

ROMANS

(2)

Chapter 9

Aware of Israel's past privileges as God's elect, Paul begins this section with anguish for his "**brethren**" and "**kinsman**" who have not accepted Jesus as the Messiah (3). Without any resentment toward his Jewish brothers who have caused him trouble, Paul says he would willingly undergo the worst possible fate, even so far as "**to be cut off from Christ**," for the sake of his fellow Jews if only they would believe (3).

In this vein Paul affirms God's many blessings upon the Chosen People, and therefore their reasons to believe: "**the sonship**" (God's adoption of Israel, Exodus 4:22); "**the glory**" (God's presence to Israel "**in the cloud**" while in the desert and later in the tent of meeting and tabernacle, Exodus 16:10; 33:9; 40:34); "**the covenants**" (bonds made at Sinai and with the patriarchs, Genesis 17:1-14); "**the law**" (the Ten Commandments, Exodus 20:1-70); "**the worship**" (Temple rituals); "**the promises**" (made to Abraham, Moses, and David, Genesis 12:2; Deuteronomy 18:18-19; 2 Samuel 7:11-16); and "**the patriarchs**" (Israel's ancestral leaders, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob). Finally, Paul assigns the greatest blessing of all upon Israel: "**the Christ**" (5).



Moreover, Paul asserts that what God promised Israel now extends to the Gentiles. As Paul explains, the Old Testament promises were not made to Israel in the sense of physical descent only, but essentially to the Israel of faith. Physical descent alone does not ensure inheritance: "**It was not through the law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith**" (4:13). For Abraham had eight sons, but the promise of salvation—and faith in that promise—was transmitted only through Isaac. True progeny are born to Abraham by virtue of a promise, not simply because they are his descendants, "**children of the flesh**" (8).

In this light, the choice of Isaac's son, Jacob (later re-named "Israel") over his brother Esau was God's alone. This point is crucial to Paul's argument because the call of the Gentiles to Christian faith is equally gratuitous; for it only appears that God is "unfairly" choosing one brother over the other, or choosing the Gentiles now only after centuries of prior relationship with the Chosen People. However, as the Jews learned from their experience with the Golden Calf at Sinai, God manifests His mercy as He wishes. Even hardhearted Pharaoh of Egypt ultimately figured into God's plan of salvation.

"**Why does he still find fault**" (19)? So, if God can make use of human stubbornness to accomplish his ends, why should He find fault with human beings? Paul answers his own question in that God's control of the world cannot be judged through man's eyes. God has been patient because He wants to allow Israel time to repent and receive His mercy.

Finally Paul laments that Israel failed to recognize Christ as the end of the law; that all along the law itself was leading to faith in Christ. The old way of attaining uprightness was difficult; but now the new way is within reach of Jew and Gentile. The irony is that it is the Gentiles who have succeeded in the pursuit of uprightness by putting their faith in Christ Jesus.

Chapter 10

In rejecting Christ as the fulfillment of the law, the Jews were assuming that they must at least contribute something so that God look may favorably upon them. They thought that keeping the law

pointed to the contribution they made. But a righteousness based solely on works (i.e., law observance) does not “**succeed in fulfilling that law**” for it is not pursued “**through faith**” (31, 32).

Due to their religious rigorism, the Jews did not want to settle *only* for something God could give them. They wanted their ultra-religiosity to *prove* God’s choice of them; that is, they wanted to *deserve* by their religious observances what God had given them by grace. Therefore, by trying to merit God’s grace, they shifted from trust in God’s goodness to their own self-righteousness. That is the point of 10:1-3, and the terrible flaw in their thinking.

Therefore, the practical, daily keeping of the law became a necessary condition for eternal life: “**A ruler questioned Him, saying, ‘Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life’**” (Luke 18:18)? And in John: “**Therefore they said to Him, ‘What are we to do, so that we may accomplish the works of God’**”(John 6:28)? Just as Moses tried to convince the Israelites that the observance of the law did not demand that one scale the heights or descend to the depths (Deuteronomy 30:11-14), so Paul applies Moses’ words in an accommodated sense when speaking about Christ. We are to accept in faith what Jesus has done for us in his Passion, death, and Resurrection, and trust in Him.

