



# How to use Explore

## In this issue

The 90 daily readings in this issue of *Explore* are designed to help you understand and apply the Bible as you read it each day.

## It's serious!

We suggest that you allow 15 minutes each day to work through the Bible passage with the notes. It should be a meal, not a snack! Readings from other parts of the Bible can throw valuable light on the study passage. These cross-references can be skipped if you are already feeling full up, but they will expand your grasp of the Bible. *Explore* uses the NIV Bible translation, but you can also use it with the ESV or another translation of your choice.

Sometimes a prayer section will encourage you to stop and pray through the application of God's word—but it is always important to allow time to pray for God's Spirit to bring his word to life, and to shape the way we think and live.

## We're serious!

All of us who work on *Explore* share a passion for getting the Bible into people's lives. We passionately hold to the Bible as God's word—to honour and follow, not to explain away.

**1**  
Find a time you can read the Bible each day

**2**  
Find a place where you can be quiet and think

**3**  
Ask God to help you understand

**4**  
Carefully read through the Bible passage for today

**5**  
Study the verses with *Explore*, taking time to think

**6**  
Pray about what you have read

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*Opening up the Bible*

# Welcome to Explore

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Being a Christian isn't a skill you learn, like carpentry or flower arranging. Nor is it a lifestyle choice, like the kind of clothes you wear, or the people you choose to hang out with. It's about having a real relationship with the living God through his Son, Jesus Christ. The Bible tells us that this relationship is like a marriage.

It's important to start with this, because many Christians view the practice of daily Bible-reading as a Christian duty, or a hard discipline that is just one more thing to get done in our busy modern lives.

But the Bible is God speaking to us: opening his mind to us on how he thinks, what he wants for us and what his plans are for the world. And most importantly, it tells us what he has done for us in sending his Son, Jesus Christ, into the world. It's the way the Spirit shows Jesus to us, and changes us as we behold his glory.

The Bible is not a manual. It's a love letter. And as with any love letter, we'll want to treasure it, and make time to read and Re-read it, so we know we are loved, and discover how we can please the One who loves us. Here are a few suggestions for making your daily time with God more of a joy than a burden:

☑ *Time:* Find a time when you will not be disturbed, and when the cobwebs are cleared from your mind. Many people have found that the morning is the best time as it sets you up for the day. If you're

not a "morning person", then last thing at night or a mid-morning break might suit you. Whatever works for you is right for you.

☑ *Place:* Jesus says that we are not to make a great show of our religion (see *Matthew 6:5-6*), but rather, to pray with the door to our room shut. Some people plan to get to work a few minutes earlier and get their Bible out in an office or some other quiet corner.

☑ *Prayer:* Although *Explore* helps with specific prayer ideas from the passage, try to develop your own lists to pray through. Use the flap inside the back cover to help with this. And allow what you read in the Scriptures to shape what you pray for yourself, the world and others.

☑ *Share:* As the saying goes: *expression deepens impression*. So try to cultivate the habit of sharing with others what you have learned. Why not join our Facebook group to share your encouragements, questions and prayer requests? Search for *Explore: For your daily walk with God*.

And remember, *it's quality, not quantity, that counts:* better to think briefly about a single verse than to skim through pages without absorbing anything. It's about developing your relationship with the Living God. The sign that your daily time with God is real is when you start to love him more and serve him more wholeheartedly.

*Tim Thornborough and Carl Laferton*  
Editors



# ROMANS: The new way

*The gospel is a liberation story about the dawning of an era of grace. But how does this new story connect with the older story of God's law? Paul starts to explain...*

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In the last issue in Romans 5 – 6 we saw that humanity in Adam is under the reign of sin which leads to death. But our old self (our old humanity) has died with Christ. So we're now under the reign of grace which leads to life. Now in chapter 7 Paul expands on what he said in Romans 5:20: "The law was brought in so that the trespass might increase") and in 6:14: "you are not under the law, but under grace").

When the law was given to humanity in Adam it did two things.

## Sin increased

### Read Romans 7:5

We inherited a rebellious attitude towards God from Adam (5:12). The law provoked this into acts of deliberate disobedience. The law told us what pleases God. But, because we hated God, we used the law to do what displeases God.

..... **TIME OUT** .....

Read Romans 4:15; 5:13 and 5:20 and see how these verses fit this picture.

## Death sentence

### Read Romans 3:19-20

The law not only revealed our sin, it also revealed the sentence of our sin = death.

### Read Romans 7:1-3

❓ *What is Paul's point in these verses?*

❓ *How does it apply to Christians?*

In everyday life we know that death releases us from obligations. It's the same for Christians: we died with Christ and therefore we're free from the law. This means...

### Read Romans 7:4

❓ *What has happened to a Christian believer and what for?*

We're freed from our death sentence. Sin no longer has any claim on us, since we belong to Christ. Paul highlights the fact that Jesus was raised from the dead. His resurrection is the guarantee of our resurrection. To die to the law means to die to the death sentence it demands. We are now to bear fruit.

### Read Romans 7:6

We're being freed from our rebellious attitude. The old written code couldn't change us. In fact, it made matters worse. But, through the work of the Spirit, God's generous grace gives us a new desire to please God.

## Pray

As you start 2021, make these gospel truths the centre of your prayerful commitment:

Praise God for your freedom from death and the crushing demands of the law.

Pray that you would live a fruitful, Spirit-directed life this year.

# Law: what is it good for?

*The law failed to make us right with God. So what's the point of it at all?*

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In Romans 5:20 Paul says that sin leads to grace. Then in chapter 6 he responds to the false conclusion that it's ok to sin. In 5:20 Paul also says that the law *leads* to sin (by provoking our rebellious attitude). So in chapter 7 he responds to the false conclusion that the law is bad.

## The law: good at its job

- ❓ *What attitudes do people have to civil and religious or ethical laws today?*

### Read Romans 7:7

- ❓ *What is Paul's point here?*

The law tells us what God requires. It therefore enables us to see that we're guilty and we need a Saviour.

## The wrong tool

### Read Romans 7:8-13

- ❓ *What is Paul's argument here?*
- ❓ *Do you recognise his description of how law provokes sin in your life?*

A hammer is good at driving nails. But imagine you've cut your finger and decide the best solution is to hit it with a hammer! You would soon discover that a hammer is very bad at healing wounds. That's not the hammer's fault. It's your fault for using it in the wrong way.

The law was good at its job of exposing our need and pointing to Jesus. But in the

hands of sin, the law made matters worse. That wasn't the law's fault—the law is holy, righteous and good (v 12). But sin used the law to:

- provoke our rebellious attitude (v 8-9).
- proclaim our death sentence (v 10-11, 13).

Imagine a school child who hates his teacher. One day his teacher forbids chewing gum in class. Previously the boy had no desire to chew gum. But now he longs to do so, if only to annoy his teacher. Her “law” against chewing gum has provoked his rebellious attitude.

## Apply

The Old Testament law, as it has been fulfilled in Christ, helps us understand the richness and depth of God's will. It teaches us how we should live as Christians to please our heavenly Father. But keeping the law doesn't work as a way of becoming right with God (as we saw in chapter 3). And keeping the law on its own doesn't work as a way of becoming holy. The law can tell us what holiness looks like, but it can't motivate us to live holy lives. For that we need the heart-warming, heart-winning grace of God and the life-transforming work of the Spirit. We obey what the law says not because the law compels us, but because we want to please our Saviour.



# What the law can't do...

*The law is good at exposing our need and pointing to Jesus. But we also need to recognise what the law cannot do.*

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## Frustrated Christians?

### Read Romans 7:14-24

- ❓ *Who do you think these verses are describing: a believer or a non-believer?*
- ❓ *Which parts of this description resonate with your experience now and in the past?*

These verses see-saw backwards and forwards between a desire to do good and an inability to do good because of the presence and power of sin. Many people think Paul is describing a Christian who is frustrated by the way they still fall into sin. This may be correct, but if we compare verse 14 with 6:17-18, another possibility emerges. Perhaps Romans 7 is describing how we're still under the *influence* of sin, while Romans 6 is talking about how we're set free from the *authority* of sin. But it's hard to see how Paul could say we're no longer slaves of sin in chapter 6 and then say we're still slaves of sin in chapter 7.

