

## Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to a number of people. The council of the Bristol Baptist College allowed me sabbatical leave during which I wrote the first draft. My colleagues at the college and our partners at Trinity College, Bristol, did lots of my work while I was away. The people who first taught me Romans inspired me with a passion to understand the letter; they are Dr Larry Kreitzer, Mr Robert Morgan, Professor Christopher Rowland and Professor N. Tom Wright whose lectures on Romans I enjoyed so much while an undergraduate in Oxford. Then there are the students who have taken my Romans module for the last decade or so. I would also like to thank my colleagues Peter Hatton and Helen Paynter who kindly commented on earlier versions of some of what follows. In addition, I am grateful to the wonderful people at BRF who have supported this project. Finally, there are the members of my family who have had to put up with me while I have tried to write. Needless to say, while all these wonderful people have, in their different ways, been an enormous help and encouragement to me, the study, along with its eccentricities and any errors it makes in its understanding, is my own. I'm happy to share any credit that might be reckoned to me, but any condemnation, I bear on my own.

This is not intended to be an academic exercise. I have not tried to reference or defend all the opinions that are expressed. It is intended for pastors and other teachers who want a fresh approach to the letter that will enable them to teach others. It may also be useful for those who want a kind of extended Bible study. It seems to me that Romans is too often reduced to a set of proof texts or treated as though it were a list of theological propositions. If this study helps anyone to appreciate Romans in other, fresher ways, it will have achieved its purposes.

Stephen Finamore  
Bristol Baptist College

## Preamble

If you've ever read that wonderful sermon by my old friends Prisca and Aquila,<sup>[1]</sup> then you'll know all about the cloud of witnesses that surround the people of God. In the cloud are all those who have belonged to God and have now died. We're waiting for the renewal of all things. I've been part of that cloud for a good while now. As I've looked on at those still on earth, I've done my share of cheering and, I'm sorry to say, my share of covering my eyes in bewilderment and disappointment. I've applauded when the church<sup>[2]</sup> got things gloriously right, and occasionally groaned as it turned down yet another blind alley.

Anyway, it's been a very humbling experience for me to watch from one side while the church read some of the letters that I wrote before I was executed. That they should pay so much attention to the things that I'd written! Don't misunderstand me, I sweated blood over some of those letters. The team and I took huge care over them. We wouldn't have done this if we hadn't expected them to be taken really seriously. We knew they'd be read out in the churches they were sent to and then in some of the neighbouring congregations too. But none of us anticipated that they would have quite the influence that they have had. Indeed, every now and again, some new saint arrives in the cloud

and after a while comes to find me. They make a point of saying how helpful they found the letters. Of course, sometimes people who disagreed with something I wrote seek me out to make a point. I've been accused of all kinds of things over the years. Apparently, I'd misunderstood King Jesus, or I'd been prejudiced against women, or I'd promoted anti-Semitism. In every case, we sat down, talked about the context in which the letter had been written and arrived at a place where we saw eye to eye. It's heaven; these things happen.

Anyway, of those who come to thank me, the majority want to talk about the letter I wrote to the Christians in Rome. Up they come and congratulate me on what I'd taught them about the justice of God, original sin, penal substitution, imputed righteousness, the doctrine of election or how to deal with those who are weak in faith. Naturally, I thank them very much indeed for their kindness. I also think to myself how astonishing it is that people manage to find such different things in the letter. Often the things they discover are profoundly true; I frequently find myself wishing that I had indeed written what they think I had. I never have the heart to tell them at the time that the things they had found so helpful were not really the things I thought I'd written. After all, it is heaven - so they'll figure it out for themselves sooner or later. Occasionally, I suggest that we might get a cup of coffee together sometime and when we meet, I explain what I meant. We always conclude that God really is good. No doubt he often guides people to interpret the text in the way that their times demand.

Recently, a number of people have suggested to me that I ought to write down what I really meant to say when I wrote the letter to the Romans. My initial reaction was that this was ridiculous. First of all, we have all the time in the world now; anyone who is interested can just talk to me about it or, in time, figure it out for themselves. And secondly, what kind of conceit would it be for me to write a commentary on one of my own letters? And anyway, I carefully said all I intended to say when I wrote the letter in the first place. Eventually, they wore me down; some of them persuaded me that I should give it a go, and this is the result.

Paul of Tarsus  
The cloud  
Eternity

---

### Footnotes:

<sup>[1]</sup> Sometimes she's called Priscilla. I'm referring to the document known as the letter to the Hebrews. The reference is to 12:1. There was a time when lots of people thought that I wrote the sermon. I wish.

<sup>[2]</sup> Church is the word for an assembly or congregation that we use for a community made up of people who follow King Jesus. It's a way of being the people of God.

## Introduction

### My story

I think that the best way to start is to try to tell you a little bit about myself and the things that were going on when I wrote the letter. The first thing that you need to know is that I'm a follower of Jesus of Nazareth. He ambushed me about 20 years ago and told me that I was to be his ambassador to the nations.<sup>[1]</sup> If you know anything at all about my story, you'll know that this came as something of a surprise. I'd got it into my head that all the Jesus followers were not just wrongheaded but actually really dangerous. Their activities were setting back the great project that, up to that point, I'd committed my life to. And so, I was on my way to Damascus to arrest some of their leaders and shut down their meetings.

You may find it surprising that I thought these people were so dangerous. Misguided and foolish perhaps, but hardly dangerous. I have to think myself back into my previous mindset to explain it to you. I belonged to a significant group called the Pharisees. We believed that God had called our people, the Jewish nation, into being for a wonderful purpose. It was through us that he would fulfil the ancient promises that he had made to our ancestor Abraham. It's a long story but basically, as I understand the text, God promised Abraham that through his offspring, every nation in the world would experience blessing. This promise was one that God had repeated to some of Abraham's descendants and had then underlined in the writings of the prophets and in the Psalms. We were his offspring and so it was through us that the blessing would come. We would be the means by which God would deal with the things that had gone wrong with the world. This would mean that the world could become the place that God had originally intended that it should become. So, you can see that I believed that to be part of the Jewish nation was a very significant thing indeed.

Now, the thing that defined us as a people was something called the Instruction.<sup>[2]</sup> This had been given to our ancestors through the great leader Moses, although some of the stories it includes, especially the ones in the book called Genesis, come from periods many years before he was born. Possessing the Instruction was a great blessing and an enormous privilege. It was a sign of how much God loved us and it was the way in which he had set us apart from every other nation. We believed that when we followed the Instruction, we were living in the way that God had originally intended that all humanity should live. To follow the Instruction was true Life. Life with a capital 'L' is not just being alive, it is living as God intended and as everyone will live when God restores the world to the way he intended that it should be.

Anyway, we Pharisees, like all the Jewish people, believed that God wanted to fulfil his promise to Abraham. He wanted to restore the whole of his creation. However, we also believed that this was something he would be unable to do until we, his people, become more truly his people. That is, until the Jewish nation learned to fully keep the Instruction we had been given. We Pharisees thought that when all of us lived this way, God would restore creation. We thought it all depended on us. One major part of keeping the Instruction was that we should keep ourselves separate from the other nations. When we did this, God would be able to act. He would send a person who would bring all his promises into being. We called him the Anointed. Most of us expected that he would be a king. This

king would inherit all God's promises; he would inherit the world. As a result, the Jewish people, after all our suffering at the hands of foreign empires, would be vindicated. God would show everyone that we had been right all along, and the other nations would honour us for it. You can see why I was looking forward to it and why I wanted to make sure that nothing ever got in its way.

Now, the Jesus-followers were threatening all these really important things. You see, they were claiming that Jesus of Nazareth was the king who inherited God's promises. Now this, it seemed to me, was dangerous heresy. Obviously, it was well known that he had been condemned in trials before both Jewish and Roman authorities and had been crucified. He had not become king in Jerusalem and established his rule over the nations. Clearly, his followers were deluded. But this did not necessarily make them dangerous. The real issue for me was that these Jesus-followers implied that non-Jews might become part of the people of God without taking on the marks of belonging. This meant that Jewish members of the group would mix with and eat with non-Jewish members. As a result, these Jewish followers of Jesus of Nazareth were not separate from the nations, were not holy, and so were not fully obedient to the Instruction. This meant that their actions were actually preventing the Jewish nation as a whole from becoming what it should be and, as a result, they were preventing God from acting to keep his promises. This was the reason they had to be stopped. With extreme prejudice.

Well, it turned out that I could not have been more wrong. I discovered that God had indeed sent this Jesus and he was indeed king. The technical word we use is 'Messiah'. It translates as 'the one anointed' but it refers to the one that God has declared to be the king. In Greek the word is Christ, so whenever I write about Jesus Christ, I mean to say Messiah Jesus or, more simply, King Jesus. It's far from being a surname, it's a title and I use it because this is the one who inherits the promises, the one who inherits the whole world. It turned out that God was not waiting for us to fully keep the Instruction before he could keep his promises. It didn't all depend on us after all. He had kept his promises in his own way and in his own time because of his own faithfulness to those promises and his own commitment to the world becoming what he had intended it should be when he created it. It was about God, not about us.

As you might imagine, when I learned that Jesus was this king, I had to seriously reconsider some of my opinions. It seems that God was not waiting for our nation to fulfil the Instruction before he acted. He had just got on with it in his own way and in his own time. This meant that the Instruction could not have quite the role within God's purposes that I had thought. It also meant that God had kept his ancient promises. He was keeping his word that, through Abraham's offspring, all the nations would find blessing. Only now it was clear that by Abraham's offspring God meant King Jesus rather than the Jewish people as a whole. People from the non-Jewish nations were indeed becoming a part of the people of God. Even more astonishingly, King Jesus summoned me to be his messenger to those nations. I imagine you can see the irony, given my previous views.

And there's more; the king was alive even though he had been executed. Let me take you back to the things I had believed when I was a Pharisee. We thought that when the Messiah came, the world would move from one age to another. The old age of death and oppression would be succeeded by a fresh age of Life and liberation. As part of this, the dead would be raised. Some of us thought that only the righteous would be raised, that is those that God wished to vindicate. These would live with

the king in his new kingdom. Others thought that all the dead would be raised for judgement; the righteous for their vindication and for Life and the rest so that they might be condemned. We called this 'the resurrection'. I now realise that God's plan was that King Jesus should die and then experience resurrection. This suggested that the new age had started even though, in many respects, the old age seemed to be continuing. There's a tension there. A lot of my thinking and writing is really trying to help the other followers of Jesus to understand and to live with this tension.

When I got to know some of the Jesus-followers, it became clear that they believed that God's Holy Spirit was active among all of them. This was soon apparent in my own experience. It seemed that the Spirit was at work in every kind of people. There were no racial distinctions; the Spirit was active in Jews and non-Jews. There were no gender distinctions; the Spirit came upon both women and men. There were no class distinctions; the Spirit was with those who were slaves and those who were free. And there were no age barriers; the Spirit was there for the young, the old and for every age in between. This extravagant, generous outpouring had been promised by the prophets in the last days.<sup>[3]</sup> This was more evidence that the promises of God were being fulfilled even though, in many respects, the world seemed to carry on just as it had before.

This was rather a lot for me to take in. I knew I had to take some time to reflect on it all and see how it fitted together. There was only one place to go. After all, where did those called by God go when faced with something so new? To Sinai in Arabia.<sup>[4]</sup> I then returned to Damascus and, only after a further three years, did I go to meet the leaders of the Jesus-followers in Jerusalem. I saw Peter who was the acknowledged leader of the movement and James, Jesus' brother, who was pastor of the church in Jerusalem. I stayed with Peter for a fortnight and, as you can imagine, I learned a great deal from him in that time.

It was during this whole period that the basic background shape to my thinking developed. I suppose I should probably give you an outline of it because it's really the backdrop to everything else that I say. It's the story I use to make sense of the world. It goes all the way back to creation.

## Salvation' story

God made humans for a purpose, and this meant that they were to live in a particular way. The purpose and the way of living were never simply ends in themselves. Rather, they were for the sake of the rest of the creation. Had humans kept to the commission they had been given, they would have been greatly blessed and honoured by God. This is the 'glory' for which humans were made. This is what we need to get back to. Instead of achieving this glory, humans fell short of it; they freely chose a different way to be human and this had consequences for them and, as a result, for the rest of creation. This rejection of God and God's purposes is the way of living that all the descendants of the first humans have embraced. I call this way of living 'Sin'. Note the capital 'S'. Sometimes I use the same word, in an extended sense, to refer to particular things we do that are wrong. I speak of sin or sins. Really, these are manifestations of Sin. I suppose you could say that Sin is the disease and that the things we do wrong are the symptoms. Sometimes I speak of Sin as a

power or a ruler and this helps to capture the idea I'm trying to get at. This way of living has consequences. The word I use to express these consequences is 'Death' with a capital 'D'. This is something that affects humans and the rest of God's creation. One of the ways I find it helpful to picture God is as a judge. When you look at things this way you can say that Death is the penalty for Sin. It's the opposite of Life.

I suppose that that might have been that. However, the scriptures tell the story of God's refusal to give up on his project. God set about getting creation back on track and this meant dealing with humans because we had caused the problem in the first place. The first step was to begin the process of restoring humans to the way of living he had planned for them. God wanted to put them back on the path to obtaining the blessing and honour he had intended. He did this for their sake and for the sake of the rest of creation. His motivation for doing this was love. The name I give to this process of restoration is 'salvation'. It's God's work in putting things right, or getting them back on track, or enabling the universe to be the wonderful thing he had originally intended that it should become. You will recall that God's initial purpose for humans was that they should fill and subdue the earth.<sup>[5]</sup> One of the ways I find it helpful to think of this is to see their goal as being to transform the whole of the earth so that it is all like the great park or garden in Eden. This is the programme that humans abandoned; we still had something in us that sought to control things, but we did it in distorted ways. This set us on a kind of vicious cycle where each mistake led to another. Fortunately, God intervened.

The story of salvation begins with Abraham.<sup>[6]</sup> He is promised the land and that all the nations of the earth will be blessed through him. I see the land as being the first fruits of the whole earth which is represented by the blessing that will come to all peoples, everywhere. These promises about the whole earth, and about all its peoples, get repeated by the psalmist and the prophets. This is what they mean when they say that all the earth will be filled with God's glory, or that all the peoples will praise God, or God's king will rule the nations. In sending King Jesus, God has made his decisive move in keeping these promises and bringing about salvation. He has addressed the fundamental issue I call Sin, making it possible for people to escape its power. He has started the process of bringing all the nations into one family and, through the gift of his Holy Spirit, he has made it possible for his people to live in the way that he originally intended that people should live. This does not mean that they are perfect, yet. They still do things that are wrong. However, their orientation is changed. It is not Sin that defines them anymore and as a result Death is no longer the final word for them. They experience something of the Life that God intended for all humanity.

So, that was the basic shape of my thinking when, about 14 years after my stay with Peter, I went to Jerusalem again and this time I met with more of the leaders. Although we were all clearly in agreement and were happy to recognise one another's callings and ministries, there were clearly some people around who were unhappy about me. Some of these were at odds with their own leaders. Others were scared that they would face persecution from people who thought in the way that I used to before I was called by King Jesus. It was groups like this who plagued my ministry and were constantly trying to disrupt the churches that I'd founded. The thing is, they would claim to represent the views of Peter and James when this wasn't really true. However, it was the case that some of the practices they advocated were the practices of the Jerusalem church and of Jewish

followers of Jesus in other places. Of course, it's one thing for Jewish followers of Jesus to do this and quite another to say that such things should also be expected of non-Jews if they wanted to be considered as part of God's people. The key issue was always the role of the Instruction in defining and identifying the people who belonged to God. Contrary to what some thought, we all believed that it has a role. You will see from my letter that we disagreed about the nature of that role.

### **Rome's story**

Now, at the time I wrote Romans, I'd never been to Rome. This was not from want of trying. It was simply that circumstances never allowed it. However, I knew a fair bit about the people there who followed Jesus. I found out a lot from Prisca and Aquila. They had been leaders of one of the groups there but had been expelled from the city, along with all the other Jews, by the emperor Claudius around the year AD49. Sadly, this had happened because of arguments about King Jesus. Some of these had led to unseemly rows in the streets and even to some violence. Most of the groups of Jesus-followers had been led by Jews. Some groups were entirely Jewish and some of these simply scattered while others went into exile together. Other groups had non-Jews in them and, in these cases, when the Jews left, non-Jews took on the responsibilities of leadership. Eventually, some of the Jewish believers from Rome found their way to Jerusalem and to other Jewish Christian churches. It was there that some of them picked up distorted reports about me and my activities.

At last, Claudius died, and Nero succeeded him as emperor. This happened in the early fifties. Claudius' decree lapsed and lots of the Jewish believers made their way back to Rome. These included Prisca and Aquila. We had become good friends and we maintained an occasional correspondence. It turned out that when they got back, things in the Roman churches were very different from the way they had been before they left. Lots of the non-Jewish leaders had done a great job and their groups had grown and were, of course, entirely non-Jewish. Some of them had been influenced by my teachings and that of my colleagues, though they hadn't always understood me properly. Some hadn't quite got the balance right and others had got the wrong end of the stick and were waving it vigorously! Of course, some of the returning Jewish Christian leaders had heard the distorted version of my thinking while they were in Jerusalem or elsewhere and, when they got back, they were very disturbed to discover that teachings associated with me had influenced the groups they'd once led.

So, with all these changes and misunderstandings going around, it was not surprising that different practices emerged among the Jesus-followers in Rome. One group, largely of non-Jews, declared themselves to be the 'strong' while referring to their brothers and sisters in the other group (largely Jewish) as the 'weak'. Not the most helpful terms to frame the discussion. Furthermore, some groups thought that they should look to me for leadership while others were deeply suspicious of me. I'm not sure that any of them really understood all of my thinking.

The other thing it's important to bear in mind is that the Roman groups, especially the Jewish ones, maintained strong links with the church in Jerusalem. There was plenty of trade between the two cities. People and letters were exchanged quite frequently. As a result, the views of the Jerusalem

church had lots of influence in Rome and, given the relative wealth of some of the people involved, some of the Jewish groups of Jesus-followers in Rome had some influence in Jerusalem.

### **My story: plans for the next stage**

I think that should give you some idea of what was going on in Rome. Next, I need to tell you something of my own situation. I was with the team in Corinth. I was there trying to sort out some broken relationships and to get the church there back on a good path. Over the years I'd written a number of letters to the Jesus-followers in that city. In some of them I really poured my heart out. You may think that I said some fairly strong things in them. That's true enough, though it's just as well that only two of the letters have survived because some of the stuff in the others was even stronger.

Anyway, the team and I had developed a long-term vision and a short-term plan. The long-term thinking concerned our mission strategy. We had reached the conclusion that we had pretty much done all we could in the north-east quadrant of the land around the Great Sea. We had established churches from Jerusalem all the way round to a region called Illyricum, which you would call the Balkans. Those churches were mostly in major cities and ought to be able to spread the message about King Jesus into their hinterlands. And anyway, there were plenty of other evangelists working in that area. We also knew that a mission was going on in the south-east quadrant. Word from there was that churches were being planted in the cities of the north-African coast. It seemed clear to us that we should go west. And, if we were going to go somewhere where Roman rule was secure, that meant Spain. So far as we knew, nobody had so much as mentioned Jesus in that part of the empire.

Our strategy in the east had been to use the church at Antioch as a kind of base of operations. They had commissioned us, sent us, prayed for us and resourced us. We needed to identify a church that could do the same things for us when we went to Spain. There was only one candidate. The westernmost church of any size that we had any contact with was in Rome. So, the long-term strategy was to use the church in Rome as our base for a mission into Spain. This was one of my reasons for writing.

The short-term goal was that I should go to Jerusalem. Not everyone in the team was in favour of this. They thought it would be dangerous. There were even prophecies given - which, let's face it, turned out to be right - that indicated how risky it was.<sup>[7]</sup> My friends all knew that I was very unpopular in certain circles in Jerusalem. There were plenty of people there who regarded me as a turncoat. I was well aware of the issues, but I felt it was really important that I make the journey. When I'd visited the Jerusalem leaders, they'd asked me to remember the needs of the poor and I'd promised to do just that. I had gathered a significant collection of money from all the non-Jewish churches I'd founded for the poor in the Jerusalem church. I knew I had to take it to Jerusalem. I hoped that this gift would show the leaders that I valued them and the church there. I hoped it would help bring about reconciliation, if that were necessary. In my mind the gift symbolised the unity of the (mainly) non-Jewish communities I had founded with the mother church in Jerusalem. Sadly, I had a nagging doubt in the back of my mind that the Jerusalem church would feel unable to



accept the gift; it would make life too difficult for them with the parts of the local community that did not agree that Jesus was the Messiah. My friend Luke wrote about that visit to Jerusalem and describes the conversation I had with James. Interestingly, Luke chose not to mention the collection at all. I'll leave it to you to think about his reasons for telling the story in the way he did.

### **The letter**

So, with all these things in mind, I sat down with my team in Corinth, and we thought about what we would need to say to the church in Rome. I knew I would need to explain myself to them and this would mean setting out my understanding of what God had accomplished through King Jesus. I was fairly sure there would be lots of common ground and that I could both correct the views of those who claimed to follow me and allay the fears of those who thought I should be distrusted. Only if I achieved all this could I hope that they might help with my long-term strategy of a mission to Spain. In addition, I held out some hope that if my positions were embraced by some of the Jewish Jesus-followers in Rome, they might mention this to the church in Jerusalem which might help me when I got there. Of course, if the Roman groups were to be of any use as a base, they would need to be united and so it would be important that my letter help them to think through issues like the relationship between Jewish and non-Jewish Jesus-followers, including the place of the Instruction in God's overall purposes. It would also be important to try to help them to avoid taking any disagreements into the streets as some of them had in the past. And, of course, I would need to give some advice on getting relationships right between the groups that some had so unhelpfully labelled the 'strong' and the 'weak'.

Clearly, it would have to be a long letter. I didn't set out to write a treatise, but I could see that it could end up looking a bit like one. I knew a lot about the different groups of believers but none of it was first-hand. I couldn't be certain of the details and so any advice I gave would have to be couched in fairly general terms. We sat round a table. Tertius agreed to act as secretary and sat to one side at a desk. And then, as a team, we wrote the letter, though we agreed that in all the circumstances, it should be sent in my name alone. When it was done, we gave it to Phoebe, and she took it to Rome. The idea was that she would be with the groups when the letter was read out to them. Because she had been involved in the discussions which led to the writing, she'd be able to explain any points which weren't clear and emphasise those bits that particular groups needed to hear.

You could say that my letter emerges from the interaction of three different stories; my story, Rome's story and the story of the God who, in King Jesus, showed us that he is faithful to his ancient promises. With those stories in mind, let me take you through the things I wrote.

---

### **Footnotes:**

<sup>[1]</sup> My old friend Luke tells the story, in three slightly different ways in the sequel to his version of the

gospel. My first-hand account can be found in the letter I wrote to the churches in Galatia.

<sup>[2]</sup> That is, the Teaching or, to use the formal name, the Torah or Law. I've avoided calling it the Law because that makes it sound like it's all legal or full of commandments. Of course, some of it is legal and it does include commandments, but it also includes lots of really important stories too. Although, I must confess, that sometimes I use the word as a kind of shorthand for both the legal provisions given to Moses at Sinai and sometimes for the scriptures as a whole as in 'the Law and the Prophets'. I'll try to be clear how I'm using the word as we go through the letter.

<sup>[3]</sup> The prophet Joel is explicit about this. Luke has written about the way in which good old Peter used the text from Joel to interpret the things that happened on the day of Pentecost when the Spirit came upon those friends of King Jesus who had been with him during his earthly life.

<sup>[4]</sup> I tell this story in Galatians. I say I go to Arabia but later in the same letter I refer to Sinai as being there. It may be that you use the word Arabia to refer to a different, or smaller, region than I did at the time.

<sup>[5]</sup> Genesis 1:28. The creation stories at the beginning of the Bible have always been really important in my thinking.

<sup>[6]</sup> At the start of his story, he is called Abram. He's one of those Bible characters whose names get changed. Abra(ha)m's story begins at the end of Genesis 10.

<sup>[7]</sup> Luke writes about one of them in Acts 21:10-14.

## Chapter 1

After all these years it was an interesting exercise to think myself back into the situation I was in when the team and I wrote the letter. Lots of the time I found myself writing in the present tense, as though I had gone back in time. At other times there's evidence that the intervening years have given me a slightly different perspective on the letter. I hope the shifting tenses do not make things too confusing!

### Verses 1-7      Making introductions

This is my greeting to the people in Rome. It's pretty formal because we only really know one another by reputation. At this point, I'm really trying to accomplish two things; firstly to introduce myself as someone worth listening to, and secondly to establish lots of common ground. I think it would be helpful if I comment on a few of the specific names, words and phrases that I use.

#### Verse 1:

#### Paul

That's the name that I go by these days. It's not the name that my parents called me, nor the one that I was known by in my days as a Pharisee. I was from the tribe of Benjamin and perhaps the most famous of our number was Saul, Israel's very first king. It was quite an honour to be named after him. However, in non-Jewish circles I went by the name Paul and that's the name by which I'm known to the churches. The scriptures are full of stories about people who change their name when God calls them. I rather like the idea that I'm counted among them.

### **A slave**

As far as I can gather, about half the population of Rome were slaves. The whole system was an indication of the utter moral corruption of the city and its empire. I've always held out the hope that little by little the story of God's action in Jesus would help expose this wickedness for what it was. Of course, it's easy to think things like that without it being either easy or appropriate to say them. I never argued that slavery is a good thing. I simply accepted that, for the time being, economic and social life was unthinkable without it. When I get the opportunity, I argue that slaves should be freed.<sup>[1]</sup>

Lots of the Jesus-followers in Rome are slaves. Among the groups of believers, they should be treated with the same respect as everyone else. Sadly, that is not always the case. So, in order to identify with them, and to try to find a helpful way to express my relationship to King Jesus, I use the word 'slave' to describe myself. It communicates something significant - I'm under orders; I'm not the master of my own destiny; King Jesus is my owner. Of course, there's a vital difference. Most slaves want to be free but I wouldn't swap belonging to Jesus for anything.

### **Jesus Christ**

These days you can easily read lots of the stories about Jesus. Back then, the stories about him simply circulated round the churches. Anyway, if you've read the gospels in the collection that came to be called the New Testament, then you know about him. Calling him Jesus Christ is simply a way of according him the status God has given him. He is the Messiah, the king through whom God is keeping his ancient promises. He is the one I belong to. I tend to refer to him as King Jesus because this is as close as I can get to communicating the emotional force of his title to today's readers.

### **Called an apostle**

'Called' is a big word. In the scriptures, that is to say, the books that most of you call the Old Testament, God calls people when he's got a special purpose for them. I've been known to compare myself with Jeremiah who felt that he had been set apart by God even before he was born.<sup>[2]</sup> He was appointed over nations and that makes me think of my own calling to go to foreigners. And like Jeremiah, I don't really feel I've been given a say in the matter. There's a sense of compulsion for me in the work that I do.

An apostle is somebody sent for a purpose. King Jesus had commissioned me to be an ambassador for him and for his message. It's like being given a mandate from heaven with something vital to say to the earth. But it's more than that - there's a sense in which I, like the other apostles, am the

King's representative, his agent; I've got his full authority.

### **Set apart**

You know how it is. Lots of us have some things that we only use on particular occasions or for special reasons. There's the best china; the plate that only comes out of the cupboard when a parent visits; or a ring that holds a romantic significance. In the temple in Jerusalem there were things that were set apart for the worship of God and could never be used for anything else. This is how I felt about God's call on me. It was my purpose. I did other things too, of course, but they were always secondary.

### **The gospel**

As you've all been told about a million times, the word gospel means good news. However, in my time it was often used for a specific piece of news; that a new king had been crowned and was establishing his authority. Actually, when this happened, it was, most of the time, very good news indeed. The last thing anybody wanted was any uncertainty at all concerning who was making the rules. When there was doubt about who was in charge, there was often fighting, people found they could go back on the deals they had made, and the situation was unsettled and worrying. Even a bad king was usually better than no king at all. So, when a new emperor gained power, messengers went out and proclaimed a gospel; a new ruler was in power. That was the meaning of 'gospel' in a Roman imperial context. Now, the wise people who translated the Hebrew scriptures into Greek also made use of the word. There's a passage in Isaiah - these days you call it chapter 52 - that we Pharisees had always regarded as a promise about the time when God would establish his rule anew. It was always an important text for me, and it played a central role when I rethought things after I met King Jesus. It's an announcement that God has become king and has returned to his capital. I realised that this is what King Jesus represented. This is the gospel.

### **God**

Let's be clear. There's only one god and that's the God of Israel, the God of the scriptures. He is the creator of everything there is and so he is beyond everything but, at the same time, he sustains the whole of creation and so is constantly active within it. He is characterised by justice, generosity and faithfulness; God keeps his promises.

### **Verse 2:**

#### **Promised**

The gospel is the announcement that God has kept his promises. The promises are recorded in the Old Testament. By sending King Jesus, God has made good on those promises. As I said to the Corinthians, in Jesus 'every one of God's promises is a "Yes".'<sup>[3]</sup> The unexpected things were the timing and the methods that God had chosen to keep his promises. That was what threw me and

meant that the Lord had to ambush me to get me to see what was going on in front of my own eyes.

