

Essentials for Faith 1:

Introduction (Romans 1:1-17)

ITS INFLUENCE

Given the greatness of its theme it is no wonder that this letter has been a huge influence throughout the history of the church. The following examples span centuries of church history and demonstrate the astounding impact the understanding of God's eternal truth on the minds and lives of individuals:

In 386 AD, **Augustine of Hippo**, a teacher of rhetoric, received assurance of salvation after reading Romans 13:13&14. The challenge to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ" struck him so forcefully that "it was as if a light of relief from all anxiety flooded into my heart. All the shadows of doubt were dispelled". He later became one of the greatest Latin Fathers of the church, and his theology has impacted the church immensely.

In 1515 AD, **Martin Luther**, a devout Augustinian monk and professor of Bible at Wittenberg University, began to teach from the book of Romans. Luther struggled with the meaning of Romans 1:17, where Paul says that the gospel reveals "righteousness" from God. He later wrote, "Night and day I pondered until ... I grasped the truth that the righteousness of God is that righteousness whereby, through grace and sheer mercy, he justifies us by faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise... This passage of Paul became to me a gateway into heaven". Luther went on to be one of the great lights of the Reformation.

In 1738, **John Wesley**, an ordained Anglican clergyman who had recently returned disillusioned from a failed mission trip to Georgia, attended a meeting in London where he heard a reading from Martin Luther's book about Romans. Wesley was profoundly affected by the experience, and wrote, "About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death".

In 1918, theologian **Karl Barth** published his commentary on Romans. He had been trained in liberal theology that looked for the improvement of society through the efforts of mankind, but the bleakness of Paul's description of mankind in Romans 1:18 onwards convinced him that man is utterly sinful and absolutely dependent on God's sovereign grace for salvation.

THE WRITER– PAUL

He was born Saul, and trained to be a Pharisee and expert in the Jewish Law. He became a leading persecutor of the church, until Jesus confronted him on the Road to Damascus. 2 key passages show us just how great a change Paul's conversion made in his life:

- **Acts 9:1-20** – his conversion, when Saul became Paul
- **Philippians 3:4-7** – Paul explains his previous privileges and his new priorities in Christ

In v1, Paul describes himself using 3 terms:

- a) **A servant of Christ Jesus** – the word means literally "bondservant", and the meaning is more like "slave". Paul was compelled to serve Christ.
- b) **"Set apart for the gospel"** – this is a contrast with his previous life when he was a Pharisee (the name "Pharisee" means set apart for the Law). Now Paul is NOT ashamed of the gospel (v16) because he realises that it is a message of power from God and that it reveals God's righteousness to all.
- c) **An apostle** – this word simply means "messenger," but in the Bible it is most commonly used to mean a special group of people who were:
 - 1) **Witnesses to Jesus** (I Cor 9:1&2, Acts 1:26) – in particular they had seen Jesus after the resurrection (Acts 4:33, I Cor 15:7-9). During His ministry Jesus appointed and trained 12 apostles (see Mark 3:14-19). After the ascension of Jesus the remaining 11 apostles cast lots to appoint Matthias as a replacement for Judas. We do not know if he was truly regarded as an apostle in the same sense as the other 11 either by the church or by God. Paul was commissioned by Christ to be an apostle when He appeared to him on the road to Damascus (see I Cor 15:7-9). His particular responsibility was to be the apostle to the Gentiles, whilst Peter had a particular ministry to the Jews (Romans 11:13, Galatians 2:8).
 - 2) **The foundation of the Church** (Eph 2:20) – they had a special role in establishing the church and expanding it to other groups of people who had not yet been included (Peter & John with the Samaritans in Acts 8, Peter in Acts 10 with the Gentiles, Paul in Acts 19 with the disciples of John in Ephesus). Only 12 apostles form the foundation of the church (see Revelation 21:14).

- 3) **They were specially called by Christ** for this purpose (Romans 1:1) – apostleship was a divine appointment, not a human one (unlike those appointed as elders and deacons – see Titus 1:5)
- 4) **They had a special authority in their teaching** – see Acts 2:42 – “the apostles’ doctrine”. The New Testament was written by the apostles (Paul wrote 13 books, John 5, Peter 2 and Matthew 1) or those who were close to them (Mark was a close associate of Peter and Paul – see II Tim 4:11 and I Peter 5:13; Luke was a close associate of Paul – Col 4:14; James and Jude were half-brothers of the Lord Jesus and part of the apostolic circle – Matt 13:55, Jude 1, Gal 1:9). Throughout the book of Acts the apostles in Jerusalem serve the function of giving authoritative guidance to the church on disputed matters.
- 5) **They performed miracles** as evidence of their apostleship (II Cor 12:12 – see also Acts 2:43)

According to this definition there can be no apostles in the church today. However, the New Testament also uses the same Greek word to describe a small number of other individuals who had the ministry of spreading the gospel and planting churches (e.g. Barnabas – Acts 14:14, James – Galatians 1:9). This class of people may have had a similar ministry to modern day missionaries (as evangelists and church planters in new regions), but they did not have the same authority in the church as the twelve.

THE OCCASION & PURPOSE OF WRITING

Paul writes this letter to the “saints” in Rome (remember that “saint” in the Bible means all Christians, who are set apart to belong to God, not just a small group of particularly holy people). Rome was the major city in the western world at that time and the centre of the largest world empire. Paul himself had not been involved in planting the church or in ministering to them (this makes this letter exceptional, as his other letters to churches are all written to churches he has been intimately involved with, often as the founder), although many members of the church were known to him (see Romans 16).

Although Paul had not visited this church before, he recognised its strategic importance in spreading the gospel across the known world. In his introduction Paul mentions two reasons why he longs to visit this church (vv8-15):

1) To strengthen the church with some spiritual gift (v11)

The phrase “spiritual gift” should not be read out of context, as some have, to refer to a particular spiritual gift or manifestation of the spirit that Paul wants to pass on to them, but in context refers to the encouragement that Paul’s visit would bring to them (v12). Paul is a church builder, and he wants to help to strengthen this church as he has so many others.

2) To preach the gospel there so more people might be saved (vv13&14)

Paul has a great burden to take the gospel to the Gentiles as well as the Jews (his particular calling was as the apostle to the Gentiles – see v5).

However, Paul’s intention is not to stay for a long period with the church in Rome (this would have been quite out of keeping with his mission to “preach the gospel where Christ is not known” – Ch15v20). He envisaged visiting Rome on his way to Spain (15:24).

The letter was written in either AD 57 or 58 while Paul was staying in the home of Gaius (15:23) in Corinth (I Cor 1:14). Paul had been busy over the past decade preaching and planting churches in the eastern Roman Empire (the Roman provinces of Galatia, Macedonia, Achaia and Asia – modern day Greece and Turkey), and he is now planning to head to the Western Empire, of which Spain was the most established region. Before this, however, he has to finish the task of carrying the gift he had collected amongst the Gentile churches to the church in Judea. Paul asks the Roman church to pray for him during this trip, since he knows that he is likely to face opposition in Jerusalem from the Jews (see Romans 15:30-32). In the event, Paul did run into trouble in Jerusalem, and was arrested (see Acts 21). He eventually reached Rome in around AD 60, but as a prisoner rather than a free man (see Acts 28). He spent the next two years under house arrest in the city, during which time he had a productive ministry preaching the gospel and writing several of his epistles. It is doubtful if he ever reached Spain as he had hoped, but almost certainly he was executed in Rome during the persecution under Nero in the mid-60s. So, why did Paul take time to write this letter to a church he intended to visit so soon?