So who else might Paul be talking about? In Romans 6 Paul has retold the story of the exodus: Christ has set us free from the slavery of sin just as Moses set Israel free from slavery of Egypt. Now in chapters 7 – 8 we continue that journey to Mount Sinai. Perhaps Paul is describing the relationship of a faithful Israelite's relationship to the law. As a believer he wants to obey God (he delights in God's law in 7:22). But without the Spirit writing God's law on his heart,

he's inevitably frustrated. So chapter 7 describes the problem for which the gift of the Spirit described in chapter 8 is the solution.

The law was good at its job of exposing our need and pointing to Jesus. What it could never do was to save us from the penalty and power of sin. For that we need Jesus and the Spirit.

## The problem resolved

### Read Romans 7:25 – 8:4

- ❓ *How do Jesus and the Spirit solve the problems posed in Romans 7?*

## Apply

Christians need to be disciplined in the battle against sin—offering every part of our lives to God (6:13). But rules, routines and willpower on their own cannot make us holy. That would be to live like an Old Testament believer. Instead:

- we constantly need to renew our vision of grace so our hearts are moved by love to obey God's word.
- we constantly need to depend on the work of the Spirit and pray for his help.

## Pray

Talk to the Lord about your struggle with sin and how you seek to solve it.



# The Spirit gives life

We ended chapter 7 feeling frustrated at humanity's inability to do what is good. In chapter 8 we burst into the new life that the Spirit brings.

## Read Romans 8:1-4

- ❓ *What could the law not do?*
- ❓ *What has Jesus done?*
- ❓ *What is the Spirit doing?*

The law could tell us the life God requires, but it couldn't make us right with God, nor could it transform our sinful nature (our "flesh"). But Jesus satisfied the law's demands when he died in our place. So for us there is no condemnation (we are right with God). And the Spirit transforms us by giving us new life.

## Pray

When do you feel like a failure? When do you feel condemned? Bring those situations to God in faith and hear God's words to you today: "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus".

## Spirit life now

### Read Romans 8:5-8

- ❓ *List the characteristics of those governed by the flesh.*
- ❓ *List the characteristics of those governed by the Spirit.*

The "flesh" is the sinful nature. It governs the lives of unbelievers. But, while Christians still feel its pull, we also enjoy the life-giving power of the Holy Spirit.

These verses are not a list of commands.

They're a description of an unbeliever (governed by the flesh) and a believer (governed by the Spirit). So if you're a Christian, hear these words as a promise. This is the life God has given you through the Spirit: you *can* please God.

## Spirit life in the future

### Read Romans 8:9-11

- ❓ *Who has the Spirit?*
- ❓ *What does the Spirit give?*
- ❓ *How can we be confident we'll be raised to eternal life after our physical death?*

The Spirit gives spiritual life in the present to every believer and this enables us to please God. This spiritual life is also a sign that God will give us physical life (resurrection) in the future. The Spirit unites us to Christ so *Christ's* resurrection becomes a promise of *our* resurrection.

## Apply

### Read Romans 8:12-13

The flesh (our sinful nature) still pulls us towards sin while the Spirit pulls us towards holiness. Our job is to follow the lead of the Spirit.

- ❓ *How are you feeling the pull of the flesh today?*
- ❓ *How are you feeling the pull of the Spirit today?*
- ❓ *Whose lead are you going to follow?*



# The Spirit gives love

*Have you ever prayed and felt that God has heard your prayers? Then you've experienced a mighty miracle. You've experienced the amazing power of the Holy Spirit.*

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## Sons and lovers

### Read Romans 8:14-15

- ❓ *What remarkable promises are there in these verses?*
- ❓ *Which one particularly excites you today?*
- ❓ *How important do you consider your feelings to be, as a Christian?*

In Romans 6 Paul has retold the exodus story. Just as Moses liberated Israel from the slavery of Egypt, so Jesus has liberated Christians from the slavery of sin. In Romans 7 we came to Mount Sinai to relive Israel's experience of the law. God led Israel by the pillars of cloud and fire to meet him at Mount Sinai. "When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance" (Exodus 20:18).

Now Christians are led by the Spirit to meet God. At this point we might well tremble with fear and keep our distance (like the Israelites). But we don't because the Spirit testifies that we're God's children.

- **Jesus makes us children of God.** Because we're in Christ we share his relationship with God the Father.
- **The Spirit makes us feel like children of God.** He gives us the confidence to come to God.

## Apply

The Spirit wants us to stop living like slaves and start living like children.

- ❓ *How does a slave behave around their master?*
- ❓ *How does a child behave around their father?*

### Read Romans 8:16-17

- ❓ *So what are the privileges of being a child of God?*
- ❓ *Which particularly excites you today?*

**We can pray.** Every prayer is a mighty miracle. Creatures ought to shrink in fear before their holy Creator. But we come to God in trusting, intimate prayer—often without giving it a second thought—because the Spirit powerfully testifies that God is our Father and that he delights to hear his children pray.

**We will inherit.** Children normally share in the family's wealth and the same is true for the children of God. Suffering is a normal part of the Christian life (as we'll see in the rest of chapter 8). But sharing Christ's suffering is a sign that we'll share his glory.

## Pray

- ❓ *What are you going to say to your Father today?*



# The Spirit gives hope

*Our culture wants everything now. But one fruit of the Spirit is patience.*

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## The renewal of creation

### Read Romans 8:18-21

- ❓ *What is the present experience of creation?*
- ❓ *What will be its future experience?*

Creation was cursed when humanity sinned (Genesis 3:17-19). Plus our sin and greed harm the planet through things like global warming and pollution. But Christ will make all things new. Just as Christians will receive resurrection bodies, so the environment will be restored.

## We're not there yet

### Read Romans 8:22-25

- ❓ *Who groans in these verses?*
- ❓ *What does this look like in practice?*
- ❓ *What's the role of the Spirit in this?*

"Are we nearly there yet?" small children ask—just ten minutes into a seven-hour car journey. The groaning of creation and believers is the equivalent of this: "Are we nearly home in glory?" The answer is *not yet*—otherwise we wouldn't be looking forwards in hope (v 24-25).

The Spirit is the "firstfruits" of the new creation (v 23). Imagine having a spoonful of the rich gravy from a casserole while it's still cooking—you can't eat the main course yet, but it's a foretaste of the feast to come. The life and love the Spirit gives are a foretaste of the new creation.

## Apply

Sometimes people say, "You can be healed if you have enough faith". It's true we'll all be healed. *But not yet*. The full redemption of our bodies comes only when Christ returns and we're not there yet. In the meantime, suffering is a normal part of life (v 17-18) and so we wait patiently (v 25).

### Read Romans 8:26-27

- ❓ *Who groans in these verses?*
- ❓ *What's the role of the Spirit here?*

The Spirit is with us when we feel the brokenness of a world that's not yet made new. When we don't know what to say, the Spirit prays for us and his prayers are always answered because they perfectly match God's will. And here is God's will for us...

### Read Romans 8:28-30

- ❓ *How does God use suffering?*
- ❓ *How does God guarantee our future?*

God planned your salvation from before time (when he predestined you) right through to eternity (when you'll share Christ's glory). Along the way he uses *everything* that happens to make you more like Jesus.

## Apply

Think about your day. Receive every circumstance as a gift from God given to make you more like Jesus.







# All-conquering love

*How do you know God loves you? What about when you get a cancer diagnosis or lose your job? What about when your sin accuses you or doubts dog your mind?*

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In this passage Paul asks four questions to reassure us of God's love.

## Who can be against us?

### Read Romans 8:31-32

- ❓ *When might you find yourself asking this question?*
- ❓ *What's the answer?*

If God gave us his precious Son then there can be no end or limit to his love. People may oppose us and circumstances may appear against us, but they *cannot* overcome God's love for us.

