

SLOW PAUL: Thinking through Romans

Preface

Paul's *Letter to the Romans* is considered by many Christians today as too difficult and too dangerous. Too difficult, because Paul's rabbinical style of argument, his use of Old Testament texts, his Jewish mindset and his polemical character militate against easy understanding and acceptance of his thinking. Too dangerous, because some of his themes – the wrath of God, the inherited sinfulness of humanity, the dismissal of religious tradition as a means of grace, the emphasis on penal substitutionary atonement, the experience of the Spirit's work, the place of the Jewish nation in the purposes of God – are subjects of debate even among those who hold firmly to the plenary inspiration of the Bible. Much better, surely, to limit ourselves to a few classic passages, and preach the gospel as simply as we can into the culture of our age.

But, as John Stott points out in the introduction to his commentary on Romans, we can't ignore the effect this letter has had at different times in church history. It radically changed things for Augustine, Luther, Wesley, Barth and many others, and through them changed the thought-patterns of entire societies. Just as the Greek philosopher Plato had seen 'righteousness' to be the overarching theme of all philosophy and politics, so Paul sees it as the centre of God's revelation to a fallen race. More precisely, he saw Jesus Christ as the one through whom God had acted, was acting and would act to bring humanity into a right relationship with himself. Jesus, his death and resurrection, his person and work, is the gospel for Paul. If Romans is a major instrument of God's for releasing the good news of Christ in different generations, why should ours be an exception?

This was the first of the *Slow Paul* flights of fancy. Having agreed to write some Bible study questions on the first few chapters of Romans, I decided that I needed to make sure I understood what Paul was actually saying, by 'slowing down' his often highly condensed argument in order to unravel the logic underneath. It is an attempt to think with the grain of Scripture; to bring out and make plain the underlying drift of meaning, without in any way dethroning Scripture itself. The result is a kind of free-range interpretation in many more words than the original. In skiing language, we are mixing orthodox downhill piste with quite a lot of off-piste or cross-country. There are anachronisms and phrasing that Paul couldn't possibly have used, though I have tried to hold these in check – most of the imagery is derived from the picture-language latent in Paul's mind or explicit in the text. There are spasmodic cross-references to other parts of the Bible, including passages in Paul's letters that hadn't yet been written. There is considerable use made of the 'imaginary objector' or 'baffled student', a technique that Paul himself uses, though more sparingly.

As for outside help, I ought to acknowledge that though I have worked through these chapters before consulting any commentators, I have sometimes then turned in desperation to writers such as Paul Barnett, GK Beale & DA Carson, F F Bruce, D Moo, H C G Moule, John Stott, N T Wright and others. My personal interest in Romans was aroused when I first read it in J B Phillips' *Letters to Young Churches*, and was furthered by a memorable presentation by David Watson of the overall structure of Romans 1-8. Needless to say, none of those should be held responsible for any distortions or misinterpretations in what follows.

The text of the New International Version (2011) is printed at the head of each section for ease of checking back to what Paul really wrote. Those who have the original Greek may wish to have it beside them. Section headings have been inserted, not to break the flow but to allow readers to catch their breath. There are in reality no breaks, no pauses, in the onward rush of this single magnificent exposition.

'Forasmuch as this epistle is the principal and most excellent part of the New Testament and most pure Evangelion, that is to say glad tidings and that we call gospel, and also a light and a way in unto the whole scripture, I think it meet that every Christian man not only know it by rote and without the book, but also exercise himself therein evermore continually, as with the daily bread of the soul. No man verily can read it too oft or study it too well; for the more it is studied, the easier it is; the more it is chewed, the pleasanter it is; and the more groundly it is searched, the preciouser things are found in it, so great treasure of spiritual things lieth hid therein.'

William Tyndale [c1494-1536] A Prologue to the Epistle of Paul to the Romans.

Synopsis

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15:14-16:27	<i>Paul's ministry and the church at Rome</i>

1:1-17 The Gospel – a message everyone needs to hear

1:1 ¹ Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God –

Paul introduces himself

[1:1] Dear believers in Jesus Christ at Rome,

This is a letter from Paul. Most of you have never met me, though you may have heard about me. I work for the Lord Jesus – indeed, I've laid my life at his feet. Technically I'm known as an 'apostle', which means that he, Jesus, has called me personally (you may have heard what happened on the Damascus road a few years ago) to be a full-time worker for the gospel of God. I live, breathe, eat and drink Jesus and his saving message.

It's this gospel I'm writing about. I want to set it down definitively once and for all, so that no-one should be in any doubt about what I teach and preach. It's going to be not so much a letter, more a short treatise. So here goes!

1:2-4 ² ...the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures ³ regarding his Son, who as to his earthly life was a descendant of David, ⁴ and who through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord.

Scripture and Jesus Christ

[1:2] What is this 'gospel'? It is God's rescue plan, the Lord of heaven and earth promising to come in person to sort out his messed-up creation. Scattered through the holy Jewish books are prophetic hints, assurances straight from God, that a Divine visitor is on the way [1:3] – his one and only Son. Here are a few examples: 'Today I have become your father'; 'Immanuel, God with us'; 'Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.' But there's more:

- He is going to trace his human ancestry back to King David: 'A shoot will come up from the roots of Jesse; I will raise up from David's line a righteous Branch.'
- [1:4] He is going to live a life full of goodness and power, because the Holy Spirit dwells in him like nobody else: 'The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him; The Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.'
- The conclusive demonstration of his divine Sonship will be his unique triumph over death itself: 'He will see his offspring and prolong his days; You will not let your holy one see decay.'

Yes, all this has been fulfilled – it has really happened! Let me introduce you to – Jesus, Jewish Messiah, everybody's Lord. My Master.

1:5a ⁵ *Through him we received grace and apostleship...*

Grace

[1:5] I and the other apostles have been given 'grace'. Small word, big idea. It's the opposite of what I, at least, deserved (if you aren't aware of my track record, ask people about 'Saul of Tarsus'), but God forgave me and poured his love and strength into me. Then he sent me to distant lands to carry his welcome news to people who had never heard anything like it before. I am so relieved and grateful!

All this has happened through Jesus.

1:5b-7 *...to call all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith for his name's sake. ⁶ And you also are among those Gentiles who are called to belong to Jesus Christ. ⁷ To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be his holy people: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.*

Invitation from God

Now we are commissioned to tell all nations, ancient or new-born, Roman provinces or places way beyond the imperial frontiers, people of every creed and culture, about how they can all believe in him as the Son of God and become his devoted followers.

[1:6] This is where you come in. You may or may not be Jewish by birth, but that doesn't matter in the slightest. You are all invited to become full members of Jesus' people. And of course you've accepted that invitation! [1:7] You are double citizens – of the great city of Rome, and of the far greater kingdom of Jesus Christ. God himself loves you to bits. You are called (there's that word again) to share his eternal presence, cleansed and purified and equipped to lead entirely new lives of goodness and loving service on earth.

So – this message comes to you from God himself, our Father in heaven, and from his Son Jesus, Messiah and Lord. May you know the wonder of his grace. May you be filled with peace, the joyful knowledge of his full pardon and friendship. And from me Paul – greetings!

1:8-10 ⁸ *First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world. ⁹ God, whom I serve in my spirit in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you ¹⁰ in my prayers at all times; and I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you.*

Praying like mad

[1:8] That's enough by way of an introduction. The first thing I want to say is that I am very keen to come and see you in person. Yes, of course I've heard lots about you – who in the world hasn't? And it's all positive: how there are all these strong believers in Rome, a thriving Christian community. It's something I give thanks to God for continually – that he's become your God, just as he became mine, by meeting you in Jesus.

[1:9-10] So I include you in my prayers, regularly and passionately. You haven't been forgotten! I'm not just saying this – my prayer life is open to my Master's gaze, as is my whole life of service to him, my desire to spread his wonderful message wherever I can. I've been praying and longing for the chance to get on a boat and turn up in your midst. I'm just asking God, if he wants it to happen, to make it happen, and soon.

1:11-13 ¹¹ *I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong – ¹² that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith. ¹³ I do not want you to be unaware,*

brothers and sisters, that I planned many times to come to you (but have been prevented from doing so until now) in order that I might have a harvest among you, just as I have had among the other Gentiles.

Planning to see you

[1:11] Why this obsession about paying you a visit? You've probably heard about spiritual gifts. They're nothing to be frightened of, in fact they are God's loving way of strengthening and equipping his people. He has given them to me to pass on to others, including you. [1:12] If I can spend some time in Rome, we can both benefit hugely, with you thrilling my heart by the faith you all share, and me passing on whatever I can in the way of teaching and ministry to you.

[1:13] You may not be aware that I've laid many a plan to travel in your direction, but something has always come up to make it impossible. I won't go into details, but there is such a rich harvest field over here, people coming to faith who have never even heard of the one true God. And that will always happen where Christ is faithfully proclaimed! All this has meant committed hard work. But now, says he hopefully, it's your turn.

1:14-15 ¹⁴ *I am a debtor both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish.* ¹⁵ *That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are in Rome.*

Why Rome?

[1:14] I've travelled through the Greek and Roman Near East, I've preached in cities and tiny villages out in the sticks, I've discussed the faith with trained philosophers as well as simple farm labourers, I've had to deal with delightfully sane people, plus a few lunatics – but I am completely committed to all of them, because Jesus died for us all equally. [1:15] That's the supremely wonderful truth I want to unfold to you too in the great metropolis. I am 100% sold on doing this – now it's down to God to make it possible.

1:16-17a ¹⁶ *For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile.* ¹⁷ *For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed – a righteousness that is by faith from first to last...*

Dynamic gospel

[1:16] Now you probably know that I've been accused of selling out spiritually (by deeply religious Jews) and intellectually (by educated non-Jews). I've been dismissed as a super-salesman, an emotional ranter, an obsessive Jesus-freak – all because I've stuck to one simple thing, the gospel. But I've nothing to apologise for, no reason to water my message down or accommodate it to 'modern' sensitivities.

Let me explain as clearly as I can. This gospel is dynamite! It is God himself broadcasting into the current world crisis and demonstrating the one essential solution, the way out of the impasse. The key thing is faith. It doesn't matter how pious you are, or how orthodox, or how knowledgeable. It's not what you do or contribute, it's what God has done – that is what I long to get into the heads and hearts of my own countrymen, the Jewish nation. It's them I want to reach first and foremost, then of course the whole world beyond.

Jews know that God saves. He did it at the Exodus. The children of Israel stood on the shore of the Red Sea and said, 'Oh no, Moses has led us the wrong way and he's never going to get us out of Pharaoh's clutches. We're doomed.' God says, 'Tell them to go ahead,' and he does a miracle – just at the right moment, he parts the waters and they escape from certain destruction. Well – God's done this for the entire human race. He's got us out of the clutches of sin through Jesus. We can walk out free.

[1:17] So I want to tell everyone that God is completely trustworthy and that all he wants us to do is to trust him, and follow the way out that he himself has indicated. This is where the first human

pair went so disastrously wrong – they believed the lie that God wasn't really good through and through. The wonderful news is that God himself in the person of Jesus has gone to all possible lengths to demonstrate that, yes indeed, he is good, and he can be trusted to the uttermost.

This message is so dynamic that by itself it can create the faith that brings a person running out of danger into the welcoming arms of the rescue team. So I want to ask everybody this one simple question: 'will you take the way out that God himself has provided?'

...just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith.'

Faith is the way (1:17b)

There is an old text in the prophets, advising the faithful what to do when danger threatens: 'If you're right with God, you will find life through trusting him.' This presupposes that your life already pleases God, because you keep to his laws. But what if my life doesn't please him? Is there any way out at all? Now read that text a different way: 'If you're right with God through trusting him, you will find life.' This is for everyone, not just the law-abiding righteous!

The walls of sin pile up on both sides of you. The chariots of the enemy are pressing at your back. God says, 'There's one way out of this, and it's through Jesus my Son. Go ahead trusting him.' And you do, not just once but as a lifetime habit – and you live, now and eternally. Put the full weight of your faith on him, because he's equal to it.

Open your eyes and let the light stream in – this is the appointed way back to God! For religious seeker, for heathen idol-worshipper, for anyone!

1:18-3:20 Sin – a crisis no-one can escape

1:18-20 ¹⁸ *The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness,* ¹⁹ *since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them.* ²⁰ *For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.*

Truth staring us in the face

[1:18] Now I'm going to lay before you the whole great story of how God has solved the human crisis. I started by saying that Jesus is God's Son, and our Lord. But what if the world won't accept God's Lordship? This is the situation made clear by Scripture, confirmed by everything we see around us, and fundamental to the gospel I proclaim. It's also a situation which is anathema to God, as you might expect. In fact, the whole human race is under his severe displeasure; it stinks in his nostrils, and it grieves him at his heart. I don't expect anyone to like this bit, so I'll tell it how it is.

There is a worldwide rebellion against heaven. Obedience to God's laws has gone out of the window. Truth lies gagged and bound in the cellar while injustice celebrates upstairs. [1:19] Oh yes, people know the truth all right! God has made sure of that. 'Has he? I can't see him anywhere! Where's your evidence?' It's staring you in the face. [1:20] Look at the physical universe, the natural world, the very laws of nature – what do they tell us about God? To produce all this takes a power greater than itself. To produce time and space requires that the Producer stands outside them, himself timeless and boundless. That's what being God means. It's so obvious – yet people refuse to accept it, because they don't want a God around, thank you. They might have to worship him, for goodness' sake! There's no excuse for such wilful folly.

1:21-23 ²¹ For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. ²² Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools ²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.

Inadequate ideas of God

[1:21] I used the word ‘folly’ just now, and I meant it. Humanity really has left its brains at the door. Given this basic awareness of God, we should have given him due honour for the glorious and wonderful Being that he is, and grateful thanks for all he has given us. Instead, we have thrown logic out of the window. A kind of darkness has come creeping over our minds and wills. We simply don’t understand the true situation. [1:22] We think we are the clever ones, when the rest of the universe sees us as the village idiot. [1:23] For example, take a sophisticated, civilised nation like Egypt. How do they picture God? Like an animal-headed man. Or the Persians, like a faceless eagle. Even the Israelites worshipped a golden calf! Snakes, dragons, grotesque monsters – the whole bestiary has been pressed into service as a source of God-substitutes. Wake up, humans! These are creatures, destined to perish. They lead people away from the one true Creator God who is imperishable, immortal, unseen to mortal eyes, glorious in holiness.

1:24-25 ²⁴ Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. ²⁵ They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator – who is for ever praised. Amen.

Creature-worship

[1:24] Idolatry has moral consequences. God honours human choices, however irrational. ‘If you want to think like this, go ahead – but see where it leads you.’ One example, uncomfortably near home, is sex. We are made in the image of God and we should treat our own bodies, and those of others, with due reverence and holy awe. Once you put another man or woman on a divine pedestal because of their physical attractiveness, you swap the truth for a devilish lie. Remember why Eve chose to take the fruit from the tree? It was ‘good for food,’ it was ‘pleasant to the eye,’ and it was ‘desirable for gaining wisdom.’ True – but when set against God’s will, wrong. [1:25] You exchange the freedom of worshipping the only true, wonderful and eternal One, for slavery to his creatures. And all because a voice says, ‘You want it, and you can have it now – so why not take it?’

1:26-27 ²⁶ Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. ²⁷ In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error.

Sex gone haywire

[1:26] I have to emphasise that though God could easily override human choices, he doesn’t do so. If you seriously want to get caught in the toils of your own passions, and reject God’s intention for you to walk in the freedom of the way of holiness with your head held high, then go ahead, says God. In the beginning God set out his plan for the human race, which was for men and women to have sexual relations with one another in the context of monogamous union. If they choose to express their desires in same-sex relations, then they should realise that they are rejecting God’s wise and loving purpose, and demeaning themselves in the sight of heaven. This applies to women getting physically infatuated with women; [1:27] it applies equally to men. My friends, you live in Nero’s Rome so you know what I’m talking about. There is a blatant disregard for faithful relations between male and female, and open expression (even, I’m told, in the emperor’s palace) of male-on-male carnality. Fallen human personality may declare such behaviour natural

or even morally acceptable, but there is no warrant for it in God's word; indeed, God has built into nature serious penalties for nature's misuse. If today's society is blasé about such warnings, it is pulling the wool over its own eyes.

1:28-31 ²⁸ Furthermore, just as they did not think it worth while to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done. ²⁹ They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, ³⁰ slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; ³¹ they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy.

Human nature without God

[1:28] This is what happens when an 'enlightened' culture thinks it can do without God. Once again we see God's permissive will at work: he didn't plan this situation, he is acutely displeased with it, yet he allows it to run its course and meet its inevitable comeuppance. Choose the darkness, and you lose the light.

[1:29] I'm going to conclude this section of my letter by deliberately painting the bleakest possible picture of fallen human nature. Let's see what happens when the darkness takes over. The results are all around us:

- Injustice – corrupt lawcourts, inequality, disregard of basic human rights
 - Moral evil – exploitation, pornography, sex-slavery
 - Greed – selfish accumulation of wealth, ostentatious lifestyles, reckless possessiveness
 - Depravity – a complete lack of moral principles, with a positive intention to harm and corrupt one's victims
 - Jealousy – begrudging others the gifts God has given them, actively doing them down
 - Cold-blooded murder, assassination, holding life cheap
 - People stopping at nothing to put their rivals out of business
 - Lies, half-truths, deliberate deceit
 - Implacable hatred, unforgiving malice
 - Readiness to spread scandal and dish the dirt
 - [1:30] Saying one thing to a person's face and another behind their back
 - Viciously persecuting religious believers who hold the name of God precious
 - Inflicting wanton violence, physical aggression
 - Arrogance, 'might is right', squashing people like flies
 - Self-promotion, claiming credit for others' achievements
 - Finding fresh ways of inflicting harm or pain
 - Blatant disregard of parental discipline
 - [1:31] A failure to understand the other person's point of view, or deliberately distorting it
 - Making solemn promises then breaking them in the interests of expediency
 - Conscious suppression of humane principles
 - Stony-faced refusal to show any mercy whatsoever
- and that's only a random selection!

1:32 ³² Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practise them.

One-way road to judgment

[1:32] All this is not merely depressing, it's extremely serious. I began by talking about God's settled opposition to human rebellion. Now why hasn't God manifested his displeasure by blitzing the whole human race (as he got close to doing in Noah's time)? Or at least by heavily and obviously penalising individuals and societies which offend him (like Sodom and Gomorrah)?

Well, sometimes he does. The attitudes and actions I've been exemplifying all lead to disintegration of the personality and of any society which tolerates them, and occasionally this happens with lightning speed. But sometimes the process isn't so obvious. All the same, it's as much an expression of God's holy anger to let things take their inevitable course, as will be the final end-of-time denouement.

If we stopped to think for a moment, we would realise that what our consciences tell us is all too true: there's a price to pay for every choice we make. We live in a moral universe. Wrong turnings have a death-notice attached to them; they are a one-way road to judgment. Yet we blithely test God's patience to the limits: not only do we casually adopt aspects of these lifestyles ourselves, we even adulate the trend-setters who push the boundaries and reset the whole moral compass of society.

'Why make such a fuss? Everybody's doing it.' And the skies darken.

2:1-3¹ You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge another, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things. ² Now we know that God's judgment against those who do such things is based on truth. ³ So when you, a mere human being, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God's judgment?

'I am above all this'

[2:1] 'But hold on,' comes the reply. 'What you say is indisputably true of some specimens of humanity, but there are plenty of exceptions, and if I'm to be honest, I consider myself to be one of them.' It's interesting that once we start arranging people in a moral achievement order, we automatically place ourselves somewhere toward the top of the list. In fact, this is what you have just done. [2:2] But don't think you can dodge out of the divine searchlight quite so easily. If you accept that God as the Judge of all must punish evildoers (such as those above), then answer this little question: are you so squeaky-clean innocent? [2:3] I agree that my catalogue of human depravity is deliberately weighted toward the negative side – but are you really nowhere in its pages? Read verses 1:18-32 again – does none of that apply to you? (If it doesn't, you must be Jesus Christ himself.) And if at least some of it does, aren't you manifesting a peculiarly odious form of hypocrisy, condemning others for things you are guilty of yourself? Furthermore, aren't you risking God's rightful, and wrathful, judgment upon you?

2:4⁴ Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?

God's kindness isn't weakness

[2:4] 'But the God I have experienced is loving, good and kind – not the vindictive, angry God you are trying to get me to believe in.' Brother, think it possible that you may have misinterpreted the situation. Yes, of course – the whole history of God's dealings with humankind is characterised by sheer love and goodness, including a frankly unbelievable tolerance of twisted human nature. But why is this? Well, it's to get people everywhere to wake up and realise how wrong they were about what he's really like! He could so easily have scrapped the whole human experiment, failed the lot of us, and started over again. Particularly when we went and crucified his one and only Son. But he hasn't – he's given us a second chance, he's given us precious time to come to our senses and return home to our loving Father and the extravagant generosity of his grace toward us in Christ. If you make yourself the shining exception to all this folly and perversity, not only are you misreading the forbearance of God, but you are guilty of a spiritual pride that is even worse than the vices I have catalogued. You are arrogantly rejecting God's insistent word. In fact, you are clearly resisting the work of the Holy Spirit who is patiently trying to make you see your true

state in the eyes of God – before you get presented with it as a *fait accompli* when it's too late to do anything about it.

2:5-6 ⁵ *But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed.* ⁶ *God 'will repay each person according to what they have done.'*

Final reckoning

[2:5] Yes, I'm talking about the Day of Judgment. This isn't something that will happen to other people – we're all in it together. God is going to give everyone the rich reward their lives have deserved, and that includes you and me. I talked just now about God's extravagant generosity, and I'm going to major on that in a few paragraphs' time. But what if that 'rich reward' is something rather different? What if someone is so unresponsive to God's love, so unshakeably self-righteous, that they decide to carry on exactly as they are? Well, they may think their ship is unsinkable – but look where it's heading. Straight into the perfect storm!

[2:6] I'm going to repeat that phrase I used at the start of this whole section: 'the severe displeasure of God.' This is the sword of Damocles that hangs over every single one of us. You may think you've got beyond such antiquated ideas, but if God is 'for' righteousness, then he is also 'against' everything that's wrong and, ultimately, everyone who allies themselves with wrong. It's there time and again in the Scriptures, for instance when the Psalmist is celebrating God's power and love in one breath and his justice in the next: 'You, Lord, are utterly fair – you look at the whole of a person's life, and you repay them accordingly.'

God is both moral and personal, and as such he is capable of justifiable anger. Not like the irritability of an old gentleman who doesn't like naughty boys and girls, nor the impersonal sanction issued by a traffic warden; more like the deep grief of a rejected lover or a spurned parent. It is the completely deserved retribution enacted by a King whose subjects have thrown over his authority and put themselves under the sway of another lord, have signed on with an alien kingdom.

You may, when younger, have been teacher's pet, her blue-eyed boy who has got away with murder or worse. God, the Lord of time and eternity, isn't like that teacher. He doesn't have favourites.

2:7-9 ⁷ *To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honour and immortality, he will give eternal life.* ⁸ *But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger.* ⁹ *There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile;*

How have you lived?

[2:7] You may be a 'Jew', a member of God's own chosen race, or you may be a 'Gentile', born outside the charmed circle; no matter, you will be asked exactly the same question. What kind of life have you lived during your allotted time on earth? Have you actively helped and benefited the others you have come into contact with? I am not talking about the occasional good deed or act of charity, it's the settled intention, the regular drumbeat of the heart, the fundamental set of the character. That's what deserves the acclaim of heaven, the glories of immortality; these are the people for whom God is going to fling open the golden gates and invite to come and live for ever with him.

[2:8-9] Or have you loved no-one but yourself? Have you, if the truth be known, consistently and often ruthlessly served your number one interest, which is to aggrandize yourself and let others go hang? Has your policy been for the end to justify the means, even if it might involve deceit,

economy with the truth and a compromise with the dark forces of this world? Then I'm sorry, but the God who has all along been watching your life and hoping, longing for you to see the light and wake up to your true state, will deliver his final verdict: 'Not one of mine!' Your claims of privilege, background, respectability will fall on deaf ears. Your pleas for immunity from prosecution will be swept away. You are in deep trouble. And the self-righteous indignation you will feel will be nothing compared to the contempt and shame you will justly receive at the heavenly tribunal.

2:10-11 ¹⁰ *but glory, honour and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.* ¹¹ *For God does not show favouritism.*

Divine impartiality

[2:10] Your fate will stand in vivid contrast to the glorious welcome and undiluted approval given to those whose lives have counted for good in the old world. It stands to reason, doesn't it? Do troublemakers deserve to enjoy peace? Will evildoers receive plaudits for wrecking people's lives? [2:11] I repeat: God doesn't have any favourites. He is utterly impartial and even-handed towards everyone. Jew and Gentile, religious and pagan, civilised and savage, world leaders and nobodies, all receive the appropriate verdict on their lives. God isn't a soft touch. End of story.

2:12-13 ¹² *All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law.* ¹³ *For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous.*

Words and deeds

[2:12] 'Aha!' you say. 'Don't the Jews, don't those brought up with enlightened moral and religious principles, have an advantage over those who aren't?' Yes, and no. Yes, because not to be brought up under a code such as that of Moses means you have fewer safeguards against the spiritual and moral disintegration that leads to the final death of the soul. But if you do have a life-giving code, and then offend against its principles, that same code will be your judge, because you are expected to live up to it. [2:13] You may come week by week to the synagogue (or, for that matter, the local evangelical fellowship) and listen attentively to the scriptures being read – but that isn't going to make you perfect in God's sight. The only person who is going to bring a smile to his face is the one who both hears the saving word *and does what it says*. This should be perfectly obvious – in case it isn't, we'll come back to it in a moment.

2:14-15 ¹⁴ *(Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law.* ¹⁵ *They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing them and at other times even defending them.)*

The verdict of conscience

[2:14] Let's think about the 'Gentiles', since you have raised their case. I wouldn't assume that they are completely unenlightened savages. (They include some of the world's finest thinkers and philanthropists, by the way.) They may not possess the Deuteronomic system, which spells out the love of God and neighbour in such incredible breadth and detail; but they do have a natural sense of right and wrong. [2:15] They have that human characteristic we know as 'conscience', which is a built-in moral response mechanism. We all come equipped with a basic knowledge of the moral law, and this includes a kind of alarm bell which rings when we infringe its requirements. By the same token, it sings away happily when we follow its rules. I'm sure you know what I'm talking about.

Everyone draws the line somewhere when it comes to moral behaviour. People may draw it in different places, it's true, but there is universal agreement that a line has to be drawn, and it's a serious matter when that line is crossed.

2:16 ¹⁶ *This will take place on the day when God judges everyone's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares.*

Jesus the Judge

[2:16] You would expect, therefore, that God too has his standards, his line that must not be crossed. This is a key to what is going to happen on the final Day of Judgment. Incidentally, these aren't just my ideas, they are true to the whole witness of Scripture. For the good news of Jesus Christ to be really good news, the bad news has to be presented fully and faithfully. The prospect of universal judgment, and humanity's unfitness for it, has got to be bad news. Yet there's good news of a sort lurking within it, which is that everybody is going to be treated scrupulously fairly by God. He knows the secrets of our lives. He knows whether we have lived up to the light that we have. After all, he has a standard by which to judge humanity, and that is the human life of Jesus. As the Jews among you will know, it is the Messiah who is going to judge the nations. Well, Jesus is that Messiah – and you have heard enough stories about him to be familiar with his life and character.

'But what if one hasn't heard of Jesus?' As I said, everyone will be judged by the light they have. If you haven't heard of Jesus, you still have a conscience to live by. If you *have* heard of Jesus Christ, then you have his light to live up to. And the question is – have you?

2:17-20 ¹⁷ *Now you, if you call yourself a Jew; if you rely on the law and boast in God; ¹⁸ if you know his will and approve of what is superior because you are instructed by the law; ¹⁹ if you are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, ²⁰ an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of little children, because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth –*

Are Jews exempt?

[2:17] I am still concerned, you see, that you think being Jewish (or adhering to any religious system for that matter) somehow exempts you from the judgment that everyone else is going to have to undergo. It doesn't! In fact, it places you in the direct line of fire.

For the sake of argument, I'm going to assume that you are Jewish (not every reader of this letter will be, but I'm deliberately highlighting my people who are steeped in a centuries-old code of belief). You wear this badge with pride. You are totally committed to keeping the law of Moses. You believe unashamedly in the One True God. [2:18] You know all too well the kind of life he requires you to lead. You are a well-trained student of the Law and so you have an enviable discernment in theological and moral matters. [2:19] Consequently you justifiably believe yourself qualified to guide those who are groping towards the truth. You might compare yourself to a lighted window beckoning to a traveller lost deep in the forest. [2:20] You have a gift for maintaining a reasonable position in the face of wild and irrational opponents. You are able to put things simply and clearly for those who are young in their faith. This is all because the Law (meaning the Old Testament scriptures) gives you a wonderful compendium of knowledge and teaching about God. In short, it is God's own revealed truth, and you are his chosen interpreter.

2:21-24 ²¹ *you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal? ²² You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? ²³ You who boast in the law, do you dishonour God by breaking the law? ²⁴ As it is written: 'God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.'*

Practising what you preach

[2:21] All right then: you are qualified to teach others – but have you enrolled in your own class? You can deliver an impressive sermon on the commandment against stealing, for instance, but do you have a one hundred per cent record of personal honesty and integrity? [2:22] Or take the celebrated seventh commandment against adultery – do you really practise from the heart what you preach from the pulpit? On the Lord's Day you thunder against all forms of idolatry, greed, covetousness and materialism, yet there you are on the first day of the working week, not exactly robbing the bank, but pushing through hard-nosed financial deals or inflated expense claims, exploiting weaknesses in the system, cosying up to the important or attractive people. [2:23] Are you completely clear of these and similar charges? Are you clear of the most serious charge of all, that of hypocrisy – proudly claiming to embody the Law, yet denying it in your lifestyle? (I myself have faced, and failed, this searching examination, as I'll tell you in a few pages' time.)

[2:24] People professing the Jewish faith should be a witness to the rest of the world; but as the prophet has said, 'God is a dirty word, because you people of God have let him down'. I have to say that this can be true of professing Christians, too.

2:25-27 ²⁵ Circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you break the law, you have become as though you had not been circumcised. ²⁶ So then, if those who are not circumcised keep the law's requirements, will they not be regarded as though they were circumcised? ²⁷ The one who is not circumcised physically and yet obeys the law will condemn you who, even though you have the written code and circumcision, are a lawbreaker.

Wearing badges

[2:25] 'But hold on a moment! Are you saying that being a circumcised Jew (or for that matter a baptised Christian) doesn't automatically make one a member of the kingdom of God?' Well, of course wearing a badge is fine as long as one fulfils the rules of membership – but if one doesn't, one might as well throw the thing in the rubbish bin for all the good it does. [2:26] Take the case of the 'good Gentile' (or the 'nice non-Christian') – they may not belong to the club, but they fulfil all the club requirements, so are you going to debar them from membership? [2:27] Aren't they going to point out, very reasonably, that someone who exemplifies the club spirit but isn't allowed to wear the club tie is actually a better candidate than someone who flaunts the tie but breaks the rules?

2:28-29 ²⁸ A person is not a Jew who is one only outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. ²⁹ No, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a person's praise is not from other people, but from God.

Inner integrity

[2:28] It may seem a trivial illustration, but I'm making a serious, fundamental point here. There's a whole world of difference between external conformity and inner integrity. Jewishness goes deeper than a mere physical mark in the flesh. Being a member of God's kingdom isn't just a matter of going through certain rituals or ceremonies. [2:29] It is something that happens in the heart and affects the whole life, and this can't be achieved by simply going through the motions, wearing the right clothes or attending the proper functions. It can be achieved, in fact, only through the work of God's Spirit, transforming a person from the inside out. Here's the crunch question: do you live for the approval of the world around, or for the approval of your Lord and God? Who is going to accept or reject you at the Last Day – society on earth, or the company of heaven?

3:1-4¹ *What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision?*

² *Much in every way! First of all, the Jews have been entrusted with the very words of God.* ³ *What if some were unfaithful? Will their unfaithfulness nullify God's faithfulness?* ⁴ *Not at all! Let God be true, and every human being a liar. As it is written: 'So that you may be proved right when you speak and prevail when you judge.'*

God's consistency

[3:1] 'Oh come on – there must be some advantage in being Jewish, or getting baptised, otherwise what's the point of all this religious observance?' [3:2] Don't get me wrong – of course there is. Right from the start, it was to the Jews that God entrusted his revealed truth, his precious self-disclosure, so that they could spread the saving knowledge of him throughout the whole benighted world. [3:3] Their failure – or the failure of some of them – to keep this sacred trust doesn't invalidate the basic loving purpose of God. [3:4] God is going to carry out his declared intentions even if every human being in history plays him false – that's how utterly consistent he is! A well-known example of this is King David's terrible moral lapse and subsequent repentance: the adulterer and murderer deals directly with the God whose law he has ripped to shreds, and says in his heartfelt prayer of contrition: 'You're right and I'm wrong; your faithful word exposes the falsity of my life. I thought I, king of Israel, was the supreme arbiter of truth and justice, but now I realise that you are, something I should have known all along.' David let God down, yes – but God never lets himself down, and he never will. That's why he, and he alone, can judge the world.

3:5-8⁵ *But if our unrighteousness brings out God's righteousness more clearly, what shall we say? That God is unjust in bringing his wrath on us? (I am using a human argument.)* ⁶ *Certainly not! If that were so, how could God judge the world?* ⁷ *Someone might argue, 'If my falsehood enhances God's truthfulness and so increases his glory, why am I still condemned as a sinner?'* ⁸ *Why not say – as some slanderously claim that we say – 'Let us do evil that good may result?'* *Their condemnation is just!*

'So why not keep sinning?'

[3:5] A curious objection tends to find its voice here, and I want to hit it firmly on the head before going any further. It's a typical example of human wrongheadedness. 'If it's only by our sinning that God's supreme role of Judge of the whole earth can be seen in all its glory, why is he so angry with us? Surely our sin is a necessary part of his self-revelation?' [3:6] That is sheer twisted logic. For one thing, if God were not utterly true to his own nature, he would have to be judged himself, and he certainly wouldn't be fit to sit in judgment over the human race! No, sin is wholly abhorrent to him, and it is only by declaring his implacable opposition to it that he can express his fundamental character of holiness, goodness, justice and kindness. He loves everything good and hates everything evil. That's who God is. If you line up with evil by sinning, you become his enemy, full stop.

[3:7] And here's another thing. Let's look at that argument again: 'OK, I admit I'm a sinner, I'm a hypocrite, I'm as crooked as a corkscrew when judged alongside the straight and true path of God's law. But in a sense it is my sin that throws into sharp relief the straightness of the law – I get the shame and God gets the glory – so why can't we call it quits? Why the need for all this judgment and wrath and eternal punishment? In fact, doesn't God actually need me to sin, so that he can appear in all his goodness and holiness? Why doesn't he pat us sinners on the back?' [3:8] You can see where this is leading in all its magnificent illogicality: 'sin is an essential part of God's good purpose, so let's go ahead and sin as much as we can, so that God is glorified all the more.' You wouldn't believe it, but we apostles have been widely reported as preaching something like this! The media have an uncanny knack of getting hold of the wrong end of the stick, and I have to

say that they will be judged as strictly as anyone else if they allow such lies to masquerade as truth. Enough of that one!

3:9 ⁹ *What shall we conclude then? Do we have any advantage? Not at all! For we have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under the power of sin.*

At the front of the queue?

[3:9] Let's sum up. I have been trying to answer the question any Jew, any religious person would want to ask: 'Doesn't my religion in some sense put me ahead of others in the queue for God's favour?' Absolutely not – in fact, it puts me at the head of the queue for his condemnation. That is where the whole logic of the gospel is leading: the charge sheet for Jew and Gentile, religious and pagan, sacred and secular human being, is exactly the same for us all. We are failures as human beings, however hard we try; we are personally responsible, and we shall be called to account for it. That's the long and the short of it.