Various suggestions have been made. Most of these focus on Paul’s desire to commend himself (and specifically his message) to the church before his visit so that they would receive him well when he came. This is certainly part of his intention, and explains both his focus on the gospel and his personal comments to the church in 1:8-17 and 15:14-33, but it does not explain why this is the longest of all his epistles. Some writers have suggested that Paul took such care to record the gospel he preached in such detail because of the opposition he was facing or in response to false accusations about him that were being made in Rome. This may also be true. However, one of the most important things to notice about the letter is the focus in it on the relationship between Jews and Gentiles. This is a major theme in several sections:

- Ch 2-3 – where Paul's argument is aimed at showing that Jews and Gentiles alike are guilty before God and need the redemption that Christ brings
- Ch 4 – Paul's argument from the life of Abraham is intended as further proof to the Jews that faith is the eternal principle on which God works with mankind (see 4:1 "our forefather")
- Ch 7 – This chapter is all about the struggle in the will of the man who knows the Law and wants to keep it but finds himself incapable of keeping it because of his sinful nature
- Ch 9-11 – These 3 chapters are all about God's purposes for Israel
- Ch 14 – This chapter focuses on relationships between people who differ over "disputable matters". The examples mentioned by Paul are issues that would be likely to arise between Christians from a Jewish background and believers from a Gentile background – regulations about special days and diet.

So, it would be untrue to suggest that Romans is simply a statement of Paul's doctrine with no concern for the specific circumstances of the church he is writing to. Rather, the way in which Paul presents the gospel truth is particularly relevant to the situation in Rome. To understand why we must have some knowledge of the history of Christianity in Rome.

The New Testament does not tell us how the church in Rome came into being, but it is quite possible that it was founded by some of the people from Rome who heard Peter preach on the day of Pentecost (see Acts 2:10&11) rather than by a mission from the apostles. The first Christians in the city were, therefore, almost certainly Jews or Gentile proselytes to Judaism. There had been a Jewish community in Rome since at least the second century BC, and it had increased in size in BC 63 when Pompey conquered Jerusalem, taking many Jews captive to Rome where they were later given their freedom. Cicero made reference to the size and influence of the Jewish community in the city in BC 59, and this influence was a sufficient threat to the Romans by 19 AD for Tiberius to expel the entire community. However, the community was re-established within a few years.

The Jews were expelled again by the emperor Claudius (41-54 AD) probably in AD 49, as referred to in Acts 18:2. By this time the church was already established there, and the Jewish Christians, including Aquilla and Priscilla, were exiled with the rest of the community. Interestingly, the reason for this expulsion according to Suetonius was because the Jews were "constantly rioting at the instigation of Chrestus". This may well be a reference to a dispute within the community over Christ (Suetonius, writing 70 years after the event, may have mistaken the name and mistakenly believed that he was actually present in Rome). The edict would have expired with Claudius' death in AD 54, but during that period of five years the remaining church in Rome would have consisted entirely of Gentile converts. This must have resulted in a power shift within the fellowship, and when the older Jewish Christians returned to the city there would surely have been relational difficulties between the two groups. It is in this context that Paul wrote this letter – a defence of a gospel that is God's power for salvation "first for the Jew, then for the Gentile" (1:16).

Having said all of the above, the fact remains that Romans is the longest of all Paul's letters, and that it contains the fullest record of the message he preached and his teaching on the Christian life. Of course the letter cannot be taken alone as "the" record of Paul's teaching, but it will provide a sound foundation. The letter does not contain exhaustive, definitive teaching on any one doctrine, but it does touch on most of the key issues in Christian belief, living and relationships.

THE THEME – THE GOSPEL

It is not difficult to tell, even from this introductory section (1:1-17) that the great theme of the epistle is the gospel (the word appears 6 times in these 17 verses). The Greek word translated "gospel" is *euangelion*, and simply means "good news". The gospel is God's good news about Jesus for us. Paul's major concern in this letter is to explain the gospel that he preaches, and for which he has been set apart (v1). It is worth remembering this over-arching theme when we consider the scope of the book. Paul's concept of the gospel was not just limited to a few points or to the message of how to "become a Christian". Rather, it includes the nature of Christian living and relationships. It changes lives radically and completely.

In these verses alone we learn some fundamental truths about the gospel message:

1) It was promised beforehand (v2)

It fulfils the prophecies of the Old Testament ("Holy Scriptures")

2) It is all about Jesus (vv3&4)

The identity of Christ is central to the gospel. He is fully:

- a) *Human* – a descendant of David. This is, of course, essential for the Jews, since the Messiah must be David's descendant.
- b) *Divine* – his divinity was powerfully declared by the ultimate sign-miracle, His resurrection. Therefore we can call Him "Jesus Christ our Lord"!

3) It calls people to obedience (v5)

The gospel has at its core a call to repentance. We are rebellious and disobedient – that is the true meaning of sin – and God calls us to obedience. Paul's particular calling and apostleship is to take this message to the Gentiles.

4) Faith is the principle by which people respond (vv5&17)

This obedience comes by faith. True faith and repentance cannot be separated. Repentance is not just turning away from sin, but also turning towards God, and that involves faith. And one cannot truly have faith in God without turning away from our own rebellious trust in ourselves. Faith is the **only** principle that makes God's righteousness applicable to our lives.

5) It is God's power to save people (v16)

The gospel is powerful. It is the only way to save a person. It is not just an issue of certain historical facts, but the truth contained in it is about present power to save.

6) It applies to ALL people (v16)

The gospel has universal application – to Jews and Gentiles. It came first to the Jews and then to the Gentiles, but it is a message for both. It transcends all cultural and ethnic divides.

7) It reveals God's righteousness (v17)

The gospel makes sinful people righteous. Righteousness means to be in a right relationship with God – a righteous person is acceptable to Him, as if they had no sin. The amazing thing about the gospel is that it makes sinful people righteous, not by their own effort or because they earn it, but because God's righteousness is revealed to them. This is the mystery of the gospel – how a holy God can declare sinful people righteous without ceasing to be holy. Romans will show us how this can be.

Each of these themes will be expanded upon in the letter. It is no wonder that Paul could say he was "not ashamed" (v16) of this gospel.

OUTLINE:

1:1-17 Introduction

1:18-4:25 Essentials for Faith

- a) The wrath & judgement of God (1:18-2:16)
- b) God's plan of salvation (2:17-4:25)

5:1-8:39 Essentials for Life

- a) Life through Christ's death (Ch 5)
- b) Slaves to Sin or Righteousness (Ch 6)
- c) Living by Law or Spirit (Ch 7&8)

9:1-11:36 God's Purpose for Israel

- a) Descendants and "children" of Abraham (9:1-29)
- b) The centrality of faith (9:30-10:21)
- c) The faithful remnant and the future salvation (11:1-36)

12:1-15:13 Essential Relationships

- a) Relationships in the Church (11:33-12:16)
- b) Relationships with the World (12:17-13:14)
- c) Relationships with the weaker brother (14:1-15:13)

15:14-16:27 Concluding Remarks

- a) Paul's purpose and plans (15:14-33)
- b) Personal greetings (16:1-23)
- c) Doxology (16:25-27)

In these studies we will not consider the section I have entitled "God's Purpose for Israel". This is not to deny its importance to the overall argument of the book, or its relevance for our doctrine (although these chapters form one of the most challenging sections of the New Testament to understand and apply correctly), but simply because the application of its truth is less direct for us as Gentile believers. These studies were prepared for a series of only 9 sermons, and as such I have chosen to focus on the other three divisions with more immediate application to our lives.

THE CHALLENGE:

- Are we living as people set apart for God and belonging to Him (v6)?
- Does the gospel impress us so much that our lives are set apart for it or are we ashamed of it (vv1&16)?
- Are we fully obedient to the demands of the gospel on our lives & living in faith (v5)?

Essentials for Faith 2:

The Wrath & Judgement of God (Romans 1:18-2:16)

KEY QUESTIONS:

- Is mankind essentially good or bad?
- What is the reason for problems with human society, and where can we look for answers?
- What is God's opinion about this, and what is He going to do about it?