### **Prophets**

These are the inspired men and women who spoke God's word to his people and to others. The books of the prophets make up a significant section of the scriptures. While I do not call myself a prophet, I find myself borrowing their imagery when I think about my own calling.

### **Holy scriptures**

When I wrote Romans the collection called the New Testament did not exist. When I refer to the scriptures, I have in mind the books that are now called the Hebrew Bible or the Old Testament. The scriptures are inspired by God. I recognised even then that they could be interpreted in different ways. From my present perspective I can see the possible approaches even more clearly. However, at the time I understood them to be telling the story I have already set out. That story contained lots of divine promises and, through King Jesus and the message about him, God was making good on them.

### **Verse 3:**

There are a number of ways to set out the content of the gospel. I spelt it out for the Romans using a traditional formula that developed in the earliest years of the church. You can tell that it's not original to me because it doesn't say things in quite the same way that I would normally express them. For example, it refers to the spirit of holiness. I was trying to send a signal to the Jewish Christian leaders that I'm not an innovator. I hold the same truths as they do. The other thing to notice is that it's a story, not just a set of doctrines.

### **Son**

This is one of the titles we give to King Jesus. It's one of the ways he spoke about himself and it's a title given to some of Israel's ancient kings. We are all God's sons and daughters - but we are adopted into the family. He was always the Son; his resurrection made that plain.

### **David**

David was the greatest of the kings of Israel. He succeeded my namesake Saul. The nation divided into two kingdoms after the death of David's son Solomon but, from their capital in Jerusalem, David's descendants ruled the kingdom of Judah for as long as it existed. To say that a man is descended from David is to acknowledge his royal status and that the promises God made to David are fulfilled through him.

### **Flesh**

This is a word that I use in a number of related ways. Here it simply means something like

'according to human ways of reckoning'. That was the meaning in the old formula I had borrowed. The family of King Jesus was from the tribe of Judah and could trace their ancestry back to David. At other times, when I'm not dependent on other people's words, I use the word flesh to mean other things. Sometimes it refers to physical descent. At other times I use it as a shorthand way to speak of the part of humanity that has a particular tendency to disobey God. I use the word in both those ways later in the letter.

#### **Verse 4:**

##### **Spirit of holiness**

This was a way of speaking of the Holy Spirit in some Jewish Christian circles. I kept to the traditional wording because I was seeking to persuade the Jewish Christians in Rome that my core beliefs were the same as theirs.

##### **Lord**

This is another word with a whole range of possible meanings. Here it refers to the ancient confession of the church, 'Jesus is Lord'; he is the one to whom we owe allegiance. However, the word is also used in the Greek translation of the scriptures to translate the name of God. As a result, there is a hint, for those who spot the allusion, that I am saying Jesus is YHWH, the name that is translated LORD - in capital letters - in most of your Bibles.

#### **Verse 5:**

##### **Grace**

Grace is another word with a range of meanings. Sometimes it's just a nice way of greeting people. At other times it's a word that speaks both of God's scandalous and extravagant generosity, his unwarranted goodness that outrages so many people, and of the attribute of God that generates that generosity. King Jesus told stories about this kind of apparently indiscriminate benevolence; you call them things like the Prodigal Son and the Labourers in the Vineyard. It is grace that motivates God to go to the lengths he does to get the world back on track; grace is the reason there is such a thing as salvation.

##### **Apostleship**

I've already said something about this but here I was filling out my sense of calling. I was stressing that my calling was to the nations and that my purpose was to bring them to the obedience of faith. To say I'm King Jesus' apostle is to say that he has sent me; I'm his envoy, his spokesman, his herald.

##### **Obedience of faith**

This is not the kind of expression I often use but I thought it was important to include it here. One of the outcomes of faith is obedience to God. My putting it like this may have surprised some of those in Rome. They had been told, or had assumed, that since I gave a different value to the Instruction than was usual among conservative Jews, I was not interested in people being obedient to God. Talk about missing the point! This was far from being the case. I wanted to stress this near the beginning, to put down a marker, as it were, even though I wouldn't be able to spell it all out until later in the letter. Lots of people imagine that I think that faith need have no practical consequences, or that if you have faith then the way that you live does not matter. I wanted an opportunity early in the letter to make it clear that this is a crass misunderstanding of my thinking. I'm sure the misunderstanding was sometimes deliberate. Let me be completely clear, the gospel I preached was intended to promote obedience because it is what brings Life - humans living in the way God intended at the beginning.

And I should probably say something about the word 'faith'. Lots of people tend to use it to mean the same thing as 'belief', in the sense that you believe in certain facts. It gets used to refer to giving intellectual assent to a list of propositions. But the word also carries the idea of faithfulness and so suggests relationship. And on top of that, it carries the idea of personal allegiance. If I say I have faith in someone, it means I have offered that person my loyalty; they have become the thing around which my life revolves. Perhaps this helps to explain the strong connection in my mind between faith and obedience.

### **Gentiles**

This is another word with a degree of ambiguity. Most of the time I use it to mean the non-Jewish peoples of the world. This means that humans can be divided into two groups - Jews and Gentiles. However, sometimes the word simply means 'nations' and could be understood to include the Jewish nation alongside all the others.

### **Name**

This is a way of speaking about a person, their character and their reputation. When I say that God does something for the sake of his name, I mean something like, for the sake of his reputation. In other words, God does things to show he is true to his promises. He can be trusted.

### **Verse 6:**

#### **Including yourselves**

Here, I am referring to the Roman Jesus-followers who are hearing the letter read aloud. They are among those to whom I am sent as an apostle. In my mind, this applies to all of them, whether they are Jews or non-Jews.

**Verse 7:****Saints**

Technically this refers to those who are holy but I use it to speak of those who follow Jesus; they are the ones who will one day join me, and all the others, in the cloud, where we awaiting our own resurrection and the renewal of all creation.

**Peace**

Like 'grace', this is a word that means different things in different contexts. It can just be a greeting; you say peace because you wish someone well. However, it can also mean the situation that exists when hostilities have ceased. It can even be used to describe the time when justice and righteousness are established. When this happens you can be sure that everyone is living in a good relationship with God, with one another and with the whole of creation; that's peace.

**Father**

King Jesus did not invent the idea that God is the Father of his people. However, he is the one who made this word his main way of addressing God. Those who follow Jesus tend to adopt this word and use it as the basis for their understanding of their relationship with God.

You might notice how closely I connect the Father with King Jesus. If I'm asked who God is, I say he's the Father of King Jesus. If I'm asked who Jesus is, I say he's the Son of God. In my mind they are defined by their relationship to one another.

**Verses 8-15      Words of thanks**

This is the thanksgiving section of the opening of the letter. It's traditional that one should be included and it gave me an opportunity to say some nice things about the Roman Christians, to assure them of my genuine concern for them, and to tell them of my longstanding desire to meet them face-to-face. Obviously, I had some important things I wanted to say to them, but I also wanted to be careful not to overplay my hand; I had not founded their church and so I couldn't expect to be granted the same authority there as I claimed in, say, Galatia or Corinth. That's why I seek to assure them there is an element of mutuality in the relationship; I can learn from them just as they can learn from me. Nevertheless, I end the section by mentioning my calling that gives me a duty to preach the gospel. This applies just as much to Rome as it does to everywhere else.

8. The presence of Jesus-followers in Rome was well known to the churches everywhere. Their existence was sometimes used to illustrate a point. Someone would be aware that their congregation was facing a degree of local opposition; the preacher would ask, 'how much more difficult must it be for the brothers and sisters in Rome?' Another congregation would wonder if the church would ever really flourish. And the preacher would remind them of the Christians in Rome and of the opportunities for influence in high places that this represented.



Part of me always had the feeling that my call to follow King Jesus would take me to the emperor. We all knew that Jesus had spoken truth to Pilate, Caesar's representative; someone would now have to speak of King Jesus to Caesar himself! And it might as well be me. That's part of the reason that, when I was taken prisoner after my last visit to Jerusalem, I kept appealing to the emperor.<sup>[4]</sup>

9. I did a lot of praying. I prayed for the churches I'd started and for the ones I didn't, the ones I knew well and the ones I hoped to learn about. It was a significant - if largely hidden - part of my ministry.

10. One of the things I often prayed for was that I would get to Rome. It did happen, but not quite in the way I'd envisaged when I wrote this.

11. At this point I was being vague. I had nothing specific in mind. I certainly did hope to offer the Roman Jesus-followers something when I saw them - and the goal of that would be to strengthen them - but other than helping them to understand my perspective on the work of God, I had no particular plans. In writing the letter I was concerned to avoid giving the impression that all I was interested in was their support for the proposed mission to Spain. It was one of my motives but was far from being the only one. My concern for them was genuine.

12. Here I am stressing that the relationship I hope to establish with the Jesus-followers in Rome is one that benefits me as well as them.

13. I had longed to go to Rome because I wanted to engage in mission there. There were lots of ways in which we spoke about the task of mission. King Jesus himself often used the illustration of fishing. Then again, lots of his stories draw on agricultural images. What I mean by the language of harvest is that people, both Jews and non-Jews, will believe the message and join one of the groups of Jesus-followers in the city. They will therefore experience the process that we call 'salvation', in which God's original purposes for humans are being recovered. Of course, speaking of harvest is also a metaphor for judgement. Our response to the message about King Jesus is an act of judgement; it makes clear who we are. I shall expand on this point in a few verses time.

14. As I've already suggested, in my time as a Pharisee I had a tendency to divide humanity into two basic categories, Jews and non-Jews. The Jews had the Instruction and the non-Jews didn't. The Jewish men were circumcised and non-Jewish men were not. However, I was aware that other people worked with different categories. For example, those who spoke Greek tended to distinguish between themselves and those who spoke gibberish, or what seemed to the Greeks to be gibberish; they just muttered bar, bar, bar. Therefore, one way to refer to everyone is to speak of Greeks and Barbarians. There was also a tendency for those who spoke Greek to think of themselves, or certainly of their educated elites who knew philosophy, as the wise, while dismissing everyone else as foolish. The point of study was to become wise. I was carefully making no judgement on any of this at this point. I was still seeking to build common ground. So, another way to refer to everyone is to speak of the wise and the foolish.

15. My main purpose was to say that I felt a burden to ensure that the gospel was preached to every category of person, however you choose to divide them up. And that included those in Rome.

**Verses 16-17 The theme of the letter**

16. The preliminaries are over. This is where I state, in rather a condensed form, the basic theme of the letter. There is deliberate understatement here. I expressed myself this way because of the reference to the wise. My point is that I'm deeply passionate about the gospel. It is the means that God is using to put the whole of humanity back on track; those who grasp it make a step towards understanding what it means to be human in the way that the one who made us always intended.

This gospel was delivered first to the Jews and then to the non-Jews. You will notice that my use of the word 'Greek' is a little slippery and I can see how it could be confusing. Earlier on I used the phrase Greek and Barbarian to indicate every type of person where Greek is specific and Barbarian the rest. Now I use Jew and Greek to speak of everyone; Jew refers to a particular group and Greek to the rest. It's a way of speaking of Jew and non-Jew. In terms of my theology, this is the only important distinction. However, I have to say that it is a much less significant distinction than I used to think it was before I started to follow Jesus.

17. Now, I need to say something about the word translated 'righteousness'. It has quite a range of overlapping meanings. One of the key meanings is the idea that something is fulfilling its original purpose. So, God shows his righteousness when he acts in a way that puts the world back onto the path that he originally intended. Since this is something that he consistently said that he would do, God's righteousness is shown in the way God keeps his promises. Where people are concerned, the word relates to the purposes God had for them when they were first created. They display righteousness when they live that way. Of course, the only human who has ever fully done this is King Jesus.

The gospel, the story of God's action in King Jesus, reveals God's 'righteousness'. Essentially, what I meant when I wrote the letter was that the gospel demonstrates that God has kept his promises; it shows how he has been true to his ancient oaths. Although I don't explicitly mention the word 'covenant' or 'pact' very often, the idea is always in the background. It's a way of thinking about the framework of God's promises to his people and his dealings with them. Basically, I'm insisting that through his action in King Jesus, God has kept his side of the bargain. This has happened from faithfulness unto faithfulness or, I suppose I might have said, from God, the faithful one, to his faithful people. Or even, out of faithfulness and for the sake of faith; God's faithfulness leads to people having faith; God's promise keeping enables human allegiance to God.

Next I quote the prophet Habakkuk. You will remember that his prophecy begins with the great question of God's faithfulness. The speaker wants to know how long it will be before God acts. This was like my cry as a Pharisee. When would God act to put things right? Or rather, when would God act to put his people right, so that God could then put everything else right? The answer that God gives to Habakkuk, who sees himself as a watchman looking out for God to act in response to his prayers, is that God's action may seem slow, but it is in process. 'The just will live by faith' says the prophet, meaning that the one who shows themselves to belong to God will do this by trusting that God is indeed acting. God is the promise-keeping God. His people live as though their God is keeping

his promises. They should not live as though everything depended on them, but instead ought to trust God to act. This was just like the answer that God had given to me. Through King Jesus, God was keeping his promises. As a result, Death is no longer our destiny; instead, we will live. When I say 'live' I don't simply mean 'survive'. I mean 'live' in the sense of living Life as God originally intended. All this is about God's way of enabling humans to recover Life as God said it would be.

### **Verses 18-32 The human dilemma**

Having set out my theme, I now set about the task of expounding it. I don't think there is anything in this section that any of the intended first readers would have disagreed with. I was still working on establishing our common ground. Basically, I am setting out the human dilemma; the way in which we have failed to be human as God intended us to be. Humans are shown to be unfaithful, to have distorted God's purposes. This is the context in which God demonstrates that he is a promise-keeper.

Just as the gospel shows us that God is keeping his promises, it also shows us God's motivation for exercising judgement; the world is distorted and has to be put right. The word I use for God's motivation in judging and in putting right is 'wrath'. The word has caused me no end of problems and I suppose this is understandable. In a couple of my other letters, I include the word in a long list of the things that humans should avoid.<sup>[5]</sup> People inevitably wonder why they should avoid something that I elsewhere claim is a characteristic of God. I suppose that I use the word in two different ways. One is to describe the kind of inappropriate anger that many humans express. The other is as a kind of technical term for the thing that motivates the exercise of judgement by those responsible for maintaining justice. This is true of the human institutions that carry this responsibility and of God who is the judge of the world.

God exercises his judgement in two different ways, within history and beyond it. Of course the two are not unconnected; the one is both a sign and a warning of the other. The judgement beyond history is something that we must all face one day. We will all have to answer to our creator as to whether we have been human as he intended that we should be human; were we 'fit for purpose'? The judgement within history is the way in which God acts within our human story to show his own character. For example, in the story of Israel, the prophets tell us that God allowed his people to be taken into exile because they failed to live in the way they had promised. My argument is that there are other ways in which God's wrath is seen in human societies and cultures. This is God at work demonstrating that, as our creator, he knows how we should live if we are to be truly human; some of the questionable things that people do show that we are not living in accordance with God's original purposes. The gospel provokes a choice. Either people - and communities - offer God their allegiance and experience salvation, or they do not and manifest the signs of God's wrath. These are indications in the present of the divine verdict in the judgement that lies beyond history.

In this section of the letter I was exploring the way in which this wrath can be observed in human history and leads to the kinds of issues I saw in my own time and have seen in many others since then. The process begins with humans failing to acknowledge their 'createdness' or 'creatureliness' and instead honouring things they have created themselves. This primal disorder leads to the ethical

disorder I saw in my own day. Then people struggled to tell right from wrong and were prepared to act as cheerleaders for others who did things that were obviously wrong. At different points in telling this story, I use the language of God 'giving people up' or 'handing them over'. I was trying to say that God doesn't rush to judgement; he lets the consequences of his purposes being rejected play out. In addition, I was deliberately using a word that the readers might recognise from the earliest traditions about Jesus; that he was the one who was handed over for our sins. It's a kind of foreshadowing of the conclusion of the longer argument in this part of the letter.

In this section I was not explicitly telling the story of Adam and Eve, but that tale is in the background of my argument. All my thinking was shaped by the Bible and so, when I told the story of humans and creation, the story of our first ancestors was never far away. References to Adam become much more explicit later in the letter. The thing about this story is that, while it is told in the Hebrew Bible, it is a story about humanity rather than about the Jews. Adam and Eve lived before the time when God introduced any distinction between Jews and non-Jews. So, while the things I talked about are usually associated with pagans, and the issues are certainly more obvious among them than they are among the Jews, all humanity is implicated to some degree in the patterns of behaviour I sketched out.

18. Basically, the truth of human createdness, and the purposes for which we are created, has been deliberately suppressed. This stops us from being human in the way that God originally intended. The result is that this provokes what I call 'wrath'. Distorting God's goals comes with consequences.

19. Clearly, you can't know everything about God on the basis of observing the universe around you, but you can get the sense both that you were created and that this was for a purpose. We are not our own creation. Yet humans manage to suppress even this awareness. We behave as though we are accountable only to ourselves and to our own desires.

20. This means that enough can be known for us to honour the creator rather than ourselves, or the things we have made ourselves. As we have, collectively, failed to do this, we have no excuse if our maker decides to hold us to account.

21. I was trying to argue that one thing leads to another. Humans failed to acknowledge their createdness; if they had done so they would have honoured their maker and given thanks for his sustaining of them. They didn't and the result was that all their thinking became distorted. If you don't know what you're made for, then all your understanding of yourself becomes twisted. It ends up missing the point and so becomes futile.

22. We thought we were so clever! How daft can you get? All that clever thinking, and all of it missing the point! All that wasted effort.

23. So instead of honouring the one who made us, we made pictures and statues of the things he had made and honoured the images instead! This is the heart of the issue and is the reason that Jewish people have such a thing about idolatry. Humans, who are created to offer allegiance to their creator, instead offered it to themselves or to things they had made themselves. Instead of looking beyond ourselves for meaning and purpose, we looked inward. As a result everything became

distorted.

24. One of the things that got distorted was human desire; it got the wrong focus. It turned in on itself. Humans dishonoured God and ended up dishonouring themselves. If you stop seeing your life, including your body, as a gift with a purpose and see it instead as your own to do with as you please, there will be consequences.

25. Here I am summing up what I've been trying to argue. Basically, we swallowed a lie and ended up in a situation where we cannot be human as intended; we serve not the maker but things we made.

26-27. Again, the consequences are seen in the distortion of human desire. I think it's important to understand that I am talking about human cultures as a whole. The activities described in these verses are symptoms of an underlying disorder not necessarily in the individuals involved but in the culture of which they are a part. And these things all have consequences. If we do not see the creator God as the one who gives meaning and purpose to us and to the world, then we will find that meaning and purpose in ourselves.

28-31. I am still arguing that certain things follow from a failure to acknowledge God. We fail to be human as God intended and so you get the list of wrongs contained in these verses. The list might seem like I've gone overboard, but piling idea on idea, and thought on thought, was an important rhetorical strategy at the time I wrote this.

32. The final outcome of moral chaos is that although we know certain things are wrong, we do them anyway and we cheer others for doing them too. We all know, at some level, that God is against such things. When I speak of God's decree, I am not thinking of anything in the laws given to Moses so much as the things that God said to humanity in general, through Adam and through creation itself. Do you remember how God tells Adam that if he gives in to a desire for something that is not his to take, he will die? If we live in God's way, that leads to Life. If we live in some other way, the consequence is Death. That's the idea here.

To summarise the argument; whether God has spoken to you directly or not, you can tell from the universe we inhabit that we humans are not our own creation. Nevertheless, humans choose to suppress this knowledge and this stops us from being human in the way that our maker intended. Instead of honouring our creator, we honour ourselves and the things we have made. This distorted way of living is inexcusable and has consequences. Since something is twisted at the heart of our self-perception, all of our thinking and desiring becomes distorted. The outcome is moral chaos where people have no means to tell right from wrong.

There are a number of different ways to look at the dilemma. The rejection of God's purposes for humans is something that elsewhere I call 'Sin'. This is like a power from which humans need to be set free. In addition, Sin has certain consequences that can be summed up in the word 'Death'. Humans need the consequences of Sin to be averted or the penalty to be waived. In other words, they need to be forgiven. Another way to look at things might be in terms of a relationship that has broken down. What is needed is therefore reconciliation. Lots of the rest of the letter argues that

God has acted to resolve these issues and teaches how humans are now enabled to live in the light of this. However, before we get to that, I knew that I had to deal with those who would have agreed with everything I said but believed it was true of others but not of themselves.

---

### Footnotes:

<sup>[1]</sup> See my letter to Philemon.

<sup>[2]</sup> Jeremiah 1.5. I also believe that King Jesus fulfilled the purposes that Isaiah prophesied when he spoke of the servant. As the servant's servant and representative, I think some of the language applies to me and to all who follow Jesus. See Isaiah 49.1.

<sup>[3]</sup> 2 Corinthians 1:20.

<sup>[4]</sup> Luke tells the story in Acts 21–28.

<sup>[5]</sup> Ephesians and Colossians. I know that there are people around who question whether I actually wrote these letters. Let's just say that if I didn't write them, I wish I had.

## Chapter 2

### Verses 1-11      **Some agree with the analysis but need to reflect more deeply**

I realised that lots of my audience would agree with pretty much everything I had written so far. It's common ground among all the Christian groups I'm familiar with. It would also be endorsed by most of the branches of Judaism that I've come across. Now I was going to be a bit more controversial because I needed to distinguish my position from the sort of things taught by the leaders in some of the synagogues I knew. If any of them had read what I'd written so far, they'd probably have been nodding their heads in agreement. The trouble is that few of them would have recognized themselves as part of the story. And let's face it, there were also a few Gentiles around, mainly those who'd come under the influence of Jewish ideas, who also loved to applaud sentiments of this kind.

So, I introduce a person like this into the argument and address them directly. I call them 'person' or 'whoever you are'. He or she represents the people who like to judge others, who feel that their group is morally superior to other groups. My point is really that the story I have told involves everyone. There is no group or category of people that is not caught up in all of this. I might have argued my case in terms of a non-Jew with this kind of blind spot, but I needed to say something about the Instruction. So, I imagined a particular kind of Jewish thinker and addressed this part of the argument to them. Actually, by and large, my own people are far more moral than the non-Jews, but we have to accept that we were far from immune to the problems I have mentioned.

Again, the discussion is quite tightly argued in the letter, so I think I'll try to outline the argument verse by verse.

1. There are people who see the force of the argument I have made and then judge or condemn others. When people do this, they're actually condemning themselves because they belong to a category of people who are caught up in all the things I mentioned. Let's be clear, my thinking at this point is not really about individuals, it's about groups. I am not arguing that every single individual does all of the things that I mention, but that all human groups have members who are involved. Those who sit in judgement are not speaking on behalf of any group that is not impacted by, or implicated in, the consequences of human folly. The judge, then, does the very things he condemns.
2. Basically, I'm acknowledging that we all agree on this point. God's judgement falls on all who do the things I've described in the second half of chapter 1. The difference is that they don't realise it applies to them as well as to others. At this point, I'm working with the picture of God as judge. If you remember my argument from earlier you will understand that living in ways other than the one God intended has consequences, which is to say that the penalty for Sin is Death because, by definition, it avoids the way of living that brings Life.
3. The one who condemns others, just like the people he has judged, stands under judgement. For that person is part of a group, or speaks on behalf of a group, whose members do the very things he or she condemns. Claiming the moral high ground makes no difference. It is what you actually do that matters, not what you claim to do or aspire to be.
4. The other possibility is that this person presumes they will be okay because of God's patience. They feel that God has a particular love or concern for their group and therefore that God will turn a blind eye to their wrongdoing. But again, I want to tell them that they've misunderstood. God takes his time because he wants everyone to have an opportunity to see the error of their ways and change things. However, there will come a point when God acts.
5. This person, who sees so clearly the faults of others, does not see their own heart, and so will face God's judgement.
6. This is the pay-off line for this section. My argument is that it's the same for everyone whatever group of humans they are part of, whether, for instance, they're Jewish or not Jewish; God does not show any partiality. There will be justice. God renders to each in accordance with what they have done. I don't think I could have said this any more clearly. God deals with us according to the things we do. He does not judge us according to what we have, and he does not judge us according to our ethnicity. I try to clarify this argument in the comments below on verses 17-24.
7. As far as God is concerned, there are two ways to live. There is the way that God intended and there is anything else. Here I describe human life as God intended it to be. You will see that I use some of the language, like the word 'glory', associated with the goal that God originally set for humans. I get this from my understanding of texts like Psalm 8, as I will discuss later. The outcome of this way of living is Life. If we were to draw on the picture of God as judge at this point, we would say that at the judgement, God will vindicate this category of people, or that the verdict would be in their favour, and the decision would be that they will live the Life of the age to come.

8. And these words describe the other way to live. There may be lots of versions of this, but they amount to the same thing because they are all at odds with God's original purpose for humans. All of them are categorised by being 'self-seeking' rather than 'God-seeking'. Those in this group do not live as though God is their creator. As a result, they do not live their lives in accordance with God's purposes. Instead, they live as though they were their own creator or as though their god or highest value was some other created thing. The upshot of this is that they pursue their own purposes and not God's. The result would be that this group is condemned at the judgement and that they will not take part in the Life of the age to come.

9. Here I make the same point again using different words and make it clear that this applies to every category of human, both Jewish people and others. I stress the consequences for those who do not give their allegiance to God.

10. And in this verse, I spell out what can be expected by those who are loyal to God. Again, notice the words glory and honour that are associated with Life. The Bible shapes my thinking. Lots of my ideas about the destiny God originally intended for humans come from Psalm 8. Verse 5 of the psalm includes these very words.

11. This is where I really drive home one of my key points. God, when it comes to the crunch, is not biased towards one group or another. He is God of the whole world, not just of one part of it. God is impartial. Everyone gets assessed on the same basis. Some might be wise and some foolish; some might have the Instruction and others might not; but the basis of judgement remains the same. This is the same basic point I made forcibly in verse 6.

### **Verses 12-16 Possessing the Instruction and living it are different things**

Jews have the Instruction and non-Jews don't. If you don't have it and have gone wrong, God judges you without reference to it. If you do have it and have gone wrong, you will be judged in accordance with its provisions. The point is that everyone is subject to the judgement of God whether or not they know the Instruction, which is to say, effectively, whether or not they are Jewish. The point is that it's not the having, knowing or hearing of the Instruction that matters, it's the living of it that counts. The ones who do that get vindicated. So, if there were a group of people who had never heard of the Instruction but lived it anyway, they'd get vindicated. At this point I had in mind non-Jewish followers of Jesus. I'll spell all this out a little bit later. I wasn't suggesting that they have it all sorted. It's true that sometimes their thoughts get conflicted. But basically, they fulfil the parts of the Instruction that really matter. Again, I intend to spell this out later.

12. We are still working with the picture of God as judge. The non-Jews, those who do not know God's Instruction, and have failed to live in God's intended way, get judged without regard to the Instruction. Meanwhile, the Jews, that is, those who possess the Instruction, and who have failed to live as God intended, get judged in accordance with the Instruction. The outcome is the same whether you have the Instruction or not, whether you are Jewish or not. If you fail to live in God's intended way, you get condemned.



13. Here it should be clear that the meaning of the words 'righteous' and 'justified' should be understood in terms of the overall picture of God as judge. Essentially, I am talking about those who get vindicated at the last judgement. By this I mean that God, the judge, finds in their favour. That is what it means to be justified or to be found righteous. Later, I will argue that the Jesus-followers are justified. This means that the outcome of God's future judgement is being, through King Jesus, announced in the present. To call this group righteous is not to claim that they are perfect but that through their loyalty to King Jesus and the work of his Spirit, God has oriented them towards himself, and so they have begun to live as God intended.

So, my basic point is that it is not *knowledge* of the Instruction that brings a favourable verdict. No, to get such a verdict you have to *live out* the Instruction. There are two ways to look at the righteous. These are really two ways of saying the same thing. They are those who live in the way that God intended; and they are those who will live the Life of the age to come. Similarly, the justified are those whose lives now demonstrate that they are those who will be vindicated at the judgement. To speak of someone as 'righteous' and speak of somebody as being 'justified' are really two ways of saying the same thing.

14. I do not want you to think that the Instruction is irrelevant to any of this. It reveals the way God intended humans to live. However, it is not the Instruction itself that matters but the intended way of living that it teaches. So, if a non-Jew, someone who has not heard or read the Instruction, nevertheless, because of who they are, actually lives the life that God intended for humans, that is to say, the way of life set out in the Instruction, then, in God's eyes, it is as though they both possessed and obeyed that Instruction.

15. In other words, we could say that the things really required by the Instruction have shaped their character and their lives. This means they have an inner guide to the way of life God intended even if they are sometimes conflicted about it. The group of people I had in mind in this verse and the previous one, are the non-Jewish Christians. I was not trying to make some sort of 'what if' point but was preparing the ground for some of the ideas I planned to explore later in the letter.

16. And here I am reminding everyone that I am still working with the picture of God as judge. I am trying to make it clear that the judgement will not simply be on the basis of outward things. It will also take into account inner or secret things because it is what is in our hearts that shapes our words and actions. I learned this from the stories I heard about the things that King Jesus taught.<sup>[1]</sup>

My point is still that God is impartial. I argue that there may be a category of people who do not appear to have heard the Instruction who, nevertheless, live in the way that God always intended humans should live and so will be vindicated at the last judgement. The group I have in mind here are the Gentile Christians. I am trying to persuade Jewish thinkers that such a group should be considered a part of the people of God and that those who know the Instruction but are not living it out, should not really be considered a part of that people. At least, not in the same way as those who do have an allegiance to God.