## Who will bring a charge?

### Read Romans 8:33

- ❓ *When might you find yourself asking this question?*
- ❓ *What's the answer?*

Perhaps I can separate myself from God by my sin. *No*, says Paul. You're not made right with God by what you do or don't do. It's God who justifies (makes us right with him) and nothing can undo that work.

## Who condemns?

### Read Romans 8:34

- ❓ *When might you find yourself asking this question?*
- ❓ *What's the answer?*

Who could rightly condemn us? Only Jesus. And Jesus is the very person who died to make us right with God. Far from bringing charges against us, Jesus is, in fact, interceding for us. He counters any accusation against us by presenting his finished work in the court of heaven.

## Who shall separate us?

### Read Romans 8:35-39

- ❓ *When might you find yourself asking this question?*
- ❓ *What's the answer?*

Sin cannot separate us from God's love, because God first demonstrated his love when we were sinners (5:8). Suffering cannot separate us, because we conquer suffering "through him who loved us". The past tense here is a reference to the cross. The cross is the great demonstration of God's love—even when our circumstances confuse us. Not even death can separate us, because God has given us eternal life through the resurrection of Jesus.

## Pray

Bring to God the guilt of your sin and the confusion created by your suffering.

Pray through this passage verse by verse, applying it to your specific situation.

Praise God for his all-conquering love.

# Together in Christ

*So far in Romans Paul has described how, even though every one of us is guilty before God, we can be right with God through faith in Christ.*




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We no longer belong to the old humanity in Adam under the authority of sin and death. Instead, we've risen with Christ to live a new life in the power of the Spirit. If you are a Christian, this is who you are as you start out in 2021.

Paul has been concerned to show that this is the fulfilment of the Old Testament story. This is not some new idea made up by Paul; it was God's plan from the very beginning. Chapters 9 – 11 tackle this subject head on as Paul considers the place of the Jewish people in God's purposes.

## My own race



### Read Romans 9:1-5

-  *Why does Paul feel anguish in his heart?*
-  *What privileges do the Jewish people enjoy?*
-  *Is Christianity antisemitic?*

Paul feels a deep love for his fellow Jews. But that love takes the form of *anguish* because many Jews are missing out on the good news of Jesus the Messiah. The exodus, covenants, law, temple, and all the rich heritage and history they have all pointed to the coming of Jesus as the Messiah (as Paul has shown in chapters 1 – 8). But they have rejected him.

## God's true people

### Read Romans 9:6-9

-  *To what accusation is Paul responding?*
-  *Who are the true people of God?*

If many Jews are missing out on salvation, then have God's promises failed? *No*, says Paul. God is saving his people as promised, but the people he is saving are not defined by ethnicity.


In verse 6 Paul uses the term "Israel" in two senses: "Israel" = the ethnic people of Israel and "Israel" = the true people of God. Not all the ethnic group belong to the true people of God. What matters is faith in Christ.

Paul's reasoning reminds us that Abraham had many sons. So being a descendant of Abraham is not enough. In fact, being a descendant of Isaac (Abraham's son according to the promise) is not enough. What matters is what Isaac represents: faith in God's promises—the promises fulfilled in Jesus. Chapter 11 says that Gentiles believers have also been added to God's people. So God's people = believing Jews + believing Gentiles.

### TIME OUT

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### Read Galatians 4:21-31

-  *How does Paul use the same kind of argument here as he does in Romans 9:7-9?*

## Pray

Pray for the Jewish people. Ask God to bring many Jews to faith in Jesus.



# By him who calls

*Why are you a Christian? "Because I've put my faith in Christ," you might respond. Correct. That's what we see in Romans 3 – 4. But that raises a further question...*

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*Why did you put your faith in Christ?*

"Because the Spirit opened my eyes," you explain. But guess what? That raises yet another question: *Why did the Spirit open your eyes? Did you do something that made you worthy to receive his new life?* Paul answers this sticky question like this: "Not by works but by him who calls" (Romans 9:12).

## Read Romans 9:10-13

Two generations after Abraham, the blessing of being God's true people skipped the eldest son (Esau) and passed instead to the younger son (Jacob). What had Jacob done to deserve this? *Nothing*. We can be sure it had nothing to do with merit because God announced this before the two boys had even been born (v 11).

Ultimately the blessing of belonging to God's true people doesn't depend on what we do but on God's choice—what Paul calls "God's purpose in election". Note that love and hate in 12:13 are not emotions God feels, but the results of his actions—blessing to Jacob instead of Esau, belonging to God's people and not belonging.

"But how can this be fair?" you might ask. Good question. Paul addresses it head on.

## Read Romans 9:14-15

❓ *What is God's idea of fairness?*

For us justice = eternal condemnation, for that's what we really deserve (as we see in Romans 1 – 3). If justice were the only

consideration, then we would all be lost. But God is also merciful, and in his mercy he chose to save some (and remain just by condemning Jesus in our place at the cross, as we saw in 3:23-26).

## Read Romans 9:16-18

- ❓ *How certain would our salvation be if it depended on human desire or effort?*
- ❓ *What difference does it make to know that our salvation depends on God's mercy?*
- ❓ *What is the result of election, according to verse 17?*

If salvation depended on human desire or effort, then we would all be lost for ever. Because it depends on God's mercy, then those whom God chooses are saved, for sure, for ever.

## TIME OUT

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## Read Exodus 4:21 and 8:15

- ❓ *Who hardens Pharaoh's heart? What does this suggest about the relationship between God's sovereignty and human responsibility?*

## Apply

### Read Acts 18:9-11

- ❓ *How does election motivate evangelism?*
- ❓ *What difference will this make to your prayers and your life this week?*

# I get knocked down...

*We may not be physically persecuted as Christians in the West (yet), but the world is increasingly hostile to Christian values. What happens when we get knocked down?*

## What do you expect?

### Read Proverbs 24:15

- ❓ *What kind of persecution can a Christian experience today?*
  - in countries around the world?
  - closer to your home?
- ❓ *What are the two instructions the “unrighteous” receive in verse 15?*

The language of being plundered conjures up images of a thief lurking in the bushes, awaiting his chance to break and enter, and ransack the building—sadly, a common occurrence in many countries today.

- ❓ *What is the command to “the righteous” person (someone who is right with God through faith in Jesus Christ) in v 15?*
- ❓ *What might a righteous person expect in life today (v 15)?*
- ❓ *Can you think of any examples where Christians have been attacked, their homes destroyed or their lives ruined on account of violent people wanting to see their downfall?*

Jesus never promised an easy life for his followers. There are Christians who feel this pressure acutely today. And if we personally don't experience this kind of persecution, we can be sure that is not the norm. Christians remain heavily persecuted worldwide, even though in the Western world we have experienced relative freedom from such aggression in recent times.

### TIME OUT

### Read John 15:18-25

- ❓ *What comfort can being chosen (v 19) give you:*
  - when ridiculed for your faith?
  - when it seems the wicked are prosperous?

## ... but I get up again

### Read Proverbs 24:16

- ❓ *What assurance can a righteous person enjoy?*

The number seven in the Bible symbolises completeness. A Christian can be completely sure that the wicked will *never* win, but will ultimately stumble and fall. By contrast, despite the innumerable times that a Christian might get knocked down because of our faith, we will not remain down. Our pattern here is the one we follow. Our Lord Jesus fell at the hands of the wicked, but heroes again. In Christ we see God's promises fulfilled.

## Pray

Pray that you would stand firm in the face of persecution. Pray for Christians who are in the midst of persecution today, and for their abusers and attackers to heed God's warning.



# The riches of his glory

*Why did God create a world that would end in judgment for some people? We can't fully know the answer. But Paul gives a hint...*

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## The rights of God

### Read Romans 9:19-21

- ❓ *What's the accusation being made against God?*
- ❓ *How does Paul respond to this accusation?*

God and humanity are not equals. We cannot sit in judgment on God's plans. He is the eternal Creator, and we are his finite creatures. There is an infinite gulf between us. That means:

- we have no right to judge our Creator.
- God has every right to do what he wants with his creatures.