GOD'S WRATH REVEALED (1:18-32)

Paul's central argument in these verses is that mankind is deserving of the wrath of God. Wrath is intense anger. Some authors have tried to limit the concept of God's present anger, preferring to focus on His love and grace. Paul's statement in v18 is quite clear – his tense is present, and the wrath referred to is God's and is revealed from Him ("from heaven" is a synonym for "from God"). There is a contrast here with the wrath of God revealed and v17 where it is righteousness from Him that is revealed. This is central to the gospel – God is intensely angry at the sinfulness of man, yet in the gospel there is hope for mankind as God reveals His righteousness. It is worth noting that this wrath is said to be revealed against the attributes of "godlessness" and "wickedness" rather than against "men" themselves – perhaps it is not inaccurate to say that "God hates sin but loves the sinner" – but this should not be read to diminish the emphasis here which is on the intensity of God's anger and the fact that it is utterly deserved. **Man is in the wrong with God!**

The two attributes of men in v18 are worthy of attention, as they serve as headings for the remainder of the section:

A] vv 19-25 – The Godlessness of man

It is interesting that this is where Paul begins in his explanation of God's wrath. The central issue is mankind's rejection of God. "Godlessness" means a lack of reverence for God that expresses itself in rejection of Him and rebellion against Him. According to Paul, mankind began with a knowledge of the truth about God – His eternal power and divine nature (v20). These truths are seen in the very nature of the created universe. In the same way that if you found a finely tuned machine (for example a watch), you would assume that there must be a maker who had both the intelligence needed to create it and the ability to do so, so the realities of the order in the universe should lead us to understand that there is a personal, intelligent, powerful creator! This revelation of God through creation is usually called "natural revelation" (as distinct from "special revelation" through scripture), and Paul makes several facts about it clear in vv19&20:

1. **It is clear** – it is "plain to them" (v19). This revelation (unlike scripture) is available to all men everywhere.
2. **It is continuous** – "since the creation of the world" (v20)
3. **It is limited** – only certain qualities of God, "His eternal power and divine nature" (v20), can be seen in creation. It is impossible to look at creation and perceive all there is to know about God, but it should be possible to know that He exists, He is personal and intelligent, separate from creation (rather than an impersonal force within the universe), and He is powerful (He must be to be able to create all we see).
4. **It involves reasoning based on the observed facts** – Paul says these qualities can be "understood from what has been made" (v20). In other words, when man looks at creation he should not just see what is there, but seek for an understanding of why it is there. Science alone is not sufficient in our examination of the physical world, but we need philosophy too! It is reassuring to know that God is not opposed to science or the scientific method – he positively encourages it. Many of the greatest scientists have been firm believers in God, exploring His creation and seeing in it the fingerprints of His creativity. It is sad that many modern scientists appear so blind to the creator, but also interesting to see the recent resurgence in belief in God among the scientific community that has come with the "intelligent design" movement.
5. **It leaves man without excuse** (v20) – man is condemned for not perceiving the reality of God. Natural revelation may be incomplete, but it is sufficient to establish guilt.

Of course, the first humans had this knowledge of God (v21), and must have had even greater knowledge, passed on from their ancestors (Adam's lifespan overlapped with many subsequent generations), but they deliberately rejected Him. This rejection began with a failure to give Him the worship He deserves ("they neither glorified Him as God nor gave thanks to Him" v21), but this led on to false worship of created things in place of the Creator (v23). Man is a spiritual being, and must worship something. The rejection of God left a vacuum which became filled with other things – the contrast is most powerful with the idols made in the shape of men and animals that Paul mentions in v23, but the reality is equally true if the new object of worship is man himself (humanism), or a false god that is really

a created spirit (demons surely lie behind many of the world's false systems of worship). By rejecting God, man lessened himself – he removed the one knowledge that enlightened all his reasoning, and his thinking and feeling became debased (v21). Thus men became fools, although in their arrogance they considered themselves to be wise (v22). The biblical definition of foolishness is not stupidity or a lack of intelligence or knowledge, but the rejection of God (Psalm 14:1, "The fool says in his heart 'There is no God'"). A person of limited intelligence and knowledge can be wise if he acknowledges God as the Creator who alone is to be worshipped and orders his life accordingly ("The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom" Psalm 111:10 and Proverbs 9:10).

Verse 24 probably refers to the particular sin of cultic prostitution (which was especially prevalent in the temple of Aphrodite in Corinth where he was writing this letter). This may explain the reference to sexual sin in this section on godlessness in addition to the fuller reference in vv26&27 in the section on wickedness. Verse 25 summarises this entire section. It is noteworthy that in the Greek grammar the word "lie" is preceded by the definite article – thus it should read "They exchanged the truth of God for *the* lie". Perhaps Paul is emphasising that the rejection of God for worship of created things is the ultimate lie. It was the lie of the serpent in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:5 – they would become like God), and it will be the lie of the antichrist (Revelation 13:14&15 – the image of the beast must be worshipped). It is indeed the root of all sin!

Conclusion – Man rejected the knowledge of the Creator God, and so replaced worship of Him with worship of created things. The result was degraded minds (thinking), hearts (desires) and bodies.

B] vv 26-32 – The wickedness of man

In these verses Paul speaks about the results of false worship and the rejection of God in the actions of mankind. Wickedness speaks primarily of man's actions towards one another. **It is important to note the threefold reference in this chapter to God "giving them over" to their sinful behaviour** (vv24, 26 & 28). This should not be read to mean that God caused them to sin, but rather that He removed His restraining influence from them and allowed them to descend into depravity. Because they rejected Him, God surrendered them to their own folly and its consequences, and did not halt their decline. God has given us a great degree of freedom in our choices as human beings, and He does not force or impose His will upon us. Paul describes this wickedness in two sections:

1) Shameful lusts leading to sexual sin (vv26&27)

The emphasis in this section is on perverted desires. Rebellion against God is the root of sin, and it leads to the derangement of natural desires, so that they become sinful. Sexual desire is a necessary, God-given thing, but in the sinful heart it becomes shameful. Any desire that is uncontrolled and that is not censored by an over-riding desire for God becomes depraved. The result is sexual sin that degrades the body (v24). The ultimate expression of this deranged sexual desire is homosexuality. It must be stated very clearly that the scriptural teaching on this issue is clear – homosexual acts are sinful. There may be people who for whatever reason (whether it is nature or nurture) who have a particular temptation in this area (just as others have particular problems with temptation to other sins – e.g. bad temper, dishonesty), but for them to act on these desires is nothing less than sin. I do not believe that homosexuality is the only form of sexual sin – extra-marital sex and rape are equally sinful – or that it is a "worse" sin than others, but it is interesting that Paul singles it out for particular mention here. Perhaps it is true that the widespread practice and acceptance of homosexuality in a society is a mark of a greater degree of sinfulness and godlessness (as it appears to have been in Sodom). As Christians we must be clear, especially in the current age, that homosexuality is an abomination before God, whilst showing compassion to those who have particular temptation in this area, and extending forgiveness to those who have been actively homosexual but are now repentant. The reference in v27 to the penalty received "in themselves" is difficult to interpret clearly. Some people see a reference to sexually transmitted diseases (possibly including HIV) here, but this is not necessarily Paul's meaning. It seems more likely that this is a reference back to v26 where he said "God gave them over". In other words, their "perversion" was the rejection of God, and the "due penalty" was the extent of their shamefulness.