**Verses 17-24 The people of God live the instruction**

Now I'm back to my imagined conversation partner. My issue with him is that he thinks that God will find in favour of the Jews because they possess the Instruction. The problem with this is that not all of them actually live out the Instruction and since living it out is what matters, it's not enough to simply say, 'we're Jewish' or 'we have the Instruction'. It's quite clear that not all those who know the Instruction have kept it. You see, there were some Jews who felt this was enough. They'd boast about possessing the Instruction and make much of this part of our heritage because it gave the Jews as a whole something that the non-Jews didn't have. And they argued that this put them in a position to teach others. However, not all of them lived the Instruction. It's no good looking at the Jewish community as a teacher of the rest if not all, or indeed not many, are actually living out God's Instruction. In fact, the Jewish community goes against the Instruction in all kinds of ways, and I list some examples. I'm not saying all Jews do this but that some do. Therefore, it cannot be the case that simply being Jewish or simply possessing the Instruction brings God's vindication. And for good measure, I bring up an Old Testament quotation to make my point.

In retrospect, I can see that I could have expressed myself more clearly. You have to remember that at this point all the main leaders among the Jesus-followers were Jewish. We still held out the hope that the mission to the Jews led by Peter and the others would be successful. We didn't envisage that the church would be a largely Gentile phenomenon. In some ways this was an argument between Jews about the best way to be Jewish. When you read it back now it has a different feel from the one that I intended. The point stands, and it certainly needed making, but part of me wishes I'd said things differently.

17. The points are addressed to my original, imagined conversation partner. This person is now more fully defined. He is a Jew who relies on the Instruction and boasts in God. Notice that I do not say that he lives out or obeys the Instruction. This is a person who believes that it is merely the possession of, or the hearing of, the Instruction that brings a certain moral superiority. Such people will boast of God's favour to them and see that favour encapsulated in their possession of the Instruction.

18. Such a person may know the Instruction very well and be fully aware of the things it promotes and of God's intended way of life for humans.

19. This person would know that the Instruction requires that those who know it should help others; Israel was to be a light for the non-Jewish peoples.

20. Therefore my imaginary conversation partner would be a teacher of the knowledge and truth contained in the Instruction.

21-22. But here's the point; this person might not listen to his or her own teaching! They might not practice what they preach. They might not walk the talk. They might not themselves live the life that God intended for us all. They, or others who are part of the same group, might live lives that do not conform to God's intention, and this might manifest itself in things like theft, sexual infidelity, or robbery from pagan shrines.

23. In other words, it is quite possible for someone to boast about the favour of God represented by their possession of the Instruction, while living in ways that are actually in conflict with that Instruction.

24. I cite a text that makes my point for me. The scriptures envisage people who appear to be a part of the people of God but who do not live as God intended and who, in consequence, bring huge damage to the reputation of God among the non-Jewish nations. Actually, it's a rather loose quotation but I had in mind texts like Isaiah 52:5 and Ezekiel 36:20. The context is God's action to bring salvation or to defend himself, even at a time when his reputation is being slandered. In just such a time, then, God has acted to bring his salvation through King Jesus.

So, my point was that it's no good boasting about possessing or knowing the Instruction. Or about how good you are at teaching others who need to hear it. What matters is whether you are actually living it out. To me it was fairly clear that many Jewish people, including many of the leaders, were failing to do this. This was one of the things that got me hot under the collar as a Pharisee. I was determined to get my fellow Jews to obey the Instruction and it vexed me when they didn't. After I met Jesus, I gained a different perspective.

### **Verses 25-29      The people of God and their badge**

So, this has been an argument about the right way to be Jewish. Inevitably, then, this is an argument about the Instruction because, when push comes to shove, it is having the Instruction that defines us Jews as a people. And the best-known expression of obedience to the Instruction is that our males are all circumcised; it was the thing that marked us out in the whole Roman Empire. It was the mark on the bodies of our men that we were the people of the Instruction. In other words, to talk about being circumcised is to talk about having the Instruction, which means being part of the Jewish people, which is to say, the nation through which God has been especially at work in history. This is something that clearly has value, but it counts for nothing before God if we don't actually live the Instruction. Circumcision is supposed to be the mark of the Instruction and that should mean wholehearted commitment to it. If it doesn't mean that, then the mark is meaningless.

Now, since the mark of circumcision is supposed to mean commitment to living the Instruction, it follows that somebody who is committed, whether they are Jewish or not, is in a better place with God than a member of the Jewish community who is not committed. Effectively, this means that the Instruction-committed non-Jew is a witness against the Jew who is not Instruction-committed. This makes more sense if you remember that I was still working with an extended law court illustration. So, you can't truly be a Jew, that is truly part of the people of God, if your belonging only has an outward expression, such as knowing the Instruction and - if you're a male - being physically circumcised. Rather, to be truly a Jew, you need to be committed to the Instruction from the heart, that's the bit of a person where the mark of the Instruction really means something and this is a work that is accomplished by the Spirit of God, not simply by knowing words. This inward commitment may not win you friends but it's what matters to God.

25. The best-known outward sign of the Instruction, and hence mark of being Jewish, was male circumcision. If you had this mark as a part of your commitment to the whole way of life that God intended, then it had a purpose. However, if you do not live that way, you might as well not be circumcised. In fact, it's worse than that, you've become a walking contradiction. Let me attempt an illustration from your century. Suppose you are buying a car. The body and the badge are those of a Rolls Royce. However, when you open the bonnet, you see that the engine, and all the other hidden parts, were made by a greatly inferior manufacturer. You'd probably want to tear the badge off the car. The badge is supposed to tell you what sort of car it really is. In fact, it simply misleads you. The badge is useful if the car is authentic but useless, or even dangerous, otherwise. It's the same, in some ways, with circumcision and the rest of the Instruction. If the outward sign doesn't tell you what's really on the inside, it is useless, or worse than useless.

26. Looking at this from another point of view, I argue that a non-Jew who does live in the way that God originally intended ought to be regarded as though they were circumcised. Going back to the car illustration, a car that has all the inner parts of a Rolls Royce, but lacks the badge, would be a terrific car. This is like the person who is not Jewish but who, nevertheless, keeps the really significant requirements of the Instruction.

27. Such a person will be in a better position come the judgement than someone who has the Instruction and is circumcised but does not live as the Instruction teaches. I emphasize my point by referring to the Instruction as 'the written code'. This expression is part of setting up a distinction that I will make later, with things that are spiritual. For now, though, I'm trying to get across the idea that it is not the external, outward things that matter but the internal, inner things. Go back to our two cars for a moment. One looks like a Rolls Royce but isn't and the other is a Rolls Royce but lacks the badge. When examined by a specialist it becomes clear which of them is the better car. One may have the badge, but that's not what really matters.

28. Hence, I argue that being truly Jewish is not simply a matter of outward appearances and that therefore true circumcision, the mark of being a Jew, is not really an outward or physical thing. I could extend the car analogy but it's approaching breaking point. I think you've got the idea.

29. Instead being authentically Jewish is really an inward thing. This means that the kind of circumcision that really counts relates to character, it is something done to us by the Spirit of God not by the written letter of the Instruction. This inward, spiritual mark of commitment does not get us any credit with human social groups, but it does bring God's approval. I draw a distinction here, hinted at earlier, between the Spirit and the letter. The Instruction has spiritual and non-spiritual dimensions. There is a sense in which the Instruction is divided or even conflicted. This will be an important part of an argument that I will develop more fully later in the letter.

So, my argument is really that the outward marks of being Jewish are meaningless unless they are matched by the inward marks of being a part of God's people. Indeed, it is those inner things that are the important ones. I may be protesting too much at this point, but I want to stress that this is not an anti-Jewish argument. I'm saying that God treats everyone exactly the same no matter who they are. Indeed, the idea of a spiritual circumcision is one I learned from the scriptures. It's right there in Deuteronomy.<sup>[2]</sup>

**Footnotes:**

<sup>[1]</sup> You can read some of this teaching in Mark 7:21-23.

<sup>[2]</sup> Deuteronomy 30:6.

**Chapter 3****Verses 1-8      The True value of being Jewish**

Well, you can see that this raises a whole bunch of questions and I explore them in the rest of the letter. And the first couple of these are about the point of being Jewish and the value of the practice of physical circumcision. Actually, these amount to two ways of asking the same thing. My answer is that these things really are important, just not in the way that some people seem to think. The first thing is that the scriptures were given to the Jewish community. It's true that some of us did not stay committed to the Instruction, but this could never stop God from keeping his promises! I suppose I used to think that it would. I believed that only when the whole Jewish community kept the Instruction properly would God choose to act to keep his ancient promises. I now realise this was a crazy way to think. As if people could manipulate God! God would be faithful to his promises no matter what. God is true to his word even if nobody else is.

This could amount to saying, given this background of Jewish unfaithfulness, that God's commitment to his promises looks even better; surely that's worth something? After all, we're making God look good! Humanly speaking, wouldn't that mean that we should get rewarded rather than judged?! But of course, it means nothing of the kind. If it did, God could not be the judge of anything or anyone. Even if one of my lies makes God's truth even more glorious, that would not turn the lie into truth or put me any less in the wrong. You might as well argue that we should all do wicked things because God might bring good out of them. Astonishingly, some people accuse me of saying just this. They think that if God can act without humans having done what they should, then there is no need for humans to do good at all! But, as I've tried to show, this is an absurd position.

My imaginary conversation partner makes a return to the discussion. I've had this conversation, and ones like it, lots of times over the years, sometimes with Jews, sometimes with Gentiles. I know the kind of objections that are likely to come. They're usually in the form of the sorts of questions I address in these verses.

1. I recognise that my imaginary conversation partner would object to my argument. Basically, they would say that since Jews and non-Jews are all treated the same, there's no point in being Jewish in the first place.

2. My response is that being Jewish is tremendously important, just not in the way that the

questioner is implying. The most important reason we Jews are significant is that we have been entrusted with God's words. That is to say that the Instruction and the inspired words of the prophets have been committed to us and we have read them, listened to them, copied them, taught them, and protected them down the centuries. That's a pretty significant role. I'm very proud indeed to be Jewish. We really matter in the story of God's dealings with humanity.

3. Okay, says my conversation partner, what if some of the Jews were unfaithful? Is that going to stop God being faithful? Paul, says my partner, are you seriously suggesting that God's faithfulness to his promises could be cancelled out by our unfaithfulness? The truth is that there was a time when I thought that this might really be the case, but I can now see the absurdity of it. God is God. He does not depend on us for his attributes. I might as well ask whether we can change what God is like.

4. And of course, we can't change God! Indeed, even if every human being turned out to be a liar, God would still be true. I cite a text that expresses this idea. It's basically saying that God will always turn out to be in the right. It's from a psalm that I took to be King David's prayer of repentance. Human kings can get things wrong and be unfaithful; God cannot and is not. Once again, I'm back working with the picture of a law court. As always, God is the judge and, as always, God does the right thing.

5. The objections to my arguments keep coming. Some have said that human unfaithfulness throws God's faithfulness into stark relief, making it stand out and look even more impressive. Therefore, according to them, the effect of my argument is to say that human unfaithfulness is a good thing. This would mean that we should be rewarded for it rather than be held accountable for it. It's still a law court argument. Basically, my critics are arguing that God should let us off because we make him look good.

6. But this doesn't follow at all! If God were to reward us, the Jewish people, for our unfaithfulness, how could he have any integrity when he judged the rest of the world? He'd have to judge them by that same standard and the result would be to reward wrong and punish right. And that can't happen.

7. Here I press my imaginary opponent's argument one step further. I imagine him saying, and believe me, I've heard people say this kind of thing a great deal over the years, that if a human lie, human unfaithfulness, makes God seem even more glorious in his truthfulness and faithfulness, why should he, my opponent, face judgement as someone in the wrong? After all, he's put God in a good light.

8. And now I take the same argument from my imagined opponent and press it as far as it will go, mainly to show just how absurd it is. Based on their position, you might as well say that we should do evil because good can come out of it. Astonishingly, this is what some have accused me of saying! All I can say is that those who assert such things will get their comeuppance.

In this section I have been dealing with potential objections to my argument. I've tried to show that none of them really amounts to very much. I've relied throughout the argument on the picture of

God as judge. There are lots of reasons to be proud of being Jewish. However, these are not always the reasons people imagine. God is always a fair judge, and he is impartial.

### **Verses 9-20      Jews and non-Jews are all in the same boat**

So, yes, there's an advantage to being Jewish but no, not in the way you might think. As groups, Jews and non-Jews have both got it wrong. It may be more obvious in the case of the non-Jews but it's true of every category of humanity. I categorise the present condition of every type of humanity as 'under Sin'. The meaning of this is something that I'll explore later but I should probably say at this point that I tend to talk about sin as though it was a person; it is a power. Those who have not lived as God intended, whether or not they know the Instruction, all live under the rule of this power. I then quote some texts from different parts of the scriptures to reinforce the point that everyone is in this category. This is still part of my engagement with my Jewish conversation partner. We have established common ground by agreeing that the Gentiles are under Sin. I deploy the texts as the culmination of my case that the same is true of the Jews.

The sharp-eyed among you will recognise that these texts come from the prophets and the psalms, not from the part of the Bible we call the Instruction. However, when I say these texts are from the 'Law' I am using the word as a kind of abbreviation for the Instruction and the Prophets, which is a way of talking about the whole of the scriptures. In other words, these scriptures, which support my contention that all are under Sin, are about, and are addressed to, those who know the scriptures, which is to say, to Jewish people. Therefore, I regard my case proven that every category of person, Jew and Gentile, is under Sin, is answerable to its creator, and has no defence.

Yes, this applies to the Jews too. Because things like circumcision and the hearing of the Instruction do not bring vindication in God's court. This is what I mean when I make the point that the 'works of the Instruction' cannot justify. I think I could have been a little clearer about what I meant by this. However, if you've been following the argument, you will know what I must have been trying to say. I am referring to the outward or external marks that the Instruction requires - male circumcision is the most obvious example, but it includes other things that function to define Jewish cultural identity. And my point is that these things, important as they may be in other respects, are not the things that count before God. Of course, this does not mean that the Instruction is worthless. It has real value, just not the value that others think that it has. One of its purposes - it has lots of others too, but this is the one I want to focus on at this point in the letter - is that it brings about an awareness of Sin. This is another one of those arguments that I will pick up the thread of a bit later. For now, let me spell out one of the implications of this. Non-Jews are under Sin, as I have demonstrated, but since they do not have the Instruction, they are unaware of their situation. Jews, who are also under Sin, *do* have the Instruction and so *are* aware, or ought to be, of their position.

9. I have stated before that there is a real significance in being Jewish. However, this significance does not make us any better off than non-Jews when it comes to the right way to be human. As I have already argued, every type of human, both Jews and non-Jews, have lived in ways other than the one God intended, which is to say that they are under the rule of the power I call 'Sin'.

10-18. I then offer this collection of texts from the psalms and the prophets which all make the point that the group being addressed do things that are wrong. My aim here is not to prove that the non-Jews have lived in ways that do not conform to God's purposes. Basically, all my readers, and most of the people who object to my teaching, accept that that is the case. The point of the texts is to prove that Jewish people are in just the same position as non-Jews. It was Jews who wrote these texts, and it is to Jewish people that they are addressed.

19. I know these texts do not come from the Instruction itself. However, they do come from elsewhere in the Hebrew scriptures, from within the wider collection of scripture encompassing 'The Instruction, the Prophets and the Writings' or, as I say here, 'The Instruction' for short. The point is that the words are addressed to Jewish people. They, just like the non-Jews, have lived in ways that go against what God intended for humans. Remember, I'm still working with the picture of God as judge. At this point, I imagine a courtroom scene in which all the defendants have been arguing their case. Now, they all recognise the sheer weight of the evidence against them and as a result they fall silent. They realise that they are guilty as charged and all they can do is await the verdict of the judge.

20. I go back, still thinking of the courtroom scene, to the particular case of Jewish people, that is, the people who know the Instruction. I've already shown that possession of the Instruction does not mean a person lives in the way God intended. I've also shown that having the outward mark of commitment to the Instruction - male circumcision - does not mean you live as God intended. Neither these outward manifestations of the Instruction, nor other things in that category, mean that you live as God intended. This is another way of saying that those who rely on these outward manifestations of the Instruction will not be vindicated at the judgement. In fact, one of the functions of the Instruction is to make us aware that we are not living in the way that God intended, which is to say that it makes us aware of 'Sin'. I shall say more about this later in the letter.

The purpose of this brief passage with all its references to scripture has been to show that, as far as failing to live in the way God intended is concerned, Jewish people stand in just the same position as non-Jewish people. None of us have lived as he wanted and so all of us face God's judgement. Some talk as though possession of the Instruction ought to make a difference to this, but, as I have shown, it really doesn't. What it does do is, among other things, let you know that you are failing to live as God intended.

### **Verses 21-25 God's solution to the human dilemma**

And this brings me to what is really the centre of this part of the argument. What God has done is to keep his promises without any reference to the Instruction. This is one of the key things that took me by surprise. As a Pharisee, I believed that God had given his people the Instruction and that it was through this that he would keep his ancient promises. However, he chose to keep those promises other than through the Instruction. He took a kind of bypass! Of course, it's not unrelated to the Instruction; it and the rest of the scriptures contain those promises and hint at the way in which they would be kept.



The promise-keeping of God came through the faithfulness of King Jesus and is for all – that is, for every person, whatever their category – who is true to him. You see, in the end, all the old distinctions count for nothing, for every category of person has gone wrong and misses out on what God originally intended for us. And more than this, those who are to be vindicated, whether Jew or non-Jew, get this as pure gift, an act of sheer generosity, through the liberation offered in King Jesus.

Going back to the issue of ‘wrath’ we were discussing earlier. Remember this is language that belongs to the courtroom, and I use the word in the specialised sense of the thing that motivates those authorised to act in judgement. That image is still present in the argument. God’s desire to see justice done was dealt with through King Jesus. I say that this happened through his blood, by which I mean his life of faithful obedience to God; an obedience that King Jesus knew would mean his death. The word I use for ‘dealt with’ is borrowed from the language of the temple; it’s used for the mercy seat. I suppose I’m mixing my metaphors here to bring together three different but related ideas; the idea of a courtroom, the idea of liberation – using language drawn from the Exodus story – and ideas about temple sacrifice. The key idea to grasp is that those who are embraced by King Jesus, and are loyal to him, get vindicated, get set free, and get their transgressions covered. This all happens because he preferred to die rather than to be disobedient. All this showed that God was keeping his promises because, being patient and kind, he had not thoroughly addressed human wrong before. God did this to show his faithfulness in the present, so that he might be both vindicated – that is, shown to be in the right – and the one who vindicates those who embrace King Jesus. God is vindicated because he is shown through all this to be faithful and true.

21. Do you remember the main theme of the letter that I set out earlier in 1:16-17? I said there that the gospel reveals the faithfulness of God; it shows that he has kept his ancient promises. It’s God’s way of bringing back to the whole world the way of being human that he originally intended. As a Pharisee I had understood that when God acted to do these things, he would do it through the Instruction. In other words, they would happen when the Jewish people complied with the Instruction. As you might know, our focus as Pharisees, in trying to get this sort of compliance, was on the outward manifestations of the Instruction because, apart from anything else, these were easier to enforce. I now realise that my expectations were wholly misplaced. God had acted to keep his promises in a different way altogether – not through the Instruction! Of course, both the Instruction and the prophetic writings tell us that God *would* keep his promises and, now that I study them from a fresh perspective, I can see that they do indeed suggest how he would go about doing it.

22. God has not kept his promises through the Instruction; he has done it through the faithfulness, that is, the faithful obedience, of King Jesus. This is something that is for every category of person, both Jews and non-Jews, who place their trust in King Jesus, for, as far as these issues are concerned, as I hope I have shown in the argument so far, there is no difference. Lots of people think that I argue that the key issue is faith *in* Jesus. Well, of course that’s really important, but if you think about it, it puts the emphasis on us and on our faith, which isn’t quite right. What I’m really trying to speak about is the faithfulness *of* Jesus; that’s what demonstrates that God has been faithful.

23. Here I am repeating one of the key things I've argued up to this point. Every category of person has failed to live in the way God intended when he created humanity. That is to say, every type of person has sinned and has therefore failed to get the blessing and honour God originally meant to give us. Psalm 8 suggests that God planned to crown humanity with glory. Our refusal to live in the way God intended got in the way of that. This psalm is very important in my thinking. I've always understood it to be about Adam. It expresses God's original intention for Adam - and so for all humans. Of course, I believe that the promise is fulfilled in King Jesus, the one to whom all things are made subject. I discussed this text in one of my letters to the church in Corinth.<sup>[1]</sup>

24. Here's the thing. Those who trust in what King Jesus has done get to be vindicated at the final judgement - which is to say, as I have said, that they are starting to live in the way God originally intended - and they receive this out of God's sheer generosity; it is pure gift. It comes through God's act of liberation that he has carried out through King Jesus. I am borrowing Exodus language here because, as we shall see later, Jesus-followers have crossed over from one way of life to another, out of Egypt to the land of promise, out of one way of being into another, out of Death into Life.

25. So what happened? Here I borrow language from the temple. At the heart of the temple in Jerusalem was the holiest place and there stood the throne of God and the ark of the covenant. It was the place of God's presence. The cover of the ark was called the mercy seat. It was over that mercy seat that God, on the Day of Atonement, was manifested in a cloud. The high priest would enter the holiest place with the blood of the sin offerings and sprinkle them both on and in front of the mercy seat. In this way, there would be atonement for the sins of the people and for the holiest place itself. This means that the sin of the people, their failure to live as God had intended, was dealt with. Using this temple imagery, I claim that God offered King Jesus as this kind of sacrifice. I say God did this through Jesus' blood. This is my way of referring to Jesus' act of faithful obedience that meant his death. God did this to demonstrate his own faithfulness to his promises. God, in his patience and kindness, had not fully dealt with Sin before this.

I can see in retrospect that I've packed quite a lot of ideas into a couple of sentences. What I'm getting at is that God cannot fulfil his promises without addressing the issue of human sin, our failure to live as God intended, and its consequences. In the past God had dealt with this, for the Jewish people, in annual rituals. As far as other nations were concerned, God had not chosen to allow the full extent of the consequences to play out. Now he has addressed these things fully through the faithful obedience to the extent of the death of King Jesus. In the temple, the sacrifice stood in for the Jewish people. Now King Jesus stands in place of those sacrifices for all people.

As I argued earlier, one of the consequences of humans living in ways other than one God intended is wrath. And by 'wrath' I mean that which motivates a judge to act. The obedience of King Jesus means that for those who give him their allegiance, there is no longer anything that motivates God to act in judgement.

### **Verses 26-31    The Instruction itself teaches this**

So, any boasting about the Instruction seems a bit pointless in light of this. But it's boasting about hearing and possessing the Instruction, and about circumcision, that's pointless. There's another attitude to the Instruction that makes sense - the loyalty to Jesus aspect of the Instruction. You see, it is loyalty to King Jesus, and through him to the true, inner, spiritual purpose of the Instruction that he represents, that leads to the right way to live. That is what vindicates a person. Commitment to the outer aspects of the Instruction alone cuts no ice with God. Another way to say this is that a person gets vindicated in God's courtroom based on our allegiance to Jesus and this happens without reference to the outward manifestations of the Instruction. If it worked on the basis of those outward manifestations, it would suggest that God is only the God of those who have the Instruction, that is, the Jews. But that can't be right. There's only one God and therefore he must be God of the non-Jews too. All can be vindicated in the same way - trust in King Jesus. This is true whether or not people are physically circumcised.

Over the years I had encountered all kinds of objections to this teaching. Most of the objections came from the way that people understood some of the teaching found in the Instruction. It had been suggested by some that my teaching amounted to overthrowing the Instruction. The truth is, as I shall try to demonstrate, I am following the Instruction here. As will become clearer later, I am advocating the true, inward, spiritual purpose of the Instruction, as opposed to its outward aspects. But I can also make my case from the written Instruction itself; after all, the story of Abraham is found in the Instruction and, if you read it carefully, you'll see that I'm fully supporting what it teaches. I will show how that works in chapter 4.

26. God has done this now to show that he is faithful to his ancient promises; that he is true to his word. This demonstrates that he is himself vindicated, that is, in the right, and is the one who vindicates, that is, finds in favour of, those who are embraced by the faithfulness of Jesus.

27. God has done it all and so there is no place for humans to boast about anything. However, which aspect of the Instruction has seen off human boasting? The aspect related to outward appearances? No. Rather it is the aspect concerned with inward things like faith and trust that has accomplished this.

28. My teaching is that living in the way that God intended - the way that leads to a person being vindicated at the judgement - happens through the inward rather than outward manifestations of the Instruction.

29. Otherwise, it would be as though God were only God of the Jews and that can't be right, can it? After all, they're the only ones who have those outward manifestations. But isn't the one God also God of non-Jews? Of course he is! You see, only the Jews can know about the outward stuff, but others can conceivably get the inward stuff. And that's the stuff that really counts.

30. After all, there's only one God and he's not divided. So, he will vindicate every kind of person on exactly the same basis. Whether you are a Jew or a Gentile, it's about living as God intended. That means that it's really about the true, inward aspect of the Instruction. That's what I'm getting at when I say it's all done through faith. Clearly, this is more courtroom language. We're back to the idea that God is impartial and is a fair judge.

31. Some people misunderstand me on this point. Given the position I take, they think I am using faith to undermine the Instruction. In fact, when you remember it's true purpose, I'm upholding the Instruction. I'll demonstrate this point in the next section of the letter by reminding you of a story told in it.

God's faithfulness to his promises is demonstrated through the obedience unto death of King Jesus. This is the basis on which God enables people, whether they are Jews or non-Jews, to live in the way he intended and so to be the people he will vindicate at the judgement. These are people who may or may not be marked by the outward manifestations of the Instruction; however, they are all marked by faith in what God has done and this means their lives are shaped by the inward, true purposes of the Instruction. I shall explore these points in more detail later. You will see how the Instruction itself came to lead in two different directions and this led to many people becoming conflicted. I will also show how God has, through King Jesus, resolved this terrible situation. You will see that my teaching upholds the true purpose of the Instruction and does not, as many claim, undermine it.

There are a number of pictures at work in my account. In my mind they all work together. However, it may be worth unravelling them. One is the law court where God is an impartial judge. He is the one who decides who is vindicated and who is not. The faithful obedience of King Jesus means that he is vindicated. I have suggested that others, those who pledge allegiance to Jesus, may be too but I have not yet spelled out how that happens. The next picture is temple sacrifice. In the past an animal was offered so that it stood in for the people of God. The obedience lay with the people who offered it rather than with the animal that was sacrificed. King Jesus is a different sort of sacrifice because he *chose* (no animal ever chose to be sacrificed) to be obedient unto death. The third metaphor is that of redemption. This hints at the idea of making a payment to set people free from slavery. In my mind this image is strongly associated with the story of the Exodus when the people of God were freed from slavery in Egypt. For me the Exodus becomes a key pattern for understanding that action of King Jesus in setting people free. In the Exodus God's people were set free from Pharaoh so that they could live for God. King Jesus sets his people free from Sin with the same goal in mind. There will be further exploration of many of these ideas later in the letter.

---

### Footnotes:

<sup>[1]</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:27.

## Chapter 4

### What the Instruction actually says

You will have registered from my comments right at the beginning that, as I understand things, Abraham is a vital part of the story. Sometimes people think that I use his story as a kind of illustration or example. It certainly does work well that way but that's not quite what I had in mind. You see, Abraham is the beginning of the story of salvation, and the great promises of God about

putting the whole world back on track start with him. In one sense, the story of the people of God starts with him. You just can't tell the story of salvation without him. Therefore, it's really important to understand who Abraham was when those promises were made.

### **Verses 1-12      It all begins with Abraham**

This is one of the places where things get confused. I know exactly what I meant to say but I left it to Tertius, who was acting as scribe, to frame the sentence. Nobody used punctuation marks in letters in those days. When he read it back to me, it simply didn't occur to me, or to any of the rest of us, that it was ambiguous. What I meant to argue was almost the opposite of what often gets translated! I was not saying Abraham was our ancestor according to the flesh! I was asking if we should understand him as our ancestor in that way. I was trying to argue that Abraham is important, not because he is our physical ancestor (this would mean the passage applied only to Jews, and - conceivably - to other nations that trace their descent to him) but because he is our faith ancestor.

So, it would be better to translate the Greek here as 'What shall we say then? Have we found Abraham to be our forefather according to the flesh?' This is a rhetorical question framed to get the answer 'no'. The point of the argument is that Abraham offers an illustration of what I mean by faith, that is, he demonstrates an inward commitment to living in the way God intended. It was this utter trust that meant that he was in good standing with God. And this happened before Abraham took on any of the outward marks we now associate with the Instruction. The outward marks are often related to what I mean when I use the word 'flesh'.

My argument is that Abraham had no such outward marks to boast about. Rather, he trusted wholly in God and in God's promises and this was enough to bring him into a relationship with God and to live in the way God intended, the way that means that you will be vindicated in the judgement. It was nothing to do with outward marks and everything to do with inward commitment. It's underlined in the psalms. Surely, what David wrote applies to Abraham as much as to anyone, which means David's words could not be meant only for those who had been circumcised, because at this point in his story, Abraham was not circumcised!