### TIME OUT

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Paul alludes to a visit that the prophet Jeremiah made to the potter's house.

### Read Jeremiah 18:1-6

- ❓ *How do these verses reinforce Paul's point in Romans 9:19-21?*

## The glory of God

### Read Romans 9:22-23

Paul's argument is this: God has chosen to allow some people to remain in their sin so the rightness or righteousness of his judgment might be evident. (Even though these people deserve wrath, God has shown great patience towards them in delaying that wrath.) God has chosen other people (who

also deserve wrath) to be saved through his mercy. Why has God planned things in this way? "To make the riches of his glory known." Only when we see God's judgment in action do we understand the depths of his grace and the wonder of our salvation.

- ❓ *How do you feel about Paul's explanation here?*
- ❓ *What questions remain for you as you grapple with this teaching?*

## Pray

Thank God for his patience towards our rebellious world and thank him for his saving mercy towards you.

## The mission of God

### Read Romans 9:24-29

This section on the mission of God is part of Paul's explanation of why God's promises to Israel have not failed (v 6). It was always God's plan to call both Jews and Gentiles to be his people (v 24). The prophets said that God would include Gentiles (v 25-26) and save only a remnant of Jews (v 27-29). So God's promises have not failed: quite the opposite.

- By saving Jews by faith God has fulfilled his promise to save a remnant.
- By saving Gentiles by faith God has fulfilled his promise to bring blessing to all nations.

# Christ is near

*God has fulfilled his promises by saving both some Jews and some Gentiles by faith in Christ.*

Is that right, Paul? Even though that means irreligious Gentiles are right with God (“have obtained righteousness”) while religious Jews miss out? *Spot on*, says Paul...

## Read Romans 9:30-33

Paul’s not talking about every Gentile here, but about those with faith in Christ. Nor is he talking about every Jew, but only about those without faith (see 10:16). The focus is on these two groups because Paul is addressing two questions:

- *How come some Jews are missing out on salvation (9:6)?*  
**Answer:** Because they’re trying to be right with God through law-keeping, which never works.
- *How come some Gentiles are being included in salvation?*  
**Answer:** Because they’re right with God by faith in Christ.

“But surely many Jews are extremely devout? Do they *really* miss out on salvation?”

## Read Romans 10:1-4

Yes, *devout people can miss out*, says Paul. Zeal is only good if it’s zeal for the right things. Imagine you need to cross a river. There’s a bridge which represents Christ. The best option is confidently to walk across the bridge (to trust in Christ). But if the choice is between hesitantly walking over the bridge or confidently attempting to jump, then hesitant faith is best. No amount of passion will save you if that passion is

misplaced. And the river is so wide that no one can possibly jump across.

It’s easy to be intimidated by religious people. But are they proudly trying to establish their own righteousness or are they humbly submitting to God’s righteousness (v 3)?

## Read Romans 10:5-13

- ❓ *How do we not draw near to Christ?*
- ❓ *How do we draw near to Christ?*

We don’t have work our way up to God or discover Christ in the depths through spiritual exercises or moral endeavour. Instead, Christ comes near to us through his word. All we need to do is trust that word and entrust ourselves to Christ. So ultimately Gentiles and Jews are in exactly the same situation: “there is no difference” (v 12). Whoever you are, you can be saved by calling on the name of Jesus.

## Re-read Romans 10:9

- ❓ *Paul gives us two things to do. How are they alike? What does declaring with our mouth add to believing in our heart?*

## Apply

- ❓ *Every time God’s word is read or preached, Christ is near. How should that shape your attitude to reading our Bibles and listening to preaching?*



# The logic of mission

*People need Christ. But how do they get him? Salvation doesn't require some heroic task we must complete.*

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We don't need to reach new heights or explore profound depths (Romans 10:6-7). The hero is Jesus, and Jesus comes near through God's word. The benefits of Jesus are conveyed through his word when people respond with faith (v 8-9). This truth creates an important piece of missionary logic.

## The need to hear

### Read Romans 10:13-15

**?** *What's the chain of cause and effect in these verses?*

Follow the logic in the steps below:

- People are saved by calling on Christ's name (v 13).
- To call on Christ's name people must believe in him (v 14).
- To believe in him people must hear about him (v 14).
- To hear about him someone must tell them (v 14).
- For someone to tell others they must be sent (v 15).
- God has sent us to tell others about Christ (v 15).

The conclusion is this: if people are going to be saved, then we must obey God's call to speak. "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news" is our commission! God says it's a beautiful thing when we tell people about Jesus.

## Apply

By speaking of "preaching" here, Paul doesn't just mean delivering a sermon. He means any communication of the gospel using words—a conversation, a Bible study, an invitation, an email.

**?** *What could you do to tell someone about Jesus today?*

## More than hearing

Hearing about Jesus is vital if people are going to be saved. But hearing is not enough.

### Read Romans 10:16-21

Paul is considering why some Jews miss out on salvation. Was the problem that they failed to hear? No, they saw God in creation and heard his word in the Old Testament Scriptures. (This is what Psalm 19, quoted in verse 18, teaches.) So was the problem that God's word failed (9:6)? No, it's not a failure of God's word as God's word is powerful to save (10:13). It was a failure to respond with faith.

## Pray

To whom might you speak of Jesus today? Pray that God would give them faith as they hear the word.



# A faithful remnant

*Paul was a Jew through and through with a passion for the salvation of his people. But a difficult question hung over him.*

## Read Romans 11:1

❓ *What's question does Paul anticipate?*

Paul anticipates this question because he's just said many Jews are missing out on being right with God (9:31-33). So have they been replaced in God's affections by Gentiles (9:30)?

## Read Romans 11:1-6

❓ *What's the answer Paul gives?*

Paul's answer is an emphatic *No!* God is still committed to Jews. *But what's the proof?*

- **Exhibit A: Paul himself**  
Paul is a Jew who is now right with God through faith in Christ.
- **Exhibit B: Elijah**  
The prophet Elijah spoke for God at the time when King Ahab was leading the people of Israel in the worship of Baal. Elijah once complained that he was all on his own—no one else was faithful to God. But it wasn't true. God was able to point to 7,000 faithful Israelites.

### TIME OUT

Read the story of Elijah's complaint for yourself in **1 Kings 19:1-18** and reflect on God's responses.

Paul describes those Jews who trust in Christ as "a remnant" (Romans 11:5). It's a word the Old Testament prophets often used. As they

condemned the Israelites for their infidelity towards God, they also said that a faithful remnant would remain who would become God's true people. Paul says that this promise is being fulfilled in the church—made up of both Jews *and* Gentiles who are faithful because they have faith in Christ.

But ultimately the remnant is not a sign of human faithfulness but of divine faithfulness. Remnant people are "chosen by grace" (v 5). They are not saved by their faithfulness to God but by his grace (v 6).

## Read Romans 11:7-10

God allowed those who rejected his grace to become hardened in their sin. But in his grace he chose some: his elect. The word "elect" in verse 7 is the same word as "chosen" in verse 5. God chose to renew and reshape their hearts so that they turned to him in faith. This is what happens when someone becomes a Christian—whether Jew or Gentile. Before we can please God, the Holy Spirit must give us new life and new desires, as Paul says in Romans 8:5-8.

## Apply

Do you feel alone in your home or workplace? Does your church seem to be alone in your neighbourhood? Remember that God has his elect there, chosen by grace. At some point, when they hear the gospel (perhaps for the hundredth time), they will respond with Spirit-given faith.





# Wild branches

*Is there still hope for the Jewish people? Yes, says Paul. In the present, Jewish people are being saved by faith in Christ. And in the future many more may be saved...*

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## The story isn't over yet

### Read Romans 11:11-16

- ❓ *What's the question that Paul anticipates people asking?*
- ❓ *How does he answer it?*

The rejection of Jesus by many Jews means that the gospel has gone out beyond Judaism to the Gentiles (v 11). That's what happened in miniature in Paul's own ministry. When he arrived in a new city, he would start preaching in the synagogue. Only when he was thrown out would he go to the Gentiles.