3:10-18 ¹⁰ *As it is written: 'There is no one righteous, not even one; ¹¹ there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God. ¹² All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.'* ¹³ *'Their throats are open graves; their tongues practise deceit.'* *'The poison of vipers is on their lips.'* ¹⁴ *'Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.'* ¹⁵ *'Their feet are swift to shed blood; ¹⁶ ruin and misery mark their ways, ¹⁷ and the way of peace they do not know.'* ¹⁸ *'There is no fear of God before their eyes.'*

Human nature: the witness of Scripture

[3:10] Once again I have to emphasise that these aren't my own private ideas. I'm going to quote a selection of texts from Scripture, not selected at random but summarising the whole sorry story of human iniquity and unfitness for fellowship with our holy God. I'm not arguing that it's true because Scripture says it; Scripture tells it how God sees it, and that's the reality.

- 'Show me one single person whose life matches the standard God requires! [3:11] Find me someone who is so deeply spiritual that they are in unbroken harmony with the mind of God and whose whole existence is dedicated to seeking and doing his holy will. [3:12] No – every single one of us has given up on God and gone our own way. All we deserve is the rubbish tip. Trawl the world for just one human being whose life rings true in every respect – you will come back with empty nets.' This isn't the Psalmist's mood on a bad day – it's the verdict of God himself as he surveys the history of this planet's inhabitants. None of us have ever been worth a moment's consideration, as far as solid goodness is concerned. Oh yes, all those wonderful biographies, those lives of the saints – but if God himself were to write them, how different they would be!
- [3:13] 'Trusting what they say is like walking blindfold through a cemetery of open tombs – every word is an innocently disguised mantrap.' David is speaking out of his own experience, but you won't find God disagreeing with him. We use words to deceive, manipulate, seduce and destroy.
- 'Talking to these people is like trying to kiss a cobra.' David again; and recalling the serpent's performance in the garden of Eden, one can see how cunningly disguised half-truths can lure a whole race to destruction.
- [3:14] 'Their mouths are like gargoyles spouting a continuous stream of filth and decaying matter.' We really are very nasty people indeed, and no amount of mouthwash can remove the decay that has infected, and continues to infect, our everyday conversation.
- [3:15-17] 'Give them the scent of blood and they'll make for it quicker than any shark; they wreck lives, they bring other people deep unhappiness; they are implacably opposed to

reconciliation and all they want is to trample everybody else into the dust.’ I’ve run a couple of texts together here to show the violent and destructive side of human nature which we see all around us every day. And don’t expect the world to improve with the passing of the centuries.

- [3:18] ‘Afraid of God’s judgment? You must be joking!’ My seventh and last text is again from the Psalms, and it sums up humankind’s attitude to the goodness and justice of our Creator God. We are so insolent, so infatuated with our own egos, that we can’t see God’s assessment of us, and we forge ahead regardless on the path of ultimate destruction.

In case you think I am enjoying this catalogue of evil, or indulging in a general hate campaign against humanity from a lofty moral pedestal, let me remind you that my own life has exhibited every single one of these traits – and I really thought God wanted me to be like this, which made my state even more hopeless!

3:19-20 ¹⁹ Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. ²⁰ Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God’s sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin.

Silence in court

[3:19] I hope you can see where all this is leading. Having a set of principles such as the Pentateuchal system isn’t an insurance against disaster – it exposes us to the full fury of the storm.

‘So we are damned if we do, and damned if we don’t. Whether someone is a deeply religious person like a Jew, or an ignorant heathen, makes not the slightest bit of difference. We will never make it into God’s favour.’ Yes! You’ve got it at last. It is completely useless to try to present ourselves as innocent before God’s court, rather than simply throwing ourselves on his mercy.

Let’s picture that scene which may seem far distant, but it’s coming all the same: everyone who has ever lived is going to be ushered into God’s presence. Oh, it’s true we have always been in his presence, our lives open to his gaze, but now there’s nowhere to hide, no darkness to escape to – all is blazing light. It won’t be like an ordinary lawcourt, where the defendants are allowed to present their case with all the eloquence available to them. Not a single mouth is going to open, not a syllable will be uttered in response to the charges as they are read out. Each person’s case will be fairly heard, but it will be heard in complete silence.

[3:20] ‘But surely there has been some good in my life? Won’t my good deeds be weighed against the bad?’ This is a common misconception. We are dealing with a God for whom the slightest taint of evil is eternal anathema. Not a wisp of wrong can exist in his presence – it would be instantly consumed. The Psalmist puts it beautifully: ‘The last thing I want, Lord, is for you to give me what my life record deserves. There is no one alive today (nor ever has been or ever will be) who can stand up under your scrutiny and be declared completely in the right.’

Look at it like this. The standard against which we are to be tested is the straight path of the law, the requirement that we love the Lord with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and our neighbour as ourselves. Deviate for a single second from that path, and you walk over the cliff edge.

The whole of humanity is in free fall, and judgment day is when it hits the ground. The hour of truth.

3:21-31 Grace – an offer anyone can accept

3:21-22a ²¹ *But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify.* ²² *This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.*

Taking God's way out

[3:21] And now, at the midnight hour of darkest despair, a light shines to lead us to safety. A rope snakes down to reach the prisoner trapped in the pit. Earlier on, at the end of the first section, I said that the solution to the human crisis lies not in what we can do to save ourselves, but what God himself has done. I have tried to demonstrate that no matter what efforts we make to be better human beings, be they ever so religious, moral, or spiritual, we can't pass the examination. What we need is 'righteousness', and we can't produce it by ourselves. (By 'righteousness', of course, I mean not a narrow religious piety or box-ticking conformity to external requirements, but the kind of life, 100% gold from the inside out, which measures up to God's own character of love, goodness, purity and truth.)

Well, hold your breath, everybody! God himself has provided this means of forgiveness, and it's out in the open for everyone to wake up and get hold of for themselves. It's arrived! Yet, if only we had eyes to see it, it's all over the Old Testament scriptures: in the Mosaic law, in the prophets, in the writings – even in Genesis. I'm going to devote the whole of the next chapter to demonstrating this.

[3:22a] Jesus is God's Messiah, God's very own Son, living the perfect life of God on earth, living as God intended us all to live. It isn't our 'righteousness' that passes all God's tests, it's Christ's. And God offers it to us, to have for ourselves!

So the only box we have to tick is this one:

- Do I rest my hope entirely on Jesus to get me accepted before God?

If you do, you join a great company of 'believers', people throughout history who, instead of dressing themselves in the garb of their own assumed goodness, have turned in desperation to God and asked him to clothe them in his.

3:22b-24 *There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.*

God's grace through Jesus Christ

[3:22b] 'Just hold on a minute! Are you saying that it doesn't make the slightest difference whether a person is religious or not?' Yes, that's exactly what I am saying, or rather what God is saying and has been saying all along. [3:23] Everyone, and that means everyone, has missed out on eternal life. God's original plan was that human beings should come through every test, every temptation, with flying colours, and so eat of the tree of life and join him in his heavenly glory. Well, temptation has got the better of us all, and we're banished – unless you are the shining exception? I will be saying a little more about Adam and the Fall; but let's get back to the wonderful news of what God has done for us all in Jesus.

I used to think I could earn my own right to heaven. If I had the right combination of impressive Jewish ancestry, scrupulous adherence to Levitical ritual and faultless performance of the Ten Commandments, the gates would swing open for me. I could, as it were, buy my way into God's eternal favour. Well, I can't, nor can anyone else. The only way I can get there is by God's sheer grace.

[3:24] 'Grace' isn't just a word, it's God's own pardoning love turning the key from his side of the door and letting us out of prison. We don't have to bribe the jailers, we don't have to satisfy the

authorities, we don't have to prove our own innocence. God is happy to let us go free, because his own Son has served our sentence for us. Every penny has been paid, every condition satisfied.

Yes, we were in free fall, but Jesus has fallen our fall for us. He hit the ground before we did, and now he catches us on his powerful wings and bears us aloft to triumphant and endless glory. There's grace for you!

3:25a ²⁵ *God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood – to be received by faith.*

What happened on the cross

[3:25a] Under the old law, God provided a place where his people could meet with him. It was called 'the seat of grace'. It was placed directly above the box containing the Ten Commandments. It was God's way of saying 'My mercy stands between you and my law; your sin is overlooked, which means that you can come into my holy presence.' This was, at best, a symbolic representation, and the box and its cover were lost centuries ago. No point in hunting for it – God has at last provided the real thing!

This is where the crucifixion comes in. As you know, a few years ago we and the Romans, representing 'humanity', hammered God's chosen King against two pieces of timber and watched him bleed to death. We executed him for crimes against God and the human race. The skies literally went pitch-black as the Lord's wrath was poured out on him. This was no play-acting or symbolic picture – it really happened. But at the same time God was doing something of crucial significance for us all. Jesus' cross became the 'seat of grace'. He stepped in between us and our sin so that we could come into God's holy presence, genuinely cleansed and forgiven. It is this provision of God that we are asked to take on trust. This is what having 'faith' means. It is receiving the free, unmerited favour of God, offered to us in Jesus Christ.

3:25b-26 *He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished – ²⁶ he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.*

The consistent justice of God

[3:25b] 'But surely God is supposed to judge sin? How can he possibly claim to be a just Judge, if he is prepared to let people off simply on the basis of faith?' Well, God's 'righteousness' is a key that turns two ways. Turn it one way, and it locks us into the prison of our own sin, and eventually kills us. Turn it the other way, however, and it unlocks us and sets us free. It is the same key, but it depends which way you turn it.

In past ages, God could have turned the key finally upon human sin, and ended us just like that. But he chose not to. [3:26] This demonstrates his wonderful patience and forbearance. Instead, he waited until the time when he would come himself in Jesus, take the full penalty of sin upon himself and so let us go free. Thus he remains completely just (he has after all punished sin finally and for ever), and he can declare us 'justified', fully acquitted, because in transferring our faith to Jesus we show that we have accepted his free offer. In a sense, indeed, we now possess God's own 'righteousness', because our faith unites us to Jesus – when God sees us, he sees his own perfect Son who never needed any forgiveness himself.

I have said 'yes' to Jesus; now I am his and he is mine.

3:27-28 ²⁷ Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. Because of what law? The law that requires works? No, because of the 'law' that requires faith. ²⁸ For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law.

The life that really counts

[3:27] If you think we can take any credit for this, think again! We locked our pride inside that stinking prison. 'But what happens to the religion we tried so hard to follow? Don't we still have to win the battle against the world, the flesh and the devil?' I just wonder if you've understood it yet. You can say goodbye to the old way of thinking. You have a new 'way', and it's called Jesus.

Remember that saying I quoted, 'Trusting him is the way to life'? This 'law' has been there all the time, telling us that the one thing we had to do was, not to struggle to lead a good life by our own moral willpower, or by our dutiful ritual observances, but to trust God to do it for us. We can't – he can.

[3:28] Here's the long and the short of it: do you want to be 'justified' before God? Do you want him to look at your life record, and to declare it entirely acceptable to him? Do you want the Lord of heaven to say, 'That's exactly the kind of person I would like living around me for evermore'? Then stop worrying about whether you're going make it to heaven or not. Trust him to do all that for you. The mainspring of your spiritual life, the life that really counts, isn't you, it's Jesus. Is that really so hard?

3:29-30 ²⁹ Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too, ³⁰ since there is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith.

No favourites

[3:29] 'I still have a problem. Surely all Scripture points to the fact that God has chosen the Jewish race to be his very own people, for time and for eternity? But you, Paul, are making two outrageous assertions: you are telling the Jews, with their proud and lofty heritage, that they don't qualify after all for the kingdom of heaven, and you are telling the ignorant and irreligious masses of Gentiles that they do qualify, and all on the grounds of faith!' Yes, that's exactly what I am doing. And, for the record, it's exactly what Jesus did too – look at what he said to the centurion, look at the parables of the Great Banquet and the Prodigal Son. It's what Peter found, too, when God sent him to Cornelius. God has no favourites. He wants everybody in his kingdom. By faith. This isn't some crazy new idea of mine - it's been there from the very beginning.

[3:30] Listen: what's the foundation truth of the Jewish faith, indeed of all monotheistic religion? 'God is one.' He's the only God, and he's the same God through and through. If he's prepared to let one group of human beings (Jews) share eternity with him, then why shouldn't he let another group (non-Jews) do the same? If he's going to make faith the criterion for one lot, why shouldn't he do it for the other lot too? Doesn't this stand to reason?

³¹ Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law.

The law abolished? (3:31)

[3:31] 'So you have finally declared the Mosaic law-code to be completely useless for salvation. You have abolished religion and morality, churchgoing and social respectability. You have set the bar at ground-level, so low that anyone can jump over it. In fact they don't even need to jump. They can stroll across it, right into the kingdom. I'm disgusted.' Well, that's where you are still missing the point. In fact, the bar is set so high that no-one, Jew nor Gentile, can possibly jump over it. Jew, Christian, Moslem, polytheist, animist, scientific atheist – we're all faced with a spiritual impossibility.

God's law of love is like a mountain-range barring our path, and on our own we're going to run out of oxygen before we've conquered even its lower slopes. But if Jesus is the air we breathe, if he is our friend and guide, we can walk on the hills of God with him. Our law is no longer what we must do for God; it's what God has done for us in Jesus.

4:1-25 Abraham – a faith-family all can join

4:1-3 ^{4:1} *What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, discovered in this matter? ² If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about – but not before God. ³ What does Scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.'*

What about Abraham?

[4:1] Let's see how this applies to probably the greatest spiritual mountaineer of all time; the man who stands at the head of the 'one God' systems of the world, who is the acknowledged father of the Jewish race: Abraham. Come with me to the pages of Genesis. We could be in for a surprise!

[4:2] You might think that Abraham made it into God's good books because his whole life measured up to God's standards. Look at the obedience he showed in leaving his home in Haran, in letting Lot have the best bit of territory, in laying Isaac on the altar. Surely he could take pride in those great achievements? Well, he might have done – but in God's sight he was as fallible as the rest of us. (In fact he achieved some spectacular failures, but let's not go into detail on those.)

[4:3] Have a look at the Genesis narrative. Note how early in the story this comes. The context is Abraham's continuing childlessness, which seemed to contradict the Lord's promise that he would nevertheless have a son of his own. God took him outside his tent and showed him the dazzling night sky, and told him to start counting the stars. 'That's how many your direct descendants are going to be.' Then what does it say? 'Abraham believed the word of God, and from that moment he was the friend of God; written indelibly against his name in the annals of heaven was the one word – "Yes!"'

4:4-5 ⁴ *Now to the one who works, wages are not credited as a gift but as an obligation. ⁵ However, to the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness.*

Debit or credit

[4:4-5] Here are two employees working for different masters. Employee A works for a stern and demanding owner called Torah. He busts his guts trying to earn his master's favour, and he gets paid on a *quid pro quo* basis – if his work's good, something goes into his bank account, but if he slackens off for even a moment, he doesn't get paid, in fact he goes into the red. But employee B's on a different contract entirely. His master's called Jesus, and he relies totally on his Master's goodness for any pay he is given. Of course he works just as hard as A, because he wants to please his master – but the whole atmosphere's completely different. Even if he makes a mess of things from time to time, he still gets enough and more to live on, because it's entirely up to his master's generosity and patient forbearance.

Employee A is bound to get into debt, because his master demands nothing less than 100% perfection. Employee B, on the other hand, can be relaxed about the amount he might owe, because his master has taken care of all that. That's the whole difference between Law and Grace. If you trust Christ to make up the deficit, however deep you plunge into the red, he has it sorted: in fact, with him your account's always in 100% credit. (If you think you can now go off and sin as much as you like, turn on a few pages.) Have you got the idea? You can choose the basis on which you want God to deal with you. It's either a debit basis, or a credit basis. A debit basis is calculated on what you owe and what is owed to you. You receive wages for what you do, or

what you don't do. (Remember that sin pays a wage too.) It's all carefully recorded in heavenly ledgers, and one day your life will be judged by those records. But if you accept God's offer of dealing with you on a credit basis, there's another ledger opened, which has 'Jesus' on the outside cover. Your name (just the name, no details) is entered there as soon as you put your trust in him. Jesus' credit with God, which of course is perfect, is credited to you. Nothing could be simpler – or more wonderful! But as I say, it's up to you which system you opt into.

4:6-8 ⁶ David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the one to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: ⁷ 'Blessed are those whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. ⁸ Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord will never count against them.'

David: a man forgiven

[4:6] Does all this make you deeply shocked? Then recall the unholy mess David got into. Let's look at his Song of Forgiveness. It's a Psalm of sheer relief, because it's by a man who deserves death for what he has done – instead, God hasn't chosen to look at David's murky deeds, but at his own promise of forgiveness. As the prophet Nathan said, 'The Lord has buried your sin where no one can get at it – you are not going to die, but live.' Result: utter joy! [4:7] This is celebrated in immortal words: 'Who is more grateful than a person whose appalling misdeeds have been forgiven, and whose repulsive offences have been covered under red carpets of welcoming grace! [4:8] Who is more blissful than someone who has this wonderful Lord erasing every sin from their account!'

4:9-12 ⁹ Is this blessedness only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? We have been saying that Abraham's faith was credited to him as righteousness. ¹⁰ Under what circumstances was it credited? Was it after he was circumcised, or before? It was not after, but before! ¹¹ And he received circumcision as a sign, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. So then, he is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness might be credited to them. ¹² And he is then also the father of the circumcised who not only are circumcised but who also follow in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.

Abraham the father of Jews and non-Jews

[4:9] 'Ah,' says someone who can't quite believe that God would do it like this. 'When Abraham's faith gained him acceptance in the eyes of heaven, he was already a faithful member of the covenant people of God.' [4:10-11] But he wasn't! If circumcision is the badge of God's covenant people, then at the time of that night-time visitation Abraham wasn't yet circumcised. In fact he got circumcised (this happens two chapters later) as an outward sign and honourable badge of the faith he had exercised before there was any talk of circumcision.

This has implications for both Jews and non-Jews. Take non-Jews first. It shows that they can claim Abraham as their father just as much as Jews can, because he is the prototype of all who put their trust in God without having been circumcised, i.e. those not yet within the covenant promises of God. Complete pagans can walk into the kingdom of heaven! (Not only did Jesus say this, but John the Baptist, 'the greatest of the prophets', taught it from the start; the story of Naaman shows this principle operating centuries before; in the book of Jonah pagan sailors and wicked Ninevites worship the Lord in awe and repentance; so I'm not inventing all this!)

[4:12] And, of course, Abraham is indeed the father of all true Jews, as long as you realise that it's not just an outward mark in the flesh that counts with God – there has got to be that faith-surrender, that all-or-nothing dependence on his promises, that characterised Abraham himself from the start. It's not dressing up in Abraham's boots that matters, it's following in his actual footsteps. The same argument applies to those who claim that being baptised as an infant, or even confirmed later in life, makes you a fully-fledged Christian. Faith isn't a box-ticking exercise, it's a personal response to God's call.

4:13-15 ¹³ *It was not through the law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith.* ¹⁴ *For if those who depend on the law are heirs, faith means nothing and the promise is worthless,* ¹⁵ *because the law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression.*

Conditional or unconditional?

[4:13] Let's be clear about this. The word of God comes to Abraham from the very start: 'You are going to inherit a blessing, and this blessing is going to travel on through all the generations of your descendants until it reaches the far corners of the earth.' It's as though God is saying, I'm giving you and your people the whole earth as your rightful possession. This is God's unshakable and irrevocable promise. Now – does this promise come in the context of law (in other words, is it conditional upon Abraham's observance of a set of rules), or in the context of faith (is it unconditional and all Abraham has to do is to accept it)? Well, of course, it's unconditional, and he steps out in faith in response to the promise, as he does to every subsequent word he hears from God.

[4:14-15] This doesn't mean Abraham was perfect, far from it – nor were his descendants perfect (you will remember the whole chequered history of the patriarchs). If they all had to attain squeaky-clean righteousness before they received the promise, no one would get any inheritance at all! In fact faith would be an empty word. Don't you see? If you operate on the basis of law, that is, having to keep all God's laws before you can receive his favour, sooner or later (probably sooner) you are going to sin, and sin immediately attracts God's displeasure, and then where are you? Instead of being friends with God, you become his enemy.

But take law out of the equation, and there is no question of sin, because sin is defined as breaking God's law. If there are no rules, you can't break them! Here are two friends. They are friends because they like and trust each other. Suppose one of them does something which displeases the other? The offended one isn't going to say, 'You have broken rule number 23, therefore we can't be friends any longer,' because rule 23 doesn't exist, yet. The offender simply apologises and they make up, and the friendship continues as before. The friendship isn't defined by rule-keeping, but by love.

4:16-17 ¹⁶ *Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring – not only to those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all.* ¹⁷ *As it is written: 'I have made you a father of many nations.' He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed – the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not.*

The wonder of grace

[4:16] 'Phew!' you say. 'That lets all kinds of things in!' Look – you haven't understood the wonder of grace. Grace, like true love, operates on a promise-and-trust basis, not on a law-and-performance one. God gives his gifts on the basis of what he can afford to give, not according to how good we've been. That's how God's blessing can travel from Abraham down through the

generations, including not only the children of Israel, who receive the fine training of the law of Moses, but also those who haven't had the benefit of any enlightened moral instruction. Everyone can have faith like Abraham's! [4:17] That's why the scripture calls him 'the father of many nations' (that's what the name Abraham means). Yes, faith lets all kinds of *people* in!

You have to realise that God's viewpoint is different from ours. We tend to judge people on what they do, and if someone does the wrong thing, they've blown it as far as we are concerned. God judges people on their faith-potential: how much grace are they capable of receiving? In fact, this is a resurrection God we have, because he is ceaselessly calling into existence things that didn't exist before, redeeming hopeless cases, making corpses stand up on their feet again. The deader a person is, the more life they can receive! This faith-and-resurrection principle travels through the whole history of the human race, starting with the creation and finishing with the new creation when faith will no longer be needed. And, of course, finding its high water-mark in the life of Jesus himself.

4:18-22 ¹⁸ *Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, 'So shall your offspring be.'* ¹⁹ *Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead – since he was about a hundred years old – and that Sarah's womb was also dead.* ²⁰ *Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God,* ²¹ *being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised.* ²² *This is why 'it was credited to him as righteousness.'*

Faith is God-logic

[4:18] Let's stay with Abraham for a final example. Some people say, 'Oh, according to you someone just has to believe for a moment and God pats them on the head and tells them they're saved for evermore.' Well, that may sometimes be the case – take the penitent thief on the cross. But the testing may go on for a whole lifetime. Abraham is given this promise early on, 'You're going to be the father of many nations,' and the vision of his offspring being like the stars, and this fierce hope is born in him – only to die away gradually as he and Sarah grew older and older and physically well past the normal age of child-bearing? [4:19] I mean to say, here is Abraham looking forward to his telegram from Pharaoh, and getting up every morning and looking in the mirror, and repeating the mantra 'So your descendants will be,' and he goes down to breakfast and dutifully kisses this wizened little future mother (who should have been a great-grandmother by now), and it seems such a hopeless charade! [4:20-21] Yet – yet – for him it isn't, *because God said it would happen*; and far from hope gradually dying away, his certainty actually grows stronger every day that passes.

Abraham was living on the oxygen of faith. This wasn't a vague aspiration, it was God-logic, firm as a rock, and it ran something like this: 'God made me a promise all those years ago; he doesn't change with the passing of time; there are no limits to his power; if he says he will do something, then he will; and the longer we have to wait for it, the more praise and wonder we will give him when it happens.' [4:22] Oh, I know his faith wasn't perfect, there are blips in the record, he was only human like the rest of us – but he hung in there. That's why there's a huge tick against Abraham's name in the annals of heaven. His faith wasn't a momentary blip – it was the mainspring of his whole existence. Ever since God took him out under the stars and said, 'Start counting,' it was non-negotiable.

4:23-24 ²³ *The words 'it was credited to him' were written not for him alone,* ²⁴ *but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness – for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead.*

One question

[4:23] Now what has all this got to do with you and me, living in a very different context, and frankly not experiencing very much in the way of direct words from God, or centenarians giving birth, or indeed anything that we could label 'miracle'? Oh, there's a miracle here all right, and it's hammering at our doors right now, and God's word is mint-fresh and designed exactly for us. This 'righteousness' can be ours! God gives us the same welcome he gave Abraham. Whoever we are, whatever creed we were brought up in, however impossible it seems that we could satisfy even the minimum requirements of a good life – if we can say 'yes' to just one question, he won't ask us any more, ever.

Here's the question: 'When someone's dead, they usually stay dead. Jesus died. Did he stay dead?'

Don't answer before you consider the implications. Like a father waking his little boy, God strode into just one cave-tomb that Easter morning and said, 'Get up, Son!' That means he, and he only, is Lord. Everyone's Lord, my Lord, your Lord. Do you accept this? Do you accept Jesus as your Lord?

4:25 ²⁵ *He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.*

Empty grave, clean record

[4:25] We've said quite a bit about the cross of Christ, and in a moment we are going to see how it solves the whole problematic business of our sin and rebellion against God. But just get hold of this.

The centre of our faith is a Person who died and rose again. It was we who offended God with our self-centred lives, but it was God who transferred the offence to his own Son and sent him to the death we deserved. Then, to prove that the penalty was paid in full, that the sacrifice was complete, that we would never ever have to do anything to achieve our own forgiveness, God presented Jesus alive again, Lord, Messiah, King.

The grave is empty. Not one sin remains unaccounted for. You may still not fully understand how God has done this, but do you accept it as true for you? Then you are 'justified'. Everything is right between you and God. Past, present, future – all wonderfully and mercifully scrubbed clean.

5:1-21 Peace with God – how the Cross has dealt with our past

5:1a ^{5:1a} *Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, ...*

Accepted on trust

[5:1a] So where have we got to? We are 'justified' once for all, totally and completely, no update or booster needed, as the result of 'faith'. This means that God accepts us as full members of his people, his kingdom-family, not on the basis of our life record, not because we have kept the rules and are clean inside and out, not because we are good Jews or exceptionally spiritual non-Jews – but because Jesus has died for us and risen again and we have unreservedly put our trust in him to set things right between us and God.

However, I need to make one point clear before we go on. Faith isn't some kind of impersonal transaction, like opening a bank account or signing a business contract. 'Faith', 'trust', 'commitment' – these aren't just words, they are life-responses which have huge implications for the kind of people we were and are going to be. We will need to explore this in depth.

5:1b-2 ^{1b} ...we have (or let us have) peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ² through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast (or let us boast) in the hope of the glory of God.

Present and future grace

[5:1b-2] Our whole relationship with God has changed, thanks to what Jesus our Lord has achieved for us. Instead of our previous surly resistance and pathetic desire for independence, we have a permanent peace treaty: no more hostilities, no more severed relations, no longer that uneasy conscience underneath the breezy self-assurance. Jesus has dismantled all the barriers. He has flung open the doors of the divine throne-room and invited us to walk right up to the Father and throw ourselves into his arms. Instead of being stopped at the gate and asked what we think we're doing here, we can come into God's very presence and bring our concerns to him, as often as we like. The whole atmosphere has changed from gloom to grace. The question is, have we accepted this peace offer from God? Have we appropriated this grace for ourselves?

We spent some time a couple of chapters ago exploring what this wonderful word 'grace' means. It is the solid rock under our feet of God's acceptance and love, a welcome we thought we had forfeited for ever, a treasure-store of blessing that can never begin to run short. We sing for the sheer relief of it! As we look into the future, we have an unquenchable optimism about all that is awaiting us: an inheritance that will make us billionaires, an unimaginable new world that will be so much better than this one, a full share in the eternal bliss of heaven. No credit to us – all credit to Christ. Peace, access, hope, glory. If we still can't believe it, it's because it's almost too good to be true.

5:3-4 ³ Not only so, but we also (or let us also) glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; ⁴ perseverance, character; and character, hope.

Determined to see it through

[5:3-4] 'All very well,' someone may be saying, 'but we haven't got there yet, and meanwhile we have to go through a whole lot of trials and tribulations as a result of being followers of Christ – how can we look forward to that?' Ah, but we can! Suffering may be our travelling companion, but it's not the name of our final destination. Do you remember our Lord Jesus telling us to 'rejoice and be glad when people persecute you'? This is because the rewards aren't just in the future, they're right here and now too. The experience of going through opposition, pain, difficulty for the sake of Christ makes us all the more determined to last it out and see it through. We're not going to cut and run. We're going to take the worst the devil can throw at us and be still there when it's over.

This is how Christian character is formed, after all. If you have it good the whole time you grow soft and flabby. 'When the going gets tough, the tough get going.' I've found this, in the countless toils I've been through as an apostle. The power I've had to draw on from Christ has kept me in the race even when I've felt beaten and exhausted. As the old me gets pummelled and trashed, the new me gets stronger every day. I've set my eyes on the final tape and I'm going to get there through hell and high water.

5:5 ⁵ And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

The love of God keeps me going

[5:5] This isn't just whistling in the dark to keep my spirits up. It's rock-solid assurance. We aren't going to be disappointed. Let me tell you a most precious and intimate secret. What keeps me

going, even in the worst times (and there are plenty), is the love of God. His everlasting love for me and my answering love for him. There's an unbreakable golden cord between us, the same love that bound Father and Son together even in the hour of greatest apparent abandonment. I haven't said much about the Holy Spirit (I'm deliberately keeping that for chapter 8) but here's a foretaste. The Spirit isn't just for special people but for everyone, and like forgiveness itself the Spirit is a free gift won for us by Christ and distributed unreservedly to all believers in him. The Spirit is like a deep, deep reservoir of God's love in my heart; like a well drilled hundreds of feet into the rock, which is fed by countless underground streams; like a mountain torrent sourced in the eternal snows, washing me clean, refreshing my powers, enabling me to love with God's own love. Who is this Spirit? Why, none other than Jesus himself in me, keeping me going, telling me I'm precious to him, whispering 'I'm here to save you.'

5:6-8 ⁶ You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. ⁸ But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

The depths of God's love

[5:6] The knowledge of God's love isn't just a comfortable feeling, though – it's rooted in the objective reality of the Cross of Christ. Let's think once again about what happened there. God's timing always perfectly meets humanity's crisis. We're not talking about a crisis in political or social or economic terms – nor as affecting particular groups such as Jews or Gentiles, Romans or Celts. No, it's the crisis of human nature and human destiny due to sin.

The Jewish Covenant was broken beyond hope of repair. Pagan religion was simply worldliness in disguise. Philosophy was at best self-improvement, at worst self-indulgence. So, having waited so long, God himself came among us as the Messiah of ancient expectation – and we strung him up, with a bit of help from our friends the Romans. That was the moment when we (that is, the human race) reached the lowest point of our spiritual history. [5:7] Now see this: when someone dies for someone else (which doesn't happen all that often!), they normally see some moral worth in the person they die for – when there's a good cause that requires self-sacrifice, people can show admirable courage in putting their lives on the line for it. But humanity was breaking every law in the book; we were scum in the eyes of heaven, fit only for the rubbish heap, meriting a tsunami of judgment like the people of Noah's day. [5:8] So what does God do? He says (in the person of his Son), 'I love these awful people so much that I'm going to die for them.' And if you think dying for someone simply means showing them an example of noble suffering, just revisit Isaiah's picture of the Servant who is personally bearing the iniquities of the whole people and going to his own ignominious death on their behalf. Jesus was and is the sin-offering demanded by the Law and prefigured by the repeated rituals of ancient Israel – but his self-offering on that cross was unique and unrepeatable, and it was all done for us, proudly maintaining our independence of God and our contempt of his eternal laws.

5:9-11 ⁹ Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! ¹⁰ For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! ¹¹ Not only is this so, but we also boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

All charges dropped

[5:9] 'So do you mean that everyone is saved and the Day of Judgment has been cancelled?' That's an important question, but I want you to think very carefully about the implications of the Cross. God's Son bled to death there under the weight of the world's sin. This isn't some kind of magic moment when God presses a button and hey presto! sin doesn't exist any more. God is a Person –

though of course much more than a single person because he is Love – and how we relate to him is crucial. We know, from Scripture, conscience and basic commonsense, that sin attracts his settled and total displeasure. On the Cross God visited all that displeasure on Christ, who exchanged his innocence and purity for our guilt and self-centredness. If we accept this astonishing generosity, which sets us right with God by a single stroke, then yes, we are saved from having to face any judgment for sin. But if we don't accept it, we will still have to explain ourselves before the awesome throne of the living God we have rejected.

Personal transaction

[5:10] This is because it's a personal transaction, not a piece of business or a conjuring trick. Hitherto God has been on one side and we've been on the other, ranged against him and yelling insults in his face. Now the love and tenderness of the Cross has won us over, as God sacrifices his own Son for us. We walk into his open arms, maybe with tears. Reconciled! All charges dropped! And furthermore, by doing this, we have escaped the embrace of death into a new life, because death is followed by resurrection, and we share in the very resurrection life of Jesus. [5:11] Yes, and we are possessed by a fierce joy in our new-found friendship with this amazing God, thanks to the self-giving of his Son, now our Saviour and King, who is the cause of our exultation, because we join in his triumph. I don't mind who hears this, nor what shame it may bring me in the eyes of an uncomprehending world: Christ died for people like me – helpless in the grip of sin, missing heaven by miles, shouting murderous defiance at my Lord – yet he rescued me from all this by his agonising self-sacrifice. Friends with God himself! I still can't quite believe it.

But we've got to receive it personally. That's God's way. If he has turned full face towards us, and that face is one of welcome and acceptance, why, we've got to turn full face towards him! He won't force himself upon us. If we choose to stand there, back turned, arms folded in defiance, then as far as we are concerned all that Christ has done has been in vain. Not to accept his friendship is to reject it. So – no, salvation is not automatic. There are no unwilling conscripts in the army of heaven.

5:12-14 ¹² *Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned –* ¹³ *To be sure, sin was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not charged against anyone's account where there is no law.* ¹⁴ *Nevertheless, death reigned from the time of Adam to the time of Moses, even over those who did not sin by breaking a command, as did Adam, who is a pattern of the one to come.*

Born dead

[5:12] 'Yes, I accept that. But by the same token, if I repent honestly and genuinely, and try as hard as I can to live a good life, surely God will accept me into heaven. Jesus' example is my guide, so I simply don't understand why all this atonement stuff is needed. In fact, all this talk about sin is hopelessly old-fashioned. People don't think like that any more.'

I don't think you realise the seriousness of the crisis, and consequently you don't appreciate the wonder of the solution. Sin brings death. I'm not talking primarily about physical death (though that may be a kind of judgment in itself) but about the spiritual death of total severance from God, the source of all life and light. All human beings are born dead, spiritually speaking. This is because we are born outside Eden. We are Adam's family. Adam was born inside Eden, he was a native of Paradise; but when he disobeyed the plain command of God, he (and Eve, of course) forfeited Paradise. So all his descendants were born outside Paradise, including us. It's not a question of just trying harder, or being sincere about repentance. It's like asking a dead man to help you with moving the furniture: he can't do anything, he's dead.

We all drowned in Adam

What we need is a new start to the human race. It's not a question of a bit of mouth-to-mouth resuscitation and the drowned person opens their eyes and gets up and joins in the beach volleyball. We all drowned in Adam. Or, if you like, his disobedience got into the bloodstream of the human race and we've all got this deadly virus. But the Adam and Eve story isn't biology, it's theology.

Our race was originally intended, under God, to populate and wisely rule the entire creation. That key phrase, 'under God,' shows how things could go wrong; and go wrong they did, because there was a disobedience, an exalting of self-will over the Creator's will, a deliberate and voluntary abandonment of a previously unsullied relationship. However it happened, and whoever did it, it is a solid fact of history, and we see the fall-out continuing to this day. This initial rejection of God's good will had two major consequences: no humans *could* qualify for eternal life with God (the rebel nature had become ingrained in us), and no humans *should* qualify (our very status had changed from sonship to bastardy). In theological jargon, the Fall incurred not only moral incapacity but penal liability.

I have written elsewhere that 'as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.' This isn't a statement of universal salvation – I hope my exposition of justification by faith has made that clear beyond contradiction. What we need is a new human race. Just as 'Adam' was the head of the old, discredited humanity, so Christ is the Head of the new, reconstituted humanity. I'll return to that in a moment.