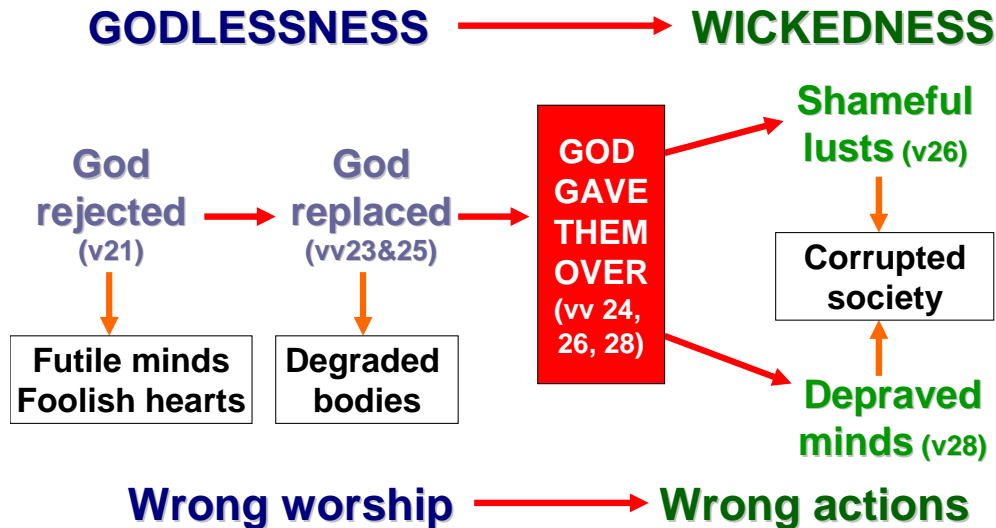
2) Depraved minds leading to multiple sins (vv28-32)

The emphasis in this section is on perverted thinking. The rejection of the "knowledge" of God led to depraved thinking so that what is wrong seemed right to them ("what ought not to be done" v28). The list of sins that follows primarily focus on the destruction of relationships between humans – greed, envy, malice and insensitivity leads to envy, strife, gossip, slander, boasting and ruthlessness. Both the attitudes they have to each other and their resulting speech and actions are depraved. They invent new ways of doing evil! What an indictment. This is the source of disharmony in human society and the reason why every system of human government that rejects God is destined to fail. The real problem is with the human heart – without God we are essentially greedy and selfish. The

approval given to others who sin is just as serious as the commission of these sins (v32). This is a challenge for a society like ours where there is a general trend towards acceptance of immorality. Without a good relationship with God human relationships are dominated by distrust, greed and selfishness.

Conclusion – The rejection of God led to depraved desires and reasoning with a decline in human morality and destruction of society.

Like a lawyer, Paul has presented a devastating case for the depravity of mankind. He has shown conclusively that man in his godlessness and wickedness is deserving of God's wrath. The image below shows the progression from godlessness (wrong worship) to wickedness (wrong actions):



GOD'S JUDGEMENT REVEALED (2:1-16)

PAUL ANSWERS OUR OBJECTIONS (vv1-4)

Paul's argument has been so convincing that we find ourselves vigorously agreeing with him. Yes, mankind is bad – full of sin, steeped in depravity. In this section Paul begins by anticipating three objections to his argument:

a) ***"I'm not as bad as some people – I'll be OK with God."***

Answer: "Do you think you will escape God's judgement?"

Paul's answer to this objection is simple – if you condemn someone else you are condemning yourself too. We are all part of this picture of sinfulness, and every human being is caught in the depravity that Paul has described. We are in no position to judge because we are sinful, and so our judgement will be impure. Only God is a perfect judge – His judgement is "based on truth" (v2). Our judgement is much more likely to be based on impurity, jealousy, incomplete information and prejudice! Our judgement is based on comparison, but His is based on the absolute standard of truth. When we see the sinfulness of mankind we should remember that we too are sinful and should cast ourselves on God's mercy. There is no room for self-righteousness. In these verses Paul is probably anticipating the thinking of some of the Jewish Christians in Rome who would have been prone to saying "Well, yes, that does describe the Gentiles pretty well, but we Jews always had the knowledge of God and we never got into all those terrible sins". Paul's answer is clear – Jews and Gentiles all stand condemned, deserving God's wrath.

b) ***"How can a loving God punish people?"***

Answer: "Do you show contempt for the riches of His kindness (and) tolerance?"

Many people struggle with this idea. The root of this question is a misunderstanding of the nature of God. It is absolutely true that God is a God of love, so much so in fact that John could say that "God is love" (1 John 4:8). John presents God as the origin of true love – revealed in the sacrificial death of Christ – and the one whose love is reproduced in us as we love one another. But, it is also absolutely true that God is a God of justice. He is full of grace AND truth, He is merciful AND holy. The love of God is never divorced from His justice, and the justice of God is never removed from His love. God would not be loving if He allowed sin to go unpunished, as this would leave the victim with no justice, and He would not be just if He ignored sin. Sin must be punished, but God is a God of kindness, and His "kindness leads us towards repentance" (v4). We must not show contempt for His kindness by continuing in sin as if it doesn't matter. It is a terrible pride that expects God to ignore our sin or "turn a blind eye to it". We cannot take His kindness for granted – God will judge, as His character demands, and it is up to us to make sure that we get right with Him before that day!

c) ***"Why doesn't God judge all this sin now?"***

Answer: "Do you show contempt for the riches of His ... patience?"

Why does God allow all the suffering in the world to continue – why does He let good people suffer and the bad people remain unpunished? From a biblical point of view the question (realising that God will judge one day) becomes why doesn't God step in right now and put a stop to all this sin? Why does He keep on tolerating it when it makes Him so angry? Is He powerless to stop it? Paul's answer is emphatic – God **will** judge sinful mankind, but He

will do it in His own time, on the day that He has appointed (v5). If we want to hurry His judgement we are scorning his “patience” (v4). God delays His judgement so that people will have a chance to be saved, or, more specifically, that they will have an opportunity to repent! Repentance means turning away from our own way of living to acknowledge that God is always right and that we have sinned against Him, and to ask His forgiveness. The proper response to a realisation of the sinfulness of man, and therefore our own sinfulness, is to repent before God and seek His mercy! When we refuse to repent we are actually storing up God’s wrath against us (v5)!!!

THE COMING DAY OF JUDGEMENT (vv5-11)

So, the wrath of God that is revealed against man’s sin (1:18) is being stored up for a day when it will burst forth – the “day of God’s wrath” (v5). On that day His judgement will be revealed (contrasting again with 1:17 when His righteousness is revealed and 1:18 where His wrath is revealed). But, how exactly will He judge mankind? What will be His standard for condemning or acquitting those He judges? Is it based entirely on His whim (as is the judgement of Islam’s Allah), or is there some standard by which He will judge? Three words used by Paul in this chapter give us some insight into the nature of God’s judgement:

1. **Truth** (v2) – God is not deceived, and His judgement is not arbitrary. Unlike human judges, He is never missing some of the facts, and His standard is not “beyond reasonable doubt”! No one can escape His judgement (v3). His standard is absolute truth, and nothing is hidden from His sight (He sees “men’s secrets” v16). Only God can judge in this way. Sometimes the things actions of others that seem wrong to us may be motivated by the best of intentions (we cannot read the motives of a person’s heart), and sometimes a person may seem to do the right thing, but their motive may be wrong! God is not deceived!
2. **Righteous** (v5) – God is completely fair. He is a just judge and will neither let off the person who should be condemned or punish those who should not. He will never make a wrong judgement based on the evidence before Him. There are no miscarriages of justice in God’s court.
3. **Favouritism** (v11) – God does not show any favouritism on any basis. He deals with people as individuals (“each person” v6), not as representatives or members of a particular group. In the context of this chapter, God does not judge the Jew and Gentile any differently – the standard of judgement is exactly the same for members of both groups. No person will escape God’s judgement because he or she is a member of a particular club.