So the rejection of the gospel by Jews led to blessing for Gentiles. Paul then invites us (v 12, 15) to imagine what blessing the inclusion of Jews might lead to! Perhaps Paul has in mind a worldwide revival.

In the meantime, Paul takes the gospel message to Gentiles in the hope that their inclusion might arouse Jews to come to God through faith in Jesus (v 13-14). "Christian" means "belonging to the Christ" or to the Messiah. Christianity is therefore a constant reminder to Judaism of its Messiah.

## Don't be arrogant

### Read Romans 11:17-21

At this point Paul's Gentile readers (including many of us) might be feeling pretty smug, since God has accepted us (albeit by grace rather than any merit in us).

- ❓ *How does Paul counter any sense of superiority?*

Even in its current state of rejection, Judaism as a corporate entity continues to have a special place in the story of salvation. Individual unbelieving Jews may be like broken off branches (v 17), but Judaism as a corporate entity continues to be the holy root from which God's people (believing Jews and Gentiles) have grown (v 16). God has not replaced Judaism with the church, but continued Judaism *within* the church. This is why Paul has been at pains to underline that we can never boast in ourselves but only in Christ (see 3:27-28 and 5:1-5)

## Gospel hope

### Read Romans 11:22-24

The story of Israel shouldn't make us feel smug. Instead it should...

- make us rejoice in God's kindness to us.
- motivate us to remain faithful to God.

There's also hope here for evangelism among Jews: if God can graft wild branches (Gentiles) into his people, then he can re-graft cultivated branches (Jews). The story isn't over yet...

## ⬆️ Pray

Pray for the work of evangelism among Jewish people.

# All Israel

*These chapters talk a lot about the future of both Jews and Gentiles. The rejection of Judaism is neither total nor final. But what's really at stake is the character of God.*

Can God be trusted? Can we trust his promises? Do his ways make sense?

## Read Romans 11:25-27

- ❓ *What's the mystery that Paul is revealing to his readers?*
- ❓ *What do you think he means by the phrase "all Israel will be saved"?*

Paul has used "Israel" to mean both "ethnic Jews" and "God's true people" (= both believing Jews and believing Gentiles). Paul uses both senses in 9:6: "Not all who are descended from Israel are Israel". That is, not all Israel (ethnic Jews) are part of Israel (God's true people).

So in 11:26 "all Israel" could mean God's true people—Jews and Gentiles (2:28-29; 4:11-12 and Galatians 6:16). When the full number of Gentiles have been saved, then God's people will include people from every nation.

Or "all Israel" could mean ethnic Judaism. Paul could be saying that one day many Jews will be saved (the quotes in Romans 11:26-27 promise repentance and forgiveness) so that all the elect Jews or Judaism as a corporate entity will again be part of God's people.

## Read Romans 11:28-32

At the moment unbelieving Jews are both enemies (when they oppose the gospel) and loved (because they're the holy root from which salvation came, v 16). The

disobedience of the Jews serves to display God's mercy all the more clearly when he moves them to faith and repentance (v 31)—just as with everyone else (v 32).

## Failed promises?

Paul's central claim in Romans is that we are right with God *only* by faith in Jesus. But many Jews have rejected faith in Jesus. Does this mean God's promises to Israel have failed?

- No, because God is free to choose who he saves (chapter 9).
- No, because the real problem is Israel's lack of faith (chapter 10).
- No, because God is saving Jews as they come to faith in Jesus (chapter 11).

Think back over what we have seen in Romans 9 – 11.

- ❓ *What have we seen that humbles you?*
- ❓ *What have we seen that excites you?*

## Pray

### Read Romans 11:33-36

Turn these verses, one phrase at a time, into confession and praise.



# When your enemy falls...

The verses today follow on from last Sunday's proverb, in which we saw the inevitable stumbling of the wicked.

## God's heart

### Read Proverbs 24:17

- ❓ *What are God's people specifically called not to do (v 17)?*
- ❓ *What is the difference between gloating over a person's downfall and being pleased that evil and wickedness have been stopped?*
- ❓ *Why does the proverb mention the "heart" in a person's response to such stumbling?*

The heart is a way of describing a person's desire. Thus, for a person's heart to find joy in the fall of a fellow sinful human shows up something dark within us that might feel natural but is far from God's desires.

### TIME OUT

### Read Ezekiel 33:11

- ❓ *What is God's desire?*

As Jesus hung on the cross, he prayed for his Father to forgive his executioners. What they were doing was heinous beyond comprehension, and would, without repentance, lead to eternal devastation. And yet Jesus did not gloat over how they would suffer but prayed for them. Jesus, the image of the invisible God, showed his heart for the lost.

- ❓ *When did you last pray for someone who had hurt you, or for someone you saw on the news who had done evil?*

- ❓ *How can you encourage yourself to make this a regular part of your prayer life?*

## Vengeance is mine

### Read Proverbs 24:18

- ❓ *What is the surprise in this verse?*
- ❓ *Who is it that brings justice ("wrath") on the wicked?*
- ❓ *What does this verse and Romans 12:17-21 encourage us to do, knowing that only the Lord has the right to avenge?*

We are to leave the how and the when to the Lord, who does not delight in the judgment of the wicked. In fact, leaving judgment to the Lord will show that we trust that he will punish justly. Gloating will show that we have not grasped that God will punish evil in his way, and may even result in God withholding judgment in order, presumably, to show us the error of our ways.

## Apply

- ❓ *Do you need to repent of times when you have seen or heard about people who have met their downfall, and gloated? What can your response be going forward?*

## Pray

Pray that your heart reflects God's own heart in the way you view evildoers.



# In view of God's mercy

*The gospel of Jesus brings with it obligations. But this is not where it begins.*

## Viewing God's mercy

### Read Romans 12:1

What comes first is understanding God's mercy towards us. In Romans 12 Paul starts to describe how the church is to live. But we're already 11 chapters into the letter!

- ❓ *What have you learned about God's mercy to you so far in Romans?*

Those who are right with God through faith in Christ have a new future (chapters 1 – 4), have a new life (chapters 5 – 8) and belong to a new people (chapters 9 – 11). We don't earn this—it's by grace. But it has implications for how we live.

### ▼ Apply

- ❓ *How can you keep God's mercy in view today? This week?*

## Responding to mercy

Our response to God's mercy is to worship.

### Re-read Romans 12:1

- ❓ *What are the characteristics of our worship in response to God's mercy?*

Our worship is:

- **bodily and "living"** = involving our whole lives
- **communal** = as all of us together offer "our bodies" (plural), we create a shared

life that is one singular sacrifice to God

- **"holy" (or consecrated) and "pleasing"** = we bring pleasure to God as we serve him
- **"true" or "spiritual" (literally "rational")** = the logical response to God's mercy.

### ▼ Apply

- ❓ *What's the connection between our corporate worship on a Sunday and our living worship throughout the week?*
- ❓ *How should the first fuel the second?*

## Renewing our minds

### Read Romans 12:2

- ❓ *What does it mean to conform to the pattern of this world?*
- ❓ *What does it mean to renew our minds?*

Our transformation begins with our minds. This doesn't simply mean acquiring more information about God. It means a radical change in the way we think about everything. We stop thinking like the world around us and start thinking about life in the light of God's mercy.

We start to think of God as a loving Father rather than a harsh kill-joy. We think of being right with God as a gift rather than an attainment. And so we think of God's will as "good, pleasing and perfect" rather than as an unwelcome burden.



# Think different

*Who would you pick to be in your church or home group? Of course we don't get to pick; God does. And he's carefully selected the people in your church for your good.*

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Romans 12:2 has called on us to change our thinking, and immediately we are challenged to think in a different way about the people God has put us next to.

## Read Romans 12:3

- ❓ *What do you think the phrase “sober judgment” means?*
- ❓ *What do you think Paul means by the “measure of faith” (ESV)?*

If your faith is stronger, it's because God gave you that measure of faith. It's not something to be proud of. Faith is not a substance we accumulate or a confidence we can summon in ourselves through our own effort. Faith is trusting in God. Big faith is simply the recognition that we have a big God. So we can't boast about having lots of faith; we can only boast in a big God.