Death penalty

[5:13-14] The penalty for stepping outside God's will is death, just as the penalty for drinking poison is being unable to breathe. It doesn't matter whether it says 'Poison' on the bottle or not, this is an inexorable rule. One day a great lawgiver called Moses would turn up and the rainbow spectrum of God's good will would be passed through a prism called the 'Law' (or Torah). Till then, specific acts such as murder, adultery, theft and so on were not labelled 'Sin', but they incurred death just the same, the ultimate death of moral and spiritual exclusion from God's holy and light-filled presence. Sin is always 'against God' – only with Moses is it defined in terms of 'against the law of God.' It's a small but crucial distinction. The relationship comes before the rule or the ritual. Mistrust fuels disobedience, not the other way round. Before Adam broke the rule, he had somehow been persuaded that God was not to be believed.

5:15-17 ¹⁵ *But the gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many!* ¹⁶ *Nor can the gift of God be compared with the result of one man's sin: the judgment followed one sin and brought condemnation, but the gift followed many trespasses and brought justification.* ¹⁷ *For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ!*

Adam and Christ contrasted

[5:15] I'm now going to show you how Adam and Christ both represent the human race, but in very different ways. Remember – we are all in here somewhere. There are several ways of looking at this contrast between Christ and Adam.

The killer and the Physician. Adam's fall from grace affected all subsequent members of the race. Once the leader has fallen off the cliff, he takes everyone else on the rope with him. Yes, everyone individually loses their balance one after another, but the downward drag is total and no-one escapes. With Christ, though, the leader hangs on and everyone is saved (don't press this illustration too far!). Or imagine that Adam contracted a death-dealing infection and this was

passed on genetically to every member of his family. By contrast, Christ's healing act and generous self-offering has released a life-giving elixir that is available free of charge to every single member of the human race. Two human beings – one the universal killer, the other the universal Physician.

[5:16] *Judgment and forgiveness.* Adam only had to sin once and the gift of life was withdrawn, the invitation to heaven torn up. One strike and he was out. That was the rule and it was fair enough. Since his moment of inglorious defiance, countless acts of God-rejection have taken place and sin has become the default mode of human behaviour. (This is not to discount all the virtuous acts that have also been done, but let's keep the line of argument clear.) Christ's act of counter-defiance, accepting all the wrong piled on him at the cross and coming through to glorious victory, has cancelled the evil of billions of transgressions. One act – judgment. Countless acts – forgiveness. Do you see how the cross makes all the difference?

[5:17] *Kingdom of death, King of life.* When Adam took the forbidden fruit, he thought he was opening the door to eternal life. In fact, who should come marching in but Death itself. Adam's single declaration of independence plunged all his descendants under the merciless domination of darkness. Instead of being free kings of the universe, they became slaves of a pretender-ruler whose only intention was to crush them under foot in his bid for divine supremacy. But see what happens when you open the door to the Lord Jesus Christ! In his train come cartloads of grace, treasure chests of spiritual wealth, wardrobes full of God-designed suits and dresses befitting the royal personage you have now incredibly become. In receiving the King we become royal family ourselves. And we haven't paid a penny of the eye-watering cost! Adam was the son of God and could have stayed that way, only he chucked his crown in the river and it's been lost ever since. The true Son of God proved worthy of his crown when he went through the river of death for us, and he confers it for life and eternity on all those, however insignificant, who crown him Master of their hearts.

Receiving isn't just a one-off act

Can I just emphasise one word here: 'receive', 'accept', 'take on board', whatever you prefer to call it. This is both a single act in the past ('we have received') and a continuing attitude in the present ('we keep receiving'). Whether or not we can name 'the day we first believed,' every new day is a fresh opportunity for taking on board barrel-loads of grace. You'll need it, if you are to run your patch of kingdom for him!

5:18-21 ¹⁸ *Consequently, just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people, so also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all people.* ¹⁹ *For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.* ²⁰ *The law was brought in so that the trespass might increase. But where sin increased, grace increased all the more,* ²¹ *so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

Our solidarity with Adam and Christ

[5:18] 'I'm finding this all a bit difficult to take in.' I don't blame you! I've spent long years thinking about these things myself. Let me go over the ground again, then.

Adam's single transgression, tragic error, crucial mistake, call it what you will, dumped all of us in the dungeon, as convicted criminals awaiting execution. Jesus Christ's single demonstration of perfect obedience (when he said in Gethsemane 'not my will but yours,' and went through the cross as a direct result) cleared our account completely and led us out into the sunshine, blinking at the wonder of it all. Adam led us into the waterless pit, Jesus pulled us out into freedom, life and hope.

[5:19] 'But how could one person's crime make the rest of us guilty?' You've got to understand the principle of solidarity. When the chief executive signs the deal, the whole company is committed to it. When the commander-in-chief crosses the Rubicon, the whole nation is involved in civil war. All the slaves are 'Spartacus'. Thus Adam 'represents' the entire line of his descendants. When the first man and woman broke that fruit off the tree (remember I'm speaking theologically), we all did it.

In exactly the same way, therefore, when Jesus died for sin on another tree, having no sin himself, we all died. In the next chapter I'm going to develop this magnificent and little-understood truth, and apply it to the way we deal with sin in our lives, our 'sanctification'. But first you need to get hold of it in relation to our 'justification'. Because Christ has gone through the whole process of death and judgment on our behalf, while remaining perfectly centred upon his Father's will, we who are united with him will never have to go through that process ourselves, though we have all been guilty of flagrant disobedience.

Law-breaking and grace

[5:20] 'I think I'm beginning to see this. But I still have a problem with what you said about the Law. Has it become obsolete? If so, why was it brought in at all?' Think of a typical example of human behaviour, like taking a short cut. Here's a nice piece of grass in the park which unfortunately provides a quick way from one area to another – so a few walkers use it and the grass gets spoilt. A notice goes up, 'Keep Off The Grass.' This clarifies where you should or should not go, but it also draws attention to the short cut, so that now more folk than ever head over the grass when they think the park keeper isn't looking. In chapter seven I'm going to develop this idea and show how the law is in itself absolutely right, but through the twistedness of human nature it generates more and more lawbreaking.

The point I'm trying to make, though, is that the grace of God in Jesus Christ deals with all this lawbreaking, and how it deals with it! For every ounce of sin there are ten tonnes of grace. You can drink the oceans dry sooner than you can diminish the depths of grace by a single inch. In my case this has proved wonderfully true; if it worked with me, be sure it can work with you. God not only wipes out sin, but creates new lives. Millions and millions of them.

Kingdom choices

[5:21] Here are two monarchs each ruling over a mighty kingdom. The first monarch is Sin. All his subjects are doing hard labour in his dark and dreadful mines, clad in rags and toiling till they drop dead. The other monarch is Grace, the invigorating sunshine of God's love, pouring freely and unstintingly from his treasure store opened up for us by Christ. Every subject in the kingdom of Grace walks free, clothed in robes that declare their princely status, enjoying a quality of life that gets better and better as time gives way to eternity.

So which race do you want to belong to – the Adam-race or the Christ-race? Which Lord will you bow to – sin or grace? Which future do you choose – death or life?

6:1-7:25 New life in Christ – understanding our old and new natures

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

Sin is poison

[6:1] 'Well, the logical consequence of what you're saying is that we should sin as much as we can, so that God can have all the more opportunities to show his glorious generosity in forgiving us.'

[6:2] I can't believe you're serious! It's like saying, 'Oh, I hear the scientists have discovered an infallible antidote to poison, so I'm going to drink as much poison as I can to publicise their genius.' Poison kills. So does sin. The glory of God's gift of his Son on the cross is that he drank the cup that by rights we should have been made to drink. Sin killed Jesus – your sin, my sin, the world's sin. My point about the abundance of God's grace is that it's more than enough to cover every sin that has ever been committed, past, present and future. This isn't a licence to cast off every restraint – it's a free pass to a new life altogether.

We are so warped that we dream up every excuse we can for tasting the forbidden fruit. We think, 'This is really living!' Well, can I remind you that when Adam tasted it, he died. And with him died the whole human race. You don't get more life by taking a swig of death every time you feel like it. The only way out of death is resurrection.

Baptism joins us to Christ

[6:3] That is the central point of baptism. Weren't you told this in your baptismal instruction? It's not just a boring rite you have to go through when you want to join the church. We are all baptised 'into' Christ. Baptism is a sign of what happens when we believe in, put our faith 'into' or 'onto' Christ. Just as you step 'into' the river or the baptismal pool, and become (for a moment) part of the water, like a drowned person, so when you take the step of faith 'into' Christ you become (permanently!) part of him. From now on his death is your death and his life is your life.

[6:4] We tend to think, 'Oh no! If I become a Christian I'm going to lose my old life, my real self.' You didn't have an old life. You died with Adam, and with Adam you stay dead because he hasn't any resurrection power. Your old self is a dead self. Your only hope of life, real living, is to get united with Christ. Then you travel with him through death, and burial – and resurrection! Just as our Lord Jesus woke up at the touch of God, like a small boy being woken up by his father, and emerged blinking into the sunshine of Easter Day, so all of us come up out of the waters of death to live Easter lives, to walk around free and unfettered, absolutely brand-new people.

6:5-7⁵ For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his. ⁶ For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin - ⁷ because anyone who has died has been set free from sin.

Seeds and plants

[6:5] This is so important that I'm going to repeat it in slightly different words. When you plant a seed in your flower-bed, you bury it in the earth; what happens down there is that the original seed dies, it doesn't stay seed any longer, it changes its nature and comes up as a flower possessing a stature, a beauty, a perfume, a glory that the old seed never had. Apply this to our union with Christ: when he died and was buried, we were buried with him – not exactly literally, of course, and there is a redemptive efficacy about his death that is unique – but then when he rose into new life, we too sprouted out of that earth as new 'plants', each with its distinctive scent and colour. This is what will happen in the final resurrection, incidentally, and that should keep us going in our present difficulties! But let's apply it to what has already happened on the Cross.

The day we all died

[6:6] In the drama that was played out on Calvary, we all had parts. You need to realise this, because I'm not just using a weird illustration – it's a description of the cosmic reality that was being enacted that day outside the city walls of Jerusalem. As the nails were hammered into Jesus'

body, they were hammered into the old Adam, the former human nature. The entire human race died that day in AD 33 or whenever it was. It was as though a convicted criminal called Sin received the final death penalty, and all those who had become fully paid-up members of his gang suffered the same fate. The week before, Sin had been as active as ever, organising revolution, handing out weapons, assigning tasks, encouraging all kinds of nefarious acts. Now he and all his followers are strung out along the highway, pinioned to pieces of timber and soon to be carrion for the crows. The revolution is over. No-one is going to obey Sin's orders any more; his empire is history.

[6:7] You, my friends, were once in Sin's crew, ready to do his slightest bidding. So was I. But he's dead and we're free – we've had the full punishment meted out to us, that volume of our personal history is closed, and a new life stretches ahead of us.

The debt is paid

We will never know the full horror of what Christ experienced that afternoon at Golgotha. But what we do know is this: he accepted the responsibility for, and endured the just penalty for, all the sins of the human race. When he died, the debt was paid, there is no more debt, there is nothing to pay, nix, nil, nada – we have had our fine (and far worse) paid for us! I'm using the language of justification which we employed earlier, but now it has an added force: not only has the judgment of sin taken place, but its power has been abolished, its reign is over.

6:8-11 ⁸ Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. ⁹ For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. ¹⁰ The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. ¹¹ In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Victims of a con-trick?

[6:8] 'So could you please explain why I still have so much trouble with sin, if it's dead and gone? Every day I wrestle with endless temptations and get overcome by a shameful proportion of them. How does this reflect the "spiritual reality" of what you say happened on Calvary?' Answer: you are still under the delusion that you have to deal with sin yourself. You are, quite simply, being conned. Your thought processes haven't been Christianised. You think you've put your faith in Christ, but when it comes down to it, you're still trusting yourself. Or no-one.

[6:9] At the risk of being utterly boring, I'll go over that ground just once more. You and I shared Christ's death that day on the Cross. (I'm not inventing this, because Jesus taught it himself; nor am I just using symbolic language or a parable, because there are deep principles of life and death operating here.) By putting our trust in him as our Lord, we enter by faith into everything God was doing that weekend. He was saving the world, and the only way to save the world is to preempt its judgment by judging it there and then in the person of his Son.

But you don't save the world by killing it and then leaving it dead. You save it by giving it eternal life. So just as we shared Christ's death, so we shared and share and will share his resurrection to new life.

Echoes from the grave

[6:10] 'That didn't really happen, it's just what we believe.' No, we believe it because we know it to be true. Faith isn't trying to make something true by imagining it, it's accepting something as true and then finding it really is! There's a relentless logic at work in the events of Good Friday and Easter Day. God is finishing off death once and for all, by going through it in the human person of his Son and coming out the other side into the sunshine of timeless life. Death won round 1 (physical agony, loss of blood, heart rupture, organic collapse) and round 2 (judgment for sin, holy rejection, severance from God, consignment to darkness) but it didn't win the fight,

because it was knocked out cold in round 3 (sin paid for, all barriers demolished, the curse of Eden reversed, eternal life restored). God put Jesus back where he belonged, as Prince of life and peace and glory. He walked out of the tomb that Sunday morning and said 'Good morning' to some tearful women and the old world was finished. Death's reign as supreme heavyweight was over – there's a new Champion!

[6:11] So if sin and death are dead and Christ is King, what's the logical consequence? He's King of your life and sin and death aren't, not any more! You're a new person, with the past dealt with and life stretching endlessly ahead, all because you have said 'Yes' to Christ. You could never have dealt with your sin, but he has. So – trust him to deal with it when it seems to clamour for attention. Those are only echoes from the grave.

6:12-14 ¹² *Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires.* ¹³ *Do not offer any part of yourself to sin as an instrument of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer every part of yourself to him as an instrument of righteousness.* ¹⁴ *For sin shall no longer be your master, because you are not under the law, but under grace.*

Faith isn't just a passive experience

[6:12] 'So if I understand you rightly, Christ will deal with the sinful tendencies I still find in myself, and I mustn't try to do anything but instead remain entirely passive?' Not quite – the life of faith isn't a 'passive' existence and I'm sure you know that. In fact, it can be a desperate struggle. Take the time when you heard the story of what Christ had done for you and you were invited to put your trust in him. I suspect for many of us it wasn't easy to do this. For one thing, we needed time to understand who Jesus was and how he really had risen from the dead. For another, there was the cost to consider, not least what would be involved in crowning Jesus Lord of my life and having nothing more to do with self and its obsessive cravings. But eventually we accepted Christ, as a major step of faith. Faith isn't a passive experience, it's an active transaction involving heart and soul and mind and will, and probably a fair amount of emotion too.

The daily battle

[6:13] But the initial step of faith doesn't mean the end of the battle; in fact the smoke of battle intensifies! You are right about the very real tendencies we all have to go back to the old life, centred on self, out for all it can get and strongly resisting the call of God. This will last as long as we have mortal bodies. The battle is the issue of obedience. We can either be at peace with God and at war with sin, or at war with God and at peace with sin. There is no intermediate state and everything depends on which King we consciously and willingly submit to. We can either tell our former master, Sin, 'Here are the members of my body and I willingly offer them to you for the resistance movement against the kingdom of God' – or we can tell our new Master, the Lord Jesus Christ, 'My body, and all that I am, are now yours, because you have brought me through death and into a new resurrection life – so please take them for the service of the kingdom, to fight for the honour of your name as long as I am in this world.' This is both a one-and-for-all decision, and a daily attitude. It doesn't depend on how we happen to feel on any given day, but on what sort of people we are determined to be.

The bottom line

[6:14] Because the bottom line is this. 'Sin isn't going to order me around any longer.' This is both a firm promise from God, signed with his Son's blood; and a settled attitude of your new Christ-filled personality. Please realise this: you aren't being asked to keep a set of rules by the sheer effort of your own willpower (that brought us nothing but grief, as I'm sure you would agree) – but to open your heart to someone who loved you enough to die for you, and who lives within you to do all the things you can't do by yourself. In short, you aren't living under the rulerhood of rules any more – you are living under the graciousness of grace.

6:15-18 ¹⁵ *What then? Shall we sin because we are not under the law but under grace? By no means!* ¹⁶ *Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one you obey – whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness?* ¹⁷ *But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you have come to obey from your heart the pattern of teaching that has now claimed your allegiance.* ¹⁸ *You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.*

Whose slaves?

[6:15] 'So it's all right if I go on sinning, because I don't have to obey the rules any longer, and every time I go off the rails the hand of Grace will pick me up and put me back on them again.' Er – not quite. I see I'm going to have to devote quite a lot of time (chapters 7-8) to explaining about the two natures that coexist within a person once they've become a Christian. But first let's use a simple illustration.

[6:16] All of us are familiar with the idea of 'slavery'. I'm not condoning the institution of slavery, I'm just using it to shed light on spiritual realities. If you enter (or are forced into) someone's service, you have to do what they require. If you enter the service of Sin, you work for the empire of the Death-lord and finally end up dead yourself. If you enter the service of the Lord Jesus, you commit yourself to work for the kingdom of goodness, justice and compassion.

[6:17] I am so grateful to the God of grace that though I myself once worked in the chain-gangs of Sin, I met Christ Jesus and fell in love with him and since that moment I have always gone to him for my instructions. This is the foundation on which all my teaching is based, which I am passing on to you, and which I expect you to pass on in your turn! In fact your life depends on this teaching (not on having a Damascus road experience, incidentally). [6:18] Quite simply, you have been released from the service of Sin, and have become heart-slaves to Incarnate goodness. The brand-mark on your forehead isn't the 'S' of sin and self and Satan, it's the 'J' of Jesus and justification. And joy.

6:19-21 ¹⁹ *I am using an example from everyday life because of your human limitations. Just as you used to offer yourselves as slaves to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer yourselves as slaves to righteousness leading to holiness.* ²⁰ *When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness.* ²¹ *What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death!*

Unconditional obedience

[6:19] I hope you don't mind my using a familiar human situation to illustrate these vital truths. We tend to prefer picture-language to abstract thought (because it's such hard work!) but inevitably all analogies have their limitations. Anyway, I'm going to milk the 'slavery' idea a little bit further, because I want to end this chapter with a direct challenge.

Before you accepted Jesus as your Master, you capitulated to every temptation that came along. Whether it was the demands of lust, or greed, or dishonesty, or deceit, no matter how illegal or immoral it was, you were all too ready for your mind and body to be at the service of what you knew basically to be wrong. I'm using black-and-white categories, of course, but don't try to wriggle out by pleading virtuous exceptions to this general rule. When the pirate ship ran up the skull and crossbones, you were on board as one of the crew; when the pirate chief said 'Follow me,' you said 'Aye aye, sir!'

The challenge is, are you prepared to give the same unconditional obedience and loyalty to the Just and Holy One? Will you yield your body and mind to Christ? Will you crown him Lord over every activity of your life today? When Jesus says 'Follow me,' will you not only say 'Aye aye,

sir!' but actually drop everything and do it? Or are you still 'um'ming and 'er'ring and messing around?

Think back to your old life

[6:20] All right then, cast your mind back to the time when you were quite happily at the beck and call of sin. Your conscience was untroubled by any requirements to treat everybody with justice and compassion. (I haven't met any of you, so please don't think I'm getting personal; for all I know, you are and always have been the saintliest lot of people ever to walk the streets of Rome! But from what I understand of the streets of Rome, you won't find them full of nice unselfish pagans.) [6:21] Let me ask this: what kind of life did you lead as a result of these old attitudes? What crop did your orchard produce? Was it the good, ripe, tasty, satisfying fruit of love, joy, peace, goodness and so on, or the ugly and corrupt fruit of pride, jealousy, malice, temper tantrums and grosser habits like sensuality and drunken orgies? And are you ashamed of all that now? Yes? And what was waiting for you at the end of the road? The loss of God, the end of hope, the restless wind blowing dead leaves over your grave.

6:22-23 ²² *But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life.* ²³ *For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Choose whom you will serve

[6:22] But you aren't in Sin's employment any longer! You aren't a galley-slave of the enemy, toiling away under decks, chained to your bench, doomed to a ghastly death if the rebel enterprise should fail, as it is bound to fail. You have changed Masters. You belong heart and soul to God and his Son Jesus Christ, and what a difference that makes! It doesn't feel like slavery at all, and in fact it isn't – you are free to walk with your head held high, a true-born child of a noble family, with hugely different ends in view. Your daily work and your life's ambition are now centred on that rare and precious thing, holiness – by which I mean not a self-generated piety that is only another version of the secret pride of the human soul, but a transparent openness to the Spirit of God, a purity of motive and intention that cuts through the compromise and hypocrisy of the world around. Yes, and your horizon isn't bounded any more by this old world, where the road breaks off at the cliff edge and the sea laps hungrily at the rocks hundreds of feet below. You are in line for an inheritance that is from everlasting to everlasting, a life that comes from before time and that stretches to infinity, in a new creation that will never lose its primal freshness, its dawn wonder.

[6:23] Make no mistake – each way has its appointed destiny. Choose the service of Sin, and you reap one kind of reward; you might have hoped for rich pickings from your old life of illicit adventure, but the coffers are empty and the prospects are nil – all the future holds is the horror of an unmasking that will bring you utter shame and permanent disintegration. But choose the service of the Lord of love, and you will find yourself showered with presents, all with your name on them, all paid for, all of solid and lasting value – and best of all, you will walk secure in the company of your Master Jesus, who left eternity to find you in time and to bring you home rejoicing.

7:1-3 ¹ *Do you not know, brothers and sisters – for I am speaking to those who know the law – that the law has authority over someone only as long as that person lives?* ² *For example, by law a married woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive, but if her husband dies, she is released from the law that binds her to him.* ³ *So then, if she has sexual relations with another man while her husband is still alive, she is called an adulteress. But if her husband dies, she is released from that law and is not an adulteress if she marries another man.*

When a marriage is over

[7:1] You may be getting tired of all this master and slave stuff, so I'm going to give you another analogy that may be closer to home: marriage. Whether your background is Roman or Jewish, you have been very thoroughly trained in the law. Now law is binding on a person – any person – only as long as they are actually living. Once they die, they are no longer under an obligation to do what the law requires. The law has no authority over a dead person. In a word, death terminates the power of law. You may think this is pretty obvious, but stay with me while we think about the implications.

[7:2] For instance, in our law a married woman is legally under the authority of her husband as long as he is alive. Once he dies, however, the legal power of the husband ceases to exist. The woman is unbound from the requirement to obey him. He can't tell her any longer to get breakfast for him, go shopping, have supper waiting for him when he comes home from work, and satisfy his every demand however unreasonable. (I know you emancipated Roman women got all this sorted long ago, so forgive me for talking in stereotypes.) [7:3] If she enters a liaison with the hunk next door while her own husband is still alive (even if he's more of a monster than a man, and even if he's blind, deaf and incontinent) the law is perfectly clear: she has been technically unfaithful, and she will be publicly placarded as an adulteress. But once her wretched husband has died, and the last clod of earth has been thrown on his grave, whoopee! She's free! She can go off and find a new boyfriend without the law police knocking at the door. (That doesn't mean she won't be hounded by the media, but that's another matter.) Death terminates the power of law – that's the rule.

7:4-6 ⁴ So, my brothers and sisters, you also died to the law through the body of Christ, that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit for God. ⁵ For when we were in the realm of the flesh, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in us, so that we bore fruit for death. ⁶ But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code.

Your death with Christ

[7:4] Now let's apply that to our situation as citizens of heaven. Let's imagine that you are married not to a human spouse, but to the Law itself. This partner makes endless demands upon you: if you're not absolutely perfect, it criticises and grumbles and makes your life a misery. You end up feeling thoroughly guilty and ashamed of yourself – but nothing you can do can satisfy this inexorable life-companion. Then one day, worn out by all this torment, you die – and all the nagging and abuse and nit-picking stops as if by magic! In the grave you are at peace.

Do you see the point? While you are alive on this earth, the Torah (if you are Jewish) or the universal law of morality (if you are Roman or Greek) ceaselessly nags at you, and even if you're a thoroughgoing hedonist or impenitent atheist, there is still the knowledge, the indelible basic awareness, that you are responsible for the way you conduct your life and that one day it could catch up with you. But then you hear about Christ, and you put your faith in him, and a strange and amazing thing happens. You die. As surely as Jesus died physically upon the cross, you too get put to death, by virtue of your being united to him by faith. (Faith isn't just a subjective thing like a taste for anchovies, it's a contractual arrangement that has objective and binding force.) You and the Lord Jesus are one, one in death and – wonder of wonders! – one in new life. Because just as surely as Jesus came back from the dead twenty, two hundred or two thousand years ago, all who believe in him (remember 'in' means 'into') join him in his resurrection existence. Wow! Like an old, dead tree in an orchard, you have been cut down and put in the logpile; in your place a new tree has sprung up with the sap of Jesus Christ flowing through it by the Spirit, and it's now busy producing all kinds of delicious fruit for the owner of the orchard, the Lord of creation, not only to enjoy himself but to offer free of charge to the queues of beggars at the gates.

Death terminates relationship

[7:5] 'Wait a moment. You've got me confused. One moment you're talking about a husband dying so his wife is free, the next it's me dying so I'm free.' Yes, sorry, I've often been accused of shifting to the next image before I've finished with the last. All analogies are provisional and you can only exploit them so far. The thing is to get hold of the principle. Death terminates relationship. When I die with Christ, my old relationship with the law is finished. An entirely new relationship has taken its place. I'm now married to Christ, not to the law. Do you see?

The central question of human nature

I'm not indulging in some high flight of fancy, as you will see clearly in a moment. I'm actually grappling with the central question of human nature and how we relate to it once we're new people in Christ. Let me take you back to the time when you didn't believe in Christ. You were one hundred per cent under the direction and control of your Adam-nature. I'm not saying you weren't capable of good deeds and intentions, because Adam was made in the image of God and that image is bound to outcrop in places, however scarred it is by sin. In fact, as I'm going to show, the God-nature in you was yearning to do the will of God and stick to his rules. But you were trapped, because the more you set out to obey God (in your better moments), the more you failed. It was like Tantalus reaching out for the lifegiving grapes and finding them just out of reach; the higher he leapt for the branch, the harder he came down again. Our Adam-inherited bodies are sin factories, processing goods for the master Death.

I'm cautious about giving concrete examples of this, but you have only to look at the daily papers and you'll see what I mean. Side by side on the same page are stern denunciations of extra-marital affairs and titillating depictions of female (or male) seductiveness. No-one can breathe this atmosphere for very long before being rendered incapable. Or if you think I'm sex-obsessed, turn the page and you'll find highly principled members of society in the dock for dipping their hand in the till. The more powerful a person becomes, it seems, the more they think they can get away with anything. The fact is, no-one is above the law, and it gets you in the end. And the media, those uncanny mirrors of the state of the human mind and heart, act as detective, police, judge, jury, executioner – and tempter. 'He or she didn't get away with it – but you can!'

Religious pride

Yes, we're all trapped, but let me tell you something else. Religious people are the prisoners par excellence. They are trapped in a relentless web spun by spiritual pride. They think they are exceptions to the general rule of human fallenness. After all, they are following God's law, they're good people, they're his favourites, they're on their way to heaven! (I know – I was one of them.) And, as with Tantalus, heaven retreats as they reach for it. They're slaves of the law and proud of it – but that same law is a will-o'-the-wisp, leading them ever deeper into the swamps of self-conceit and self-delusion. And they end up being condemned by the very law of love they have proclaimed so confidently. 'Love the Lord your God, and your neighbour as yourself!' 'Have you?' And, too late, they realise they haven't got anywhere near it. Finis.

[7:6] What a relief, then, to escape from this relationship with the law, this living death! If we've come to Jesus, and collapsed in utter exhaustion at his feet (whether pursued by the angels of holiness or the demons of the flesh), then we're free. Jesus saves me now. I've got a new Master, and instead of facing a blank wall of rock in my solo mountain climb, I've got a Guide who will take me all the way to the top, with the views getting better and better all the time. He gives the personal direction, and the resources of energy, and the exhilarating joy, and above all the companionship, that the old self-guided system could never deliver. (I'm talking about the Holy Spirit, but you'll have to wait till chapter 8 for more about that.)

7:7-11 ⁷ What shall we say, then? Is the law sinful? Certainly not! Nevertheless, I would not have known what sin was had it not been for the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet.' ⁸ But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of coveting. For apart from the law, sin was dead. ⁹ Once I was alive apart from the law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died. ¹⁰ I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death. ¹¹ For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death.

Human nature

[7:7] 'So the law, the Torah, the lofty moral law, the rule-book of God delivered by angels – it's really the devil in disguise!' Not so. God is good, his revealed will is good, the law is good. The problem lies with human nature, and I see I need to explain this from my own personal history. I'm going to describe the tension I used to find myself in, and (if I'm to be honest) still do find myself in. I hope it may throw light on what we experience as true believers in Christ.

What I'm going to describe is the universal human situation. It began, in fact, in the Garden of Eden (as I explained earlier), and what happened then stands as a paradigm for the subsequent spiritual history of Adam's race. It wasn't just Eve who took the forbidden fruit, it was all of us. So I'm going to cast this account in the first person: when I say 'I', I mean Everyman and Everywoman.

The first perfectly obvious point is that if there are no rules, I can't break them! I am free to do anything I like. But as soon as God places a limitation on my behaviour (and this includes intentions as well as actual deeds), then disobedience becomes an option. If God says, 'Don't even think about taking fruit off that particular tree,' and I start thinking about it, entertaining the idea, running a 'let's suppose' scenario, reaching the point of asking myself 'Why not?', I'm done for. In fact I was done for as soon as the process started. I'm not saying that as soon as we are tempted, we've committed sin, because clearly temptation can and should be resisted – that's why we can talk about human responsibility and free will – what I'm saying is that sin starts in the heart before it reaches the hands (Jesus made the same point). That's the whole point of that awkward Tenth Commandment, after all: 'Don't even want the forbidden thing.' Because as soon as you do, you're on the slippery slope.

Crossing boundaries

[7:8-9] 'So are you saying that God's command actually caused Adam to sin? Why then did God give the command in the first place?' No – what I'm trying to get at is this curious propensity we find in ourselves to do precisely what we're told not to do. It's almost as if the one thing we mustn't do exercises a hypnotic fascination for us. The limitation on our choice makes us determined to see if we can overstep that limitation. Take an example I used earlier: the notice 'Don't walk on the grass' makes us ask 'Why?', and this turns so easily into 'Why not?' – so we have a quick look round, see if the park keeper is watching, and tiptoe across the forbidden turf. We get a kick out of this, as though we have proved that the limitation doesn't apply to us, we are some kind of gods above the law, and anyway, it gives us a buzz. Then, halfway across, along comes the park keeper and says 'Hey!' and slaps a hefty fine on us. Out goes the fun, in come guilt, shame and confusion. We feel angry with the keeper, the system, and most of all with ourselves. We look round for someone else to blame, maybe our friends who should have stopped us. And so on.

Except that the ego trip the human race first took and is still taking is so very much more serious than just walking across a stupid bit of grass. God had his own very good reasons for circumscribing human free will, and it was all to do with eternal life and a trusting relationship and innocence maturing into holiness. Once the boundary had been crossed, however, all that

went out of the window. Once I said 'No!' to God in one single respect, I wanted to do it in every other respect. In short, I wanted God out of my life altogether.

Testing and temptation

[7:10] It's true, of course, that if God hadn't issued a command in the first place, I wouldn't have had the option to sin. There wouldn't have been any wrong path to take. This I take to have been the 'innocence' of Adam and Eve, as God led them dancing through the garden of Paradise in the dawn of the human day, endlessly exploring, endlessly delighting. But sooner or later God had to bring them to the glade where one particular tree grew, the tree with the double trunk that could bear fruit either for life or for death. Refrain from its fruit until God decides that the time is right, and the eternal inheritance is theirs, the fulness of the world to come, timeless royalty and divinity. Take the fruit, and they taste evil for the first time, the poison that will surely kill them and all their descendants, a life that is no life because it is divorced from the God of life. Know and trust God, and you live; know and follow evil, and you die – it is as simple as that, it happened once and it has been happening ever since. Sin became incarnate reality, enfleshed in humanity.

[7:11] How could I have been such a fool? I knew the right, and I chose the wrong. It wasn't the possibility of choice that caused me to do that, it was a false trail of reasoning that fastened my desire on the one thing I must not desire. I suppose I confused the test and the temptation. The test said, wait until it is time to have it; the temptation said, have it now. In that sense, as soon as there was a choice, a command to obey or not to obey, there was the potential for sin; but it was still external to me. Once I listened to the voice of wrong and followed where it beckoned, the evil became part of my nature – and inevitably that meant death.

7:12-13 ¹² So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good. ¹³ Did that which is good, then, become death to me? By no means! Nevertheless, in order that sin might be recognized as sin, it used what is good to bring about my death, so that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful.

Is the Law itself evil?

[7:12-13] 'So what you're saying is that God's will, as expressed in concrete law and commandment, is as pure and straight and good as he is himself – yet it kills you? How can what is so good for you be so bad for you?'

I am not saying, never have said, and couldn't possibly say, that the law is evil. But I agree it needs explaining carefully, otherwise my whole gospel is in danger of being misunderstood. In fact, the explosive force of the good news depends on the holiness of the law. Remember, the law (both the original command to Adam, and the Mosaic code enshrined in Torah) is the revealed and explicit will of God. If God had not spoken, we would know nothing about his will and there would be no possibility of obedience or disobedience. Once there is the option of disobedience, sin can rear its ugly head. Sin kills, but first it deceives. The way it works is like this: it takes the revealed will of God, the holy law intended for our good and our delight, and subtly twists it. This happened to Adam and Eve, it happens to Everyman and Everywoman, it has happened ever so surely to you and me. (Oh yes, it happened to me, and still does!)

Sin twists God's commands

Here we see the devilish and destructive nature of sin, its diabolical cunning that seems to proceed from an outside agency of evil. It slithers up to this good and beautiful creation of God, the wonderful guidance he gives us day by day, then twines itself around it and ever so slightly puts a spin on it. 'God does indeed want you to be good, so that you can become like him and live for ever. What he hasn't told you, though, is that in order to know good you must know evil as well. Otherwise (and this is what God really wants, because his apparent generosity is a stratagem for

preventing you from growing up) you remain obedient little slaves of good, never reaching your full stature as human beings. Instead of blindly trusting him, therefore, you ought to be finding your own way, making your own decisions, becoming wise in your own right, not just following a wisdom laid down by someone else.' Now you see the full devilish nature of sin! It isn't just a harmless temptation to do a bit of innocent exploration, it's bent on your total destruction. It's saying in effect, 'Look over the cliff edge and you'll get a far better view than from behind the fence – go on, just have a peek'; so you look, and the dizzying drop and the free airspace beneath you exercise a strange and compulsive fascination: for a moment you think you're really going to be able to fly, until you realize too late that the body plummeting towards the grinning rocks hundreds of feet below isn't someone else, it's you.

Yes, sin is truly horrific. It uses God's good commands, twists them to suggest something rather different, and before you know it you're falling to your death. Do you now see? Have I managed to open your eyes to the dreadful thing sin is? That departing from the revealed will of God is, and never could be anything else than, the direct route to death?

7:14-17 ¹⁴ *We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin.* ¹⁵ *I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do.* ¹⁶ *And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good.* ¹⁷ *As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me.*

Human nature without Christ

[7:14] What I am describing is our state before God without Christ. It is our situation before we became Christians; it is also a description of the old nature that is still in us even after we've become Christians – the propensity to sin that we experience daily, and that can only be 'put to death', i.e. rendered inoperative, by Christ's work in us through faith. This is the work of the Spirit that I'm shortly going to unfold in all its glory. What I am doing in chapter 7 is to concentrate almost obsessively on the state of our human inheritance apart from Christ. And I have to say that it's less simple than you might imagine, so please bear with me while I explain.

It isn't just a straightforward matter of writing off Adam as totally evil. This is because Adam was created in the image of God, and just as this didn't cease to be his basic nature after he sinned (the same goes for Eve, of course), so it is with us. Genesis says tellingly that Adam's offspring now have two 'images', their original God-image and their now inherited Adam-image. This sets up a clear conflict of will. With my God-image I want to do his holy will; with my Adam-image I want to do my own self-centred will. I recognize that the guidelines of God's law are there for my spiritual good, and if I were a free agent I would naturally gravitate towards that law. But I'm not free, because I have sold myself to sin and thereby become its slave. I am 'fleshly', not spiritual.