I think the idea I'm striving for here is that you cannot really argue that Abraham was Jewish when he first received God's promises. The Instruction had yet to be given and he'd not been circumcised. On the other hand, you cannot really say he's a Gentile, a non-Jew, because the distinction didn't exist at this point. So, Abraham can work as a prototype for people of every kind, the Jewish people who are his physical descendants and the non-Jews who are not. This is because what truly matters is trust in God's promises, that is, being one of, what we might call, the spiritual descendants of Abraham.

You see the act of circumcision came after this. The faith comes first, and the circumcision is secondary. The latter seals the former. It depends on the former, not vice-versa. The faith, and the resulting relationship with God, happened before he took on the outward mark of being a male Jew. The upshot of all this is that he is the forefather of all the people of faith. This includes the non-Jews

who are in relationship with God just as Abraham was, and it includes Jewish believers who share that faith.

1. I've already told you what I meant to say here. While Abraham is the physical ancestor of the Jews, this is not really what makes him significant. What matters is that he is the forerunner of all the people of faith.
2. It's not the outward manifestations of the Instruction that mean Abraham will be vindicated. If it were, he would have something he could brag about; it would be about him. It would be a matter of his accomplishments or his birth right. However, that's not the way it works and so he has nothing to boast about before God.
3. What the scripture in fact says, and I know I'm paraphrasing here but this is what it's getting at, is that Abraham trusted in God's promises, and this meant that he was treated as though he had started to live in the way that God had always - from the very beginning - intended that humans should live. In other words, his trust in God meant he would be vindicated.
4. Let's compare all this to our working lives. If you have a job, you do your work and in return you get paid. This is the pattern proposed by those who think that the outward manifestations of the Instruction are what bring vindication. Vindication would then not be something you receive as a gift from God but as something to which you are entitled.
5. On the other hand, the pattern I propose is that this is not something we work for; it is a gift from God. It is not the outward manifestations of the Instruction that count but the inward faith commitment. What matters is trust in God who will vindicate those who have not, up to that point, lived as God intended. Why? Because he treats their inward faith commitment as the sign that they will now live in the way that God had always intended.
6. David, writing in the psalms, speaks about this gift, this blessing of the one whom God treats as though they were living in the way he intended, on a basis other than the outward manifestations of the Instruction.
7. It's great to be among those who, although they have not lived in accordance with the Instruction, have been forgiven for that and for whom the consequences of failing to live as God intended have been dealt with.
8. This verse repeats the same thought using different words. How great to be a person whose failure to live as God intends is not counted against them by God.
9. Another rhetorical question for you to consider. David promised this and it's a blessing that fits Abraham's story and circumstances. But is it promised only to those who are circumcised, that is, to Jewish people, to those who know the Instruction? My answer is that Abraham got this blessing without any reference to his being Jewish. It was because of his inward commitment that he was dealt with by God as though he had started to live in the way that God intended.
10. I can imagine all kinds of objections that people might make to this line of argument. The best

way to argue my case is through some more questions. The first concerns Abraham's identity at the time he received the promise. Who was Abraham when this happened? Was he circumcised at this point in the story? Was he Jewish at this point? Did he have the Instruction at this point? If you check the story, you'll see that it all happened before he received the mark of circumcision! In other words, the answer to the question posed in verse 9 is that the blessing is for both categories of people, Jews and non-Jews.

11. We must be careful not to put the cart before the horse. The important thing was that Abraham trusted God. The mark of circumcision came later. The mark was a sign of Abraham's trust in God's promises, his inward commitment to live in the way that God originally intended for humans - and that trust was there before he was circumcised. The point is that the outward is a mark of the inward and it is the inward that really counts. If the outward is there but the inward is not present, then the outward achieves nothing because it is then not a sign or a mark of anything. So, God's plan has two parts; the first concerns the non-Jews who have an inward trust in God; they are treated as though they have started to live in the way that God intended. Abraham is their father.

12. The second part concerns those in the Jewish group for whom the same thing is true. If they have faith like Abraham, then he is their father. The point is that this is something for the whole of humanity, not just one category.

Let me summarise what I've been trying to say. It links in with the points I was making in chapter 2 about the true purpose of circumcision and in chapter 3 about every category of humanity missing out on the glory of God. I am demonstrating that my teaching, far from undermining the Instruction as some allege, in fact upholds it. I've done this on the basis of a key story in the Instruction, the story that begins the whole process of salvation, the story of Abraham.

Remember, salvation means restoring humanity to the way of life God originally intended for them. The root of the problem was that humans rejected God's way of being human; they failed to trust God. In effect, by putting his trust in God and living as though God's promises are true, Abraham begins the process of turning things around. God promises to overlook Abraham's wrongdoing - for until this point he has lived in ways that do not conform to God's intended pattern - and to treat Abraham's trust as though it amounted to a life truly lived as God intended. On that basis God declares that Abraham will be vindicated at the last judgement. All this happens before Abraham is circumcised. There is no Jew and non-Jew at this point. Abraham can therefore be treated as the ancestor of all the people who trust God's promises whether or not they are Jewish, that is whether they bear the outward signs of the Instruction or not. Those outward signs are to be understood as marks of an inward trust in God and not vice versa.

There is a sense in which this is the beginning of the story of the people of God. The story of the covenant community that seeks to live as God originally intended starts with Abraham.

## **Verses 13-25    Creation from nothing and life from death**

Now, the promises God makes to Abraham are vital. They provide the basic framework for understanding the way that God is at work in the world. However, there is a very significant mandate in the Bible that comes even earlier in the Instruction. This is big story stuff, so I'll leave the details for you to fill in. Remember, this is all about the right way to be human. That is, to be human in relationship with our creator.

The first humans were given a mandate, part of which was 'fill the earth'. In other words, the whole of the earth - potentially at least - belonged to them. As we have seen, humans went off track, but it was God's purpose to get them back on it. This is an instance of God's righteousness - his commitment to his original purposes for humanity and for the rest of creation. God intends to restore things. The story of that restoration begins with Abraham. God promises him several things, but they boil down to these two - that through him all the nations of the world will experience blessing, and that his descendant would inherit the earth.

Now I know that the word 'earth' is often translated 'land' and applied to the territory of Israel but that is not the way that I understand it. Or rather, I understand the land to represent the earth; the gift of the land in Israel's story is a kind of token - it's the first instalment of the rest of the planet. The way it fits into the story is that the promises to Abraham should be understood as a repetition of the original mandate to humanity. Abraham is the figure through whom the restoration of humanity begins. His descendant will inherit the earth. I need to be clear here about just who this descendant is. There are lots of promises in the psalms about the worldwide reign of the anointed King. I see these in terms of the same original mandate and the promise to Abraham. Of course, they were never fully fulfilled by any of Israel's or Judah's kings, but they are fulfilled in King Jesus who has been given exactly this authority. In other words, the mandate, the promises to Abraham and the words of the psalms, not to mention the prophets, all find their fulfilment in Jesus.

This is why I say that the promise to Abraham and his descendant is that he would inherit the world. And, once again, it is not through the Instruction that this promise is kept but through God's faithfulness. If inheritance were about the Instruction, particularly in its outward forms, then trust would not enter into it. If you understand it that way, you might as well write off the promise.

Here we come to another tricky idea that needs careful thought; you can't break a rule if you have no rules. People who don't have the Instruction cannot transgress, for transgression is the crossing of a known boundary, a bit like trespass. Of course, where you do have the Instruction, almost by definition you have transgression and transgressions have consequences. They provoke what I have been calling 'wrath', that is the thing that motivates judges to act.

Notice how Abraham's faith is effectively the reversal of the primal disobedience. This points forward to a greater obedience to come.

So, it doesn't rest on rules because that could result in the promises not being delivered. Instead, it is based on relationships of trust so that the fulfilment of the promise can be a matter of grace and so there is a cast iron guarantee, not just to the people of the Instruction but to everyone of whatever background who trusts God as Abraham did, for he's the father - the prototype - of us all, the father of many nations.



Let me say something about the kind of faith Abraham had; he believed in the God who gives life to the dead, the God who makes something out of nothing. He had nothing other than trust in God to make him believe that God's promises could come true: he was an old man, his wife was an old woman; she was, to the best of his knowledge, barren. Yet he lived his life as though the promises were true. That's the kind of trusting faith that brings us into relationship with God and starts us out living in the way God originally intended. It was his and it's ours too; it belongs to those who believe in the resurrection of Jesus who was handed over for the times we've crossed the wrong line and who was raised to life to bring us into relationship with God and to get us vindicated in the judgement.

So, that's the big story; God has kept his ancient promises. He has done it in a way I had not expected; that is, he has not done it through the Instruction, though his method was perfectly consistent with what the Instruction actually teaches.

You will have noticed that I hurried over a couple of things. There have been references to Adam, for example and hints of what Jesus accomplished. There have also been questions about ethics. These are among the things I plan to spell out in the next few chapters.

13. The promise to Abraham is a kind of reformulation of the original mandate and promise given to humanity. Abraham stands in the place of Adam as the one whose descendant will inherit the world. King Jesus is this descendant. This promise to Abraham precedes the giving of the Instruction. It did not come about because of Abraham's commitment to the Instruction or its outward manifestations, it came about because of God's commitment to his original purposes. Abraham trusted in these things.

14. If it were simply a question of having the Instruction that made a person heir of the promises, in other words, if simply being Jewish were sufficient, it would mean that none of the inward commitment mattered or counted for anything. The promises would count for nothing. To put it another way, if it were about the Instruction then there could never be any blessing for those who do not possess that Instruction. Yet God has promised that all the nations - those with and those without the Instruction - will be blessed. If you make it about the Instruction, you make the promise void.

15. I think this is one of those places where the line of thought we were pursuing when the letter was written got a bit dense. Let me try to explain. If you don't have the Instruction, you cannot really break the Instruction. A transgression is the crossing of a known line. If there's no line, there's nothing to transgress. You may be failing to live as God intended and you may be aware of it, but you're not actually breaking any rules that you know about.

Now, let's deal with the issue of 'wrath'. Remember that this is the word I use for the thing that motivates a judge to act in judgement. If you have an Instruction and someone transgresses, there must be consequences. Wrath is the characteristic of God that motivates him to enforce those consequences. Basically, no Instruction, then no transgression and if there's no transgression, there's no wrath. So, in a sense, the Instruction brings wrath.

16. The Instruction is therefore tainted by wrath. I shall say more about this later. For now, it's sufficient to argue that, because of its link to wrath, the Instruction was not an appropriate vehicle for bringing about God's promises. So, God acted because of his own faithfulness. This means that God's promise-keeping rests on his sheer generosity and is guaranteed to all Abraham's spiritual descendants, whether they bear the outward marks of the Instruction or not.

17. One of the promises that God makes to Abraham was that he would be the ancestor of many peoples. Therefore, Abraham should not be understood as the father of the Jews alone. They may be (among) his physical descendants but his spiritual descendants - and that's the kind of descent that really matters - can be from any nation at all. The God who made this promise is utterly reliable. He is the one in whom Abraham trusted. This God gives life to the dead and creates things out of nothing.

18. Abraham had quite a story. God offered him these promises and, even when it looked for all the world as though they could not possibly happen, Abraham continued to live as though those promises would come true. He had been told about his descendants and he trusted it would be so.

19. Humanly speaking, there were things that made the promises hard to believe. There was his own body, for he was an old man by this time, and there was his wife Sarah, who everyone thought was unable to conceive. Yet these things did not stop him trusting.

20. Abraham got on with life trusting that God would bring about the things he had promised. As a result, he trusted more and more and his life gave glory to God, which is to say - remember Psalm 8 - that he showed, in part at least, the results of what happens when you live in the way that God had intended that humans should live.

21. I think this is clear enough. Abraham was convinced that he could rely on God to deliver on his promises.

22. My argument should now be clear. Abraham relied on God and God treated that trust as meaning that Abraham was living in the way that God intended humans to live.

23. This willingness of God to treat him as though he were living in the way God intended does not apply to Abraham alone.

24. It also applies to us. Those of us who trust in the God who brings life to the dead and things out of nothing, who raised King Jesus, are also treated as though we are living life in the way God intended.

25. This Jesus was handed over to death on account of our wrongdoing and was raised to life so that we might live as God intended, that is, live in such a way that God will find in our favour at the judgement.

The idea is that God intended humans to live in a certain way. This was a fundamental part of God's intention for creation. One result of this way of living would be that humans would give glory to God. This is because God's true, original purposes for the whole creation would be being fulfilled. As we

saw, humans rejected this way of being, but God wasn't prepared to abandon his project. He planned a way to bring salvation, which is to say, to restore humans to the way of life he'd originally envisaged, and so renew the whole of creation. The story of this process begins with Abraham. Where other humans failed to trust God, Abraham believed in God's promises. Because of this trust, he could be treated by God as though he was living as God intended, with the consequences of his previous failure to live that way being forgiven. Abraham's faith is parallel to the faith of those who follow King Jesus. There is slightly more to it than I have implied. I have said that Abraham can be treated as though he is living as God originally intended. In fact, his trust in God means he can start to do just that. That's why I can say that he gave glory to God. This is certainly also true, as I'll explain later, of those who follow King Jesu

## Chapter 5

In the opening chapters of the letter, I tried to demonstrate that there is no part of humankind, Jewish or otherwise, that has lived in the way that God, our creator, intended for us when he made us. I have also argued that this has certain consequences. Instead of embracing Life, we have been embraced by Death. I have also shown that God, acting through King Jesus, has addressed the issue and now offers a way for us to get back on track.

In the next section of the letter, I pick up some of the issues I have already mentioned and work out some of the details.

### Verses 1-11      **The argument so far and its implications**

In these verses I spell out some of the implications of the things I have been arguing up to this point. I'm summing things up before moving on to the next stage of the discussion. I have argued that the followers of Jesus are 'justified by faith'. This is shorthand for saying that God will find in our favour at the final judgement on the basis of our trust in what God has done through King Jesus. This, in turn, is to say that God treats us as though we had always lived in the way that God originally intended humans to live. As I shall show, our being treated like this really does mean that we have indeed, albeit falteringly, begun to live in the way God intended.

1. Remember that words like 'justification' and 'wrath' are law court language. Wrath is the thing that motivates the judge to act. If the court finds in your favour, wrath is not exercised against you. To put this another way, there are no issues between you and the judge; you are at peace. Those who follow King Jesus will be vindicated at the last judgement and therefore have peace with God. They have nothing to fear for God will bring no charge against them.<sup>[1]</sup> Another way to look at this is through another metaphor - I was never afraid to mix them. Think of a king who expects loyalty from his subjects. If they rebel against him, then they're at war with him. If they subsequently offer their allegiance, then they are at peace. Those who follow King Jesus have given their allegiance to God. This is the category of humans who are justified, that is, who will be vindicated at the judgement. There is peace between them and God.

2. This means we are welcome in God's presence now. One of the big issues in the ancient world was about who could get access to the powerful. If you could get to them, then you could ask for their help. King Jesus has made sure that his followers have access to God. It's like you've got a ticket to the Houses of Parliament or to the White House that says 'Access All Areas'. One consequence of this is that we anticipate experiencing the glory of God. Remember that speaking of the glory of God is often shorthand for the goal that God originally had for humanity. We have begun the journey that will lead us there. None of this is anything that is earned or deserved. We receive it as a gift. It is a matter of grace. So, there are three stages in my thought about this, all of which only happens because of the generosity of God. First, we are justified which means that God will find in our favour at the last judgement. Next, as those who will be vindicated, we have access to God now. Finally, we hope to live more and more fully in the way that God intended. The process of salvation has past, present and future dimensions.

Actually, there's a little more to it than that. I was trying to imply a reference to the temple in Jerusalem. There the high priest has access to the presence of God in the holy of holies just once a year. Those who follow Jesus enjoy this access in prayer and in worship in the here and now.

3. So, while all of this brings us joy, it is something we experience in the midst of considerable suffering. The followers of King Jesus can experience persecution and they are not immune to the pains and losses that can afflict anyone. However, we are aware that this suffering can have a purpose; it teaches us how to endure.

4. And when we learn to endure, we become stronger people. You sometimes hear people say, 'Anything that doesn't kill me, makes me stronger,' and it's that sort of idea that I'm getting at here. We develop character and that, in its turn, helps us to trust in God's future, to become people characterised by a sense of hope.

5. And if your hope is in God, then you will not be disappointed. After all, as I've been saying almost from the very start of the letter, one of the things the gospel shows us is that God can be trusted to keep his promises. But there's more to it than that. You see, following Jesus is not an intellectual exercise; it is a relationship, and it is highly experiential. As I shall outline later, the Holy Spirit is active in our lives. An important part of his work is that God's love is poured into our hearts. This is the foundation of everything. Knowing we are loved is the basis on which we build our lives. All this is attempting to show that following Jesus is something that profoundly affects the way we live. I shall build on this idea later in the letter. For now, it is important to get the idea that God starts off by treating us as though we were living in the way he always intended and then, through his action in our lives, starts enabling us to indeed live in that way. God accepts us just as we are, but then wants to move us on to become the people he longs for us to be.

6. I'm afraid there's another picture in this verse. This one is built round the idea of health. Basically, we were sick and there was nothing we could do about it. You know what it's like when you're really ill. You're helpless. And you can easily get worse if nobody's there to help you. You need someone to rescue you. King Jesus rescued us by giving up his life for us. We were in Sin. We habitually lived in ways which did not conform to the way God, our maker, had intended. However, at the time of God's choosing, Jesus died and was faithful to the point of death, for the sake of those

who were not living in the way God intended.

7. You could put brackets around this bit of the argument. There were stories that circulated in the ancient world about people who were so lovable that others were willing to give their lives for them. So, I could conceive of the idea that a person might give their life for someone really good, even if this would be pretty unusual. You might have seen a film called *Saving Private Ryan*. In the film a group of soldiers is ordered to go to absurd lengths to rescue a young soldier who is caught behind enemy lines. The group all end up giving their lives in this mission. At the end, the leader of the group speaks his dying words to the young man who has been saved and tells him to 'earn this'. In the film's final scene, set many years later, we learn that these words have haunted the saved man. He wonders if his life has been good enough to 'earn' what has been done for him and asks his wife if he has been a good man. As I say in the letter, there are people who might be prepared to die for someone good.

8. However, God's love is more extraordinary than any such illustration; King Jesus' act of obedience unto death happened while we were sick, while we were God's enemies, while we were under God's judgement, while we lived in the realm of Sin, while we were failing to live as God intended. We were not good and had no prospect of being so. Yet King Jesus was willing to die for us.

9. So, we can be absolutely sure that this obedience to the point of death has brought us to a place where, going back to the law court imagery, God the judge will find in our favour and so we shall not face judgement.

10. I change the image slightly at this point. I move away from the law court picture and go back to the one I introduced in the first verse, the one based on our having become enemies of God and so needing to find peace with him. I picture God and humanity as being enemies. We made ourselves enemies of God by refusing to live in the ways that God originally intended. This put us at odds with his original goals for the whole of creation. We ended up working against his purposes. Yet though we were his enemies, God acted through the obedience to death of his son King Jesus to bring about reconciliation. More than that, the life of the risen and ascended King Jesus, will save us; that is, will enable us to live as friends of God, as those whose lives conform to the purposes God had for humanity when he first created us. I shall explore later how the risen life of King Jesus continues to have an impact on his people. For now, I'll just say that he does this through the continuing impact of his teaching and example, through his intercession for us and through the work of his Spirit within us.

11. The outcome is that we rejoice in this reconciliation. Where once I might have boasted in my own identity or achievements, thinking that these were significant in God's purposes, I now boast only in what God has done through King Jesus.

The courtroom imagery of the last part of the argument remains but is supplemented here by the language of war and enmity. The idea is that the human rejection of God's way of being human, a story told or summed up in the story of Adam, makes us rebels - we have made ourselves the enemies of our Creator. God has acted through King Jesus to bring about peace with his rebel enemies. The whole image is one of reconciliation. This makes a natural link to the discussion of

Adam that now follows.

### **Verses 12-21 Jesus or Adam - Two ways to be human**

You will have registered that the story from the opening chapters of the Bible has been in the background of a lot of the discussion so far. It is time to make it much more explicit. The story of Adam and Eve explains that humans took the wrong path. Their disobedience took us off track. I have suggested ways in which the story of Abraham begins the long journey of turning things around. Now I shall explain how in and through King Jesus, God has made the decisive move to get us back on track.

Sin, the wrong way to be human (see chapter 1), came into the world through the actions of the first humans - the Bible calls them Adam and Eve - and they were given the primal mandate and the first commandment. Adam and Eve represent all of us; their story is our story; we live with the consequences of their action because we are all born into human societies and cultural practices that have developed as a result of the decisions they made. There was no escape until King Jesus created one.

The first consequence of human disobedience - of failing to be human as God intended - was that death became a reality. This became the common human experience because everyone was in this situation. However, it is important to understand that physical death is just a symptom of a deeper and far more serious issue. It is a sign of the real or deeper Death, that is, of being excluded from the life of the age to come, excluded from the glory that God promised to humans when he gave them the primal mandate. In summary, pulling together my understanding of Genesis 1 and Psalm 8, their mandate was, 'to be God's agent in the created order, fill the earth, subdue it, be crowned with glory and honour'. That was the track we abandoned and it's the track that God's action through King Jesus puts us back onto.

The other thing to bear in mind as you read the next section is that I regard Adam and King Jesus as being the prototypes of the two different ways to be human. Adam is the prototype of disobedience and hence is associated with Sin and Death. King Jesus is the prototype for obedience and hence offers Life as God intended, and so glory. In this argument, I compare the two prototypes. We will see that there are some points where things run in parallel and others where they don't.

In the next few verses, I tell the story of humanity from Adam to King Jesus. In outline it goes like this. Adam broke the commandment God gave him and so ceased to live in the way God had intended. Instead, he and all his descendants ended up in the way of living called Sin, the outcome of which is Death. All his descendants till the time of Moses, who received the Instruction, live this way. However, since the Instruction had not yet been given, they did not know that they were in that condition. Nevertheless, the consequences of that condition were apparent, the most significant consequence being death. When the Instruction came, the group of humans who received it - that is, the Jews - learned what it meant to transgress. As a result, the presence of Sin was more obvious to them.

12. Sin, that is, living in ways that do not conform to God's original purpose for us, came into the world through Adam. His story sums up our rejection of our creator. The consequence of his disobedience was that death entered the creation. And since all humans have, inevitably, been influenced by Adam's action and its consequences, we have all lived, one way or another, in ways which do not conform to God's original purposes, which means that we all sin, which in turn means that we are subject to its consequence which is Death. Let me stress that I do not simply mean physical death. I mean Death in the sense of being excluded from the things that God originally intended for humans. Physical death is a pointer to this greater Death. Similarly, when I speak of Life, I don't simply mean our current physical life, I mean the kind of Life God originally planned for humanity.

13. I can see that I have argued my point here quite densely and it might be better to unpack it. If you know the story of Adam and Eve, you will know that they disobeyed God. There was a commandment, and they knowingly broke it. This put them and all their descendants into the realm I call 'Sin'. That is, they lived in ways other than those that God had originally intended. So now, all humans find themselves in this category.

Now, I know that I have suggested a link between the Instruction and transgression and Sin, but we need to recall that there had been a primal commandment - don't eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil - long before the Instruction was ever written down. So, all humans lived in the realm of Sin, that is to say that, because of Adam's transgression, they were not living in the way God intended. They were in that condition before the Instruction came along. But, where there is no awareness of the Instruction, people are not actually conscious of that Sin. After all, how would they know? Most humans were unaware of the primal commandment and of the Instruction that God later gave. The upshot of all this is that all of humanity is in Sin. However, this was not necessarily apparent to any of them because none of them, at this point, had the Instruction.

14. Nevertheless, humans lived with the consequences of this Sin, the most obvious of which is Death. Indeed, Death was pretty much in charge from the beginning until the time of Moses, when the Instruction was given (I do not mean to imply that it stopped being in charge at that point. In fact, it was at this point that its rule became obvious, at least to those who were given the Instruction). This applied to everyone whether or not they knowingly transgressed as Adam did. Most humans were in Sin, even though they were not necessarily aware that they were breaking any specific rules. In all of this, the figure of Adam works as a kind of polar opposite to King Jesus, the one God was planning to send to address the issues.

15. I have set up the idea that Adam and Jesus are related to one another. In some respects, they are like one another and in other senses they are very different. The governing idea is that, in response to the primal disobedience of Adam, God offers the obedience to the point of death of King Jesus. In some ways the two are parallel to one another but in other ways they are not. My first point is that the act of grace offered by King Jesus is unlike Adam's transgression. This is because Adam's act of disobedience resulted in Death for many while God's grace through King Jesus has brought Life to many. One is an act of disobedience, it abandoned God's way of being human and resulted in Death. The other is an act of obedience by one who fully embraced God's way of being human and it resulted in Life.

In these verses, I sometimes say that what King Jesus accomplished is for 'many' and sometimes that it is for 'all'. I can see that this may lead to some confusion. I didn't intend 'all' to be literal but to underline the contrast between the actions and their consequences.

16. In addition, Jesus' action is not like Adam's in that the act of disobedience meant we stood under God's judgement; it brought the consequence of Death for those who lived in ways other than the one God intended. God's action through the obedience to death of King Jesus happened after very many acts of disobedience by other people, and led to our being vindicated, that is, escaping judgement. The two ways of life lead to different results, one condemnation and Death, the other vindication and Life.

17. Look at it this way, the primal disobedience led to the reign of Death, but God's act of faithfulness through King Jesus offers us the opportunity to reign in Life. Notice the use of the word 'reign'. This is my reference back to the primal mandate that God gave to humans as well as to the language of Psalm 8. Those who follow King Jesus are to live in the way God originally intended for humanity; they are to be *crowned* with glory.

18. Now I go back to the picture of a law court. One act of disobedience, that is the transgression of Adam, leads all to judgement and Death, and one act of faithfulness to God's way of being human leads to vindication and Life.

19. One act of disobedience by Adam affected all humanity and made them live in ways other than God's intended way and thus live under Sin; in contrast, one act of obedience brings many to Life in the way God originally intended.

20. So, one of the effects of the Instruction was that it served to increase the number of transgressions. It intensified the issues associated with Adam. It's obvious when you stop to think about it; those who did not have any instructions did not have any lines to cross and so did not transgress - though they still lived in Sin. Of course, increased transgression brought increased awareness of Sin, but in this very place, that is, among the people - Israel - where the Instruction was known, grace was given in abundance. In other words, issues had to come to a head among the people who knew the Instruction because that was where Sin was most apparent. It was not apparent there because they were worse than anyone else. In fact, they were almost certainly considerably better. It was apparent there because knowledge of the Instruction meant there were lots of transgressions which revealed and magnified the underlying issue of which transgression is the symptom; Sin, that is, living in ways which do not conform to God's original purposes for humans. Remember, Sin is the disease, its symptom is transgression and its outcome is Death.

21. So, we have a story of two people who promote two different powers as king. After the disobedience of Adam, Sin was king in the time of Death. Now, after the obedience of King Jesus, grace is king because he allows people to be treated as though they live as God originally intended and this leads to Life in its fullest sense. All this only happens because of King Jesus.

The argument here has been about understanding Adam and Jesus as polar opposites. Both are representative figures. They represent the two ways to be human. Adam, the one who committed the



primal act of disobedience, stands for all the ways of living that do not conform with God's original intention. They all lead to Death and to *exclusion* from the Life of the age to come. On the other hand, King Jesus is the one who lived in full obedience to God's way of being human even though it meant his death. This leads to *participation* in the Life of the age to come.

God has placed before us a choice. We can either belong in the group represented by Adam or in the one headed by Jesus. We reflect either the disobedience of the first or the obedience of the second. We experience either the Death associated with one or the Life offered by the other.

The place where the contrast between them comes into clearest focus is among the Jewish people. This is not because they are worse than anyone else, quite the opposite. It is because they possessed the Instruction. It was therefore among them that transgressions took place, and these transgressions revealed the underlying issue of Sin, that is, living in ways God did not intend for his creation. So, it was there that the issue of Sin needed to be addressed.

So, I have explained that, through King Jesus, God has made it possible for humans to be saved, that is, to live as God originally intended and so to enjoy all the promised consequences of such Life. I have also implied that historical Israel, the people who had the Instruction, must be significant in the story. Clearly, the place of Israel and the role of the Instruction are issues that I am going to have to treat in more detail later. Right now, I must deal with a possible objection to my argument.

---

### Footnotes:

[1] I meant, of course, that this peace with God was something that we have. I recognise that some versions of the letter imply that this is something that that I am encouraging the Roman Christians to have. That wasn't really the point I was trying to make.

## Chapter 6

So, I have concluded my comments on the last chapter by arguing that it was in Israel that Sin was magnified. This is not because the Jews were worse than anyone else; far from it. We were probably the most ethical nation on earth. Partly this was because we had the Instruction. However, having the Instruction proved to be a double-edged sword. It meant we knew what the rules were and therefore we knew when we broke them. The number of transgressions in Israel clearly exposed the presence of Sin; the Instruction might mean that overall we lived in better ways than other nations, but it also revealed the fact that we were living in ways other than the one God intended. However much better off we were than the other nations, we were still in the same boat - the boat called Sin. And in our case it was obvious.