THE BASIS OF GOD’S JUDGEMENT OF INDIVIDUALS

So, then, what is the basis of this judgement? Paul summarises it in v6 by quoting an Old Testament principle (Psalm 62:12 and Proverbs 24:12): **“God ‘will give to each person according to what he has done’”**. The key issue will be how we have lived our lives (and we only have one life on which this judgement will be based!). According to vv7-10 there are only two alternatives – two groups of people, with two destinations. This is entirely consistent with how Christ spoke of the day of judgement (see John 5:29) – only two groups of people and two destinations. It should raise the question – which group will I be in?

a) Those who do good will receive eternal life

At face value this statement seems as if Paul is advocating a salvation based on works, but we know from his other writings (Ephesians 2:8 being a prime example) that this was NOT his view. In fact, in the context of Romans 2 this is also clearly NOT what he is suggesting. Remember that in vv1-4 he has gone to lengths to make it clear that no one stands guiltless before God – “all have sinned” (to quote his conclusion in Ch3v23). So, Paul is not saying that some people will be good enough to escape God’s wrath. To understand this statement (which comes from v10), we must look at v7. Paul says that these people persist in doing good because they are seeking “glory, honour and immortality”. In other words, **these are the people who are seeking God and ordering their lives in keeping with it**. They are not saved because of their works or how good they are, but because of their faith (although he doesn’t mention the word here) – because the motivation of their lives was a search for God! Their reward is “eternal life” (v7), which includes “glory, honour and peace” (v10). These people get exactly what they have been seeking! Paul’s use of the phrases “who does evil ... good” are reminiscent of Christ’s words in John 5:29 about the judgement He will preside over after the resurrection.

b) Those who do evil will experience wrath and anger

Unsurprisingly, the contrast here is not based on the fact that these people have sinned, but what they were seeking in their lives. They have been seeking only themselves – their own satisfaction – and have rejected truth to follow after evil (v8). These are people who have no faith in anything except themselves, and no desire for anything beyond their own pleasure. They have refused to repent and have been storing up wrath for themselves. On the day of judgement this wrath will be released (v8), resulting in “trouble and distress” (v9) for them.

The table below summarises Paul’s teaching on these two groups.

	REWARDED	CONDEMNED
Summary statement	Those who do good (v10)	Those who do evil (9)
Their life’s goal (what they seek)	Glory, honour and immortality (v7)	Themselves (v8)
Characteristic of their actions (resulting from their goal)	Persistence in doing good (v7)	Rejection of the truth and following evil (v8)
The verdict	Declared righteous (v13)	Stored wrath released (see v5)
They receive	Eternal Life (v7) – including glory, honour and peace (v10)	Wrath and anger (v8) – including trouble and distress (v9)

WHAT ABOUT THOSE WHO NEVER HEAR? (vv12-16)

It must be said that in vv6-11 Paul's main concern (in the context of this letter) is actually to show that Jews and Gentiles alike stand before God's judgement, and that both Jew and Gentile will be condemned or rewarded on exactly the same basis – how they as an individual have lived their lives. There is no automatic salvation for the Jew (a repeated theme in this epistle), and no automatic rejection for the Gentile. This is made even clearer in verses 12-15. Here Paul contrasts the Jews, who have the Law, and the Gentiles who do not have it. When it comes to God's judgment, the Law is only the standard for judgement of those who knew the Law. Having heard the Law does not save a person – they will only be saved if they obeyed it (v13). Notice that even these people (who have honestly attempted to obey the Law) must be "declared righteous" – they are not righteous in themselves as they have not perfectly kept the Law. Paul will make that utterly clear in 3:20, "no-one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the Law". **The Law cannot save – it can only condemn!**

For the Gentile (a Gentile is anyone who is not Jewish) there is another standard against which they will be judged – the conscience (v15). This is the inner voice that tells us whether we have done right or wrong. Although it may be conditioned by upbringing or culture, it is remarkable how people from every nation have experienced this inner voice. Guilt, although it can become pathological, can be a very healthy thing if it is in response to wrong-doing and leads us to seek forgiveness. So, Gentiles will be judged according to how they have acted based on the testimony of their conscience. The conscience is another revelation of God to man!!!

In this letter we will see God's revelation of Himself to man in four progressive degrees of light:

"General Revelation" (available to ALL people):

(i) **Creation** (1:20) – it reveals His power and divine nature

(ii) **Conscience** (2:15) – it gives a sense of right and wrong and leads us to repentance and faith

"Special Revelation" (available to SOME people):

(iii) **Covenant / Law** (2:13) – the Jews had the Old Covenant promises of God

(iv) **Christ** (3:22) – He is the ultimate revelation of God – the purest light!

Increasing
Light



In this chapter Paul is dealing only with those who have not heard the Christian gospel. For those who have, there will be another standard of judgment – their response to Christ! However, the principle of God's judgement is made quite clear here – He will judge each individual according to how they have responded to the light He has given them. A Gentile who has sought the Creator who lies behind the universe, and who has sought to live in keeping with his conscience will receive eternal life, whilst a Jew who has rejected truth and lived for his own pleasure will receive God's wrath.

This leads to the question that many Christians have been asked – what about people today who never hear the gospel? Will they be condemned? When we ask this question, we are effectively asking exactly the same question the Jews would have asked – "What about those who have never heard?", except they would be talking about people who had never heard of God's Law rather than the gospel. The Jews mistakenly believed that only those who were Jews could be accepted by God and saved from His wrath. In this chapter Paul explodes that theory by showing that all those who seek God in repentance and faith will be saved irrespective of their race, and that not all Jews will be automatically saved (a theme we will see Paul develop in our next study).

So, when it comes to our question of those in the 21st century who never hear the Christian gospel, **it is quite consistent with Paul's teaching to say that God will judge these people on the same basis as described in Romans 2 – as individuals based on their response to the light they have received from God.** There will be many people in Heaven who have never even heard of Jesus during their life on earth (before you panic too much, Abraham and Moses will be two of them!), quite probably including many from the centuries after Christ who never had an opportunity to hear the gospel. It is not for us to say who will and will not be included in this gift of eternal life – only God knows – but ultimately we can rest secure in the knowledge that His judgement will be absolutely and utterly fair. As Abraham said when faced with God's judgement on Sodom, "Will not the judge of all the earth do right?" (Genesis 18:25). We must also be careful that we aren't distracted from the question of our own standing before God by questions about hypothetical people "in the jungle"! Often non-Christians who ask this question are really hiding behind a smokescreen – deflecting attention from themselves and their responsibility before God.

THE AGENT OF GOD'S JUDGEMENT

Paul's comments on judgement close with a reminder that judgement is part of his gospel (v16). There is no need for good news if you don't realise the moral bankruptcy and darkness of sin of the human race. He affirms that Jesus will be the sole agent of God's judgement. This is interesting to note – that it is through Christ that God will judge all people, whether they have heard of Him or not (in the same way that it will be by Christ's death and resurrection that all people will be saved, whether they knew about Him or not!).

CHALLENGE:

- Are you trusting in God for salvation? Have you repented towards Him and are you seeking Him in humility and faith?
- Does sin in our lives and in our society bother us? Do we really believe that God is intensely angry with sin, or has it become something minor to us?
- How, in practical terms, should we take our stand for God's truth in the face of increasing sinfulness in society without falling into the trap of self-righteousness?
- What are we doing to take the gospel to people who have never heard?

Essentials for Faith 3:

God's Plan of Salvation (Romans 2:17-4:25)

KEY QUESTIONS:

- Why does most of the Bible focus on just one nation (Israel)?
- How can God make sinful people right with Himself without doing something wrong?
- How can we have a relationship with God?

GOD'S PURPOSE IN CHOOSING ISRAEL (2:17-3:20)

NOT THAT ALL JEWS WOULD BE SAVED (2:17-3:20)

One common misconception that many Jews in the first century had, was that the only people who could be "saved" were the Jews, as if God did not care about all the people of other races. Actually, this is not the message of the Bible, even the Old Testament. There are a surprising number of non-Jews in the Old Testament who had faith in God (the people of Nineveh in Jonah's day, Namaan the Syrian and the Magi who visited Jesus are a few prime examples), but, more importantly, Paul shows us in Romans that only those Jews who had personal faith in God were actually "saved". God's covenant with Israel did not save people in itself (you could be a circumcised Jew and have no real relationship with God) – it only saved when mixed with faith in the individual (see 9:6-9). The purpose for which God chose Israel was never intended to be that they would be the only nation on earth who could be saved – it was so that all nations on earth could be saved through the witness of Israel and ultimately through the Messiah the Jews would bring forth. **This issue of the true purpose for God choosing Israel, and the fact that only Jews who had faith would receive eternal life is one of the core themes in Romans.** In these verses Paul counters this opinion in 3 stages:

1) The True Jew (2:17-29)

This section contains a classic Pauline diatribe with a Jew who has confidence that he will escape God's judgement because of his instruction in the Law and the fact that he has been circumcised (the sign of God's covenant relationship with the nation of Israel, which was given by God to Abraham – see Genesis 17).