## ▼ Apply

- ❓ *What measure of faith do you think you have been given?*
- ❓ *Think of two people who you think may have a greater or smaller measure of faith than you. How do you think of them?*

If you look down on other people, then you haven't understand how faith and grace work—so perhaps you're not as mature as you think!

## Read Romans 12:4-6

- ❓ *What is Paul's big idea here, and what does he want us to do about it?*

The church is like a human body. Just as the body is made up of different limbs and organs with different functions, so a church is made up of many individuals with different roles. So our differences make us stronger and more effective—when we work together.

## ▼ Apply

- *We need you!* Your contribution may be different from that of other people, *but it matters*. So don't feel inferior.
- *You need us!* Your abilities are not better; they're just different. Plus your abilities are not your achievements—they're God's gifts given “according to the grace given to each of us”. So don't feel superior.

## Giving our all

### Read Romans 12:6-8

There are two warnings implicit in this list. Don't complain that other people are not doing what you do. And don't complain that you can't do what others can do.

Church life is not a competition for roles or recognition. God's gifts are given not so we can be self-serving but self-giving. It is not about self-fulfilment but about building up others in the body of Christ.

### Re-read Romans 12:8

- ❓ *Are you serving your church generously, diligently and cheerfully?*



# A gorgeous gathering

*Though sometimes the culture of a church can turn toxic, most of the time a local church is a beautiful thing.*

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There is nowhere else in your neighbourhood where such a diverse group of people come together as family. Paul paints a picture of this beautiful community life in today's reading.

## Read Romans 12:9-16

Think about each of the characteristics of a beautiful church that Paul identifies. In each case consider these questions:

- ❓ *What does this characteristic look like in your church? (To clarify what each characteristic looks like, try to identify its opposite.)*
- ❓ *How could you better embody this characteristic?*

1. Love must be sincere.
2. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.
3. Be devoted to one another in love.
4. Honour one another above yourselves.
5. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord.
6. Be joyful in hope.
7. Be patient in affliction.
8. Be faithful in prayer.
9. Share with the Lord's people who are in need.
10. Practise hospitality.
11. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.
12. Rejoice with those who rejoice.
13. Mourn with those who mourn.

14. Live in harmony with one another.
15. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

## Pray

As you review the life of your church, pick three things for which you want to give thanks.

Pick three things you want to pray for and ask God to grow them—either in yourself or in your church.

## Apply

Everything in these verses is a call to practical action. So knowing what we should do is clear. When it comes to application the big question is *how?* *How* do we love people from the heart? *How* do we hate evil when our culture often celebrates it? *How* do we honour others when we long to be acclaimed? *How* do we maintain our spiritual zeal? *How* can we be patient in affliction? *How* do we keep on praying when no answer seems to come? *How* can we bless people who are unkind to us? *How* can we live in harmony with people who annoy us? *How* can we avoid pride without feeling proud of our humility?

## Re-read Romans 12:1-2

- ❓ *What answer to these questions can we find in verses 1-2?*





# How can good beat evil?

Sooner or later everyone finds themselves wronged in some way. Usually these experiences are simply annoying and don't leave behind lasting harm.

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But some people become victims of crime, bullying, betrayal or persecution. We are vulnerable people in a hostile world, and being a Christian can mean suffering from increased hostility. Suffering is part of being united to Christ (Romans 8:17).

## Looking for trouble

### Read Romans 12:17-18

- ❓ *We can't always avoid trouble, but how might we make it more likely or exacerbate it?*
- ❓ *What could you do "as far as it depends on you" to minimise conflict?*

## Looking to bless

### Read Romans 12:19-21

- ❓ *What should you not do?*
- ❓ *What should you do?*
- ❓ *How might you be tempted to take revenge?*

For some revenge means throwing punches or shouting abuse. But it can also involve doing as little as possible or withdrawing in a sulk (being "passive aggressive"). Others talk behind people's backs, taking revenge on a person's reputation.

Paul not only calls us to stop taking revenge but to start blessing those who persecute us—to "overcome evil with good". Verse 20 gives some practical examples of what this might involve.

- ❓ *How could you bless those who make your life difficult?*

## Looking to God

It can be appropriate to turn to the relevant authorities when we're wronged (as we shall see in 13:1-7). But that doesn't always resolve the situation.

### Re-read Romans 12:19

- ❓ *What's our ultimate hope for justice?*
- ❓ *How does this help us endure suffering now?*

God's justice will be done—if not in this life, then in the next. That's good news, unless you've ever been selfish or unkind—and that includes every one of us! The problem with crying out for vengeance is that we've all wronged other people.

God always avenges wrong. For unbelievers that takes place at the final judgment (Romans 2:5). For believers it has taken place at the cross. At the cross God justly avenged the wrong we have done by judging Jesus in our place (3:25-26). We can show mercy because we've received mercy (12:1).

## ⬆️ Pray

### Read Matthew 5:43-44

Here's one way to bless those who make life difficult for us—pray for them.

# God's strange servants

*How should Christians relate to the state? It's something that many Christians struggle with, but Paul gives some clear principles in today's passage.*

## Read Romans 13:1-7

- 🔍 Find all the commands in these verses.
- 🔍 Now identify all the reasons for these commands.

## Submit to the state

We're to "be subject to the governing authorities" (v 1, 5). We're do what the state defines as right (v 3) and avoid what it defines as wrong (v 4). Verse 7 expands these principles to every level of society—including the police, civil servants, government agencies and schools.

Remember Paul himself had a run-in with the state on a number of occasions. He'd been arrested, beaten, and imprisoned simply for preaching the gospel. Yet he still commands submission to political authorities. *Why?*

## The reasons

God has established the state. Three times in verses 1-2 Paul says the state is "established by God". Whether they recognise it or not, our politicians are God's servants (v 4, 6). So to rebel against the state is to rebel against God (v 2). By respecting authorities and paying taxes we're honouring God.

But there's another, practical, reason why we should submit: because the state punishes wrongdoers. In verses 3, 4 and 5 Paul says we should obey the state because otherwise

we're likely to be fined or imprisoned. God in his kindness has given us the state to restrain evil. It may be difficult to grasp, but even a corrupt state is better than no state at all—anarchy.

So why should I, for example, obey the speed limit? First, the God reason. The police officer with the speed gun is God's servant, whom I should honour "as a matter of conscience" (v 5). Second, the practical reason. I may get fined for breaking the limit: "because of possible punishment" (v 5).

### TIME OUT

But what about when the state is evil?

1. **Read Acts 5:29.** While we should obey the state whenever possible, we should disobey the state whenever necessary.
2. Compare Romans 12:19 and 13:4. While we should look to the state to avenge injustice on God's behalf, our ultimate hope for justice is God.

## Pray

Pray that your political leaders would commend those who do right (v 3) and punish those who do wrong (v 4).

### Read 1 Timothy 2:1-4

Pray that your political leaders would allow Christians to proclaim the gospel freely so that people might come to a knowledge of the truth.





# The law of love

*We often think of laws as an unwelcome restriction or a necessary evil. On the other hand, we think love is great. But law and love are really two sides of the same coin.*

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## People of the law

### Read Romans 13:7-8

Paul has just said we should give what we owe—whether that’s taxes, revenue, respect or honour (v 7). Verse 8 sums it up: “Let no debt remain outstanding”. But there is one obligation that never ends—the obligation to love one another.

### Read Romans 13:9-10

Love is the summary and fulfilment of the law of Moses. Every other law is really an application of the command to love. Law is simply love getting down to earth.

#### TIME OUT

These verses help us read the Old Testament properly. The law of Moses described how Israel were to love God and one another in an agrarian economy before the coming of Christ. Our context is different—both our social context and our relationship to the coming of Christ. So we no longer obey many of the ceremonial and civil aspects of the law of Moses. But the law of love remains the same. Moreover, by showing what love required from the Israelites back then, the law of Moses can inform us as we work out what love requires from us today.