“**No distinction between Jew and Greek**” (11-13). Again, the opportunity to believe in Christ was offered to all, but especially to Israel; they cannot claim that they did not hear the gospel. Rather, as Paul writes, “. . . **they have not all obeyed the gospel**” (16). The contrast is obvious between the Gentiles (a “**foolish nation**”) who accept Christ in faith, and the Jews (“**a disobedient and contrary people**”) who refuse to believe in him (19, 21).

Chapter 11

Yet despite Israel’s lack of faith, God has not rejected His Chosen People. In God’s plan mercy is to be shown to all (1-32). Invoking the Prophet Elijah, Paul points to the remnant of Jews in 1 Kings 19:18, who remained faithful. However apart from this remnant, Paul’s sorrow is that most of the Jews do not believe (9:1-2).

“**Now I am speaking to you Gentiles**” (13). Still, the Gentiles must not be presumptuous because they have accepted Christ; they have no right to look down on Israel. Although a Christian, Paul still sees himself as a member of the race of Jews, and even calls them “**my kinsmen by race**” (9:3). If the conversion of the Gentiles represents the first phase of redemption, then the acceptance of the gospel by the Jews will represent its definitive stage.

“**Some of the branches were broken off**” (17). Paul sees the Gentile Christians as the wild olive shoot now grafted onto Israel, in place of the lopped off branches of unbelieving Jews. While Paul does not deny that the defection of Israel has facilitated the conversion of the Gentiles, Israel’s “branches” was not broken off so that the Gentiles might be grafted onto the trunk. For the blessings of the Gentiles are due only to God’s gratuitous selection of them and their response in faith, and not to any merits of which Gentile Christians can boast. The only difference between the broken off branches and the newly added branches is faith in Christ. For grafting wild olive tree branches (Gentiles) onto cultivated trees (believing Jews) is not the natural way to raise olive trees, though it is exactly what God has done (24).

Again, lest the Gentiles “**become proud**” (20), if branches belonging to the tree by nature could be lopped off (because of infidelity), so can those that have been simply grafted onto it (if unfaithful). In the end, Paul says that that all—Jews and Gentiles—have been unfaithful to God Who yet makes use of such infidelity to manifest His bounty and mercy.

Chapter 12

The common pursuit of the good is expected of those who are members of the body of Christ. Paul subtly compares Christians who strive to do what is right with animals sacrificed on feast days; that is, a kind of **“living sacrifice holy and acceptable to God”** (1).

The Christian, though in the world, must live for God and not be conformed to any other standard. This change in orientation is not external but inward, involving the renewal of human reason by the presence of God’s indwelling Spirit. Such worship offered to God should manifest itself in society based on humility and charity.

As an apostolic founder of Christian churches, Paul realized the danger to the community of elements within that overestimated their works. Because Christians are **“one body in Christ,”** they must use their different gifts of grace for the community’s benefit.

Moreover, Paul insists that charity be shown even to one’s enemies. The Christian should pursue only the good, and leave the retribution of evil to God. By such kindness the enemy may be moved to regret his evil, and his shame become like coals of fire, **“burning coals upon his head”** (20).” Such “coals upon the head” is an allusion to an ancient Egyptian ritual whereby a penitent carried a plate of burning charcoal on his head to express repentance. Paul’s general principle is to defer any retribution to God’s judgment.

Chapter 13

Paul admits that Christians must obey ordinary human authorities, which is a form of obedience to God himself because the relation of human beings to God is not limited to the religious sphere. In this sense Paul appeals to conscience, which suggests a moral obligation to obey civil laws. Paul links human relationship to civil rulers with the divine origin of civil authority itself. Of course, civil authorities are to conduct themselves rightly and seek the interests of the community.