- *Law alone has no value (vv17-24)*

Paul is ruthless in his description of the hypocrisy of the Jewish nation (vv17-24), showing that the behaviour of some Jews in breaking the commandments of God has actually dishonoured God's name among the Gentiles. Those Gentiles who keep the demands of the Law without having access to it will condemn (or will expose) these Jews who have it by do not keep it (v27). For a Jew this would be absolutely shocking – they were convinced that they would stand in judgement against the godless Gentiles!

- *Circumcision alone has no value (vv25-27)*

Even circumcision, precious as it was to the Jews as their badge of acceptance with God, is not enough to make a person right with God. The Jewish Rabbis taught that "Circumcised men do not descend into Gehenna (*hell*)", but Paul says (as Jesus had taught – see Matthew 21:28ff) that inclusion in God's covenant with Israel is not enough to save a person if they have no faith.

- *Conclusion – the true Jew (vv28&29)*

So, then, just being a Jew by race or circumcision is not enough to make one right with God – the true Jew is not one who has been circumcised physically alone, but one who has experienced a circumcision of the heart (vv28&29). The word "Jew" comes from the name of Judah, which is associated in the Old Testament with the word "praise" (see Gen 29:35, 49:8), and the true Jew seeks praise from God, not from men (v29) – his religion is primarily concerned with honouring God rather than pleasing men. Paul's reference to the "circumcision of the heart" brings the focus to the human heart rather than external things. The idea is of cutting off one's selfish desires, pride, and stubbornness. This was a concept contained in the Old Testament – for example Deuteronomy 10:16 where God's people are told to let go of their stubbornness by circumcising their hearts, and Jeremiah 9:25&26, where God speaks of punishment for all whose hearts are not circumcised even though physically they are. God looks for spiritual reality (a circumcised heart), not outward rituals (Law and circumcision). Paul could testify personally to this reality. He had been outwardly devout and respectable as a Jew, but his heart was not right with God until Christ confronted him.

2) God's Relationship with Israel (3:1-8)

In this section Paul continues his diatribe, anticipating three objections from his Jewish critic. Paul's insight into the mind of the Jewish objector to the gospel may be based on actual debates he has engaged in on his missionary journeys, but must also draw from his personal experience as an opponent of the gospel. Here we can imagine Paul the Pharisee debating with Paul the apostle!

Objection 1 – “What advantage ... is there in being a Jew, or what value ... in circumcision?” (vv1&2)

Although being a circumcised Jew cannot in itself save a person, Paul maintains that there is great value in being a Jew. The Jews, Paul says, are blessed with the words of God. It was through the Jewish nation that the Old Testament was given to us. This was a great responsibility and privilege that was unique to the Jews.

Objection 2 – “What if some did not have faith? Will their lack of faith nullify God's faithfulness?” (vv3&4)

Just because many of the Jews had no faith in God is not to say that God's purpose will not be worked out through the nation as a whole. God remains faithful despite the faithlessness of his chosen people. This is a vital principle in the character of God – He is completely true (v4), and completely faithful. In fact, the unfaithfulness of Israel makes the faithfulness of God even clearer by stark contrast, and God's righteousness is made more clear by contrast with man's unrighteousness.

Objection 3 – Paul's teaching proves God to be unjust in His judgement of mankind (vv5-8)

The critic responds to Paul's teaching by claiming that God would be unjust to judge mankind in His wrath since man's unrighteousness only serves to make His righteousness more clear. This is the classic argument that accuses God of using mankind as pawns – that He created humans who are incapable of doing the things He demands of them just to show how perfect He is. Paul makes clear that the faithfulness of God is not something to be taken for granted by the individual as a way to expect to escape from his judgement, an argument he repeats in Ch 6 (v1). He anticipates the critic suggesting that sin is actually a good thing since it shows just how good God is. In fact, there had been a scandalous report that Paul made this claim (presumably from some Jewish legalisers who objected to his preaching about God's grace towards Gentiles who had not observed the Law). The real accusation here is that Paul is being soft on sin. Paul roundly condemns such teaching. Individual responsibility for one's actions is central to the gospel he preaches. We are not merely pawns used by God to show His own perfection – sin is sin, deserving of punishment, and we stand condemned before God. God's judgement is fair and deserved.

3) The Purpose of the Law (3:9-20)

So, then, if the Jews are so privileged to have the words of God, what was God's purpose in giving it to them? Paul has already shown that it was not to bring salvation to all who know the Law (vv17-24) or just to increase His own glory (vv5-8). In fact (v29), Paul says that no one can possibly be declared righteous before God by keeping the Law, since no one can perfectly keep its demands. No, God gave the Law for one reason only: to make us conscious of sin (v20 – see also 5:20, 7:7-11). Paul prefaces this comment with a lengthy quotation from various Old Testament passages that speak of the sinfulness of the Jewish nation. The Law reveals just how perfect God is, and when we compare ourselves with its perfect standard we realise just how sinful we are, and how much we need His mercy and grace. The Law cannot deal with the problem of sin – we need another way to be declared righteous before God.

THREE REASONS WHY GOD CHOSE ONE NATION

Those of us who are not from the Jewish nation may wonder why most of the Bible (from Genesis 12-Malachi) focuses on just one nation and God's special relationship with them. We may wonder why God did not have a similar relationship with our own nation. We must remember that the Old Testament does contain references to non-Jews relating to God (see above), and also that just because we have no record of God's relationship with other nations does not mean that He had none. There must have been faithful people within other nations, who will not be condemned on the day of judgement. However, the reality remains that God singled out one nation – the descendants of Abraham, later known as the people of Israel – for His special covenant relationship. As explained above, this was not to identify only that nation for salvation, but for specific purposes within His overall plan for mankind. Paul will return to the topic of Israel in Ch9-11, and from these chapters and other scriptures we can identify 3 key reasons why God singled out one nation:

1. To receive His very words in the Law and Prophets (3:2 & 9:4)

The Jewish nation was given many words from God, which are recorded in the Old Testament. They were very faithful at preserving the scriptures, so that we have access to them today.

2. That through Israel the other nations would see the glory of God

God called the nation to show the surrounding nations how a nation ruled by God could function. At times in their history the Jewish nation were successful in witnessing to other nations about God's glory (for example Rahab in Joshua 2:8-12), but in general they were unsuccessful. This is one of the reasons why God allowed the nation to be taken into exile. Too often the people compromised with idolatry and inter-marriage with surrounding nations. They insisted on having a king to rule them instead of being ruled directly by God.

3. The Jewish nation would bring forth Christ to be the Saviour (9:5)

This was the greatest of all God's purposes in choosing Israel, and one that was successful. The Old Testament contains many prophecies about the Messiah (or Christ) who would be God's special

messenger and a saviour for all nations. The prophecies speak of Him as a suffering servant and as a triumphant king. Unfortunately many Jews, including the chief priests, did not recognise Jesus as the Messiah, largely because they had a misconception of what the Messiah should be like.

RIGHTEOUSNESS REVEALED (3:21-26)

DEFINING THE TERMS

Paul has clearly shown that the unrighteousness of the Gentiles and the self-righteousness of his Jewish critics leave them condemned before God, but with the “but now” of v21 he introduces the righteousness of God revealed in the gospel. Onto the dark canvas of 1:18-3:20, a glorious light is about to burst. This section of Romans is very technical in its language. The image is primarily of a courtroom. God is the judge and we are the defendants. Paul has already established our guilt before God. The question now is whether there is any way for us to be acquitted or declared not guilty. This would seem impossible. After all, if God is a just judge, how could He declare us not guilty when all the evidence points to our guilt? Paul is about to reveal just how this can be.

