romans, A Seamless Tapestry

You might think of Paul's letter to the Romans as a beautiful seamless tapestry, composed of many threads, that together produce a beautiful picture of God's love for humanity. The trouble is, how does one look at one thread, in isolation, when it is connected to other threads in the tapestry? It's difficult to examine this "tapestry of divine love" because there are so many threads woven throughout, producing so many different subtle shades of meaning. (Recently published commentaries on Romans run to 800 or 1,000 pages!) Be aware, then, that the isolated themes described below are only single "threads," only rough attempts to suggest the beautiful meanings in this letter. We have limited our background study to 11 important concepts in Romans.

1. Love of God

As you read, you will notice how frequently the word love appears in the letter, for good reason. According to Paul, everything stems from God's immense love - his love for you and all his creatures. Love is just about everything, for God is love. It is the basis for God's plan of salvation. It guarantees our opportunity to get right with God. It motivated Jesus' coming into the world and his sacrificial death on the cross. Love is what pulls us home to the Father.

Don't be deterred or put off by Paul's complicated arguments in Romans. Remember that this is a love story, foremost: "God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us...But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:5, 8). Whatever else you learn from Paul, learn this: Christ died for you, a sinner. He came to rescue you in particular, and nothing you can do will stop him from loving you. Nothing in all creation "will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:39).

Just as love is the central quality of God's character, God expects us to make it the central quality of our character: "And whatever commandment there may be, [is] summed up in this one rule, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore, love is the fulfillment of the law" (Romans 13:9-10).

Sometimes searching people are lured to accept toxic and deformed versions of Christianity. (Cults and sects are always around us.) One of the ways to test a religious group for its authenticity is to use the Biblical love test. Jesus said, "All men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another" (John 13:35). If a religious group practices manipulation and control, if they hurt people emotionally or physically or spiritually, then you can be sure they are not an authentic Christian fellowship. The acid test of true Christianity is love (see 1 Corinthians 13 for an extended definition of Christian love). True religion reveals a God of love, and this love always leads to freedom from sin and bondage. Love never cripples, de-means, or hurts. It enables a person to grow into mature adulthood. This kind of love is the theme of Romans.

2. The Righteousness of God

Paul often refers to God's "righteousness". As we have seen, it appears in the central theme statement of the letter: "For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last" (Romans 1:16-17). "Righteousness" refers to a quality of God's own being. It is a quality of his moral character suggesting his goodness and moral