Is my 'flesh' my true self?

This term 'flesh' is going to come in quite a lot from now on, so we need to be clear about what it means. The Lord Jesus himself used it to refer to human nature bounded entirely by the horizons of this present world and the will to prioritise one's own needs and requirements. 'Flesh' therefore isn't the physical as opposed to the non-physical, it's the selfish and worldly as opposed to the divine life centred on God's will. The flesh is as ugly as the divine is lovely and attractive. This sets up the conflict I referred to just now. The flesh makes us want what is devilish; the divine makes us want what is Godly and beautiful. Two sets of desires within the same person, one set pulling us down, the other pulling us up. I know this sounds simplistic, but it's the truth about human nature and I want to make it as plain as I possibly can.

[7:15-16] I am Everyman and this is my problem. I recognize that my actions do not represent my true self. I want to do noble and good things during my life on earth, I want to love and be loved, I

want to contribute positively to the world of which I am part. Instead what happens? I find myself doing mean, contemptible, hurtful things to people. I catch myself thinking lustful and unworthy thoughts. I am trapped in self-obsession. I have high ideals that I am utterly incapable of carrying out. (Yes, of course there are apparent exceptions at both ends of the spectrum: there are people who shine with a natural goodness that has nothing to do with faith in Christ, and there are utterly amoral people who have no conscience about doing the most sadistic and ruthless things. But all the same, we don't really know what goes on in their minds, for instance when they wake up at two in the morning and wonder what their true values are. What I'm describing is average, run-of-the-mill human nature – what as a regular matter of fact I find going on in myself every day of my life.)

[7:17] The fact that I have moral values and noble ideals shows conclusively that I acknowledge a higher law than myself. I have to conclude, therefore, that it isn't the real 'I' who am responsible for my life's record – it's an alien principle within me, a cuckoo in my nest called 'sin', which takes me over and distorts my true character. I am not the author of my own autobiography.

7:18-23 ¹⁸ For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. ¹⁹ For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing. ²⁰ Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it. ²¹ So I find this law at work: although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. ²² For in my inner being I delight in God's law; ²³ but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me.

Moral paralysis

[7:18] 'In that case, how can any of us be held responsible for our own actions? How can God judge me for my sin, if it isn't the real "I" who am committing it?' Not so fast! I've already written at length about the *theology* of sin and guilt, and I shall come back to that and try to wrap it up in the next chapter. What I'm doing here is to analyse the *psychology* of sin, to work out why we as human beings demonstrably and consistently miss the holy will of God by a million miles. (The whole point of this navel-gazing is to show the glory of God's solution in our Lord Jesus Christ.)

True goodness is something we all (well, most of us) recognize as being what every human being would like to achieve. By the same token, we are all painfully aware that in ourselves, as we are at this moment, we do not find this goodness happening. (This has led many philosophers to conclude that what we call 'the good' is no more than a social contract, a mutual arrangement we have cobbled together to keep the human race from tearing itself apart.) [7:19] My basic orientation is towards myself, towards fulfilling my own aspirations and desires first and foremost, and other peoples' only where they fit in with and further my own. Yet at the same time, in my saner moments, I disapprove of this attitude and wish I were a different person. I have a model in my mind of the ideal father or citizen or ruler, which I am incapable of living up to.

[7:20] Thus I have to conclude that I am in a strange kind of moral paralysis. I'm like a highly intelligent person trapped inside a paraplegic body that won't respond to my most strenuous demands. I may think I'm in control and am living a successful, rational and reasonably altruistic existence, but in reality I'm some kind of omnivorous monster. (Check back through your private thoughts over the last 24 hours and see if this is an exaggeration.) But is it the true 'me'? Aren't I in my heart of hearts someone better than this? Answer: yes! Of course I am. I'm made in the image of God himself, for goodness' sake! So what's gone wrong?

I am a battlefield

[7:21] I spoke just now of an 'alien principle', which I can now formulate in the plainest terms. I have a will for good which normally tends to be trumped by a will to evil. When I set myself to love God and my neighbour, I end up resenting both of them. When I resolve to go straight, I find myself cutting corners. When I vow that today I shall be a model of sweet reasonableness with my family, there I am an hour later snarling at them and going off in a huff. Yes, I am basically well-disposed and have lofty moral ideals – this is my default setting as a creature of God; but in practice it doesn't work out like that. [7:22-23] I am a battlefield of conflicting characters. I am a microcosm of an all-out civil war. I am a besieged city, with the standard of the King flying from my citadel, whose gates have been stealthily opened by a traitor from within. I am right and wrong, locked in a mortal struggle, feeling the ugly grip of fiendish hands about my throat and unable to shake them off. This paralyses my good intentions, stifles my best aspirations and undercuts all my attempts to rise higher. 'This isn't the real me!' I shout, then off I go and do something loathsome and vile. I'm a moral and spiritual wreck.

7:24-25a ²⁴ *What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?* ²⁵
Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!

I need outside help

[7:24] All this may sound rather rhetorical and melodramatic, but you'll have to forgive me for getting emotional, because I feel it deeply. I'm a mockery of the human being God intended me to be. (As a matter of speculation, if I passed all the tests I'm currently failing, I would probably be set much stiffer tests, and there is no knowing what a majestic person I would end up as, if I came through with colours flying. But that's just a pipe-dream, because I'm actually a pathetic mess of a person.)

So I urgently need outside help. Here I am in my prison cell with rats running over my feet; being able to see the blue sky through the bars only makes it worse. I grip the unyielding metal and shout, 'Is there anyone out there?' [7:25a] And the answer comes, 'Yes, there is! The King himself is coming to your rescue, in fact he's already arrived.' And when I enquire his name, I find it's the one person I longed for all the time – it's Jesus, God's specially appointed rescuer and troubleshooter, equipped with all the keys needed to throw open my cell door and let me out, weak-kneed and blinking, into the bright sunshine of God's love. O God, thank you, thank you, thank you! I'm free!

7:25b *So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in my sinful nature a slave to the law of sin.*

Double slavery

[7:25b] 'Just calm down for a moment. What you seem to be teaching is that human nature is pulled in two directions: it is being pulled upwards by God's law, and pulled downwards by the law of sin. Yet Jesus said that no-one could serve two masters. So what exactly are you saying?'

Well, that's a good way of summing up the whole human dilemma. Jesus of course was talking about the obsessive pursuit of earthly riches being incompatible with wholehearted consecration to God. So let's take worldly wealth as an example. Isn't it so true that even the most single-minded financier, whose whole life is dedicated to increasing his (or her) bank-balance, sometimes wakes up in the middle of the night with a conscience about where their life is going? (I have to say that some people's consciences have stopped troubling them completely, but that's what happens if you ignore them long enough.) So they dream up plans to give some of their wealth away, and set up charitable foundations and so on. I'm not saying this is a bad thing, and this is the point I'm making – there is something in each one of us which though it may not credit the existence of God

in so many words, still acknowledges a principle that there are moral ideals around, and generosity to others is one of them. Yet ask this rich person to abandon their money-orientated lifestyle, and they can't. The Rich Young Ruler found exactly this – the look on his face as he walked slowly away from Jesus said it all. It wasn't that he had riches – riches had him.

We need a new birth

So yes, there is a kind of double slavery operating. In fact, every new arrival on earth is born into this spiritual kind of slavery. On the one hand, thanks to conscience, 'the light of God in the human soul' as it is sometimes called, we retain some knowledge of God's will and (at least in our better moments) feel bound, however vaguely, to live up to it; yet on the other hand we have an inbuilt bias towards self and away from the will of God, which is part of our present human make-up and is a clear sign that we are dominated by another principle which definitely isn't from God at all. In short, we find in ourselves a double allegiance, a dual bondage, which confuses our minds, hobbles our willpower and divides our hearts. Tell me I'm talking nonsense!

If we are born that way, then nothing less than a new birth can release us from it. This can't be a second natural birth; it can't be achieved by moral reformation alone. It's got to come from God, from above, not from within. Yet it needs to work in my earthly, everyday life. That's where the gospel breaks in upon us with its wonderful, hope-filled promises. May I go on?

8:1-39 The work of the Spirit – our present and future hope

8:1-2 ¹ Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, ² because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death.

The double freedom of the Spirit

[8:1] We're free! And all thanks to Christ Jesus. In place of this double slavery – to a divine will we can never live up to, and a devilish self which cripples and destroys us – we have a double freedom. In the past, before we came to Christ and were united to him by faith, the law, the word of God in the scriptures, marked us as unfit for the kingdom of heaven. But now that condemnatory sentence has been torn up! We've been marked with a new label, which is the Holy Spirit, and it's this Spirit I want to talk about now in all his fulness and richness.

He (because the Spirit is Jesus personally indwelling each believer) gives us new life in a double sense: he cancels the sentence of death, as I've said, and he confers the power to live according to God's will. I'm under a new law, a new principle which is nothing like the old one. I'm a new 'you' – the old 'me' has gone – because I'm indwelt by Christ. You're not just an add-on, Lord Jesus – you're my whole life.

[8:2] Go back for a moment to my first words in this letter, when I insisted that Jesus' resurrection is the final proof that he is God's Son. This resurrection could not have happened if there had been the slightest taint of sin on Jesus' record. How was Jesus enabled to stay close to his Father, to please him in everything he did, to resist the temptation to go his own way, or to take a shortcut to the heavenly status he had always had? How? By the Spirit, the translator of God's living goodness into human character. How could Jesus go unerringly to the heart of God's will, so that every second of his wonderful life was given over to the service of anybody but himself? Because this 'Spirit of holiness' was the mainspring of his whole existence. In archery terms, the Spirit was for Jesus the hands that held the bow, that drew back the string and that guided the arrow straight to the centre of the target.

This same Spirit that indwelt Jesus is the one who now indwells you. Drink it in. Believe it with every fibre of your being. The day before yesterday, your carriage was out of control and the

horses were bolting down the twin tracks of law and sin, heading straight for death. Yesterday, Christ died and rose to set you free for ever. Today, you have his own Spirit living in you and guiding you along the unfolding path of life and holiness. Tomorrow is bright with hope.

8:3-4 ³ For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴ in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

How to keep the Law after all

[8:3] 'But I've always lived by the Law, I've always obeyed my conscience, I've never stopped seeking to do the will of God. Why do I need Christ?' Oh yes, I used to think like that too! This is the way of self-justification. 'I've done this, I've been that.' Look: the old 'I' could never stay on the path of God's will. Just think what the Law says: 'Love God, love your neighbour.' Have you always done that? Consistently? Unswervingly? Don't fool yourself – that is the biggest deception of all. The highway of God's holiness stretches ahead of us, pure and good and right, but can we stay on it? Not for five minutes. The Law gives us the road to walk on, but not the legs to walk with. Set yourself a test: start out today with the intention of loving your neighbour as you love yourself. When you turn in for bed, see how far you've got. I suspect you're in for a shock.

If we'd been able to manage all by ourselves, God would never have needed to send us his Son. Well, he might have come on a royal visit, just to see how his subjects were getting on, the inspector awarding 'Outstanding' to all the pupils in the school. But what did Jesus come for, really? He took on the full nature of a human being, the human being God intended us all to be (sin isn't part of original human nature, remember), and he showed us how to love. Jesus loved God and neighbour as no-one has ever done before or since. Then he died a death he never deserved. Why? As a sacrificial lamb, as a perfect, pure, spotless offering for the world's sin.

Jesus in our place

The place: Skull Hill in Jerusalem. The time: a few years ago. The historical event: Jesus, the Man, nailed up against a Roman cross. What was really happening there? In a way that neither you nor I may ever fully understand, God was taking on himself, in the person of his Son, the full punishment and condemnation for all human sin and wrongdoing. The Judgment happened then. Sin itself got crucified.

[8:4] 'So what about the Law? Are we still meant to keep it in all its fulness?' Isn't the answer obvious? Jesus kept it in our place. He died for our failure to keep it. It isn't I who have to keep it any longer, it's Jesus. He has replaced the 'I' in my life. The Holy Spirit of the new Adam has taken over from the sinful self-will of the old Adam. The new 'I' can walk along the straight path of the Law with the legs of Jesus.

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

Two natures revisited

[8:5] Let's be really practical and apply this to our thought-life. Let's contrast our old 'I'-centred thinking with our new Christ-centred thinking. Remember that thinking is so much more than just having vague ideas; it's about plans, intentions, attitudes, what we call mindset. Here are two people planning their day. The first asks, 'How can I get the maximum profit out of today? What

does the world expect of me today? How can I use other people to achieve what I want?' That's the old Adam attitude. The second, faced with exactly the same choices and the same sphere of operations (city, home, travel, whatever), asks, 'How can I please the Lord today? What would he like me to do for him? How can I be of help to other people this very day?' That's the new Spirit attitude. Which mindset are you?

Different roads

[8:6] Get out the map and see where each road leads. As soon as you set foot on the 'I'-centred road, every step you take brings you closer to death; in fact, to adopt the deliberate mindset of the self-life is a kind of death in itself. I don't mean physically, as if selfishness involved literally contracting some incurable disease – the self-orientated person often appears in radiant good health, 'never felt better in my life, thank you!' I mean what I have always meant by 'death', what the Lord God meant by it in the primal Garden: 'the very day you eat of the fruit you will die,' the light of God in you will be snuffed out, the eternal inheritance awaiting you will be cancelled, the relationship which alone can satisfy the heart of human beings will be terminated.

Then see where the other road leads, the Spirit-centred road. The whole atmosphere is immediately different. Again I don't imply physical blessings of health, wealth or success – Spirit-led believers are often called to go through times of great stress and hardship (I have written elsewhere about my personal experience!) – what we're into is something far deeper and more enduring: we walk in the companionship of Life himself, the wonderful Counsellor, the mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of peace. Yes, the peace and joy of knowing Jesus as Lord, of submitting my life-prospects to his wise and loving direction – there's nothing like it! And this is just a foretaste of what's coming later.

Don't be fooled!

[8:7] Let's not allow ourselves to be fooled for one moment. The 'old nature' I described in Romans 7 is a rebel nature. I don't care how respectable, how religious, how morally earnest you are (as I was myself right up to the moment I met the Lord outside Damascus) – I don't care how cultured, how creative, how philanthropic even, your outward life is – at the root of it all is a self-principle, an obdurate pride, which puts you firmly in the enemy camp. You may think you are doing God's will, but you aren't. You may congratulate yourself on your own piety, but you've missed God's holiness by a thousand miles. You don't love God or your neighbour, you love no-one but yourself. The kingdom you belong to isn't God's, it's the kingdom of this world, ruled by forces utterly opposed to the true King.

[8:8] Try as you will, you can't lift yourself into God's good books by pulling on your own sandal- straps. There is no way you can persuade God to be pleased with you while you remain in the driving-seat of your life. The horses have bolted and you're out of control. Get real!

8:9-11 ⁹ *You, however, are not in the realm of the flesh but are in the realm of the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, they do not belong to Christ.* ¹⁰ *But if Christ is in you, then even though your body is subject to death because of sin, the Spirit gives life because of righteousness.* ¹¹ *And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you.*

Am I really a Christian?

[8:9] 'In that case, I'm in despair. I don't think I've ever been truly converted. I lose out to the self-nature every time, even though I'm meant to be a Christian. Perhaps I need a completely new experience of Christ which will blow my mind and rid me of the old Adam completely.' No – I've got good news for you. If you've asked Christ into your life, if you've invited the resurrected and living Son of God to be your Lord, you have left that old life behind.

Imagine you are living in an old house which has become thoroughly run-down. The roof is leaking, the walls are crumbling, the carpets are mildewed and the drains are smelling. Then one day there's a knock at the door. It's Jesus, asking if he can come in and live there and renovate the place. He'll cook the meals and clean up after you, anything, as long as he's given a free hand to refurbish whatever and however he wants. This is what happens when we let the Spirit take over our lives. The Spirit is none other than Jesus himself. All we need to do is to open the door and invite him in. If we refuse to do that, then we don't belong to him. But if we do, then we do, full stop. So stop worrying about whether you're a true Christian or not.

Resurrection life

[8:10] 'The Spirit of God', 'the Spirit of Christ', 'Christ in you' – the description varies, but the fact is the same. So are the consequences. A resurrection has taken place. Just as Jesus' broken body was sealed in the tomb, so was mine. Jesus identified himself with sin and got slaughtered for it; so too the old 'I' which was riddled with sin perished there with him. (I may be repeating what I've already said several times, but what great news it is!) The only way resurrection could take place was and is through the Spirit of God. Because Jesus was himself fully pleasing to God and lived a life fully adjusted to his Father's will, his sacrifice was accepted; and because he identified himself totally with humankind, we too became accepted in him. When God looks at my record, he sees Christ's. When God opens the book of life to see who qualifies, he sees only one name, and that is the name of Jesus; but as he gazes at that name, there appear the names of all those who have signed on with Jesus. Yours, and mine, written there by the Spirit. Magic? No. Miracle? Yes!

[8:11] Get hold of this: the Spirit who breathed resurrection life into the mangled body of Jesus is the same Spirit who has now taken up permanent residence in you. The potential is staggering. For one thing, it affects our daily lives here and now. God's Jesus-Spirit floods our hearts, souls, minds and even our physical capacities with the love-life he always intended we should express. But, looking to the future, the resurrection power of the Spirit is going to achieve an even greater transformation. He is going to take our flesh-and-blood bodies, no matter what has happened to them on this earth, and reassemble them into immortal bodies fully capable of lasting the course of eternal holiness. But we'll have to wait for the Last Day for that.

8:12-13 ¹² *Therefore, brothers and sisters, we have an obligation – but it is not to the flesh, to live according to it.* ¹³ *For if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live.*

Life and death choices

[8:12] 'But meanwhile we have to live with these bodies we've got, with their capacity for sin and disobedience. Or does the fact that we have died with Christ mean that we can't sin any more?' Here are two debtors. They both owe huge sums to their creditor, but in an act of unparalleled generosity he lets them each off the whole amount. The first one determines that he is going to show his gratitude by faithfully serving his former creditor to the best of his ability. Yes, he may make mistakes and run up further debts, but ashamed as he is, he knows they will be taken care of and anyway, his main aim is to please his new Master in every way he can. The second debtor interprets his obligation entirely differently: he realises that whatever sums he squanders, he's going to be covered for everything, so he goes off and leads an unrestrained life of utter prodigality. And surprise surprise, he doesn't last long.

[8:13] Yes, my Christian brothers and sisters, we have the choice of how to live, and it's a life-or-death choice, as it has always been. Nothing's changed here. While we are in these mortal bodies we shall be tempted to go wrong, and it's always possible to return to the old ways and live as if we had never been redeemed by the cross of Christ. But that way lies death, as we've repeated again and again. Why stumble around in the graveyard when you can stroll through the garden?

You may be thinking of some specific temptation which is hammering away at you fit to break the door down. My advice is this: go to Jesus about it. He's there, living in your life. He knows what you were like, and what you are still like. He knows the power and the hypnotic fascination of your desire and self-obsession. You can't kill the old nature, but he can, and he has, and he will. He needs your full cooperation, that's all. Can you refuse it? Do you still really think death is preferable to life? Or, like that prototype human couple, are you still falling for the old lie that the God who promises you eternal life can't be trusted to carry out his word?

Look: you aren't being asked to go back to the state of innocence that existed before the Fall. That simply isn't possible. What you are being asked to do is to go on through death into life. Not on your own – this death, this life, isn't something *you* are being asked to achieve. It has been achieved already for you by Jesus, and all you have to do (all!) is to allow Christ to come alongside and take you through it with himself. The goal isn't innocence, it's holiness; and it's not your holiness, it's Christ's. This is God's plan, and he's sticking to it.

8:14-17 ¹⁴ For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. ¹⁵ The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father.' ¹⁶ The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. ¹⁷ Now if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.

Afraid of the Holy Spirit?

[8:14] Being led by the Spirit isn't passively waiting for today's or tomorrow's blessing, it's actively putting yourself under the command of Christ and so proving that you are in very deed a reborn child of God. Again, submitting to the leadership of the Spirit isn't a kind of special gift that only a few have, while the rest of us blunder on in a twilight knowledge of God's will. Every true-born believer can count on the Spirit's guidance, help and companionship.

[8:15] I've gone on long enough about the old nature, essential though it is to understand all that. Let's now look at the other side of the coin – the astonishing privileges of belonging to the kingdom-family of God through our relationship with Christ. This is what happens when we receive the Spirit. Some people are scared stiff by any mention of the Holy Spirit. They think it's going to cripple their personality, turn them into someone that isn't really them, and load them with a whole set of fresh superstitions and shibboleths. They might even be getting into some weird cult! (It has to be admitted, sadly, that some powerful personalities have misused teaching about the Spirit in order to dominate their followers and, in extreme cases, to reduce them to a state of abject misery by means of threats, sanctions and spiritual bullying.) No – that's not God's intention. Trust the devil to twist God's word into meaning what it doesn't mean at all!

The right to call God 'Father'

The Spirit is God's appointed means of setting us gloriously free. He rescues us from our old death-bound human family and makes us members of his own Divine and royal family. The nearest parallel I can think of is adoption, though once again we need to recognise the limitations of an illustration based on human law or custom. It can sometimes be difficult, even in the best and most loving cases, for the adopted child to feel that they really are proper members of the new family; and of course, genetically speaking, they can never be, though once you see this in proportion it isn't that much of a big deal. The secret of God's programme of adoption is that by becoming a member of Christ by faith, you receive the full family status which he (Christ) has always possessed from before time itself. You are reborn as brothers and sisters of the eternal Son of God.

Thus you have the perfect right to call God 'Father', not just 'Our Father' in a general sense but 'my Father' who is personally and specially and uniquely yours. It's the delighted 'Daddy!' of a small child who wakes up in the night and wonders who this stranger is by his bedside, then realises that it's the person who loves him best in the world. (This could of course be 'Mummy!' – gender distinctions don't operate in God's case.) You can call out his name at literally any time of the day or night, at the top of your voice or in a gentle whisper. He's always there for you to go to, to put your arms around, to confide your closest thoughts or stammer your nameless fears to.

[8:16] This is the special work of the Spirit, it's what he loves to do. Not only does he confer new life, not only does he stamp us with the seal of God's ownership, but he continually reassures us that we are loved, welcomed and honoured. Whatever our experience of earthly parents has been (and I recognise that some of them are far from ideal), the Spirit re-educates us in our notions of what is meant by having God as our Parent. You are so anxious – relax!

Inheritance present and future

[8:17] Dare to look ahead into the future. (Some of us find this quite difficult.) Don't be scared – think. Use a bit of human/divine logic. You're a child of God, all right? Then you are going to inherit everything he has. You're a brother or sister of Christ? Then you share fully in Jesus' inheritance. Nothing on earth or in hell can stop you claiming that inheritance. Human systems of inheritance involve the legator dying and the estate being parcelled out among perhaps dozens of relations, so that you get only a fraction of the whole. Neither of these drawbacks applies in the case of God's family. For one thing, the dying bit has been done already and will never need to be done again; and for another, everything he has is yours. And what's more, you don't have to wait – you can start enjoying your inheritance now, and it only gets better and better.

My point is that we already *possess* the full inheritance, by virtue of our being 'in Christ' – but while we are in this mortal phase of our lives we do not yet *enjoy* the full experience of it. We are waiting at the door for our transport to arrive, and one day we shall climb on board. This waiting may involve going through many difficulties, much opposition and misunderstanding, pain and loss, heart-break, disappointment and apparent failure. Just what Jesus met on earth! He went through all that for us, and that's how we can believe that he goes through our present suffering with us. One day, though, all that will finish, and we'll share his glorious incorruptibility then just as he shares our frailty now.

8:18-21 ¹⁸ *I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.* ¹⁹ *For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed.* ²⁰ *For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope* ²¹ *that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.*

Two-act play

[8:18] As I suggested just now, use some inspired logic! (Faith is logic based on the word of God; human reasoning is logic based on everyday assumptions.) The suffering we have to go through in this present existence is real. I am not trying to sweep it under the carpet. It's not an illusion, as some philosophies try to argue. But God's word tells us that it is infinitesimal compared to the splendid future waiting in the wings.

At present we are like a cast performing in the first act of a two-act play. We haven't been given our script for the second act, which may make some of us nervous, but we have been given a good idea in outline of what is going to happen. We have been promised that it is absolutely incredible, and knowing the talents of the producer we can well believe it. [8:19] So the whole theatre is on tiptoe with expectation, wondering what it's going to be like when the curtains open on the

glorious second act. As for the actors, they might reasonably expect that they won't be needed for the second half, but far from it – they are going to be central to the action (not *the* centre, because that role is reserved for Someone they know already); the characters they have played in the first part are going to come on again, but unbelievably transformed.

That's a feeble illustration of what you can look forward to if you are a child of God by faith in Jesus Christ. Yes, you already are part of God's growing family; but none of us has more than the faintest idea of what we're going to look like. The whole creation is impatient for the moment of revelation to take place. Look at nature in the first days of spring, everything trying to burst outwards and upwards towards the light and the warmth – we live in a waiting world.

The old creation

[8:20-21] We live, in fact, in the present creation, which is wonderful enough, but it's nothing like the creation to come. This old world was declared 'very good' by its Creator – it is superbly fit for the interim purpose for which it was designed – but it isn't perfect, and of course human sin has disfigured it almost beyond recognition. But I'm not actually talking about sin and moral evil just now (this may surprise you, and I'll explain further in a moment.) Right from the start a principle of dissatisfaction was built into the physical creation, so that we would never mistake this world for the completely perfect one that is to come. You will recall the constant refrain of The Preacher: 'Vanity of vanities! Everything is meaningless.' He's not just lamenting his own failure – he's trying to get us to realise that this world, in itself, contains no ultimate meaning. It only has meaning when it relates to something outside itself, which is God's own redemptive purpose. The cycle of nature, spring – summer – autumn – winter, birth – death – rebirth – death again, the seemingly endless repetition of the phases of the sun and moon and stars, the wearisome treadmill of human work and the final indignity and futility of extreme old age – all these are deliberately built into this first creation and are inescapable. It's almost as if Nature wants desperately to be reborn but can't escape from its prison, its wheel of imperfect being. It's all slowly and inexorably running down and one day it's going to disappear in a puff of smoke.

This isn't as if God's original idea has gone wrong – it has been his plan all along. It is the way he designed things to work even if the mystery of sin and evil hadn't come along subsequently to make his task (and ours) considerably more difficult. What we consider evils – pain, ageing, death, suffering, disease, natural disasters, the predatory basis of the food chain – are built-in potential hazards that humanity has been commissioned to encounter and, with God's guidance and help, to overcome and transcend. Nature itself is morally neutral, it is neither good nor bad in a spiritual sense, because it doesn't operate according to spiritual laws. Sin and evil only come in, as I've tried to explain in ch 5, when we humans try to go it alone independently of God and in defiance of his expressed will. Then all our relationships go wrong, including our relationship with the natural world that we are supposed to steward and harness.

At the same time there is a beauty and wonder manifested in nature that catches at our hearts and makes us long for something far better. Our present limitations only make us want to escape into an unbounded freedom. Our experience of dissatisfaction generates an intense longing for perfect fulfilment. As heirs of God we become painfully aware that even though we know freedom from sin and experience the love of Christ here and now, there's something so much better to come. It's the sheer relief of discovering the glory we always knew was there. It's like children longing for the story to have a happy ending, and finding that it really does.

8:22-23 ²² We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. ²³ Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies.

So much more to come

[8:22] What we inherit from the past, even before the Fall, is a provisional creation, a temporary structure that isn't meant to last (well, only a few billion years, which is no time at all to God). Shackled by mortality, it restlessly heaves and groans, like a woman in the throes of childbirth. It is always throwing up earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, tsunamis, floods, famines, forest fires. We who have been appointed its stewards have to work out how to control its moods, restrain its excesses and harvest its abundance for good. All this, of course, is made much more problematic by the fact that we don't get on with God or each other, or, let's face it, with our own selves.

[8:23] This may account for the malaise you may feel even though you have been given the gift of the Spirit and made new people in Christ. It's just a foretaste of the fulness of life to come, a tiny shoot appearing above the ground betokening the incredible harvest to follow. I don't want to appear to contradict myself – we have indeed already been 'adopted' into God's family and nothing can alter that fact. But there's so much more to come! The invitation card to the royal wedding is there on our mantelpiece, and every day we look at it longingly and think, 'It's getting nearer and nearer!' We aren't just going to be part of the congregation – we're going to be the bride!

We use the word 'redemption' to describe the costly sacrifice Christ made on the cross, to pay the full price for our sins and everybody else's, so that we can say with perfect confidence that our release has been secured, we're out of jail, we have the freedom of the city. But we have a bigger and even better 'redemption' in view, and that's what's going to happen when we come to the end of our mortal existence and find we've got new bodies waiting for us. The old model has been scrapped, or if not totally scrapped, transformed into something a million times more powerful and beautiful and wonderful.

8:24-25 ²⁴ *For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have?* ²⁵ *But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.*

Waiting isn't easy

[8:24] Again, we talk quite rightly about being 'saved' by our hope and trust in Jesus Christ. It's central to the gospel. But until we die physically, there's always going to be a faith element to cope with, because we can't visibly see him, we don't have direct enjoyment of his tangible presence (apart maybe from little foretastes, visions, dreams or blessings given to some of us in order to encourage everyone else.) [8:25] One day 'hope will vanish into sight' and we shall see him face to face; but until then we have to wait patiently. It's not easy, I know, but we mustn't give up just because we can't see what's round the corner. Hope is fundamental, because it's *the* sign that we trust God's word about what is coming, and we stake our whole lives upon it.

8:26-27 ²⁶ *In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans.* ²⁷ *And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God.*

The Spirit and prayer

[8:26] 'So do we have to conclude that the Spirit isn't that much help after all, if we still have to go through such painful anticipation?' Not a bit of it! This is where prayer comes in. Prayer is a wonderful and vital thing, ready-made for every believer. We pray out of a sense of helplessness and dependence; in fact if we thought we could manage on our own, we wouldn't bother to pray. But then we rapidly discover that we can't even pray properly! Despite knowing from the Bible what God's will is in general, we often find it very difficult to apply it to our immediate situation or to the needs of others. We desperately want to ask God for something but we don't know what it is. We try to put our longings into words, but grammar and syntax fail us and all we can do is to

groan incoherently, with doubtless some weeping thrown in. [8:27] This is where the Spirit works in a very real and practical way: he's an expert at both ends of the problem. He's the 'go-between agent' who puts us and God in touch with each other. At our end, he's there in our hearts knowing perfectly what we're like, what our situation is and what we need at any given moment. At God's end, he knows what God wants for us and how we fit into his overall plan. And he connects those two ends up. In a sense, he does the praying for us, because he himself is the hot-line to God; but it's got to be *our* prayers that he's hot-lining, so it doesn't absolve us from the need to pray.

Prayer, at its simplest, is telling God that we trust him, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is bringing anything and anyone to the throne of grace, knowing that we are welcomed, loved and heard. Prayer is God's appointed way of getting his will done on earth. So let's never, ever, give up or get discouraged, even though we may think at times that the line's gone dead and nobody's listening. They are!

8:28-30 ²⁸ *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.* ²⁹ *For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.* ³⁰ *And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.*

No accident

[8:28] 'But so often things go terribly wrong, or I let the Lord down catastrophically, or life just becomes too much for me. Is that a sign that the Spirit isn't able to do his work in me?' Far from it. Everything is grist to his mill. He knows how much you basically love him and want to follow and please him. He's not going to wave a magic wand over your difficulties and suddenly make life a bed of roses – he's got bigger plans than that. (This is not to say that emergency prayers aren't frequently answered in a miraculous fashion, because God delights to surprise and shower gifts on his children even in thoroughly materialistic ways.) But his chief concern is for our Christian character, for us to grow into the likeness of Christ. For that purpose he will use absolutely any material that comes to hand, even apparently useless rubble. Nothing gets wasted in God's economy. It's not you that has to make sense of the random events of life, it's the Lord who is working it all together in an intricate but ultimately totally satisfying design.

[8:29] We haven't accidentally blundered into the Christian camp. There's an overall plan. God knew we were coming. He hasn't built the stage and put up the scenery just so that he can take it all down again – he has a cast that runs into thousands of millions, and the wonder of it is that he has a script for each actor however brief their appearance. Yes, he has a part for every human being, which they have to learn, they have to perform, they have to express with the full force of their infinitely varying character and personality; yet, incredibly, he is not only the director but also the leading actor in his own play, appearing in every scene and drawing out the full potential of each individual and group as they relate freely to him. So inevitably (because we're not just a cast in a stage production, we're a time-wide family, a kingly dynasty ramifying through the ages into innumerable branches) there develops a unifying likeness, generated by the love-relationship which the Producer has with each of his creatures. If you are sometimes tempted to observe that the church you know isn't like that, well, get the bigger picture!

Full participation

[8:30] I'm talking, as always, about Jesus, who was there before the stage was built or the play begun, whom we know as the Father's only Son, yet who has no beginning nor end, who has always existed in perfect relationship with him through the Spirit. This relationship, as we know, is not a closed circle but faces outwards, to gather in and welcome all who respond to his call to become his brothers and sisters. All who do respond, who somehow hear the divine message and however tremblingly reach out a hand to Christ, are instantly cleared for full participation in the great enterprise. They might think that their past life, their unbelief or pursuit of pleasure or self-justifying pride, might disqualify them or at any rate remain as a black mark against them, but not a bit of it – all that's over and forgotten.

And when the final act is over and the curtain falls, it rises again on a totally transformed scene, a panorama of such grandeur and majesty that the universe itself gasps 'We never thought it was going to be like this!' The former stage now extends in all directions, bathed in a glorious light that streams directly from the King himself. This is all his work, and his alone; yet he calls us to share it, and he went to the cross to bring us all in. You don't want to miss out on it, do you? The party's for you!

8:31-32 ³¹ *What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?* ³² *He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?*

God on our side

[8:31] 'I've got only one response to all this, and that is that I think you're going well over the top. You make it sound as if we're all going straight to heaven on some kind of magic carpet. I'm afraid that doesn't accord with the reality of life as I know it, and as you too surely know it.' Once again I would ask you not to get emotional about suffering and what you rather loftily call 'reality'. I repeat, there's a Divine logic at work which is completely different from the logic of this world, and founded on much more secure premises.

Yes of course, I've never denied that people have to go through all kinds of grief in their lives in this age, and Christian believers are no exception. I have personally experienced extreme opposition and deprivation, and I probably talk about it too much. But I want you to see the other side of the picture, the real 'reality' as it were. *We've got God on our side.* 'The Lord be with you' is a common Christian greeting. Well, he *is* with us, ever since we put our trust in Christ. His Spirit is with us. We've got the Creator of the universe wearing our team's shirt. What's the opposition worth? Less than nothing.

Where the logic leads us

[8:32] Open your eyes and look steadily at the facts. Never tire of going in your imagination to the hill of Calvary and gazing at what is happening there. God's love is being stretched beyond the limits. Normal people draw the line well short of offering up their own children to make life better for themselves – as you know, it's forbidden in the law of Moses. Even Abraham, who was prepared to sacrifice Isaac because he thought God had told him to, was restrained at the last moment. Everyone is thinking, watching Jesus being nailed to that cross, that God must personally come and release him, so proving once and for all that he truly is God's Son. But he doesn't. Not only does he allow Jesus to endure the utmost in human suffering and agony, but he turns his back on him. His own Son has become loathsome to him, an object of utter disgust, because Jesus has identified himself with each one of us in our sin and moral ugliness. This isn't happening because God is really a sadist and enjoys taking it out on members of his close family. If you think that – or if you think I'm teaching that – you must have a peculiarly twisted mind. It is sheer love that sends

Jesus to that Roman place of execution, and it is sheer love that keeps him there until the whole debt is paid. Abraham spared Isaac's life, but God didn't spare Jesus, even though he pleaded in acute distress not to have to go through with it, unless it really was his wonderful Father's will. Now see where the logic is leading us. If God was prepared to go to those lengths to save us, if Jesus was prepared to throw his life away to rescue you and me from certain death – is there anything else he is going to withhold from us? When we pray, for instance, is God going to say, 'Well, I don't know, I think you've gone too far in asking that – I was generous enough to let you have my own Son, but that's as far as I'm going and you're not getting any more'? Of course not! He's going to grant you heaven, with earth added for good measure. If he's given us Jesus, his most precious gift, he's going to go on giving us him, day after day, need after need, and all totally free of any obligation on our part – except to ask. And to say 'Thank you.'