First, let us define some key terms from these verses that will enable us to follow his argument:

- **Righteousness** = right standing before God (to be “not guilty” in His court).
- **Justification** = to be declared righteous (to be declared “not guilty”), as opposed to condemnation, which is to be declared guilty and punished accordingly. It is more than just “pardon”, which would remove the deserved punishment but leave the person still guilty of the crime, as it means that all guilt is removed and a right relationship restored. This does not mean that the person automatically becomes perfect – the process of sanctification by which the Holy Spirit makes us progressively like Christ is life long. Stott highlights this distinction as the difference between becoming legally just by justification and morally just by sanctification. Another way to put it is that justification gives us a right standing with God, while sanctification produces in us a right character.
- **Grace** = God’s undeserved favour to us. Grace is the “giving” word of the Bible – it is always associated with what God freely gives us, and is closely associated with the idea of God’s love.
- **Redemption** = when a price is paid to buy something back. The term was originally used in the Old Testament to describe the act of paying the price for a slave to set them free. It is also used of God’s action in delivering His people from captivity in Egypt (Exodus 15:13) and by God Himself to describe His action towards Israel (Isaiah 43:1).
- **Atonement** = a sacrifice that brings peace by diverting the wrath of God away from a person. Some scholars have suggested alternative meanings for the word translated “sacrifice of atonement”, apparently because of a belief that it is wrong to think of God’s wrath being appeased by the cross. However, this objection owes more to pagan concepts of angry, moody gods who need to be kept happy by our sacrifices, than it does to the Bible. God’s wrath, as we have seen, is not moody or fickle, but absolutely just, and we do not make sacrifices to keep him happy – He provided the sacrifice to make us right with Him because of His undeserved favour (grace) towards us (see also I John 4:10).

THE CORE OF THE GOSPEL

Paul now returns to his initial declaration about the gospel in Ch1 v17 – that in it a righteousness from God is revealed. This is the power of the gospel – that by it sinful people can be made right with God (justified). The just God can declare the unjust just without acting unjustly. How can this be? Paul develops his argument in vv21-26 in seven stages. This righteousness is:

1. From God, apart from the Law (v21)

This really summarises all Paul has said so far. Obviously since mankind is in the wrong with God we do not have any righteousness of our own – if we are to have it, it must come from God. It cannot come through the Law, since all the Law can do is make our guilt even more obvious. The gospel speaks of righteousness coming from God to man, rather than man trying to come to God, as all other belief systems suggest we must. Salvation is entirely God’s initiative and work.

2. Testified to by the Old Testament (v21)

The gospel is not something that came completely “out of the blue”. It was promised in the Old Testament. It is the fulfilment of the prophets and the Law. If we want to understand the gospel, the Old Testament gives us the framework for doing so (as Paul could say in I Corinthians 15, the gospel is “according to the scriptures” – in other words, following their pattern). This is especially true when it comes to the concept of sacrifice that Paul mentions in v25. The Old Testament introduced a pattern of sacrifices given by God by which people could worship Him. The sacrifices were an expression of the peoples’ dependence on God to save them. The idea was that the animal that was killed took the place of the person making the offering. The person deserved to die, but God was providing a substitute to die in his or her place. Of course, these animal sacrifices could not really remove sin, but they showed that

the person's faith was in God alone, and they expressed a hope for a sacrifice that could genuinely take the place of a sinful human being. The sacrifices pointed to Christ! As John Stott puts it, this righteousness from God was no "divine afterthought". So, God's plan of salvation began long before the birth of Christ – it is the plan of all the ages, and the greatest story behind all of human history.

3. Through faith in Jesus Christ (v22)

This is a central emphasis of Paul's preaching. The only way to receive this righteousness is by faith in Christ. Paul will expand this principle later in Ch3 and throughout Ch4. If the gospel is the greatest story in human history, then Jesus is the central figure in human history!

4. For all people since all have sinned (v23)

Paul emphasises the reason why we need God's righteousness – our sin. We have fallen short of God's acceptable standard (glory), which is absolute perfection, by our own actions as individuals. There may be degrees of sinfulness, but no one is perfect, and all come well short of God's standard. If a number of people sit an exam, in which the pass mark is 100%, and they achieve varied results, but no one has 100%, all have failed. It is really immaterial how much they failed by – they have flunked the subject! The words of Handley Moule (quoted by John Stott) make the point more forcefully: "*The harlot, the liar, the murderer, are short of it; but so are you. Perhaps they stand at the bottom of a mine, and you are on the crest of an Alp; but you are as little able to touch the stars as they*". For this reason there is no difference between the Jew and the Gentile. We are all sinners, and we all need the gift of God's righteousness. The only logical response to this realisation is to cast ourselves on God's mercy and rely on His provision of Christ for our salvation.

5. Given freely by His grace (v24)

God's righteousness cannot be earned. All we earn by our actions is death (see 6:23) – God's righteousness is a free gift to us because of God's undeserved favour (grace) towards us. This stands in contrast with almost every religious system on earth which are based on the principle that man must earn merit with God or with "the gods" by his won actions. Christianity is blatantly honest about mankind's sinfulness and powerlessness to save himself.

6. By justification based on the redemption that came from Christ's sacrifice of atonement (vv24&25)

God can declare us righteous (justify us) only because of the death of Christ. When He died, Christ paid the price for our sins – to release us from the slavery sin held us in (redeem us). We were like slaves sold to sin and absolutely incapable of freeing ourselves, but Jesus bought us back. Only He could pay that price. We could not, for we were morally bankrupt, but He was perfect and sinless, and so His death could be our ransom. His death was a sacrifice – the final perfect sacrifice for sins forever – that brought peace between man and God. Paul presents Christ as the sacrifice of atonement by which the price of our redemption is paid. The significance of Christ's blood in relation to the atonement is that blood represents the life of the sacrifice (Leviticus 17:11), and "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness" (Heb 9:22). So, Christ took our place on the cross, bearing our sins and receiving the wrath of God they deserved, and in so doing paid the price to redeem us to God. This is the centre of the gospel, and unique to the Christian faith. No other religion or philosophy claims that people who have done nothing to deserve it, and who, in fact, deserve punishment, can receive forgiveness and a new life as a free gift – all teach some form of salvation or self-betterment based on man's own efforts. Sadly the doctrine of the atonement has been belittled in recent years, but we must hold firm to it as the only hope for the forgiveness of sins. F.F. Bruce has summarised the significance of the atonement in these terms:

The death of Christ, then, is the means by which God does away with his people's sin – not symbolically, as in the ritual of Leviticus 16 ..., but really. And really in a twofold sense: the sin has been removed not only from the believer's conscience ... but also from the presence of God.

7. Demonstrates, rather than compromising, God's justice (vv25&26)

This justification – the transferring of righteousness from God to us – does not compromise God's justice. Because Christ's sacrifice was acceptable, God is able to forgive us and declare us not guilty. In His eyes our sin is blotted out by Christ – the punishment has already been taken by Him and we cannot be condemned. Far from compromising His justice, the gospel declares it for all to see. The Son of God dying to make it possible for sinful people to be saved – amazing!!! The death of Christ is the basis of forgiveness not only for those who come after Him, but also for all those who have been "declared righteous" beforehand. In His patience, God did not punish their sins (v25), because in Christ the punishment would be fulfilled. Christ died for the sins of Abraham, Moses and David just as He did for ours. His sacrifice of atonement is the only basis for the forgiveness of sins for all those who have faith, whether they have heard of Him or not. This is the missing piece in the jigsaw of God's judgment in Ch2. There we saw that some people would be declared righteous, but not how. Now we know how – through the sacrificial death of Christ, a sacrifice of atonement and redemption. The justification that this sacrifice makes possible is applied to all those who have genuine faith in God.