This argument raises a number of issues. In particular, it might leave you wondering what possible basis there can be for an ethical life. If the Instruction is inextricably linked to transgression and Sin, how can you tell how you are supposed to live? I never argued that the Instruction is no longer

relevant but lots of people thought that's what I meant. Or they thought that was what my argument amounted to. So, in the next section of the letter, I needed to begin an exploration of the basis for living a good life. After all, I have argued all along that only those who live in the way that pleases God will experience Life.

## **Verses 1-11      Crossing over from Death to Life**

Do you recall that I said earlier that Adam and King Jesus are representative figures? What I meant by this is that they stand for the rest of us. Adam stands for all the ways to be human that do not conform to God's original plan, and King Jesus represents the way that does. The rest of us belong to one side or the other. I'm going to give an account of the way you can cross from one side to the other.

1. At this point I introduce a possible objection to my argument. In the letter I put the objection in the form of a question. The questioner effectively says that if it's really true that grace abounds where Sin is clearest, then surely the best thing to do is to keep sinning; that way we keep the grace flowing. Some have even accused me of teaching this kind of nonsense.
2. The argument doesn't work at all. In fact, it is wholly inappropriate for Jesus-followers to live that way; the whole point is to leave behind those wrong ways of being human and to embrace God's way to be human. I introduce here the idea that Jesus followers have 'died' as far as the power called Sin is concerned. This doesn't mean they no longer do things that are wrong; they may commit sins. However, they no longer belong to Sin. This means that sins (or transgressions), that is, the symptoms of Sin, are not a fitting part of the life of the person they are becoming. I am getting away from an ethic based on rules and developing an ethic based on being - one that is based on virtues and character. Those who follow King Jesus are engaged in a process of formation; they are becoming the kind of people who live in the way God intended. So their lives are not defined by rules but by the future God holds out to them. Sinning is not a part of that Life. The rules might be useful because they point to what Life is supposed to be like, but they are not the things that govern their lives.
3. All the communities of Jesus-followers have a ritual that derives from King Jesus. These days you can read about it near the beginning of the first three gospels. Those who trust Jesus are immersed in water and then come out of the water. We call this ritual 'baptism' and we understand it as being joined with King Jesus. This means that we are identified with him and that the things that are true of him are becoming true of us. When we go under the water we are joining him in his death. This is significant because his death was the culmination of his life of utter and total obedience to God.
4. In our baptism we find ourselves identified with King Jesus in his death, his obedience to God. But there's more to it than that, for we know that Jesus was raised from the dead and lives a new kind of life. In the same way, in the ritual of baptism we are also raised back out of the water. In this action, we identify ourselves with the new life of King Jesus, which is the Life that God always intended for humans. Baptism encapsulates something that has happened to us; we have left behind one way of

being human and have embraced another. We have left Adam behind and become identified with King Jesus. We have left behind Death and have embraced Life.

5. We have been joined with King Jesus in his death, that is, in his obedience that led to his death, and so we are united with him in his life. And his life is resurrection Life. Resurrection Life is the kind of life that is no longer subject to Death. It is the kind of life that God originally planned for all of humanity. It is the kind of life that the followers of King Jesus are learning to live.

6. Look at it this way. The person that we used to be, the one who lived in the wrong ways and was therefore subject to Death, has died. Since they have pledged allegiance to King Jesus, they belong to him, they are *in* him. This means that the things that are true for their King are also true for them. They died with Jesus in his act of obedience that culminated on the cross. Their former self, that body, dominated by the wrong way of living, is no more. This means that those who follow Jesus are no longer controlled by those wrong ways of living. I introduce another picture in this verse. It's one that will be developed later in the chapter. It revolves around the idea of being enslaved. I've already argued that humans have chosen to live in ways other than those originally intended by God and that this means they live in the realm called Sin. Now I assert that if we are in Sin's territory we are enslaved by Sin. As I have already said, until God acted through King Jesus, there was no escape from this condition.

7. Do you remember that I have been saying that the consequence of living in the wrong ways, the ways other than those God intended, is Death? Well, once you have died, that's it - you've experienced the consequences. This suggests that if you've died and come back to life, things can start again. This is what has happened in our baptism. Only this time, when we come out of the water, we start as those who are freed from Sin, as those who are no longer its slaves or its subjects. This does not mean that we no longer do things that are wrong but that those things no longer define us. We are no longer identified with Adam and his *disobedience*, but with King Jesus and his *obedience*.

8. And there's more. Not only do we die with King Jesus, we now live with him. That is, we will live the kind of Life he lives. This should mean that we're getting to be more and more in line with God's original purposes for humanity.

9. Here I am emphasising some of the points I have already made or that I have implied. King Jesus has died. He is raised. He lives the resurrection Life that is beyond the reach of Death. He has escaped its power and influence. King Jesus, being a human being, could die, but now he's raised to a new kind of Life. He can't die again.

10. When King Jesus died, he died to deal with Sin and its consequences. He died once and he did it on behalf of everyone. His death makes it possible for humans to escape the consequences of their failure to live in the ways God intended. The Life he now lives has nothing to do with Sin and Death. It is lived entirely for God. Imagine that humans had never sinned but had been obedient to their original purpose and had fulfilled God's plans for them. Imagine where they would be. Well, that's where King Jesus is. And it's where those who follow him will end up too!

11. So, let's go back to the point where this discussion began, I was talking about whether or not we should continue in Sin. The answer is obviously that we should not. Indeed, for the reasons given, those who follow King Jesus should see themselves as dead as far as Sin is concerned but alive as far as God and God's purposes are concerned.

Forgive me if I repeat myself but this seems a good point to take stock of the key points of the argument. God created the world for a purpose and created humans with a key role within that purpose. Had they stuck to that purpose they would have been wholly fulfilled and all this would have glorified God. However, they chose not to do this and there were consequences for them and for the whole of creation. However, God was not going to give up on his purposes and found a way to get things back on track. He would enable humans to live the Life he had planned and they would fulfil all his purposes for them and they would be glorified. Adam represents humans getting it wrong. King Jesus represents them getting it right. God's actions in King Jesus deal with the consequences of humans getting it wrong and offer them a fresh opportunity, empowered by God's Spirit, to get it right.

There are a couple of pictures in my mind at this point in the argument. One concerns ownership. You have to remember that slavery was a fact of life in the Roman Empire. I was not commending it but borrowing the concept in order to make a point. Jesus-followers are those who have changed one owner for another. We used to live in ways that did not conform to God's original intention. In one sense we had no choice about this. These ways of living were like a power that controlled us; it's as though we were enslaved to it. However, just as a slave who dies escapes its master, so when we died - remember how I said that baptism is a kind of death - we escaped from Sin. In one sense it's really Jesus who died and now lives again. Those who follow him are identified with him and so we can say we have escaped Sin and now live with King Jesus and live the sort of Life he lives; Life that conforms to God's original purpose for humans. In being raised from the dead, King Jesus can never die again and so he has escaped the rule of Death. Remember that Death is the consequence of Sin. That's why I can say that Jesus, the one person who never transgressed, died to Sin, and now lives the Life God intended all humans to eventually enjoy, the Life of the age to come, the Life crowned with blessing, honour and glory. Those who follow Jesus are therefore also dead to Sin and live the Life God intended.

### **Verses 12-14 Know whose you are**

The key idea here is that those who follow King Jesus should remember who they are. If Jesus is their King, then Sin should not be.

12. Clearly, all this ought to have consequences for those who follow Jesus. The power of Sin has no right to rule us, and we should resist its attempts to make us live in the wrong way. Our bodies remain mortal. They are subject to physical death. Committing sins is a very real possibility for us. But it is a denial of the things that King Jesus has done for us and of the Life he leads and in which we join. For the Jesus-follower to sin may be inevitable but it is at odds with the Life to which we are called and with the type of person we are becoming.

13. In the past, when we lived in ways that were not according to God's purposes for humans, there's a sense in which we presented our whole beings to the power I call Sin so that, under its rule, we did things that were wrong. Now we need to stop doing that. Instead, we should present our whole selves to God. After all, as I've been saying, we've been brought from Death to Life. This is who we are, so we should live like it. That means we should offer ourselves to God, place ourselves under his rule, so that we live in the way that God originally intended all humans to live. This is true for every part of our person, our minds, our spirits and every part of our bodies.

14. If you've started to follow Jesus, then Sin is no longer your boss. And this relates to the Instruction. Obviously, this applies to those who know the Instruction which means all those who are Jewish. It might also have applied to any non-Jews who have been influenced by Judaism. Those who follow Jesus are not subject to the Instruction but to grace. That is, they are treated as though they are living in the way God originally intended as a gift, and not because they possess the Instruction. I have already demonstrated that without King Jesus, every category of human being is in the realm of Sin. The Jewish people within that realm are also subject to the Instruction. When Jewish people become followers of Jesus they die as far as Sin is concerned and they also die as far as the Instruction is concerned. It is no longer the thing that defines them. Its outward manifestations no longer mark their identity. Instead, like all other followers of Jesus, they are part of the realm of God's generosity.

Indeed, as I shall try to explain later, there is a connection between the Instruction and Sin. It served to remind people that they were not living in the way God planned. Furthermore, it was understood to mean that what truly mattered was its outward badges, like circumcision and possessing the Instruction. People tended to rely on those things believing that, in and of themselves, they represented the kind of life God wants. As I've tried to make clear, that was never really the case. The good thing is that you can rely on the sheer generosity of God for help to live Life as God intended.

I think the main point of all this is clear. I am urging the followers of Jesus to live out the truth of their new identity.

### **Verses 15-23 Right living comes from right identity**

The argument continues in this section. I develop the picture of slavery by arguing that those who follow Jesus have changed owner. Looking back, I'm not terribly comfortable with the image but it made good sense in the original context. It's worth bearing in mind that some of my Jewish friends struggled to understand the basis of morality in my teachings. For them, ethical decisions depended on the Instruction. Since it seemed to them that I had abandoned the Instruction, they couldn't see how anyone could know how to do the right thing. They saw themselves as the beneficiaries of the Instruction since it showed them the right way to live. As I shall try to make clear later on, I am not against the inner parts of the Instruction, so much as its outward aspects. And I'm only really against those if they get emphasised at the expense of the inner meaning of the Instruction or are imposed unnecessarily on people who are not Jewish.

15. So, at this point I go back to the sort of question I was asking at the beginning of this section; does being the beneficiaries of God's generosity rather than the beneficiaries of the Instruction mean we should live in the old way? Of course it doesn't. Some suggest this because the only morality that they can imagine is based on obeying rules. As we will see, I propose that the only true basis for morality is the transforming work of God. This gets worked out in more detail later when I discuss the work of the Holy Spirit.

16. Now I extend my illustration from slavery. This was always a bad idea but it was a social and economic fact of life in the ancient world. It seemed perfectly reasonable to use it as an illustration at the time though it makes little sense in the contemporary world. Basically, I'm arguing that it all boils down to two options. It's like that old Bob Dylan song, *You've gotta serve somebody*. Either we live as God intended or we don't. Essentially, the question is, who will be our master, God or Sin? We offer or present ourselves to one or the other. It could be the wrong way to be human, which means our boss will be Sin and the consequence will be death. Or it could be obedience, which is to say, God's way for us to be human, which leads in turn, though I didn't spell it out at this point in the letter, to Life.

17. Those who follow Jesus, such as those in the churches of Rome, had once indeed been enslaved to the power called Sin. But they have experienced an inner transformation that enables them to be obedient, as it were, from the heart. The good Life they live emerges from within; it's an expression of their new identity.

18. They have been set free from the power of their old boss, Sin, and have become the slaves of righteousness, which is to say, they live in the way that God originally intended for humans. And this is, as we have seen, something that springs from their transformed characters. It is heart-obedience. This is an idea I'll expand on later. It is not about complying with a set of rules but something that springs from your new, true, God-given identity. It emerges from the very centre of who we have become - and are becoming.

19. At this point I was very careful to stress that all the stuff about slaves and masters is a picture. I talked about slavery because it was a means to get my point across. Some of the concepts involved are tricky to grasp and an everyday illustration can help. The idea is that at one time the Roman followers of King Jesus had presented themselves to do wrong and this led them on a slippery slope to doing worse and worse things. Sin gets you stuck in a vicious cycle. But now they should present themselves to do good, embracing a virtuous cycle, the result of which is that they become holy. The old way led to a kind of lawlessness, that is, to a life outside the true purpose of the Instruction, but the new way leads to all the things like holiness that were part of the true goal of the Instruction.

20. Expanding on the slavery picture, I emphasise that you can only have one boss. If Sin was the boss, you could not live in the ways that God intended.

21. And what did you have to show for having Sin as your boss? From doing those things that you'd now rather not think about? Death! That was the prize. As I have mentioned more than once, Death is the consequence of Sin.

22. But now your boss is God, you are free as far as Sin is concerned, you get made holy and that leads to Life in the way that God originally promised.

23. You see, when Sin is your boss what you earn is death. But God's economy is different. You don't get what you earn or what you deserve. God gives freely. And his gift is Life, the Life he originally intended for humankind. God does this because King Jesus, through his obedience, did earn and does deserve this Life. Those who follow him, who belong to him, are freely given the opportunity to share in that Life.

The heart of my argument is that we were enslaved to the power called Sin and as a result were headed for Death. God has intervened through King Jesus in a way that gives us a free gift. Part of this is that we are transformed by being joined to Jesus. This means we can begin to live differently. It is not something we do ourselves so much as something that happens within us because God is active in us. This means we no longer belong to Sin but instead belong to God. It's all about something that God has done. His activity means that we can obey God from our heart. It is something that springs from who we become, not something imposed on us from outside. It's an approach to ethics that sets us free to become the people that God summons us to be rather than one that puts us in a straitjacket. It's one that takes us off the highway to Death and puts us on the road to Life.

## Chapter 7

Well, that was the argument I was trying to make. The believers have crossed over. They've changed bosses. The two different ways of living belong in two different realms. For Jesus-followers to do wrong just doesn't belong to their identity. Of course this doesn't mean that they don't do wrong, only that this isn't a reflection of who they are becoming.

This proved to be a difficult set of ideas for people who were used to a system of ethics based on rules. It also raised again some of the questions that were raised before and that I gave some initial answers to. Inevitably, those questions concern the Instruction. By this point in the letter I felt I had prepared the ground and that this was my opportunity to treat the issue in some depth. But it's important to remember that the question of the Instruction is inseparable from the question of Israel or the Jewish people because my own people are the Instruction-bearing people. This means that the people called Israel are always in the foreground of this discussion. To speak about being under the Law is to speak about the condition of Israel.

### Verses 1-6 Dying to the old, living in the new

I tried to make it as clear as I possibly could that this section is primarily about the Jewish Christians, those who consider themselves to be part of the people who have the Instruction. But I am also extending the argument from the previous section about having different bosses and about death, meaning you can exchange one boss for another. I contrast the Instruction with the work of

the Spirit. As we will see, the former relies for its impact on the outward parts of a person but the Spirit transforms us from within. This is a very important part of the argument of the letter. I address the work of the Spirit in more detail a bit later.

The argument in the last chapter about Jesus-followers having died and been raised remains part of the background of the argument here.

1. This section is addressed primarily to the Jewish Christians and, by extension, to those influenced by Instruction-like understandings of ethics. I point out, as I did in verse 15 of the last chapter, that a Jewish person's relationship with the Instruction lasts only while they are alive. The Instruction is your boss for as long as you live.
2. It's like being married. For as long as your spouse lives, you're committed to them and you have to be faithful to them. However, if they die, you are released from the obligation and can marry someone else if you wish.
3. This means if you take up with another person while your spouse is alive you are committing adultery. But once your spouse dies, the situation changes. You're free to marry someone else and, if you do, you're doing nothing wrong.
4. So it is with the Instruction; if you have been baptised and so have died with King Jesus, then you have died as far as the Instruction is concerned and you are no longer committed to it. It no longer defines you. It is no longer the grounds of your identity. Therefore, you are free to belong to someone else. You can belong to King Jesus, the one who has been raised from the dead, and in this way you are enabled to live in the way that God always intended.
5. In our old way of life, the Instruction worked on the part of us most prone to going against God's intention for us. I call this the 'flesh'. I'm not really talking about the body, though I sometimes use the word that way. What I really mean here is a particular way of living and thinking that is controlled by ideas about physical descent, outward marks, appearances and so on. The Instruction was understood to put an emphasis on this kind of thing and this stirred us up to do things that went against the way of life God originally intended for us, and this led to Death. I can see that this is actually quite a complicated and difficult idea. It's one I only introduced at this point and that I tried to explain a bit later on. The main point is that the Instruction was understood to put a focus on outward things rather than inner ones.
6. But we're released from the Instruction, dead to our old boss, so we can serve in accordance with the Spirit of God - of whom more later. We have moved on from the Instruction, with its focus on outward things, to the Spirit and now the focus is on inner transformation.

You can see I've raised two different issues. One is the question of the Instruction and how it actually served Death, and the other is how the Spirit enables us to live in the way that God intends. You will notice that I have again referred to the Instruction as 'the written code'. I do this when I am particularly referring to its outward manifestations as opposed to its true inner purpose. It is the former that contrasts, as we shall see, with what God does through the Holy Spirit.



The next section of the letter has given rise to some controversy over the years. I can see that it could have been clearer. However, at the time it seemed to make good sense. What you need to understand is that I'm addressing the first of the issues I've just mentioned, the way in which the Instruction, though it was God's good gift, became inextricably linked to Death. In my mind this was obviously an issue about Israel, the people who were given the Instruction, and their experience as they lived with it. Part of the confusion about my meaning is a result of my decision about the best way to tell the story. I decided to tell the story in the first person. This was no problem to me because, as an Israelite, I was part of the story. I could bring my own experience to this. But I was intentionally writing the story of Israel's relationship with the Instruction.

In other words, all those questions about whether I was talking, in this chapter, about my experience before or after King Jesus met me are a little beside the point. The topic is clearly the Instruction and so the one who speaks is the one who knows it. But I'm not specifically talking about me but about the impact of the Instruction on a people. For these purposes I tell some of the story from the perspective of Adam because he was given a commandment that was a kind of forerunner of the Instruction. The idea is that Adam is the prototype for all humanity and in particular for those who live under the Instruction.

If you've been following the story so far, and have noticed the things I've said about the inner and outer aspects of the Instruction, then you already have a strong clue about the way the argument is going. The argument works like this; the Instruction is given by God and intended to do good. However, it becomes corrupted by Sin. The outcome of this is that the Instruction has a double effect; it is both good and bad. And this, in turn, produces a double impact in those who try to live by it. We discover that a part of us wants one thing and another part wants another; it causes a crisis in the human heart. It plays havoc with the human will. It generates conflict between different desires within us. The split in the Instruction causes a split in the will of those who live under it.

### **Verses 7-11      The Instruction is good but gets corrupted**

The Instruction is a good thing. It is a God-given thing. But it gets corrupted because its focus is on the outward rather than the inward. I said a couple of verses back that the Instruction arouses a desire to do the wrong thing. I'm going to try to spell out how this comes about.

7. Let's be clear. The Instruction is from God and therefore it is categorically not Sin. Nevertheless, it is not unrelated to the wrong ways in which humans have decided to live. Certainly, without the Instruction, there would have been no transgressions and we would have had no idea that there was any such thing as Sin. Or perhaps I should say that any awareness humans might have had of Sin would have been extremely vague and tenuous. For example, the Instruction is very clear about coveting. It refers to desiring things that belong to other people. However, if the Instruction had not pointed out that this was wrong, I'd have had no idea that this is what I was doing. Yet coveting is obviously a problem. When you think about it you can see that it's the root of lots of actions that are more obviously wrong. People murder, steal and commit adultery because they want things or privileges that are not theirs to take. Remember the story about the garden and the fruit that

belonged to God? And how Adam and Eve were provoked to desire the fruit and then to act on that desire? In one sense what I describe in these verses is Adam's experience and I suppose I'm putting these words into his mouth. If it hadn't been for the commandment, he would not have known it was wrong to desire the fruit. Adam's story sums up the story of those who live under the Instruction.

8. However, Sin, or we might speak of the serpent in the Genesis story as Sin's agent, made the most of the possibilities given by the commandment. This resulted in Adam, or all those he represents, which is all of us - though, for the purposes of my argument, Israel in particular - giving in to all kinds of wrong desires. If it hadn't been for the commandment, Sin wouldn't have got a grip. Sin needs the Instruction to bring it into the open.

9. Adam had once known Life without the commandment. This may seem an odd way to read the text in your day, but it was fairly standard at the time I wrote. Leaving aside for the moment the story of creation in Genesis 1:1-2:3, Adam had been created as the first human in 2:7. This was before the planting and growth of Eden and the placing of Adam in the garden. Only then, at 2:16 does the commandment arrive. But when it arrived, Sin soon got a grip and the result was that Adam died. Of course, he did not physically die at that point but he did lose access to the tree of life and so death became a reality for him and his descendants.

10. The commandment promised life. If Adam had been obedient, he would have remained at work in Eden, he would have had access to the tree of life, and he would have developed in the way that God intended. That is, Adam was promised that he would experience Life if he kept the commandment. Instead, the commandment resulted in Death.

11. Death came because Sin tricked Adam. It took advantage of the opportunity presented by the commandment and brought him Death.

That's my retelling of the story of Adam. I tell it in the first person because it's my own story too. Indeed, it's the story of everyone who's ever lived under the Instruction. I suppose that in an extended sense, it's the story of everyone else too. I need to stress that it's not the fault of the Instruction - which is God-given. It's the fault of Sin because it distorts the way that human desire works so that we end up conflicted. Thankfully, God, acting through King Jesus, has provided a solution to our quandary.

### **Verses 12-13    A conflicted Instruction means conflicted people**

In these verses I will spell out the problem with the Instruction and its consequences. The Instruction is conflicted and it leads to conflicted people. The Instruction is good but can be manipulated to provoke bad. This leaves those who try to follow it unable to choose to do the right things.

12. So, let me be clear. There's nothing wrong with the commandment. There's nothing wrong with the Instruction. They came from God. Their purpose is good. Their goal was to promote holiness and

lead humans to Life.

13. It wasn't the commandment that caused the problem. It was Sin that did that. Sin is so pernicious, so dangerous, that is able to pervert or twist something good in such a way that it actually ends up doing the opposite of what was really intended. Something that was supposed to offer Life ended up bringing Death. Astonishingly, what the commandment does achieve is to demonstrate just how awful sin is.

This is how commandments work. That's how the Instruction works. You can see it in Adam's story. And in Israel's. And in mine. And, I suppose, in all of humankind.

### **Verses 14-25    Being conflicted**

You can see these things at work in Israel's story. You can see them in my own story. I suppose most of us can see something of it in our own lives. The Instruction is good but it's become twisted. It's as though there are two sides to it. And the result is that there are two sides to me. The perversion of the Instruction leads to the corruption of human desire.

14. We know that the Instruction is good, but Israel is not. It is supposed to be a spiritual entity, but Israel is human and there's a part of it that is prone to disobedience, susceptible to getting things wrong. Israel tends to define itself in terms of the physical rather than the spiritual. The result is that Israel has sold out to sin; it practices the wrong way to live human lives. Let's face it, part of us is prone to desiring what we should not; Sin has got its grip on us.

15. The truth is that when we live under commandments like this, we get really mixed up. Part of us wants one thing and part of us wants another. For example, part of me wants to do the right thing but I end up doing the opposite. I don't seem to know my own mind. I seem to be capable of wanting to do one thing but actually doing another.

16. You see, and remember that I'm speaking as Israel, part of me agrees with the Instruction and longs to live it out; it acknowledges that the Instruction is good and right. But, though I think it's good, I can't actually do it. Basically, I'm conflicted.

17. My problem - Israel's problem - is that Sin has a grip on part of me and it does things the better part of me doesn't want to do. There's an 'I' that wants one thing and another 'I' that wants another. The true 'I' agrees with the Instruction but Sin lives in me, and acts through me, and so I do something else. A part of me longs to live up to the Instruction but there's another part of me that wants other things.

18. So there's nothing good in that part of me, the part that's prone to distorted desire. One part of me can desire what is right but the other part of me can't deliver on it. I desire to do right but cannot. I can want it but I cannot accomplish it. Israel's problem is that it is conflicted. You might say that its physical side is not under the control of its spiritual side.

19. The result is that I end up not doing the good I want to do but instead the harm I don't want to do. This is Israel's condition.

20. In other words, under the Instruction, Israel is conflicted. Sin has managed to get a grip. It's not the better part of Israel that does wrong. But Israel, like everyone else, is ruled by Sin and its better part is not the bit that controls everything it does. Remember, this is about those who live under the Instruction. Those without the Instruction usually don't even want to do the right thing. You can see that I think humans are in a mess. Even the best of us are conflicted. We're divided. The better parts of us are at odds with other parts of us.

21. So, this is the impact of the Instruction. The best part of me may want to do what is right, but there's evil, always on hand, to make sure I get it wrong. It's like the story of Cain who is warned that sin is crouching by his door and longs to capture him. And, as we know, it did just that.<sup>[1]</sup> It's as though the Instruction has two distinct parts and two distinct effects. One aspect of it leads to Israel going wrong and this frustrates the other, better aspect of it.

22. So, we have a divided Instruction and a divided Israel. You see, the better part of me, my inner being, delights in the Instruction, which is to say, the inward part of the Instruction that conforms to its true purpose. I call that part 'God's Instruction'. My heart loves it.

23. But there's another aspect of the Instruction that has got hold of another part of me and it's like being at war. The better part of me, my mind or heart if you like, with its delight in the Instruction, is held captive by the other aspect of Instruction. This latter aspect is the part of the Instruction that's been corrupted by sin - Sin's Instruction - and that has a grip on the other part of me. Remember, I'm still talking about Israel. There are good and bad aspects of the Instruction and good and bad aspects of Israel. I tend to categorise the good as 'inner' or 'inward' and the bad as 'outward'.

What this amounts to is that, as for Adam, as for Israel and as, we might add, for code or rule-based approaches to ethics too, everything ends up conflicted. We, as people, get conflicted because we cannot be what we long to be, and the Instruction gets conflicted too; part of it is true to its origins and is good and delightful. And part of it gets coopted by Sin and works against our best interests and truest desires. We're in a right mess.

24. So, still speaking as Adam and as Israel, and so for humanity in general, I acknowledge that I need rescuing from this mess.

25. Thankfully, God, acting through King Jesus, has done exactly this. He has rescued us. Just to get the point across again, I stress that the best part of me serves the good part of the Instruction but the other part of me serves the wrong part of the Instruction. One is the Instruction as God intended it and the other is the Instruction as Sin has corrupted it.

So, what have we demonstrated? Firstly, that because of our weakness, the Instruction is not fit for purpose. Next, that Jews can, if they are following King Jesus, be set free from the Instruction's negative impact. Meanwhile, non-Jews can also be liberated from their false gods and false ways of

being human. Now, all this raises the question of how we can be human in the way that God intended and that's the theme of the next section. Try to keep in mind that the impact of Sin on the Instruction is to send it in two different directions - one good and one bad, one inward and one outward. The outward aspect of the Instruction leads Israel astray but the inward part of the Instruction continues to appeal to the inner part of Israel. The result of this split in the Instruction is that those who live in it end up conflicted. This is an issue that God has sorted out through Jesus, as I tried to explain in the next section of the letter.

---

### Footnotes:

[1] Genesis 4:7.

## Chapter 8

### Verses 1-8      **Life in the Spirit and the true purpose of the Instruction**

In this section, I'm trying to summarise parts of my argument up to this point and then show how the work of Jesus and the transforming work of God's Spirit resolve the issue, the great dilemma, set out in the previous part of the argument. Humans need to be rescued. They were created to live Life but have chosen to live in a different way. This different way of living has consequences which, among other things, involves the prospect of being found to be in the wrong when God acts as judge. The Instruction, though great in many ways, and having Life as its goal, was, in the end, not fit for purpose because it was prone to being corrupted by Sin. In the end it left us all conflicted. The good news is that God has acted through King Jesus to resolve the crisis.

The Instruction, when corrupted by Sin, split into two. One part is God's Instruction and one part Sin's. The former relates to the Spirit and the latter to the flesh. One part works on the inner person and the other impacts things that are outward.

1. The first verse summarises one of the main points I have made so far. I return to the courtroom image. If you belong to King Jesus, then you need have no fear about the outcome of God's judgement. He is going to find in your favour. I will show over the next part of the argument how the work of God in those who follow King Jesus will enable them to orient themselves to live in God's way and will start them off on a journey of becoming the person they were created to be.

2. The way it works in terms of the Instruction is this; remember that both the Instruction and the person under it were conflicted. There's a good side to the Instruction and bad side. One impacts the inner and one the outer. I argue that the former belongs to the Spirit and the latter to the flesh, that is the part of a person that is prone to living in ways contrary to God's original purpose. The idea is that God's action in King Jesus has done something about this; the good bit of the Instruction, the bit that belongs to the Spirit, sets you free, through King Jesus, from the bad bit of the Instruction, the bit that belongs to sin and death. In other words, because of Jesus, the bit that helps the right way to

be human defeats the aspects that relate to the wrong ways of being human. God, acting through King Jesus, has ensured that the good part of the Instruction liberates you from the bad part.

3. The Instruction as a whole was not fit for purpose because of its relationship with the flesh - I explained in the previous chapter how the Instruction, with its focus on the flesh, the outward and Sin-prone part of a person, enabled Sin to get a foothold. As a result, the Instruction could not achieve the goal of bringing Life. So, God chose to accomplish his goal in another way - he sent his Son as a human. King Jesus was truly human - he had human flesh. It was there, in his flesh, that Sin faced judgement and was condemned. Human flesh was Sin's stronghold, the place where it could get a grip - but not in the case of King Jesus! The idea here is that Sin faced judgement in the flesh of God's Son.