8:33-34 ³³ *Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies.* ³⁴ *Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died – more than that, who was raised to life – is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.*

Marble out of clay

[8:33] I can see that you're still hung up about deserving God's mercy and goodness and doing something to show that you're really not that bad. The old attitudes die hard. Self-justification started in the Garden of Eden and it's still in the human bloodstream. You persist in thinking that you've got to have just the tiniest credit account with God so that he'll notice the plusses and not the minusses. Wishful thinking! There is nothing, absolutely nothing, in you or me which makes us eligible citizens of heaven. We've signed up with the enemy, haven't we? The miracle is that God should have torn up our debt-laden account-book and substituted Jesus' charge-free record – and that, my friends, is all down to his merciful decision, whenever and for whatever reason he took it.

[8:34] 'But haven't I got to be perfect before God will have me in heaven?' Well, yes, you have, but that's his work, not yours. You are a piece of rubble from the quarry, rejected for all your flaws and cross-grained unworkability; but God has picked you out and said, 'I'll have that one, I can do something with it.' He has deliberately chosen you off the rubbish heap, so that he can fashion you into a living likeness of his beloved Son. Imagine, then, that someone, the devil perhaps, comes along and says to God, 'You can't possibly have that one, I know all about her or him, they're rotten to the core, they'll splinter into pieces as soon as you tap them with your hammer.' And God replies, 'Speak for yourself, Satan! If I choose to make marble out of clay, who are you to challenge my decision? Come round my workshop with me and see all the twisted bits of wood and grubby fragments of shale that I'm in the process of turning into priceless works of art. You never expected that when you trashed my creation, did you?'

No human being can say of another person, 'That one's not fit to be in God's presence.' None of us has a leg to stand on. But there's one person who does have a right to say that: Jesus Christ. His life on earth pleased his Father in every respect; nobody could find a single flaw in him. If he chose to indict every member of so-called 'humanity' for what they've thought and said and done, not a single voice would be raised in dissent. As you know, and as I hope I've made clear enough already, there is going to come a Day when Jesus is indeed going to summon the entire human race from their mortal resting-places and call them to account for their life record.

Rejected?

So will we who have crowned him Lord of our lives be rejected in this devastating day of reckoning? I hope I've made that abundantly clear, too, but I'll repeat it for one last time: how could someone who has given his life for us, then risen from the grave to demonstrate God's full acceptance of his sacrifice for sin, and who now never leaves the Father's presence but is

continually beseeching him to intervene graciously in our troubled lives – how could such a person (none other, of course, than Jesus himself) then turn round and say ‘I’m not having this one’?

I learnt this lesson even before I became a Christian. None of you will have been there when we had Stephen systematically murdered under a hail of rocks, but it’s permanently gouged into my memory. Not because I was the one authorising his ‘execution’, not because I was responsible for the first ever Christian martyrdom, but because as he faced certain death Stephen had a vision of Jesus actually standing there next to God’s throne and (as I now believe) interceding for us all as we prepared to do this horrific deed. And then as he died Stephen himself prayed for me to be forgiven. That not only brought me (eventually) to Christ, but remains as a humbling example of Jesus’ intercessory ministry and of God’s forgiving love. If he can deal like that with me, he can do the same for anyone.

8:35-37 ³⁵ *Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?* ³⁶ *As it is written: ‘For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.’* ³⁷ *No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.*

Victory parade

[8:35] Christ is by the side of every anxious believer. He promised he would be. He promises you, me, anyone who happens to be reading these words way into the future, that his friendship is not affected by the worst the world can throw at us. We may have to suffer. We may meet formidable difficulties. We may be actively persecuted as we witness to him. We may run short of even the basic necessities of life like food and drink. We may not be able to afford decent clothes for our backs. We may go in danger of our very lives. We may even lose them to hostile crowds or infuriated authorities. [8:36] This is no surprise. Not only Jesus himself, but the old scriptures warn us that this will, not may, be our lot. I’m sure you know what the Psalmist says, ‘We face death all day and every day; people think no more of slaughtering us than a butcher would think of cancelling his order for today’s fresh meat from the fields – and all because we dare to identify ourselves with your name!’

[8:37] But none of this matters in the slightest. What matters is that we are on the winning side. God is a tough lover. He isn’t concerned primarily with our earthly security, comfort or well-being. He is playing for altogether higher stakes. In the person of his Son Jesus, he has already swept the enemy off the field, thanks to the cross. From now on it’s a victory parade and we’re proud to be his captives, suffering every conceivable humiliation from the jeering crowds, but secretly rejoicing in his whispered promise, that we are his dearest, his most treasured possession, and that we can rely one hundred per cent, one thousand per cent, on his unceasing care for us.

8:38-39 ³⁸ *For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers,* ³⁹ *neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

My Lord’s love

[8:38] Oh yes! Tell me I’m wrong. Tell me that death is the worst thing that can happen to me. Tell me that life is a bitch and God is a monster. Blow my mind with angelic visions, terrify me with demonic visitations. Persuade me that the world’s in a mess and the future’s going to be even worse. Tell me the stars control my destiny. [8:39] Impress me with lofty religious aspirations or deep philosophical theories. Promise me the delights of created things, obsess me with the craving for human affection. All these things could so easily shatter my faith into tiny pieces. But they have absolutely no effect on my Lord’s love for me.

He came to me in Jesus. He died so that I could live. He met me on the road. He forgave me the worst I had done or could ever do. He is my generous Lord who takes me as I am and holds me close to himself, telling me, 'I will never leave you, because I love you so much. I have wanted you to be with me from everlasting to everlasting.'

9:1-11:36 Israel – have God's purposes failed?

9:1-5 ¹ I speak the truth in Christ – I am not lying, my conscience confirms it through the Holy Spirit – ² I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. ³ For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people, those of my own race, ⁴ the people of Israel. *Theirs is the adoption to sonship; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises.* ⁵ *Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of the Messiah, who is God over all, for ever praised! Amen.*

Praying the unthinkable

[9:1-2] You are simply not going to believe what I am going to tell you now. I have just declared that nothing in time or eternity will ever separate me from the love of God in Christ Jesus. I believe that with all my heart and soul. Yet – yet – there is a great grief at the centre of my being, which is like a wound that never stops throbbing with pain. I know I'm sometimes guilty of going over the top in the language I use in order to get a particular point across, but I'm not doing that now; I'm speaking the plain and solemn truth, in the presence of my Master who knows everything about me, and with the full approval of my conscience, cleansed and enlightened as it is by the Holy Spirit.

[9:3-4] The intensity of my love and concern for my fellow-Jews, my human blood-brothers and faith-family, is such that I have even found myself praying this unthinkable prayer: 'Lord Jesus, if it meant that they could come into the Messianic inheritance that is rightfully theirs by your grace, I would be prepared personally to be sent into the wilderness of utter rejection and separation from you.'

Divine privileges

Yes – I feel it that deeply! They have missed the whole purpose of God for them. Let me enumerate their wonderful privileges, their divine endowments. Their name says it all – Israelites, members of the twelve tribes descended directly through Jacob from Abraham himself, each one a prince with God, called to the kingly destiny of ruling and judging the world. They were rescued from Egypt and slavery to become the true-born sons and daughters of the Most High. They carried around with them the shining presence of the Holy One. They were offered a unique relationship with the Lord of heaven and earth, enshrined in a series of mutual and binding agreements reminding them of his irremovable love for them and simply requiring their trust and obedience in return. They were called into the priestly service of the One True God in tabernacle and Temple. To them were given the very words of God, the promises of hope and blessing spoken through prophet and psalmist and written indelibly in Scripture.

Abrahamic inheritance, Messianic destiny

[9:5] Such a precious inheritance! It stretches all the way back to Abraham, in an unbroken line of spiritual and physical solidarity; and it travels forward to the coming of the Messiah himself, destined to be genetically one of them, God's personal appearance on earth. Make no mistake: the Messiah is not just a divine representative, he is God Almighty in person, the Sovereign Lord of all, inhabiting the eternal praises of heaven yet moving among his own people for the blessing of the world. So wonderful, so true! And yet – and yet – they've looked right through him and told him to get lost. Are you surprised that I feel this so deeply, just like Moses in that wilderness nightmare? 'If you're going to ditch them, then you can delete me as well.'

9:6-9 ⁶ *It is not as though God's word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. ⁷ Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children. On the contrary, 'It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.'* ⁸ *In other words, it is not the children by physical descent who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring. ⁹ For this was how the promise was stated: 'At the appointed time I will return, and Sarah will have a son.'*

Is God contradicting himself?

[9:6] 'So Scripture isn't indelible after all. God may have promised that Israel would be his special and chosen people, but it didn't work out, so that bit of his word has become void. Scripture isn't always sovereign.' Quite impossible! I agree that we've got a dilemma here, but you don't solve it by simply assuming that God didn't mean what he said so clearly and so often.

However, it's always the case that where God's word appears to contradict itself, it is challenging us to think more deeply, to delve below the surface tensions to the true intent of God's will. Yes, Israel is his chosen nation. But the description 'Israel' is both narrower and broader than just a racial or genetic one. It is narrower because there is an Israel within Israel (I'll return to that in a moment); it is broader because there is an Israel outside Israel.

[9:7] Let's examine the deeper meaning of the name 'Israelite'. Does it mean every single physical descendant of Abraham? Or does it mean something else? This line of thought isn't some kind of ingenious cop-out – it is bound up with the whole question of how non-Jews can be included in God's chosen people; it's been fundamental to my gospel commission from the start, and we know that the Lord Jesus himself tried to open his opponents' eyes to this radical and shocking truth.

Let's go back to that famous chapter in Genesis where Isaac is born to Abraham and Sarah in their old age. If this hadn't happened, God's word certainly would have fallen at the first hurdle. But there's still a problem, because Hagar's son Ishmael is Abraham's rightful heir through primogeniture. So God gets on the line to Abraham: 'It's the offspring of Isaac who are going to be your true heirs.' [9:8] In other words, God says, I'm setting up a principle that is going to operate until the end of time: my true children, my kingdom people, are going to be a faith-family brought to birth by my word, not a flesh-family generated by purely natural human descent. [9:9] If you want to look up the actual wording of the promise, it's there in black and white: 'I've got the date down in my diary, says God, and it's Sarah's delivery time and Isaac's birthday. Impossible? I don't know the meaning of the word.' Ishmael was a sperm-child, but Isaac was a word-child, and so it will be with all future generations. You say it can't be done? God says it can, and he's going to do it. Remember: the Messiah comes of this line.

9:10-13 ¹⁰ *Not only that, but Rebekah's children were conceived at the same time by our father Isaac. ¹¹ Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad – in order that God's purpose in election might stand: ¹² not by works but by him who calls – she was told, 'The older will serve the younger.'* ¹³ *Just as it is written: 'Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.'*

A second principle

[9:10] I can see a possible objection here. 'Yes, but Isaac still has to be born naturally. You go on about the Messiah being a descendant of David – well, isn't that actual physical descent?' Right, then – let's look at another, equally startling story, to show I'm not making all this up out of the top of my head. At the same time it establishes a second fundamental principle. The first principle was that faith, that is, believing God's word even where you can't see it happening, is to be the characteristic of God's genuine kingdom people. They might be flesh-born, yes, but they're primarily promise-born. The second is that God chooses who are to be his chosen ones. They don't choose themselves or qualify in any way for the privilege. It's God who calls and chooses. It sounds so obvious and inevitable – yet so shocking. Let me illustrate.

I said this was shocking; but turn to the other end of our scriptures, where the Lord says, 'I loved Jacob, but I hated Esau.' You can apply this historically and politically if you want, as Malachi and other prophets do, to Israel's relations with Edom, but what is Scripture really saying? God isn't tied to human ideas about who should be first and who should be second, or who is in and who is out. It's his decision, and it frequently overturns human priorities and assumptions. God chooses and calls; faith responds. The language of love and hatred may be strong, but it's God's way of saying, 'Don't tell me who are to be my chosen people.'

Jacob and Esau

Isaac, the next in line to Abraham and of course one of our patriarchs, marries Rebekah and she conceives twins. Note that they are Isaac's children, therefore promise-born. After the usual struggle with infertility and after a tough pregnancy and delivery, Esau emerges first, with his brother Jacob hanging on to his heel. As we know, Jacob was to fulfil his name of 'Me First' in various discreditable episodes, while Esau became noted more for his brawn than his brain. [9:11-12] Yet when does God reveal his sovereign choice in favour of Jacob (the younger) rather than Esau (the older)? Is it after he has carefully considered the merits of their respective lives? No – it's before they were even born. Rebekah the mother-to-be takes her distress to the Lord and gets the answer, 'The first twin to emerge is going to be second in line to the second one.' And Jacob's hanging on to Esau's heel as though he has already heard God's call inside the womb!

9:14-18 ¹⁴ What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all! ¹⁵ For he says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.' ¹⁶ It does not, therefore, depend on human desire or effort, but on God's mercy. ¹⁷ For Scripture says to Pharaoh: 'I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.' ¹⁸ Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden.

'God is unfair!'

[9:14] As soon as I start talking about the elective sovereignty of God, there is invariably a storm of protest. 'This makes God out to be arbitrary and unfair! If God has decided from the start who are and who aren't going to be his special people, human freewill is reduced to the jerking of a puppet on a string and all choice is an illusion.' Not so fast! Human responsibility is alive and well – and what has each last one of us chosen to do? To dethrone God, that's what.

The golden calf

[9:15] Let me take you to two well-known stories about Moses, one towards the end of the book of Exodus and the other near the beginning. In each of them we find similarly shocking statements by the Lord. Remember the story of the golden calf? While Moses is up on Mt Sinai receiving the lifesaving Law, the people run riot and show what they really want to worship – not an apparently remote and terrifying deity, but the tangible and immediate gods of sex and gold. Moses intercedes with the Lord and offers to be blotted out of God’s book of life if only the people can be accepted back into God’s favour. (I’ve told you why I can identify with that.) God replies that it is those who have sinned who will be blotted out; then a few verses later he says this: ‘If I show mercy to anyone, or forgive anyone’s sin, it is simply and solely because I choose to do so.’ [9:16] We think we can impress God by the strength of our moral willpower, or by coming top of the class or first in the race, but we can’t see that the only reason why God forgives us is that he’s decided to be that sort of God.

Moses and Pharaoh

[9:17] The other story is about Moses and Pharaoh. The Lord is giving the Egyptians a hard time; they’ve had six plagues and there are worse to come. But the point is, he’s giving them time to repent, time for Pharaoh to see who he’s up against and to humble his proud will. ‘Look, Pharaoh,’ says the Lord, ‘I could have finished you off long before this; but I have a plan for your life, which one way or another is going to be fulfilled. You think you’re the number one potentate around here, but I’m trying to open your eyes to see that it is I who have put you on your throne. You want your name to be famous in history for your wealth and your empire, but I want my name to be known throughout the world of space and time for my love and care for my people.’

[9:18] But Pharaoh wasn’t having any of that, so God allowed his choices and decisions to harden around him like concrete, until he was no longer able to break out of the prison of pride in which he had encased himself. God’s saving desire is such that he wants to have mercy on everyone, even though none of us deserve a moment’s consideration. But in the end it’s his decision, and his alone, as to who gets the pardon and who gets the prison. Just believe that his supreme and sovereign control is exercised in love and wisdom, that’s all.

9:19-21 ¹⁹ *One of you will say to me: ‘Then why does God still blame us? For who is able to resist his will?’*
²⁰ *But who are you, a mere human being, to talk back to God? ‘Shall what is formed say to the one who formed it, ‘Why did you make me like this?’ ‘* ²¹ *Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for special purposes and some for common use?*

Putting God in the dock

[9:19] Do I see you shrugging your shoulders and saying, ‘So when it comes down to it, God’s will gets done whatever. Human freewill is an illusion – we’re just pieces on the board being moved around by the Master chessplayer. But in that case, why are we to be held responsible for our actions? The court of final judgment is no more than a show trial rigged in advance by an inflexible dictator.’ [9:20] Well, that kind of fatalism is open for you to adopt, but it’s a dead end. Human pride doesn’t like being told there’s a God around, can’t you see this? We love putting God in the dock and accusing him of mishandling his work of creation. We tell him that if we were in charge we’d have done things differently – and all the time we’re dependent on him for every breath we take and every ounce of energy we have.

The potter’s workshop

[9:21] Remember when the Lord takes Jeremiah down to the potter’s workshop and shows him the craftsman making each vessel precisely the shape he wants; and if it goes wrong, he reworks it patiently until it comes out according to his original design? Just suppose, though, that the earthenware jug he’s making starts talking back and complaining, ‘I didn’t want to be this shape!

Why didn't you let me have a say in what kind of jug I was going to be?' Why do you find it so hard to accept that the Creator God has a perfect right to design and shape each of his creatures for the precise function he has in mind? We are all human clay, and the astonishing thing is that he offers us the privilege of being used in his service to glorify him, when all we are fit for is to carry out the slops.

In fact, as I'm going to show a little later, the Lord is calling every single one of us to cooperate fully with his plan of salvation, and that includes people who might have thought they weren't in the original plan at all. But I can see that you're still worried by the idea that some human beings, created by God, might be predestined for destruction and never actually have a chance of salvation at all.

9:22-24 ²² *What if God, although choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath – prepared for destruction?* ²³ *What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory –* ²⁴ *even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles?*

Toughness and tenderness

[9:22] Most of us have absolutely no conception of the toughness and the tenderness of God. Let me take you back to the first chapters of this letter, when I tried to highlight the crisis humanity is in, as its refusal to accept God's Lordship comes up against his total displeasure towards sin and evil. I told you what should be obvious to everyone, that as a race and as individuals we are heading towards the perfect storm of God's judgment. He hasn't been mealy-mouthed about this, or kept it tucked away as a nasty surprise to be revealed at the end of time. No, he wants everybody to know that his attitude to all rebellion and wrongdoing is, always has been and always will be one hundred per cent hostile; and furthermore, that he is perfectly capable of carrying out the sentence he has declared. Tsunamis, tornadoes and volcanoes are puny natural illustrations of the terrifying, impersonal yet deeply personal power of God; get into the wrong relationship with it or him and you lose your life for ever.

[9:23] Yet his tender love and astonishing patience are so great that he is still keeping the door open for every single one of us to come back to him. We are all heading for destruction, yet we were all created for glory. Forgive me if I tell my own story once again. I was a complete monster and I really thought that God wanted me to kill Christians and eradicate this heresy from the face of the earth. If God had chosen to knock me off my horse on the Damascus road and break my neck, I would have gone straight to judgment with the utter certainty of condemnation and permanent banishment from his heavenly kingdom. Instead, he sent Jesus to me. He spoke to me of forgiveness and grace. I was literally blinded with the light of his love and glory. And he sent me to tell the Gentiles all about this avenue of escape, won for us by the cross and empty grave of Jesus.

The choice is yours

[9:24] You ask whether you are predestined for wrath or glory – the answer is, you are both, and the choice is yours! Harden your heart and reject him, like Pharaoh, and you get wrath; open your heart and accept him, as you Romans have done, and you get mercy. Some of you are Jews and some of you are non-Jews, but it doesn't matter in the slightest; you have responded to the call of God in repentance and faith and have become his children. Here we have a whole new twist in the story, and for that we need to go to the book of Hosea.

9:25-26 ²⁵ *As he says in Hosea: 'I will call them "my people" who are not my people; and I will call her "my loved one" who is not my loved one,'* ²⁶ *and, 'In the very place where it was said to them, "You are not my people," there they will be called "children of the living God."'*

God's new family

[9:25-26] Hosea is preeminently all about the tenderness and patience of God towards unfaithful Israel. The book opens with the heart-wrenching story of Hosea's family. He has married a deeply promiscuous woman who has borne him a son; then she produces a daughter and son who may not be his. The Lord tells him to call the two younger ones 'Rejected' and 'Not Mine' as a prophetic parallel to what is happening in the nation as a whole. Some names to give your children! Yet in the midst of all this pain and heartbreak we find God saying, 'Rejected has become my loved and accepted one; Not Mine has become my specially chosen one.' The fractured family has found healing and unity.

Now listen carefully. He's not just talking about Jews by race, he has the whole planet in mind. How do I know this? Hosea makes it even clearer: 'Did I call you Not My Children? Scrub that out! Write instead, Beloved Children of the God Who Lives For Ever.' God is issuing a new birth certificate for his rejected family. A family that is going to include people who were never part of it originally. Do you see what this Lord of ours has done? Instead of writing off the chosen nation of Israel for her traitorous apostasy, and of course also the rest of the world which has turned its back on its Creator, he has embraced us all in a new contract granting full family status to absolutely anyone, Jew or Gentile, deserving or undeserving. A contract of eternal life with the Eternally Living One. It's a breathtaking vision, isn't it! And you believers in Rome are its fulfilment. (I'm going to make this clear before the letter ends, by showing what a glorious mix of Roman, Greek and Jewish you are.)

9:27-29 ²⁷ *Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: 'Though the number of the Israelites be like the sand by the sea, only the remnant will be saved. ²⁸ For the Lord will carry out his sentence on earth with speed and finality.'* ²⁹ *It is just as Isaiah said previously: 'Unless the Lord Almighty had left us descendants, we would have become like Sodom, we would have been like Gomorrah.'*

The witness of Scripture

[9:27-28] I've been calling witnesses from Scripture, and probably the most powerful witness of all is Isaiah. (I've been accused of simply arguing from proof-texts, or even of twisting the original meaning of texts to suit my theme. I'm not into that game. The Holy Spirit has led me to passages which act as windows, so to speak, into the mind and intention of the Lord God. When the scriptures were originally written, the curtains were drawn across the window; but now, with the coming of Jesus the Messiah, the curtains are pulled back and the light streams in.)

Isaiah's 'remnant'

Isaiah, you will remember, is the prophet of the 'remnant', the tiny band that stays faithful. His heart almost breaks as he looks back at the promise of God to Abraham ('I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore,') and contrasts this vision with the reality on the ground. Hosea, Isaiah's northern contemporary, is wrestling with the same problem. The vast majority of Israelites have been demonstrably unfaithful; they have gone off after other lords and have deserted the One True God; and all they now have to look forward to is not blessing but destruction and exile. So Isaiah cries out in agony, 'When God promised Abraham all those descendants, he can't have meant that they would all be Israelites by physical birth – yes, there will be uncountable multitudes, but only a small fraction of them will genetically be Jews. His word is going to be fulfilled all right, within human history, but he's going to have to cut most of the Jewish people out of his will.' And I share that pain of Isaiah's.

[9:29] He puts it into even sharper relief a few chapters earlier when he compares Jerusalem to the wicked cities of the plain: 'Look at what happened to Sodom and Gomorrah! Only a very few of their citizens escaped destruction. That's what's going to happen with Jerusalem.' He is referring, of course, to the dramatic rescue of Lot's family who were literally the only 'righteous' people left in the whole city. This 'remnant' theme runs not only through Isaiah but is found in many of the other prophets as well. What are they all trying to say – or what is the Holy Spirit telling us through their deeply puzzling words? Might it be that a tiny 'seed' will remain and become the seed-corn of a new nation entirely?

9:30-33 ³⁰ *What then shall we say? That the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith;* ³¹ *but the people of Israel, who pursued the law as the way of righteousness, have not attained their goal.* ³² *Why not? Because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works. They stumbled over the 'stumbling stone'.* ³³ *As it is written: 'See, I lay in Zion a stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall, and the one who believes in him will never be put to shame.'*

The faith-principle

[9:30-31] 'Hold on a moment! I can see where all this is leading, and I find it scandalous and offensive. You're saying that God's people, those billions of grains of sand on the beach, are going to consist in very large part of non-Jewish people who have found favour with God even though they were never concerned about it in the slightest; whereas the Jews, following the path of Moses' law which leads straight into the heart of God's will, have completely missed their destination. Is that really what you mean?' [9:32] Yes, it is, and all because of the faith-principle I've been hammering at fit to burst. The whole direction of Scripture isn't back to Moses, with its message of 'Keep the law and live' – that way lies frustration and failure – , but forward to the Messiah-Christ, with his message of 'Trust me and live!' You can call it a scandal if you want, and the attitude of most Jews I meet in my gospel work is that it is indeed deeply offensive to God's chosen people. [9:33] But the great Isaiah warned us about this too, when he said (I'm combining two or three texts together here): 'I the Lord am the master-builder, and I'm building a house for myself in the true Jerusalem. The foundation stone of this house will be the one who is to come. But the darkness of the people is so thick that they will trip over this stone and fall flat on their faces! Nevertheless, everyone who recognises the true worth of this stone, and puts their trust in it – or him – as the sure foundation of God's people and of their own lives, will have no cause to regret or feel any shame at what they have done.'

Once again, and I make no apology for this, it all comes down to what you are going to do with Jesus. Reject him, and all you have to depend on for salvation is your physical descent from Abraham and your pitiful attempts to keep Moses' law; accept him, and you become a full citizen in God's heavenly city with your faith firmly fixed on the Chosen One, God's true King.

10:1-4 ¹ *Brothers and sisters, my heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved.* ² *For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge.* ³ *Since they did not know the righteousness of God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness.* ⁴ *Christ is the culmination of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.*

Paul's heartache prayer

[10:1] My brothers and sisters in Christ, I am not trying to destroy the Jewish faith. But the whole point of a faith or religion is that it should actually work! If it doesn't solve the problems of sin and injustice, and bring people back into a life-saving relationship with the One True God, it is absolutely useless. Every day I bring my heartache to the Lord and it goes like this: 'O Lord, here are the people you have chosen, whom you led out of Egypt with a mighty hand and brought

safely into the Promised Land – and now they’ve lost their way. They need rescuing all over again. They are wandering and leaderless, because they have rejected you as their Leader. You’ve come in person yourself to bring them to the heavenly Jerusalem, and instead they’ve executed you as a traitor. Won’t you open their eyes and let them see?’

[10:2] I know what you (my never-silent objector) are going to say. ‘You can’t accuse the Jews of being unconcerned about God – they are desperately sincere in their desire to find him.’ Yes, but sincerity, my friend, is not enough. If I’m sincerely trying to get back to my house in a thick fog, and I miss the road that leads there, no amount of earnestness or zeal is going to bring me safely home. It’s no good being sincerely wrong. If only my fellow-kinspeople could see this!

The way of righteousness

[10:3] Let’s go back to that key word, which as we have seen is the single most important point at issue: ‘righteousness’. This describes our relationship with God himself, a relationship of unconditional acceptance on his part, and of unswerving allegiance on ours. Now if you fail to understand the way to come into this relationship, you’re going to be as lost as those Israelites wandering in the desert. If you reject God’s way of finding the way back to himself, and try to set up your own way of doing it, it’s no surprise if you run into trouble.

[10:4] Haven’t I said it often enough? Here is my gospel for the Jew: the whole culmination of the law of Moses, the direction in which it is pointing, its fulfilment and therefore its vanishing-point, is Jesus the Messiah. How can this be? Because the single purpose of the law is righteousness, a right relationship with God evidencing in a transparently good life – which is the achievement of the Lord Jesus and his alone, and which consequently we can achieve only by putting our trust in him, by centring our hopes for time and eternity in him. If you’re a Jesus-believer, you don’t need the law any more, not for salvation anyway (though it’s a good guidebook to the life of love). In fact, if you persist in setting up perfection through the law as your single goal, you render the whole salvation plan of God null and void where you are concerned. Sorry to go on about this, but it’s why I wrote the letter in the first place.

10:5-10 ⁵ *Moses writes this about the righteousness that is by the law: ‘The person who does these things will live by them.’* ⁶ *But the righteousness that is by faith says: ‘Do not say in your heart, “Who will ascend into heaven?”’ (that is, to bring Christ down)* ⁷ *‘or “Who will descend into the deep?”’ (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead).* ⁸ *But what does it say? ‘The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart,’ that is, the message concerning faith that we proclaim:* ⁹ *if you declare with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.* ¹⁰ *For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved.*

Follow God’s laws and live

[10:5] Now what does Moses himself say about all this? Take a look at Leviticus: ‘Why am I giving you all these detailed instructions? Because they’re the only firm path through the quicksands of human evil and error. Follow them, and you live; turn aside from them, and you die.’ It’s not thinking about following them that matters, it’s actually doing so. So he gives them this wonderfully clear and precise description of God’s way, as tangible and understandable as the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of flame by night, leading them safely onward – and he watches them lose their way time and again.

Excuses, excuses!

[10:6-7] So when Moses is 120 years old and about to take his leave, he makes a final despairing appeal: ‘This business of loving God and following him isn’t as complicated as you seem to think it is! You are sitting there going, “Oh, this Divine word is about a hundred miles above our heads, so we’ve got to get a superman to go up into the sky and bring it down to us, then we might be able

to hear what it says and start trying to carry it out.” Or you fantasise about it being at the other end of the Mediterranean, and needing someone to go on an amazing journey of daring exploration to an unknown land and bring it back; until then you haven’t a clue what it’s all about and you certainly can’t begin to put it into practice. What feeble excuses! It’s here, and it’s now. You’ve got God’s word right in your midst. It’s in your mouth every time you say it out loud. You’ve learnt it by heart. It’s part of you! Don’t give me all that stuff about don’t know and can’t do. You have no excuse; just get on and do it!

Moses points to Christ

Now Moses was God’s prophet, and he was pointing forward to the Messiah-Christ, who is the Word of God in our midst. What he is saying is this: you don’t need to go up to heaven to bring Christ down, because he’s already come down to us and been born as one of us and been living just along the street. Nor do you need to plumb the vastness of the sea to find him, because he’s done even better than that – he’s descended into the depths of death with our sins and come up again without them.

[10:8] Our gospel, in fact, is pure Moses: ‘God’s word is right there in your heart and in your mouth!’ Why? Because all you have to do is to believe it, once you’ve heard it from us (and that’s not too difficult because we’ve brought it over land and sea to everybody we possibly can). [10:9] It’s in your mouth because you have uttered the priceless words, ‘Jesus is Lord, and he’s my Lord.’ It’s in your heart because you have embraced the resurrection miracle as God’s truth: ‘If God did it for Jesus, he can do it for me.’ [10:10] How to be saved? Believe and confess. Believe wholeheartedly in the Easter message, that Jesus died and rose again to put you right with God, and you’ll find he has done that very thing. Then tell someone else that Jesus is now your Lord and Master, and you’ll find that this apparently lunatic admission has got your name inscribed in God’s book of life.

10:11-13 ¹¹ *As Scripture says, ‘Anyone who believes in him will never be put to shame.’* ¹² *For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile – the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him,* ¹³ *for, ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’*

No cause for shame

[10:11] I’ve already quoted the promise that no-one who puts their trust in Jesus as Lord is going to have any cause to regret or be ashamed of having done so. Because people are going to try to make you feel ashamed. If you’re a Jew, ‘you’re abandoning the faith of your ancestors!’ If you’ve been a happy-go-lucky hedonist or scientific atheist, ‘you’ve become one of those God-bothering anti-intellectuals!’ Somebody somewhere is going to say something disparaging or downright nasty about you.

[10:12-13] But it doesn’t matter. Far more important issues are at stake. No matter what your family background or your previous attitudes have been, you have woken up to the reality of the Lord Jesus and to the sheer, wonderful grace of his offer to you: ‘Anyone who cries out to me to save them will find me right there beside them.’ This promise was originally made in the context of the Lord’s final coming to judge the earth, but you needn’t wait till then. In fact the apostle Peter quoted these words on the day the good news was officially launched. I myself remember praying desperately, ‘Lord Jesus, save me!’ in Damascus, as I began to understand how my physical blindness matched my far darker inner blindness.

‘You ought to be ashamed of yourself?’ Never! The only cause for self-castigation would be if I turned my back on God’s offer of forgiveness and new life. I would, in fact, be a complete and utter idiot if I did that. Because Jesus my Lord never, ever lets anyone down.

Saved!

Have you felt the tremendous relief of this word, as I have? 'Saved, rescued, salvation, safety' – the constant song of the Psalmist, the major motif of Isaiah, the central issue of the gospel of Christ. No more burden of guilt and prickings of conscience from the past. No more tyranny of sin, captivity to Satan and obsession with self in the present. No more prospect of rejection, declaration of unfitness, exclusion from the feast or estrangement from God's people in the future. Once I was out in the open plain, with the hounds of hell steadily gaining on me and no help in sight. Now I am secure within the city walls, rejoicing with its citizens and an honoured companion of its King. What a message to bring to the people I love more dearly than anything on earth! And what a tragedy that they can't hear it or share in its blessings!

10:14-15 ¹⁴ *How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?* ¹⁵ *And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written: 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!'*

Getting the good news round

[10:14] All this, of course, lays a great responsibility on those of us who have already responded to the good news. There are people out there who haven't yet 'called upon the name of the Lord' and found new life in Christ. There is an inescapable logic at work here. People don't ask for help if they don't think they need it. If they do realise that they need assistance, they don't go to someone they don't trust. Or, indeed, someone they've never heard of. I know this sounds basic commonsense, but if there's no publicity about the Lord Jesus Christ, who he is, what he has done and what he can do for you, and if nobody recommends him, then don't be surprised if no-one believes in him. We are all loudspeakers for Christ; in our lives, our actions and words, we are his messengers. [10:15] And unless we have this sense of being commissioned by him, of his depending upon us to get the good news round, we're going to be kicking our heels at home.

Remember Isaiah's picture of the captive Jerusalem sitting in the dust and then hearing the good news of liberty and restoration? He imagines a messenger coming over the mountains, at first a mere dot in the distance, then as he gets nearer you begin to catch his words: 'Peace, joy, salvation, victory!' His story is so good that people laugh, 'His feet may be dusty, muddy and smelly, but they're the loveliest things we've ever seen!' We are so grateful to this person for coming through difficulty and danger to reach us with the news we have needed so badly. He may just be a lowly emissary, but he's done his job and got here in time. Otherwise, we wouldn't have heard. We wouldn't ever know.

So – where are your feet going today, and who's going to be grateful to God that you came? Lord, here am I; send me!

10:16-17 ¹⁶ *But not all the Israelites accepted the good news. For Isaiah says, 'Lord, who has believed our message?'* ¹⁷ *Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ.*

The stumbling-block

[10:16] 'How come, then, that with the good news of God's salvation in Christ being rung out loud and clear, there are still those who don't, and won't, accept it? Including and especially, members of the chosen people of Israel?' Yes, I know. This is my heartache. I don't understand it. It is a great tragedy, and a great mystery. But stay with me while we explore its implications.

Let me take you back to the last and greatest of the Servant Songs of Isaiah. It starts on a note of complete astonishment. God's Servant is someone incredibly important, much greater than any

earthly king or potentate, yet his exaltation is strangely humiliating and painful. The message isn't what anyone expected to hear. Nobody is going to believe it. What is going on here? As Isaiah goes on to explain, this Servant-Messiah is going to meet with total rejection. He is going to be stripped of all human dignity and is going to become a thing of loathsome ugliness. Why? Because his work is going to be the bearing of human sin. How can this Messiah be the all-conquering King promised not only by God's word to David but even by Isaiah himself?

[10:17] This, in a nutshell, is the stumbling-block for the Jew and the obstacle for the Christian messenger. Oh yes, the messenger is being faithful to his (and her) commission, he knows faith can only come through hearing the word, and the word is only valid if it is centred upon Jesus who is the Christ. The story of Philip and the Ethiopian official illustrates this point: as the man reads this very same chapter of Isaiah, Philip explains how it is fulfilled in Jesus, and the result is that he believes and is baptised. This is how it is meant to work, and of course in countless cases it does. But what if the Ethiopian had been your well-trained and zealous member of the Jewish circumcision? Would he have believed quite so readily? In my experience of preaching the gospel for the last twenty years or more, I have to say, sadly and even bitterly, that the overwhelming answer is 'no'.