## Apply

### Read 1 John 3:16-18

- ❓ *What did love look like for Jesus?*
- ❓ *Is there someone today you could love with actions rather than simply with words?*

## People of the day

### Read Romans 13:11-14

Paul is talking here about the coming of a new world at the return of Christ. He describes our present age as “the night” and the coming of the new age as the dawning of “the day”. He’s playing on the idea that crimes and misdemeanours are often committed under the cover of darkness. Christians are to wake up and live as people of the day—behaving in a way that is consistent with God’s coming new world.

- ❓ *What behaviours are we to avoid?*
- ❓ *What behaviours are we to adopt?*

Notice that verses 11-14 are all a rationale for the call to “do this” in verse 11, and “this” is the life of love described in verses 8-10.

## Pray

Pray you would have the opportunity to show love to others today, both in big ways and in the small everyday interactions you have with them.

# Fretting and fearing

Today we will see a call not to fret over the wicked but to fear those who can bring justice.

## Evil effects

### Read Proverbs 24:19-20

- ❓ What are the instructions of verses 19?
- ❓ Who are these instructions for?

Last week in verses 17-18, we were warned against one type of response to the inevitable downfall of the wicked: *gloating*. Today we are warned against two quite opposite responses to evildoers: *fretting*, or compulsive worrying, and *envy*.

- ❓ Why might a believer “fret” or “be envious of the wicked” even when we know about their ultimate downfall?

It is a part of how God has ordered his world that no sin is so personal that it does not affect others. So the effects of some wicked act might be felt for days, months or even a lifetime. You might be living now in the shadow of someone’s sinful actions towards you personally, even if it was years ago and the perpetrator is long gone. However, there are two important truths to hold on to.

- ❓ What is the encouragement (v 20)?
- ❓ Why is that sometimes difficult to believe?

There will be no eternal reward for those who reject Christ, and their destination is not to be envied.

### TIME OUT

### Read Psalm 37

## Evil’s end

### Read Proverbs 24:21-22

- ❓ Who are we to fear?
- ❓ Why?
- ❓ What does verse 22 tell us about justice from the Lord and his delegated authorities?

To fear God is not a cowering terror but a humility and submission to God as our divine authority. God delegates his authority to the king; and through the king, and the apparatus of state, he enacts his judgment on evil—or at least part of it.

- ❓ Why should this help us not to “fret because of evildoers,” or be “envious” and “join in” with rebelling against the Lord and his delegated authorities?

## Apply

- ❓ How does this encourage you to be a good citizen?

## Pray

Praise God that you can trust him for justice, just as you can trust that the justice that we deserve to bear for our sins has been paid by Christ, our substitute, on the cross.

Pray for those who cry for justice. Pray that they would find peace in seeing that God is the ultimate judge and that justice will be served in this life or the next.



# Church wars

*It's a sad reality that many people view Christians as hopelessly divided and fond of picking fights with each other. So what should we do when we disagree?*

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## When to let it go

### Read Romans 14:1

We shouldn't quarrel over "disputable issues" or "opinions". A "disputable issue" is something over which Christians can disagree without compromising the gospel.

### Read Romans 14:2-6

- ❓ *What were the disputable issues in Rome over which Christians should have agreed to disagree?*
- ❓ *Can you think of examples of disputable issues today over which Christians should agree to disagree?*

## When to take a stand

Paul took an implacable stand against false teaching. Paul was even willing publicly to confront the apostle Peter in Galatians 2:11-14. There are clearly at least two scenarios when we may need to take a stand (even if that does mean "quarrelling").

1. When people reject the central truths of the faith. The New Testament is full of commands to oppose false teaching which undermines the message of salvation in Christ (see 1 Timothy 1:3-5).
2. When people turn secondary issues into primary issues. Paul saw circumcision as a secondary issue (Galatians 6:15), and he was happy to circumcise Timothy to help reach unbelieving Jews (Acts 16:1-3). But Paul refused to circumcise

Titus when people insisted that circumcision was a necessary part of being a Christian—that is, when people falsely made it a primary issue (Galatians 2:3).

## No condemnation

### Read Romans 14:4, 7-12

God is the master of other Christians—not you (v 4). They are to live to please the Lord, who died for them (v 7-9)—not to please you. Other Christians must stand before God to give an account (v 10-12)—so you shouldn't, as it were, make them stand before you to give an account.

What's more, God enables them to stand before him (v 4)—not necessarily because they're in the right but because they're in Christ (5:1-2). We must not condemn those for whom there is now no condemnation (8:1). Other Christians don't need to win your approval because they already have God's approval. We can live with differences because we all live "in view of God's mercy" (12:1).

## Pray

Pray for those in your church with whom you disagree.



# When right is wrong

*Do you ever feel judged by other Christians? Do you ever judge others? It's tempting to want to be proved right. But Paul shows that there may be bigger issues at stake.*

## Loving your family

### Read Romans 14:13-23

Look carefully at verses 14, 20 and 23. The same activity can be ok for one Christian and not for another. If someone is convinced something is wrong, then for them it is wrong. The activity itself may be ok, but if they think it's wrong and still do it, they're choosing to disobey God.

Now look carefully at verses 15 and 21-22. This means it can also be wrong for you to do this activity—even though you're (rightly) persuaded that it's ok.

Paul is clear that Christians are free to eat meat or not and keep the Sabbath or not. We tend to think of weak Christians as those who are not very strict or disciplined, but here the weak Christians are the over-strict ones, who don't fully understand the freedom they have in Christ.

But Paul's main point is that we're not to encourage other people to act contrary to their conscience. Because there's freedom, we're free to eat, and we're free not to eat. So we can use our freedom not to eat to avoid pressuring a brother or sister to act against their conscience (v 15). Forgoing your rights in this way is pleasing to God (v 18).

## Apply

- What freedoms have you forgone, or could you forgo, for the sake of others?

## What's really at stake

### Re-read Romans 14:15 and 20

If we lead other Christians to act against their conscience, we may “destroy someone for whom Christ died” (v 15), and we may “destroy the work of God” (v 20). That's serious! If we encourage someone to ignore their conscience, we're switching off the inner warning system that God has given them to combat sin. Christ died to lead that person out of sin and condemnation, and now we're leading them back into sin and condemnation.

### TIME OUT

There is a time for Christians to correct and disciple one another.

### Read Galatians 6:1-6

- What does Paul call us to do in these verses?
- What safeguards does he commend to ensure we do not overstep our role?

## Pray

Pray that you would be sensitive to the Christians you spend time with, and that you would get to know them so well, that you would know how to live to encourage and help them best.



# The same attitude

*Paul is still concerned with how we handle disagreement. In today's passage he gives us more reasons to bear with one another.*

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## The power of Christ

### Read Romans 15:1-2

- ❓ *What should we do, according to these verses?*
- ❓ *What should we not do?*

Often our sinful inclination is to put other people down to defend our rights. Paul calls us to do the exact opposite: not to please ourselves and instead to build others up.

## The pattern of Christ

### Read Romans 15:3-5

- ❓ *Who is our model, and what is our motive for putting others first?*

Despite being God's anointed King, Jesus did not please himself. Instead he sacrificed himself to build us up. He laid aside his rights to make us right with God.

#### TIME OUT

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In verse 3 Paul uses a quote from the Old Testament to exhort us to imitate Christ, God's ultimate King. In verse 4 he comments on this. Although the Scriptures were "written in the past", they were also "written to teach us". They speak in a personal way with contemporary relevance and power through the work of the Spirit.

## The praise of Christ

### Read Romans 15:6-12

- ❓ *What happens when we accept one another and build one another up instead of insisting on our rights or our opinions?*
- ❓ *What happens if we follow Christ's example and give ourselves to serve others?*

Instead of our churches having competing voices fighting for supremacy, we join our voices to sing of the supremacy of Christ.

The main division in the church in Rome was between Jews and Gentiles. So Paul uses Old Testament quotes to show that God's goal is to create a people from every nation united in his praise. Just as in a choir different voices combine to produce rich harmonies, so our differences combine in Christ to create something beautiful, to God's praise. Our corporate worship is a powerful celebration of our unity-in-diversity and a powerful sign of the reconciling power of the cross.