Aware that Jews were accustomed to epitomize the law and its 613 positive and negative commandments (*mitzvot*), Paul says its application is much wider. For example, although in Leviticus 19:18 “neighbor” means fellow Jews, Paul says it has a wider extension, that is, **“love is the fulfillment of the law”** (10).” If Christ is the goal of the law (4), then “love,” which motivated his whole existence and sacrifice, is love’s fulfillment of the law and the norm for Christian conduct.

Furthermore, Christians are already living in the **“end times”** (1 Corinthians 10:11). In this new era Christians are called upon to conduct themselves accordingly and live their faith with love (Galatians 5:6). For the indwelling Spirit is now nearer than it was when they first put their faith in Christ. Paul is implying that Christians cannot afford to remain in the unprotected condition of scantily clothed sleepers at a time when the situation calls for “armor,” which the Christian has “put on,” that is, Christ through baptism.

Chapter 14

“As for the man who is weak in faith, welcome him” (1). Again, Paul addresses such minor questions as the eating of meat and the observance of holidays; that is, he is dealing with the age-old problem of the scrupulous versus the enlightened conscience. But because Paul is not intimately acquainted with the church in Rome, he answers these questions in only generic terms. The obligation of mutual charity is clear. Each must accept the other as God would; for such “weak” Christians are members of God’s household. The Christian must not judge other Christians, be they weak or strong.

“Nothing is unclean in itself” (14). Guided by love for the other, Paul says the created thing itself is neither clean or unclean. Therefore, while the weak man who follows the dictates of his conscience may be distressed at the sight of Christians eating certain foods, the strong must not flaunt his enlightened conscience before the weak. Paul refuses to allow Christian freedom to be

asserted when it causes distress to another. The Christian's obligation is not to destroy the **"work of God"** by making a weak brother stumble (20).

Chapter 15

Now that his labors in the East have come to an end, Paul visits Jerusalem with the much-needed collection from the Gentiles that acknowledges that **"salvation comes from the Jews"** (John 4:22). Paul asked the Roman Christians to pray that the gift will be accepted in the right spirit; that is, as an "offering" made to the Christian community in Jerusalem as once it would have been made to the Temple. In fact, Paul implies that his preaching of the word of God is a kind of liturgical act itself; and that his work among Gentiles is a form of sacrifice. That is, Paul is offering to God not slaughtered animals but repentant human beings.

"What Christ has accomplished through me" (18). As God's instrument Paul's overriding goal is to carry Christ's name to areas where it is unknown. He also acknowledges the work of other apostles and prophets who founded churches. For Paul, his goal is **"having sealed or stamped the fruit,"** which is an image from tenant farming (28). When the harvested fruit was delivered to the owner, it was marked with the farmer's seal. Paul wants the collection taken up for Jerusalem to be known as coming from the churches founded by him in the Lord's harvest.

Since Paul believes he is still under suspicion in Jerusalem, he asks the Roman church to pray for three things: that no danger may befall him from unbelievers in Judea; that his collection is received in the proper spirit; and that he may eventually come to Rome with a joyous heart.



Chapter 16

Phoebe, whom Paul refers to as "deaconess," is an unknown Christian woman and bearer of Paul's letter. While there is no way of being sure that the term "deaconess" means anything more than a servant or messenger, Phoebe is welcomed into the Christian community as one of its members. As his letter concludes, Paul sends personal greetings to at least twenty-six acquaintances. Paul is grateful for the intervention of Prisca and Aquila on his behalf in Ephesus during the riot of the silversmiths in Acts 19:23-41. Paul also reflects on the conversion of Epanetus, a Christian leader in Ephesus, who helped in the conversion of many in the Roman province of Asia. Paul then lists individuals and families to whom he would like his readers to pass on his greetings.

". . . The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet" (20). Satan is understood as the personification of all disorder, dissension, and scandal in the community. God, who shapes human ways in peace, will do away with such dangers threatening it.

After Paul's farewell, there are further greetings from those who are with him. Finally Paul blesses God Who promises the gospel of Christ to human beings and the constancy of Christian life.