4. And the purpose of this was that we might fulfil the true purpose of the Instruction, which is to say, we might be human in the way God intended us to be. We can accomplish this because we no longer live in line with the part of ourselves that is prone to go wrong but instead, we live in line with the Spirit of God.

5. Let me try to spell this out. Some people live in line with the parts of themselves prone to Sin; that's the focus of their inner being, their minds are concentrated there. On the other hand, other people live in line with God's Spirit and the focus of their inner selves is on the things that matter to the Spirit.

6. Those in the former category end up being human in the wrong way and the outcome, as I have insisted throughout, is Death. Meanwhile, those in the latter category are learning to be human in the right way, and the result of that is Life and peace.

7. The former group end up in opposition to God, they do not submit to the good part of the Instruction. Indeed, they couldn't do it even if they wanted to.

8. As a result, they cannot live in the way God intended for humans and therefore cannot serve God's purposes or please him.

At the start of the letter, I argued that all of humanity are in the same boat. And it's sinking. The divisions people think are important, like the one between Jews and non-Jews, don't matter in the way lots of people thought. Everyone has failed to live in the way God intended. God had given the Instruction as part of the project to resolve this. Its goal was to restore humans to the way of living God had intended, that is, to offer them Life and peace with God. Parts of it were focussed on the outer aspects of people and this meant it had a flaw; it could be exploited by the power called Sin. The Instruction has two dimensions. There is the corrupted part and the good, inward part. Humans needed God to deal with the issue of Sin among those with the Instruction as much as among those who had never known the Instruction. This would enable the true purpose of the Instruction, Life, to be restored. I have then argued that God, through King Jesus, has intervened to accomplish this. There are now, thanks to King Jesus, two groups of people - and it's a distinction that does matter. There are those who continue as before and those who respond to God's intervention. The former group continue down the path to Death while the latter are on the journey to the Life God originally

planned for humanity.

### **Verses 9-17      The Spirit means we are part of God's people**

9. I now assure the Roman followers of Jesus that since God's Spirit is in them, they are living in line with the Spirit and not with the flesh. One of the things that characterises the people of God is the possession of the Spirit of King Jesus.

10. Indeed, those who are indwelled by King Jesus may have bodies which are heading for death because of sin, nevertheless, the Spirit brings them Life because God is faithful and committed to his original intentions for humans and for creation.

11. This is the promise for those who are indwelled by the Spirit of the God who raised King Jesus from the dead; this same God, through this same Spirit at work in you, will give Life to your body. In other words, the consequences of Sin will be undone. This is not a promise that the present bodies of Jesus-followers will live forever, so much as that they will, like the body of King Jesus, experience resurrection.

12. So, those who follow Jesus are not owned by the part of us that is prone to Sin. We owe it nothing and we have no obligations to it. We have no reason to live in accordance with it.

13. Indeed, those who do live that way are, as we have seen, on the path to Death. However, one of the things that the Spirit does is enable us to kill off all that kind of stuff, the wrong things we do with our bodies, so that we can now live in the way that God always intended.

14. The people of God are those who are led by the Spirit. These are God's sons and daughters. Because they are God's sons and daughters, they are the ones that will inherit from God. They will inherit all God's promises.

15. Let me make this clear in case any of the language I used before put things in doubt. I am aware that I used an illustration from slavery, and I want to correct any misunderstanding this may have caused. Son and daughter language - and ideas about inheriting promises - takes us much closer to the true situation. We are indeed part of God's household, but not as God's slaves but as those who have a share in it. Do you remember the story Jesus told about the two sons and one goes back and asks to be a slave and the Father embraces him as a son - that's the idea here. And so, the heart of the Jesus-follower says 'Father'. The work of the Spirit is categorically not to make us slaves so that we need to be afraid of a taskmaster. The work of the Spirit is to adopt us as the sons and daughters of God. That is why we can cry 'Abba'. We all know that King Jesus was the Son of God and called God 'Father'. We are adopted as sons and daughters of God, and this means we can have a relationship with God that is modelled on that of King Jesus. We too can call God 'Father'.

16. In fact, when we do this, it is the work of God's Spirit within us letting us know in our inmost being that we really are God's beloved sons and daughters. This is God's own testimony and so it can be utterly trusted.

17. And just to be clear, if we are God's sons and daughters, then we are God's heirs. We share that status with King Jesus. We are the ones who inherit God's promises. We are the ones in whom all the ancient promises are being fulfilled. We demonstrate this in several ways but one of the key ones, one I intend to explore next, is that we suffer. We suffer because suffering marked the path of King Jesus, and we are identified with him. If we do then we will also share in his glory, his present status, for, as we have seen, the things he has gained, the things originally promised to all humanity, will be gained by those who belong to him.

Look at it this way. In the very beginning God set out his intention for humankind. Humans were to fill the earth and have dominion over it. My abbreviated way of talking about this is to say that humans were to experience Life. I'll explain why. When God gave humans the first commandment, the consequence of disobedience was Death. So, if we had been human as God planned the result would have been Life. However, as we chose other ways, our experience has been Death. I believe the original promises are repeated elsewhere in the Bible. If you read Psalm 8 it tells you what humans were intended to be - crowned with glory. The obedience of King Jesus means he has received this promise. He has ended up in the place humans would have reached had they never disobeyed. And those who follow him are put back on track to get there too. However, we are not there yet. The whole of creation will have to go on a difficult journey to arrive at the place where it was always intended to end up. And the Jesus-followers are the vanguard. Our presence gives hope to the rest.

Some of you will be working with translations of my words that refer only to sons and not to sons and daughters. Others may have versions that refer to children. If I used words like son or sonship it was not because I had any intention to exclude women. It was because under Roman law it was generally only the sons that had to right to inherit. I was using words because of the legal context not because I thought anyone was excluded or mattered more than anyone else. King Jesus is God's Son and therefore his heir. This means that he is the one who receives all that God promises. Those who belong to King Jesus are his brothers and sisters. This means they are co-heirs with him.

### **Verses 18-30    The redemption of the cosmos**

18. So yes, the suffering is real. There is no getting away from it. Nevertheless, you cannot compare it to the glory that is coming when humans and the creation are as God intended them to be. King Jesus is already there and he's like a forerunner for the rest of us.

19. The whole of creation is involved in this. This salvation that God has brought through King Jesus is not just for humans. It's for everything. And it's all looking forward to it. It knows what has happened to King Jesus and it knows that his followers are the vanguard. Therefore, it's all waiting, longing, yearning for us, the children of God, to be made known.

20. Let me remind you of creation's story. The first humans were appointed as the representatives of the whole of creation. So, when the first humans disobeyed, their action inevitably impacted everything. God responded to their disobedience and one of the outcomes was that the universe



descended into apparent futility. It lost its sense of purpose. This was something that God did but it was never intended to be the final word on the subject.

21. There was hope! Even as God acted as he did, he did not give up on his original goals and purposes for creation and so he promised that he would act to restore things and put them back on track. Creation will be set free from the trap it's in. It will share in the freedom of the glory of God's children, who are those who will be human as God intended, and will therefore treat creation as God intended.

22. Let me try another illustration. It's as though the whole of creation is suffering in childbirth. I use this analogy because it suggests a suffering that is creative, a suffering which is arduous but where, if all goes well, the mother declares it to have been worthwhile because of the new life that has been brought to birth.

23. And we are part of creation and long for our true role within it. We are indwelt by the Spirit. We have received the first fruits, the down payment on God's promises. We groan because of our sufferings and because of our longing that things should be restored to the way God intended. Creation groans as we all long for the renewed creation to be born. We will receive our inheritance, our bodies will be redeemed, and we will be human in the way God intended.

24. This is the point of salvation. We have the hope of getting back to where God originally intended that we should get to. Hope, by its very nature, is for things that cannot yet be seen because they lie in the future. You would hardly call it hope if its focus was on something that had already happened!

25. So, we hope for things that have yet to happen, that remain in the future, as yet unseen. And we wait patiently.

What I am trying to get at is this. God's project is salvation. That means restoring humanity and the rest of creation to the condition that God originally intended they should reach. King Jesus has started the last stage of the process by which this will be accomplished. The whole of creation is emerging from its long nightmare and is yearning for its own renewal. The followers of Jesus are part of the vanguard of this process. For now, our experience is one of suffering, but we hope for all that God has promised and we wait for it to come to pass.

26. Part of the role of the followers of Jesus in this process is to be praying. Sometimes, praying for things like this is difficult. How would we know how to pray for a renewed world to come into being? It is something so extraordinary, so far beyond anything any of us have ever known, that we can hardly picture it, let alone put it into words. We are weak and yet the Spirit helps us. Our longings are inchoate, half-formed, but the Spirit helps us. The Spirit within us intercedes alongside us and our yearnings emerge as sighs that express the inexpressible.

27. And these prayers are heard by God. He knows human hearts and he knows what the Spirit desires. He knows that the Spirit is pleading on behalf of the followers of Jesus and doing so in ways that conform to God's own purposes and will. In other words, in our prayers led by the Spirit we long for and pray for the things for which God longs.

28. This is the basis on which we know that everything in the whole of creation is actually working towards the same good purpose, for the sake of those who love God and who are called to live out his original purpose for all of humanity. This thought is not really a promise about every individual thing that happens to every individual so much as a promise about the overall direction and purpose of the whole creation.

29. This is what God always intended for humanity. He knew beforehand and chose those who would play this part; to be human in the way that Jesus is now human. On this basis, he would be the older brother of a whole host of brothers and sisters.

30. The whole process is about the work of God. He chose those who would take part and then he called them. These are the ones he vindicates, whom he treats as though they were living in the way God intended and who are learning to do just that. These are the ones who will know glory. I know I've put all of these in what seems to be a past tense but I'm trying to get across the idea that this is something that God is doing and so can be treated as already done. Another way to look at this is to say that everything God needed to do has already been done in God's action through King Jesus. Everything else is just allowing the process he has begun to come to its conclusion.

This section acknowledges that suffering is part of the present human experience. However, it insists that the suffering has a purpose. It is part of the process by which the whole of the cosmos will be renewed. The followers of Jesus are the vanguard of this process because God's Spirit is at work in them.

### **Verses 31-39 God is unstoppable**

I think most of this speaks for itself. I am moving towards the end of this section of the argument, and I want to assure the readers of the outcome for them of all the things I've been discussing. The point is that there is nothing to fear for God has acted. I return to the law court image and make it clear that those who follow Jesus have nothing to fear when judgement is announced. Any suffering they experience now cannot prevent the future verdict from being in their favour. It's worth saying that Psalm 110:1, which I, along with all those who followed Jesus at that time, believed was fulfilled by King Jesus, influenced my ideas at this point. Psalm 8 is also there in the background.

31. I am going to try to sum up the consequences of my argument up to this point. God has kept faith with his purposes for creation. He is on our side. Who is going to line up against him?

32. Here the argument is that God has gone beyond the usual standard by which commitment is measured. The story of Abraham and his willingness to sacrifice Isaac was usually understood as demonstrating Abraham's commitment to God. In the text he is praised because he does not withhold his son, and, as a result, the promise of blessing for the whole world is repeated. Yet in the end, God allowed Abraham to withhold his son and to offer a ram instead. Now, though, God has gone a step further than Abraham. In the background is the idea that Isaac was not necessarily willingly obedient to being a sacrificial victim, but that King Jesus freely chose to be obedient even

though it meant his death. The commitment of God and the obedience of King Jesus go far beyond even the devotion of Abraham. If God's already given us such a gift, we can be sure we'll inherit everything he has to give.

33. Going back to the law court imagery that is such an important part of my argument, I point out that there is nobody who can bring a charge against us. The verdict of the court is known in advance. God has already announced our vindication.

34. And if God has announced that we will be vindicated, who is possibly going to say the opposite? At this point I introduce a well-known traditional theological teaching associated with primitive Jewish Christianity. It is thoroughly explored by Prisca and Aquila in the sermon I mentioned near the beginning. King Jesus has died, is risen, and is now seated at the right hand of God where he is our advocate. He speaks on our behalf. The argument is based on our understanding that Psalm 110 is fulfilled by King Jesus.

35. In this section, I try to imagine what could get in the way of our vindication by God and I fail to come up with anything. Psalm 8 suggests that King Jesus will have dominion over everything; it will all be under his feet. Psalm 110 suggests that he's already at God's right hand and that all his enemies will end up at his feet. So, there is nothing that can get in the way. I list lots of the things that many of us fear, but they're all covered by the promises of the psalms. None of them can get in the way of the love of King Jesus for us.

36. At this point I slip in a reminder that our present context is one of suffering. The writer of Psalm 44 knew this. He speaks of the experience of the people of God. However, if you read on in the Psalm you hear the writer praying to God that God would rescue his people. At last, God has done just this. For now, our experience is one of persecution, but this is not the final word.

37. Rather, we overcome all these things - and then some - because of King Jesus and his love for us.

38. Here I list all the things that are already, or that will be, placed under the feet of King Jesus. Those who follow him have nothing to fear from any of them.

39. And the same goes for the things in this verse too. There truly is nothing that can get between us and God, given all he has done for us through King Jesus.

This is the end of a major section of my argument, and I think it is worth repeating the outline of what I have tried to establish. When God created the world, he had a particular goal in mind for both the creation as a whole and for the humans within it. Sadly, human disobedience prevented this goal from being achieved. Human disobedience resulted in Death, and this affected them as well as the rest of the things that God had made. This affected every type of human, whether they knew the Instruction or not. Nevertheless, God is not one to give up on something to which he is committed. He is faithful in all his purposes. He therefore found a way to put both humans and the creation back on track. God did this through King Jesus. Those who follow Jesus no longer face Death but are offered Life. They are the vanguard of the renewal of the whole creation. They are the ones who are learning to be human in the way that God originally intended, and the result will be that they will

enjoy the Life that God had planned for all humanity. Nothing can get in the way of God.

Now, you can imagine that all this leaves some significant questions left to be explored. Even if I have satisfied you about the Instruction, you may still have some serious questions about the people to whom that Instruction was committed. What is the role in God's purposes of the physical descendants of Abraham, particularly those who bear the Instruction, the group that we might call historical Israel or Israel by descent? What part do they play in God's continuing purposes? Those are the issues that dominate the next stage of the argument.

If you've followed the argument so far then you might be able to anticipate some of what I'm going to say. If the law is divided and this leads to a divided self then perhaps Israel itself is divided and can be spoken of in two different ways.

## Chapter 9

If you've been following up to here, then you'll be able to see that my argument creates a serious question. I've always been a proud Jew, with a passion for my heritage and for the traditions of my people. And now I faced a huge quandary. Up till this point I'd been arguing that the Instruction doesn't have the role in God's purposes that I used to think that it had. Was the same true for Israel, the people who are defined by their possession of that Instruction? If Jews and Gentiles were in the same boat and could attain Life in the same way - through King Jesus - then how did Israel fit into God's plans for the future?

### Verses 1-5      **My concern for the Jewish people**

In this section I express my sadness at the present spiritual condition of most of my own people and outline some of the great privileges they have. The key spiritual issue was that most of them refused to recognise that God had sent Jesus of Nazareth as King and Saviour. As a result, they were missing out on the Life God was offering through him.

1. I knew I was going to have to speak about this from the heart. But it wasn't just me. I knew that my thoughts and feelings came from God's Spirit.

2. If the truth be told, I was really devastated about all of this.

3. I wished - I still wish - I could get my fellow Jews to understand how God has acted. Indeed, there's part of me that thinks that I would rather find myself cursed by God and cut off from King Jesus, if it would help open their eyes to what has happened. For I belong to these people. As far as lines of descent are concerned, these are my family, my brothers and my sisters.

4. After all, they are Israelites. They have all kinds of privileges. They are the sons and daughters of God. The glory of God has been in their midst. God made pacts with them. He gave them the Instruction, the worship in the tabernacle and the temple. God has made them promises.

5. The list goes on. All the great promises that I've talked about in this letter were given to the ancestors of the Jewish people. And as far as lines of descent are concerned, God's true King is theirs - King Jesus himself is Jewish. Let's face it, King Jesus is their King before he's anyone else's. And he's in charge of everything. He's God and is to be blessed forever.

Given all that he had given to Israel in the past, I couldn't for the life of me understand why God had not helped them to see all that he's done through King Jesus. I'd thought about this long and hard for a long time, and I'd reached the conclusions which are set out over the next three chapters. Please remember that these were written without the benefit of the hindsight we all now enjoy. I think the words still speak the truth but it's important to remember that they were written before the church became an institution led mainly by non-Jews with a history of prejudice against the Jewish people, and before the adherents of Christianity and Judaism started to see themselves as belonging to two separate religious systems.

### **Verses 6-18      Two ways of being Israel**

In this section I explore what all this might mean. Has God changed? Or changed his mind? How does this all fit into the story of Israel as it is told in the scriptures? You have already seen my tendency to see things as twofold. We saw this in terms of the Instruction. And we saw it in terms of Israel seeking to live under the Instruction. Well, we'll now see how it works out in Israel's story. Israel exists in two different forms, one physical and one spiritual. The two overlap one another but are distinct.

6. First of all, I needed to be completely clear; the word of God has been fulfilled. It's always been this way whenever God has acted. There's always been two ways of looking at the nation we call Israel. One is in terms of physical descent and the other in terms of the spiritual promise. There's always been the physical version where you measure things by their family line which we might call 'Israel by descent'. But there's also been a spiritual version where you measure things differently. We'll call this 'Israel of promise'. The key thing to grasp at this stage of the argument is that not all those who are recognised as being a part of Israel by descent are necessarily a part of Israel according to the promise. Physical and spiritual Israel overlap with each other but are not identical.

7. I still think the easiest way to explain this is to go back to the beginning of the story and tell you the story of the descendants of Abraham. He had loads of physical children. However, the scriptures make it clear that his true, spiritual descendants are the ones who came through Isaac - or some of them. The physical descent was one thing, but the line of promise was related to it but different from it. When it comes to the things that God has guaranteed, it's the line of promise that counts.

8. Let me stress, this means that it is not simply the question of physical descent that matters. The ones who count as the sons and daughters of God, the ones who inherit the promises, these are the true descendants. If you remember, I argued something very similar to this in chapter 4.

9. I thought I should probably remind the readers of what the promise to Abraham actually said. It

was that Abraham's wife Sarah would have a son. Abraham had a concubine and he had other wives. Through them he had lots of children. But the true descendant was Sarah's son, Isaac. The promises were inherited by him.

10. And it doesn't stop there. If you continue with the story, the pattern repeats itself. Isaac and his wife Rebekah had children. Let me remind you what happened to them.

11. There were two boys, Esau and Jacob. And the line of promise was announced before they were born. It was declared before the boys had an opportunity to do anything or to reveal their characters. In one sense, the story's not about them it's about God. The story is about God's line of promise.

12. The promise is not something that was earned or deserved. It was a matter of God's purposes. That's why Rebekah was told, before those twin boys were born, that the first born would end up serving the second born.

13. Just to rub the point home, I reminded the Romans of another text that helps make the point. It's from the prophet Malachi. Part of my reason for quoting this was so that you can see that it's not just me making this kind of argument. The prophetic books in the scriptures also understand this. There's a little bit of hyperbole in the words to help generate the intended effect; God loved Jacob and hated Esau.

14. Needless to say, I can see that some people will choose to argue the toss about whether this is fair or not. I have to say, I think they're missing the point.

15. After all, this is all a matter for God. It doesn't depend on us but on him. Everyone is on a path to Death. That's the point I was making in the first part of the letter. However, God chooses to be merciful to some.

16. You can see that the story shows that inheriting the promise was never a matter of human will or effort. It was never something earned or deserved. It was simply a question of on whom God decided to show mercy. This is the heart of the argument and if you follow closely, you will see that I pick up the idea of God's mercy as part of the conclusion at the end of chapter 11.

17. There are lots of examples of this in the story of Israel. Here's another. This time it's about the Egyptian King at the time of the Exodus. He is told that the purpose of his rise to such a great position was so that God's power could be shown and so that God's name might become famous. This underlines the point I am making that the story of Israel is really God's story.

18. Let me conclude this part of the argument by underlining the point I've made. The story is all about God. God decides who will receive mercy. God decides who will close their heart towards him.

The thing to remember is that the issue remains the place of Israel in God's purposes. At this stage in my argument, I was retelling the story of Israel to make it clear that true, spiritual Israel is related to, but is not the same entity as, Israel by physical descent. The promises belong to the former, which is one part of the latter.

There are other things I could have pointed out though they might have muddied the water. In the story of Israel there are a number of people who are clearly a part of spiritual Israel even though they are not Israelites by descent. They expressed faith in the true God but were not born into one of the tribes of Israel. The most obvious examples are Rahab and Ruth. Both, according to tradition, were ancestors of King David and of King Jesus (Matthew 1:5).

### **Verses 19-24 Is God just?**

At this point I got drawn into a discussion with the team about whether all this was fair or not. I decided to include in the letter some of the points that were made. It's a bit of a digression from the main theme but we'll go back to that before too long.

19. Now, you might argue that this is hardly fair since none of us can resist God's will. What chance has any one of us got?

20. But we must remember that this is the creator we're talking about. Do we really think we know better than God? That would be like a lump of clay saying to the potter, 'You don't want to make me into this! You ought to make me into something better than that!'

21. Think about a potter who has had a batch of clay delivered. From the same batch he makes a range of different things. It's not the clay that's different, it's the plans of the potter.

22. Now, to get back to our courtroom image for a moment, God can be thought of like a judge who is motivated to exercise judgement. Suppose this judge has been very tolerant and put up with all sorts of nonsense for a very long time. That's like the clay bins that are made to be thrown away.

23. Might it not be that he's done this in order to offer his glory, the eventual goal of all creation, to those on whom God has chosen to be merciful, those he has shaped to share that glory?

24. And this group could include all of us whom God has called, that is those who follow Jesus whether we are Jews or non-Jews.

I confess that there were times when I used to think of this as a knockdown argument and there were other times when I had niggling doubts about it. Things are a bit clearer from where I sit in the cloud of witnesses. I thought about trying to explain it all at this point but found that there wasn't a way I could put it into words. My argument gets to some of the truth of what was going on but not to quite all of it. You will notice that I've introduced the Gentiles, the non-Jewish peoples, into the story of Israel at this point. In the next section, I'm going to defend this move by reminding you of the teaching of some of the prophets.

### **Verses 25-29 God promised that non-Jews would be part of his people**

I'd made the point that there is a distinction between Israel by descent and Israel according to the promise. This is God's doing. I'd also hinted that the non-Jews may have a part in all this. Now I go back to the telling of the story of the people of God. I pointed out that the idea that the people of God might extend beyond physical Israel is not some new idea that I'd invented but something promised in the scriptures by the prophets. I understand these prophecies as restatements of the foundational promise to humanity and the promises to Abraham about all the nations being blessed. Non-Jews too can inherit the promises of God.

25. Let's look at the prophet Hosea. He makes it perfectly clear that God always intended that some of those who were not his people, that is non-Jews, should become part of his people. God would love those to whom God had not previously shown love.

26. This underlines the point. Those who were once not the people of God will be called God's children. This makes it clear that there will be non-Jews who will inherit the promises.

27. You get something very similar in the prophet Isaiah. Firstly, he makes it clear that though Israel by descent might be a vast number, only a portion of them would inherit the promise of salvation. That fits in completely with the argument I have been making - physical Israel and spiritual Israel are related - but separate - entities.

28. Then, the rest of the quotation makes it clear that when God chooses to act, it will be decisive.

29. There's now a further text from Isaiah which I take to refer to the same decisive action. Only a few physical Israelites are left within Israel, that is within true, spiritual Israel, the part that inherits the promises. It is only an act of God's mercy that there are any at all in this category. If these had not remained the loss would have been like the infamous story of Sodom and Gomorrah.

I read these prophecies as having come to pass in the proclamation of the gospel of King Jesus. The non-Jews who were becoming followers of Jesus were those who had once not been part of the people of God, but now were. They had become a part of spiritual Israel. In addition, the promised judgement on Israel that, however numerous they might be, only a small group would be saved, hence part of the spiritual people of God, had happened. You could see it in the way different groups are responding to the proclamation of the gospel. Part of me was very upset by what was happening, but I could see that it was prophesied. As always, God was doing what he had said he would.

### **Verses 30-33 Why was this happening?**

So, just what is going on and how shall we begin to explain these things? How had non-Jews found their way into the people of God while physical Israel had been left out in the cold? These are the questions I explored here and in the opening verses of the next chapter.

30. I was looking for another way to put this. Non-Jews who had no clue about God's promises had inherited them. They had not been seeking to live in the way that God had always intended but they had found themselves treated as though they were doing just that, and then had started doing it, all



because of their trust in King Jesus.

31. Meanwhile, Israel thought that the promises would come through the Instruction, and so failed to understand the point of the Instruction. Israel behaved as though outward obedience to the Instruction would enable them to live in the way that God always intended. It didn't happen. They failed to fulfil the true purpose of the Instruction.

32. What went wrong? Well, this happened because they thought it was an outward rather than an inward thing. They tried to do it as though what really mattered were the external badges found in the Instruction, and not what goes on in the inner being. As a result, when the solution was offered, they stumbled over it rather than embracing it.

33. Once again, I need to stress that I wasn't making any of this up. It was exactly what the scriptures said would happen. I quote a text that I understand in terms of King Jesus and the proclamation about him. King Jesus is what God had placed within Israel and, as a result, physical Israel had been revealed for what it is. This is the moment of which Isaiah spoke. Israel by descent is shown to be, at least most of them, outside of the line of promise. On the other hand, those who do trust in King Jesus are not shamed, that is are shown to be those who will be vindicated at the final judgement, which is another way of saying that they are those who inherit the promises of God.

To sum up the argument, there have always been two ways of being Israel. The Israel that really matters is spiritual Israel. This is the part that will inherit God's promises. In addition, God had promised that the nations would be blessed, and that non-Jews would become a part of the people of God. As the message about King Jesus was proclaimed, you could see these prophecies being fulfilled. Furthermore, there was a significant prophecy in Isaiah that suggested that, when God intervened to keep his promises, Israel would stumble. This must be what was happening. The question I had to wrestle with was whether the stumbling was final or just a temporary setback. This is an issue that I address in chapter 11 but before that I need to say something more about how Israel came to stumble and the impact that this has had.

## Chapter 10

I'd been arguing that there have always been two ways of understanding Israel. One was as a physical entity, and the other was as a spiritual one. I'd also tried to show that the prophets looked forward to a day when the non-Jewish nations were welcomed into the people of God. My claim was that this day had now come. It had come because of the impact of King Jesus. He revealed that most of Israel was going about things in the wrong way. They gave their main attention to the outward aspects of the Instruction and neglected the inner ones. As a result, they could not embrace the Life that God was offering. At the same time some people from the non-Jewish nations, through their allegiance to King Jesus, did start to embrace that Life.

### Verse 1-4      **How Israel went wrong**

In this section I was trying to explain how Israel, as a whole, had gone wrong. What it boiled down to was that they were trying to do something themselves that God had already done for them.

1. Now, I long for all the Jews to live as God intended and so experience God's salvation. I made this point at the start of chapter 9, and I repeat it here to make it clear just how much this issue means to me.
2. There's no question that many in physical Israel have a huge enthusiasm for God but sadly, they're barking up the wrong tree; they've missed the point; they've got the wrong end of the stick.
3. They've forgotten that God keeps his own promises. They thought they had to keep God's promises for him. The upshot of this was that when God acted to keep his promises, they didn't see what was happening. They therefore missed out and sought to keep them for him and as a result missed out when God kept them. They tried to make things about themselves rather than about God. When God acted to put the world back on track, most of Israel just couldn't get on board with what he was doing.
4. You see, King Jesus actually accomplishes the things the Instruction purported to achieve but really couldn't do; he enables people to live in the ways that God always intended, he gives them Life. He does this for those who trust in him. King Jesus is the real point of the Instruction. What he has accomplished means that those who follow him can be said to have righteousness. This means that, enabled by God's Spirit, they have begun to live in the way that God intended.

I think I've summed up where things went wrong for many of my fellow Jews. Of course, I'm dependent here on the understanding of things that I had once held. Basically, we were trying to do God's job for him. We behaved as though God's intervention to keep his promises depended on us rather than on God. In other words, we stopped trusting in God to do this and started believing that it depended on us. I shall say a little bit more about this in the comments on the verses that follow. This was because we got ourselves caught up with the outward aspects of the Instruction and forgot that its real point was what happened in our inner selves.

### **Verses 5-13      The Instruction speaks in two contrasting ways**

Do you remember that I have outlined a kind of split in the Instruction itself - how part of it pulls one way and another part pulls the other? Well, I set out a key example of this in what follows. The idea is that most of the Jewish community is trying to do something that God has already done himself. The gospel is the announcement that God has indeed already done these things - he is keeping his ancient promises. The Instruction has been affected by Sin and, as a result, it is conflicted - it speaks with two voices. In the next few verses, I try to show that it can be read in two different ways. One is about human action to bring about God's promises and the other is about God's own action to deliver them.

5. The first example comes from Moses. This is an example of the Instruction suggesting that human

action is needed to get God to act. He says that doing the things in the Instruction will bring Life. This says nothing about the inner life or the need to be transformed. It's almost as if it leaves God out of the picture. Please understand, I am not for a moment saying that this is the way Moses saw things, but it is the way many of my fellow Jews understand him and, as a result, they treat the Instruction in the wrong way.