## Pray

Use the words of verse 13 to pray for people in your church whom you find difficult. And use these words to pray for the unity of your church.



# Ambition

*What's your ambition? To represent your country at the Olympics? To succeed in business or climb the career ladder? To find love or have a family?*

Paul tells us why he wrote to the Romans, and, in so doing, he reveals his ambition.

## Read Romans 15:14 and 23-24

*What is Paul ambitious for?*

Paul didn't write to sort out some kind of problem in the church. So why did he write at all? Back in 1:9-13 Paul says he plans to visit the church in Rome. But this is not to be a sightseeing trip. Instead, he wants to preach the gospel among them (1:14-15). But Paul's goal is bigger even than that: Paul wants to make Rome a stepping-stone for a new mission to Spain (15:24).

In this passage Paul talks about his duty and ambition. In one sense it's very personal. But he also wants the church in Rome to share this duty and this ambition. He wants every Christian to feel this missionary passion to take the gospel to the ends of the earth.

## Our gospel duty

### Read Romans 15:15-16

Paul describes proclaiming the gospel as a "priestly duty". It's the image of a priest going into the temple to offer a sacrifice. Christ has made atonement through his sacrifice once for all. So for Christians what priests and sacrifices mean has been transformed:

- The priest is every Christian.
- The temple is the presence of God.
- The offerings are new Christians.

## Read Romans 15:17

*How does Paul feel about this new kind of priestly service?*

## Our gospel ambition

### Read Romans 15:18-22

Paul's ambition is to preach Christ in new places. This passion has borne remarkable fruit all around the Mediterranean. But then Paul says that this is actually "what Christ has accomplished through me ... through the power of the Spirit of God". That's because this ambition is Christ's own ambition for his people.

## Apply

- In what ways are you fulfilling your duty to proclaim the gospel?*
- What are you doing to support the proclamation of the gospel in new places?*
- How are you doing at proclaiming the gospel where you live?*



# The struggle to reconcile

*Paul's big plan is to proclaim Christ in Spain. But first he's going to make a massive detour. Why?*

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## Via Jerusalem...

### Read Romans 15:23-29

- ❓ *Can you work out Paul's travel plans?*
- ❓ *Can you work out the thinking behind this enormous detour?*

Paul really wants to come to Rome and he really, really wants to go Spain. But he's about to head in the opposite direction. That's because he's made a collection among some of the Gentile churches for the needy Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. He's about to go to Jerusalem to deliver this money. Only then will he go to Spain via Rome.

## ... with love

### Read Romans 15:30-33

- ❓ *What do you think lies behind Paul's odd prayer requests here?*

Paul is heading to Jerusalem with a big gift for the church. He prays for safety from unbelievers. That's understandable. In fact, we discover in Acts 21 – 23 that Paul ended up being arrested in Jerusalem and coming to Rome in chains. But Paul also prays that the church will receive his gift favourably. And that is odd—because we don't normally worry about whether needy people will accept a gift. What's going on?

Paul has preached the gospel to the Gentiles. He's said that Jesus is not just the Jewish Messiah but the Saviour of the

world. He's also said that Gentile converts don't need to become Jewish and be circumcised—faith in Christ is all they need because Christ has done everything needed. This has been what the letter to the Romans has been all about.

But not everyone agrees. What Paul calls “my struggle” is his battle to get Jewish Christians to accept Gentile converts (Romans 15:30). So Paul has collected money from Gentile churches for the Jewish church to bring them together. It is not a foregone conclusion that this gift will be well received. Paul hopes to come to Rome “with joy”, but he might end up coming in sorrow (v 32).

Paul's prayer is that the collection will be a sign of gospel unity. Paul's fear is that it will become a sign of disunity.

## Apply

Paul has a strong commitment to gospel unity. He's literally going out of his way to be reconciled to other Christians.

- ❓ *What might this mean for you personally?*
- ❓ *How does your church express gospel unity with other churches, both locally and throughout the world?*

Pray for those associations now.

# It's all about mission

*The Bible is all about mission: God's mission to bring salvation to the world through Christ and our mission to spread that good news to all nations.*

## Read Romans 16:1-16 and 21-23

- ❓ *What strikes you about this list of people?*
- ❓ *What have they done or what are they doing?*
- ❓ *Are there any with points of connection with your life?*

The names suggest a range of ethnic backgrounds. There's also a mix of men and women. As the “director of public works”, Erastus would have been a high-ranking citizen (v 23), while Phoebe was in a position to be a “benefactor” (v 2). As tentmakers (Acts 18:1-3), Priscilla and Aquila had a lower status, while others had names common among slaves. But all these people are brought together by the gospel and a shared desire to serve Christ. They have given money, taken risks, opened homes, been imprisoned, remained faithful, and worked hard because they share Paul's passion to proclaim Christ.

## Read Romans 16:17-20

Not everyone who calls themselves “Christian” shares this passion for Christ. Despite all that Paul has said about the importance of unity in chapters 14 – 15, he wants us to watch out for false teachers.

## Read Romans 16:25-27

The prayer at the end of Romans is full of echoes of its beginning. In 1:1-5 Paul says he is set apart for the *gospel* of God, which is regarding his Son ... *Jesus Christ* our Lord,

who was foretold through his *prophets* in the Holy Scriptures (literally “*writings*”), to be made known to all the Gentiles (or “*nations*”), so that they could experience the *obedience that comes from faith*.

We find the same big ideas at the end of the letter. Romans is about calling the nations to faith by proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ. This mission was promised in “the prophetic writings”. The Christian life is all about mission because the Bible is all about mission. Mission is not just Paul's personal version of Christianity or a specialist interest—it's central to the Bible story. The stories of Abraham, Moses, David and the prophets come to their climax in your church as people from all nations come to the obedience of faith.

## Apply

- ❓ *What you have learnt from reading Romans that you want to put it into practice? Try to write down three very specific things.*

## Pray

What you have learnt from reading Romans that you want to turn into praise?

Finish your prayers by saying (out loud if you can) the words of Romans 16:25-27 for yourself and your church.





# Going straight

*God loves justice, as today's proverbs show—and we are called to love justice too.*

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## Say it as it is

### Read Proverbs 24:23-25

- ❓ *How do you feel when you see injustice in the world?*
- ❓ *Today, one incentive for judges to be impartial is a high salary, so that they are not tempted by bribery. What other reasons for impartiality are there here?*
- ❓ *Is this proverb solely aimed at courtroom judges? Why or why not?*

We might not all have the right to convict the guilty in a court, but we must all seek to distinguish between guilty actions and the innocent—whether that's in our family relationships, at work or as we react to media stories. If we have a voice to call out guilt, we must be mindful not to call that which is wrong “right”.

## ▼ Apply

- ❓ *When can you say or want to be told that a guilty action is fine: consider speeding and lying, for example?*

..... TIME OUT .....

### Read Micah 6:8

In Jesus we can see that God does not ask of us what he was not prepared to do himself. The cross shows God to be utterly and completely *just*—in punishing sin; *merciful*—towards sinful humanity as he bore the punishment we deserved; and *faithful*—in

his promise to reconcile sinful people with their holy God.

## Be part of the cure

### Read Proverbs 24:28-29

Verse 28 is an application of the ninth commandment, “You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour”.

- ❓ *Can you picture a scenario like those given in verses 28-29?*

Verse 28 reminds us that we can be part of the problem or part of the cure. We have solid reasons in verses 23-25 why we should not do this—the end of the unrighteous is destruction. But this verse calls us to reflect on how we can be tempted to want others to see our neighbour as guilty, even if they are innocent.

- ❓ *What does verse 29 tell us not to do?*

This is not a call to allow violence or evil to go unpunished. Rather, it is a reminder to us that there is a difference between justice and a manipulative desire for revenge born out of the heat of our hurt.

## ▼ Apply

- ❓ *When might you be tempted to use a person's past failings to call them guilty and exact revenge?*
- ❓ *How can the forgiveness you received through Christ challenge you here?*