10:18-21 ¹⁸ *But I ask: did they not hear? Of course they did: 'Their voice has gone out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.'* ¹⁹ *Again I ask: did Israel not understand? First, Moses says, 'I will make you envious by those who are not a nation; I will make you angry by a nation that has no understanding.'* ²⁰ *And Isaiah boldly says, 'I was found by those who did not seek me; I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me.'* ²¹ *But concerning Israel he says, 'All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and obstinate people.'*

Gospel logic

[10:18] Why is this? Surely, if my gospel logic is correct, once a person hears the news of what God has done in Jesus Christ, faith results as a matter of course. The preaching of the gospel itself has irresistible power. Well, the Jews have heard the message. Just as the whole of creation proclaims God's handiwork, so that there is no excuse for ignorance about the existence and power of God, so too Christ's ambassadors have gone out through the whole length and breadth of the world and shone his light into every corner. I know we haven't finished yet, there is much land still to be possessed, but few people can plead that they've never heard the story. And we have faithfully gone to the Jews first, as a matter of strategic priority. We have consistently operated in the public domain.

[10:19] 'I just wonder, though, whether your gospel logic *is* absolutely watertight. The sequence 'sending – word – faith – salvation' is of course the way it is meant to work. But didn't Jesus himself say that the success of the word depends not just on the generative power of the seed, but also on the receptiveness of the soil? The sower might do his work faithfully, but the birds of the air could gobble it up before it had a chance to take root. It is all too possible that the message may not be understood. Could this have happened in the case of the Israelites?'

The Song of Moses

I agree that it looks like that. The long history of Israel is characterised by a chronic failure to see what kind of a God they are dealing with, and what he is really up to. This has lasted down to the present day. But I can't accept that this is simply an inability to understand what God is saying to them. There's more to it than that. Let's have another look at those marvellous end chapters of Deuteronomy, where we have Moses wrestling with this problem of Israelite rebelliousness and stubbornness. He has given them the Book of the Law, but he still dreads them turning to other gods. So he teaches them a Song, which in turn they are to teach to their children. It's going to be part of the core curriculum of the Jewish people. If they ever depart from the Lord, it is going to be there as a witness against them. I know this wonderful Song by heart and I'm sure many of you do too.

Moses contrasts the love and faithfulness of the Most High with the treacherous unfaithfulness of his people. Unthinkably, they have transferred their allegiance to other objects of worship, more immediate and tangible than the invisible Father-God they originally knew. So he says, 'You have aroused my jealousy and anger by turning to so-called gods that aren't really gods at all. All right, then: I'm going to arouse your jealousy and anger by choosing a people who aren't really a people at all, and who haven't got the understanding of me that you have.'

There's a kind of counter-logic at work here. Hear, believe and obey, and your salvation is secure; but hear, disbelieve and disobey, and you lose your security. In fact, you risk being replaced by a nation that you would consider to be beyond the pale. Salvation is like water finding its own level: block it at one point, and it overflows somewhere else.

Non-searchers find God

[10:20] Isaiah too reaches this unthinkable conclusion. 'Don't assume,' he pictures God saying in desperation to Israel, 'Don't assume, just because Gentile nations aren't religious in the way you are, that they won't find me. They're going to discover me by accident! They may be looking in completely the wrong direction, or be so blind that they're not looking at all, but I'm still going to open their eyes and show myself to them.' [10:21] And he contrasts the situation with his own precious chosen people: 'I've been like a parent holding out both hands to my own children, begging, beseeching them to run into my arms – yet how have they responded? By turning their backs on me with arms folded in complete defiance. By shaping their mouths into a permanent "No!" And this has been going on all day every day for centuries.' What a paradox!

11:1-6 ¹ I ask then: did God reject his people? By no means! I am an Israelite myself, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin. ² God did not reject his people, whom he foreknew. Don't you know what Scripture says in the passage about Elijah – how he appealed to God against Israel: ³ 'Lord, they have killed your prophets and torn down your altars; I am the only one left, and they are trying to kill me?' ⁴ And what was God's answer to him? 'I have reserved for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal.' ⁵ So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace. ⁶ And if by grace, then it cannot be based on works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace.

God's Plan torn up?

[11:1] 'Paul, you have got to face the fact that God has given up on his chosen people. He has done what he said he would do, and he has replaced them with complete strangers.' I agree that would be the simplest solution to our dilemma; but it is completely unacceptable. For one thing, I'm a member of the people of Israel myself. I'm a physical descendant of Abraham, I'm from the tribe of Benjamin which is so blessed that it rides between God's shoulders like the youngest child being carried by its parent. How can I possibly conclude that my Father doesn't want me after all? [11:2] Has he torn up the Plan he made before time began? Has he consigned all those promises to Abraham to the rubbish-heap? God never changes his mind; it may seem as if he has, but it is quite impossible.

Elijah's mistake

'Well then, you are a rare exception to the rule.' This would be to repeat Elijah's mistake. There he is in the cave on Mt Horeb, and the Lord throws everything at him, hundred-mile-an-hour gales, massive earthquakes, forest fires – and Elijah realises that there are bigger forces at work than he in his depressed state of mind has ever conceived. But he stays inside his cave, secure in his unshakeable self-righteousness, until everything suddenly goes quiet and he is called outside by the gentlest of all whispers. [11:3] And this wonderful, gracious, loving God listens once again to his petulant refrain, how Israel had murdered God's own prophets and destroyed the holy places, and how he Elijah was the only faithful Israelite left standing, and they were after his life too. [11:4] So how does the Lord reply? Not with another riddle, but with a straight answer: 'The only one? There are seven thousand others like you, who haven't for one moment sold their souls to pseudo-gods of nature and fertility like Baal and the others in Jezebel's pantheon. And by seven thousand, I don't mean just a tiny army, I mean an enormous multitude you couldn't begin to count. They are mine, and they're going to stay mine. But thanks all the same, you're a star too.'

The single principle: grace

[11:5] Do you see how grace works? It's not us telling God what we deserve, it's God giving us what we don't deserve. The fact that Elijah, you, I or anyone else have been through fire and tempest to stay true to the Lord is totally irrelevant. God does things the way he wants to. We think, from our particular corner of space and time, 'Oh, what a pitiful minority we are – just a tiny fraction of the total number – the faithful few.' Yet from Elijah's day (in fact, from Abraham's day) up to the present moment, AD 57 or 2057 CE or whatever you want to call it, God has been quietly assembling a massive kingdom people, and his choice of who is going to belong to it is based on one principle and one only: 'This is the birthday present I want for my Son.'

[11:6] Don't you see (I'm preaching to myself as much as to my readers) that if grace is going to be grace, nobody actually deserves any privileges with God at all. If he wanted to end the whole thing here and now, none of us could lift a finger. The fact is that you and I, whatever our background and past, have been chosen for a purpose, to do a particular job for him, which is to widen the kingdom to include the entire human race. This is the Abrahamic vision: the friends of God, like the stars in multitude, blessing and transforming the earth.

11:7-10 ⁷ What then? What the people of Israel sought so earnestly they did not obtain. The elect among them did, but the others were hardened, ⁸ as it is written: 'God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that could not see and ears that could not hear, to this very day.' ⁹ And David says: 'May their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a retribution for them.' ¹⁰ May their eyes be darkened so they cannot see, and their backs be bent for ever.'

Is God arbitrary?

[11:7] 'Yes, Paul, but don't you see the problem? If you're a Jew, you have an inbuilt longing for God. Your deepest desire is to see his face. Is God going to say, "Sorry, but however much you want to worship me and serve me, I have not personally selected you and that's it"?' Put like that, I agree it seems monstrously unjust, even cruel. You can make God out to be an arbitrary and sadistic potentate who has his favourites and the rest can get lost. The truth is rather different. Listen.

Impregnable hearts

The one person God cannot get through to is someone who is absolutely determined never to capitulate. They have thrown up an impregnable wall around themselves. [11:8] We're going to have a good look at the chapter in Isaiah where the prophet is saying that there are basically two contrary processes going on in human hearts. One is where a person starts by seeing and hearing (perhaps because they've had a good religious education) but ends up blind and deaf; and the other is where they start blind and deaf and end up seeing and hearing. God has decided (and he's sticking to it) that a human being has autonomy over his or her own heartland. To the sightless person who wants to see, yes of course, God gives wonderful new vision; but to the sighted person who can see perfectly well but won't have anything to do with it, well, he takes away their ability to see.

Spiritual truths

[11:9] David the Psalmist experienced this too, with contemporaries who should have supported him but had turned against him. He utters what appears to be violent and even vengeful language, but he is expressing spiritual truths in the midst of deep disappointment and anger. His enemies were meeting at mealtimes and plotting against him, and they had their spies everywhere. OK, says David, I can't do anything about this so I'm taking it to the Lord. Please, Lord, turn their table-talk round so that their plots fall upon themselves, they fall into their own trap and get what they deserve. [11:10] Please turn their wisdom to folly and let them end up carrying the burdens they are trying to create for others. (I'd like to go on to show how this Psalm is all about the sufferings of the crucified Messiah, and how he turns this prayer round so that other people's sins fall upon himself, but that's for another time.)

Basically, if you harden yourself against the Lord and refuse to let his truth guide you, it's as though you are letting darkness stream into your soul instead of light, and the inevitable result is, you end up blind. Yes, it's tough; but if you think God's a soft touch and you can take him for a ride, you'd better think again. The Jews' stumbling-block is the Messiah question. If they don't accept that Jesus is God's Chosen one, they disqualify themselves from being chosen themselves. It doesn't matter what wonderful, sincere and spiritual people they are – this is the acid test. Is Jesus Lord?

11:11-16 ¹¹ Again I ask: did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all! Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious. ¹² But if their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their full inclusion bring! ¹³ I am talking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I take pride in my ministry ¹⁴ in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them. ¹⁵ For if their rejection brought reconciliation to the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead? ¹⁶ If the part of the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy; if the root is holy, so are the branches.

Not final rejection

[11:11] 'You are making it look as though it was God's intention all along to get the Jews to commit spiritual suicide by rejecting their Messiah.' Oh no, it wasn't. As I said, like water finding its own

level, when God's will to save people is blocked in one place, it overflows into another. But unblock the first blockage, and it will flow back again in its full glory! It may seem odd to say that the rebellion of the Jews brings salvation to the Gentiles, simply to make the Jews wild with jealousy – but we're encountering the heart of the Almighty here, where human love is magnified a thousandfold.

[11:12] The Jews crucified their Messiah. Does that mean that God shuts up shop and has nothing more to do with the human race? Not a bit of it! If the family won't accept the incredible riches of their inheritance, he's going to offer it to non-family instead. But the 'instead' doesn't mean final rejection – the inheritance isn't a fixed amount, it's infinitely expandable, and it remains never less than fully and permanently available to the heirs for whom it was first intended. If and when they claim it in full, the whole world will have been immeasurably enriched.

God's ultimate intention

[11:13-14] Here's a special message to the non-Jewish folk among you. I know I go on the whole time about how I'm an apostle to the Gentiles and what a privilege it is to have been given this ministry, but I'm sure you realise that there's an agenda here: it's just possible that some of my fellow-countrymen may wake up and say, 'Hey, Paul, what are you doing? You're giving away our treasure outside the family, but we want it too!' and they start getting jealous and demand their share of salvation, which of course was designed for them all along.

[11:15] God wants his house to be full. He is planning a new heaven and earth crammed with Jews, Gentiles and any other subdivision of humankind you can think of. It may look as if the exclusion of the Jews is necessary for the Gentiles to be included; but the ultimate intention is for the whole world to be united under the Lordship of Christ. He died for everybody, so it can't be his will that part of that everybody should stay dead. There's a resurrection coming, and the Jews are going to be as much part of that as anyone else. And that will make it an even more glorious resurrection.

Original holiness

[11:16] Here's a woman doing some home baking. First she makes a small lump of dough and mixes the yeast in; then she adds dough until there's enough for the whole household. She's not going to throw away the first lump in favour of the extra dough – otherwise the new dough won't rise and the whole batch will stay dead and untransformed. Or here's a man growing a field of olive trees: he starts with a very special olive-shoot of the finest quality, and bit by bit it develops a trunk and branches and grows magnificently. He's not then going to chop out the original stock and just leave the new branches – the precious sap has got to keep flowing up from the roots through the whole plant. The holiness God wants in his heavenly kingdom started with Israel, and it's a very special holiness which is essential for the whole outfit – he's not going to strip out the original article and replace it with a second brand of holiness which has nothing to do with the first kind. The Jewish faith and character has always been a necessary part of God's final design, and it's going to stay that way.

You see how I'm trying to solve my basic problem: 'Has God jettisoned his own people?' The answer has got to be a resounding 'No!'

11:17-21 ¹⁷ *If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root,* ¹⁸ *do not consider yourself to be superior to those other branches. If you do, consider this: you do not support the root, but the root supports you.* ¹⁹ *You will say then, 'Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in.'* ²⁰ *Granted. But they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but tremble.* ²¹ *For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either.*

Human pride

[11:17-18] Let's stay with the olive analogy a bit longer. I appreciate that if you're born and bred in a city, as I am, you won't appreciate the finer points of olive-growing and grafting, so I'll keep it simple. I've often heard arguments about who represents the true Abrahamic stock planted by God: is it Israel, or is it the Church of Christ? I've heard Jews quoting scripture after scripture to prove that they are the original tree producing vintage fruit, while Gentiles are an upstart variety of olive grafted in at a much later stage. The non-Jews reply that the whole situation has changed: the original branches have been broken off and yes, they are wild stock that has been grafted in, but it's as a replacement for the fruitless and withered Jewish branches, and the true, life-giving sap now flows through them. Recognise this altercation for what it is: human pride, desperate to establish its own superiority. It has no theological merit whatsoever.

Life from the roots

[11:19] It doesn't matter what kind of a branch you are. What matters is that you get your life from the roots. It's the roots and the trunk that support the branches, not the other way round. If you're a believer who wasn't born a Jew, and you argue that the Jewish branches had to be broken off so that you could be inserted in their place, ask yourself exactly why they were broken off and how you qualified for being grafted in. [11:20] Answer: unbelief and faith. Jewish unbelief, Gentile faith. Your faith isn't something for you to be proud about, as though you have a superior variety and God has recognised this and chosen you specially for his people. You are only part of the tree at all because you put your trust in Christ for salvation and are totally dependent upon his Spirit for life and growth. This should make you thoroughly humble and remove any arrogance you may be tempted to feel. [11:21] You could so easily wither and drop off the vine – and we all know people and even churches that have suffered precisely this fate. God has no favourites: if you hang in there and keep believing, you'll bear fruit for Christ; if you turn back and give it all up, you'll wither. That's the rule, and there are no exceptions.

11:22-24²² Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off.²³ And if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again.²⁴ After all, if you were cut out of an olive tree that is wild by nature, and contrary to nature were grafted into a cultivated olive tree, how much more readily will these, the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree!

God's goodness

[11:22] Don't try to reinvent God in your own image. He's not just your regular nice guy who tries to get on with everybody. Open your eyes to what he is really like. God is *good*. His goodness consists of limitless generosity to the completely undeserving, total faithfulness to his declared intentions, a blazing passion for justice and an uncompromising antipathy to all evil and unbelief. If he tells Abraham, Moses, David and every prophet in sight that what he wants is faith, then faith is the name of the game. No faith – curtains. The smallest glimmer of faith – come on in! But then, stay in. If you decide it's not for you after all, out you go. Sounds simple, is simple.

One strike and out?

[11:23] 'Yes, Paul, thanks for brilliantly summarising the whole of the Old Testament story. But we need urgently to know one thing: is there a second chance? Or is it, as far as Israel is concerned, one strike and you're out?'

Thanks for asking that because it leads me to my final point and the solution of this whole agonising dilemma. Olives again. Some of the original branches failed to bear the fruit of faith and had to be cut off. But supposing as they lie there on the ground, withered and useless and ready for burning, they say to the olive-farmer, 'Please graft us back into your tree – we want to be part of your great and glorious orchard after all' – what then? No problem! God loves nothing better

than regenerating completely dead specimens. [11:24] After all, think about it, he's done it with you who didn't start off as Israelites. You belonged to a tree that was growing wild, producing little or no worthwhile fruit, part of the natural jungle. Then he opened the door of the kingdom to the Gentiles. He took wild branches, as it were, and grafted them into the trunk of that tree on which he had spent centuries of careful preparation, cultivating it and grooming it for the great work of spreading his knowledge everywhere on earth.

If he can do that, it's a comparatively simple matter for him to take rejected members of the original tree, branches that used to bear good and wholesome fruit, and graft them back into their own natural environment. Yes, of course there's a second chance – as long as we seize it!

11:25-27 ²⁵ *I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers and sisters, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in, ²⁶ and in this way all Israel will be saved. As it is written: 'The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob. ²⁷ And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins.'*

Lifting the veil

[11:25] I hope you get the point. It's all too easy for Gentile Christians to assume that they've taken over the whole orchard and that the Jews are nowhere in sight. But you're reckoning without God. He's going to solve the problem all in his own good time. Even now, Jews are trickling into Christ's kingdom. But, it's true, the nation of Israel has for the most part gone into cold storage. It's only temporary, though. Let me lift a corner of the veil and peer into the future. One day the mission to the Gentile world will have reached its fullest extent, and then a wonderful thing is going to happen. Israel will find her Messiah.

Messiah talk

[11:26-27] Turn once again to Isaiah and that heart-rending catalogue of human iniquity and failure from which I quoted in the second section of my letter. It is first and foremost an indictment of God's own people. It sets out his case for abandoning them completely. So does he? Not a bit of it. He says, OK, no-one else is going to rescue them from their appalling degradation, so I'd better do it myself. And where does he set up his headquarters for this terrifying assault on sin? Sion, Jerusalem, Golgotha. 'That's where the Redeemer is going to do his work' says Isaiah. 'That's where he's going to offer the chance to a crooked and twisted nation to repent. That's where the new covenant is going to be sealed. That's where the Spirit is going to be given for a permanent possession. That's where my words of salvation and forgiveness are going to be passed on from generation to generation and to the ends of the earth.' If this isn't Messiah talk, then I don't know what is.

Do you see the point? God never, never gives up. He waits (for centuries, if necessary) to see if the nation can get back on the right road – but it can't, so he rolls up his sleeves and sorts out the mess himself through his Servant-Deliverer Jesus. God means business, and his business is to save his people, and while he's about it, to save a whole lot of others who were never going to make it either.

11:28-32 ²⁸ *As far as the gospel is concerned, they are enemies for your sake; but as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs, ²⁹ for God's gifts and his call are irrevocable. ³⁰ Just as you who were at one time disobedient to God have now received mercy as a result of their disobedience, ³¹ so they too have now become disobedient in order that they too may now receive mercy as a result of God's mercy to you. ³² For God has bound everyone over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all.*

God's mind hasn't changed

[11:28] 'In that case, why are the Jews giving us non-Jews such a hard time? Is it because we've been given the gospel and they haven't (yet)? Why aren't they more grateful?' I know what you're going through – I've been through it myself, and it isn't over yet. Try to take the long view. They are his chosen people, his treasured possession, his channel of blessing for the whole world. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph – they are the foundation stones of the whole enterprise. He made an unbreakable covenant with them. [11:29] Don't ever underestimate the love and patience of God. You or I would have given up centuries ago, but not God – once he has set his love on someone, be they ever so undeserving, once his call has come to someone, there is no going back on his intentions. He will carry on until he has done it, and no amount of human perversity is going to stand in his way.

Rebellion and pardon

[11:30-31] It's all about rebellion and pardon. Here's a thoroughly unpopular king, whom everyone considers to be a tyrannical dictator. In his kingdom there are goodies and baddies. The baddies have always given him grief and he's handed out all the usual punishments, prison, exile, death and so on. But now the goodies, too, who have at least made a show of cosying up to the tyrant, start muttering and rebelling, and they have to be punished in similar fashion. So after a while the dictator does an extraordinary thing. He pardons all the baddies! He says, it doesn't matter what you've done in the past, here's your Get out of Jail Free card. And the (former) goodies can't believe their eyes. Perhaps the tyrant is quite nice after all? So they queue up to get their freedom passes as well.

Charter of freedom

[11:32] That, believe it or not, is the present and future scenario. The whole world is in rebellion against God. Jews, Gentiles, the lot of us. (Why, is a complete mystery.) We've all gone off the rails, wandered off God's Highway of Holiness. So God has acted as one might expect: he's thrown us all in prison, and the prison is called Castle Disbelief. He's locked us up and put us in charge of a thoroughly nasty gaoler called Giant Disillusionment. But all the time we've had in our possession a wonderful charter of freedom, called Servant Promise, if only we could be bothered to take it (or him) seriously. All the gates have sprung wide open, beckoning us back into the glorious sunlit country outside. It's the Gentiles who discover this first. Then, finally, finally, the Jews cotton on too. And they troop out in their millions, singing.

'You wish!' No, I *know*. I know what God's like. He sent Jesus personally to get me out of jail, and told me to tell the others. It's going to happen on a worldwide scale. Just you see.

11:33-36 ³³ *Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!* ³⁴ *'Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counsellor?'* ³⁵ *'Who has ever given to God, that God should repay them?'* ³⁶ *For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be the glory for ever! Amen.*

God takes advice from no-one

[11:33] I'm lost in wonder at this God who fills heaven and earth. He is unfathomably wise. He knows absolutely everything. He is infinitely resourceful and imaginative. You think you can second-guess him, but he's always several steps ahead of you. You start trying to plot his likely moves, but the heaving seas and windblown desert sands carry no trace of his footprints. [11:34] Whoever we are, archangels, devils, saints or sinners, none of us has more than the slightest inkling of what he is intending to do – and, as Isaiah found all those years ago when trying to discover the Lord's plans for the future of his people, he doesn't take advice from anyone. He has revealed enough for us to get on with, and that's all we're going to get, for the time being.

[11:35] We think in our puny arrogance that we can strike a bargain with him. He must surely give us some credit for our intelligence, our shining goodness, our contribution to his kingdom! But as Job discovered, God owes no-one anything. What we think are his due rewards to us turn out to be gifts of sheer grace.

[11:36] Everything originates from him. Nothing takes place without his full permission and proactive planning. All that happens works towards his ultimate good purpose. It will take all eternity to catalogue his praises, because his glory is unending. All true, I promise you. Start singing now!

12:1-15:13 The Church in the world – how all our relationships have changed

12:1 ¹ *Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship.*

The compassionate God

[12:1] Let's see where we've got to. My dear friends at Rome, I hope the agonising we've done over this whole question – who are the true people of God? – has brought you to the Lord's feet in gratitude and humility. There are no longer Jews and Gentiles in God's Israel. Once all of us were excluded, we weren't his people, we were right off the road, upside down in the ditch. Now we're all included, we're welcomed and accepted into the kingdom family; and all because God chose to do it that way. Like the Good Samaritan in Jesus' story, he found us by the wayside and had compassion on us. He picked us up and brought us into the warmth and shelter of a proper home. He settled our account in full – there's nothing for us to pay. To do this he had to make the long journey to the cross. He took the worst that the world's unbelief and cruelty could inflict on him, and hung up there for each and all of us. Such love!

My primary relationship

Now we've got to face the same world, and I have lots to say about this. So let's get our basic attitude settled from the start. (Please treat this, and any command you find in these pages, not as a ruling from some apostolic or monastic order, but as a direct appeal from the Great Encourager himself, the Spirit who is Jesus' own resurrection holiness present in us.) Each of us has a body, a living, breathing, moving, thinking, feeling, personal 'I'. My body is myself in relationship, where I touch the created world, other people, time and space, the eternal God.

So one relationship has got to be primary, and all the rest secondary – this body's relationship to God. You all know what a sacrifice is, whether your tradition is Jewish or pagan. It is a living being laying down its life (willingly or unwillingly) on behalf of someone not itself. This act may seem messy and unnecessary, but it is the principle of all life and freedom. Others die, we live; we die, others live. Now here's the miracle: when we offer ourselves consciously and unreservedly to the Lord, we may think we're losing our true selves, but in fact we come alive! When we start living for Christ, and not for sin and self-gratification, we come out of the darkness into the sunshine of God's love and full approval. Believe me, he is longing for this to happen for you.

Is this a single act of dedication, or a ceaseless and constant readjustment? Well, of course it's both. We've used the priestly language of sacrifice, and now we can use the word 'worship.' When we say 'I belong to Jesus, and Jesus belongs to me,' it may be the first time we've ever said it (there's got to be a first time), or it may be the thousandth time; but each time, we hit truth, life as God meant it to be lived – with himself as the primary relationship. All Scripture points to this. All nature witnesses to it. All human philosophy is meaningless without it. All church or temple

'worship', liturgy, singing, teaching, is a mockery if it is not offered in heartfelt gratitude to the One who laid down his life for us.

12:2 ² *Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.*

God's design for you

[12:2] 'So what is this "constant readjustment" you speak of? Is it a question of finding exactly the right path to tread every day, so that we are never out of the centre of God's will?' Let's think about this. Suppose you're a traveller trying to get from A to B. The road, like all Roman roads, seems broad and straight enough, but making progress depends on getting your wheels firmly into the two ruts scored by countless vehicles before you, and sticking to them. You are so intent on keeping to the prescribed road-pattern that you never notice the bird wheeling free overhead. It too is under direction, from some homing mechanism in its makeup, but at any moment it can manoeuvre up or down, to one side or the other, without consulting any book of rules or recommended itinerary – and all apparently without the slightest effort.

Most of us journey along ruts carved for us by systems and cultural patterns that have nothing to do with faith in God and everything to do with how other people want us to behave. Much of this is good and normal, of course; human society wouldn't have a chance if we were all complete mavericks. But if you end up looking exactly identical to everyone else, you miss out on God's design for you. (I have to say that this is even true of much that passes for 'church', and I'm coming to that in a moment.) When the Spirit sets a person free, they start thinking, 'I used to please myself, but I was like a caterpillar crawling along its leaf, obsessed with the next bit of stuff. Now I've got someone else to please, and that's Jesus Christ. I'm like a butterfly winging my way through a new world. Sometimes I want to burrow back into my cocoon or my former caterpillar life; but now I've got the choice to travel a different course.'

God has a plan for your life, but it's not a kind of mapped-out groove you've got to find and stay in for safety's sake. It's an exhilarating path you and he travel together; it's a satisfying partnership of heart and mind and will; and you end up where he wants you to be. It's that good!

Cruise-liner or lifeboat?

What I'm really talking about is a complete change of attitude. The church isn't a cruise liner where we expect sun lounges to be arranged for us on the top deck; it's a lifeboat where every person is urgently needed to carry out their specific task, otherwise people don't get rescued and they die. Christ's plans for you aren't necessarily going to be comfortable – they're always related to his master Plan, which is to find as many lost people as possible and bring them home.

12:3-5 ³ *For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. ⁴ For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, ⁵ so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.*

God's gift and our gifts

[12:3] That's what the church is there for. But human pride is so insidious, and it gets into the holiest places. Once I thought I was the bee's knees, but then I discovered the grace of God, and my pride crumbled. That's the only reason I can talk to you, not because I have some kind of apostolic charisma. We all want to be the best for God; but when that means 'better than that person over there,' we've fallen for the devil's lie. Beware of always trying to be super-spiritual. God is the great giver, and his greatest gift is Christ; on him we depend moment by moment to show us his will and to give us the strength to follow it. That's the life of faith. Faith isn't a kind of

extra-special quality which some people have a lot of and most of us have much less of. It's the capacity to be empty enough to receive God's fullness. In that sense we all have the same amount of faith: total helplessness and dependence on Christ.

[12:4] 'But aren't some of us entrusted with more responsibility than others, and to that extent God gives us varying degrees of giftedness?' Yes, of course that's true. Let's think about this whole question of being servants and ambassadors of Christ, and the gifts we need to fulfil this calling. The great secret of service is that God gives each one of us the ability, and the dependability, to be of use to others according to their needs. My favourite analogy is the human body. All its parts have work to do, but it's not the same kind of work. If we decide to take the dog for a walk, for instance, our brain works out where to go, our eyes show us the way ahead, our feet take us along the path, our voice shouts at the dog and sings to the Lord, and all the time our heart pumps the blood round and so on. [12:5] So with the church of Christ, universal and local. However many or how few we are, we have different functions to carry out, and we depend on each other to get it right.

12:6-8 ⁶ We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; ⁷ if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; ⁸ if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.

Grace and 'graces'

[12:6] The church isn't a one-man band, nor is it a collection of prima donnas. We're a miscellaneous assortment of sinners saved by grace, and saints serving by grace. Don't confuse 'grace', which we all have by the bucketful, with 'graces', which are specific capabilities (natural or supernatural) we can offer for the Master's use. Some examples: take prophecy. This is the ability, which some have and others don't, of hearing a message from God and passing it on to others. Such messages don't have the status of Scripture, in fact they should always be testable by Scripture and not just be the product of a person's powerful imagination. But it does require a humble confidence that the Lord has given me this perception and that it's going to be important to someone. I've chosen this example first because it's a skill we need to develop more widely in the church, the Spirit-given ability to speak words of insight into a particular situation, to articulate a vision or a challenge, both in public and in private.

[12:7] Then there's *diakonia*, service. This is a gift for practical administration, for seeing what needs to be done and rolling up your sleeves and doing it, like running a lunch club for the poor or keeping the church's accounts. If you think this makes you more important than others, remember that the Lord Jesus called himself a *diakonos* (servant) – and he washed the disciples' sweaty feet. Or take teaching: if you find you can explain things simply and attractively, whether it's to a children's group, or to new converts, or to the gathered church on the Lord's Day, then trust God to use you to build up others, and work at your gift. [12:8] Building up others, in fact, is an absolutely vital function; my colleague Barnabas had the name 'Son of Encouragement' because he always saw the potential in people and could make them feel better about themselves with a deft word of appreciation or a humorous challenge to stretch themselves a bit farther. I have learnt so much from that man.

Then again there's the ability to deal with those much-needed finances. If God has blessed you with earthly riches, share them around, not patronisingly but with the simple joy of helping people to meet their needs. It also applies to leadership – it takes special gifts to head up a show and take it on in the right direction, and it takes a lot of hard work too! But by the same token it's all too easy for resentment to take over, if you think others aren't pulling their weight or making life difficult for you. Don't let the spark go out; keep at it cheerfully, and don't lose the sense of

urgency. A final example is keeping relationships sweet; we all ought to be doing this, of course, but it's a special gift to be able to go to two people who are holding some kind of mutual grudge, and to show them how to forgive each other, all with a lack of intensity and a saving lightness of touch. Not easy!

12:9-10 ⁹ *Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.* ¹⁰ *Be devoted to one another in love. Honour one another above yourselves.*

Things we should all be doing

[12:9] So far I've given examples of things some can do and others can't. But of course there is a whole range of things we should all be doing. Let me ask you some questions about your church; if some of them seem a little too close for comfort, remember that it isn't I who am asking them, it's the Lord whom we have the honour of representing in the world, and in whose image we are all being recreated.

My first question sums up all the others. You know his command about loving one another; well, it's easy enough to *say* we should, but do we *do* it? From the heart? Or are we play-acting love, wearing beaming masks but concealing poisonous thoughts about each other?

My second question concerns our attitude to sin, to what we know to be dead set against the Lord's will: have we made a secret pact with it? Do we pay lip-service to biblical holiness, while actually leading double lives? Whose side are we on? The devil's, who is our sworn enemy? Or the Lord's who died for us and to whom we should be sticking so closely that nothing can come between us and him?

Loveblindness

[12:10] Back to this 'loving each other' thing. We aren't just members of a worldwide association, we're actually brothers and sisters in the same family. Do we have family feuds? Or are we – I've coined a new word for this – loveblind? That is, are we prepared to put up with others' defects and uglinesses for the sake of the One who has turned a blind eye to ours?

This leads to a similar question: do we pay special respect and attention to our brothers and sisters in Christ? Yes, I know we should give due honour to absolutely everyone we come across in our daily lives, but there's something extra-special about our fellow-Christians, because they are reborn in Christ's image, they are his Spirit-bearers, they are each and every one Christ in all his infinite manifestations.

12:11-13 ¹¹ *Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord.* ¹² *Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.* ¹³ *Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practise hospitality.*

Attitudes to service

[12:11] Now some questions about what kind of servants we are in the Lord's household. Is the Master's business the last thing on our agenda? When he asks us to do something for him, do we shrug our shoulders and say 'I might get round to it eventually'? Are we like dead coals in the grate, grimly carrying out our 'religious duties' – or are we alight with the warming and encouraging fire of the Spirit? In fact, do we regard our Christian service as a thing we've got to do, rather than a King at whose disposal we are only too delighted to put ourselves?

Coping with the future

[12:12] Next, what I might call our general outlook on life. We live in a fairly bleak world, or at least most of us do. The future may be unrelentingly grim for some of us (I'm aware that Christ-followers are not exactly popular in Rome) – so how do we cope with this? Do we give way to despair? Do we cut and run at the first signs of trouble? Do we consider prayer a complete waste of time? Or, as I explained in an earlier chapter, do we keep the vision of what is to come, the

second act of the play as it were, steadily in view, so that there's an unquenchable joy bubbling away deep down, no matter what the present circumstances are? Are we prepared to hang in there when things get really bad and everyone seems to be against us, because Jesus hung in there for us? And where prayer is concerned, far from being some kind of pious pretence we've got to keep up, do we value it so much that we turn up the volume and make ourselves positive nuisances in God's ever-open audience chamber? Hope, patience, prayer – the devil has yet to develop a weapon that can penetrate this armour.

Security and comfort

[12:13] I keep thinking of things we ought to be doing for each other but might not be doing in actual fact. I suppose you realise that becoming a Christian means burning your boats as far as earthly security and comfort are concerned? I know the Psalmist says in a moment of optimism that he has never seen the righteous person's family begging for bread, and Job's self-satisfied 'comforters' seem to think that if you're right with God he won't allow any material affliction to happen to you, but the fact is that fellow-Christians are often in desperate need and the only way we can make those ancient texts come true is to put our hands deep into our pockets and help them in any way possible. I'm involved in collecting for the Jerusalem saints at the moment and I'm prepared to risk life and limb to get the funds to them – after which I'm coming to see you (more on that later)! At the very least we can be opening our homes to our fellow-believers (and not just the socially acceptable ones either), laying on wholesome meals for them, or even giving them a roof over their heads. The same applies to casual visitors. Impossible? What if it were Christ knocking at your door?

12:14-16 ¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. ¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. ¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not think you are superior.

People can be nasty

[12:14] 'Well, it's more likely to be the police knocking at my door.' Yes, I know. Even so, you can be polite to them and cooperate as far as your conscience allows. We all know the dignified restraint our Lord showed at his monstrously unjust hearings; he didn't loose off at his persecutors, and he wants us to show the same verbal and physical self-control. People can be very nasty, but that's no excuse for us turning nasty at them. I know I'm not exactly perfect in that respect; but the fact remains that some people have actually become believers themselves after witnessing the gracious way Christians have reacted to their insults and threats.

Showing compassion

[12:15] Maybe nothing out of the ordinary is happening to you at this moment, but it's a fair bet that some people you know are getting more than their share (how much is that?) of either blessing or suffering in this mortal life. Some philosophies will tell you to take up a detached attitude and remain personally unaffected. No – don't be afraid of getting involved. If someone's throwing a party because they've been promoted or had a massive tax rebate, go and join the celebration. If they've just had their house flooded or heard some terrible news, show active sympathy. Showing 'compassion' means suffering (or rejoicing) alongside someone else – just as Jesus did when he was approached by lepers or saw the hungry crowds. It doesn't mean you can answer all their questions, like 'Why me?' It does mean we are, each and every one of us, members of the same body.

Stuff your pride!

[12:16] As I said, it's all about attitude. We need to drop our prejudices and treat people with equal consideration, no matter how attractive or unattractive we find them. You're going to meet all shapes and sizes in your Christian fellowship. Human pride says, I can't possibly be seen talking

to this person, or sitting next to that one at a meal. Well, stuff your pride! Realise that you may not be everyone's flavour of the month either – yet people are prepared to associate with you. What you consider fine breeding, good education and moderate lifestyle may look like snobbery and affectation to others. It's very levelling to be a follower of Christ. Don't be affronted – learn to laugh at yourself.