6. The next example shows the right approach. It's as though the trust-based approach to living as God intended is the one speaking in the text. It says that God is not depending on you to climb up into heaven to bring about his promises - to bring down his promised King. This is simply not in your power to do.

7. What's more, God isn't depending on you to climb down into the place of the dead as though you could bring his promises up from there - perhaps by finding the promised King down there and bringing him up with you. Again, this is not something that's in your power. Only God can do it.

8. Instead, we rely on the promise that the word of God's promises is already with us, we speak it, and it lives within us. We depend on God for this - it is something he has done for us and not something we try to achieve for him. This word about God's promises is, in truth, the gospel proclaimed by the followers of Jesus.

9. Salvation, that is Life as God intended, belongs to those who trust in King Jesus. This means acknowledging that he is Lord, that is raised to rule at the right hand of God - along the lines of Psalms 8 and 110, as I discussed earlier - and trusting in your inner self that he is alive.

10. It works like this. Those who trust in their inmost being in King Jesus are those who will be vindicated. It's that law court image once again. This is another way of saying that these are the ones who live as God intended, which is to say are embraced by God's salvation. How can you tell who they are? They are the ones who openly confess King Jesus.

11. We have already seen that scripture promises that those who trust in him are the ones who will not be shamed, that is who will be vindicated at the judgement, and will inherit the promises of God.

12. And obviously, this must apply to every category of humanity, both Jew and non-Jew. God, as I have argued previously, is the God of the whole world and treats everyone on the same basis. Those who call on him know he is generous to them.

13. Let me quote another text to make sure the point gets home. This is the fulfilment of the ancient prophetic promise. It is those who call on God, whoever they are, Jew or non-Jew, male or female, old or young, because they trust God to keep God's promises, who will share in salvation.

The point is that it is not for us to keep God's promises for him. Our role is to trust that God is getting on with it. Those who do, and live out that trust, are those who share in the promised salvation and live Life as God intended. Most of Israel, on the other hand, has gone wrong because they insist on trying to do God's job for him.

**Verses 14-17 The importance of preaching the gospel**

So, it should be clear by now that it is important to proclaim this message that we call the gospel. People must trust in this and can only do that if they've heard about it and they can only hear if someone tells them, and people can only tell them if others send them out to do just that. It's a wonderful thing and Isaiah makes just this point about it. But not everyone has grasped Isaiah's meaning even if they know his words very well. Again, this is just as we would expect from the prophets. In any event, people learn to trust by hearing the teaching about King Jesus.

14. I think these words are fairly understandable. You need the proclamation of the gospel which lets people know that God has acted to fulfil his ancient promises. Only then can people hear, and only if they hear can they trust, and only if they trust can they act on that trust. That's why it's so vital that the churches send out preachers. In the background to this argument is my concern that the believers in Rome should, once I had visited, send out me and the team on our proposed mission to Spain.

15. And, of course, this gospel cannot get announced unless God, acting through his people in the churches, sends out messengers. I paraphrase a text from Isaiah and the gist of it is that when it comes to those who announce the gospel, even their feet are lovely! In this section of his book Isaiah was telling the people that God was acting to keep his promises and he was going to be restored as ruler in Jerusalem and show the whole earth his salvation. Small wonder that the one who brings such a message should be welcomed. Needless to say, I believed then - and know for certain now - that those sent out as preachers by the churches are those who bring the message of which the prophet speaks.

16. At this point my thoughts begin to stray back to the main argument which concerns the unbelief of most of the Jewish community. It is clear that not everyone has responded to this gospel. Isaiah predicted that this would be the case. Just a few verses after the words I just quoted, in the run up to a song about King Jesus, the servant who would suffer for the sake of others, he states that few believe the message.

17. So, attempting to sum up the argument I have made, trust comes through the message that people hear, and what they hear comes through the proclamation about King Jesus.

The great news, prophesied by Isaiah, that God would keep his promises, has been fulfilled through God's action in sending his Son. This is a message that is to be proclaimed so that, hearing it, people can give their allegiance to King Jesus.

**Verses 18-21 Part of Israel has heard but has not believed**

Now, lots of people have heard because heralds and evangelists and preachers are going out into the whole world, just as God as promised. However, many of my fellow Jews have not grasped the message they bring. Again, it's as Moses suggests; the Jewish people are being provoked to jealousy.

God says that through him nations who were not even looking for God have found him, but that Israel ignores him no matter how much he pleads with them.

18. Surely, the problem with Israel cannot be that they simply have not heard. Far from it. Indeed, the voice of those who proclaim the gospel is reaching not just Israel, but into the whole world.

19. At this point I explicitly go back to the question I addressed before - the unbelief of the majority of the Jews. I have tried to show that this is exactly what was always predicted by the prophets. I now quote Moses to make the same point and this time to suggest that God has a motive for all this. Remember, as we saw, Israel had got the wrong end of the stick about the way God would fulfil his promises. God plans to 'rub their noses in it'. He will provoke anger in them. The idea is that they will see non-Jews experiencing the promises and enjoying Life, and that they will respond with jealousy.

20. Isaiah makes the same point even more strongly when he insists that God always promised he would allow non-Jews who had never even thought of searching for God to find him, and that he would show himself to non-Jews though they never asked for it.

21. In other words, God always promised he would reveal himself to the non-Jews. Meanwhile, he was disappointed with the response of Israel. He kept pleading with them but to no avail.

Let's sum up the argument to this point. A majority of physical Israel has rejected King Jesus, and this had upset me and led to reflect at some length. The first stage of understanding what is going on comes through a retelling of Israel's story. This demonstrates that there was always a difference between Israel by descent and spiritual Israel - the smaller group within it who inherited the promises. The mistake the Jews of my own day made was to believe that it is up to them to fulfil God's promises. They haven't trusted God to do it himself. In fact, anyone, whether Jew or non-Jew, who accepts that by sending King Jesus God is keeping his ancient promises, can share in God's salvation. The announcement of this message is therefore vitally important. Of course, the Jews have had every chance to hear. The fact that many of them have not responded while many non-Jews have, shows that God is seeking to provoke them to jealousy.

I will go on to argue that there are some Jews who do believe and that this conforms to the pattern you can observe at every point in the story of Israel. This pattern will tell us something about God's purposes.

## Chapter 11

### Verses 1-6      The remnant

Some people think I believed that God had definitively rejected his people, but that's not what I'm saying at all. The fact is that I'm Jewish myself - as are lots of those who follow King Jesus - so I couldn't possibly be arguing that God has rejected the whole of Israel. Obviously, God has not rejected those he foreknew which is to say, that God has not rejected Israel according to the

promise. A little Bible study will help us to understand what's happening. Elijah thought that he was the last one left who was faithful to God, but it turned out that he was far from alone. In the same way, there's a remnant of Israel by descent that is still within the people of promise. But they're not there because of their outward displays of belonging but on the basis of the sheer generosity of God.

1. Let's be clear. I was not arguing that God has turned his back on all those who belong to Israel by descent. He's reached out to the likes of me. I'm as much of a Jew as anyone.
2. This is part of a continuing pattern. God has not rejected the whole. There are some he foreknew, that is, whom he has chosen to receive his promises. It was the same in the time of Elijah who ended up pouring his heart out to God against what Israel was doing in his time.
3. Things were pretty bad. God's prophets were being killed and God's altars destroyed. Elijah thought he was the last person left who was faithful to God and he was being hunted down.
4. In fact, things were not as bad as he thought. God had in fact ensured that there were 7,000 within Israel who had stayed faithful to him.
5. The same applied in my own time. There was a remnant of Israel according to the flesh who, because of the generosity of God, had believed that God was keeping his promises through King Jesus.
6. However, I need to be clear. This was because of the generosity of God; it was like a gift. It wasn't because of anything we deserved or how we'd acted, because then it would not have been a gift.

This is a pattern in the story of Israel by descent. There are periods when the vast majority fail to see what God is doing. However, there is always a minority who, through the generosity of God, are enabled to stay faithful. It was more than Elijah in his day, and in my day, it was more than just me.

### **Verses 7-12      Insight into God's purposes**

How shall we explain what went wrong? Israel by descent sought the fulfilment of God's promises and failed to get it. However, the chosen ones, the remnant, Israel after the promise, did receive those promises. The rest missed it. Scripture predicts that this would happen. The question then becomes, what is God's purpose behind this? We have said, as Isaiah prophesied, that Israel after the flesh has stumbled. Does this mean they are written off completely? Categorically not! It's all part of God's plan. The fact that much of Israel has missed the point, has created an opportunity for non-Jews which, going back to the earlier text, serves to make Israel jealous for its own promises. In other words, Israel's transgression, in the workings of God's purposes, means that the non-Jews are receiving God's blessings. And just think how much greater the blessing would be if they were fully included!

7. This was my attempt to put it another way. Israel by descent failed to find what it was looking for. That is, it did not manage to see how God was fulfilling his ancient promises. The majority were

hardened. Do you remember, we saw this idea with Pharaoh? They could not see that God had acted. However, because of God's generosity, a small number within Israel did understand.

8. At this point I cite texts which make the point. These are prophetic insights into the state of Israel. Sadly, they cannot see what's going on in front of their own eyes.

9. David makes much the same point when he speaks of something in the very centre of people lives becoming something they trip over.

10. David continues with this theme when he speaks of people being unable to see what is going on.

11. All this raises a question. Is this a matter of stumbling, by which I mean something serious but temporary? Or is it a matter of falling down in such a way that there is no prospect of getting up again? Is this hardening of heart permanent? My answer is that it's a matter of stumbling and this is something serious, but not something that need last forever. It's a temporary condition that, in the purposes of God, creates an opportunity for the non-Jews to have a share in salvation. And this is something that will provoke jealousy in Israel.

12. In fact, this temporary condition has resulted in the promised blessings of God becoming available to the whole world. And if Israel's stumbling accomplishes that, just imagine what blessings for everyone there will be if Israel does finally embrace what God has been doing! The Jews may still have a part to play in this story.

So that's the pattern that can be seen if you look at the story of Israel. There's always a line of promise which is a kind of spiritual Israel within physical Israel. Sometimes this part of Israel is very small indeed. It didn't necessarily stay that way. At the time I wrote this letter, spiritual Israel seemed pretty small, but that didn't necessarily mean it would always be that way. Indeed, the pattern of God's dealings with Israel suggests otherwise. Actually, the pattern is also there in the story of the true King of Israel, the true Israelite. King Jesus' story is one of life, death and new life. This is the pattern of God's dealings with his people and with the world.

### **Verses 13-16    There remains hope for Israel**

Some of the non-Jews in Rome had missed all of this. They gave a different answer to the question I just raised. They thought that Israel's condition was final. They'd got it into their heads that God had completely lost patience with Israel according to the flesh, and this led to their getting some ideas that made them dismissive of Jewish people. So, I directed these words at them. Certainly, I was King Jesus' ambassador to the non-Jews and I was quite happy to talk up my calling but in part this was because I hoped to provoke jealousy in other Jews and that as a result some of them would come to accept what God has done in King Jesus. I saw it this way - if the leaving out of part of Israel has brought the rest of the world this astonishing message of reconciliation, then when Israel did accept it, it would be like a resurrection. Think of it in terms of an offering. The first fruits represent the rest. The Jews who have already accepted Jesus are like the first fruits. They represent all the other

Jews. Or to change the analogy, you can think of Israel as being like a tree. If the roots are good, then the branches will be good. Israel's roots are holy and so the branches are holy.

13. Some of the things I'd heard about the attitudes of some of the non-Jewish Christians towards the Jewish Christians and towards other Jews had given me cause for concern. I needed to help them towards a better understanding of their position. King Jesus had commissioned me as his ambassador to the non-Jewish nations. I think that's a really big deal, and I was prepared to talk up the ministry I'd been called to.

14. Nevertheless, it was important to bear in mind that, as we have seen, one of the reasons God had chosen to bless the work of the gospel among non-Jewish people was that this would make Jewish people jealous as they saw God's promises being fulfilled among other nations. This might mean that some of them would change their minds, see that God has indeed acted in King Jesus, and so come to share in the salvation being offered.

15. I suggested that the Romans should look at it this way. The exclusion of most of the Jews had enabled many non-Jews to be reconciled to God; the subsequent acceptance of those Jews would amount to a kind of resurrection. It would be like life from the dead!

16. I tried a couple of other illustrations. One from the rules for Temple offerings and the other from gardening. When you make an offering of dough, you only have to offer the first loaf. This offering stands for the rest. It makes the rest holy. Likewise, if you have a tree and the root of the tree is sound, the branches will also be sound. If the root is holy, the branches are holy.

I was clearing the ground for arguing that God has not permanently rejected the whole of physical Israel. Far from it. I held out the hope that at least some of them would, at some point, believe the gospel.

### **Verses 17-24 The people of God are like an olive tree**

I presented the Romans with an illustration. They should think of the people of God as being like a cultivated, carefully nurtured olive tree with holy roots. Then they should think of God as being like a gardener who chooses to break off some of the natural branches so that there was space to graft in a shoot from a wild olive tree. This would enable the wild shoot to share nourishment from the roots of the tree. The last thing the wild shoot should be is arrogant with respect to the native branches. The root supports the wild grafting and not vice versa. It's no good boasting that you must be super important because others were cleared out to make space for you. Their unbelief meant they were broken off whereas your trust in God through King Jesus means you are grafted in. So, best not to get proud. If God was willing to break off the natural branches, you can be fairly sure that the wild ones could go too. God is both kind and severe. Severe to those cut off but kind to those grafted in. Be sure to appreciate his kindness or you could end up being broken away. And the unbelieving Jews, the branches broken off, well, if they come to trust, there's the prospect that they can be grafted back. In fact, to graft back a natural branch is much more straightforward than the task of



grafting in a wild one.

17. Having offered two illustrations, I choose to work with the one about the tree. It's an olive tree because I knew these grow in the Holy Land and in Italy. I'd seen them in Tarsus too. Everyone in the audience would be familiar with them. I'm comparing the people of God to an olive tree and telling the story of Israel from this perspective. The people of God, Israel, is like God's cultivated olive tree. The non-Jews are like wild olive trees. It's as though God, the gardener, has chosen to break some of the branches off his cultivated olive and in their place has grafted on some branches from wild trees. This enables the wild branches to be nourished by the roots of the cultivated tree. The idea is that some of historical Israel has excluded itself from the people of God and this has created space for some non-Jews to become part of that people. Bear in mind what I said about the holiness of the root affecting the branches. The nourishment of the root makes the new branches holy. The non-Jews are not holy on their own account but by virtue of their being connected to historic people of God. The non-Jews who follow King Jesus have become grafted on to Israel according to the promise.

18. This means that the last thing the non-Jewish believers should ever do is boast about their situation. The grafted in branches should not boast over the branches that have been broken off nor indeed over the cultivated branches that remain. They need to remember that it is the root of the cultivated tree that nourishes them and makes them holy. They need the cultivated tree, but the cultivated tree does not need them.

19. Some might be tempted to brag about their own significance. They might think that they must be especially important because cultivated branches were broken off in order to make room for them.

20. Well, it's true that cultivated branches were broken off to make space for them but, as we have seen, those branches represent those Jews who have not trusted that God has acted to keep his promises. The non-Jews who are part of the people of God are only there because they have trusted in King Jesus. The last thing they should feel is pride as though this were their own accomplishment. Instead, they should be in awe at the astonishing generosity they have received.

21. Let's face it, if God was prepared to break off cultivated branches, he might well be prepared to break off the uncultivated ones. If some Jews could cease to be part of the people of God, the same must surely be true of non-Jews.

22. You can see from all this that God has acted with both kindness and severity. Those Jews who have not trusted have been severely treated. On the other hand, the non-Jews who have trusted in King Jesus have been very kindly treated. They should pray that God continues to be kind, or they too might find themselves rejected.

23. And they needed to understand this: those who are part of physical Israel who have been excluded from the people of God will, if they come to trust in what God has done, be restored to the people of God. For God is the gardener so has the power and the skill to graft them back into the cultivated olive tree.

24. You see, the non-Jews who trust in King Jesus are like branches broken from a wild olive tree and grafted into the cultivated tree which is the people of God. In a way this goes against the grain. It's a difficult operation. How much easier would it be to graft the broken off cultivated branches back into the cultivated tree? There is a sense in which Jews are more naturally a part of the people of God, more disposed to trust in God's promises.

It should be clear from this that it was my hope that at least some of my brothers and sisters would embrace King Jesus. It's one of those great mysteries. I've hinted in places that I hope for a full inclusion of Israel. In others I've suggested that only some of them might be grafted back in. Looking back from my present perspective, I can see that over the years, plenty of Jews have embraced King Jesus, or have been embraced by him, and so I can say that they have been grafted back in. However, as yet, this has not happened for the Jewish community as a whole.

### **Verses 25-36 The great hope**

This part of the argument, the part that reflects on God's dealings with Israel, is ending. It started with anguish at the start of chapter 9, and it ends in the praise of God at the end of chapter 11. It's all part of an established pattern that we see in the scriptures, and the way it operates is a mystery. As I have shown, only part of Israel is hardened, and this is a temporary thing. It will last until all the non-Jews - representatives from every nation on earth - who are going to come in, have come in. And that's the way that all Israel will be saved. After all, God promised a deliverer from Zion who would banish ungodliness from Israel and promised to take away their sins. This is what King Jesus has done. So, the unbelieving Jews are, in one sense, an enemy but, so far as being chosen is concerned, they are loved on account of their ancestors for God does not go back on his word. The non-Jews were once disobedient but have now received mercy, so now the unbelieving Jews are disobedient so that, when the time comes, they can receive mercy. In other words, both Jew and non-Jew go through disobedience so that God can be merciful to them.

25. The non-Jewish believers in Rome need to understand what is really going on. I have been exploring a great mystery. The current situation is not a permanent one. For a temporary period, I didn't know how long it would last, and I still don't; the Jews as a whole are still unable to see that God has acted in King Jesus. This period will last until all those who will come to believe from all the non-Jewish nations have become part of the people of God. The distinction between Israel according to descent and Israel according to the promise will last at least until all the non-Jews who are going to join have become part of the people of God. Then the hardening will fade and some or all of physical Israel will recover from its stumble.

26. This is the way that all spiritual Israel will share in salvation. The text that I quote is one that is about King Jesus. This is what God has already done.

27. God has kept this covenant promise by sending King Jesus to deal with the sin of Israel - as well as that of the rest of the world.

28. As far as the gospel is concerned, the announcement that, in King Jesus, God is keeping his ancient promises, the unbelieving Jews are enemies. That's a strong word and in retrospect I might choose a different one. My point is that they do not believe in what God is doing and some of them actively oppose it. Nevertheless, God loves them because it was their ancestors that he chose and that he loved.

29. And God cannot go back on the gifting and the calling of those ancestors.

30. The non-Jews who follow Jesus were once disobedient to God, but Jewish disobedience has, as I have argued above, created a space in which they have been shown God's mercy.

31. Let's press this a little further. At the time of writing, and this has persisted, most Jews were disobedient. This gave believing non-Jews a space in which they could receive mercy. This may well lead, in turn, to a future situation in which the unbelieving Jews have an opportunity to receive mercy.

32. There's a pattern here. Every type of human has experienced a time of disobedience so that God has the opportunity to offer mercy to them all.

33. God really does have it all worked out. However, we struggle to keep up! We may not understand but God knows what he is doing.

34. As the prophet so rightly points out, God really doesn't need advice or a consultancy service from the likes of us!

35. A similar point is made in the book of Job. God does not need us. There's no reciprocity in this relationship. God is the giver, not us.

36. God made everything and it's all for God and it's all about God and it's all for the glory of God.

I must admit I got a bit carried away after I'd written all of that. I felt the need for some doxology, some prayer glorifying God's mysterious purposes. As you can see, I held out the hope that at least some Jews would come to trust in King Jesus, and over the generations that has happened. I also expressed the hope that as the gospel became known in all the non-Jewish nations, the Jews would come to trust in greater numbers. This has yet to happen. However, there have turned out to be far more non-Jewish nations than I could possibly have envisaged at the time I wrote. No doubt God still has some surprises in store. I think that it's important to grasp that there is only one people of God. It can be pictured as an olive tree. The roots of the tree are the ancestors of the Jews who received God's promises. When God acted to fulfil those promises, some Jewish people could not accept what he'd done and the result was that they, for a time at least, ceased to be a part of the people of God. At the same time, non-Jews who did accept what God had done became part of the people of God. When all the non-Jews, or all the ones destined to do so, have joined God's people, then it will be the turn of the rest of physical Israel, or all those Jews destined to do so, to become a part of the people of God.

Please remember that I wrote all this almost two thousand years ago. I didn't know when I wrote it

how long the periods would last or quite how much animosity there would be between Gentiles who claimed to follow Jesus and the Jewish people. In its context, this was a plea for mutual respect and an expression of hope of eventual unity. It also tried to see it all in terms of the God who created us all.

## Chapter 12

So, those were the main theological arguments. I wanted people to keep them in mind for what came next. I had said that God is, through King Jesus, fulfilling all his ancient promises. He is restoring humans to their true purpose. This applies to the whole world and therefore the promise is for both Jews and non-Jews. Both have their parts in God's purposes. The Instruction, the gift that marked out the Jewish people, is extremely significant but it is not the path to the right way to be human, at least not in the way that I used to think. Every category of humanity had lived in the wrong way, and, in King Jesus, God has reached out to all of us with the gospel, which is the path to the right way to be human. This has raised questions about the continuing role of Israel, and I have addressed these.

Now, I'm going to suggest some of the implications of these arguments for everyday life and I'm going to apply them to some of the issues that I'm aware of within the different groups of Jesus-followers in Rome. Do you remember that King Jesus said we were to be merciful because God is merciful? [1] I have just explored the way in which God is merciful to every part of humankind. In the next few chapters, I'll try to show how being merciful plays out in practice.

### Verses 1-3      **Life in the people of God**

This is my appeal to the Jesus-followers in Rome. I try to spell out the ways in which they should respond to the mercy they have received from God. I begin with some general suggestions before getting down to the specifics.

1. Speaks for itself, I think. I have just been speaking about the mercy of God to both Jews and non-Jews. This mercy is one which brings them out of a state of disobedience into one in which they are obedient to God, that is that they start to live in the way God always intended that people should live. I use sacrificial language, temple images, to describe this. I do that because I want people to make the link to the self-giving of King Jesus that I discussed earlier in the letter. To live in the way God always intended is an act of worship.

2. In the past, the Romans had lived as those whose pattern was Adam and all those like him. Now their lives are to have a different shape; a shape that comes from the renewing work of God's Spirit in their inner being. When the Spirit does that work we become aware of the true purposes of God for us; we recognise what it is that God wants.

3. In this verse I'm underlining the points made earlier that neither Jews nor non-Jews should Lord it

over the other, or anybody else, come to that. A little bit of self-awareness goes a long way. I was saying this out of my apostolic authority.

These are general points. The more specific suggestions follow. The key points to note are that Jesus-followers are called to live a particular kind of life in response to what God has done for them. The way of life can be understood in terms of the fulfilment of the worship that took place in the temple, and it is based on inner transformation and not on outward marks. This helps sum up some of the arguments you will remember from earlier in the letter.

### **Verse 4-8      The community of Jesus-followers and the human body**

Here, I'm offering an illustration about the life of local congregations drawn from observation of the human body. The idea is that the human body has many limbs and organs, and each is different, and each is vital to the wellbeing of the whole, and that the communities of Jesus-followers can be compared to this. Together we make one body and that's how we belong to one another. And just as each part of the body has a function, so everyone in the church has a particular gift that God has given them and that they should exercise. Examples include prophecy, service, teaching, exhortation, giving, guiding and caring. The list is not meant to be exhaustive. The idea is that we all belong, and we all have a part to play. This is a shorter presentation of an idea I explored at greater length when I wrote to the church in Corinth. [\[2\]](#)

4. The human body has many different parts and each part has a different purpose. There is an essential unity but there is also a necessary diversity.

5. It's the same with a community of Jesus-followers. There are lots of us but, because we belong to Jesus, we are like one body and each of us belongs to all the others.

6. And just as the parts of a body all have different purposes, so we all have different gifts. What we offer depends on the gifts we've been given. Prophecy, for example, depends on faith; you offer it insofar as you can be confident that the content comes from God.

7. If your gift is to serve those in need, then minister to them; if it's teaching, then teach.

8. If your gift is encouragement, then be encouraging and if it's giving, then be generous; if leading, then be diligent; if compassion, then be cheerful.

The reports we had heard said that there was lots of division among the Jesus-followers in Rome. They didn't respect one another, and they didn't work together. If the church was going to thrive, they needed to be united. Everyone needed to respect and appreciate everyone else. The same was true if they were going to become partners in the mission to Spain we were planning. The purpose of the illustration was to begin to address this problem.

**Verses 9-21      This is what true Life looks like**

This is pretty much the standard ethical teaching that was around in the primitive church. As you can tell, it's all based on the teachings of King Jesus. At this point, none of the volumes called 'gospels' had actually been written, though an earlier version of one of them was in circulation. However, stories about Jesus, summaries of his sayings and versions of the stories he told were all well known in the churches. Here I am summing up the teachings of King Jesus and occasionally using words or groups of words associated with the versions in circulation so that the readers recognise the source of the ideas. On other occasions I put things in my own terms. I often do this to make certain things more explicit. So, I've recast Jesus' teaching on forgiveness in terms of not seeking vengeance. Some may argue that there's more to forgiveness than this and they may be right, but in the Roman context where people can keep a feud going for generations, it seemed important to emphasise this aspect of it. It's really important to keep stressing this stuff. So much of our ethics are at odds with the prevailing standards that we all need to keep reminding ourselves of who we are. Humility is a case in point; most of the free people associate it with slaves and lower-class servants. It would never occur to most of them that it's a virtue worth acquiring. Likewise, the idea that you should care for your enemy. Most people think that's what you do for your friends. It's not how they expect to treat their enemies. And the idea of living at peace with everyone might seem bland in some parts of the world in the 21st century, but it seemed remarkable then. Essentially, people understood life as a competition. For you to succeed, others must fail. The idea that you could be at peace with them seemed ridiculous. The Jesus-followers really were learning to be human in a new way, that is, in the way that God originally intended. They were living Life.

9. I think these words speak from themselves.

10. One of the stories about King Jesus that circulates round some the churches has him offering a new commandment to his followers; he tells them to love one another. Part of this is to honour one another.

11. These words seem plain to me. They communicated well in the first century and they seem apposite two millennia later.

12. The same applies here.

13. And here too.

14. Again, I hope you can clearly see the dependence of this teaching on the sayings of King Jesus. His teaching tells us about the Life that God originally intended for humans.

15. You will notice that lots of the teaching suggests that our actions should take their cue from the circumstances of the people around us. Lots of the teaching that was around in other circles at the time suggested that emotions were to be avoided and that people should insulate themselves from being impacted by the feelings of others. You can see that I taught something very different. Our ethics were - and remain - oriented towards others.

16. I've thrown in another plea here for those who heard the letter read out to get on with one another. Then, in telling the Jesus-followers to associate with the lowly, I am saying that they should make real friends with the poor. I don't want any of this nonsense where people think they are too good for other people or that it wouldn't be unseemly to be seen with them. King Jesus befriended tax collectors and prostitutes.

17. The denial of vengeance is at the heart of Jesus's ethical teaching, and it was a remarkable teaching in a culture where honour was often thought to depend on being seen to respond to any harm that was done to you.

18. This is an important goal; to be at peace wherever that is possible.

19. Back to this issue of vengeance and now I'm making it clear that this is an issue for 'wrath' - it is translators who have added the words 'of God' - by which I mean that it is for judicial processes to deal with rather than for us. Those processes may be human (as we will see more clearly a little later in the argument) and they may be divine.

20. Generosity to enemies is an important part of the teaching of King Jesus. It's not original to him though. Similar guidance is found in Proverbs. Jesus is very keen on the idea of generous actions that confound those who attack you. Think of his teaching about turning your cheek, walking an extra mile with a soldier, or handing over all your clothes to someone who sues you.

21. This is the line that sums up what has gone before. We are not to give in to the evil around us. We are seeking to bring it round to our way of thinking. Our responsibility is to live in the way that God intended. And to help others to see that it is the best way to live.

King Jesus taught us how to human as God intended. In these verses I've offered a summary of his teaching with the Jesus-followers in Rome in mind. I was trying to describe what it looks like when people live Life. Note that when I urged people to abandon vengeance, I told them to leave room for wrath (I carefully didn't say 'wrath of God') although the text I cite does bring him back into it. The idea of wrath as the thing that motivates those whose task it is to administer justice is an important one and it crops up in the next bit of the letter.

---

### Footnotes:

[1] Luke records this in his Gospel at 6:36.

[2] See 1 Corinthians 12:4-27.

## Chapter 13

Every now and then I think about something I wrote and can see how it must come across in new contexts. When I wrote this chapter, I was thinking about the Jesus-followers in Rome in the middle

of the sixth decade of the first century. If I'd known that it might be taken as a general statement about attitudes to political power, for all times and in all places, then I might have expressed myself a little differently.