THE SUPREMACY OF FAITH (3:27-4:25)

NO ROOM FOR BOASTING (3:27-31)

There is no room for boasting in the gospel, because God's righteousness is a free gift, to something we earn. We cannot point to our upbringing, family or racial background, or even our own good deeds as the reason why we deserve to be saved. It is entirely because of God's grace, which none of us deserve. This does NOT nullify the Law (make the Law unimportant) BUT upholds it (3:31) – it is because the Law is true that Christ had to die, as we are declared sinners who cannot work our way back to God. The Christian gospel does not trivialise sin, but recognises its true seriousness as something that can only be dealt with by the sacrifice of the only Son of God, the greatest price that could ever be paid. So, how do we receive this free gift from God? By the principle of faith. I like to call faith the "great leveller". It is the only way to relate to God irrespective of one's background or achievements. In particular, in the context of this letter it is the only way that either Jew or Gentile can relate to God.

It is vital, then, that we understand the true meaning of Biblical faith. As with many concepts, it is easiest to understand what faith **is** by first considering what it **is not**. True Biblical faith is not just intellectual assent – in other words, it does not merely mean to be able to agree that certain things are true. Becoming a Christian is not just about being able to tick boxes beside a list of statements about God and Jesus. True faith means depending or trusting completely in God. It is based on the word of God, and means to believe both that God has the power to and that He **will** fulfil His promises. The person who has faith will ordering their whole life in keeping with this confidence in God. To have faith in Christ means to depend completely on Him to be the One who saves you through His sacrificial death in your place. You have no other hope than this, and you are trusting God to lead you from now on in your life. In this sense, faith can never be divorced from the preceding step of repentance (turning from our own sin to trust in God).

J.I. Packer explains it thus: "The nature of faith ... is to live by the truth it receives; faith, resting on God's promise, gives thanks for God's grace by working for God's glory". So, faith is a dynamic and active thing that becomes the basis for the person's actions. It's basis is not our own feelings or ideas, but the truth of God revealed to us in His word and in Christ. The power of faith is not in faith itself, but in the one in whom it is placed, Jesus Christ. I like to summarise this concept of Biblical faith in 3 phrases:

**Resting on God's promises,
trusting in His power to fulfil them,
and acting accordingly**

A CASE STUDY IN FAITH – ABRAHAM (Ch4)

Paul now, particularly appealing to the Jewish reader who may have had the greatest difficulty in accepting this teaching about faith, refers to the supreme Old Testament example of faith – Abraham (who lived around 2000 BC). Abraham is commended in Hebrews 11 for his faith demonstrated in 3 actions – obeying God's call to leave his home (vv8-10), trusting God to give him a son even when he was old (vv11&12), and offering his son Isaac to God believing that God could raise him from the dead (vv17-19). In Romans 4 Paul has the second of these particularly in mind (see vv18-22). The essence of Abraham's faith was that he was "fully persuaded that God had power to do what He had promised" (v21). Because of this faith, righteousness was "credited" to him by God (v22, where Paul quotes Genesis 15:5). This same principle of the exchange of faith for righteousness applies to us too (v23). When we exercise faith in God we are declared righteous before Him. To have faith in God a person must believe that He is both able and willing to help them – in other words they are depending on God's power and faithfulness. Abraham trusted both in God's power and His faithfulness to His promise (v21).

It is worth noting that Paul refers to God here as the one who "raised Jesus our Lord from the dead". The resurrection of Jesus is a vital part of the gospel. If he had not been raised our faith would be in vain (see I Corinthians 15:17). The fact that God raised Him again is the proof that His sacrifice was accepted, and therefore that our sins are forgiven. In the Old Testament Temple the people would wait to see if the High Priest would return alive from the Most Holy Place. If he did not, the sacrifice he brought had not been acceptable to God. Jesus, our High Priest, offered an acceptable sacrifice, and so returned alive. He lives to save us and to keep us. A dead saviour would be no saviour at all. As Paul says – he died for our sins but was raised for our justification (v25).

So, then, Abraham is a supreme example of faith, and Paul draws out three aspects in which Abraham sets a particularly clear example, especially for those Jews who may still be placing confidence in their circumcision or the Old Testament Law:

1. Faith NOT works (vv1-8)

Abraham was justified by faith, not works, as the quotation from Genesis 15:6 proves. Paul elaborates on this verse by contrasting our wages, which we are owed, with God's gift of righteousness, an idea he

will return to in Ch6. He introduces a second witness, King David, to support Abraham. David experienced God's forgiveness not by his works, but because he too had faith in God.

2. Faith NOT circumcision (vv9-12)

Abraham had faith and this was credited as righteousness **before** he was circumcised (in fact, at least 14 years beforehand). Circumcision came later as a sign of God's covenant with Abraham and his descendants. If Abraham could be declared righteous without being circumcised, so can Gentiles like you and me.

3. Faith NOT Law (vv13-15)

Again, Abraham lived before the Old Testament Law was given (it was given 430 years later, in the time of Moses), so the Law cannot be essential for our justification. In fact, the Law only brings wrath (echoing Paul's statement in 3:20 that it serves to prove our guilt), not righteousness.

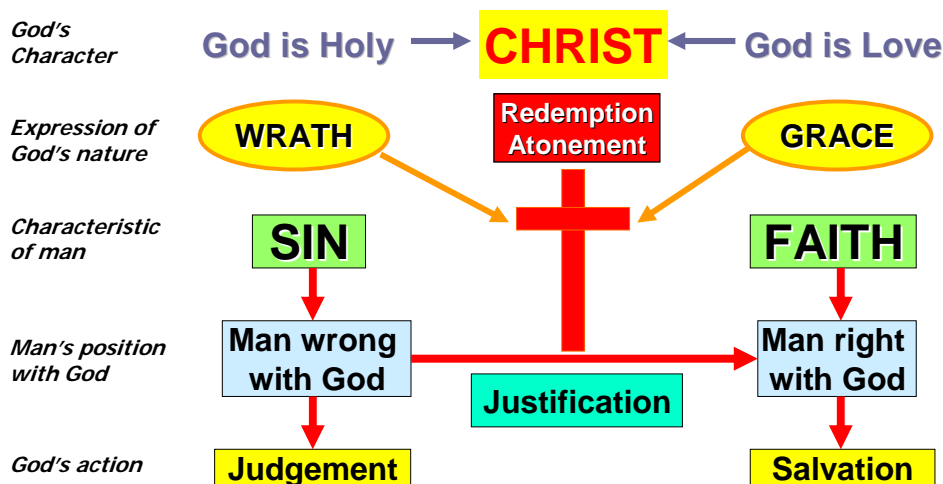
CONCLUSION – The many children of Abraham (vv16&17)

All those who have faith are children of Abraham: *"the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring"* (v16). This was why God changed Abram's name (meaning "exalted father") to Abraham (meaning "father of many") in Genesis 17:5 (quoted in v17), saying that he would be the "father of many nations". Faith is the one principle throughout human history (as Hebrews Ch11 reveals) by which people can relate to God and receive the gifts He offers in grace.

A SUMMARY STATEMENT OF THE GOSPEL SO FAR

**We, who are sinners deserving God's wrath,
are saved from His judgement
by His gift to us of righteousness,
paid for by the sacrificial death of Christ,
proved by His resurrection,
offered to us freely by grace,
and received by repentance and faith.**

Of course, this is not the "whole gospel". It is just the beginning – the way in which we "become" Christians. The gospel also includes a full understanding of how we live and relate as Christians, as Paul will continue to teach in the remainder of this letter. The gospel includes essential truth for life and relationships as well as for faith. However, the centrepiece of the gospel is the cross of Christ. In Jesus the holiness and love of God are perfectly expressed (see John 1:14), and in His sacrifice of Himself on the cross God's wrath and grace met – His wrath was diverted from sinful man onto the sinless Christ, and His grace became available to all those who place their faith in Christ. Through this sacrifice, which brought redemption and atonement, man can be justified, so that he moves from death to life, from a wrong relationship with God into a right relationship with Him. When a person repents and believes this justification becomes effective in his or her life, and a new life begins – one which is lived by the spirit in relationship with God (as the remainder of Romans will show). The image below summarises these truths in pictorial form:



CHALLENGE:

- Have you received God's free gift of righteousness?
- Are you continuing to live by faith in God?
- How does your understanding of God's grace impact your life?