12:17-21 ¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. ¹⁸ If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. ¹⁹ Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord. ²⁰ On the contrary: 'If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.' ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Retaliation is out

[12:17] 'But you don't know what I've had to put up with some people! They deserve everything they've got coming to them.' Yes, they probably do. But human retaliation isn't the name of the game; never has been, never will be. What I'm going to recommend, what Scripture itself indicates, isn't easy, but it's the best way. [12:18] The Lord talked memorably about 'turning the other cheek', and he practised what he preached. You have got to take a deep breath and work out exactly what your reaction is going to be to this insult, slight, manifest injustice, whatever. People recognise true goodness when they see it. Forgiveness is a beautiful thing. There will always be folk who try to stir up trouble, but our job as followers of the Prince of Peace is to be peacemakers, not vengeance-takers.

[12:19] Here is a court-room, and this person who has made your life a misery is up for trial. The judge's throne is there, and you have every right to take your place on it and not only pronounce the verdict, but carry out the execution. However, you refuse. It isn't your job. In fact, the only One who has any right to blaze with anger against human wrongdoing is God himself. And written right across the court-room in letters of fire are the old words, 'If there is wrong to be repaid, I will personally see that justice is carried out – signed, the Judge of all the earth.'

Practical forgiveness

[12:20] 'So what do I do? I've got to do *something!*' Yes, and I'll tell you what it is. In fact, let the word of God tell you. It's there in the old book of wise sayings, which is so realistic about the situations we humans get ourselves into. 'OK, so you've got this feud that's been going on for years, and both sides would cheerfully kill each other. Take the initiative. Hold a massive street party in the other person's honour. Lay on the finest food and wine. Demonstrate in down-to-earth, practical ways that you have totally forgiven them. Instead of raining down fire and brimstone upon their heads, warm them with the sunshine of the love that streams from the Lord himself.' Go on – see if it works!

[12:21] And if you do, I'll tell you one person who'll be gnashing his teeth in fury: the devil. All his deep-laid plots to set Christian against Christian, house against house, nation against nation, will come to absolutely nothing – because you have decided that as far as you are concerned, evil isn't going to have the last word. God's goodness is going to win the day.

13:1-2 ¹ Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. ² Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves.

Co-operating with the authorities

[13:1] 'This peacemaking thing is all very well on an individual level, but what if you live in a system that is fundamentally hostile to Christ? What if the authorities are determined to stamp out the faith of the church? Do you cooperate with them?' You have raised a point that is relevant to Christians in every age. To what extent should we go along with the requirements of a secular state? When Nero Caesar tells me to jump, how far do I jump?'

Every state, every institution or social system, has a governmental structure; and every member of that institution has a duty to abide by the rules that have been laid down, and to do what they are told by those appointed to see that the rules are obeyed. We of all people should realise that the political system we live under is part of God's good creation – it's not just some kind of social contract, nor is it a deep-laid plot by the powers of darkness to crush the life out of us. All governments have powers delegated to them by God, and these powers are incarnated in rules, regulations, officialdoms, hierarchies, all of which are responsible for the good order of the realm. This applies to nation states, business organisations, the armed services, churches, schools and colleges, sports teams, right down to individual families and kinship groups. Everyone lives in several interlocking spheres of obligation.

[13:2] So if you decide that you're going to range yourself against the government of the day (I'm not talking about the democratic casting of votes, I'm talking about civil disobedience or outright revolution), get one thing perfectly clear: you are rebelling not only against a human institution but against something ordained by God. As such, you are liable to get dealt with at two levels: at the level of the state whose laws you have infringed, and at the infinitely higher level of the judgment throne of God himself.

13:3-5³ For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended. ⁴ For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. ⁵ Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience.

Seeing from God's perspective

[13:3] 'So I've got to submit meekly to everything the state tells me to do, even if it's manifestly unjust?' Hold on a moment while we try to see things from God's perspective. From the very beginning human beings have had the power to distinguish between right and wrong, and to choose which of these they are going to follow. This applies to your earthly citizenship as much as it applies to your citizenship of the kingdom of heaven. Now of course the Fall has affected institutions as well as individuals. I am certainly not arguing that every political system is morally perfect; in fact some are irredeemably corrupt. But God hasn't abandoned his plans for how human society should ideally work. He has set authorities in place to limit the potentialities of the evil will. You complain about the terror police; but there's an essential principle of fear built into the system, so that it's not the obedient citizen who needs to be afraid, but the disobedient one.

[13:4] I'm saying something that's perfectly obvious, surely? It's all about rewards and sanctions, incentives and deterrents. You can either work with the society God has put you into, or you can work against it. If you work with and for it, you should be honoured as a good citizen, you should get the appropriate pat on the back (medals, prizes, promotion, higher responsibility and so on) and you deserve the full support of the authorities for carrying out your programme of good and constructive efforts for the welfare of your fellow-citizens. If you work against it, or try to manipulate it for your own selfish purposes, you won't sleep easily at night. You're flying in the face of two powerful forces for good: on the human level, the authorities who should be on your

side have to turn their weapons against you, and you know what penalties they have available – fines, exile, even execution (and for non-citizens, crucifixion). But they are only reflecting the far more serious situation you have got yourself into, which is to incur the active displeasure and settled antipathy of God himself.

[13:5] I'm saying 'you', but of course I'm generalising. Most of us opt for civil obedience, because we don't want to risk getting punished; but more fundamentally, we have this sense of right and wrong built into us so that we're hard-wired to follow the good path, the way that's better for society and consequently better for us.

13:6-7 ⁶ *This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing.* ⁷ *Give to everyone what you owe them: if you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honour, then honour.*

Practical obligations

[13:6] An example of what I'm talking about is paying the proper taxes. I'm not saying all tax-collectors are pure as the driven snow – we know very well that they're not – but that's not the issue; the fact is, they are ultimately not the state's employees, but God's. (I can see the look of incredulity on your faces – how can these devils be working for God? Well, the alternative is that either Satan himself is in full control of all human institutions, which he's not, because the Lord hasn't resigned as Sovereign overall; or that there's no God or Satan and everyone can do as they like, as long as they get away with it.) Please give your local officials the benefit of the doubt; they are working their socks off to keep the streets clean, providing decent hygiene, making sure there's enough food and so on, and like all of us they are fulfilling God's original commission to keep the anarchic forces of nature (including human nature) under control. [13:7] Being Christians doesn't exempt us from submitting to the network of obligations to which worldly citizenship commits us: to complete our tax returns, to pay extra levies on goods and services, and while we're doing it, to treat our fellow-citizens with due courtesy and respect, particularly if they are laying themselves on the line to see that we have a reasonably tolerable existence on this earth.

13:8-10 ⁸ *Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law.* ⁹ *The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery,' 'You shall not murder,' 'You shall not steal,' 'You shall not covet,' and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'* ¹⁰ *Love does no harm to its neighbour. Therefore love is the fulfilment of the law.*

The real revolution

[13:8] 'But doesn't our commitment to the kingdom of Christ override all human obligations? Aren't we supposed to be turning the world upside down? Isn't our primary obedience to God rather than to mere mortals?' All true. But don't you see the real revolution that's going on? It's the arrival on earth of the promised kingdom of love and peace; its weapons aren't angry demonstrations or burning down property, but the irresistible power of the Holy Spirit. [13:9] When you take out membership in the company of Jesus, you start working for a new society altogether. A society where every dealing with another is characterised by Christ's own love and unselfishness; a society where debt is unknown, because instead of grabbing everything they can its citizens are giving all they've got, and if they could, they'd give even more; where nobody is trying to seduce your wife, or ruin your life, or filch your belongings, in fact where the very thought of doing so wouldn't enter anyone's head. [13:10] A state, a world, where there don't need to be any rules or commandments, because the one rule is that everyone loves everyone else 24/7, planning actively for their welfare as though it was their own – which it is, because we belong to each other as one great family of God. If your philosophy in life used to be, 'I have a right to do

what I like, as long as it doesn't harm anyone else,' now you've redesigned your life Christwards you have a new philosophy, which is something like, 'I have no personal rights at all, just the responsibility to bring the love of God into the homes, marketplaces, streets, cafés, sports arenas and country lanes where Jesus would have walked, but now I'm walking them for him.'

13:11-14 ¹¹ *And do this, understanding the present time: the hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.* ¹² *The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armour of light.* ¹³ *Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy.* ¹⁴ *Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh.*

World crisis

[13:11] 'Oh yes, Paul, I do so agree with you. The Christian life is like a journey, isn't it, travelling ever onwards, getting nearer the Christ-ideal, spreading sweetness and light wherever we go!' Wrong story. The gospel is like a bucket of icy water poured over a sleeping person. The house is on fire. You were deep in your dreams and you never smelt the smoke. You are needed for a world crisis. The future is travelling toward us like an invading army. Yes, the Lord's people can wake up every morning rejoicing that our hope of a new world and the return of the King is a day nearer than it was yesterday, indeed than it was when we first put our trust in him for salvation. In that sense there's nothing to be afraid of, whatever might happen in between.

[13:12] But in another sense we still need to shake off the half-slumber we so easily drift into. It'll be dawn in just a few minutes. We're going to meet the Lord today. The world's interview date with its Maker is down in the diary for nine o'clock this morning. And here you are still thinking those doubtful thoughts, still shifting lazily in your half-allegiance to the night-time. The enemy is stealing in through the window and you haven't begun to strap on your armour. The sun's climbing over the horizon and you're still stark naked. Get real!

Wake-up call

[13:13] You may think you're the very model of respectable, decent Christianity, but the truth is, you need to clean up your act. I'm going to ask a few basic questions here, because quite frankly the witness of the church is still very far from what it ought to be. You may not any longer attend the drunken orgies and drug-soaked raves you did before coming to faith in Christ – but what about those fellowship meals where you drink rather more than is prudent? You may not be shacking up with the latest highly desirable partner, but are your thoughts still not far short of a pornographic display? You may not be slugging it out with your neighbour or trading juicy insults with your work colleagues, but why is it that you can't stand the Christians just down the road or, worse still, you're cold-shouldering folk in your own group because their brand of spirituality is different from or (you uneasily suspect) deeper than yours? [13:14] We may think we're getting away with it as far as other believers are concerned, but the world is looking at us carefully and doesn't always like what it thinks it sees. And there is no corner of our mortal lives that is hidden from the full gaze of our glorious God. We can go on indulging our tawdry fantasies, our one-track obsessions, if we really want to, but there's a much better life available to us. There's a full wardrobe of beautiful clothes just next to our bed, and their designer is Jesus. All we have to do is to get up and put him on. Yes, we can wear Jesus wherever we go. In our secret chambers and in the public squares. Yesterday we may have been sultry models on the world's catwalk, but today we're modelling Christ before the eyes of heaven and earth. And he is infinitely and unutterably lovely.

Wake up, you dozy people! Make up your minds. Which is it to be – the world, or Christ? Darkness or daytime?

14:1-4 ¹ *Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarrelling over disputable matters.* ² *One person's faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables.* ³ *The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them.* ⁴ *Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To their own master, servants stand or fall. And they will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand.*

Grey areas

[14:1-2] 'Paul, you are operating in black and white categories and that's all very fine and necessary, but there are some grey areas where Scripture doesn't lay down in precise terms how our discipleship should work out. We at Rome are having problems with festival meat that's been offered as a sacrifice to the traditional gods, and has come on the supermarket shelves at a bargain price. Poor households can't afford to buy organic meat straight from the fields, so when this sacrificial stuff comes along it's a godsend (no pun intended). But some of our members frown on this, because the meat's spiritually contaminated, or so they say. They think all Christians should go vegetarian when offered cuts off a beast which has been ritually slaughtered in honour of a pagan idol. Yet other Christians laugh it off on the grounds that idols don't exist anyway, there's only one true God, so meat offered in temples is exactly the same as any other meat, as long as it doesn't give you food poisoning.'

Yes, let's have a look at this one. We've been having the same dilemma at Corinth so I know what you're talking about. It came up, if you remember (no, you won't), at the First Jerusalem Conference when we managed to get James and the legal brigade to accept just the minimum requirements for Gentile converts, but they wouldn't surrender this one. It's likely to be an issue in churches all over the Empire, and it's one that won't go away in a couple of days. Well, my view is that it's not really about meat at all – there are deeper principles at stake here.

Unity of the fellowship

[14:3] When we put our trust in the Lord Jesus to save us from sin, we are set free from the need to justify ourselves by keeping rules or carrying out rituals. Some click with this straightaway and feel a glorious sense of liberation, and their new faith spreads through their whole life like a fresh breeze, blowing away the cobwebs of their old attitudes and practices. Others take longer to get used to the new way of thinking, and cling uncertainly to what they were brought up to believe, particularly in matters of conscience. Let's call these Brother A (the breezy, assured convert) and Brother B (the nervous, cautious one).

The basic principle at stake is the unity of the fellowship. It is founded on the fact that Jesus died for each one equally, and therefore we need to accept anyone and everyone who believes in him for salvation, however assured or cautious their faith is. We are not required to pass their beliefs or lifestyle through a kind of spiritual filter before we welcome them with open arms. (I'm not talking about church leadership – there are stringent criteria to be observed here.) Now apply this to the food we take on board. Brother A has no problem whatsoever with sacrificial meat; nothing has changed, it's just a juicy steak. Brother B won't touch it and goes into vegetarian mode at the slightest whiff of idol worship. And here they are sitting down to supper together, eyeing each other up. Brother A thinks Brother B is impossibly stuffy and makes disparaging remarks about 'learning to grow up'; while Brother B mutters that Brother A is setting a libertarian example and encouraging worldiness.

Up to the Master

[14:4] And the Lord longs to bang their heads together and say, 'Look, I love both of you equally and totally! There are far worse things I've had to forgive you for than getting it wrong about a lump of meat.' Put it like this. Both of you, Brothers A and B, are servants of Christ. It's none of your business weighing up the amount of faithfulness someone is showing to their Master; that's

up to the Master himself. Whether a servant deserves a pat on the head or a kick in the backside is entirely up to his Lord. And I tell you one thing: that Lord pulled me to my feet when I was lying flat on my face in the Damascus road dust, and he's able to do the same for every single servant of his. If we're sinking in the seas of worldiness or legalism, like Simon Peter on the lake, our omnipotent and merciful Master will stretch out a timely hand and pull us to safety and usefulness. He's done it for you; let him do it for others.

14:5-9 ⁵ *One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind.* ⁶ *Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord. Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God; and whoever abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God.* ⁷ *For none of us lives for ourselves alone, and none of us dies for ourselves alone.* ⁸ *If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.* ⁹ *For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living.*

Wrong priorities

[14:5-6] There's a grave danger lurking here, and I've noticed it in other churches too: the danger of getting our priorities in the wrong order. We think, 'This point may be comparatively minor, but if we give way on it, the whole edifice of our faith will come tumbling down.' And we cling to it as though our lives depended upon it. One example is 'special days'. It may be a tradition in our church, our family or our neighbourhood to regard a particular day (the Jewish sabbath, for instance, or an anniversary or saint's birthday) as having a special sanctity – and we fence that day about with spiritual barbed wire as though God will visit us with dire judgment if we do anything secular for those 24 hours. Then we see a fellow-Christian carrying on as though it were a perfectly ordinary day, and we get furious and threaten excommunication. This is complete nonsense. It's up to each mature believer to work out how they organise their calendar, prayerfully, in front of the Lord himself.

It's as though the spokes of a wheel, instead of making sure they're joined firmly to the central wheel-hub, were to start looking along the rim and saying, 'You over there, you're pointing at a different angle from me; get yourself straight!' If I decide to keep a particular day sacred for the honour of Christ, or if I go without food for some definite purpose – or, for that matter, if I decide to hold a party or give my family a special treat – it's Jesus my Master I'm doing it for, to please him and express my gratitude to him, not to satisfy the tick-list of some faceless church committee.

New life in Christ

[14:7] The danger, of course, is that we make ourselves the centre of our lives instead of Christ. This is to go back to the old person we once were, where we lived entirely for ourselves and regarded death as the greatest possible evil. I'll tell you what's died, and it's that old way of thinking! [14:8] We're new people in Christ, we don't exist on our own any longer. It doesn't matter what life brings, or when we die for that matter. We live for him, and every day is under his control and lived for his pleasure, not for ours or anybody else's. Get real, won't you? [14:9] Did Jesus die under our sins and come out the other side into a new life altogether, simply so that we could grumble about each other's lifestyles? (I'm not talking about morality here, but about ritualism.) Jesus has torn up the rule-book and released us into the freedom of the Spirit. We needn't be afraid of what the next day or week are going to bring, or even whether we'll be alive at the end of it, because he's in charge, he's our Lord, and all our superstitious little observances mean absolutely nothing to him.

14:10-12 ¹⁰ *You, then, why do you judge your brother or sister? Or why do you treat them with contempt? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat.* ¹¹ *It is written: "As surely as I live," says the Lord, "every knee will bow before me; every tongue will acknowledge God."* ¹² *So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God.*

The right to judge

[14:10] I'm going to ask you a searching question. Who do you think you are? It's human nature, I'm afraid, to dodge this question by comparing ourselves to people we know, and estimating how important we are by sizing up a few others (in extreme cases, everyone else) and awarding them marks for spirituality or service value. I made this point when we were thinking about God's final judgment on human sin and pride. That was in a different context: everyone's need to hear the gospel and come to Christ as the only way out of the crisis. The context here is fellow disciples, companions on the journey with Christ, who take up attitudes to other believers and frankly rubbish them, or at least mark them down for supposed imperfections.

If this is you, then you are acting as if you were God himself. You are setting up your wretched little tribunal and taking your seat on your throne and dealing out verdicts as if you had some kind of divine right to do so. The unwelcome truth is that you yourself are going to come up for assessment before the One who alone has the right to hold tribunal. This prospect is facing all of us without exception. [14:11] Scripture is never wrong. (Have you been rubbishing the scriptures as well?) Turn to that famous chapter of Isaiah where the Lord summons the whole earth to judgment: 'I am the living Lord and there is no other. I am the only Judge whose opinion counts for eternity. Every single human being who has ever existed is going to come into my presence and be confronted with the truth about their lives. They will find themselves on their knees begging for mercy. They will be asked questions about things nobody else has ever known about, and the facts will come tumbling out. They will acknowledge that I alone have the right to deliver the final verdict, whether they die or live.'

[14:12] Who is this figure sitting on the throne? Why, it's Jesus himself! As I have been saying consistently throughout this letter, he is the only one who can justify any of us. And he has delivered his judgment on us already, by bringing us with him through death and out the other side. He is going to give us a chance to explain what we have been trying to do for him – all our flawed efforts to witness to him and do something for others. How disappointing, then, if all we can find to say is that we thought we were better than X or Y. How very, very sad.

14:13-15 ¹³ *Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling-block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister.* ¹⁴ *I am convinced, being fully persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for that person it is unclean.* ¹⁵ *If your brother or sister is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy someone for whom Christ died.*

Overriding law of love

[14:13] Come down off your little tin throne. Lock the door of your private judgment chamber behind you and hurl the key as far as you can away from you. Make up your mind once and for all that the only verdict you're going to pass on your fellow Christians is whether some aspect of your behaviour is going to hold up their progress in Christ, or even send them sprawling on their faces in the road.

[14:14] Let's go back to this apparently trivial matter of where we source our cuts of meat. Now I'm Jewish, and I was brought up to consider certain kinds of meat as spiritually contaminating. (You'll remember the apostle Peter had the same problem.) But when I came to Christ all that changed. I realised then, and haven't had occasion to change my mind since, that no food is going

to damage your soul as such; it's just food and nothing else. You may get food poisoning from infected meat, but you won't get soul-poisoning – and that includes meat that has been dedicated to the honour of some pseudo-deity that we know perfectly well doesn't have any real existence.

But – and it's a big 'but' – if a member of your fellowship can't shake off the conviction that what's being served for dinner is going to compromise his or her faith, then for their sake you yourself ought to abstain from eating it. [14:15] I'm simply applying the overriding law of love. It applies, of course, to other issues besides eating idol-meat. The new world is breaking in on the old, and the dynamic of that new creation is love, the love Jesus showed when he set aside his own preferences and swallowed the poisoned dish we had so thoughtfully prepared for him. It killed him, but gave us life. Are we now going to undo all his good work by wrecking the faith of a fellow-saint, and all in the name of a 'perfectly harmless' fillet of steak?

14:16-18 ¹⁶ Therefore do not let what you know is good be spoken of as evil. ¹⁷ For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, ¹⁸ because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and receives human approval.

Misinterpreting freedom

[14:16] 'But surely we've got to help fellow-Christians towards maturity; we don't want the Lord's people to stay trapped in outworn superstitions or ritual nonsense.' Look at it this way. The freedom we have in Christ is precious beyond description. We are offering this treasure to the world. If we misinterpret our freedom to mean that we can walk roughshod over the sensibilities of other members of the family, we invite the contempt of outsiders. 'These Christians keep talking about the kingdom of God, but when it comes down to it, all they're concerned about is being kings of their own precious little patch of grass.' [14:17] We've got such a wonderful gospel to proclaim. Jesus has died to put us right with God. We can have the peace the world so badly needs, peace with God, peace with ourselves, peace with each other. We have the privilege of offering the fresh, living water of the Holy Spirit, bubbling up in each one of us and generating unbelievable joy and optimism.

[14:18] Keep the really important things steadily in front of your eyes. Instead of getting hung up about what should or shouldn't be on the menu, dedicate yourself afresh to kingdom service. Ask the Lord what you can do for him in the power of the Spirit. Tell him you want above all to please him; and if possible, you'd like to be someone your fellow-humans find they can rely on. It's a prayer he loves to answer in abundance.

14:19-23 ¹⁹ Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. ²⁰ Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a person to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. ²¹ It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother or sister to fall. ²² So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who does not condemn himself by what he approves. ²³ But whoever has doubts is condemned if they eat, because their eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin.

Limiting personal freedom

[14:19] So where have we got to on this admittedly tricky food question? Let me summarise. We need to be peacemakers, not troublemakers; builders, not destroyers. [14:20-21] How ironic if one moment we're praying to be used in God's work and the next we're actively wrecking it by taking up attitudes over a piece of meat! Food in itself is harmless; but if my choice of menu is deliberately offensive to someone else, that's got to be wrong. We're not just talking about eating and drinking here – other examples might be how we dress, what entertainments we enjoy, what

language we use, what company we keep, how we make our money. If we can't pursue a particular choice of lifestyle without seriously confusing our fellow-believers, then we ought to have nothing to do with it.

[14:22] Sort it out before God. (There will be people who will try to draw up a strict code of practice for everyone else, but what have I been saying about external rules and regulations? Does the Spirit count for so little?) Tell him quietly that he is the One and only God and that thanks to Christ you have died to all merely human 'dos' and 'don'ts'; but that for the sake of his kingdom family you are prepared to limit your personal freedom in apparently unimportant matters. Tell him you trust him completely to deal with your critics and to bring the church to maturity. Then leave it with him.

Disregarding conscience

[14:23] Look at it this way. There are issues of personal discipline here. We need to keep under constant review what we allow ourselves to think and say and do. Our conscience, enlightened and sensitised by the word, will bring us to heel quickly enough. Disregard conscience and you become like a boat that has lost its rudder and is heading for the rocks. The life of faith, in fact, is like sailing a sturdy little dinghy. Set the sail and the compass in accordance with the chart, and you'll push steadily on through the roughest seas; allow the sail to slacken and the steering to lose direction, and you're in trouble. We find our directions from the word of the Lord; the sail fills with the wind of the Spirit, and our conscience is the compass keeping us in line with the Lord's will. Even a comparatively insignificant thing like eating idol-food, when we know the person who's sitting next to us has serious doubts about it, can throw us off course – and suppose our example leads them to tuck into the 'contaminated' meat as well! Both of us will be going against the insistent prompting of our consciences. That can be little short of lethal in the context of Christian faith and fellowship; and it raises barriers between us and the Lord.

15:1-4 ¹ We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. ² Each of us should please our neighbours for their good, to build them up. ³ For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: 'The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.' ⁴ For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope.

'Strong' leadership

[15:1-2] 'But look, I've been a Christian for some time, I'm sorted doctrinally thanks to personal Bible study and courses of teaching, and I've finished with the old superstitions and hang-ups that I used to think were part of being a "keen" Christian. People look to me for wise instruction and strong leadership. How can I adopt the blinkered mindset of people who still need to claim the freedom that is in Christ and to move on in their spiritual journey?' I agree that we need to produce strong leaders in the church, who can take weaker members on to where they should be, but see it like this: if you were leading a walking party through difficult terrain, and you noticed some of the group straggling at the back, would you shout 'Come on!' and keep going at the same pace, or would you go back to see what was holding them up? What should a good leader do? I suggest that you would treat their blisters, shoulder their backpacks and slow the pace of the party to enable the hindmost to keep up and not get left behind. If you simply stride on up at the front and blithely ignore the slower brethren, you may be giving yourself a good time, but are you really helping others to stay in the race? Aren't you in fact destroying what little faith they have?

[15:3] Look at the example of the Lord Jesus himself. He could have adopted the attitude, 'I'm here on a royal visit, so everyone should make my time on earth as comfortable as possible, especially since I designed it for their pleasure in the first place' – but did he? Look at that amazingly prophetic Psalm where king David is enduring the loathing and contempt of people who have

absolutely no reason to hate him. He realises that the root of the problem is that they hate God even more, and they take it out on him (David) because he – despite his many failings – represents the obedience to God that they refuse to show. And they effectively crucify him. Their reproaches break his heart. I use this Psalm to show that the Messiah isn't some strong, all-conquering hero who sweeps all his enemies before him; no, he allows them to fling all they can at him and put him through acute physical torture, rather than assert his power and destroy them. He leaves that side of things to the God of his salvation. And I bring that into focus with a figure dying helplessly on a cross. [15:4] You Gentiles probably consider much in the Jewish Scriptures unnecessary and unintelligible, but if you look hard enough, you will find massive encouragements to help you endure pain and hardship, and to keep you steadily hoping for the Lord to make everything right in the end.

15:5-7⁵ May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had,⁶ so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.⁷ Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.

Jesus' attitude to the weaker

[15:5] What I'm trying to say is that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ isn't a tyrannical despot who demands that we keep up with him, and if we fall behind for a single moment he will abandon us to the wolves and vultures. No – his patience and tenderness are absolutely amazing. He comes personally to the back of the party and encourages the weak to keep going; he shares their difficulties and shoulders their burdens. Look at how, in the full flush of his triumph over death and sin, he sought out Simon Peter and Thomas, whose failures and doubts had made them serious candidates for rejection, and gave them an opportunity to be restored to full fellowship; how he allowed the emotionally broken-up women disciples to fling their arms round him and experience the reality of his risen life; how he could have taken his leave of the two disciples at Emmaus once he had delivered that majestic Bible study, but instead went into their home and gave them an unmistakable token of his presence. He even offered Judas a special mark of honour and called him 'Friend', though he knew full well that by then it was hopeless. If this was Jesus' attitude to those weaker than himself, how much more should it be ours!

Acceptance

[15:6] No, you are not being asked literally to adopt the narrow and (to you) obscurantist viewpoint of those who can't accept your more 'enlightened' understanding of Christian teaching; but you may need to bring your attitude into line with the humility of Christ, so that you do your bit for the unanimity of the fellowship, and so that your worship meetings are full of heartfelt praise issuing from a deep and singleminded gratitude to our wonderful God, who allowed his uniquely precious Son to go through suffering and death in order to give the entire human race a second chance. [15:7] If he was prepared to accept no-hopers like us into his heavenly kingdom, how can we not extend full reconciliation and cheerful acceptance to each other? Then the world might be able to say, 'We never realised that God was like that – please can we join in the celebration?'

15:8-12⁸ For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, so that the promises made to the patriarchs might be confirmed⁹ and, moreover, that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written: 'Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles; I will sing the praises of your name.'¹⁰ Again, it says, 'Rejoice, you Gentiles, with his people.'¹¹ And again, 'Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles; let all the peoples extol him.'¹² And again, Isaiah says, 'The Root of Jesse will spring up, one who will arise to rule over the nations; in him the Gentiles will hope.'

Hope for Gentiles

[15:8] Yes, Gentiles singing praises to the One true God! This is the final thing I want to say, and I want to say it loud and clear. You will be familiar, I'm sure, with Isaiah's portrayal of the Messiah as a Servant. At first it seems as if the Servant is Israel herself, God's chosen witness to the nations. But then it emerges that Israel herself needs bringing back to the Lord, because she is distorting the truth about God; so the Servant becomes a figure distinct from Israel, even rejected by Israel yet still fully identified with her. His work is to carry out God's original intentions, to make sure that the plan announced so unmistakably to Abraham and the patriarchs doesn't fall by the wayside.

[15:9] What is this plan? You know it so well. It is to bring back a lost world, to fling open prison doors to the ends of the earth. The nations of the world are going to come flocking back to God, and their journeying song is of God's mercy, goodness, love, kindness, favour. They thought they were out in the cold, and they find instead that a welcoming fire has been lit, the doors of the palace are permanently in 'open' position and there are beacons lighting their way home.

It's not just Isaiah's idea. We see it in David's great thanksgiving for deliverance when he declares that he's going to sing so loudly about the Lord's goodness that far-off nations are going to hear the music and start singing too. [15:10] We see it way back at the climax of the song of Moses where the best texts include an invitation to pagan outsiders to join the angelic choirs and the chorus of Israel in hymning God's praises. [15:11] We see it in the shortest Psalm of all which is all about the peoples of the world acclaiming God's faithfulness. [15:12] And, of course, it's all over Isaiah, especially in the wonderful 'root of Jesse' prophecy where we see the whole earth bathed in peace and harmony under Messiah's rule, and the entire planet deluged, not in a flood of judgment, but in the knowledge of a merciful and forgiving God. Yes, there's hope even for Gentiles, and what a hope!

15:13 ¹³ *May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.*

Internal dynamo

[15:13] This hope is centred on the One who was to come, and who indeed has come. The King, not only (as they wrote mockingly on the cross) of the Jews, but of every human being under the sun. Now, hope is in short supply these days. No-one knows what the next decade is going to bring; there may be tumultuous times ahead for the church of Christ, for the Jewish people, even for the Roman Empire itself. But behind it all stands a God whose faithfulness is everlasting and whose promise is sure – the God of our Lord Jesus Christ. Let him take the weight of your anxieties and pressures. Transfer all your hope and fears to him. Don't try to find your joy in passing pleasures or economic advantage; don't look for peace to military security or self-help philosophy. Human nature was built to run on trust. When we (as a race) withdrew our trust from the one dependable Source of all wisdom and power, we lost the ability to find true satisfaction and purpose. But the great good news is that we who believe in Jesus now have this Source within us, an internal dynamo whose name is the Holy Spirit. He is like a never-failing spring of clear, fresh water, welling up in our hearts and overflowing into lives of thankfulness and joy. We can look forward in total confidence to all the good things he has in store for us

My prayer for you, dear Christians at Rome, is that you may know the reality of this expectation in the midst of your busy lives. May this God of hope take the strain from your souls, and fill you with the abundance of his love.

15:14-16:27 Paul's ministry and the church at Rome

15:14-16 ¹⁴ *I myself am convinced, my brothers and sisters, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with knowledge and competent to instruct one another.* ¹⁵ *Yet I have written you quite boldly on some points to remind you of them again, because of the grace God gave me* ¹⁶ *to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles. He gave me the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.*

Temple servant

[15:14] Of course, even though I have yet to meet you in person, I have no doubt that you understand all this and that your lives are already showing abundant signs of Christlike qualities; you know the Scriptures well and share them among each other in house groups and one-to-one instruction. [15:15] I've probably gone over the top, if that's possible, in celebrating and rehearsing the great truths of our faith in this letter to you (it could have been twice as long!) I'm just so excited at the commission our gracious God has given me, me of all people, to present the Lord Jesus to the world as its Saviour.

[15:16] I have a vision. The Temple at Jerusalem isn't going to last much longer in its present form. It's expanding worldwide. It's moving into Gentile territory. Wherever I take the gospel, I feel like a Temple servant ministering to crowds of worshippers, offering them the bread of life in Jesus Christ, ushering them into the very presence of the Holy One, reassuring them of their full right of access. It's the vision Isaiah had of Israel's former enemies now flocking gladly to Jerusalem bringing gold and silver offerings and singing salvation songs. But it's not the old familiar Sion he's thinking about. There is a new Jerusalem being built in every country of the world, and it's called the Temple of the Holy Spirit, where people who had never heard of God can now find forgiveness and the power to live lives of radiant goodness and purity. What a privilege to be part of this work!

15:17-21 ¹⁷ *Therefore I glory in Christ Jesus in my service to God.* ¹⁸ *I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me in leading the Gentiles to obey God by what I have said and done –* ¹⁹ *by the power of signs and wonders, through the power of the Spirit of God. So from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ.* ²⁰ *It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else's foundation.* ²¹ *Rather, as it is written: 'Those who were not told about him will see, and those who have not heard will understand.'*

A heart for pioneering work

[15:17] 'Paul, you're giving the impression of being a bit full of yourself, talking about your achievements as if they were unique. Surely others are in this gospel work too?' Absolutely. I know I can go over the top in describing what's happening. But I always make clear that it's not my achievement, it's what Christ is doing, carrying out the plan of his Father. That's what I'm delirious about. [15:18-19] I certainly don't want to seem to be claiming credit for what God has done through others. The Lord Jesus has been building his kingdom among the Gentile nations through the efforts of many different workers – but he's included me among them, and that's what makes me so exuberant. I've not only preached to attentive crowds of total outsiders, I've seen God at work in them through powerful miracles and spectacular transformations; I've seen and heard people completely overwhelmed by the Holy Spirit. Please don't think it's the power of my oratory or any special gifts I possess naturally. It's Jesus continuing his earthly ministry.

You know he told us to start at Jerusalem and go to the four corners of the world? Well, I've got to the Balkans, which isn't very far, but at least I've made sure that nowhere's been missed out and that no-one can complain they haven't been told what this 'wonderful news about God' actually is. [15:20] I've got a heart for pioneering work, which means talking about Christ to people who have no idea who he is and what he has done. Other people are doing the same thing where God has sent them, so I don't want to take over their particular building site and start putting up scaffolding with my name blazoned all over it.

The gospel's power to shock

[15:21] I was talking just now about the Servant and his worldwide mission. He's not an all-conquering hero, comfortably ensconced in Jerusalem and issuing commands to emperors and potentates. No, he's a lonely and rejected figure, reigning from a cross-shaped throne with a crown of thorns jammed down on his head; and when rulers and kings see him, their eyes open wide in astonishment. They have never beheld such a thing! They begin to realise that the story of Christ crucified is unique in human history, and it dawns upon them that this could be a Saviour they need themselves. I've witnessed to kings, proconsuls, prefects and councillors, and I'm happy to do the same for the Roman emperor himself. Yes, the gospel has the power to startle and shock people who have never heard anything like it before. The only people I can't get through to are those who think they know it all and are frankly bored with the whole thing. Incredible, or what?

15:22-29 ²² This is why I have often been hindered from coming to you. ²³ But now that there is no more place for me to work in these regions, and since I have been longing for many years to visit you, ²⁴ I plan to do so when I go to Spain. I hope to see you while passing through and that you will assist me on my journey there, after I have enjoyed your company for a while. ²⁵ Now, however, I am on my way to Jerusalem in the service of the Lord's people there. ²⁶ For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the Lord's people in Jerusalem. ²⁷ They were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings. ²⁸ So after I have completed this task and have made sure that they have received this contribution, I will go to Spain and visit you on the way. ²⁹ I know that when I come to you, I will come in the full measure of the blessing of Christ.

Jerusalem, Rome, Spain

[15:22] It is quite extraordinary how, whenever I've decided 'Now's the time to go and see those folks in Rome,' another mission opportunity has cropped up. As usual, this is the Holy Spirit's restraining guidance; he is in charge of operations, and God's timing is always perfect. But it's hard not to feel a little frustrated sometimes! [15:23] Nevertheless, it really does seem now as if work in the Eastern Mediterranean has progressed far enough for me not to be needed, and that therefore my long-awaited chance to visit you has arrived. [15:24] See what you think of my plan: Rome, then Spain! That far western province is part civilised, part untamed – rather like Galatia or Illyricum. They may have heard about Jesus through informal contacts, but they still have little idea of the full glory of the gospel message. I could see you all on the way, and you could be my springboard for the journey on to the West. I would want to stay long enough to be able to relax and enjoy your company, though inevitably (since you're such a large church) I might not be able to spend time with each of you individually.