It's important to remember that less than twenty years before I wrote, the Jewish Jesus-followers had been involved in the disturbances that had led to all the Jews, including the ones who believed in King Jesus, being thrown out of Rome on the emperor's orders. These things were still fresh in everyone's memory because some of the issues about property and leadership were still being sorted now that the Roman Jews were returning from exile. Understandably, there was plenty of anti-government feeling in some of the groups of Jesus-followers and some were muttering about not paying their taxes. I really felt like I had to say something.

You see, nobody thinks that governments are a brilliant idea. They're often brutal, oppressive and exploitative. However, they also serve a useful purpose; they help keep competition and vengeance in check. They are one of God's strange gifts. They are necessary only because of human sinfulness and they have a couple of essential functions. By and large they are better than the alternative.

### **Verses 1-7      Respect the civil authorities**

So, I told all the Jesus-followers in Rome that they should accept the authority of the government and that God had given us our governors. To resist them amounts to resisting God and will involve consequences. Now, I think it's important to say that government has a limited role and purpose; it can't do whatever it wants. Its task is to promote good conduct by dealing with bad conduct. The people involved in the courts are motivated by wrath in this. They exercise this and deal with wrongdoing so that individual victims of crime and their families don't have to. We all contribute to the costs involved in this by paying our taxes. Those who fail to respect the authorities and avoid paying their taxes are likely to get punished. The last thing we needed was for the Jesus-followers in Rome to get themselves exiled again.

1. God has instituted human governments and they exist because of God. Therefore, we should acknowledge their authority. This is, of course, a general principle. It does not mean there are never exceptions. The scriptures are full of examples of God's people challenging the powers that be when that was necessary.
2. As a rule, the authorities should not be actively resisted because God has appointed them. Resistance usually brings unwanted consequences.
3. Rulers have a purpose. It is to create a context in which all the members of society can engage with one another peacefully. To this end, those who do wrong are to be punished. Those whose conduct is good should have nothing to fear.
4. The authorities are entitled to use violence in their pursuit of punishing wrong. This is what I meant by 'the sword'. The state can exercise 'wrath', that is, it is rightly motivated to exercise



control through judicial processes. This is a main part of its God-given purpose.

5. Therefore, we have two reasons to comply with the authorities. One of these is because they are entitled to punish those who resist them, but more significantly, given their role is given to them by God, it's simply the right thing to do.

6. Something similar applies to the payment of taxes. These are the way we contribute to the necessary costs involved in government.

7. Those who follow Jesus are to give due recognition to the state and to the role God has given it. We do this by contributing our taxes, paying our dues and honouring the authorities.

I think I need to be clear that I wrote this without much nuance because of the particular situation in Rome and the things that had happened to the Jews there. The principle is clearly right but there are occasions when the people of God must think twice before obeying the authorities. Indeed, there are plenty of instances where governments have been a terror to the good rather than to the bad and where they have allowed the powerful to break the rules with impunity while coming down like a ton of bricks on minor indiscretions by the poor. When this happens the followers of King Jesus have to consider carefully how they should behave in relation to the authorities.

### **Verses 8-10      The heart and true purpose of the Instruction**

Let me stress, the position I am advocating is an ethic of obedience to the teachings of Jesus based on our identity as people who belong to him. It is not based on the outward parts of the Instruction. But it is related to the inward meaning of the Instruction. In particular, I recall that when King Jesus was asked to name the greatest commandment, he answered by referring to the Shema - the call to love God with every part of our being - and the reference in Leviticus to loving one's neighbour. These are the heart of the Instruction and if anyone obeys them then the Instruction's true purpose is fulfilled. If you keep these, you keep all the others that matter. You have the basis for living in the way that God originally intended.

8. In this verse I stated an important principle. To enjoy Life, we should live as though we owe it to everyone to love them. If we love other people, we are fulfilling the real purpose of the Instruction. This is the heart of the way of living that God originally intended for humans.

9. Indeed, all the commandments, particularly those that relate to our attitudes to other people, are all summed up in the command to love our neighbours as ourselves. If we do this positive thing, love others, we will not break any of the other commandments. In a sense, the other commandments help to make clear the sorts of actions that constitute a failure to love our neighbours.

10. That's why I can insist that love does no wrong to others and so can assert that those who love are living out the real point of the Instruction. They are living in the way God intended.

The instruction still has an important role. However, the focus should not be on the parts that impact

the outer person, things like circumcision, but on the parts that direct the inner person, like the commands to love God and our neighbour. The outer marks are not wrong in themselves but can be unhelpful if you treat them as though they were the heart of the matter when they are only intended to be signs that the inner aspects of the Instruction are being followed. It's the inner aspects that matter. I don't object to Jews who continue to practise the outer aspects on the basis that they're a sign of the inner ones, but I do object to people who think that the outer aspects should be imposed on the non-Jews who follow Jesus as though you can't belong to the people of God without them. This was the issue when I wrote to the churches in Galatia.

### **Verses 11-14 Understanding the time**

The other important thing for the Jesus-followers in Rome was to be aware of the time. Basically, since the resurrection of Jesus and the gift of the Spirit, we are living in the times of promise. These are the last days, although I'd no idea when I wrote this letter how long they might go on for. That was never really the point. The point was to persuade people to live in the light of the coming presence of King Jesus. We live as those who are ready for the light to dawn and behave appropriately. This means that we don't live part of our lives in secret and do different things there. We live as though everything we do takes place in the presence of God. Indeed, we are in Jesus, we have put him on like someone might put on a uniform and so we do not do things in accordance with the part of our nature that is prone to Sin.

11. The point here is that since the resurrection of Jesus and the giving of the Holy Spirit, we know that the last times have begun. The clock is ticking. The time for us to fully share in God's salvation is getting nearer by the day. That will be the time when everything will be as God intended. We are called to live like that now, today.

12. I continue to make much the same point. The day that is coming is the time of the fullness of God's salvation. It's time to start living as we will when that day dawns. The distorted ways of life that belonged in the night are no longer appropriate to those who follow King Jesus.

13. I list some examples of ways of living that belong in the night, and which are not the sorts of things that those who follow Jesus should get involved with.

14. Instead we should clothe ourselves in King Jesus. By putting on Jesus, we become like him. We do this through prayer and through the work of the Spirit within us. This means there's no place for things that focus on the parts of us that are prone to Sin.

You will see from this section that my teaching about the last days is not concerned with speculation about the future but with the ethical implications of the time we live in. The fact that the day is about to dawn means that we need to live as those who belong to that day. The call on us is to live as God originally intended. This is not something that can be put off in the hope that it will become easier. Now is the time for Life. In the age to come, everyone will live in this way. The Jesus-followers are those who have already started in the here and now to live the Life of the age to come.

## Chapter 14

### Verses 1-23 **It's more important to love one another than to be right**

As you may have gathered, the different groups of Jesus-followers in Rome were not getting on with one another. It was complicated. At the heart of the disagreements were different attitudes towards the Instruction and this broadly represented a division between Jews and non-Jews. Having said that, there were quite a few non-Jews on the Jewish side and a handful of Jews on the non-Jewish side. The non-Jews on the Jewish side were mostly people who had been linked to one or other of the Roman synagogues before they began following Jesus. The Jews in the non-Jewish camp were Jews who thought like me, or at least that's how they thought of themselves. In truth, some of the issues were personal but they got dressed up as though they were differences that mattered to God. At root the real problem was that some of the leaders involved didn't accept, love and respect one another.

Anyway, the leaders on the non-Jewish side decided they would refer to their group as the 'strong in faith' while referring to the others as 'the weak in faith'. Essentially, the strong felt that they need not worry about the provisions of the Instruction while the 'weak' felt that they should be taken seriously. These were really unhelpful designations but, somehow, they had stuck and so I made use of them. However, when you read what I say you might want to put ironic air-quotes around the words strong and weak in this part of the letter! It will help you get the tone of what I was trying to say.

I had set out my theological positions on the issues I wanted to address and then given a general outline of ethical teaching. In this section I have the situation in Rome firmly in my sights. I genuinely wanted to help them resolve their differences. However, I confess that I did have an ulterior motive. As I've already said, I was very keen that the community in Rome would agree to be the base for my mission to the west, to Spain. A united church would be a much more effective partner than one focused on its internal squabbles. Most of my remarks are addressed to the 'strong', most of whom, as I've said, were not Jewish.

1. Some of the 'strong' thought they should have nothing to do with the 'weak'. My first proposal is that they should, in fact, make them welcome. Sometimes they would invite them to meetings, but their purpose was to try to prove them wrong in an argument, not to accept them as equals. Clearly, I thought that they should put a stop to this.

2. The 'strong' thought they could eat anything. It didn't matter to them if it was something that part of the scriptures forbade or if there was a good chance it was the leftovers of a pagan sacrifice and temple party from the day before. You need to remember that in the ancient world, the life of animals were nearly always taken through a ritual. This meant that almost all animals that were butchered died as part of a sacrificial ritual. Since lots of Jews grew up with the idea that the pagan gods were demonic, you can see why they wanted to be sure they were avoiding meat that might be associated with them. Add to this the fact that the meat would not have been dealt with in accordance with the scriptures' rules about these things and you can see why lots of the Jewish Christians - and the non-Jews who had once been linked to the synagogues - might have been functional vegetarians. They were not necessarily opposed to eating meat in principle, only to its

practice in their context. So, for the most part, they ate fruit and vegetables. In its context, such a position seems perfectly understandable.

3. Nevertheless, those who called themselves 'strong' had no qualms about these things at all. Indeed, some of them saw this as a kind of badge of the strength of their faith. As a result, they despised the others. At the same time, I'm afraid to say, those in the other camp tended to judge those who did eat meat. They considered them as little better than pagans and thought that they didn't really understand the scriptures. My point was that God had welcomed both the groups and so, whatever the rights and wrongs of the matter, these differences should not become a basis for division.

4. My argument here was that 'It is not for us to pass judgement on one another. We are all accountable to the same King and he will look after all of us.'

5. The 'weak', influenced by the Instruction, liked to keep certain days as festivals while the 'strong' felt that every day was given equally by God, and they all have the same value. Each is welcome to their own opinion. It's not something worth getting het up about. The point is that everyone should think the issue through and their practice should match the conclusion to which they come.

6. The key thing is that if a person chose to mark the feast, they should do it to honour God. If they ate meat and were grateful for it, they honoured God who provided it. Meanwhile those who would not eat the meat should also honour God in their practice and give God thanks.

7. This is where I offer the basic principle and I think that this has stood the test of time. The thing that matters is that none of us, 'weak' or 'strong', Jew or non-Jew, lives or dies for our own sake.

8. Rather we live and die for the Lord. We all belong to him.

9. Christ died and then lived again and so both the living and the dead belong to him.

10. In the light of this, there was no reason for the Jesus-followers in Rome to despise one another as the 'strong' did the 'weak' or to judge one another as the 'weak' did the 'strong'. They all have the same judge and that's God.

11. Here I quote a text to make the point. God is the judge of all, and all things are made to offer God praise.

12. So, each of those who heard the letter, and this applies to all subsequent readers too, is answerable to God for the way they treat others.

13. The conclusion to all this is that the Jesus-followers in Rome should stop judging one another. Instead, they should try to be supportive to one another and stop trying to trip each other up.

14. Theologically, I'm on the side of those who call themselves 'strong'. Nothing is clean or unclean in itself; that's something that we humans project onto it. But this projection can be a reality that needs to be taken properly into account.

15. So, if one of the 'weak' groups believes something to be unclean and someone in the 'strong' group eats it anyway, that is not an act of love. The act of eating the thing that another thinks is unclean ends up hurting someone who belongs to King Jesus. It contravenes the rule that we should love one another. And this rule is much more significant than any of the theological points over which people are arguing.

16. The result is that something you regard as good, eating the meat for example, gets spoken of as something evil.

17. What matters for those who live under the rule of God is not these questions of what you eat or drink, but living life in the way God intended from the beginning, peace with God and with one another, and joy in God's Holy Spirit. These are the things that hold us all together.

18. Whoever understands this and serves King Jesus in this way is accepted by God and approved by his followers.

19. Therefore, I insisted, do the things that build peace and that build up everyone.

20. Questions of what food to eat cannot be allowed to bring down what God is building. As I've said, theologically, everything's clean, to that extent the 'strong' are correct but as soon as their insistence on eating meat causes another Jesus-follower to struggle, they're in the wrong. You can be as much in the right as you like but if you do it without love, you're very much in the wrong.

21. So, if something causes a problem to another follower of Jesus, something like eating meat or, to take another example, drinking wine, or anything else come to that, then it's best not to do it.

22. Your faith, that is your opinions in this area, are best kept between yourself and God. So don't give yourself any reason to judge yourself in this area. And be sure of your own mind.

23. If you do have doubts, then, best not to eat because whatever we do ought to spring from faith. If it doesn't, it can lead to sin.

I could easily see how people who had heard teaching derived from the letter I wrote to the Galatians might, if they forgot about the context of the message, think that people who kept Jewish festivals had missed the point of the gospel. But the point in Galatia was not about people who freely chose to keep festivals but about an attempt by outsiders to impose them and to say that you couldn't be part of the people of God without them. In most circumstances, where there is division, the way forward lies in reminding those involved that they are to love God and to love one another. Sometimes there's a point of principle at stake and just occasionally this is a hill that you might choose to die on. Most of the time our clever arguments are the way we try to keep power and influence for ourselves and for our group. The law of love sees right through that kind of posturing and shows a better way forward. The point of all this is that lots of the time it doesn't matter how clever you are or how theologically correct you, if you don't love others, it all counts for nothing. I seem to remember making this point at some length in a letter I wrote to Corinth (see 1 Corinthians 13). The picture of the community of Jesus-followers as a body was there in the background of that

argument as well.

## Chapter 15

In this chapter I round off the argument I set out in chapter 14 and then go on to celebrate a key theme of the letter - the way that, through King Jesus, God has kept his ancient promises. He told the founders of Israel that the Gentiles would become part of the people of God, and he repeated that promise in the psalms and the prophets. After that I say something about my own ministry and my plans for the next stage of my mission.

### Verses 1-7      **Welcome one another**

This is one of the places where the chapter divisions in your Bibles break up the flow of an argument. These verses are the conclusion to the argument about the 'weak' and the 'strong'. It's an appeal to both sides that they follow the example of King Jesus and welcome one another. As you will see if you read on, the discussion about the 'weak' and the 'strong' blurs into a comment about Jews and non-Jews. This is a strong clue that these different divisions are related to one another.

1. Those of us who are theologically in the 'strong' camp have a responsibility to the 'weak' and should not simply please ourselves. It is an important principle of community building that everyone should consider what impact their behaviour will have on others.
2. This explains the same basic point. If we behave in ways that help other members of the community, we will build them up. This will help to strengthen the community and keep it united. In the communities of Jesus-followers we should always try to help others in their journey of faith and avoid doing things that hinder their progress.
3. The essential reason for behaving in the way I suggest is that it reflects the example given to us by King Jesus. He didn't go round pleasing himself, did he? No, he lived and died for the sake of others. In the community, we all belong to Jesus and that's why I can use the text from Psalm 69. The suffering one who speaks in the Psalm is clearly King Jesus. Understood this way the scripture suggests that when those who follow Jesus have a go at one another, we are really having a go at him.
4. With a 21st-century approach to history, you might think that it's a bit of a stretch to interpret the Psalm in that way. One of my principles for understanding the scriptures is that, though it was written in the past and can still be understood as addressing the circumstances of its time, it is a living word that speaks to us in our own time. It's worth remembering that everything in the scriptures is there to instruct us. We have to endure a great deal, and the scriptures are a gift from God to encourage us and give us hope.
5. This is my prayer for the Jesus-followers in Rome. Since God has, through King Jesus, endured so much for us in staying faithful to his own promises, and since this gives us such encouragement,

they all - 'weak' and 'strong', Jew and non-Jew - ought to live together peacefully. The unity of God demands the unity of God's people.

6. The outcome of this would be that they would give glory to God who is the Father of our Lord, King Jesus. And they would do this together, or as I put it, with one voice. That's the vision! A community made up of people of different kinds all united and working together because of their allegiance to the same king. This is part of Life as God intended.

7. And this is where I sum up the argument. The goal is the glory of God which is, as we have seen, one of the outcomes of people living true Life. This is the purpose for which King Jesus has welcomed each of the people and groups in Rome. Their response, in the light of this, should be to welcome one another.

When this section of the letter began at the start of what is now called chapter 12, one of the first things I did was talk about the church using the illustration of the human body. That idea is there in the background of the argument about the 'weak' and the 'strong' and the need for different groups to welcome one another. What sort of human body would it be if different parts of it refused to accept one another or cooperate with one another? God's people should be united.

### **Verses 8-13**

### **Celebrating God's promise-keeping**

In this section I give a brief summary of the mission of King Jesus and then quote several scriptures that are intended to celebrate the fact that God is keeping his ancient promises so that non-Jewish peoples are joining Jewish people in the renewed one people of God.

8. In some ways this verse is a link to the previous section. It offers a theological defence of the argument. I'm telling the Jesus-followers in Rome exactly why they should all do as I say. It's worth noticing that at this point I slip out my practice of speaking of the 'weak' and the 'strong' and instead talk about Jews and non-Jews.

This is the defence; King Jesus came to serve the Jewish people, that is, the circumcised, the nation that possessed the Instruction, with two related purposes. The first reason was to show that God is true to his word and was confirming the promises made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the founders of Israel.

9. The second reason was the outcome of those promises - the non-Jewish peoples of the world are being welcomed into the people of God and are therefore giving glory to God because of the mercy he has shown to them. In other words, I am emphasising the point that I've been making throughout the letter. God's action in Jesus is for both Jews and non-Jews. It is about God keeping his promises and enabling people from every nation on earth to become a part of the one people of God and to experience Life.

At this point I introduce a string of texts that all make the same basic point and demonstrate that the scriptures anticipate that God will do what he is now doing. The texts come from the prophets and

the psalms, and they all show people from all over the world can belong to God. As far as I am concerned, all these texts promise that God will be faithful to his ancient promises and anticipate their fulfilment through the ministry of King Jesus. The first text is from the psalms and insists that God will be confessed among the non-Jewish nations of the world. If God has overcome the key division between Jew and non-Jew, there can surely be no divisions within the people of God.

10. This text is from the Instruction. Some see the Instruction as the foundation of the idea of a distinction between Jews and non-Jews. But, as I've been arguing in much of this letter, it's not as simple as that. Here the Instruction itself is summoning the non-Jewish nations to rejoice alongside Israel.

11. This text is from another Psalm in which the non-Jewish nations are summoned to offer praise to God.

12. The last of the texts is about King Jesus. It's Isaiah's promise that God's true king will rule the whole world and that the non-Jewish nations will put their hope in him.

13. And I rounded off this section of the letter, with its very particular advice to the Jesus-followers in Rome, with a short prayer. Looking back, it looks a bit like a false ending to the letter but in fact it, like the doxology at the end of chapter 11, marks a change of subject.

The main argument of my letter is now at an end. The rest is mostly personal news and greetings. I have spelled out how God has, through King Jesus, stayed true to his original purposes for creation. God consistently promised that he would do this. I have made it clear what this means for the Jews, the historical people of God, and the part they play in God's purposes. I have discussed the true purpose of the Instruction and have shown the ways in which it has been bypassed and the ways in which it remains relevant. I have explained how those who follow King Jesus should live and have addressed a major issue in the Roman communities. In closing I have made it clear that everything I have said conforms to the great themes of scripture.

### **Verses 14-33    Offering encouragement and sharing plans**

Now, I go on to offer some words of encouragement to the followers of King Jesus in Rome and to talk a little about my own circumstances and plans.

14. I've made the main points that I wanted to. I'm moving to a conclusion now and there's a slight change in tone as I move from criticising and making suggestions, to reassuring. Hence the comments in this verse. In part, I'm preparing the ground for hinting at the things I want them to do for me.

15. In the previous verse I acknowledge that the Jesus-followers in Rome are able to teach one another. I suppose some might say that in that case there's no justification for sending them a letter full of teaching. I recognise that some might think I need to offer a defence for this, especially as some of the views I have expressed have been rather, shall we say, forthright. Therefore, I hint at my



apostolic calling as grounds for the implicit authority I've claimed.

16. Here, I spell out the commission I've been given by King Jesus and talk about it in terms of priestly service. Mostly, I use language borrowed from the prophets to describe my sense of calling but here I put it in priestly terms. I make it clear that I see the non-Jewish people who are being gathered to God as a kind of offering. I am anxious that others see this offering as an acceptable one. In my mind it is linked to, perhaps represented by, the financial offering the non-Jewish churches have gathered for the Jerusalem church to distribute. You could say that the acceptance of that financial offering by the Jerusalem church will symbolise their acceptance of the believers in the churches I have been hard at work getting planted. I want to get that acceptance established before I move on to the next stage of my mission. In the back of my mind there is a nagging doubt that the offering won't be accepted. Not because James won't want to take it. He could certainly make good use of the money. But because there will be pressure from non-Christian Jews (and some of the Christian ones too, I fear) to avoid being seen to be too close to non-Jews and hence undermining the national project of getting God to keep his promises through the Instruction. You can see the irony.

17. Okay, I admit it. I'm really pleased with all that my team and I have accomplished as King Jesus has enabled us. I feel like a significant stage of my mission has been accomplished.

18. And, in truth, nothing else is worth mentioning. King Jesus has used me to get the non-Jewish nations - or representative groups from among them - to obey God, to live in the way that God originally intended.

19. God's used all kinds of things to enable this to happen; words and actions and signs and wonders, all done in the power of God's Spirit with the result that the team and I have planted churches in the whole of the north-east quadrant of the land around the Mediterranean Sea.

20. Having achieved that, it was time to move on to the next stage of the mission. At that time there were quite a few missionaries busy working in the area. It was my ambition to go somewhere to preach where nobody had yet, to the best of my knowledge, so much as heard of King Jesus. It's not my task to build on what others have started. There's nothing wrong with doing that, of course, but it's not my calling.

21. There's a text that speaks to me about this. It's from one of Isaiah's songs about King Jesus, the servant, that I refer to often. It suggests that the news about the servant will be spread among those who had never heard that they should expect such a person. I cannot get over the fact that God has commissioned me to be one of the means by which this astonishing prophecy is fulfilled.

22. I'd often wanted to go to Rome, but the demands of the mission always got in the way.

23. But the stage of work that had kept me busy up to this point was drawing to a close and so, since I'd always wanted to go to Rome, I intended to grab the opportunity.

24. I planned to come and stay a while on my way to Spain. And I hoped that the Jesus-followers in Rome would feel able to pray for me and support me on that journey.

25. However, before I headed for Rome and for Spain, I had to go to Jerusalem with the collection for the poor there.

26. The communities of Jesus-followers in other places were delighted to have an opportunity to contribute to helping the poor among the Jesus-followers in Jerusalem.

27. The non-Jewish Jesus-followers were grateful for the chance to make the contribution, and so they should have been. As I've tried to explain before, the non-Jewish believers have shared spiritual blessings which have come to them from the Jews, and so, surely, they can respond by offering material blessings in return.

28. Once I'd returned to Jerusalem and delivered the collection, I was determined to go to Rome on my way to Spain.

29. And I was sure that, when I got to Rome, I'd be happy and be feeling blessed because all the things I was mentioning would have been dealt with and would be behind me. If you've read Luke's history of those days, you will know that I did get to Rome but not in the way I'd expected.

30. This is a plea for prayer that God would help me to get all these things done.

31. There were some influential people in Jerusalem who did not follow King Jesus and who I feared, with good reason as it turned out, would oppose me. As a result, it's possible that all the things I was offering to Jerusalem, both funds and the people those funds represent, would not be accepted.

32. Basically, I was saying 'I trust that all will go well and that I will come to see you with great joy and have a great time with you.'

33. Another blessing. This was a prayer to mark an end to this brief section of the letter.

It's been particularly strange to look back on this part of the letter. We made our plans so carefully. First Jerusalem, then Rome, then Spain. We had it all worked out. I suppose I should have known better! God had other ideas. I did get to go to Jerusalem. Things there didn't go according to plan and, as I'd been warned would happen, I ended up getting arrested. I never regretted the decision to go. Firstly, I was keeping a promise to the apostles there. And secondly, I was following in the footsteps of King Jesus. He knew what awaited him in Jerusalem but went there anyway. I felt I should do the same. He died and was resurrected there. I, however, was taken to Rome as a prisoner. So, I did get to Rome as I'd hoped, but not in anything like the way I'd planned. Jesus was condemned by the emperor's representative Pilate. I was able to offer my defence, and speak about King Jesus, before the emperor himself.

## Chapter 16

The chapter consists mostly of greetings, but there's a warning, mentions for some of the team members and our hosts in Corinth, a blessing and a final doxology.

**Verses 1-16      Sending greetings**

These are the greetings. They are the traditional conclusion to a letter though there are rather more of them than usual. As it turned out, between us, the team and I knew quite a few people in the communities of Jesus-followers in Rome. Most of those we mention are the leaders of the different groups and the people who acted as hosts. The majority were non-Jews but there were a few Jews among them. In my comments I shan't mention all the names but point out the ones I think you might be interested in hearing about.

1-2. First mention goes to Deacon Phoebe. She's the one who took the letter from Corinth to Rome. I told the Romans to look after her. I told them that if there's anything in the letter that's not clear, just ask her, and she'd be able to help. She'd been a financial supporter of my work for some time.

3-4. Then come Prisca and Aquila. It still seems odd to put the woman's name first but she's definitely the leader. She and her husband wrote that marvellous sermon that I've already mentioned. These are people who took huge risks to help me. They are among the Jewish Jesus-followers who have done most to help the non-Jewish communities.

7. Notice that I included Junia among the apostles. I didn't mean that she was one of the 12 but that the churches recognised that she had been sent out by King Jesus as his representative to proclaim his message and to plant new communities. Whatever some later manuscripts and translators may think, Junia was both a woman and an apostle.

16. The greetings end with a call on everyone to greet one another with a kiss - something that sums up the mutual love that should exist within and between the communities of Jesus-followers in a city. In addition, I send them all the greetings of all King Jesus' communities.

The greetings remind us that while the letter is written to the different communities of Jesus-followers in Rome, individual people all matter and our friendships with them were really important to us.

**Verses 17-20      A warning**

This is a bit of a postscript. It gives you an insight into one of the many problems that we faced back in the day. Sadly, there were people who made it their business to go around all the communities, especially the ones that I'd started, telling lies about me. Most of the time they'd claim to represent James and the church in Jerusalem. This was not true. They taught what they thought James ought to be teaching but they were putting their words into his mouth. Lots of them know the scriptures really well and so they know how to bamboozle some of the trusting souls who lack experience. It can be very hard for new Jesus-followers to know how to argue with them. And they seem to get everywhere. Some of them are in it for the money, some are desperate to stop non-Jews from claiming they are part of the people of God and some are just misguided. They're all incredibly

divisive. So, before signing off, I asked Tertius, who was acting as scribe for the letter, to warn the readers in Rome to be wary of these people. You see, it occurred to me that if any of them caught wind of the fact that I'd written to Rome and planned to pay a visit there, they might try to get there themselves and start stirring up trouble.

17. There are people who go round undermining the work of King Jesus' ambassadors and teaching things which cause the communities of Jesus-followers to argue amongst themselves. They are best avoided.

18. These people often sound good and the simple-minded are easily taken in by them. Truth be told, they're just after your money.

19. You followers of Jesus in Rome have a reputation for being obedient to God and balanced in your thinking. That's great. Try to stay that way.

20. I couldn't resist closing off with a blessing to round off this section of the letter. In part of it I refer to an ancient promise. Even as the first humans were excluded from the garden of Eden and so from Life, God announced his judgement on the serpent, who I understand as the embodiment of the power of Sin. The offspring of the woman will crush its head. I take this as reference to King Jesus who has defeated the enemy. However, though beaten, that enemy is still active. I assured the Jesus-followers in Rome that his defeat will soon be complete.

I suppose it's true in every age that misguided and selfish people will distort God's beautiful message and that the gullible will be taken in by them. Their teachings are insidious and must be opposed.

### **Verses 21-23 Introducing the team**

As I said earlier, quite a few people were involved in writing the letter and hosting the team while we put it together. This was the opportunity to mention them and to acknowledge their contributions. Most of you will have heard of Timothy. And I've mentioned Tertius already because he was the one who scratched out the words of the letter with his stylus. And then I mention a couple of Corinthian leaders, Gaius and Erastus, who were with us. We were in Gaius' house when we wrote the letter.

### **Verses 25-27 Glory to God**

And I couldn't end without another doxology which sums up some of the key points I wanted to get across. It makes clear that any glory associated with the letter belongs to God and to nobody else.

25. God's promises were no secret but the way he had chosen to deliver on them was a mystery, one now revealed in King Jesus.



26. It was there in the prophets, and the meaning of these is now clear and their message can go to every nation to bring about obedience, the way of Life that God originally intended. This is the faithfulness of God and it should be celebrated!

27. What a display of wisdom! God has accomplished his ancient purposes through King Jesus and has brought Life. All the glory is his!

It was tricky to try to sum up the letter in just a couple of verses. I'll have another go. The key idea is that God has shown his faithfulness to his ancient promises and has brought representatives of the non-Jewish nations into the covenant people of God. We get to belong to this community through our allegiance to King Jesus. This is God's way of announcing in the present the outcome of the final judgement. Those who belong are transformed from within by the Spirit of God so that we begin to live out the true inner purpose of God's Instruction and so start to experience Life as God intended. This is a step in the process by which God will renew the whole of creation so that it fulfils all the plans God had for it when he first called it into being.