[15:25] Anyway, that's in the pipeline, after I've been to Jerusalem. Why have I got to go there again? I agree it would be safer not to, considering the opposition that could await me, but my personal safety is the last consideration. I'm not just a pioneer apostle, I'm in the service of the church, and an important part of my work is to supply the practical needs of the Lord's people. As you will doubtless have heard, the church in Jerusalem has a large proportion of needy people, widows with large families and so on. Since someone once called Saul was partly responsible for

this in the first place, I feel it is only right for me to try to heal the wounds. But it's not just guilt that is motivating me. [15:26] Dozens of cities in southern and northern Greece have clubbed together to raise fantastic sums of money for the poor Jewish Christians at Jerusalem. I haven't had to browbeat them into doing this. [15:27] Time and again I've come across this interesting argument: 'The Jewish people are God's channel for spiritual blessings to reach the whole world. This started with Abraham and climaxed in the Lord Jesus' gift of himself. It makes sense, therefore, for us outsiders (and now insiders) to try to repay some of this blessing by sending practical, material help back to them.' [15:28] I fully agree with this, and feel it is my top priority to make sure that the money raised reaches Jerusalem safely and gets into the hands of the people who can make sure it is used most effectively.

So please be patient! It may take a little time to complete this operation (which is as sacred to me as anything else I do for my Lord), but Spain is definitely on the agenda after that, and that will involve a few delightful weeks with you on the way. [15:29] I'm not coming just to get wined and dined and to put my feet up. I have so much to share with you about the Lord Jesus Christ; and you can tell me everything you've been through for him. We're going to have a feast of blessing, with the King himself presiding! I am so looking forward to this. But as I say, it may be next year rather than next week.

15:30-33 ³⁰ I urge you, brothers and sisters, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me. ³¹ Pray that I may be kept safe from the unbelievers in Judea and that the contribution I take to Jerusalem may be favourably received by the Lord's people there, ³² so that I may come to you with joy, by God's will, and in your company be refreshed. ³³ The God of peace be with you all. Amen.

Request for prayer

[15:30] So – my usual urgent request – I need your prayers. You are my brothers and sisters and my fellow-workers. The Master himself told us to pray for each other; and (as I said earlier) we have two powerful allies in this work, Jesus at the right hand of the Father, and the Spirit in our hearts, bringing us assurance of the Father's love and enabling us to care properly for each other. Prayer isn't just rattling off a few perfunctory sentences then getting on with the main business in life – it's Olympic wrestling! It needs deliberate training and planning and sacrificial dedication. [15:31] There's a spiritual battle to be won. I love my fellow-Jews in the homeland deeply, but some of them are captives to a spirit of unbelief and they are out to get me. Your faithful intercession can see me safely through their fanatical plots. The other thing is that the saints at Jerusalem (well, some of them anyway) are still deeply suspicious of my motives, so please pray that when I lay all this money at their feet, they may accept it as a gift from God and praise him for it.

[15:32] The last prayer, of course, is that I should have a fair and prosperous voyage to Rome and be able to relax happily in your company, and you in mine. It will be as God wills, so I'm not worrying about the exact details of how or when. [15:33] I don't want a single one of you to be anxious on my behalf. May the Prince of Peace himself rule in your hearts. And he will. He hears every prayer. He will do it.

16:1-2 ¹ I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchreae. ² I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of his people and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been the benefactor of many people, including me.

Phoebe

[16:1] Now before I seal up this letter and send Phoebe on her way, I've got a number of personal messages to pass on. (If this letter is copied and sent on from Rome to other churches, you can leave out this end section.) Who is Phoebe, you ask? You're in for a real treat! Not only is she a deeply loved sister in Christ to me and Timothy and the others, but she's an important member of the leadership team here at Cenchreae, the trading port for Corinth. I'm grateful to the Cenchrean church for allowing her to go, though they can hardly spare her. [16:2] Please give her the splendid hospitality the Lord's people are renowned for everywhere! Apart from delivering this letter safely, she has important business in Rome, and she might appreciate help initially in finding her way around and so on. Phoebe is an incredibly resourceful character who is always helping people out of her great heart of love. She has been an invaluable source of practical support to me during my stay in Corinth. I recommend her to you as warmly as I can.

16:3-10a ³ Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus. ⁴ They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them. ⁵ Greet also the church that meets at their house. Greet my dear friend Epenetus, who was the first convert to Christ in the province of Asia. ⁶ Greet Mary, who worked very hard for you. ⁷ Greet Andronicus and Junia, my fellow Jews who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was. ⁸ Greet Ampliatus, my dear friend in the Lord. ⁹ Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ, and my dear friend Stachys. ¹⁰ Greet Apelles, whose fidelity to Christ has stood the test.

Prisca and Aquila

[16:3] Now for a whole sheaf of personal greetings to individuals and house-groups among you, some of whom I've already met, and others I've been told about or are known to folk here in Corinth. I'm running out of space, so forgive if I'm briefer than I ought to be, or leave some people out. I'm going to see you soon anyway!

First on the list must be my beloved friends and fellow-warriors Prisca and Aquila. [16:4] You literally saved my life here in Corinth at maximum risk to yourselves and I shall never forget that. You've travelled all over the Roman Empire teaching and encouraging churches and key leaders and now you're back in Rome, hosting a local branch of the church in your lovely home. Thank you so much for all you do. It will be wonderful to see you again. [16:5] Please pass on my warm greetings to all in your fellowship.

Epainetos, dear friend whom I remember so well, you were the first person in the whole province of Asia Minor to put your trust in Christ, promising a rich harvest to come – fulfil your name and be full of praise! [16:6] Mary, you have been working your heart out for the Roman church; you've done wonders for so many, and you haven't counted the cost to yourself. [16:7] Andronicus and Junia, my fellow-members of the tribe of Benjamin, you've been in prison like me; you've done outstanding apostolic work founding churches, and you've been Christians even longer than I have. [16:8] Ampliatus, you are another dear Christian friend of mine. [16:9] Urbanus, you've done kingdom work along with me; and Stachys ('Ear of corn'), we've shared good fellowship in the Lord. [16:10a] Apelles, you wear the badges of long and faithful service to Christ.

16:10b-16 Greet those who belong to the household of Aristobulus. ¹¹ Greet Herodion, my fellow Jew. Greet those in the household of Narcissus who are in the Lord. ¹² Greet Tryphena and Tryphosa, those women who work hard in the Lord. Greet my dear friend Persis, another woman who has worked very hard in the Lord. ¹³ Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother, who has been a mother to me, too. ¹⁴ Greet Asyncretus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas and the other brothers and sisters with them. ¹⁵ Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas and all the Lord's people who are with them. ¹⁶ Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ send greetings.

More greetings

[16:10b] My warm greetings to the Christian group in Aristoboulos' household. [16:11] Herodion, you're another Benjamite, so a special salute to you.

Now for the group in Narcissus' household. You are such a witness in the imperial court! [16:12] Tryphaena and Tryphosa, you lovely twin sisters, you never stop trying to win people for the Lord. And Persis – I feel I know you so well! – people tell me about all the things you've been doing for Christ, so just keep on keeping on.

[16:13] How could I have left you out, Rufus? The Lord has had his special hand on you ever since your father carried the cross for him. And you too, dear lady, Simon's widow, you were such a help to me in Antioch; in fact you were a mother in the faith to me when I was trying to make sense of it all and getting rejected by my own family.

[16:14] Now, there's another group of you and I've been given some of your names (which may be names you took when you were baptised): Asyncritus ('Singleminded'), Phlegon ('On fire for the Lord'), Hermes ('God's messenger'), Patrobas, Hermas. [16:15] And still another group which includes Philologus ('One who loves the Word') and Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas. My salutations to you all!

[16:16] Give each other a friendly bear-hug from me. I'll soon be along to do it myself! This visit to Rome is really special and every church I visit wants their warmest wishes passed on to you. That's why this list is so long!

16:17-20a ¹⁷ I urge you, brothers and sisters, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. ¹⁸ For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people. ¹⁹ Everyone has heard about your obedience, so I rejoice because of you; but I want you to be wise about what is good, and innocent about what is evil. ²⁰ The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.

Insidious thinking

[16:17] You are a marvellous illustration of the truth that the church of Christ transcends all distinctions: Jews, Greeks, Romans; male and female; slave, freed, free, high-born; native-born and incomer; palace official and artisan worker. So it is all the more important that you keep a sharp weather-eye open for the kind of people (professing, alas, to be true and faithful Christian believers) who exaggerate minor differences and set up a string of irrelevant criteria which have little or nothing to do with the mainstream apostolic teaching you have so warmly embraced. Sadly, I have to warn you to maintain a discreet distance from such folk. They may be attractive and able speakers, and use all the right language, but they confuse and unsettle members of your fellowship who hold a simple and traditional faith, and ultimately they lead people away from a healthy dependence on God's word. [16:18] Such teachers may hold honourable credentials as servants of Christ, but in reality they are only out to peddle their own ideas, advance their own careers and satisfy their desire for self-importance.

[16:19] Don't get me wrong – I'm not saying you're all backsliders and heretics – far from it! In fact I've heard nothing but good about you wherever I've gone, how you're a model of sound doctrine and good order. I couldn't be more delighted with you. It's just that I know from experience how insidious some thinking can be, when it suggests that if you want to be really pleasing to the Lord you need some kind of superior wisdom or spirituality. No – true wisdom is to see through such masquerades, and to keep to the Spirit's straight path of pleasing Christ and resisting the lure of moral evil. [16:20a] God isn't into the business of drawing up battle lines and setting Christians against one another. The name of his game is reconciliation, bringing us to peace with himself and

peace with each other, and ultimately peace for the whole world. Yes, we're engaged in a deadly spiritual battle, but it's not with each other, it's with the arch-enemy of souls, Satan himself – and it's a battle you're going to win, because you are on the side of the Conqueror; but you may have to hang in there until victory is finally assured.

16:20b-23 *The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you.* ²¹ Timothy, my co-worker, sends his greetings to you, as do Lucius, Jason and Sosipater, my fellow Jews. ²² I, Tertius, who wrote down this letter, greet you in the Lord. ²³ ^[24] Gaius, whose hospitality I and the whole church here enjoy, sends you his greetings. Erastus, who is the city's director of public works, and our brother Quartus send you their greetings.

A few more!

[16:20b] I end with the traditional greeting: 'May the grace of our Lord Jesus be with you.' But it's not just a formula, because I long above all that you know more and more of the wonderful companionship and sheer moment-by-moment availability of this Lord of ours.

[16:21] Hold on! People are crowding round me wanting to be included in the message. Greetings from Timothy, who's always at my side to do the Lord's work here in Corinth. Lucius, Jason, Sosipater (all fellow-Benjamites) want to say hello.

[16:22] I'm going to say my bit too. I'm Tertius, and my arm's practically dropping off because I'm Paul's amanuensis and I've physically written the whole of this 'brief' letter. OK, I've done it for Jesus and that makes it all worthwhile. Just got enough energy to write 'Hi!'

[16:23] A dignified wave from Gaius our generous host. I (Paul) have been staying with him and writing this letter here, and his house is big enough to fit the whole church into on special occasions. Then there's Erastus who is Minister for Housing and Public Works at Corinth. And Quartus, such a model Christian.

16:25-27 ²⁵ Now to him who is able to establish you in accordance with my gospel, the message I proclaim about Jesus Christ, in keeping with the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, ²⁶ but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all the Gentiles might come to the obedience that comes from faith – ²⁷ to the only wise God be glory for ever through Jesus Christ! Amen.

Praise God!

[16:25-27] I'm writing this last bit myself (Tertius is on strike). Anyway I want to authenticate it in my own handwriting.

Praise God, the Almighty! His great power is sufficient for all of us. Whatever you folk at Rome have to go through, he won't let his church there collapse. Its foundations are sure, because they rest foursquare upon the gospel I proclaim – and it's not my gospel, it's the message the Lord Jesus himself wants to be taken right round the world. It's not only a continuation of his own teaching while on earth, it's the final fruition of God's purpose for humanity, lying dormant since ancient times but now released in its full glory. Now the old scriptures make perfect sense! We can understand what the law and the prophets were trying to tell us all along. Just as the undying Lord of creation released his word to start off the physical universe, so too he's given a fresh command to bring the light of Christ to every nation under heaven. Our Master is everybody's Master. He hasn't let us down, and he won't let you down. This God knows what he is doing. He is utterly unique, and he's come to us in our Lord Jesus Christ. To Father, Son and Holy Spirit be lifted a magnificent song of praise that will take all eternity to find its full expression. My letter's finished, but God's glory goes on and on and on. Yes!

CROSS-REFERENCES

There are some sixty citations of the OT in Romans, more than any other Pauline letter: these are underlined, while probable further allusions are *asterisked. Other references are either passages that Paul may have had in mind, or are from parts of the NT written earlier or later than Romans but saying broadly the same thing.

1:2-4 Your father Ps 2:7. God with us Isa 7:14. Prince of peace Isa 9:6. Roots of Jesse Isa 11:1. Righteous Branch Jer 23:5. Rest on him Isa 11:2. Good news to the poor Isa 61:1. Prolong his days Isa 53:10. See decay Ps 16:10.

1:5a Anything like it before Acts 22:21; 26:16-18.

1:11-13 Spiritual gifts 1 Cor 12 and 14; Eph 4; Rom 12.

1:17b Old text in the prophets Hab 2:14.

1:18-20 Tell us about God *Ps 19:1-6.

1:21-23 God-substitutes *Ezek 8:10. Glorious in holiness 1 Tim 6:15-16.

1:24-25 See where it leads you Hos 4:17. Gaining wisdom *Gen 3:6; 1 Jn 2:16.

1:32 Noah's time Gen 6:7. Sodom and Gomorrah Gen 18:20. Road to judgment Jas 1:15; Rom 6:23; Gal 6:7-8.

2:4 People everywhere Acts 17:30. Grace toward us in Christ Acts 14:16; 2 Pet 3:9; Lk 15:17-18. Too late to do anything about it 1 Tim 2:4, 2 Tim 2:25-26, Jn 16:8.

2:5-6 Repay them accordingly Ps 62:12, Job 34:11, Prov 24:12. Deserved retribution Dt 7:10, 32:35a, Prov 11:31. Doesn't have favourites Dt 10:17.

2:7-9 Exactly the same question *Ps 62:12.

2:10-11 Favourites Rom 2:6, 1 Pet 1:17.

2:15-16 Witness of Scripture Eccl 12:14.

2:17-20 Qualified to guide Job 29:15.

2:21-24 Have let him down Isa 52:5; *Ezek 36:20-21.

2:28-29 Company of heaven Jn 3:3, 6; Rom 14:17.

3:1-4 Subsequent repentance 2 Sam 11-12. Known all along Ps 51:4.

3:5-8 Widely reported Acts 17:6, Rom 6:1.

3:10-18 With empty nets Ps 14:1-3, repeated at Ps 53:1-3. Disguised mantrap Ps 5:9. Kiss a cobra Ps 140:3. Decaying matter Ps 10:7. Run a couple of texts together here Prov 1:16; Isaiah 59:7, 8. Again from the Psalms Ps 36:1.

3:19-20 Psalmist puts it beautifully Ps 143:2.

3:21-22a Prisoner trapped in the pit Zech 9:11. End of the first section 1:16-17.

3:22b-24 Adam and the Fall Rom 5:12-21. Swing open for me Phil 3:4-7.

3:25a The Ten Commandments *Exod 25:22. Wrath was poured out on him Mt 27:45; *Isa 53:4. The seat of grace *Lev 16, *17:11; Heb 9:22. Lost centuries ago Jer 3:16.

3:27-28 It's called Jesus Jn 14:6; Rom 10:4. Trusting him is the way to life *Hab 2:4; Rom 1:17. Justified before God Lk 18:14.

3:29-30 The centurion Matt 8:5-13. The Great Banquet Lk 14:15-24. The Prodigal Son Lk 15:11-32. Cornelius Acts 10:34-35.

4:1-3 The Genesis narrative Gen 15:6. The one word 'Yes!' Jas 2:23; 2 Chr 20:7; Isa 41:8.

4:4-5 Turn on a few pages Rom 6:1-4. Sin pays a wage too Rom 6:23. Judged by those records Rev 20:12. Jesus' credit with God Jn 8:29.

4:6-8 Song of Forgiveness Ps 32. Not die but live *2 Sam 12:13. From their account Ps 32:1-2.

4:9-12 Two chapters later *Gen 17:24. Jesus say this Mt 8:11. Taught it from the start Mt 3:8-9. The story of Naaman 2 Ki 5:15-19. Awe and repentance Jon 1:16; 3:10.

4:13-15 Far corners of the earth *Gen 12:1-3. Hears from God *Gen 12:4, 13:18, 15:6, 17:22, 21:14, 22:3. Breaking God's law 1 Jn 3:4.

4:16-17 The name Abraham means Gen 17:5. Corpses stand up Ezek 37:10. Starting with the creation Heb 11:3. No longer be needed 1 Cor 13:10-12.

4:18-22 Thief on the cross Lk 23:40-43. So your descendants will be Gen 15:5.

4:23-24 Did he stay dead? Rom 10:9. Everybody's Lord Rom 14:9.

5:3-4 When people persecute you Mt 5:11-12. When it's over Eph 6:13. As an apostle 2 Cor 4:7-12; 11:23-33. Beaten and exhausted Phil 4:13. Stronger every day 2 Cor 4:16.

5:5 About the Holy Spirit Previous refs are 1:4, 2:29.

5:6-8 People of Noah's day Gen 6:5-7. Isaiah's picture Isa 53. Sin-offering Lev 16:5, Rom 8:3.

5:12-14 'In Christ all will be made alive' 1 Cor 15:22. The penalty ... is death *Gen 2:17.

5:15-17 Master of their hearts Col 1:13-14. One word ... 'receive' Jn 1:12. We have received Rom 5:11; Acts 2:28; Rom 8:15. Keep receiving Rom 5:17; 1 Pet 1:9.

5:18-21 Not my will but yours Mt 26:39. Freedom, life and hope Zech 9:11. Line of his descendants Heb 7:9-10. We all died 2 Cor 5:14, 21. More lawbreaking than ever Rom 7:7-12; 1 Tim 1:9-10. Proved wonderfully true 1 Tim 1:12-16. Creates new lives Isa 55:13. Till they drop dead Rom 6:23.

6:1-4 Burial and resurrection Jn 11:25-26.

6:8-11 In the person of his Son Jn 3:16. Jesus taught it himself Jn 12:26.

6:15-18 Do what they require 2 Pet 2:19b; Jn 8:34.

6:19-21 Goodness and so on Gal 5:22-23. Drunken orgies Gal 5:19-21.

6:22-23 Pride of the human soul Lk 18:9-14.

7:7-11 The forbidden fruit *Gen 3:6. As I explained earlier Rom 5:12-21. Jesus made the same point Mt 5:28, cf Prov 6:25, Jas 1:14-15. The forbidden thing Exod 20:17. An example I used earlier Rom 5:18-21. Follow evil and you die *Dt 30:19. Such a fool *Gen 3:13.

7:14-17 Genesis says tellingly Gen 5:1-3. Jesus himself used it Jn 6:63.

7:25b Ignore it long enough 1 Tim 4:2. Riches had him Mk 10:17-22. It is sometimes called See Jn 1:9. Not from within Jn 3:3-6.

8:1-2 The old me has gone 2 Cor 5:17; Gal 2:20. First words in this letter Rom 1:4.

8:3-4 I used to think like that too Phil 3:6; Acts 23:1; Mk 10:20.

8:5-8 You will die *Gen 2:17. I have written elsewhere 2 Corinthians. Prince of peace Isa 9:6. On your own piety Lk 18:11.

8:9-11 Said several times Rom 6:4, 6, 8, 7:6. Through the Spirit of God Rom 1:4, 1 Pet 3:18. Intended we should express Ezek 36:25-27; Rom 5:5. Wait until the Last Day for that 1 Cor 15:50-57.

8:14-17 Eternal Son of God Heb 2:11. Nameless fears to Dt 33:27. Everything he has is yours Lk 15:31, 1 Cor 3:21-23, 1 Pet 1:4.

8:18-21 Waiting in the wings Isa 65:17; Jer 33:12-14; Ezek 40-48; Amos 9:11-15; Zeph 3:14-20. Everything is meaningless *Eccl 1:2. Going to look like 1 Jn 3:2.

8:22-23 Redemption in view Mt 19:28, Acts 3:21, Eph 1:10, Col 1:20. Going to be the bride Rev 21:2.

8:24-25 Face to face 1 Cor 13:12.

8:26-27 Weeping thrown in Heb 5:7. Loved and heard Heb 4:16. Knowing perfectly what we're like *1 Chr 28:9.

8:28-30 Follow and please him Jn 21:17. Through the Spirit Jn 1:18.

8:31-32 What's the opposition worth? *Isa 50:7-9. Law of Moses Lev 18:21. At the last moment *Gen 22:11-12, 16. Pleaded in acute distress Lk 22:44; Heb 5:7.

8:33-34 Merciful decision Rom 9:33, 11:33. Torn up your debt-laden account-book *Isa 53:11. Speak for yourself Satan Zech 3:1-5. In every respect Jn 8:29. A single flaw in him Jn 8:46; 1 Jn 3:5. Life record Jn 5:22, 27. Abundantly clear Rom 8:1. Sacrifice for sin *Isa 53:6; Rom 4:25. Stephen systematically murdered Acts 7:54-60. Next to God's throne *Ps 110:1. Interceding for us all *Isa 53:12.

8:35-37 Every anxious believer *Ps 118:6. Promised he would be Mt 28:20. The old scriptures Job 5:17-22. What the Psalmist says Ps 44:22; cf *Isa 53:7.

8:38-39 Never leave you Heb 13:5, 6. Everlasting Dt 33:27, Ps 103:17, Jer 31:3.

9:1-5 Delete me as well *Exod 32:32.

9:6-9 Special and chosen people *Gen 12:2; *Exod 19:5-6. Come back to that in a moment Rom 9:27. Gospel commission from the start Acts 26:17-18. Radical and shocking truth Jn 8:31-59. Famous chapter in Genesis Gen 21. Your true heirs Gen 21:12. By purely natural human descent Jn 1:13. There in black and white Gen 18:14, cf *17:21, *18:10. Messiah comes of this line *Gen 22:16-18; Heb 11:17-19.

9:10-13 Descendant of David Rom 1:4. Jacob and Esau Gen 25:19-26. God's call inside the womb Gen 25:23. The other end of our scriptures Mal 1:2-3. Faith responds 2 Tim 2:19.

9:14-18 The golden calf Gen 32. I can identify with that Rom 9:3. Because I choose to do so Exod 33:19. My love and care for my people Exod 9:16. He wants to have mercy on everyone 1 Tim 2:4; 2 Pet 3:9.

9:19-21 The potter's workshop Jer 18. His original design *Jer 18:4. What kind of jug I was going to be? *Isa 29:15-16; *Isa 45:9-12; Isa 64:8; Job 10:8-9. I'm going to show a little later Rom 10:13.

9:22-24 Created for glory Isa 43:7; Mal 2:10. To come back to him Ezek 33:11; 2 Pet 3:9. I was a complete monster Acts 9:1.

9:25-26 'Rejected' and 'Not Mine' *Hos 1:6, 8. My specially chosen one Hos 2:23. Makes it even clearer Hos 1:10. Turned its back on its Creator Rom 1:21. A glorious mix of Roman, Greek and Jewish Rom 16.

9:27-29 The light streams in 2 Cor 3:14-17. Tiny band that stays faithful Isa 7:3, 10:21. Sand on the seashore *Gen 22:17. Wrestling with the same problem Hos 1:10. Cut most of the Jewish people out of his will Isa 10:22-23. Going to happen with

Jerusalem Isa 1:9. The only 'righteous' people left in the whole city *Gen 19:15-16; 2 Pet 2:7-8. Many of the other prophets as well Isa 37:31-32; Jer 23:3; Ezek 14:22; Joel 2:32; Amos 5:15; Mic 5:7-8; Zeph 3:9-13; Zech 8:11-12, 13:8-9.
9:30-33 Combining two or three texts together here *Isa 8:14, Isa 28:16; Ps 118:22.

10:1-4 Israelites wandering in the desert Ps 95:10; Ps 107:4-9. Null and void where you are concerned Gal 3:10-14. Why I wrote the letter in the first place Rom 1:16-17.

10:5-10 Take a look at Leviticus Lev 18:5. Actually doing so Dt 29:29. Final despairing appeal Dt 30:11-14. Moses was God's prophet Dt 18:15. Living just along the street Jn 1:14. Come up again without them Mic 7:19.

10:11-13 Already quoted the promise Rom 9:33; Isa 28:16. Promise was originally made Joel 2:32. Good news was officially launched Acts 2:21. My far darker inner blindness Acts 9:14; 22:16.

10:14-15 Good news of liberty and restoration *Isa 52:1ff; Isa 52:7. Lord, here am I; send me! Isa 6:8.

10:16-17 Servant Songs of Isaiah Isa *52:13-53:12; Isa 53:1. God's word to David 2 Sam 7:12ff. Even by Isaiah himself Isa 9:2-7. The result is faith Acts 8:26-40. Overwhelming answer is 'no' Acts 18:6, 28:25; 1 Thess 2:15-16.

10:18-21 Has irresistible power Rom 1:16-17; 1 Thess 1:5. Existence and power of God Ps 19:1-4; Rom 1:19-20. Land still to be possessed Josh 13:1. Strategic priority 1:16; Acts 13:5, 17:2. Operated in the public domain Acts 26:26. Chance to take root Mk 4:15. Message may not be understood Mt 13:19. Lasted down to the present day 2 Cor 3:14. Israelite rebelliousness and stubbornness Dt 31:27. Teaches them a Song Dt 32:1-43. Witness against them Dt 31:19. So he says Dt 32:21. Unthinkable conclusion Isa 65:1-2. Discover me by accident Mt 13:44.

11:1-6 Carried by its parent Dt 33:12. It is quite impossible Rom 11:29. In the cave on Mt Horeb 1 Kings 19:9ff. Massive kingdom people Rev 7:9. Birthday present Jn 6:37.

11:7-10 Deepest desire is to see his face Ps 27:8; Ps 63:1. A good look at the chapter in Isaiah *Isa 29. Takes away their ability to see Isa 6:10; Jn 9:39-41; Jn 12:37-40; Acts 28:26-28. Had turned against him Ps 69:22-23. Wisdom to folly 2 Sam 15:31. Into your soul instead of light Mt 6:22-23. You'd better think again Gal 6:7.

11:11-16 The Jews wild with jealousy Rom 10:19. To have been given this ministry Eph 3:8. Wants his house to be full Lk 14:23. Under the Lordship of Christ Col 1:20. Jettisoned his own people? Rom 11:1.

11:17-21 That have suffered precisely this fate 1 Cor 10:12; Gal 3:1-9; 2 Pet 3:17; 2 Tim 4:10; Rev 2:5, 3:16. There are no exceptions Jn 15:6-7; Rom 2:11; 1 Pet 1:17.

11:22-24 Regenerating completely dead specimens Rom 4:17; 1 Cor 1:28.

11:25-27 Heart-rending catalogue *Isa 59. In the second section of my letter Rom 3:15-17. So I'd better do it myself Isa 59:15b-21. Twisted nation to repent Lk 5:32; Acts 2:38. New covenant is going to be sealed Mk 14:24. Given for a permanent possession Acts 2:17. Words of salvation and forgiveness Isa 27:9. And to the ends of the earth Mk 14:9; Lk 23:34; Isa 49:6.

11:28-32 It isn't over yet 1 Th 2:14-16; Rom 15:31; Acts 28:22. Blessing for the whole world Gen 12:3; Exod 19:5-6. An unbreakable covenant with them Dt 4:31; Jer 31:31-34. Be they ever so undeserving *Dt 7:7. Going to stand in his way Isa 43:13; Php 1:6; 1 Th 5:24. God's Highway of Holiness Paul appears to be anticipating John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* here; apologies to all concerned.

11:33-36 No trace of his footprints Job 5:9; Ps 77:19. Doesn't take advice from anyone Isa 40:13-14. For the time being Dt 29:29. As Job discovered *Job 41:11.

12:1 Good Samaritan Lk 10:25-37. Resurrection holiness present in us Rom 1:4; Jn 14:16. Himself as the primary relationship Song 6:3; Jn 5:40; Phil 3:8.

12:2 Without the slightest effort Ps 119:45; Mt 11:30; 1 Jn 5:3. End up where he wants you to be 1 Thess 5:23-24. Bring them home Lk 15:4, 1 Tim 2:4, 2 Pet 3:9.

12:3-5 Some kind of apostolic charisma Rom 1:5. Fallen for the devil's lie 2 Cor 10:12. Greatest gift is Christ Eph 4:7. Receive God's fullness Eph 3:19. Analogy is the human body 1 Cor 12:12-31.

12:6-8 Develop more widely in the church 1 Cor 14:1. Called himself a diakonos Mt 20:28; Lk 22:27. Disciples' sweaty feet Jn 13:14. Son of Encouragement Acts 4:36. Don't let the spark go out 2 Tim 1:6. Lose the sense of urgency 2 Tim 1:10, 4:2. How to forgive each other Phil 4:2-3; Lk 23:34.

12:9-10 Image we are all being recreated Rom 8:29; Eph 4:13; 2 Cor 3:18. Everyone we come across in our daily lives 1 Pet 2:17.

12:11-13 Not exactly popular in Rome Acts 28:22. In an earlier chapter Rom 8:18-21. Hope, patience, prayer Rom 8:24-26. Penetrate this armour Eph 6:16-18. Family begging for bread Ps 37:25. Affliction to happen to you Job 5:24. Often in desperate need Jas 2:15. I'm coming to see you Acts 19:21; Rom 15:24-25. Christ knocking at your door Mt 25:40; Heb 13:2.

12:14-16 Monstrously unjust hearings 1 Pet 2:23. Perfect in that respect Acts 23:3. Saw the hungry crowds Mk 1:41; Mt 9:36. Members of the same body 1 Cor 12:26. Stuff your pride Jas 2:1-4.

12:17-21 *Never will be* Gen 4:15; Ps 94:1-2. *Turning the other cheek* Mt 5:39; 1 Pet 3:9. *Practised what he preached* 1 Pet 2:23. *Followers of the Prince of Peace* Isa 9:6; Mt 5:9. *Judge of all the earth* Gen 18:25; Dt 32:35; Rom 3:19. *Old book of wise sayings* Prov 25:21-22. *See if it works* *2 Kings 6:20-23; 2 Chron 28:15; Prov 16:7.

13:1-2 *Delegated to them by God* Mk 12:17. *Good order of the realm* 1 Pet 2:13; 1 Tim 2:1-2. *Something ordained by God* Dan 5:18, 21.

13:3-5 *They are going to follow* Gen 2:16-17. *Won't sleep easily at night* 1 Pet 4:15.

13:6-7 *Not the state's employees, but God's* Jn 19:11; Eph 6:9. *God's original commission* Gen 1:28. *Tolerable existence on this earth* 1 Pet 2:13-17; Mk. 12:17.

13:8-10 *Turning the world upside down* Acts 17:6-7. *Primary obedience to God* Acts 5:29. *Power of the Holy Spirit* 2 Cor 6:6-7; 10:3-4.

13:11-14 *Full gaze of our glorious God* Ps 139:11-12; Heb 4:12-13. *Unutterably lovely* Song 5:16; Isa 33:17. *Wake up, you dozy people* Eph 5:14.

14:1-4 *Same dilemma at Corinth* 1 Cor 8. *Surrender this one* Acts 15:20. *A couple of days* Rev 2:14, 20; see also Younger Pliny Letters 10:96. *Criteria to be observed here* 1 Tim 3; Tit 1:5-9. *Peter on the lake* Mt 14:31.

14:5-9 *In other churches too* Gal 4:10; Col 2:16. *On our own any longer* Gal 2:20.

14:10-12 *Comparing ourselves to people we know* 2 Cor 10:12. *Human sin and pride* Rom 2:1-11. *The whole earth to judgment* Isa 45:23. *It's Jesus himself* Jn 5:22; Phil 2:10-11. *Justify any of us* Rom 3:24, 5:18, 8:34 etc; Isa 45:24-25. *Out the other side* Jn 5:24; Jn 11:25.

14:13-15 *Peter had the same problem* Acts 10:14. *Food and nothing else* Mk 7:19.

14:16-18 *The contempt of outsiders* Jas 2:7; 2 Thess 1:12; Rom 2:24.

14:19-23 *The Spirit count for so little* Gal 3:3; 1 Tim 4:1-4. *Heading for the rocks* 1 Cor 11:27-32; 1 Tim 1:19; Jas 1:6. *Between us and the Lord* Jas 1:7-8.

15:1-4 *Amazingly prophetic Psalm* Ps 69. *Reproaches break his heart* Ps 69:20. *If you look hard enough* Jer 29:11-13; Acts 17:11-12.

15:5-7 *Shoulders their burdens* Isa 41:4b; Mt 12:20 = Isa 42:3. *Restored to full fellowship* Lk 24:34; Jn 20:27. *The reality of his risen life* Mt 28:9; Jn 20:17. *Token of his presence* Lk 24:30. *By then it was hopeless* Jn 13:26; Mt 26:50. *How much more should it be ours* Phil 2:1-5.

15:8-12 *Messiah as a Servant* Isa 42:1. *Witness to the nations* Isa 43:10, 49:3. *Distorting the truth about God* Isa 48:1, 49:5-6a. *Rejected by Israel* Isa 49:7, 50:6, 52:3. *Fall by the wayside* Gen 12:3, 18:18. *To the ends of the earth* Isa 49:8-9, 25, 52:10. *Flocking back to God* Isa 49:6b, 51:11. *Thanksgiving for deliverance* 2 Sam 22:50 = Ps 18:49. *The song of Moses* Dt 32:43. *Shortest Psalm of all* Ps 117:1. *Root of Jesse prophecy* *Isa 11:1-10; Isa 11:10.

15:13 *In short supply these days* Eph 2:12c. *Hopes and fears to him* Ps 55:22; 1 Pet 5:7. *Name is the Holy Spirit* Gal 5:22-23; Phil 4:13; Col 1:27. *Thankfulness and joy* Jn 7:38. *Has in store for us* 1 Pet 1:3-9.

15:14-16 *The vision Isaiah had* Isa 60:3-7. *Gold and silver offerings* Isa 60:9. *Singing salvation songs* Isa 60:6 LXX. *Temple of the Holy Spirit* 1 Cor 3:16-17; 2 Cor 6:16.

15:17-21 *What God has done through others* 2 Cor 10:13-16. *Four corners of the world* Acts 1:8. *Talking just now* Rom 15:8. *Lonely and rejected figure* *Isa 52:13-15; Isa 52:15. *I've witnessed to kings* Acts 26:2, proconsuls Acts 13:7, 18:12, prefects Acts 24:24, councillors Acts 17:22. *Roman Emperor himself* 2 Tim 4:17.

15:22-29 *Spirit's restraining guidance* Rom 1:13, Acts 16:6. *Rome, then Spain* Acts 19:21. *Safety is the last consideration* Acts 21:13; 2 Cor 11:23-27. *Browbeat them into doing this* 2 Cor 8:4.

15:30-33 *The Spirit in our hearts* Rom 8:26, 34. *Fanatical plots* Acts 23:12. *Rule in your hearts* Col 3:15.

16:3-10a *Prisca and Aquila* Acts 16:3, 18-28; 1 Cor 16:3, 19; 2 Tim 4:19.

16:10b-16 *Carried the cross for him* Mk 15:21.

16:17-20a *Transcends all distinctions* Gal 3:28. *Desire for self-importance* Phil 3:2-3. *Superior wisdom or spirituality* Col 2:4, 23. *A battle you're going to win* *Gen 3:15; *Ps 91:13.

16:20b-24 *Gaius our generous host* 1 Cor 1:14.

16:25-27 *In my own handwriting* 1 Cor 16:21; Gal 6:11; 2 Thess 3:17. *Trying to tell us all the time* 1 Pet 1:10-12.

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 Sherborne
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